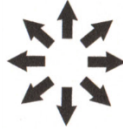
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**RENEGADES OF THE
DARK MILLENNIUM**

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RENEGADES OF THE DARK MILLENNIUM



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Night Lords

BRING THE NIGHT

Rob Sanders



They called it the Veiled Region for a reason. Dust-choked and buried in the Garon Nebula, the Hell Stars were a bloodshot haze, their dungeon glow the red of instruments heated for torture. What Demrid Sheremetev wouldn't give to see them now. Arx-Phineus IV was a miserable garrison world in a forgotten corner of the Segmentum Tempestus. It was a bleak world, mostly mica desert and crumbling fortifications that would hold more interest for an Imperial archeographer than an enemy. To the 1002nd Volscian Shadow Brigade it was home.

As Lord Marshal and Planetary Governor, Sheremetev was responsible not only for his Guardsmen but also for the garrison-serving communities dotted across the small world. When a supply brig passed through a nearby meteor storm, the ship warned the garrison world that it too was likely to encounter the phenomenon. With little to do but drink, gamble and fight - with the locals and each other - Sheremetev was eager to distract his men from the tedium of never-ending garrison duty. Seeking the sanction of his regimental commissar, the venerable Arturus Gannibal, the Lord Marshal proposed a skeleton watch and authorised a session of rest and recreation for the duration of the storm.

In doing so, Demrid Sheremetev granted his long-suffering Volscians and the people of this ugly little world something they could never have dreamed of finding in the murky skies: a night of beauty. As Arx-Phineus IV's brief day turned to night, the Lord Marshal ordered an extra ration of grog for his off-duty Guardsmen. Music from settlement drinking-holes was carried across the mica deserts on the wilderness breeze. Volscians came out onto the sands, crowding about Guard bastions and derelict

fortifications. They sang the raucous songs of their hive world home with drink in their bellies and local girls in their arms. On the roof of the central command spire, among the vox-masts and gun emplacements, the Lord Marshal and Arturus Gannibal shared a bottle of amasec Sheremetev had been saving and watched the show.

Eyes turned towards the heavens. The meteorite shower lit up the sky with its dazzling re-entries. The nebulous murk became a dance of light, flashing, streaming. Meteorites slashed down through the atmosphere, trailing blinding arcs of light. It was an incredible sight. The firmament glowed. It was the last beautiful thing any of them ever saw.

Somewhere a vox was bleeding static. It was all Sheremetev had heard for days: the brain-aching hiss of nothingness punctuated by begging, suffering and screaming, or sometimes by the whoosh of Volscian las-fire. A vox-bank on an open channel was receiving sporadic transmissions from forts, bastions and outposts from across the garrison world.

Beyond the stale stench of death and the fearful unfamiliarity of a world made stranger, Sheremetev only had the ear-bleeding insistence of the vox to help him visualise the horror of the planet's predicament. His garrison world. His responsibility. The night of the meteor shower had taken everything else. The world turned. The blazing re-entries died away with the festivities. As night turned to day, Sheremetev ordered the Volscian Shadow Brigade back to force readiness and a full complement for the early morning watch. Only then did he hit his bunk. He was awoken only two hours later by the officer of the watch, Lieutenant Krusak. He informed his superior that an epidemic of blindness had broken out amongst the garrison Guardsmen and the wider planetary population. Many had already lost their sight. For others it was deteriorating fast.

'Send for the chief medical officer and the regimental astropath,' Sheremetev had ordered. If the situation was as bad as it sounded then they might need to send for assistance.

'Exley's over-run in the infirmary. We've sent for the astropath,' Krusak had told him. 'But we can't find her.'

Sheremetev had sat on the side of his bunk. Gannibal and the Volscians were murky silhouettes. 'Keep looking. And turn on the lights,' the Lord Marshal had said.

'...they're on, sir,' Krusak had told him. Sheremetev nodded to himself in the growing darkness. He tapped on his temple.

