



## THE WONDERWORKER

### I

Only mortals measure time in the passing of years. Immortals, and those closest to eternal life, measure the tread of time in moments and memories. I can recall every word spoken to me over the course of my life, I can remember every second spent fighting on this galaxy's battlefields, but I measure it through the conjuration of evocative memories. Entire wars become distilled into those moments that mattered most - a duel with an enemy warlord, perhaps, or a brother fallen in war and never to rise again.

I have no shortage of such waypoints. The Imperium, an empire I helped forge, has butchered thousands of my brothers since the declaration of the Long War. And I have struck down hundreds of its champions, worthy and unworthy alike.

Sometimes it can be reduced to an even cruder poetry. In the past, I have marked the passing years by numbering Telemachon's attempts on my life, and counting my attempts to destroy him in turn. However, our spiteful attempts on each other's lives played little part in those earliest years. Only when we had armies at our backs did our grudge deepen and degenerate.

It is a strange comfort to think that he is out there now, far from Terra, commanding my fleet. He sails at our Warmaster's side while I am here, blinded and mutilated in captivity, speaking these stories to a servitor that would never even know if I lied.

Tonight, my flesh prickles with inflicted pain. The Inquisition is not so naive as to think their petty tortures matter to me, and in that regard I wonder why they bother at all. Cutting my skin with sacred blades and breaking my bones with holy instruments will not change a single word of what I say.

I cannot, after all, change the truth.

I believe several of them are uneasy that I surrendered myself into Imperial custody. They did not ravage my army and capture me in battle; I came alone to the surface of Terra, and that remains a blow to their pride. No surprise, given the number of times the Inquisition has sought to assassinate me in the past. Generation upon generation of Inquisitorial agents have hunted me for thousands of years, stalking me under countless names and titles. Some even came close to seeing me dead. The Imperium is nothing if not persistent.

Not all of my captors are so easily baited. Siroca least of all. She comes alone more and more, and I wonder just who claims the parchments bearing my dictated words.

'What came after Harmony?' she asked me.

How do I answer that? Everything. Everything came after Harmony. War after war, battle after battle, allegiance after allegiance and betrayal after betrayal. We endured, we survived, and we rose.

'But what came first?'

Inquisitor Siroca can be an impatient creature.

'First,' I tell her, 'we licked our wounds. Part of the process of regeneration took me to Chariz Terenoch, Wonderworker of Anzu and Thaumaturge of the Heka. We met in his fortress.'

'And?'

'And he told me I was already dead.'

II

'You're not Iskandar Khayon,' he said to me.

Chariz Terenoch was no taller than I, and his armour was of the same ornate style, bearing similar markings. The starkest difference was that after the Rubric

he had painted his a deep, dark green between the golden trimmings, while mine - in the months after Harmony - was still the colourless grey of bare ceramite and fire-blasted bronze. It felt wrong to retake the cobalt of the Thousand Sons, and Abaddon had not yet decreed that we would claim the black.

'Your words present me with a problem,' I admitted. 'For I am indeed Iskandar Khayon.'

'Khayon died at Drol Kheir.'

I shook my head. 'You have no idea how weary I am of hearing that, Chariz.' With a hiss of vented air pressure, I pulled my helm clear, immediately filling my senses with the chlorine spice of sacred oils. His throne room reeked with the death-laced, resinous scent of refined alchemicals. I could not even begin to guess what reagents the Wonderworker used in his craft.

As I removed my helmet, the two Rubricae standing watch by the fleshmetal throne turned to regard me in their slow, dull way. They, like their master, wore the green and bronze of the Heka warband. Apart from these two sentries, Chariz and I were alone in the great chamber. I sensed no echoes of past presences imprinted upon the walls. I doubted he received many guests here.

Chariz, who was bareheaded himself and with the dusky skin so typical of many Tizcans, was unconvinced even upon seeing my face.

