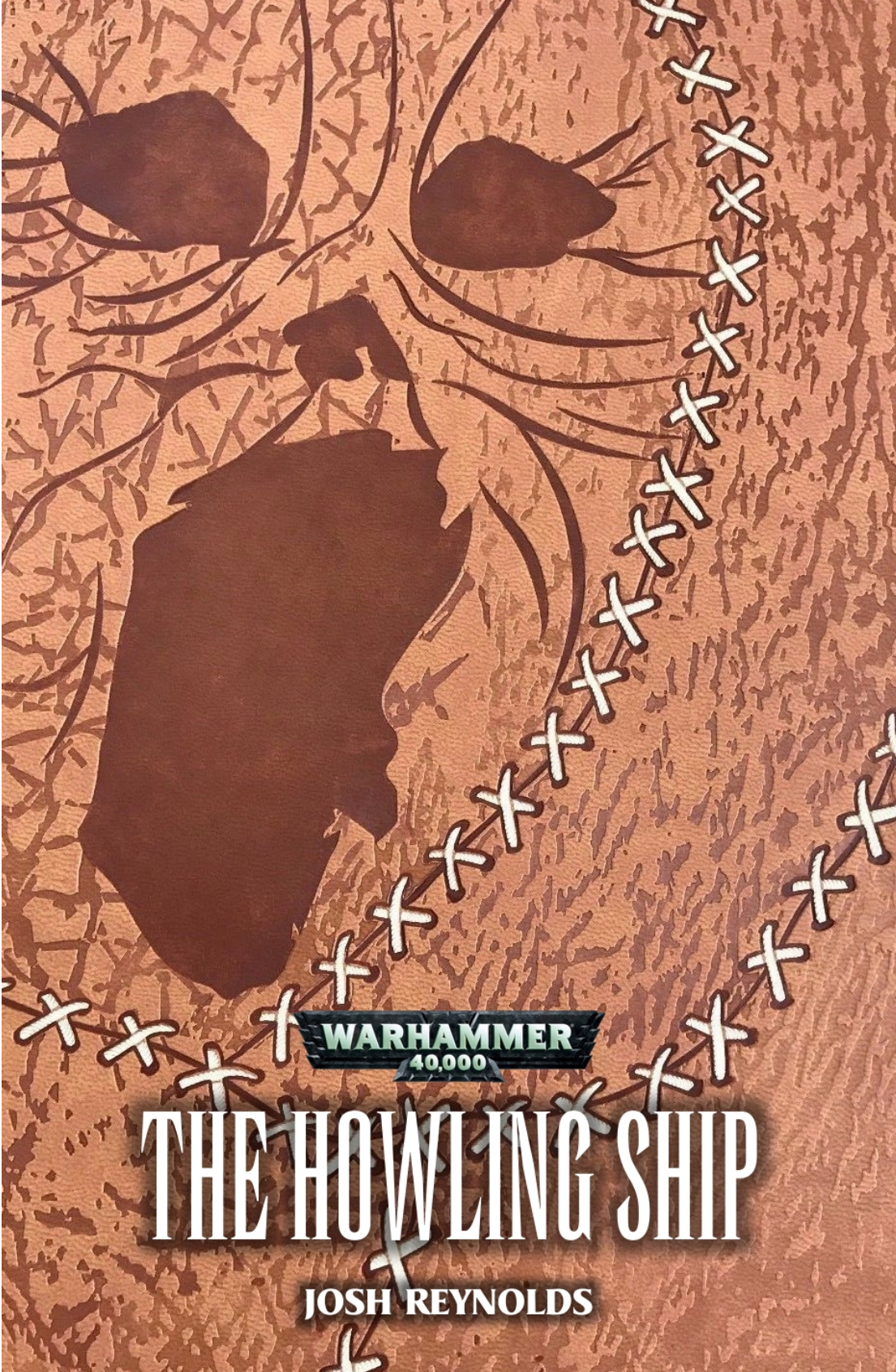


WARHAMMER
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THE HOWLING SHIP

JOSH REYNOLDS



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THE HOWLING SHIP

Josh Reynolds

Now

Lungs straining in the chill of the containment hold, Borja clawed for the grip of his fallen bolt pistol. If he could just reach it... He only needed one shot — just one. Pain trundled up and down within him, gripping his spine with chemical claws. His muscles burned even as his bones cracked and his organs stuttered in their rhythms. Muttered prayers did nothing to hold it back, even as they failed to bring him closer to the pistol. He wanted to scream, but couldn't muster the strength.

Others had no such trouble. The howl rose up from the deep cells, swelling to fill the hold. The sound battered at him, chewing away at his concentration like a chainblade. It was a cry of terminal fear and agony, of rage and helplessness. A thousand throats, a thousand minds, howling as one. The pressure of it beat at the air, caused cogitators to seize and vox-casters to overload. It echoed throughout the ship, pummelling at every living thing with relentless force. Borja tried to tune it out, to ignore the pain of whatever was eating away at his system.

'Emperor aid me,' he said, his voice sounding tinny and weak.

'He is not listening to those prayers you so assiduously mutter, you know. He is dead, and whatever power his husk might have once possessed is elsewhere now,' a voice said. It was deep, but hollow, like the clanging of funerary bell. The gantry creaked with the speaker's weight. This close, he stank of embalming fluid, sour blood and the acrid chemical stink of sterilising solutions. Ancient servos whined within battered ceramite housings as the speaker sank smoothly to his haunches. The screaming of

the caged psykers did not seem to bother him in the least. Indeed, he hummed along with it, as if it were a familiar melody,

'I met him once, you know. Just briefly. Even then, he impressed me. A unique intellect. A true man of science. A philosopher-king, surrounded by primitives. And now... reduced to godhood, by a gaggle of simpering dullards.' Impossibly strong fingers caught Borja's scalp and jerked his head up. He stared into a thin, sallow face, backlit by the sputtering gantry lights. A monster's face, captured in antediluvian pictographs long since scoured from every archive and data-bank in the Imperium, save those secret cogitators hidden on dusty Mars and ominous Titan.

An old nightmare from a forgotten millennium, now made horrid flesh.

Arachnid limbs of brass and plasteel topped by blades, saws and glistening syringes, rose over his hunched frame, twitching in time to some imperceptible cadence. Even armoured, he was skeletally thin, like some starveling parasite crouched inside the shrunken body of a previous victim. The deep amethyst of his power armour had faded to a dull hue, and bare ceramite showed through in places where it was not hidden beneath his skin-coat. Borja fancied that the silently screaming faces which adorned that coat mirrored his own.

'These ships were his idea, you know. Back then, these gloomy cells would have been places of quiet contemplation and meditation. Witches were rare things, and much prized. Now... Well. Now things have changed, have they not?'

Hollow, cold eyes studied him, probing him. The monster saw him and saw through him, to the very meat of his soul. And he knew it found him wanting. Borja writhed beneath the weight of that gaze. Fear flooded him – no, not simply fear, but terror. A pure terror, as visceral as any childhood fright. The hollow gaze did not flicker, did not seem to notice the horror which gripped him. He might as well have been an insect, pinned to a board.

'He would not be pleased with this. With any of it. Though, he might understand, even as I do. I have always admired humanity's willingness to self-medicate. For that is what this is. An attempt to treat an unknown illness - or a forgotten one. A wasteful attempt, and foolish, but one must acknowledge it nonetheless.'