'Not in here,' he had announced grimly.

That had been two weeks ago. Perhaps more.

'Arturus?' Sheremetev croaked across the command post.

'Lord Marshal,' the aged commissar replied finally. 'Still here.' It was difficult to tell where he was. The floor possibly. Sheremetev had found his way to a chair in front of a crackling runebank, the raw hiss of the vox in one ear and the meaningless chatter of a technomat servitor repeating what Sheremetev could only think was an endless and growing list of emergency imperatives in lingua-technis. 'Lieutenant?'

Nothing.

'Krusak?'

'I think the lieutenant's dead, sir.'

'Vanders?'

'Yes, Lord Marshal.'

'Sergeant, check in,' Sheremetev ordered.

'Yes, sir,' the gruff voice of the hive world sergeant returned. 'Ordell... Zandt... Nardina... Wozniak...'

The Lord Marshal heard all but Wozniak bleakly identify themselves from their positions on the blind perimeter. Thirst and hunger had hit them hard. Like the lieutenant, Wozniak too had left them.

Then, as the roll call was completed...

'Did you hear that?' Sheremetev said. The distant boom of engines closing. It built to a passing thunder, roaring thrusters taking craft down to the dusty plain to the east of the base, the landing zone that the garrison charitably called the spaceport.

'A lander?' Gannibal said weakly

'The Adeptus Astartes?' the sergeant suggested.

Sheremetev wanted to give the Volscian some hope.

'Viper Legion, out of Aurelius,' the Lord Marshal told them.

'Emperor be praised,' Guardsman Nardina gasped.

The Viper Legion occasionally honoured Arx-Phineus IV with visits as part of their own patrols and broader vigilance within the Garon Nebula.

'Sergeant,' Sheremetev announced, the dry rasp of his voice assuming something of its usual confidence and determination. 'Protocols will be

observed. Meet the Adeptus Astartes in the courtyard. Inform them that we are the victims of a rare astral phenomenon. Apprise them of the desperation of our situation. Take Zandt. Go, son. Emperor's speed.'

'Yes, Lord Marshal.' As with Sheremetev, something of the old Volscian sergeant had returned. Sheremetev listened to Ordell pull aside the materials they had used to barricade the command post door and heard the two Guardsmen stumble and pat their way along the access corridor.

For the longest time Sheremetev, the commissar and the remaining Volscians listened. They waited for salvation.

It never came.

The light flutter of hope in the Lord Marshal's stomach turned to lead as he heard the sickening crash of a boltgun out on the landing zone. Tumbling through the absolute darkness inside his head, his heart snatched in sickening realisation, Sheremetev knew the sound of an execution round. It was closely followed by another.

'God-Emperor, no...' was all the Lord Marshal could manage.

'Secure the perimeter,' Commissar Gannibal ordered.

'What's happening?' Guardsman Nardina bleated fearfully.

'It's not the Viper Legion,' Gannibal told him. 'Nardina, Odell, get on the door.'

The wait was an eternity of screams. Not simple suffering. Not brutality for survival's sake. Not the pain and suffering that had followed the garrison world's descent into darkness. It wasn't fear for what was to come. It was the heart-plunging horror of the here and now. Menace. Dread, fully realised. Torture. Terror. Death.

Across the open vox-channel, without the command centre and within, Guardsmen and the Imperial citizenry they were supposed to be protecting were at the mercy of an invasion force. Sheremetev had no choice but to wait and bear silent witness to the fearful ordeal while plate-clad monsters hunted his people with boltgun and blade through the private darkness of their doom. When it arrived in the command centre, the hydraulic inevitability of power-armoured steps carrying the Angels of Death right up to their door, the thunderclap of boltguns was almost a relief.

Nardina died without even getting his finger to his trigger. Ordell's lasgun sent a wild whoosh at their attackers but to no avail. Within moments the coppery sting of their messy deaths filled the chamber.

