

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN

THRONE OF LIES

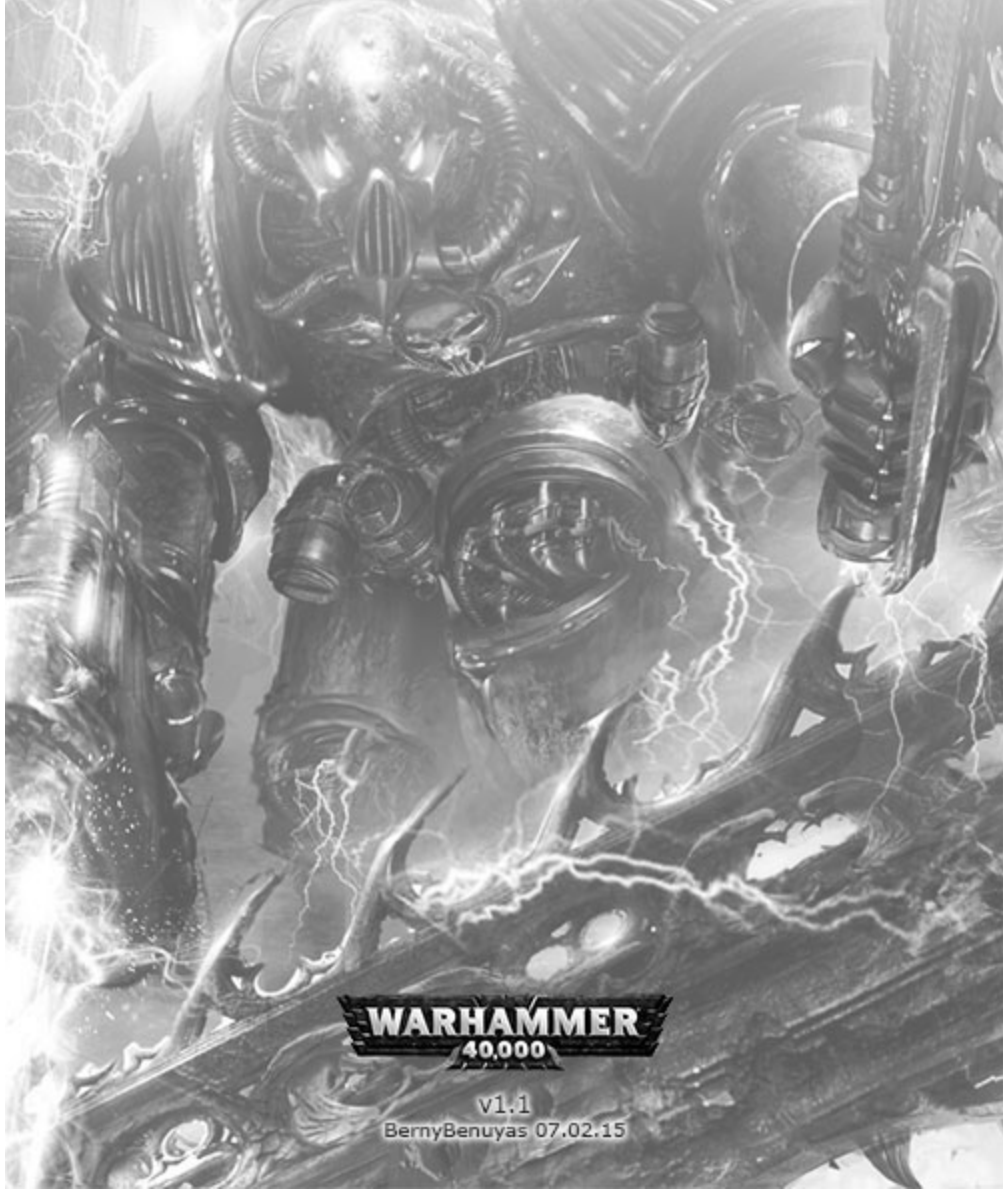
A NIGHT LORDS AUDIO

WARHAMMER
40,000



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The *Covenant of Blood* tore through the warp, splitting the secret tides like a spear of stained cobalt and flawed gold. Its engines struggled, breathing white fire into the ever-shifting Sea of Souls. Pulsing like arrhythmic hearts, the thrusters laboured to propel the ship onwards. Its passage was a graceless dive, slipping through boiling waves of thrashing psychic energy.

Tormented fields of kinetic force shielded the craft from the warp's elemental rage, but the storm's force was merciless. Reaching out from the hurricane, the claws of vast creatures raked across the shields, each impact hammering the vessel farther from its course.

In a sealed chamber at the ship's prow, a lone figure knelt in silent repose. Her human eyes were closed, yet she was far from blind. Her secret eye, the eye she hid from the world beneath sweat-stained bandanas and uncomfortable helms, looked out into the void. The ship's hull was no barrier, and the crackling shields no obstacle. Her secret sight pierced them with effortless ease, and she stared into the storm beyond.

Like oil on water, the seas outside roiled in a sickening riot of colour. A beacon of light usually pierced the chaos – a lifeline of ephemeral radiance

splitting the swirling murk. All she had to do was follow it.

There was no beacon this time. No radiant lifeline. The crackle of the shields buckling under pressure was all that illuminated the storm outside.

The tides rolled against the ship in jagged, unpredictable waves, too fast for human response. By the time she saw a flood of migraine-bright energy spilling towards her, the shields were already repelling it. They sparked with pained fire as they sent the assaulting wave back into the psychic filth from whence it came.

The *Covenant of Blood* trembled again, its engines giving a piteous whine as the tremor ran through the ship's plasteel bones. It couldn't take much more of this. The kneeling woman took a deep breath, and refocused.

Her lapse of attention had not gone unnoticed. The voice, when it came, was an insidious whisper breaching her heart, not her ears. Each word resonated, echo-faint, through her blood.

Centuries of conquering the void. Centuries of laying claim to the stars. The dance of hunter and hunted, predator and prey. You, Navigator, will be my end. The death of glory. The pain of failure.

The ship was threatening her again. She didn't take that as a good sign, and hissed a single word through clenched teeth.

'Silence.'

She swore that, somewhere on the edge of imagination, she sensed its laughter.