The monster let Borja's head fall, and stood. Borja groaned. The bolt

pistol was too far away. He couldn't make his fingers work. The pain boiled away all thought of movement, all hope of anything save surrender. Still, he tried.

The monster sighed. 'I salute your dedication, sir. I can do no less.'

A heavy boot caught Borja between the shoulders, pinning him to the frost-coated gantry. 'Nonetheless, I will have my prize... one way or another.'

Then

'A good hunt, then?'

Borja turned from the oculus, a frown on his seamed face. 'Is it ever, Sarban?' he said, running a thumb along the groove of scar tissue that decorated his throat. Inquisitor Borja was a short man. He was dark and broadly built, dressed in pale robes and heavy armour the colour of bone. Purity seals and prayer ribbons decorated his armour. A weighty Mordian-pattern blade hung from one hip, its power-generator humming softly as he tapped his thumb against the pommel.

'Well, you survived, at least,' Sarban said. Her voice was deceptively mild. The mistress of ordnance for the Black Ship *Savonarola* was a true daughter of the world of Perkunas: willowy thin and as pale as milk. She had been trained at a young age by the ordnance-adepts of the Houses of Thunder and was fully conversant in the common language of high explosives. She turned her attentions back to her holo-charts. 'More than I expected, really.'

Borja restrained a smile. 'I do my best to live up to your low expectations.'

Some things never changed. Sarban thought in terms of vectors, trajectories, distances and yields, and cared little for the niceties of conduct. His status as an agent of the Holy Inquisition did little to deter her from sharing her opinions. He turned back to the view-screen. Watching the stars flicker by alleviated his frustrations somewhat. 'No, it was not a good hunt. But it was successful. The Howling Man is restrained. He will be bound and sacrificed to the Emperor, after his soul has been cleansed.' A fitting fate for one who'd tried to thwart the Emperor's will. Or one who'd made an annoyance of himself, at the very least.

'How many did he kill? A few hundred?' Sarban said, studying her charts. The ship was off course and behind schedule, which wasn't unusual given the choppy nature of the Emyrean this close to the Eye. Sarban was one of the most experienced mistresses of ordnance the Houses of Thunder had ever produced, and she had been with the Black Ship *Savonarola* for longer than Borja had known her.

The cruiser was one of thousands that made up the League of Black Ships, the recruiting fleet of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. They were the second largest human fleet in the galaxy and the most feared. Where the Black Ships passed, worlds were stripped of innocents, saints and monsters, all to cull unsanctioned psykers as well as provide cadets for the ranks of the Imperium's sanctioned psykers. And, of course, to feed the ranks of psychic kindling which kept the Astronomican lit.

Borja didn't like to think of that. Either the requirements of keeping the Astronomican burning or what would happen if it ever went out. The thought of the latter and its consequences kept him awake most nights, and at his appointed task, no matter how it rankled at times. Sacrifices were required to keep the Imperium turning.

'Whatever number it was, it was hardly enough to warrant commandeering us and taking us so far off schedule,' Sarban continued. Conscience as she was, she took the delay personally.

'A few million is more than enough, if you count the soldiers who died in the uprisings he sparked.' Borja frowned. The true death-roll yet uncalculated and likely never would be. The Paramar system was still in a state of upheaval, but the inquisitor had little doubt that the noble houses could handle things now, in their own way. Suhl Osman, better known as the Howling Man, had been the spark that set the system alight. Now that he was safely restrained in an isolation cell in the hold of the *Savonarola*, the flames he'd stirred would dwindle to nothing. Maybe.

Borja forced the thought aside. It wasn't his concern, from his brief meeting with the representatives of the Hundred Houses, he wasn't entirely certain that the system-lords didn't deserve everything that was happening to them. The Howling Man was a symptom of a greater corruption, but an institutionalised one, rather than a heretical one. He was a revolutionary, not a cultist. But revolution was just as great a heresy as worshipping something with too many syllables in its name. Especially if it was led by

someone whose merest whisper could crack ceramite like glass.

Paramar was hobbled by its decadence, and growing worse even as the system-lords attempted to crack down on the various rebellions, all the while indulging themselves in the expense of the greater planetary populations. Heresies sprang up like weeds between such cracks in the stone of Imperial law. The Howling Man was just the first — and loudest. There would be others. Until then it wasn't his concern.

'How far out are we?' he asked.

'To Sol? Or away from Paramar?'

'Either.'

'Nowhere near and still too close.' She glanced at him. 'Was it really that bad, then?'

He shook his head. 'Worse than I expected, better than I feared. Paramar is cancerous. If it's not treated, it'll erupt into war. Removing Osman from the equation staves off the inevitable for a few decades more. But—'

'But it's a symptom, rather than the cause.' Sarban tapped a star-chart. 'You did all you could. We all do what we can, Borja. That's all the Emperor asks.'

'Maybe,' Borja said. He flexed his hand, feeling the pull of newly healed skin. He'd come closer to death on Paramar than he liked to think about.

Only Emperor's grace had rescued him from the ignominy of being turned into paste by Osman's psychokinetic abilities. He closed his fist, banishing the thought.

'I'm looking forward to being well away from here, however the Emperor feels about it,' the captain of the *Savonarola* said. Captain Helgic was a short stump of a man, born of low-gravity stock and built as tough as old boots. Fusion scars marred otherwise ugly features, turning his scowl into something monstrous.

'Was the hospitality of Paramar not to your liking, captain?' Borja aid.

'Nothing to enjoy,' Helgic said. 'Besides, too many pirates. Whole system is rife with them.' He stood at the edge of the command deck, hands behind his back.

'Pirates would never dare attack a Black Ship. They'd be mad to try,' Sarban said.

'Even so, there are better systems. Safer stars.' Helgic glanced at the inquisitor. 'Further we get from the Eye, the better. Especially with a

bellyful of witches.'

'That we agree on,' Borja said. He shivered slightly, thinking of the other damned souls occupying the containment cells in the ship's hold - besides the Howling Man, there were almost a thousand psykers huddled below. The *Savonarola* had been collecting the tithe from nearby systems, when Borja had requisitioned it for his own mission. It was the only vessel within three systems that possessed the proper equipment to restrain a psyker as powerful as the one now in its hold.

'Why you didn't simply kill him is beyond me,' Sarban said, leaning back in her throne. 'Then we wouldn't be off course and behind schedule. Besides, isn't that what inquisitors do? Kill people?' She said it blandly, without rancour. Even so, her words stung. There was truth there.

'Only those who threaten the Imperium,' Borja said. Even as he said it he thought back to his meeting with the system-lords. They hadn't been happy to see him, but then, no one was ever overjoyed to find the representative of the Inquisition on their doorstep, even when needed them. And they had needed him. They were smug creatures, grown fat on the toil of others. There was no shame in being king of the hive but, something about them had set his teeth on edge. He'd considered digging into their affairs, if only to teach them a much-needed lesson in humility, but he'd accomplished what he'd set out to do, and saw little need to waste further time dealing with them if he didn't have to.

'And who decides that?' Sarban pressed. 'How many get sacrificed for the good of the Imperium, Borja?' There was a recognisable edge to her words now. It was an old argument, born of familiarity, and one of the reasons he allowed her to speak so freely to him. Faith, like a sword, occasionally needed to be sharpened. And the best way to sharpen faith was with challenge.

'As many as are required,' Borja said, softly.