Silence. Step. Silence. Step. Sheremetev angled his head and listened for his end. When the voice came it was a booming everything, intimate yet everywhere - at one with the darkness in which the Lord Marshal was drowning.

'I have brought you the night, mortal...'

Sheremetev blinked his blindness and swallowed back his fear.

'My name is Demrid Sheremetev, Lord Marshal of the 1002nd Volscian Shadow Brigade...'

'No, no, no,' the voice chided, the words chill like the desert night. 'We don't deal in names. Neither yours, nor our own. We are the night.'

'You are traitors...'

'We deal in dread and the end that follows,' the renegade angel told him. 'It is our calling.'

'The storm?' Sheremetev asked. 'It was yours?' He had to know.

'A weapon of terror,' the Chaos Space Marine told him. 'One of many at our disposal, Imperial pig. Now listen carefully.' The darkness gave an order to one of its own. There was a scuffle. Sheremetev could hear Gannibal's feeble grunts of exertion against the Chaos Space Marines that held him. He reached out but flinched as the commissar's bolt pistol went off. The Lord Marshal heard his friend cry out as an armoured gauntlet crushed the bone in his hand around the pistol as well as the *thunk* of the pistol hitting the floor, where the owner of the silky voice kicked it away

'That's better,' the darkness said. 'Now we can talk. We have in our possession your soul-bound wretch of a regimental astro telepath. Know that she *is* but a possession to us. Without purpose, a piece of meat. I implore you, do not take away that purpose, for it is the only thing keeping her alive.'

'What do you want?'

'I want to answer your prayers,' the darkness promised. 'I want to send a request for assistance to the Viper Legion on Aurelius.'

'You want to lure the Emperor's angels here so that you can murder them,' Gannibal bawled at them, the aged commissar still struggling against his captors.

'The witch will help us in order to save her psyker skin,' the darkness told Sheremetev, 'but for Aurelius to take us seriously, we need your regimental authorisation codes. The ones you are going to give me.'

'Don't give this monster anything,' Gannibal roared.

The darkness gave another order, an instruction that was only made complete by the hideous screaming of the commissar that followed.

'Do you hear that?' the darkness put to Sheremetev, coming in close. 'He lacked foresight and I'm taking his eyes. He wasn't going to need them. I'm here thinking about what else he might not need - and he will be but the first. I'll bring in your men one by one and take them apart before you. You'll hear their screams. You'll feel their blood spray against your face.'

Sheremetev was shaking his head. 'I beg you. Don't do this...'

'No, I beg you, do not take the selfish path.'

'I can't give you...'

'You can,' the darkness insisted. 'You can and you will. And here's why. Nobody's coming to help you, to save you, to avenge you. My vessel is positioned to destroy any vessel attempting to leave or enter the system. After deploying the atmospherics you took for a pretty storm, we sat in deep orbit for days just to listen to your tiny garrison world tear itself apart. The screams. The merciless degeneration of order into chaos, robbery and murder. Before we even set foot on this planet, we savoured it all. Do not doubt our commitment to your suffering. Do this and I promise you my mercy.'

'Demrid, no,' Gannibal moaned.

'You have to,' the darkness told him, so close the words seemed to proceed from his own broken mind.

'I have to...' Sheremetev finally agreed.

'The astrotelepathic authorisation code?'

'Four-two-seven,' the Lord Marshal told him miserably. 'Psi-Sigma-Epsilon-Delta.'

The voice was suddenly distant once more, the Chaos Space Marine in congress with his dark brethren.

'Ensure that she tells them that this miserable world belongs to the Night Lords,' the darkness seethed. 'And exaggerate reports of our number. I want the Viper Legion to send everything they have.' Then to another renegade angel, 'Have the *Tenebrious* hold low orbit and stand by to receive our Thunderhawks. Then set a course for Aurelius'

'Yes, my lord.'

For Sheremetev there were no words.