Above all else, she loathed the crude poetry of the ship's primal intelligence. The machine-spirit at the warship's core was a bestial, dominant consciousness. It had resisted its new Navigator for weeks now. She was beginning to fear she would never rise as its master.

The claws of the neverborn tear at my hull-skin, promising to bleed my innards to the void, it whispered. You are damnation. You are the bearer of blame. You will cast us into oblivion, Octavia.

She bit back a reply, keeping her mouth as closed as her human eyes. Her third eye stared unblinking, seeing nothing but the storm raging outside.

No. No, there was something more now. Something else sailed the Sea of Souls, more suggestion and shadow than form and flesh. She pulsed a warning at once.

+Something beneath us, something vast. *Evade at once.*+

Octavia sent the command with all her strength, a desperate plea to the ship's pilots. At the speed of thought, she felt the response flash through the interface cables binding her to the throne of brass and bone. A dead voice, the tone of a lobotomised servitor at the ship's helm.

'Compliance.'

The *Covenant of Blood* shuddered now, its burning engines forcing it to climb through the psychic syrup of un-space. The predator, the vast presence beneath them, stirred in the etheric fog. She felt it thrash, and saw a shadow the size of a sun ripple in the storm. It drew closer.

+It's chasing us.+

'Acknowledged,' the servitor replied.

+Go faster. Go much, *much* faster.+

'Compliance.'

The vast presence broke through the lashing waves of psychic mist, unaffected by their density. She was reminded, for an awful moment, of a vast shark pushing through the open ocean, dead-eyed and forever hungry.

+We have to break from the warp. We can't outrun this.+

This time, the answer was rich with emotion, none of it pleasant. It was deep, low, and tainted with inhuman resonance.

'How far are we from the Torias system?'

+Hours. Days. *I don't know*, my lord. But we're dead in minutes if we don't break from the warp.+

'Unacceptable,' growled the Exalted, master of the *Covenant of Blood*.

+Do you feel the way the *Covenant* is shaking? A psychic shadow made of black mist and hatred is reaching out to swallow us. I am the Navigator, my lord. I am dragging this ship from the Sea of Souls, no matter what you say.+

‘Very well,’ said the Exalted reluctantly. ‘All stations, brace for re-entry to the void. And Octavia?’

+Yes, my lord?+

‘You would do well to show me more respect when Talos is not aboard.’

She bared her teeth in a grin, feeling her heartbeat quicken at the threat.

+If you say so, Exalted One.+

The huntress moved through the chamber, one of many in the cavernous palace, clad in a stolen crimson gown and someone else’s skin. Her name, for the last two hours, had been Kalista Larhaven. This was even confirmed by the numeric identity code tattooed onto the flesh of her right wrist.

The true Kalista Larhaven, the original owner of both the name and the exquisite dress, was now folded with graceless, boneless ease into a thermo-ventilation shaft. There she lay, silent in death, an unknown martyr to a lost cause. She had her own hopes, dreams, joys and needs – all of which had ended in the shallow thrust of an envenomed blade. It had taken longer to hide the courtesan’s body than it had to end her life.

The huntress passed a flock of acolyte clerics. They shuffled along the carpeted floor, chanting in heretical murmurs. The first of them bore an incense orb on a corroded chain, the bronze sphere seething with coils of thin, sugary mist. This priest greeted the courtesan by name, and the huntress smiled with the dead whore’s lips.

‘Do you go to attend upon the master?’

The huntress answered with wicked eyes and an indulgent smile.

‘I wish you well, Kalista,’ the priest replied. ‘Go in peace.’

The huntress offered a graceful curtsey, subtly submissive, moving as one born to a life of giving pleasure. The true Kalista had moved this way. The huntress had watched it, gauged it, captured the essence of it – all in a handful of heartbeats.

As she walked away, she felt the eager eyes of the whispering priests following her movements. She exaggerated the swing of her hips, favouring them with a last glance over her bare shoulder. She read the hunger in their dark eyes, and much better, the idiotic conviction. Let them go about their business without knowing the truth: that the girl they desired was already dead, packed into a tube close to the thermal exchange processors elsewhere in the palace.

The heat would accelerate the process of decay, so the true Kalista would become a quick victim to the bacteria that always laid claim to a human body in the hours after it drew its last breath.

But the huntress was unconcerned. She would be gone by the time any discoveries were made, her duty done and her escape a source of infinite grief for the people of this worthless planet.

Before she had become Kalista Larhaven, the huntress had worn the skin of a nameless maidservant for almost an hour, using the shape to reach the lower levels and move through the slave tunnels. Before that, she had been a trader in the palace's vast courtyards, licensed to sell holy relics to pilgrims. Before that, a pilgrim herself, wearing the ragged clothes of a vagabond: a wandering beggar in search of spiritual enlightenment.

The huntress had been on the world of Torias Secundus for a single day and a single night. Even as she drew close to completing her mission, she lamented the time spent so far. She was above this assignment. She knew it, her sisters knew it, and her superiors knew it. This was punishment – a punishment for the failures of the past.

Undeserved, perhaps. Yet duty was duty. She had to obey.

She moved on through the palace, passing chanting acolytes, scurrying clerks and raucous packs of intoxicated nobles. The halls were growing

busy as noon approached, for with the coming of noon came the High Priest's long-awaited speech.

The woman who was not Kalista blended into the crowds, passing with smiles and feminine curtseys. Her irritation never showed on lips of rose-red, nor in eyes of ice-blue. The fact remained, though – this skin would not get her to the High Priest's side at the right moment. Time was a vicious factor. If killing him was the only goal, he would be dead from a sniper's kiss already, long before taking to the podiums later today and addressing the people of the city.

But no. His death had to be choreographed along exact lines, played out like a performance for all to see.

The huntress sensed she was reaching the end of this skin's lifespan. Already, the chambers through which she moved were the domains of the chosen elite, with clothing becoming increasingly ostentatious and more expensive. The apparent courtesan graced her way through the carnival of colours, her stolen eyes flicking in predatory need.

Noblewoman to noblewoman, priestess to priestess, courtesan to courtesan.

None of them suited. None would allow her to finish what she had begun.

She needed another skin. Soon.

The door to the Navigator's chambers ground open on rough hydraulics. Nothing on this ship worked right. Octavia checked that her pistol was holstered at her hip, and left through the only portal leading out of her room. Her attendants, whom she despised as much as she loathed the ship itself, bustled around her, imploring her to return to her chambers.