'The fact that you wear Khayon's face means nothing. I once met a shapeshifter that could assume the form of any man, woman or legionary simply by tasting a drop of their blood. If you are Khayon as you claim...'

'I am.'

'Then where is your hell-hound? And where is your murderous winged alien?' His cold, pale brown eyes narrowed as he gestured dismissively towards me. 'Those beings never leave Khayon's side.'

What could I say? That we had fought a clone that believed itself to be the slain Warmaster of the Imperium, and that it had destroyed Gyre's physical form? That a blood-maddened thing in

Horus's armour had rampaged through our ranks and half-killed Nefertari?

'For now,' I said, 'they have both left my side.'

'Then where is the Tlaloc?'

'Dead. Gone.'

'And your precious axe?'

'Broken.'

'And where are Makari and Djedhor?'

He had a talent for probing fresh wounds.

'I thought it prudent to come alone. This was supposed to be a show of minimal force, Chariz. You are making me regret that choice.' The Wonderworker had pearls woven into the skin of his face, following the contours of his bone structure. Emeralds gleamed in his mouth, drilled and implanted into the artificial ivory of his teeth. Both were Tizcan traditions, customs sometimes seen among my home world's wealthiest and most respected artisans.

We stood in a chamber that matched his dark and curious elegance, with the twisted walls showing exquisite bronze carvings of Prospero's Fall. I admired a particularly gruesome scene of Magnus the Red turning away from a sky raining fire. His weary betrayal had never been portrayed quite so perfectly before: a being of our primarch's power could have fought the Wolves before they even made planetfall, yet he had chosen - out of misplaced guilt - to hide in his tower until the very end and let the Einherjar annihilate our home world.

And so the sons paid in blood, as their broken father's penance. Sometimes I suspected Lheor was right. Perhaps the Thousand Sons were a ludicrously sentimental Legion, unable to overcome its past.

'What am I to believe?' Chariz asked, pulling me back to the present. 'I'm sharing words with a brother who died at Drol Kheir, who has no evidence of his identity and also claims he was sent to me by the dead High Chieftain of the dead Sons of Horus, while the long-lost flagship of the Legiones Astartes drifts in orbit high above my fortress. A ghost has come to my world, sent by another ghost, sailing aboard a ghost ship. What am I to think, Khayon? What would you do in my place?'

That, at least, was easy to answer.

'I would trust this ghost, and do whatever it asked me to do.'

The Lord of the Heka smiled, though the expression did not reach his eyes. 'And why should I do that?'

'Because if you do not willingly comply, my friend, the Vengeful Spirit will tear this fortress apart, and I would pry command of your Rubricae from your dying mind. But I would like to come to an agreement before we reach the point of needing to resort to base threats. Your talents are needed.'

He did not answer for some time. Chariz Terenoch was not a man to be rushed.

'Does Abaddon truly live?' he asked at last.

'He does. And more than that, he wields the weapon that slew the Angel and crippled the Emperor.'

The suspicious stare became tainted by something fierce, something close to cunning. 'I would like to see those blades with my own eyes.'

'That can be arranged.'

Chariz considered my words. 'And if I comply,' he said eventually, 'what does Abaddon require of me?'

'Ezekyle needs nothing from you. It is I that need your expertise, not him.'

Curiosity lit a fire in his dark eyes. 'Now I know you're not who you say you are. Iskandar Khayon could never afford my craftsmanship.'

'Times change, Chariz.' I unchained the deck of tarot cards from my belt, sliding the thick papyrus cards free from their casing of Hayed flesh. Each one showed a figure of twisted, daemoniac madness, painstakingly painted by hand. I fanned them for him, feeling my knuckles tighten possessively when his breath caught in his throat. His surge of desire to take them at any cost pressed against my senses: oily, thick, and jealous.

The last card, at the bottom of the deck, I handed to him.

He took it with due reverence, the light still flaring in his eyes. His gauntleted fingers caressed the treated papyrus, following the painted lines upon its surface.