'We bring the night,' the darkness told him. 'We brought the night to your wretched world and while the Viper Legion mobilises their companies, rushing to the aid of your corpses, we will bring the terror of the night to the angels' home world.'

Sheremetev heard Gannibal moan.

'Mercy...'

The Night Lord chuckled darkly.

'Your people shall die of thirst,' the darkness told him. 'Of starvation. Of each other. You, however, who have been of such use to our cause... How could I not grant you an angel's mercy?'

Sheremetev heard the clunk of the Night Lord's bolt pistol priming.

'What do you think I am, a monster?'

THE SUREST WEAPON

Nick Kyme



Even though he knew it was coming, the blow still took Vadeth by surprise. A welt of pain spread slowly through his cheek as the bone strength was tested, and hot knives raked his skin where the mail of his attacker's fist bit into flesh.

He tasted blood, warm from where the cut bled down into his mouth. Three teeth were loose, and his jaw cracked ominously when he tried to speak.

'Quiet!' snapped the attacker. 'In here, you have no voice. The weak are not afforded this privilege. All there is for you is suffering.'

Fresh pain surged through Vadeth's back and chest as he strained against his bonds. The manacles bit into his wrists, and he imagined all the ways he would kill this man before him. A bulky silhouette. A shadow possessed of menace and malice. Vadeth didn't know who his tormentor was, nor did he recognise the voice in his dazed state, but he vowed in that moment, strapped to that chair, that he would seek this craven out and brutally despatch him.

As thoughts of revenge manifested, Vadeth looked up. One of his eyes was nearly sealed shut and he could feel there was blood all over his face, but the glare he gave to his shadowy aggressor spoke of his desire for vengeance and a promise of retribution.

The beating stopped. Suddenly and inexplicably the mood in the small, dark room changed. Vadeth heard footsteps as the attacker backed off. He wondered if he was going for a weapon, or some tool to extract further agony and humiliation.

'Good,' said the attacker, his voice neutral, almost approving.

Vadeth kept glaring, feeling his hate turn into something tangible that he could clench in his fists.

'You are ready.' With those final words, his attacker left the room.

It took Vadeth a few seconds to realise he was not alone.

Breathing, laboured and irregular. Their breaths overlaid and contradicted one another. Vadeth discerned two other individuals including himself. Prisoners, as he was.

He remembered little of the battle, which was unusual in itself as Adeptus Astartes had perfect eidetic recall. Yet, there were some elements of his memory missing. They didn't feel gone as such, just... indistinct. Cloudy. Either poison or some kind of psychic infiltration.

Xenos. He remembered that part. He and his brothers had been purging a colony of vermin that had crossed their path. It seemed the eldar had use for salvage as well - two factions of them, going at it tooth and nail. They had all looked like raiders to Vadeth's eyes, but Gaust had assured him they were of different castes.

'Here, brother,' the hoary veteran had said. Gaust was his sergeant, but Vadeth was on the verge of leaving the old warrior's squad to join the Malevolent's elite, the Vilifiers. If this battle went well, if Vadeth acquitted himself with the brutality and efficiency he knew he was capable of and had done so thus far during this latest punitive campaign in the Heklion Cluster, his place amongst the Vilifiers would be guaranteed.

Gaust had pointed one patched-up, gauntleted finger. The glove was from a different suit of armour, a different Chapter in fact. One of the Techmarines had given it a cursory repaint but the rigours of war and Gaust's own indifference towards maintenance had allowed some of the old colour and iconography to bleed through the black and yellow Marines Malevolent livery.

'See. One, pirates. The other, rangers. They are both outcasts, skirmishers and scrappers. Whatever hoard they fight over must be worth all of this blood.'

The two eldar factions were killing each other. Bodies lay strewn across a verdant battlefield, now scarred by fire and corpses. The edifice they both clamoured to enter had looked like a tomb to Vadeth's eyes. Perhaps it was an armoury, as Gaust had suggested. Either way, it was plunder too valuable to ignore.