Sarban made to reply. Helgic gripped the top of her cradle. 'Quiet.'

Borja waved a hand. 'It's fine.'

'It's not. She knows better. She's just sour because we're a bit behind.'

'Fifty-six hours behind. Fifty. Six.' Sarban slapped the edges of her throne. She sounded as if she were glad of the change of subject. 'That's more than a bit.'

'My apologies,' Borja said.

'Apology not accepted.'

Before she could elaborate further, the stillness of the command deck was shattered by a howl. Long and quavering, it echoed from every vox-caster in sight, gathering volume and strength the longer it went on. Not the cry of a beast, but a man in torment. It rose, sweeping over the command deck like a wave. It beat at the ears and brain, striking with animal fury.

Sarban shouted something, but Borja heard nothing save the howl. Hands clamped to his ears, he watched as a junior officer fell to his knees, cybernetic systems sparking as the feedback tore them apart. Borja realised that it wasn't one voice, but many, joined together in a single, communal howl of fear.

* * *

Now

Sarban spat numbers as fast as she could conceive them. Firing solutions scrolled across her holo-slate, ranges for a war waged across oceans of distance. *Savonarola* bucked as its attackers gouged its flanks with lance-fire. Helgic barked orders, his voice never rising above an even rumble. Weapons batteries fired, flinging bright death into the dark. The command deck echoed with the screech of proximity klaxons and the babble of the vox, as crew-stations reported in. Gravity was out on decks three through five, thanks to a hull breach. Two hull breaches, she realised, as more reports came in.

But only two, and close together. Close to where the psy-shielded upper decks gave way to the hold. A Black Ship was almost two vessels in one, connected by internal, dedicated transit-shafts. Were they being boarded? If so, Borja would need to be warned. A flicker of worry raced through her. She hoped the inquisitor was still alive. She pushed the thought aside as the deck shuddered again. They might all be dead, if she didn't pay attention.

'Don't these fools know who we are?' It had been centuries since anyone had dared attack a Black Ship. They were armed to the teeth. It wasn't worth it, not to pirates. A single Black Ship on its own could murder a planet.

Yet here they were. Here it was. Her eyes went to the breach-reports

again. Why just two? Luck, or something else? If it had been a boarding action, there would have been reports. There was something funny about them... too low on the hull to hit anything vital.

'If they do know, they don't care. And if they don't, it's too late to tell them. I need more numbers. We got out of their way. Now give me a heading so we can kill these bastards,' Captain Helgic growled into her ear.

She started as his ugly face thrust close to hers. More numbers spilled from her lips, automatic now. It was all numbers. Void war was just number war: trajectories, firing solutions, coordinates, range, predictive mathematics... numbers.

One set of numbers against another. She closed her eyes, trying to calm herself, but it was impossible.

The howling continued, echoing from every vox, and from half of the servitors, slaved to their control-cradles. A raw-throated roar of fear and panic, rising up to swallow her. She pounded her fists against the sides of her head. 'Can't we shut them up – I can't think. Why hasn't Borja silenced them yet?' she screamed. 'I can't work like this.'

Helgic gripped her shoulder. She took strength from that grip. Helgic had been leaving corpses floating between the stars since before she was born, he had a kill-rate more than three times that of the average frigate captain, and had had at least five ships shot out from under him. But he'd never lost. That was why the *Astra Telepathica* had chosen him to captain the *Savonarola*. He was as merciless in his way as they were in theirs.

'Two hull breaches — we're being boarded...!' Sarban began, her voice hoarse with stress. Someone had to warn Borja. Even if she was wrong, the possibility was too much to ignore. 'Did you hear? Maybe...'

'Read me the numbers, Mistress of Ordnance. Give me the equations. That is all you must do,' Helgic said, squeezing her shoulder. 'Focus on that. Let me worry about the rest.'

A console exploded, and a servitor squalled, its howl cut short. Crew rushed to dampen the flames. Helgic snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. 'Numbers, Sarban. Forget the howling, forget Borja. He can look after himself. It is up to us to look after ourselves. Give me a trajectory. If we do not kill them, they will kill us, boarders or no.'

She gave him his numbers. He grimaced and flung out a hand, bellowing orders. The *Savonarola* shook like a wounded animal. She felt the tremors

of its engines as it swung itself about, slowly, so slowly. Time slowed, an infinitesimal moment stretched across what felt like hours. Void war was just number war. But numbers could kill as easily as a bolt round to the head. Easier, in fact. The deck shuddered as the main battery fired. The power of the guns thrummed up through her, rattling her teeth in her jaw, momentarily blotting out the incessant howl slithering from the vox. But not for long.

'Ha, that's the way - light them up, you wretches. Sear the void clean,' Helgic said, hunching forward with pugnacious enthusiasm. The deck yawed beneath his feet, but he didn't so much as twitch. More lance-fire flared across the oculus-screen, bright streaks of plasma, carving a pale scar across the flesh of infinity. There was no up or down in the void, and their attackers moved at convergent angles. One wheeled away, venting raw plasma. The other kept on its interception course.

They were frigates, she thought, and old. They bristled with unsanctioned and unholy modifications - reinforced prows, blister-like sensor nodes and strange, baroque ornamentation. Whenever the Black Ship's sensors tried to identify them, consoles would explode and a wash of sparks would tumble down across the command deck, filling the air with heat and light. Someone, somewhere, was screaming, and the howling continued - impossibly loud, impossibly long.

Where was Borja? What had happened to him?

She pushed the thought aside, looking for more numbers. He would have to look after himself. But she said a little prayer all the same.

Then

Crew members stumbled, clutching at their heads as the howl exploded from every vox-caster and cogitator-grille. Helgic cursed and slumped against Sarban's throne, momentarily stunned by the sudden assault. She tasted blood, and reached up to touch her face. The scream edged upwards into nigh-inaudibility, but the pressure was still there. It throbbed on the air like the heartbeat of a giant. It beat at her mind, drowning everything else out, and she heard Borja begin to speak, to rattle off something that might have been a prayer. Whatever he was spouting, it didn't seem to be having much effect on whatever assailed them. The pressure increased, unabated.

A psychic smog flooded the deck, rising like smoke from the vox-casters. She hunched forward in her throne, seeking the path to safety as panic gnawed at her heart. She grabbed hold of the old disciplines, taught to all children of the Houses of Thunder, gripping them tight, hoping they might shield her from the mad roar of sound. 'I will not be beaten by... by *noise*,' she hissed.

Only the most disciplined of candidates were assigned the Black Ships. Only those who could drink from the poisoned chalice of such an honour, and flourish, to bring glory to their house and lineage. The Houses of Thunder had supplied ordnance masters to the Imperial fleet for time out of mind, and she would be damned if she was going to be the first to break in combat.

She began to recite the forty-third stanza of her oath of service under her breath, stacking one verse atop the next, over and over, building her bubble. She was a Sarban, and she would not be beaten. She had a duty to perform, and she would continue to do so until the numbers failed her, and her soul crumbled to dust.

Gradually, the pain began to fade. The sound faded, not entirely, but enough. Enough for her to focus on what was in front of her. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Below, servitors jerked in their cradles, and began screaming lines of meaningless code. The numbers sluiced together, merging into the greater howl, anchoring it, redoubling it. Several crew members had slumped at their stations, weeping or stunned. Helgic roared orders, fighting to be heard over the howl. Borja drew his pistol and fired. A servitor slumped, skull burst. The rest fell silent. So too did the vox-casters. Helgic looked at him. 'What—?'