'Khayon/ he said, his voice now a whisper. 'So it is you.'

I nodded and said nothing, knowing silence would speak for me. There could be no greater sign of trust than to allow another practitioner of the Art to cradle a daemonic primer. Allowing him to touch any of the cards - let alone that particular one - was a gamble at best and a risk at worst. Sorcerers killed each other for far less.

Sure enough, Chariz continued as he thumbed the details of the daemon painted on the parchment.

'Only you would take one of their wolves to use as your own.'

The card was The Huntress. Its face showed a wolf made of smoke and shadow, with eyes of lambent white. Like the other cards, the pigments I used in painting the image were a compound of rare reagents, chosen for their potency. Unlike the other cards, it bore no number, and was not to be used in any prophetic tarot. Part of the set, yet undeniably separate.

'Gyre chose her own form. I had nothing to do with it.'

'I apologise for doubting you,' Chariz said as he handed the card back to me. 'Why have you come?'

'I need you to forge me a new weapon.'

He nodded, doubtless having expected no less. 'You said your axe was broken, yes?'

'Yes. Horus Lupercal shattered it with Worldbreaker.'

Then Chariz Terenoch, Thaumaturge of the Heka and one of the most renowned weaponsmiths ever born to the Thousand Sons Legion, looked at me as if I had spoken in a tongue wholly devoid of meaning.

'Who did what?'

### III

The last time I had enjoyed Chariz's dubious hospitality was when he had taken me into his fortress's inner sanctum. The deeper one walked into his citadel, the deeper one walked into his mind. The walls went from stone and bronze to dusty red coral, interlinked and interwoven in binding structures. Anzu was a world with expansive oceans, and Chariz worked his dark and dubious miracles beneath the boiling tides. Out there in the liquid void beyond the coral walls, vast and fiery intelligences devoured one another in an unceasing war. I could sense them but not see them. They existed to my reaching mind, but to my ship's scanners and the evidence of my eyes, the waters outside the tangled coral castle were a cold and lifeless murk.

The world was forever reacting to him, as so many daemon worlds reacted to their masters' minds. His turbulent imagination manifested in the form an endless oceanic slaughter between beasts no one but Chariz could see.

His arcane forges were down in the fortress's deepest reaches. I had expected to be offered another chance to walk those lower halls, but in this I was wrong. In the first example of what countless brothers would later request, he wished to see the Vengeful Spirit. Not out of any nostalgia or mawkish affection, but to see what changes the Great Eye had wrought upon its sacred decks. I agreed without resistance.

The primary' hangar was nearly empty but for inactive gunships and fighter craft, populated only by isolated clusters of the Tlaloc's lowest-ranking tech-adepts and their servitor contingents. The moment our boots touched the deck, I felt Chariz casting out with his senses, sniffing after new sensations, seeking any nexuses of psychic resonance.

Be careful, I warned him.

He learned the truth of that warning almost immediately, crashing back into his own mind with a violent lurch.

So much life, he pulsed. His silent voice was rancid with suspicion. 'How have you crewed a Gloriana battleship, Khayon?'

'We have not,' I replied. 'Not yet. Come, I will show you what you are sensing.'

In the warship's labyrinthine hallways, we encountered the crystal dead. They still sang their silent, psychic songs, and it did not surprise me to see Chariz treat them with funereal respect rather than break them to observe their reactions. His gauntleted fingers caressed them more willingly than I had, though I could sense his interest in them was as warp-born phenomena, not as the grave markers of loyal crew. Another wealth of observations to be made. Another lesson of the Great Eye to be learned.

That dispassion had a place. Still, I was not certain that place was here, with these statues. I had come to respect them, in my own way. Once I had dreamed of wolves; now the soft and mournful songs of a hundred thousand dead men and women soothed me to sleep.

'They are calling to you,' he said as we passed several of the reaching grey crystal figures.

'I know, Chariz.'

'They sing your name.'