The order came down from Captain Vinyar, observing the conflict from the *Purgatory* in low orbit above them. The ship was so vast it had been visible in the night sky, crowding out the twin moons and obliterating stars

with its presence. If the xenos had seen it, they did not seem to care. All that mattered was the white bone tomb and the prize within it.

Thirty heavily booted feet had tramped over the rise, inflicting further injury on the once bucolic landscape. Vadeth had been in the lead with Gaust and the rest of the squad. First had come war shouts, spat from every Malevolent's mouth, then the bolters. Back when he was a Scout, each neophyte had been taught by his taskmaster to fire in short bursts.

'Spare your shells,' the grizzled trainers had often barked. 'You have teeth on your blades and in your mouths. Use them, but know they are not your surest weapon.'

A xenos body jerked as one of Vadeth's shells hit it. Hooded cloak, light tan armour that looked like fibrous wool - the alien's armour was no protection against a mass-reactive round. It had exploded violently, torso and legs separating, and showered its kin and foes alike with blood. The distraction was useful. It sowed further confusion. One more burst, six paltry shells in total, had been all that Vadeth expended before he waded in with the saw.

Gaust wielded a mattock. It had a power field generator that manifested as a minute electrical charge around the hammer's head. Wafts of corposant drifted down the haft, bleeding off its killing end as Gaust went about his task with mechanical pugilism.

The eldar were more proficient at close quarters. Vadeth duelled with one. It wore black, segmented armour of a distinctly insect-like aspect, with barbs on the shoulders, elbows and knees. In the sprawling melee that had erupted across the largely barren plains, both factions had become embroiled with the Space Marines.

Vadeth took a blow against his upper armour. The eldar had an energy lash that snagged the limb and proceeded to burn through the baseplate's ceramite casing. Despite the pain, Vadeth seized the taut whipline and yanked his enemy towards him. A headbutt connected with the xenos's face as they met, caving in the nose and much of the left cheek. Blood and bone rained down Vadeth's faceplate, and the whip around his arm went slack. He used it to strangle one of the other xenos.

Only a handful remained. They had banded together, in spite of their ostensible differences. Raised bolters hemmed them in, an ever-decreasing

circle of bile-yellow power armour constricting around them like a hangman's noose.

Vadeth remembered only fragments after that moment, after he had turned to Gaust to compare stories of their acts of prowess during the battle. He remembered Gaust's chest and the chasm within it coring him open. He had burbled something, blood drooling over his bottom lip as his insides were slowly liquified. Vadeth couldn't make out what it was. His gaze had been drawn to Gaust's slayer.

The auspex was foul with whatever churned cud was infecting the air. Vision was impaired by the self same leaf gruel the Malevolents had disturbed when they had charged across the plain. Vadeth had seen an outline of power armour, distant enough to be vague but not so far that he did not recognise the meltagun in the figure's hands.

More shouting, this time in urgency not battle fervour. Regroup. Redeploy. Survive.

An object had rolled over to Vadeth. He looked down at it, sitting innocuously at his feet. The grenade exploded. Vadeth's world had turned black. He had awoken an indeterminate time later in the cell.

Lights flared, not stark, but coming from abject darkness it took Vadeth a few seconds to adjust to them. The two others with him were eldar, one of each faction. Belatedly, Vadeth realised there were three factions, and the Marines Malevolent were one of them. They were all prisoners. The figure with the meltagun, a vanguard of another force, a renegade warband. The Malevolents had either lost the battle or had left him for dead.

There was something jutting from Vadeth's chest. He had only just noticed it, but now that he did, it burned. The bindings around his wrists and ankles broke apart, the shackles clattering to the ground noisily. There was no time to clutch at the thing burning into his skin. The eldar were free too. Something about their eyes... Vadeth saw fury. Unreasoning. Pure. He was the focus of it. Snarling, the xenos flew at him. No weapons, just brawn and determination.