'Break the circuit,' Borja said, rubbing his ear. 'It's always the way of it.'

'What was that?' Sarban croaked, trying to rub the ache out of her temples. The sound had been psychically induced, whatever it was. She'd served aboard a Black Ship long enough to recognise the taste of iron and cinnamon on her tongue. She wiped her mouth, shuddering in disgust, wondering if Borja had felt it as well.

'It's the Howling Man,' Borja said. 'I recognise that scream. Somehow, he's managed to subvert the restraints. He—'

Whatever he'd been about to say was lost as the howling surged up again,

all the louder for the moment of silence.

'Impossible,' Helgic said, almost shouting. He flung up a hand a moment later. 'I know, I know. Obviously not impossible.'

Before Borja could reply, proximity klaxons began to wail, dueling the howl. Crew-stations began to report in, spilling a confusing babble of voices into the air. The howling rode the frequencies, almost droning everything else out.

'Two ships approaching at all speed,' she said, loudly.

'Pirates?' Helgic said.

'I don't know. Sensors aren't getting a proper fix on them,' Sarban said shouting to be heard over the screams echoing through the vox. 'They're fast, whatever they are. We can't outrun them.' She blinked. 'Are you smiling?' It was hard to tell, with a face like Helgic's.

'Yes,' Helgic said. 'Haven't had a proper slobberknocker in some time. If they want a fight, I'm happy to give it to them.' He stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it about. 'Be better if that dashed screaming would stop, but we can't have everything.'

'Whoever they are, they're not the real danger. Osman is - if he breaks loose...' Borja began, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

'He's your responsibility, inquisitor. As this ship and its cargo is mine. You see to yours, and I'll see to whoever's come knocking,' Helgic said, meeting Borja's gaze calmly.

Sarban was impressed. Borja, for all his politesse, was an intimidating man, and he spoke with the voice of the Inquisition. But Helgic was a captain of the Imperial Navy and had a spine of pure ceramite.

'We do not have time for this,' Sarban said.

Both men looked at her.

'Missiles incoming,' a servitor said, with a decided lack of concern. The bridge shuddered. Sparks burst from a console and spilled down setting a servitor alight.

As crew members raced to dampen the flames, Borja turned to the captain. 'I need a security team. We need to make sure he stay where he is — or failing that, we need to see that he poses no threat. The rest I leave in your capable hands.'

'As you command, inquisitor,' Captain Helgic said. Thumping his chest in salute. 'Armsmen will be waiting for you on the access deck.' More alarms

began to screech.

'Thank you, Sarban,' Borja said, leaning close.

'Thank me if we survive this. You handle him. Leave the rest to us,' she said, looking up at him. 'Be careful, Borja. I felt something - in the howl, I mean. I think they might be frightened.' It sounded foolish, even as she said it. Of course they were scared, given where they were heading. They'd be fools not to be. But what she'd felt had been different. More immediate. Not just fear. Terror.

Borja nodded slowly. 'I will,' he said. He touched her shoulder, but briefly, hesitantly. Then he was gone, and she had only her numbers and her prayers.

Now

'Listen to them, screaming their hearts out. As if a few decibels more or less will make a difference to their ultimate fate. I suspect an attempt at catharsis, a search for relief from fear and pain,' the abomination said, conversationally. 'I have done much the same myself, on occasion. It seems a shame to cut it short, but — ah. There they go.'

The howl faltered, as it had on the bridge, when Borja had shot the servitor, as the circuit had been momentarily broken. The monster went to the cell and tried to open it. But the cell was code-locked, and only Borja knew the proper numerical string to open it. He heard a growl of frustration as the cell resisted the best efforts of the would-be thief, and took strength from it. Osman was his prisoner, and would stay that way.

The howl surged back, perhaps not as strong, but still strong enough. The monster grunted in annoyance and backed away from the cell. 'This will not serve, you know,' he said.

Borja couldn't tell who he was speaking to.

'I can break the lock, given time. But that is something I suffer a distinct paucity of. If only I had the code for the cell...' A sigh, as of an old man struck by a sudden memory. 'Time. Time has always been my enemy. Not death, nor really. But time is a bastard. It eats away at everything. Don't you agree, inquisitor?'

The gantry-rail creaked. From the corner of his eye, Borja made out the ghoulish figure leaning over it, as if surveying the depths below.

'The Sisters of Silence once crewed these ships. Few would willingly

stand in their way, or interfere with them. Even the most ardent of brothers were understandably hesitant to confront them.' A laugh, awful and without mirth, pierced the echoing din.

Borja's fingers trembled just a few inches shy of the grip of his bolt pistol. A finger's breadth from salvation. His nerves still burned with whatever toxin he'd been dosed with, but he pushed past the pain. Or tried to, at least. Inquisitorial training could only carry a man so far. But he didn't need to go far. Just a few inches more. He prayed for strength.

If he gave in, he might as well be dead.

The monster was still talking. 'They are gone now, I think. Like so many things. As so many things will be, come what may. Entropy, my friend, is the great worm which gnaws. Foundations flee and things come undone. But there is life in the ruins yet, I feel. And it will flourish, beneath my guiding will. As your Emperor once guided us, I shall guide the future-man, the New Man. But I shall not be an absent father, oh no... I will stand at his shoulder, and show him all the wonder and glory of the universe. Would you like to see that?'

He knelt again, armoured fingers clutching at the back of Borja's neck like the talons of some demented bird of prey. Or like those of an angel stripped of all pity and mercy. Breath made foul by something cancerous washed over Borja's face. 'You are strong, my friend. A weaker man would have died by now, eaten alive by the pain. But here you still fighting for every breath. I admire that. And so, I make my offer. I can make the pain go away, if you but give me the code to open the cell.' He slid the pistol a millimetre closer to Borja. Then he slid it further away, far out of reach. 'Or I can make it worse. Your choice, my friend.'

Borja slumped, limbs trembling. The fire was in his bones now, eating away the marrow. Blossom of red bloomed behind his eyes and his synapses felt as if they had been dipped in acid. He was being consumed from within. It was growing worse with every pacing moment. Still, he reached for the bolt pistol. The world narrowed to the delicate filigree fining the grip, and the Inquisitorial sigil stamped on it.

The grip on his neck relaxed. 'Death is for fools. In a universe gone mad, we need people with common sense, don't you think? Who better to show humanity the way than one who has seen the worst and survived? Give me the code. Learn from this mistake. Live to fight another day.'

'Make your choice.'

Then

A black-armoured nightmare thundered through the bulkhead. The vox throbbed with screams and curses as the monstrosity roared and swept out his chainaxe. The diamond-hard teeth bit into a hapless armsman's gorget and tore through the metal as if it were paper. His head rocketed from his neck, followed by a glistening spurt of blood, which spread like oil through the gravity-less corridor.

The head bounced across the deck at Borja's feet. The Traitor Marine howled like some great wolf. His armour was festooned with totemic fetishes and savage sigils that hurt the eyes. It was an obscene thing, an impossible thing. Borja had never seen a Renegade Astartes in the flesh, though he'd read about them, in the Abominatus Archives.