She wanted to shoot them. She really, *really* wanted to shoot them. The most normal of them couldn't pass as a human even in poor lighting. It looked at her, smiling with too many teeth, clasping its hands together as if in prayer.

‘Mistress,’ it hissed. ‘Return to chambers, mistress. For safety. For protection. Mistress must not be harmed. Mistress must not bleed.’

She shivered under its beseeching touch. Hands that possessed too many fingers stroked her clothes, and worse, her bare skin.

‘Don’t touch me,’ she snapped.

‘Forgive me, mistress. A thousand apologies, most sincere.’

‘Get out of my way, please.’

‘Please return, mistress,’ it pleaded. ‘Do not walk dark places of ship. Stay, for safety.’

She drew her pistol, sending the creatures scurrying back.

‘Get out of my way. *Now.*’

‘Someone comes, mistress. Another soul draws near.’

She stared into the blackened corridor outside her chamber, lit by weak illumination globes that did nothing to defeat the darkness. The figure emerging from the gloom wore a jacket of old leather, and carried two heavy pistols at his hips. A hacking blade – the kind of weapon one might find in the hands of a jungle world primitive – was strapped to his shin.

Half of his face glinted in the reflected light. Augmetic facial features, the most obvious of which was a red eye lens, were of expensive and rare craftsmanship. The human side of his face twisted in a crooked smile.

Octavia returned it.

‘Septimus,’ she said.

‘Octavia. Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, but that was the roughest ride through the Sea of Souls I’ve ever had to suffer through.’

‘The ship still hates me,’ she scowled. ‘Why are you here? Keeping me company?’

‘Something like that. Let’s go inside.’

She hesitated, but complied. Once they were back in her chamber, she ensured the door was locked. Anything to keep her annoying attendants away.

Octavia could, if one was being generous, be considered beautiful. But beauty needs light and warmth to bloom, and these were both denied to the young Navigator. Her skin was the unhealthy pale of unclean marble, marking her as a member of the crew aboard the lightless battleship, the *Covenant of Blood*. Her eyes were losing all colour as her pupils grew accustomed to remaining forever dilated. Her hair, once a tumbling fall of healthy dark locks, was a ragged mess held into false order by a ponytail.

She looked across to Septimus, who was absently picking his way through piles of discarded clothes and old food cartons.

‘Look at this mess. You are a filthy creature.’

‘Nice to see you too. To what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘You know why I’m here.’ He paused. ‘Talk of your attitude is beginning to spread. You’re making the crew uneasy. They worry you’re going to enrage the Legion because you can’t follow orders.’

‘So, let them worry.’

Septimus sighed. ‘*Asath Jirath Sor-sarassan.*’

‘Speak Gothic, damn it. None of that whispery Nostraman, thank you. I know you were swearing. I’m not a fool.’

‘If the crew worries, they might take matters into their own hands. They’d kill you without a second thought.’

‘They need me. Everyone needs me. Without me, the ship has no Navigator.’

‘Maybe,’ said Septimus slowly. ‘But no one wants tension with the Legion. Things are always on the edge, but when someone starts to breed difficulties? The crew has lynched troublemakers before. Dozens of times.’

‘They wouldn’t try that with me.’

He laughed bitterly. ‘No? If they thought it would please the Legion, they’d hang you from a gantry in the engineering deck, or beat you to death and flush your body from an airlock. You need to tread with care. Talos is off the ship. When First Claw isn’t on board, be cautious in how you deal with the Legion and the crew.’

‘Don’t give me this crap,’ Octavia snapped. ‘I was under more strain than you can even imagine. For Throne’s sake, the Geller field was dying. The ship was moments from falling apart.’

Septimus shook his head. ‘Sometimes, you still forget where you are. Your talent spares you the worst treatment, but you’re still a slave. Remember that. Delusions of equality will get you killed.’

‘You’re as bad as those things that try to keep me sealed in here. I’ve survived three weeks without Talos watching over me. A few more hours won’t make any difference’.

She paused for a moment before changing the subject. ‘Any word from the surface?’

‘Nothing yet. As soon as they vox confirmation, I’ll bring them back on board. It’s close to noon in the capital city. The High Priest will be speaking soon. Won’t be long now.’

‘I don’t suppose you know what they’re actually doing down there?’

Septimus shrugged.

‘What they always do. They’re hunting.’

At the heart of Toriana, capital city of the world below, the masses waited for their leader. The plaza of the Primus Palace was flooded with an ocean of humanity – ninety thousand men, women and children. Each family had been carefully selected by the government’s Departmento Culturum and marched to the gathering by armed enforcers.

Above the sea of cheering faces, an ornate balcony jutted from the palace’s side. Ten figures stood in motionless silence, enduring the crowd’s roars, with rifles clutched over armoured chestplates. Faceless black visors and carapace armour the colour of old blood marked these soldiers as the Red Sentinels, elite guard of the High Priest himself. The back-mounted power packs carried by each one hummed with suppressed tension, bonded to the ammunition sockets of their hellguns via thick, segmented cables.

The Sentinel leader kept up a constant stream of muttered words into the vox-network, checking on the position of his sniper teams situated on nearby rooftops. All was in readiness. Should trouble arise from the crowd, the Sentinels and the enforcers on the streets had enough firepower to paint the marble floors red and reduce the plaza to a charnel house.

The air itself thrummed as a Valkyrie gunship hovered overhead, its adamantium hull turned amber by the midday sun, and its cannons seeking targets in the windows of adjacent buildings. Satisfied, it moved away on growling engines, bathing the Red Sentinels below in a heated wind of thruster wash.

The Red Sentinel captain spoke a final order into the vox, and the massive double doors behind him opened. At the first sight of the robed figure walking onto the balcony, the crowd erupted in praising cheers.

High Priest Cyrus was the wrong side of middle age, and his fine encarmine robes looked painted onto his porcine form. Jowls shook as he raised fat hands to the sky.

‘My people!’ he proclaimed.

The High Priest, once Imperial Governor of this world, licked his lips as he bathed in the cheers rising to meet him. His was a solemn duty; to herald in a world free of Imperial taxation and tithe. A world under his rule, aided by the council of cardinals, known collectively as the Benevolence.