Vadeth was hurting. Slow. He had been worked over much more severely than his fellow prisoners. The xenos were wiry, but still strong and well-conditioned in spite of captivity. One clambered onto Vadeth's back as he flailed, trying to remove it. The other rained blows against his face, torso

and neck. Again, in his weakened state, Vadeth's defence was poor. As the blood welled fresh in his mouth and he spat out a tooth, the darkness crept inexorably at the edge of his vision - he realised they were beating him to death. As formidable as he was, Vadeth was going to die unless something changed.

Defiance at his allotted fate flourished first. It got him up from his knees and onto his feet again. It lasted for a few seconds before the xenos harrying his body swept his trembling legs from beneath him. His throat was being crushed, two bony hands wrapped around it, squeezing. A kick to the side of the head drew sparks in front of his eyes and a dull throb that sounded ominous.

To be laid low by this scum went against everything his Chapter stood for, against their sense of superiority and xenophobia, the belief in their pre-eminence and intolerance of any deviance. These creatures were abominations. They were lesser than Vadeth in every way.

Thou shalt not suffer the alien to live.

Vadeth's dislocated jaw prevented him from saying the words but he felt every word of it. He felt a well of hate surging up within him that drove him, burning, to his feet. He roared, a mangled, discordant shout of undisputed fury. He broke the thing on his back by ramming it against the wall. The other he pummelled to death with his elbows and fists. In seconds it was over and Vadeth was left bloody and adrenalized. The lights flared again, so bright he had to shade his eyes with one bloody hand.

A figure was standing before him. It spoke in the same voice as earlier.

'What is the surest weapon?'

Vadeth couldn't answer. He could barely see. Lowering his hand, he was readying to fight on when he saw the sergeant in bile-yellow and coal-black livery.

Marines Malevolent. My Chapter.

It wasn't really a question. It was merely a part of their mantra. Vadeth had provided a physical statement of the other part in the battered bodies at his feet.

'Look down,' said the sergeant. His name was Kastor and he was wearing some of Gaust's armour, as well as carrying his power hammer. A man would kill for a weapon such as that.

There was a shard jutting out of Vadeth's chest, stone-like and crimson in colour. As he looked upon it, he felt his hate rekindled but was able to master it.

'That's what was in the tomb. Not a weapon, not as such,' Kastor told him, 'but just that. It drove them frenzied. It even worked its way into Brother Igrat. He killed your old sergeant before Clytok destroyed most of the rock. The red haze lifted in us after that. What's left is embedded in you. It afforded an opportunity. I decided to use it as your test. Initiation. This one was unique.'

Dazed and battered, it took Vadeth a few minutes to recall who Kastor was. He led the Vilifiers, and was one of the most vicious fighters ever to have graced the Chapter.

'I needed to see,' said Kastor, 'if you could embody everything we are. If your hatred outweighed theirs, even with the shard driving them to madness.'

Vadeth said nothing. Even if he had words for Kastor, he couldn't speak them anyway. His eyes spoke for him, burning with contempt.

Kastor smiled, his scarred, grizzled visage at odds with the expression.

'You are a Vilifier now, Vadeth. And you won't need this anymore, either.' He reached out, tore the shard from Vadeth's flesh and crushed it in his mailed fist. 'You have learned your most important lesson. Our mantra is not merely just words. It's truth. Hate, brother,' he said, recognising the lingering fury in Vadeth's eyes. 'Hate compels us. It drives us. Keener than any sword. More enduring than any starship or fort. Colder than Fenrisian ice.'

Kastor held out his hand to seal the oath of inducting a recruit to the Vilifiers.

Vadeth struck him instead, so hard it put the sergeant on one knee.

Spitting out a gobbet of blood, Kastor smiled as he looked up at his latest charge.

'Yes, brother. Now you see it, don't you? Hate is the surest weapon.'