The fifty-seventh verse of the Sigsand mantra sprang to his lips. Agents of the Inquisition were taught early to build ramparts of faith and repetition in their heads to hold back the assaults of the Primordial Annihilator. Somehow, he didn't think his old tutors had had these sorts of assaults in mind. He fired his bolt pistol. The handful of surviving armsmen joined him, unleashing a fusillade of lasbolts on the advancing renegade.

The crews of the Black Ships were chosen from among those who could withstand the almost brain-searing malaise caused by confining thousands of frightened, half-mad psykers together in the same space. A few were blanks — lacking even a modicum of psychic potential. Others were simply preternaturally hardy. Whatever they were, they were disciplined. The remaining ten armsmen held the line, and, at his order, began to fall back. While it was possible that they could overwhelm the brute, it would be a costly endeavor. Better to retreat, and preserve his men for more important duties, like protecting the hold.

This was nothing more than a distraction, and likely one being repeated elsewhere on the ship. If the garbled messages streaming across the vox were any indication. A single renegade, even two or three, could be contained, albeit with some difficulty.

One of the armsmen, slower than the others, was caught by their attacker. The chain-axe whirred down, splitting the unfortunate crewman from

crown to crotch. The Renegade Astartes shoved the bifurcated body aside as lasbolts caromed off his blackened power armour. He thudded towards the remaining armsmen, taking a two-handed grip on his weapon.

'Fall back,' Borja said, fighting to keep calm. 'Fall back to Junction C-5.' He took aim, trusting in the Emperor to guide his hand. The bolt pistol bucked in his grip, and the roar was comfortingly loud in the confined space of the corridor. For a moment, it even drowned out the howling.

The renegade staggered as the shot caught him in the head. He hesitated, just long enough for Borja and the others to reach the next bulkhead and seal it. Adamantine plates slid into place, and the seals swelled with a welcome hiss. A thump echoed a few moments later, from the other side, followed by a muted howl of rage.

'Throne's sake, what was that?' one of the armsmen said. Like the others, he was clad in insulated overalls, marked with armaplas plates on his chest and shoulders, and a durable combat rig, holding extra power packs for his lasgun, as well as a combat knife. His chest-plate was marked with the aquila and the encircled eye of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

'A distraction,' Borja said. 'We've been boarded.' He turned. 'You, and you. Fall back to the transit shaft. Seal every bulkhead behind you and lock down the lower holds. There's only one reason something like that—' he gestured to the bulkhead, '—would be interested in a ship like this. The rest of you, come with me. We have to see to the prisoners, and initiate standing orders, if necessary.'

His words resulted in a flurry of nervous looks. No one liked going down into the lower holds, even at the best of times. There were a few nulls among the crew, but none in evidence here. Only normal if highly trained men. Men whose cast-iron nerves were stretched to the breaking point, both by slaughter they had just witnessed and the night-omnipresent howl still echoing from the vox. Borja had limited its reach by switching frequencies, but it was still there, in every warning klaxon and vox-caster.

'There is nothing for it,' Borja said, meeting every eye. 'The howl grows worse. We must silence it. We cannot let those damned souls in the hold fall into the hands of creatures like that. We are the servants of the God-Emperor and we have a holy duty. I will not sanction you for feeling fear. But Throne help me, I will, if you give in to it.' He raised his bolt pistol. 'If you give in to fear, you are as good as dead already and of no use to either

me or the Emperor.'

'We're with you, sir,' one of the crew, a bulky Cadian named Gorman, said. He tapped the sign of the aquila tattooed over his eye. 'In the Emperor's name.'

'In His name,' Borja said.

The reinforced hatches that led to the hold marked every major junction. The hold stretched from aft to stern, a cavernous, open space of gantries, walkways and containment cells, suspended by a collapsible frame. If necessary, the hold could be opened to the void, and the cells unlocked, so that the cargo could be dumped. If it came to this, he would order it himself. Better to sacrifice a cargo than to lose the ship.

Borja had heard stories of psykers going mad, becoming something other despite the restraints placed on them, and the resulting monstrosities being vented into the Immaterium, along with their unfortunate victims. Some whispered that such abominations still lived, waiting for their chance to latch onto a passing ship and resumes their murderous frenzy.

He doubted that was the cue here. The containment harness Osman wore was operated by holy circuitry and had been blessed by high-ranking adepts. It constricted his vocal cords, keeping him from utilising his abilities to their full potential. Yet somehow, he'd managed to override the circuitry and fill the vox with his devilish caterwaul.

A short-distance transit-elevator carried Borja, Gorman and the others to the upper gantries of the hold. A flat plain of ironwork extended into the gloom in every direction. Lumen strips cast a weak light, and ice particles glittered on the air. The holds were insulated, but otherwise unheated. Frost clung to every available surface and Borja's breath formed a cloud about his head.

The hold echoed with the howl. It undulated from gantry to gantry, savaging the air. Every scaffold and strut vibrated with the force of that sound, and ice cracked and shattered from the incessant sonic dirge. The hold was acting as a massive amplifier, doubling and redoubling the howl with every passing moment. It rose from the deepest cells, crawling up towards them. Borja tried to ignore it. If it grew too strong, it might overload the ship's systems entirely.

Security alarms were flashing silently, casting eerie shadows through the

frost-wracked air. Those alarms signalled that something was loose in the hold. Grim possibilities ran through his mind, including the likelihood that one of the captive psykers had opened a breach to the warp. Even as the thought occurred to him, Borja dismissed it. The daemonic had a particular odour, and it was one which was thankfully not in evidence. No, this was the work of the Howling Man. He was certain of it. The thought reassured him, somewhat. Osman was a known quantity. Powerful, yes, murderous, certainly, but known.

'That sound... it's like ants in my brain,' Gorman muttered. Borja glanced at the armsman, and saw that he was sweating profusely. His eyes were wide and wild, and he flinched at shadows. The other remaining armsmen were faring little better. They murmured and huddled together as they walked.

The hold of a Black Ship was unnerving at the best of times. Too many psykers in too small a space played havoc with the natural order, even if they were restrained. An unprepared mind might suffer hallucinations, or simply... break, from proximity. The armsmen were better trained than that, but the howl was like acid on their nerves, steadily eating away at their discipline. The howl needed to be silenced, and quickly.

'There is strength in faith,' Borja said. 'Find your faith, find your strength. Or I will find it for you.' He held Gorman's eyes, until the armsman looked away. 'We descend. Every man pick a level. Vox-silence, unless you find something. If you see anything, call it in.'

Men peeled off from the group as they descended, filing silently down stairwells and out along connective walkways, hunting for any sign of the intruders. They did so reluctantly, but followed his orders without complaint. Gorman was the last to go. 'Throne keep you, inquisitor,' he said.

'And you, armsman. Remember - He is always watching,' Borja said. Gorman nodded jerkily and vanished into the swirling clouds of frost. Borja continued on alone. He intended to check on Osman himself. The others had their orders, and he knew they would follow them, whatever their fears. The howl continued, rising and falling, shaking the gantries as he crossed over the gaps between containment cells. The very air rippled with the force of it. More than once, a gantry reverberated free of its housing, nearly tumbling him into the depths. Power conduits burst,

scattering sparks into the depths, and lumen strips popped and went dark. His vox-link fuzzed and crackled, dropping in and out. The ship was dying. The howl was flaying its systems, node by node.

In every cell he passed the psykers stared at him with the same expression - fear. They were contorted in their restraints, and the sound grew worse if he drew near their cell. It was as if they were trying to keep him, or something else, away.