‘My people, hear my words!’ he continued. ‘We stand at the dawn of a new age of peace and prosperity! No more shall we hurl our faith and fortunes into the furnace of Imperial slavery. No more shall our world suffer alone, ignored by the Imperium of Man. No more shall we struggle through famine and civil war, led into folly by self-serving ministers appointed by distant Terra.’

Cyrus paused, waiting until the cheers died down before he continued. ‘This is the age of the Benevolence! The new faith! The Benevolence encircles us all, in hope and trust. Faith in one another! Faith

in other worlds that have thrown off the same shackles! Shoulder to shoulder, we stand defiant against the oppression of the past!’

The crowd roared, as Cyrus had known it would. Already, they were chanting his name as their saviour, their saint.

‘Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters! We are free, united far from the reach of the hated False Emperor! I... I...’

He never finished the sentence. The fat man staggered, gripping the balcony’s railing. The Red Sentinels moved as one, their rifles up and panning for threats. The cheering from the crowd was drowned in confusion.

The huntress smiled as she watched. The timing had been perfect; the venom delivered the very moment this false prophet dared to decry the God-Emperor. The crowd had seen it. The hololithic image feeds had recorded it, so the whole planet had witnessed it. Now they knew the price of blasphemy and secession.

The digital weapon concealed on her gauntlet was only good for a single shot, one sliver-dart, rich with neurotoxin. The targeting laser was flashless, and easily powerful enough to pierce the heretic’s silk robes. She’d fired it right into his spine, and none of the Red Sentinels were any the wiser.

The High Priest tumbled forwards and he pitched over the balcony’s edge. He didn’t scream as he fell, for he was already dead.

The huntress smiled behind her faceless visor, moving with the other Red Sentinels, feigning panic and anger to mirror theirs. She disliked the bulky armour they wore, but the skin was a necessary one. The Sentinel she’d killed to acquire it had put up a reasonable fight – for an unaugmented human, at least.

The huntress made a show of scanning for enemy targets on balconies of adjacent buildings, relishing the panicked voices jabbering over the vox. In a matter of minutes, she would be able to leave this wretched gathering and make her way back through the city, in readiness to abandon this world forever.

She was already making her way to the double doors when the sun fell dark, and heavy engines whined behind her. The huntress turned, her eyes narrowed, her heart starting to beat faster.

Five shapes dropped from the sky. Armoured in massive suits of power armour, they thudded down onto the balcony. Flame and smoke retched from the thrust generators on their backs, and helms with painted skulls for faces watched her with unerring focus. Not the other Red Sentinels. Just her. These warriors had been waiting on the roof, knowing she would make her move.

Each of the figures raised a bolter clutched in dark gauntlets.

‘Assassin of the Callidus Temple,’ intoned one, his voice a growl through his helmet’s vox-caster. *‘We have come for you.’*

There was no thought of fighting. The huntress turned and ran, preternatural agility blurring her form like quicksilver. Sentinel armour rained from her as she sprinted back through the palace, discarded as fast as she was able.

She heard them giving chase. The clanging thuds of ceramite boots on mosaic floors. The coughing bursts of jump packs breathing fire, propelling the warriors down the halls faster than the huntress could run. Bystanders, innocent or otherwise, cried out as her pursuers cut down anyone in their way.

She heard the throaty crashing of bolters, and weaved across the detonating ground where shells hit home. She leapt as she ran, knowing they were targeting her legs, seeking to bring her down by an explosive shell to the back of the knee.

One shell impacted on the huntress’s calf, but spun aside, deflected by her synthetic skin armour. Another exploded against the wall by her shoulder, sending chalky debris clattering over her face. Still, she ran.

When a shell finally struck home, it took her in the meat of the thigh. Despite years of pain resistance training and narcotic compounds introduced into her bloodstream to deaden her nerves, the agony was unrivalled. The huntress howled as she went down, her thigh reduced to

nothing more than a ruin of hanging flesh and muscle stripped from the bloodstained, broken bone.

Spitting curses, she clawed herself forwards, vicious even in futility. She had enough of a lead to drag herself to her feet, and round the next corner in an awkward, limping run.

Her flight to safety lasted mere seconds. As she rounded the corner, shoving her way through a milling crowd of servants, two immense, dark forms brought her to the ground. Her muscles stung with chemical enhancement, straining against the armoured warriors pinning her to the floor. She went to draw her blade from her thigh sheath, only to scream in frustrated rage when she realised the scabbard and blade had been torn from her body when the exploding shell struck her leg. She yelled fresh curses as her reaching forearm was smashed under the boot of another traitorous warrior.

She writhed under their oppressive strength, losing control in her anger, not even realising her face was flowing into the visages of a dozen women she'd killed in the last two days. From above, she heard the leader of the warriors speak while his men held her down.

'My name is Talos of the Night Lords Legion. And you are coming with me.'

The huntress opened her eyes, feeling them ripe with stinging tears. The first thing to grace her senses was pain, jagged and unfamiliar in its intensity. Everything below her spine ached with sickening pulses in time to her heartbeat.

Immediately, training took over from disoriented instinct. She had to learn her whereabouts, then escape. Nothing else mattered. Her vision focused, resolving the blurred gloom into a semblance of clarity.

The chamber was intentionally dark, kept that way by low-burning wall globes. With no furnishings beyond the table she lay upon, it had all the

charm of a prison cell. The huntress tried to rise, but her limbs wouldn't answer. She could barely even raise her head.

She became aware, at last, of rasping breath, with the teeth-aching rumble of active power armour.

'Do not try to rise.' The voice was the same rasping growl as before. 'Your legs have been amputated, as have your arms below the elbows. You are conscious only because of chemical pain-inhibitors flushed into your bloodstream.'

The armoured figure came into view, stalking to the edge of the table. Its face was a battered war helm, the visage painted bone-white to resemble a human skull, and a rune from a filthy, forgotten language etched into its forehead. Across its breastplate, an Imperial eagle was ruined by ritual scarring, the holy aquila symbol no doubt profaned by the heretic warrior that wore it.

'You will not escape this chamber,' said the figure – Talos, she guessed. 'You will never return to your temple. There is no fate for you beyond the walls of this cell, and so I grant you a choice, assassin. Tell us what we wish to know, and earn yourself a quick death, or tell us after we have subjected you to several hours of excruciation.'