ABADDON: CHOSEN OF CHAOS

Aaron Dembski-Bowden



*From shame and shadow recast.
Free.
When all others bow to the Throne.
In black and gold reborn.
Brothers.
When all others stand alone.*

When the prisoner is brought before us, I cannot tell if he possesses enough dignity not to struggle in futility, or simply lacks the strength to fight back. His armour, once cast in the regal white of his butchered Chapter, is now a ruined suit of gunmetal grey. Where honour badges and deed tokens once showed proud on the ceramite, scars and scorch marks are the only decorations he now bears. I could say that Fate has not been kind to him, but that would be a lie. *We* have not been kind to him. Nor to his Chapter. Nor to the population they sought to protect.

Fate had nothing to do with this.

My Rubricae cast him to the muddy ground. This duty done, they turn their faceplates to me, awaiting orders.

Kill him if he moves, I send to them, silently

They level their ornate bolters on the prone captive with the slow, wraithly movements of those that can no longer even feign life. Rain hammers all of us in an oily torrent, hissing from the horned helms of my brothers and the Kheltaran crests of my ashen dead servants.

'Let me,' says Lheor. His helmet's mouthpiece is a snarling thing of clenched ceramite fangs. Once it was red. Now it is black. 'Let me carry out the sentence.'

In recent years, Lheor has taken to scratching his kill-markings on his armour. His hands twitch in unpleasant spasm without weapons to grip.

When our commander offers no reply, Lheor steps forward, resting the toothed edge of a chain-axe against the captive's neck.

'Ezekyle. Let me have this honour.'

I sense nothing but loyal, wrathful devotion from him. It emanates from his mind in a stinging, unseen mist.

The prisoner looks up - a defiant stare, yet not entirely able to hide his surprise at the name my brother has spoken. But we are the Ezekarion. We are the only souls permitted to speak the Warmaster's name.

Telemachon stands next to me, watching with arms crossed across his breastplate. His mind is sealed to me, and I am content to leave it thus. It has been nine years since I last tried to kill him. It has been seven since he last tried to kill me.

'A little restraint, brother,' he says to Lheor. 'This one may be useful.'

Telemachon has the most beautiful voice I have ever heard. A voice to sway souls and cleanse consciences - soft without implying weakness; strong without arrogance. Even the crackle of vox corruption cannot flaw its smooth tone.

'Khayon,' the Warmaster says.

I turn at my name, looking at Abaddon, who alone among us stands barefaced in the rain. It is difficult for those of us with sixth senses to look at him for long.

'Ezekyle,' I reply, already looking away.

'What do you counsel?'

He knows that I am weary of this war. I have threatened, more than once, to take my fleet and sail ahead of the Legion, hunting other prey. Only by the Warmaster's request have I stayed with them here, on the front lines.

'If you wish me to divine destiny from his entrails, brother, I suggest you ask the White Seer or the Weeping Girl.'

I risk another glance towards him. His eyes glint unhealthily amber in the fading sun. Veins cobweb beneath his cadaverous skin, thick with the

power that ripens his immortal flesh.

I hear his sword beginning to whisper to me, and realise that I have looked for too long.

At once, I turn back to the prisoner. The warrior - a captain of his thin-blooded Chapter - trembles as death draws near. One of his hearts has already failed. The blood-stink is strong on him; not even the heavy rain and the bitter wind can hide it. His breaths rattle in his half-cut throat.

'I need no prophecy from his death throes,' Abaddon tells me, and steps forward himself. He rests the Talon's curved scythe-blades on the prisoner's shoulder. 'Why did you allow yourself to be taken?'

The brother-captain lifts his head and... spits upon the clawed blades of a weapon that butchered a primarch.

Lheor chuckles, wet and dark. Telemachon's laughter is a mellifluous thing, inspiring others to laugh with him. Even I feel a smile creep across my mouth at this warrior's last act of defiance. Rain washes the acidic goblet of saliva from the curved adamantium.