'I know.'

'Khayon, Khayon, Khayon,' he said quietly, repeating the dirge that stroked both of our senses. I waited until he pulled his thoughts back inside his own skull.

'Brother,' I said, 'would you like to see Sanguinius?'

The Angel of Blood knelt in the heart of Lupercal's Court, beneath the hanging banners of half-forgotten warrior lodges and alliances between Legions and regiments that had long since fallen into mistrust and animosity. Here, in this grand strategium a short distance from the command deck, the first heretics had built their schemes upon foundations of false confidence and the lies of mad gods.

Sanguinius was alone, rendered in a motionless storm of contradiction, showing a demigod's strength and a mortal's weakness in the same flawless lines. He was on his knees, yet his great wings were spread high and wide. He had died to Horus's butchery, yet here he was preserved unwounded, showing no sign of the injuries that had ravaged him.

The contrast was clearest in his eyes. They were narrowed in agony's reflection, yet still conveyed the sense of soulful regret that thickened and sickened the air around the crystallised statue. The primarch's grey crystal hands were offered outward, not in yearning as the others reached, but to ward away the final blow that had ended his immortal life.

That detail rang false to me. 'The Angel of Blood had died here on his knees, cut down and murdered by the First and False War-master. But I could not imagine Sanguinius pleading for mercy or striking such a piteous posture when the blade finally fell. The Vengeful Spirit, and my sister now incarnated as its consciousness, had a memory as bitter and biased as any Legion warrior.

Chariz slowly circled the kneeling statue again and again, his fingertips stroking over the flawlessly rendered feathers of the Archangel's wings, and along the individual strands of the primarch's hair. I heard my brother swallow, and felt how difficult it was for him to form words.

It's perfect, he pulsed to me. The most exquisite death echo I have ever seen.

'I often come here to meditate,' I admitted.

'Where is Horus?'

That was a question I had asked myself more than once. Ashur-Kai and I had spent many long hours seeking any spoor of the First Primarch's spiritual legacy. We had come to a unique conclusion.

'The Vengeful Spirit remembers all those that died aboard its decks. All who breathed their last breath within these halls are honoured thus.'

'Then Horus should be here,' Chariz pointed out.

'I thought so as well, but the Emperor did not kill Horus. The Emperor annihilated him. The primal matter of his body was eradicated, and his soul was removed from reality.'

'Banished?'

'Banishment implies existence elsewhere. It was... erased. Torn from existence, pulled apart into nothingness. There is no echo of his death for the warship to memorialise.' I gestured to the kneeling Angel. 'And so we have Sanguinius alone, kneeling before Horus's ruined throne.'

My brother and I were silent for a time. A companionable silence, as I allowed him the time to absorb all of the things that were becoming commonplace to me. A month before, the sight of this dying demigod's torment immortalised in grey psy-crystal had left me breathless and speechless. Now, it was merely home.

'Have you seen enough?' I asked politely.

'I'm a Thaumaturge, Khayon. A worker of wonders. I have never seen enough, nor learned enough, but if you wish to move on I will accompany you. What other miracles lie aboard this vessel?' He was distinctly more polite now that he had seen our ship. That, also, was a trend I would encounter many more times in the future when we crossed paths with brothers from other Legions.

'Many more. However, you have not yet agreed to forge my weapon.'

'Then I agree here and now. It will take several weeks to attune the components to your anima, even before forging the blade.' Hesitation crept back into his dark eyes as he ran a thumb along his pearl-encrusted features. 'Did you bring me the raw materials?' I found myself smiling in response to his sudden professionalism. Here at last was the master artisan I had sought out.

'I have brought you materials the likes of which you have never seen before, Chariz. The blood of cloned primarchs. Shards of Worldbreaker, the maul of Horus Lupercal. The ashes of Imperious, Solar Priest and Avatar of the

Astronomican.'