He heard the first whispers as he descended the steps to Level 7-C. A crawling, scratching murmur, sliding beneath the howl. Implorations, hissed from a hundred mouths, but with one voice. And a familiar one at that.

Despite the psy-blockers and restraint-litanies, Osman was speaking through his fellow captives. It wasn't unusual for the minds of weaker psykers to resonate with those of stronger ones. A crude gestalt, often formed out of instinct. Blind minds, seeking what little comfort there was to be had in the dark of the galaxy.

The sheer force of this particular gestalt was only bearable due to its diffuse nature. It wasn't aimed anywhere in particular, which was why the ship, not to mention its crew, was still in one piece. It put him in mind of some sort of instinctive defence mechanism... as if these weaker minds had been caught up in Osman's wake, rather than joining him by choice.

Borja pushed the thought aside as he heard a snuffling from somewhere below. He froze, and glanced down. Distorted shapes, barely visible in the dim light of the lumen strips, shuffled below him. They were larger than men, their bodies twisted into impossible contortions of muscle and bone, as if their creator had been seeking to understand the limits of mortal flesh. Bestial eyes glared out at the world through masks of scar tissue and abnormal bone growth. The mutated creatures slunk along the lower gantry, clutching battered weapons in fumbling paws. Their foul breath frosted in the air of the hold as they neared a particular cell. Borja knew whose cell it was without even having to check - the Howling Man.

Without thinking, Borja caught the rail and vaulted to the lower gantry. His feet caught one of the mutants in the back. Abnormal bones snapped under the impact, and the creature flopped down, squealing. Borja caught its head in his hands and gave its neck a vicious twist. It fell silent. Borja drew his bolt pistol as another mutant scuttled towards him on flipper-like

feet, its circular, fanged maw pulsing wetly. His shot punched through its rubbery flesh and knocked it from the gantry.

A club studded with rivets thudded down on his arm, jostling the pistol from his grip. Ignoring the pain, Borja drove his elbow into his attacker's belly. The mutant folded over with a grunt, and the inquisitor drove stiffened fingers into its compound eyes. The mutant screamed and reared back, clawing at its face. Borja lunged to his feet, drawing his power sword. The blade hummed as it swept out in a tight arc. Bestial flesh parted like smoke and the mutant slumped back as its innards spilled between its scrabbling paws.

A scream – a pure bolt of sound – sewed through the air and the fourth mutant's head burst, even as it made to strike him. Its body toppled over Borja and he shoved it away with a curse. In the darkness of the cell, someone coughed. Borja staggered to his feet and struck the lumen pad, illuminating the interior. The occupant glared at him.

'You,' Osman said, his voice as raspy as Borja remembered it. Despite the noise, he could hear the psyker as if they were speaking normally, the Howling Man looked the worse for his captivity. The wounds he had taken had scabbed, but he was still hollow-cheeked and pale. He was an angular man, covered in ganger electroos and old scars. He crouched amid a web of chains, their links strung with aquila amulets.

'Me,' Borja said. 'Cease your howling, heretic.'

'No. Not until I'm away from here. Open up this cell and let me loose, or I'll boil your brains in your skull like I should've done on Paramar.'

He shook his restraints. Burnt out power couplings and fried capacitors revealed at last the purpose of his wailing. Osman was trying to scream himself free of his restraints, and his fellow prisoners were acting as unconscious amplifiers. But the feedback from the gestalt was overloading the circuits in more than just the cell. There was no telling which would give out first — Osman's restraints, or the ship itself.

'You do not dictate terms, heretic. You are a prisoner, not a passenger,' Borja said, squinting against the racket. If he risked opening the cell, to put a bolt-shell in the psyker's brain, Osman might very well kill him before he could get a shot off.

'I know what I am, Borja. And I know that I — we — are in danger. I can feel the ship rattle every time I scream, and I'll happily howl it to death if I

have to. I know what he means for me, and I don't intend to let that happen. I'll kill us all, rather than fall into his hands. Do you hear me?'

'Who are you frightened of — the renegades? They're no threat to this vessel. We have them contained,' Borja said, thinking of the black-armoured hulk who'd so easily butchered Helgic's armsmen. Had they come for Osman? It wouldn't be the first time the servants of the Ruinous Powers had come looking to steal away the Emperor's due.

'Not them. Someone worse...' Osman trailed off. His gaze sharpened. 'You have to let me out!' His head rocked back, and he began to scream. The world blurred around Borja, fading in and out as the sound enveloped him. He staggered back from the cell, trying to reorient himself. The effect was stronger than before, overwhelming his mental defences. As he fell against the rail, the scream faded into ragged coughing. 'I won't let him take me,' Osman said, hoarsely. 'You have to let me out. Or kill me. Just do something.'

'Who, Osman? Who are you afraid of?' Borja said, staring at the man in the cell, considering whether he should simply shoot him now and be done with it. But he needed to know what could be more frightening to an unsanctioned psyker than the bowels of a Black Ship. 'Are they the reason you drowned a system in blood?'

'You know why I did it,' the Howling Man croaked. 'It had to be done. The lords of Paramar are monsters. They have to be stopped.'

'That's not for you to decide.'

'Then who? The Emperor, maybe?'

The Emperor, the Emperor, the Emperor. The voices, too hoarse to scream, slithered out of the nearest cells.

'It's all rotten, fool, root and branch. Paramar is a glorified Petri dish. And it has been for a long time. It started with the system-lords, and spread, like a virus.' Osman's eyes bulged and spittle hissed against the cell's power field. A power coupling cracked from his restraint harness and slid to the floor, sizzling.

'The only virus I saw was you.' But even as he said it, Borja knew he was wrong. He'd sensed something on Paramar. Despite what he'd thought, it looked as if his mission there wasn't over. If there were any truth to Osman's words, the entire system might need to be purged.

'I'm a symptom, not the sickness itself,' Osman snapped. He trashed in his

chains. 'Maybe you should have looked more closely, inquisitor. But now he's come for me and it's too late. Let me out!'

The sound of his voice reverberated through Borja's bones. It was eclipsed by the creaking of the hull. The ship shuddered. Vox-alarms began to blare along the upper gantries. Osman slumped. 'No. Too late...'

Too late, too late. TOO LATE. The voices rose in a scream, echoing throughout the hold. Borja shuddered at the raw, animal panic in that sound. 'Too late for what? What are you talking about?'

All at once, the howling ceased. Not just Osman's, but all of it. It was as if every mouth in the hold had snapped shut at once. Borja looked around startled by the sudden silence.

'He's here,' Osman whispered.

Now

Sarban prayed to the God-Emperor for salvation, even as she calculated trajectories. Her head was full of the wailing of the psykers, the screaming of the vox, and the groaning of the bulkheads as the *Savonarola* engaged in glacial manoeuvres. Far below her, the weapons decks shook with the rage of a wounded animal, lighting up the dark with ribbons of fire. The crewmen observing the void shield platform shouted up reports to Helgic, who bellowed back.

He glanced back at her. 'Shields are holding, but we're flaring hot. I need an intercept trajectory — I want that cruiser on the left between us and his friend, if we can manage it. Berkwald, status — any sign of unwelcome visitors?' he shouted turning towards the hull-monitors.