The huntress spoke through blood-flecked lips, her voice a ghost of its former strength.

'I will die before speaking secrets to a heretic.'

Even through the vox-crackle, the reply was tinged with amusement. 'Everyone says that.'

'Pain... pain is nothing to me,' said the huntress.

'Pain is nothing to you when what remains of your body is flooded with inhibitor narcotics,' replied Talos. 'The interface nodes implanted along your spinal cord will change your perception of pain soon enough.'

'I am Jezharra,' she said defiantly, 'daughter of the Callidus. You will get nothing from me, fallen one. Nothing but curses heaped upon your worthless life.'

Talos laughed.

‘Stronger souls than yours have cracked in our claws, assassin. No one resists. Do not make me do this.’

‘How did you know I would come?’

‘I saw it,’ he said. ‘I am a prophet of the Eighth Legion. In moments of affliction, I can see along the path of a future yet to come.’

‘Sorcery,’ spat Jezharra. ‘Black magic.’

‘Perhaps. But it worked, did it not?’

‘You think yourself cunning for arranging that ambush? For luring a daughter of the Callidus to this backwater world, and baiting the trap with a cult’s high priest?’

‘Cunning enough to have you here, at my mercy, with your arms and legs severed by my brothers’ chainblades.’

‘My death is meaningless,’ Jezharra sighed. ‘My life was lived in service to the Golden Throne, so do what you will. Agony will never twist me into a traitor.’

‘Then you have chosen,’ said Talos. ‘These are your final moments of sanity, released from pain. Enjoy them while you can.’

‘I am Jezharra, daughter of the Callidus. My mind is inviolate, my soul unbroken. I am Jezharra, daughter of the Callidus...’

The huntress grinned as she chanted the words. The warrior turned, addressing another presence in the room, a figure the bound assassin couldn’t see.

‘So be it. Excruciate her.’

Jezharra, the huntress, resisted for seventeen days. It was by far the longest any human had lasted under the Legion’s interrogation. When she broke at last, little remained of the woman she’d been, let alone the consummate killer.

She wheezed secrets from split lips, the words forming vapour in the chamber’s freezing air. Once she had said all she needed to say, she lay slack in her restraints, trying to summon the strength to beg for death.

'The... Uriah System.'

'Where in the Uriah System?' asked Talos patiently.

'Uriah... is a dying star. Temple is... on the planet... farthest from it. Three. Uriah... Three.'

'What of the defences?' pressed Talos.

'Nothing in orbit. Nothing permanent. Local... local battlefleet patrols nearby.'

'And on the surface?'

'It... it is done,' breathed the dying huntress. 'Kill me...'

'What defences are on the surface of Uriah Three?' repeated Talos.

'Nothing... Just my sisters. Fifty... fifty daughters of Callidus. A lone fortress-temple... in the mountains.'

'Coordinates?'

'Please...'

'The coordinates, assassin,' insisted Talos. 'Then I will end this.'

'Twenty-six degrees... Eighteen... forty-four... point fifty-six. The heart of the tundra. Seventy degrees... Twenty-three, forty-nine point sixty-eight.'

'Is the temple shielded against orbital attack?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'And the hololithic recording is there?'

'I... I saw it myself.'

'Very well,' said Talos.

The warrior drew a golden blade. Its craftsmanship was exquisite, forged in an age of inspiration long-forgotten by the Imperium. On a ship of ancient relics, this was by far the most revered. The Night Lord stepped closer to the husk on the apothecarion table.

'Jezharra...'

The warrior let the assassin's name hang in the air. With his free hand, he disengaged the seals of his helm, pulling the death-mask off with a serpentine hiss of venting air pressure. The assassin's eyes were gone,

taken from her in the interrogation, but she sensed what he had done in the way his voice changed.

‘Thank you,’ he said softly.

She spat at him before she died – one final act of defiance. In a way, it was hard not to admire her. But Talos’s blade fell, embedding itself in the table as the assassin’s head rolled free.

The warrior stood in the stinking chamber for an indeterminate number of heartbeats, before replacing his war helm. His vision drowned in the red wash of the eye lenses’ tactical display. White runic text scrolled across his retinas. He blinked at the jagged symbol on the lens display – the Nostraman hieroglyph meaning brotherhood. A muted click signalled the opening of a vox-channel.

‘This is Talos.’

‘Speak, Soul Hunter,’ growled the Exalted.

‘The assassin has broken. Set course for the Uriah System. Her temple is on the world most distant from the sun. I have the coordinates.’

‘We have been chasing this ghost for decades, Talos. The Legion has hurled itself at temple after temple after temple, across a hundred systems. You are certain the hololithic is there?’

Talos looked down, his targeting reticule locking on to the motionless, tortured body, then the severed head on the blood-slick floor.

‘Summon the Legion, Exalted One. I’m certain it’s there.’

Some worlds, by ill-fortune or intent, fall far from the countless billions of trade routes and pilgrimages that shape the Imperium of Man, linking untold numbers of stars in an astral cobweb. These worlds may be forgotten or ignored, but are never truly unknown. Every secret is laid bare somewhere, even if only a single reference in an abandoned archive in distant Terra’s librariums.

Uriah was an unremarkable sun. It seemed notable only for the fact it scarcely burned bright enough to be called a star at all. The worlds turning

around it in their measured, heavenly dance were all frost-locked spheres of eternal winter.

Above the third such world, a vessel fell into low orbit. It was a crenellated blade of darkened bronze and midnight blue, proudly displaying the skull insignia of the VIII Legion. It arrived alone, but did not remain that way for long.

Other vessels, warships all, tore holes in reality as they broke from the hell-space of the warp. Each bore the same insignia, each was armoured in the same colours – and each was an echo of a much finer age. The design of each warship was ancient, as if they'd burst from the Sea of Souls after travelling for millennia, rather than mere weeks.

Many of the warships were twisted, darkened, more brutish in aspect than their original architects had envisioned, but their lethal grandeur remained. As they came together, the fleet appeared to be something from ancestral memory, when humanity had reached out to rediscover the stars ten thousand years before.

Contact between the ships was hesitant. Greetings passed over crackling signals, many with tones of guarded reluctance. The Legion rarely gathered, and many of these captains were rivals. A hundred centuries of bloodshed, defeat, predation and pain made for short tempers and shorter alliances.