His mind reached for mine, ferocious in his need to know if I spoke falsehood. But I have never been a liar. Every word I spoke was naught but cold truth.

'There is more,' I promised him. 'Sanguinius's own sword is aboard this ship, Chariz. It lay next to his corpse when Horus struck him down. Ezekyle has made a gift of it to three of us, letting us use the pieces of its broken blade however we see fit.'

I was the last to make use of that gift. Telemachon had melted his portion down into a new silver facemask of surpassing beauty. Lheor, with typical World Eater crudeness, had reforged his pieces into hundreds of monomolecular teeth for his arsenal of chain weapons.

More than awe lit my brother's eyes now. Avarice shone there, greed without shame. If these were the materials I would grant him in the new blade's construction, then his payment would surely be of similar majesty.

If I may pause to reflect for a moment, I am given to understand that fragments of Lord Rogal Dorn's sword were used in the forging of the Sword of the High Marshals - a relic that is still treasured across the Imperium in this last, dark millennium. Similarly, Telemachon kept his faceplate for thousands of years.

And by comparison, many fragments of Lord Sanguinius's blade went into the teeth of a chainaxe that Lheor would lose in a swamp less than a decade after it was forged. Not all of us treat legends in the same way.

'If this is to be a force weapon,' Chariz pointed out, 'there's the matter of psychically resonant materials necessary for the construction of its power field generator.'

The Thaumaturge had guessed my intent. He was already turning to the incredible, torment-wrought statue of Sanguinius when I shattered it with a sudden telekinetic pulse. Jagged knives of grey glass rained across the chamber, clattering against the durasteel deck.

In the tinkling quiet, I heard Sanguinius screaming. That, also, rang false. The wishes of the warp? The delusions of a haunted ship? Either way, it was no

matter. I pointed at the spread of broken crystals.

'Use those.'

V

I watched him work in the foundries aboard the Vengeful Spirit. A great many unspoken words lingered in the fire-touched air between myself and Chariz. I told him little of my journey past the Firetide, and in kind he told me little of which warbands had sought out his services. He considered me secretive and irritating. I considered him naive to the point of foolishness. In my eyes, he was fortunate not to have been captured and enslaved by a war-band seeking to use him as a pet weaponsmith.

Chariz was that rarest of things: a true mercenary, supplying his craft to any warlord able to pay his price. Some of the work shamed him, I was sure of that. It emanated from his aura in occasional waves when the discussion turned too personal. At such points, he would fall silent and speak no more. I saw no benefit in challenging him.

We were brothers but not close, raised on the same but born into different cultural castes. His roots were ripe with the decadence and indulged ease of the wealthy artisan class. I was from the more philosophical, stargazing tiers of society.

The writings of Old Earth - the Terra That Was - tell us of three pillars in its primitive societies: Those Who Toil, Those Who Pray, and Those Who Lead. Peasants, priests and princes.

Tizca was similar without the same barbaric pretensions. Our code was Ixacalla teotich asta hicuan, meaning 'All are equal beneath the shining sun! The castes were free, even encouraged, to interact.

As one of the Thousand Sons, Chariz became one of the Legion's finest forgewrights, blending sorcery and a smith's skill into his own avenue of the Art. He pursued psychic mastery not for knowledge, war or power, but for its use in

his craft. I admired the practicality of it, even as I recognised he was fortunate to have escaped the Rubric. When Ahriman's folly devastated the Legion and slew those with the weakest sixth senses, I would have expected Chariz

and those like him - to end their lives among the ashen dead.

He used my blood in the weapon's forging. He used my breath, my emotions, and my memories. The blade was attuned to me, to my soul, before I ever touched it. It was shaped perfectly for my grip before my fingers ever closed around its hilt.

Chariz never asked what weapon I desired, nor did he ask about the specifics of weight and shape. His skill was in forging a weapon to match its wielder's needs, twinned with the owner's soul. That was his gift, and his insight. He did not cater to the whims of warlords that demanded ornate flourishes and specific daemons bound into unholy iron. Supplicants brought him the materials and remained outside the artisan's decisions. Trusting in his judgement was not just an aspect of his craft, it was the beginning and end of it.