'Nothing yet, captain,' Berkwald said, over his shoulder. 'We've got five - no, six - hull breaches. Isolated reports of hostiles on decks C, D and E. Garbled reports of monsters and... and giants in armour. Some casualties, but no sign of any boarding torpedoes.' He sounded nervous, and Sarban didn't blame him. If the reports were true, and not just down to panic, they weren't dealing with common pirates.

Helgic grunted. 'That's not normal. Not for pirates. And especially not for renegades.'

Sarban frowned. Ships were too valuable to destroy out of hand, if you could avoid it, especially if you were a pirate. They were floating fortresses, requiring innumerable man hours to build and operate. Even if

you were planning to strip them for scrap. They needed to be in more or less one piece. Normally, pirates would have already begun boarding actions, fighting their way to the bridge in order to kill or capture anyone capable of controlling the vessel. She thought again of the two hull breaches she'd detected earlier. She pulled up the numbers, quickly estimating the times and trajectories of the initial exchange.

'What if they don't want to take the ship?' she said.

'What?' Helgic yelled, not quite paying attention. His eyes weft on the cracked view-screen. The distant shape of what might have been Gladius-class frigate came about, its thrusters flaring like tiny suns.

'What if they don't want the *Savonarola*? We need to sweep the hull for landers.' The howl abruptly fell silent, and she realised that she was shouting. Helgic stared at her in consternation. 'Landers,' she said again. 'A few magna-meltas and a good distraction is all you'd need.' Like a frigate or two, for instance. She looked at her console again. 'The first two breaches were below the threshold line... right - right *in the hold*.' The last came out as a whisper.

The howl was gone. Either Borja had succeeded, or... She forced the thought aside. 'They're running,' Helgic said, watching the view-screen. The dull rumble of his voice punched through the fog of her calculations, startling Sarban. He hadn't been listening to her. She looked up.

'What?'

'They're breaking off and retreating. We're venting fuel and fire and they're running,' Helgic said, claspng his hands behind his back. His eyes were locked on the screen, where twin shapes were moving away into the void, like wounded tigers retreating into the tall grass. Sarban felt a moment of relief, followed by a wave of doubt.

Pirates wouldn't run. Not with blood in the water, and nary a torpedo fired. The crew began to cheer. A jubilant sound, underscored by not a small amount of relief. Glad to have survived, glad they'd won, glad they could hear themselves.

Helgic glanced at her. 'We must have hurt them worse than I thought.'

'Or they got what they came for.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Had Borja reported in yet?' she asked.

Helgic looked at her. Then he cursed and turned, roaring orders to the

crew. Sarban sank back into her cradle, numbers forgotten.

She continued to pray, however.

Then

Borja heard the sound of metal striking metal. A sharp tik-tik-tik sound. 'An intriguing sonic distortion. I had assumed that it was a cry of welcome.' The voice pierced the resurgent din like a knife. It was thick with cool, clinical disdain. 'Given the state of my assistants, I would gather is anything but. How disappointing.'

'Show yourself,' Borja said, a hand on his pistol. Osman was moaning in his cell, and his cries were echoed by what sounded like every throat in the hold. As if every single psyker was screaming, weeping, or whimpering.

'No. You are an... inquisitor, are you not? Isn't that what they call you?' Something clattered in the dark. 'A surgeon by any other name. Cutting away at the cancer, even as you desperately seek its source. I sympathise.'

'And who are you?'

'An old ghost. On one world, they call me Manflayer. On another Clonelord. My favourite of them is Pater Mutatis — Father of all Mutants. I am not, but I take the compliment in the spirit it was intended.'

The names burned across his mind, one after the next. Memories of hours spent poring over ancient text-slates in the archives of the Administratum rose to the surface of his thoughts, bringing with them a sensation of deepening dread.

'Fabius Bile,' Borja said, softly. Hoarsely. Sudden fear etched the name on his tongue and across his mind. The Butcher of Terra, the black legend who had slaughtered millions, and done worse to those he didn't kill. The creature whose deeds occupied a full three sections in the Abominatus Archive.

'Fabius Bile,' Osman said, in his cell.

Bile, Bile, Bile, echoed up the voices from the other cells, like a tarnished thread woven through the omnipresent howl. Some of them began to scream again. Others began to pray. In the cells closest to Osman's, the occupants thrashed in their restraints, as if seeking to batter themselves unconscious against the walls.

'Hello, Osman. I have long wished to meet you. My servants tell me that your scream can split open a battle-tank as if it were a piece of fruit. Such

intriguing possibilities there.' Bile's voice slithered out of the dark. It came from everywhere and nowhere. Borja speculated the renegade could be above him or even below him.

'Why are you here, monster?' Borja said, knowing the answer even as he asked the question. He had to keep the creature talking, until he had a clear shot.

'I should have thought that was obvious. I am here to take my due.'

Osman moaned in his cell, and the deck plates rattled. Borja tried to ignore him. 'These souls are bound for Holy Terra. You have no claim on them.'

Laughter. Oily and thick. Borja's stomach lurched as it rang out over the gantry and sifted down like ash. 'Holy Terra... Is that what we're calling it now? How he would have hated that. Not one for that sort of thing, our progenitor. Very firm views on the subject of religion. Views I share myself.'

'Heresy,' Borja said, voice suddenly hoarse.

'Truth,' Bile said. 'Then, it's much the same thing these days, is it not?'

A gantry creaked, and Borja turned. He wondered where Gorman and the others were. Dead, probably.

'The truth is heresy, and the lie, holy writ. The story of us, buried to a grave of falsehood. The Emperor was a master of deception. Those who followed him, merely gifted amateurs, and soon swallowed by their own fabrication.'

The blasphemous words beat on the air like gun-shots. Borja slid his pistol from its holster. 'I will kill him before I let you take him. Show yourself,' he said, activating his vox-link, hoping Gorman and the others would hear. If he could bluff the beast long enough, help would arrive — if it was going to.

The ship shuddered again. The howl's pitch rose and fell. He heard the harsh crackle of lasgun from somewhere above.

A scream, cut off suddenly. A body plunged past the gantry, vanishing into the dark below. One of the armsmen, Borja thought. It might have been Gorman. He whispered a silent prayer.

'I abhor violence,' Bile said. 'It is a crude thing, but unfortunately necessary in these trying times. My associates will see to yours. Meanwhile, you have something of mine, and I would have it back.'

'No,' Osman moaned. *No, no, no.*

'Yes. There are nearly a thousand souls on this vessel alone, by my estimations. Minor talents, mostly. A rather pathetic coven of war-singers. One daemoniac, sadly gibbering. But Osman here is the true prize. The culmination of generations of selective breeding - a battle-psyker second to none. My servants on Paramar have kept an eye on him since the day of his birth, and I have received reports of his progress with satisfaction, if not elation. He is dangerous, deadly... and now, safely restrained, for the harvesting. You have my sincerest thanks.'

'He is not yours, filth. The Emperor has claim on his soul,' Borja said. Bile's words reminded him of his suspicions regarding the system-lords. Could it be they to whom Bile was referring? Was that what Osman had meant? The thought set his stomach to roiling, and piqued his curiosity at the same time. He had to keep Bile talking, if possible — find out the names of those working with him. He could hear more screams, and the vox-frequency crackled with requests for aid. He caught the echoes of lasfire and the unmistakable whirring of a chainaxe. Gorman and the others were sacrifices on the altar of necessity.