While warship commanders exchanged hails and veiled threats, the decks of every vessel came alive with preparation. Thousands upon thousands of warriors swore oaths of moment, machined armour into place and readied drop-pods and Thunderhawk gunships, as well as grievously rare teleport platforms.

The Night Lords Legion was going to war.

Proximity alarms wailed only once, when a Navy patrol fleet ghosted within range of auspex sensors. A single Endeavour-class cruiser, its hull resplendent in Imperial gold, sought to come about and break into the warp, seeking the only realistic route of escape. Its lesser escorts remained

behind, seeking to slow any pursuit. Despite the gesture's futility, every second the destroyers could buy for their retreating flagship was precious.

A single vessel broke from the Legion fleet formation, an agile strike cruiser bearing the name *Excoriator*. What followed was a massacre unworthy of record within any Hall of Remembrance. Stunted torpedoes crashed against *Excoriator's* void shields, as effective as broken glass raining against plasteel. In reply, precise lance strikes cut into the adamantium meat of the three Imperial escorts, bursting their thin shields in a heartbeat and scoring the metal skin beneath. A second volley, mere moments after the first, carved them apart in dispassionate surgery.

Excoriator's shields briefly lit up again, kinetic pulses of light rippling across their surface as the cruiser glided through the debris.

With a shark's silent pursuit, the Legion battleship loomed close behind the fleeing cruiser. With game desperation, the Imperial vessel unleashed its meagre weapons, batteries of plasma and solid shot spilling into the void, clashing as they dissipated across *Excoriator's* shields.

The Legion warship returned fire, its lance strikes rupturing the patrol vessel's shields with impunity. With the prey's shields down, the predator didn't leap upon its quarry with a hunger to destroy. *Excoriator's* lances fell silent, and drew alongside the fleeing vessel. Instead of broadsides opening up and hammering the smaller ship into drifting scrap, the Legion warship disgorged boarding pods in an overwhelming wave. A dozen, spearing across space and digging into the vulnerable skin of the Imperial ship.

Excoriator didn't wait. Its engines fired, and the great warship veered in a lumbering arc, heading back to the fleet waiting in orbit. Aboard the Imperial ship, over a hundred warriors of the Night Lords Legion went about the business of purging any crew too loyal or weak to be of use.

It took only three hours for the Endeavour-class patrol cruiser to pull into formation with the Legion ships, joining its might to theirs. It bore a new name, the *Faithless Song*, to go with its new allegiance.

The cold sun began to fade over the ice-rimed mountain range below the Legion's geostationary coordinates. Night was falling on the surface, and at last, with all in readiness, a voice carried over the fleet's communal vox-network. The words came in a dead language, spoken by no living soul outside the fractured brotherhood gathered here.

'Acrius Toshallion. Jasith Raspatha vorvelliash kishall-kar.'

Seated inside her sealed chamber at the prow of the *Covenant of Blood*, Octavia looked to Septimus.

'What did he say?'

'It doesn't translate easily,' Septimus replied.

'Humour me,' insisted Octavia. 'It's important. What did he say?'

"'Vengeance, as night falls. By dawn, none will ever recall the Legion's shame.'"

'I don't understand,' said the Navigator, frowning. 'Why has the fleet gathered? What's so vital about one world out on the Rim?'

'If I knew, I'd tell you. I've never seen this many Legion ships in one place before. If I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes, I'd never believe it could happen.'

He moved to the bank of viewscreens adorning an entire wall. His gloved fingertip tapped ship after ship, each one a different class and size.

'These are supply ships. Promethium tankers, mostly. These look to be slave ships... Imperial Guard troop carriers, taken by the Night Lords over the years. These are Legion warships. There, the *Hunter's Premonition*. That's *Excoriator*, sister ship to the *Covenant of Blood*. This, here, is the *Serpent of the Black Sea*, one of the Legion's flagships from centuries ago. It was supposed to be lost in the Hades Veil. The Legion battleships alone could carry... ten, maybe twelve thousand Space Marines.'

'I didn't know they had that many warriors,' said Octavia, her voice tinged with worry.

‘No records show how many there are. I doubt even the Exalted knows. These are just the ships close enough to answer the call, but even so, outside of the Warmaster’s crusades, this is a gathering of rare significance.’

Septimus fell silent as he watched the warships shedding landing craft like a herd of beasts shaking off their fleas. Pods streaked planetwards, trailing tails of flame, each one a meteor burning through the atmosphere. Following them in majestic, arcing dives, gunships and heavy landers swooped through the cloud cover, their hulls gleaming orange with the heat of atmospheric entry.

Octavia came over to him, staring into the viewscreens, unable to fixate upon a single image. It was all too much to take in.

‘They’re not sending any human craft down,’ she noted. ‘No slaves. No cultists.’

‘It’s fifty degrees below zero on the surface of Uriah Three. Even colder at night. Only legionaries can survive outside of shelter in those conditions.’

‘How many of them are making planetfall?’

Septimus answered slowly. ‘I believe... it looks like all of them.’

The drop-pod threw up a torrent of snow and rock as it pounded into the earth. The edges of its dark hull glowed with fierce heat, its ceramite skin hissing and steaming in the air. Door seals spat free with mechanical clicks and vented steam, and like a flower in bloom the ramps opened, lowered, and slammed into the melted slush around the pod’s whining engines.

Talos was the first from the pod, his red-stained vision scanning the mountain pass ahead. His helm’s auto-senses muted the roaring wind to a tolerable background level.

The ground trembled, an earthquake’s echo, as more drop-pods came down across the tundra. Already, the sky was darkened by landing craft

and gunships fighting the vicious winds.

An identifier rune flashed white on the edge of Talos's retinal display. Mercurian's name glyph, though the vox gave all their voices a similar crackling cadence.

'We could do this alone. The five of us. But look up, brothers. The sky is black with Stormbirds and Thunderhawks. How many of the Legion muster with us? Nine thousand? Ten? We have no need of them to prosecute this war.'

Now Xarl's name-rune flashed, bold and urgent as the squad moved across the snow.

'He may be a miserable bastard, but he's right. This was our glory. We did the work. We sweated for weeks on that wretched world, living amongst that pathetic cult, waiting for the Callidus Temple to open their eyes and fall into our claws.'