'Hold this,' he told me at one point.

To my knowledge, he had not slept in six days when he ladled the molten orange metal onto my gauntlets. It was like holding magma. As the superheated liquid steel hissed and steamed and began the slow process of trying to eat through the heat-resistant ceramite of my gauntlets, Chariz unlocked them with smooth haste, using his forge tools to drill them open before tossing them into his forge fire with the molten sludge he had bid me to carry.

Several nights later, he pressed a slice of black shrapnel into my mouth. It immediately lacerated my tongue, filling my mouth with the copper spice of my own blood over the scorched earth aftertaste of old wars.

'Swallow it,' he told me, 'then cut it out of your belly in one hour, with your own jamdhara. Return it to me still wet with your blood and internal acids.'

I obeyed the first order. An hour later, I obeyed the second, learning as I held it in my palm that he had fed me a fragment of Worldbreaker's spiked head. Immediately after that revelation, I obeyed Chariz's third request. He took it from me without comment, hammering the shard into a lumpen mess of shapeless metal. The anvil he had brought up from Anzu was a block of dark

iron in the shape of a wounded and wingless dragon. The Thaumaturge's hammer seemed to break the beast's back anew with each strike.

Tokugra, Ashur-Kai's familiar, joined us on several nights as the weapon neared completion. The crow would perch upon the gargoyles lining the walls of the primary forge, blessedly silent and keeping its cawed prophecies to itself. Chariz did not even seem to notice it. I suspected Tokugra was here as Ashur-Kai's eyes rather than out of its own interest.

On the final night, a Prosperine lynx padded its way into the cavernous forge. The firelight turned its white eyes into amber gems as it looked around with a disinterested air of lazy, feline self-importance.

Engine-stink and false fire, the beast sent to me. Let us hunt instead of watching the miracle-worker toil.

Chariz heard, for he looked up at the lynx's indolent demand. The hammer fell silent while he turned to the source of the silent words.

'Gyre?' he asked the great cat. I felt him questing towards the beast with his senses. His sixth sense was significantly weaker than mine. I realised it then, as his senses felt almost feeble, like a child's hands unable to keep their grip.

Prosperine lynxes are ill-named, comparatively speaking. Archival evidence indicates that the Ancient Terran root species was a small creature, something of a scavenger that, at best, hunted rodent vermin. The lynxes of my home world were closer in size to Terran horses, and as subtly psychic as the majority of Prospero's fauna. The animal to which they bear the closest resemblance is the Terran tigrus-cat, or tiger, though even they are small and slight by comparison. This lynx was black-furred with dark grey striping along its flanks. It stalked like a murderer and lounged like a contented queen.

'Gyre?' Chariz asked again. The lynx yawned, entirely for show, and licked its sabre-teeth.

I will hunt without you then, it sent to me.

We are almost finished here.

The cat's mind reflected my words back at me - the psychic equivalent of

being too distracted to pay attention. Without any other acknowledgement the lynx padded its way from the forge chamber, pausing only to growl up at Ashur-Kai's crow. Tokugra rustled its feathers and hopped up to a higher gargoyle.

Chariz turned to me, his hammer still in his hand. 'That was a Prosperine lynx.'

'Yes. It was.'

'I believed them extinct.'

'They are.'

'Was it Gyre?'

I gestured to the metal cooling on the anvil. 'Keep working, Thaumaturge.'

## VI

Artisan craftsmen tend to mark their work. A name in the corner of a painting; a flourish at the end of a song; an imprint in the base of a statue - something, somewhere, marking the art as the creator's. Weapon-crafters are no different. Many are the tales of smiths adding a drop of their own blood for symbolic purposes to the quench-water when it comes time to cool a newborn blade.

