

THE HORUS HERESY™



LUCIUS:
THE ETERNAL BLADEMASTER

An audio drama by Graham McNeill

Lucius, the Eternal Blade

Graham Mcneill

Lucius walked beneath a sky torn and shredded by storms. He had died beneath a sky like this, in a shattered temple far from what the XV Legion called – with stultifying literalness – the Planet of the Sorcerers.

The Emperor's Children had splintered in the wake of Fulgrim's apotheosis on Iydris. Some had followed the primarch to answer a summons from the Warmaster, while others seized Legion ships to strike out on their own.

But a black mood had all but consumed Lucius since Iydris.

He had died, but that wasn't why he brooded. He had been beaten.

A Raven named Nykona Sharrowkyn had actually killed him, and had taken no satisfaction from that supremely unlikely feat.

That rankled. That hurt.

Lucius did not know what intervention had brought him back – whether it had been some higher power or the lunatic science of Fabius – and didn't much care. Now, he had something to prove. To himself more than anyone else.

He was Lucius the swordsman. No one was more skilled with a blade.

Lucius first heard of Sanakht from Hathor Maat, a legionary who reminded Lucius so much of his younger self that he had wanted to kill him there and then. Maat told Lucius that Sanakht was a student of the ancient schools of swordsmanship, a warrior of unsurpassed skill whose defeat remained unseen by the Corvidae's most gifted scryers.

Lucius didn't know who the Corvidae were, but was willing to bet that they had not factored him into their visions. And so he had abandoned the rest of his Legion, as much as the rabble Fulgrim left behind could still be called, and set off to find this Sanakht.

The one constant that Lucius came to appreciate of the Crimson King's adopted home world was that nothing was constant. He had been walking for what felt like forever, but his destination came no closer. Sometimes Sanakht's tower

appeared to be no larger than a gunship, hovering over glassy plains that reflected a sky that did not match the one above. Other times it rose from distant mountains, a stalagmite of such colossal proportions that it was a mountain itself.

It was always just ahead of him, taunting him.

Drawing him on.

Right now, it appeared as a slender minaret of fluted ivory and mother-of-pearl with a cupola that burned in silver fire. It stood amidst a thick forest of trees that writhed with their own sick radiance. Living flames leapt from branch to branch, giggling with childish amusement as the forest grew and fell back, denying him a way through.

‘Scared of me, are you?’ Lucius shouted, and the blue flame at the top of the tower flared brighter in response.

He drew his sword, its blade radiant silver. It had been a gift from his primarch; too noble a weapon for hewing, but a necessity in times of need.

Lucius hacked at the glass trees, shattering glowing limbs to fragments with every swing. He pushed deeper into the glittering forest, shorn branches reforming behind him with the sound of windows breaking in reverse.

The capering flames screeched in annoyance, but Lucius ignored them. They darted in and sought to burn him, but he unhooked the barbed whip that he had lifted from Kalimos and lashed them back.

They squealed and fled its agonising touch.

Then the forest parted, and Sanakht’s tower was before him. Closer now, he saw the mercury-bright flame veining its structure like a living thing.

A warrior in crimson armour stood in a duelling circle of flattened sand before the tower. Twin swords hung at his waist – one pommel capped with a dark jackal’s head, the other with a white hawk. Both were hooked khopesh blades with strange, shimmering curves that gave Lucius a thrill of anticipation.

To face a new blade was always interesting.

‘I hear you have been looking to fight me, Lucius,’ said the warrior, his face obscured behind a helm with a silver crest and faceplate.

‘Are you Sanakht?’

‘I am Sanakht of the Athanaeans, yes.’

‘Then I’ve come to fight you.’

‘It is your wish to die?’

Lucius laughed. ‘I think I did that once already, so I’m not about to try it again.’

Sanakht removed his helm, revealing a youthful face and close-cropped, ash blond hair – innocently handsome in a way that Lucius couldn’t wait to destroy.

‘Your feelings say different,’ said Sanakht. ‘You want to know why you came back. That is why you sought me out – to find a swordsman as skilled as the Raven. One who revels in the kill.’

‘They tell me you’re good,’ said Lucius.

‘I am the best of my Legion.’

‘That’s not saying much.’ Lucius hooked the whip to his belt and entered the duelling circle. Sanakht drew his swords; one crystalline edged and glittering with witch-fire, the other a simple energy blade.

Lucius rolled his shoulders, and swung his blade to loosen his wrist. He had sparred with his own Legion, but had stopped short of killing anyone since Iydris. No such restraint was needed here.

He circled Sanakht, studying his movements, assaying his reach and footwork. He saw strength and speed. Confidence that crossed into arrogance. Sanakht was so like himself, it was almost funny.

‘I assure you that I will defeat–’ Sanakht began, but Lucius attacked before the Thousand Sons warrior could finish speaking.

All of his strikes were repulsed with casual ease. They broke apart and circled

again, studying one another and using obvious cuts and feints to test the other's mettle.

'You have natural ability,' said Sanakht, 'but I have studied every school of the blade since the first swords were hacked from the Dobruja flintbeds of Old Earth.'

They came together again in a clash of blades. Sanakht was blindingly fast, his two weapons moving in perfect concert. Lucius could fight with two swords, but preferred the focus of a single blade. Sanakht's blades cut high and low, forcing him to work twice as hard to keep them at bay.

'Your thoughts betray you,' said Sanakht, and Lucius heard the first trace of amusement in his voice. 'You fight with passion, but I can feel every attack before you make it.'

'Are you actually giving me tips on technique?'

Sanakht swayed aside from a throat-opening thrust. 'I am a scholar of martial knowledge. It is my duty to pass on what I have learned to others, by example.'

'Thanks, but I don't need your help.'

'You are manifestly incorrect,' said Sanakht.

Anger touched Lucius, but instead of controlling it, he let it consume him. An angry swordsman made mistakes, but now he needed that anger. He threw himself at his opponent, discarding any notion of testing his defences, just going for the kill. He wanted to take this arrogant cur apart, to gut him without mercy and without finesse.

To give him an ugly death.

Sanakht turned aside the attacks with lightning-fast parries and ripostes, but Lucius kept up an unrelenting pressure. He forced him back to the edge of the circle, relishing the confusion he saw in Sanakht's eyes.

No longer able to pick out Lucius's emotions from the morass of anger, Sanakht was falling back on techniques learned by rote, and from ancient teachers.

And that just wasn't good enough.

Lucius hooked his sword under the energy-wreathed blade and spun it from Sanakht's grip. As the warrior's arm went wide, Lucius kicked him in the groin and slammed the hilt of his sword into his face.

Sanakht fell back, rolling and bringing his second sword to bear. Lucius smashed it aside, and his return stroke swept down to open Sanakht's throat.

But the silver blade stopped a hair's breadth from Sanakht's neck, as though striking stone. Resistance vibrated up Lucius's arm, and he crashed his other fist into Sanakht's jaw instead.

'Sorcery?' he spat. 'You'd save your miserable skin with sorcery?'

'He wouldn't,' said a voice behind Lucius. 'But I would.'

Lucius spun around, his sword coming away from Sanakht's neck. Another red-armoured warrior stood at the edge of the duelling circle, a cloak of blackly iridescent feathers billowing at his shoulders.

'And who are you to spare his life?' Lucius demanded.

'I am Ahzek Ahriman,' said the warrior. 'And I will soon have need of Sanakht.'