Talos grunted his disagreement. Mercurian was morose at the best of times, and could always be trusted to see the darkest edge of any event. As for Xarl... He trusted no soul outside their own warband, and relatively few within it.

'This is not some personal glory to be etched onto our armour,' said Talos. 'This is the Legion's vindication. The others deserve to be here. Let them redden their claws alongside us.'

No name glyphs chimed in response. He was surprised the others were letting it slide so easily. Surprised, but grateful. Talos stalked on, his armoured boots crunching through the snow to crush the rocks beneath. Other squads fell into rough formation behind First Claw, but Talos and his brothers were allowed the honour of leading the advance.

The trek through the mountains would have killed a mortal in moments. Talos felt nothing, protected from even the void of space in his Mark 5 war plate. Even so, to prevent his joints from freezing, his powerpack's active hum had risen in pitch. The vox-network came alive with technical servitors reporting that the oil pipes and fuel tanks in the landed gunships were already icing up.

The temperature gauge on the edge of Talos's visor display remained unmercifully hostile. After only half an hour of trekking uphill, his power pack was humming with almost distracting intensity. He kept wiping frost from his faceplate when it threatened to form a crust.

The next warrior to speak was Cyrion. Despite the vox stealing all tone and humanity from his voice, his irritation bled through easily enough.

'I could have lived with annihilating this fortress from orbit. That would satisfy my honour, and spare us this tedious trudge.'

No one replied. Every one of them knew this mission required visual confirmation before it could be considered complete. Laying waste to the Callidus stronghold from orbit would achieve nothing.

'Don't everyone agree at once,' said Cyrion dryly.

Talos scowled behind his visor, but said nothing even as Cyrion continued.

'What if the Callidus bitch lied? What if we're marching half the Legion in neat formation through these mountain passes and a host of ambushes await? This is the most foolish advance in history.'

Now Talos replied, his own temper rising to the fore.

'*Enough*, Cyrion. Humans cannot survive outside shelter here. How will they ambush us? With thermal suits and hurled rocks from the cliff edges? If that were even a threat worth considering, orbital imagery would have caught it by now. This is a hidden temple. Defending it with a host of cannons upon the walls would require serious generation of power, and attract easy attention from orbital scanning.'

'I still do not like this march upland,' Cyrion grumbled.

'The march is symbolic, brother. The Legion commanders wished it, and so it shall be. Let the Callidus stare down from their fortress battlements, and bear witness to the doom that comes for them.'

Cyrion sighed. 'You have more faith in our leaders than I, Talos.'

Once more, the others fell silent. Above them, the looming fortress, hewn from the mountain rock, drew ever closer.

The Siege of Uriah III would enter the annals of the Night Lords Legion for its significance, if not its duration. The fortress rising from the side of the mountains was shielded against orbital bombardment, with multi-layered void fields offering dense resistance to any assault from the skies. As with many such defensive grids, the overlapping shields were considerably more vulnerable to attack from the ground.

Behind the marching warriors came entire battalions of Legion war machines: massive Land Raiders leading the way for the more compact Vindicator siege tanks, along with their Predator counterparts. Arrayed across ridges, nestled atop outcroppings and landed by Thunderhawk carriers along cliff edges, the Legion's armour battalions aimed cannons and turrets at the fortress's walls.

There was no heroic speech. No inspirational mantra. With a single word of order, the tanks opened fire as one, lighting the night with the brilliant flare of lascannon beams, and the incendiary bursts from Demolisher turrets.

In the shadows cast by the flickering shield and the storm of assaulting fire, Talos watched the siege begin in earnest. Cyrion approached where he knelt on the lip of a cliff.

'How long do you think they can keep us out?' he asked.

Talos lowered his bolter, no longer looking through the gunsight. The fortress itself was blurred behind a mirage of wavering air – a haze that gave off no heat. The void shield distorted the view of what lay behind it, reducing the battlements to uneven silhouettes.

'With over five hundred tanks at the walls? This firepower would cripple an Emperor in a heartbeat. Blood of the Father, Cyrion... We've not gathered this much armour in one place since the Siege of Terra. The walls will fall, and we'll be inside before dawn.'

The prediction was true enough. The sky was not yet lightening when, four hours later, the void shield shimmered, fluttering like an ailing

heartbeat, before disintegrating with a thunderclap of displaced air pressure. The Night Lords closest to the shield's edge were thrown from their feet, dozens of squads sent crashing across the icy landscape in the powerful rush of air, adding to the snowstorm's gale.

Without pause, without respite, the tanks turned their cannons upon the fortress's lower walls.

The first breach was torn exactly thirteen seconds later, a section of rock wall blasted inwards under a Demolisher shell. Squads broke into loping runs, moving around the still-firing tanks. They entered with the freezing wind, chainswords revving into life.

The defences were broken, and the slaughter could begin.

Talos led First Claw through the catacombs, his boots crunching on the layer of ice already coating the stone. With the fortress breached, its innards were at the mercy of the blizzards tearing across the surface of Uriah III. Many of the Imperial servants dwelling within the temple died from exposure within minutes of the walls coming down, and those that survived deeper within the complex soon fell victim to the grinding bite of Legion chainblades.

The Night Lords purged the fortress, chamber by chamber, level by level. In the combat arenas, where the Callidus agents were put through their rigorous training, banks of esoteric machinery lined the walls. Bolters made short work of the priceless bio-manipulation technology, explosive shells ripping apart the machines responsible for shaping generations of assassins.

First Claw moved through the catacombs, laying waste to the subterranean surgeries, their blades tearing medical equipment into ruin.

'These are the apothecarions where they implant muscle enhancers and the polymorphic compound that allow the Callidus to shapeshift,' said Talos. He reloaded his bolter, slamming a fresh magazine home and taking aim at an automated surgery table. 'Brothers. Leave nothing intact.'

Their bolters opened up with harsh chatters, detonating priceless, irreplaceable Imperial machines as the Night Lords left naught but scrap in their wake.

Yet, something was wrong. Cyrion voxed the others, lowering his bolter as they entered another underground apothecarion.

‘As thrilling as this worthless vandalism is proving to be, I’ve been paying attention to the general channels. No squad has crossed paths with any assassins yet. Talos, brother, you were lied to. There are no Callidus here. It’s an abandoned temple. This place is a tomb.’