'I am feeling magnanimous today. This is not your concern. Leave him and walk away. If you give him to me, I will call off the attack. I have no interest in this ship, or its crew. Only the cargo. Step aside, and you will save thousands of lives. You don't even have to open the cell for me. I am quite capable of doing that on my own.'

Borja hesitated. He glanced at the cell. Osman's expression was resigned, beaten. It was the same expression he'd had the day Borja had run him to ground, in the Gardens of Flame. The look of a man with no hope.

Bile continued, 'I am a physician myself, If I could save every life the universe, I would. But sometimes one must make a sacrifice for the greater victory. Surely you understand?'

Borja did. Sacrificing millions to save billions was practically an art where the Inquisition was concerned.

Osman closed his eyes. 'Please,' he croaked. *Please, please, please.*

Borja turned, searching for the foe. His breath stung his lungs. 'No,' he said. His voice sounded weak, even to him, and he cursed himself. Osman's eyes popped open, in surprise. Borja smiled bitterly. 'No. I won't let you do this. They are bound for the Emperor's judgement, and as such

under His protection until they reach Holy Terra. You are Excommunicatus Abominatus Extremis. You will not lay a hand upon them.' His words echoed out, and hung on the frosty air.

The silence stretched. One moment. Two. And then, a soft sigh. 'There is an old parable, from long before the coming of Old Night, and the Emperor's rise... In it, a man called Standfast marches against Hell. Are you Standfast, little man? Do you see this as your march into Hell? Or is this the desperation of a surgeon, as the hour draws late?'

The voice was closer than before. Again, he heard the strange clicking. Tik-tik-tik. What was it? Where was it coming from? He glanced at the psyker and tapped his throat. Osman stared at him for a moment and then nodded in understanding,

If he failed, Osman would have to defend himself. Between the code-lock and the psyker's howl, they might be able to hold Bile back long enough for Helgic to send reinforcements. It felt odd, to be communicating so with a heretic. But Osman was bound for Holy Terra and the Emperor's judgement, and Borja intended to get him there, one way or another. He turned, hearing the tik-tik-tik again. Like the mechanical limbs. Distant shapes moved farther along the gantry, obscured by the chill fog. More mutants? Borja levelled his bolt pistol. Osman's eyes widened suddenly.

'Behind you,' the Howling Man shouted. *Behind you, behind you, behind you*, came the echoes, rising up from the containment cells.

Borja spun, pistol rising, finger tightening on the trigger. The crack of the weapon was loud in the frozen silence of the hold. A spidery limb struck him, its tip piercing his armour and the flesh beneath before withdrawing swiftly. The pistol fell from his hand.

Borja reeled back, clutching at the wound. A burning sensation swelled outwards from it until his every nerve was shrieking in agony. He clawed for the hilt of his power sword, but his fingers weren't working and he couldn't even grip it. He coughed and toppled, unable to control his seizing limbs. The world narrowed to the limits of his pain. He felt, rather than saw, the approach of his attacker.

'A toxin of my own design. I synthesised it from a species of reptile native to one of the so-called Exodite worlds. I'm told it's quite pleasurable, if one is an enthusiast of pain. If you are not... Well, I did give you a chance.'

Now

Borja heard the hiss of some mechanism, followed by a stifled moan from the Howling Man. 'That is enough of that, I think,' Fabius Bile said, as if from far away. 'Sleep. Sleep and dream of the world yet to come. A better world than any of us deserve.'

Bile looked down at him. 'A wise choice to give me that code, my friend. A few lives for all the thousands who crew this vessel. A hard choice, I know, but such is the lot of the pragmatic. If it helps, rest assured that I am not a thief. He is mine. I fertilised the soil from which he sprang. I am the gardener, and he is my harvest. I would not bother to explain myself, but... Well, these things cannot go unchallenged. I have my reputation to think of, after all. It is not a good one, but it was hard-earned.'

'P-Paramar,' Borja hissed, through clenched teeth. He hadn't meant to give Bile the code, but the numbers had slipped out through the holes the pain had eaten in his faith. The shame of it resounded in Borja's skull, as loud as Osman's scream and as painful as the toxin eating at his nerve-endings. Another failure, to add to the list.

He'd been wrong. He should have dug deeper. He'd known system-lords were hiding something, but he'd been too blinded by his seeming success, too eager to make a triumphal return to Terra. And a consequence, he'd failed the Holy Inquisition, and the Emperor. The thought was almost a match for the pain gnawing away at him.

Bile inclined his head. 'Yes, Paramar. The system-lords pass along their compliments, by the way. You made quite the impression on them, and my creations are not often impressed. They asked that I kill you, but... Well, as I said, I abhor violence. And in any event, strong as you are, there is a high likelihood that the poison will claim you yet. We shall leave it up to fate.' He dropped Borja's bolt pistol onto the inquisitor's chest. 'As promised.'

He stepped into the cell, and swiftly freed Osman's limp body from its restraints. 'Rest assured, I shall treat him gently. We do what we can, for those in our charge. An old homily, from before it all went wrong. "We do all that we can, for those in need." That is our purpose. That is why we were made, and clothed in ceramite.'

Borja fumbled with the bolt pistol, wanting to shoot Bile. But he lacked the motor control to lift the weapon.

Bile turned, cradling the psykers form to his chest. 'In any event, a most spirited debate. Small comfort, I know, but one must learn to take the proper perspective.' Bile smiled down at Borja, his gaunt features resembling a skull in the dim light 'As one sort of physician to another... You did all you could, and more.'

So saying, he stepped over Borja and left him lying in the dark and the cold with his failure, and the bolt pistol in his hand, its barrel pointed at his head.

Borja listened to Bile's footsteps recede into the silence, and endured the heat of the toxin as it continued to burn through his veins. Sarban's question came back to him, circling his mind. *How many get sacrificed for the good of the Imperium?* 'As many as required,' he croaked. He considered the bolt pistol. He had just enough strength left to pull the trigger. But he didn't. Faith needed sharpening, and this moment was whetstone.

Osman had been right. He'd missed what was right in front of him. He'd failed, but he would live to fight another day. He would learn from his mistake. He would survive. He must. Whatever the cost. Even if the pain hollowed him out and left him an empty husk.

He shoved the bolt pistol away.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, he thought he heard the voices of the crew as they at last managed to find him. He thought he felt hands shaking him, trying to rouse him. He was certain he herd Helgic roaring his name, but dully, distantly. He was glad Helgic had survived. He would need the captain, when they returned to Paramar. The system-lords had much to answer for. And Borja intended to see that they did so.

The pain was fading now, he thought, seeping from his abused system. He'd endured it, outlasted it, but he'd burnt himself out in the process. He needed sleep. He heard someone call for a medicae, and then heart nothing much at all. 'Paramar...' he muttered.

The system-lords were Bile's creatures as much as Osman, as much as the mutants he'd killed on the gantry. He knew that now, and just as surely knew that they weren't the only ones. As he slipped into unconsciousness, he wondered how many monstrous seeds Bile had sown throughout the galaxy.

And how many were even now waiting to be harvested?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Reynolds is the author of the Blood Angels novel *Deathstorm* and the Warhammer 40,000 novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*, all three featuring the White Scars. In the Warhammer World, he has written the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, and for Age of Sigmar he has written the Legends of the Age of Sigmar novels *Pestilens* and *Black Rift*, the Realmgate Wars novel *Fury of Gork* and several audio dramas including *The Lords of Helstone*. He lives and works in Northampton.

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