Chariz gave more than a drop of blood. He gave part of himself, layering his aura and senses around the weapons he created, investing his own pride and power into them. Just a scarce touch of his soul, but enough to mark his blades apart even if his craftsmanship did not make his genius so utterly apparent. To hold one of Chariz's weapons was to know a man had dedicated his whole heart to its perfection.

He presented it to me without ceremony, offering it while it still steamed with the last kiss of the cooling - and blood-tainted

water.

A sword. I had used an axe for decades, but he had fashioned me a sword. I felt no irritation. I knew the blade was mine even before I clutched it, and the moment my fingers closed around the grip I knew I would never again wield a weapon as wholly, utterly mine as this one. Saern was my most precious weapon because of what it represented. The sword Chariz forged for me was by far the finest.

The long blade was silver, rich with acid-etched Tizcan runes in spiralling mantras and mandalas. The hilt was darkened metal, indented for my grip, comfortable beyond comfort. When warriors speak of their weapons being extensions of themselves, they are speaking of familiarity and training. Ibis sword, a blade I had never held before, was an extension of my mind and power as surely as an extension of my arm. It thrummed with a subsonic vibration, the crystal-fed generators in its handle awakening to my touch. The pommel jewel was a gem of psychically-shaped amber, showing an animal's roaring face. The beast was chimeric in nature - half of its face was a howling Fenrisian wolf, the other half was a snarling Prosperine lynx. Somehow it looked natural - Chariz had fashioned the two halves of its head mesh together to perfection.

I felt the weight of the sword in my hands - not its physical weight, but its resonance and importance. The list of arcane materials used in its creation is too long to list here, but the most obvious components cannot be ignored. Here was a sword forged from the fragments of two primarchs' weapons.

It had never woven a wound nor taken a life, yet it pulsed with murmuring threat and lethal promise. How would it sing when bathed in ten thousand years of ichor and blood?

I do not remember how long I was lost there that night, just staring at the piece of perfection crafted for me by my brother. I know that it was his voice that brought me back from my reverie.

'Khayon,' he said, and not for the first time.

I looked at him, realising for the first time that gratitude can reach such heights of ferocity that words are incapable of doing it justice. Instead of speaking, I sent the raw, unfiltered thanks from my heart to his. It was a psychic pressure heavy enough to send him back two steps before he recovered.

'Your satisfaction pleases me in kind,' he said. 'You know what I wish as

payment.'

I did. I had known it since he came aboard.

'We suspected you would ask. Ezekyle has already given his acceptance. You are one of us the moment you wish it, Chariz.'

Before answering, he looked down at my armour, at the colourless war-plate I wore. 'Who am I joining, Khayon? Who are you?'

'We do not yet know.' I cradled the sword in my hands, still caught by its splendour. 'But we are sailing to the remnants of Lupercalios, for we intend to find out. If the last Sons of Horus will not bare their throats and swear allegiance to us, then they will die like the rest.'

Our eyes met in that moment. That simple connection shredded all pretence and deception. The sword was no favour to me. It was his test, his trial to prove worthy of coming with us. Neither of us had said it, yet we had both known it all this time.

'What would you have done with me had I failed, Khayon?'

As I have told Thoth and Siroca so many times before, I am not gifted with a liar's tongue. So, again, I told only the truth.

'I would have gutted you, given your head to Ezekyle, and stolen your Rubricae by binding them to me.'

The eye contact lingered. 'You still intend to take my Rubricae.' It was not a question.

'I do. Whatever this new Legion is called, I will be the master of its ashen dead.'

When the stare finally ended, Chariz was the one to break it. He went to one knee before me, his head lowered, his hand on his heart.

In that moment, he became the first of the Black Legion's warriors ever to kneel to me as his warlord.

'My lord,' he said.

In the back of my mind, I felt Abaddon's presence, and his pride. I le saw everything aboard the Vengeful Spirit. None of us knew how.

It begins, Khayon. It begins.