Talos cursed, swinging his golden blade and splitting a surgical table in two. Both halves clattered to the tiled floor.

‘She was *not* lying,’ he said angrily. ‘I have seen it in my visions. I heard the truth in her voice, after seventeen days of excruciation. The hololithic is *here*.’

The two warriors faced each other, edging closer to open argument. It was Cyrion that backed down, offering a salute, fist over his breastplate.

‘As you say, brother.’

Talos cursed in Nostraman, a flowing sentence of bitter expletives leaving his lips and emerging harsh over the ragged vox-link. Just as he drew breath to order the squad onwards, the general channel sparked into life.

‘Brothers, this is the Exalted. My honour guard has reached the thirtieth sub-level. It is a Hall of Archives. First Claw, come to me at once. Talos... You were right.’

Talos entered the chamber, and confusion took hold before anything else. The librarium had clearly been swept clean long before the Legion had arrived in orbit, leaving empty bookshelves, blank display cases, and bare plinths.

Warriors from the Legion lined the walls – Night Lords from squads and warbands that First Claw didn’t recognise. In the heart of the room

stood the Exalted, its twisted bulk overshadowing the warriors nearby. The daemon in its heart was forever reshaping the Exalted's outer flesh, and the Legion lord hadn't been human – or even a transhuman – in many hundreds of years. A spined monstrosity of clawed hands and hulking armour breathed in a deep thunder rumble. It inclined its malformed head, grimacing through black fangs because it struggled to form any other facial expression through the mutations of its skull structure.

'Talos,' it said. 'The temple has been abandoned. The slaves left here were nothing more than custodians, remaining in the event of the Callidus's return.'

Talos stepped closer, his ceramite boots disturbing the dust of ages on the dark stone floor. Other footsteps tracked hither and thither across the ground. The tread of his Legion brothers. None were human. Humans had not walked these halls in years.

'I do not understand. You said I was right.'

The Exalted held out its claw, each bladed finger possessing too many joints. In the daemon creature's palm was a fist-sized sphere of discoloured bronze. A single lens peered from the sphere's side – a glaring eye of green glass.

A hololithic recorder.

'You *were* right. This remained, when all else was taken.'

'They wanted us to find it,' said Talos.

'It is not the original. Our hunt to destroy the original recording remains unfulfilled. But this... this is enough, for now. The Legion will thank you.'

Talos bit back his disgust at what the Exalted had become, taking the bronze sphere without comment. A simple twist of the top hemisphere caused a series of clicks from within, and the soft whirring of the lens brought itself into focus.

A grainy image beamed from the lens, monochrome green like watered-down jade. It showed...

'The Lord of the Night...' breathed Talos reverently.

It showed a hunched figure, its posture and musculature somewhere between human perfection and bestial corruption. The distortion stole too much clarity to make any true details, but the figure's face – his narrow eyes and fanged maw – smote the hearts of all bearing witness to it.

Primarch. Konrad Curze, the Night Haunter, Commander of the VIII Legion. Their father. The genetic forebear and biological template of every living Night Lord.

The flickering hololithic primarch rose from a throne stolen by distortion. He advanced in a silence that spoke of faulty recording, his movements jerky and interrupted by static interference.

None of that mattered. After centuries, the Lord of the Night's loyal sons were seeing him once again. Their father's ghost, here in this tomb of a temple.

If the Callidus had left the hololithic record to mock the Legion that would one day find it, they had severely misjudged the closure it offered, and the resurgence of purpose felt by every warrior present. Gauntlets clutched at bolters with inspired strength. Several warriors wept behind their skulled faceplates.

'*Ave Dominus Nox.*' They chanted the words in worshipful, thankful monotone. '*Ave Dominus Nox.* Hail the Lord of the Night.'

The primarch's last moments of life unfolded before their eyes. The towering demigod laughed, still locked in eerie silence, and then leapt forwards. A burst of visual static scratched the image into oblivion, only for it to reset and restart a moment later.

A wraith doomed to repeat its actions into eternity: the Night Lords primarch rose from his throne again, spoke words that went unheard, laughed without sound, and raced forwards, only to vanish again.

'I remember seeing it in the flesh,' whispered the Exalted. 'I recall watching him rise from the throne, so many years ago, and obeying his order to watch as the assassin approached. I remember how he laughed before he leapt at her.'

Talos cancelled the archival playback, staring down at the metal orb in his hand. It had several settings, each one activated by turning the top hemisphere by a few degrees to the next frequency.

He lowered his hand, keeping the orb in his fist.

‘We will ensure every Legion ship is granted a copy of the images contained here,’ he said. ‘Some things must be kept fresh in our memories. Come, brothers. We should return to orbit. There’s nothing more for us to find here.’

The deck shuddered beneath Talos’s feet as the *Covenant of Blood* pulled out of orbit. He had stood with his brothers of First Claw on the command deck, as the Legion fleet bombarded the temple site from orbit. The lances cut down into the planet below, a tectonic barrage that levelled the entire mountain range.

Then, one by one, the Night Lords warships broke away.

Alone in his meditation chamber, Talos regarded the hololithic recorder orb once more. He turned the device to its first setting, and watched his father laugh in the seconds before his death.

He watched this seven more times, before twisting the recorder to its next setting. Nothing happened. He tried the next, and received the same result.

Only the last setting contained another archive. A vox-recording.

Talos recognised the voice immediately. It was the assassin who had slain his father in the age before the Long War. More than that, it was the woman he had disembowelled and torn apart himself, in pursuit of vengeance.

She spoke from the grave, ten thousand years dead, repeating the same words just as the primarch’s spirit was caged into repeating the same actions.

This is M’Shen, daughter of the Callidus. I’ve found Commander Curze of the Night Lords Legion. I–

The recording broke into static.

This is M'Shen, daughter of the Callidus. I've found Commander Curze of the Night Lords Legion. I-

More static.

This is M'Shen, daughter of the Callidus. I've found Commander Curze of the Night Lords Legion. I-

Static.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's written several novels for the Black Library, including the Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach* and the *New York Times* bestselling *The First Heretic* for the Horus Heresy. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his wife Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere. His hobbies generally revolve around reading anything within reach, and helping people spell his surname.