Only Abaddon remains outwardly untouched by mirth, though I feel his amusement pulsing from his mind in a flicker of unconcealed honesty. He crouches before the prisoner in a grinding, whirring chorus of armour joints.

'Did that soothe your shame?' he asks the captain. His voice is brutally gentle. Almost... kind. 'That little surge of spite. That little act of defiance. Did it ease your shame at dying with your duty undone? Did it avenge the one thousand brothers that we have murdered and desecrated? Did it vindicate your failure to defend this world?'

The captain spits again, this time into the Warmaster's face. Abaddon smiles as it trickles down his cheek.

'These, my brothers, are the thin-blooded, mind-scrubbed children that the Imperium has birthed in our absence. These are our inheritors.'

More chuckles. The captain's defiance is sincere, but he is playing Proud to the wrong audience.

'Once,' the Warmaster tells him, 'we were angels. Not outside Imperial law. *Above* it. Not the defenders of humanity. The *lords* of it.'

The captain draws his last breath, ready to spit a third and final time - Abaddon denies him the chance. With almost loving slowness, the

Warmaster sinks a single talon into the Space Marine's chest, carving hearts, lungs, muscle-meat and spine in a slow caress.

'Do you hear that screaming?' he says softly. 'That shrieking at the edge of your fading senses? The gods are coming for you, hero. They are coming for your soul.'

Abaddon withdraws the claw and kisses the dying warrior on the forehead - a Bronze Era warlord blessing one of his chosen warriors.

'Sleep, brave champion of humanity. A life without worth is coming to a close, and you go to your reward in the Sea of Souls.'

He rises to his feet. No longer supported, the captain's corpse topples into the mud. But before the Warmaster turns away, he hesitates.

'Khayon,' he says to me.

'Brother.'

'Can you find the daemon that devoured that warrior's soul?'

He knows I can. He is asking if I will.

'It will be done,' I tell him.

'Thank you. Bind it into the corpse, and cast it in with the rest of the Secondborn.'

A preview of
THE TALON OF HORUS
Aaron Dembski-Bowden



Two Minutes to Midnight 999.M41

Before the beginning, there was an end.

As I speak these words, a quill scratches quietly on parchment, faithfully recording everything I say. The soft sounds of writing are almost companionable. How quaint, that my scribe uses ink, pen, and parchment.

I do not know his true name, or if he even possesses one anymore. I have asked several times but the scratching quill is my only reply. Perhaps he has nothing more than a serial code. That would not be uncommon.

'I will call you Thoth,' I tell him. He offers no response to this courtesy. I inform him it was the name of an ancient and renowned Prosperine scribe. He doesn't reply. Imagine my disappointment.

I do not know what he looks like. My hosts, caring and gracious souls that they are, have blinded me, shackled me to a stone wall, and invited me to confess my sins. I am reluctant to call them my captors', when I walked unarmed into their midst and surrendered without violence. "Hosts" seems a fairer term.

On the first night, they took my first and sixth senses, leaving me sightless and powerless in the dark.

So I do not know what my scribe looks like, but I can guess. He is a servitor, doubtless like millions of others. I hear his heart, as passionless as the stately ticking of a musician's metrogauge. His cyborged joints whirr and click as he moves, and his breathing is a verse of measured sighs through a slack mouth. I never hear him blink. Most likely his eyes have been replaced by augmetics.

Commencing a chronicle like this requires honesty, and these are the only words that feel true. Before the beginning, there was an end. This is how the Sons of Horus died. This is how the Black Legion rose.

The Black Legion's story begins with the assault on Canticle City. That was where everything changed, where the sons of several Legions abandoned the colours of the past and went to battle for the first time in black. Even so, such a tale requires context. Let us begin with the Legion Wars, and the search for Abaddon.

There is an era recorded in the annals of Imperial history that has suffered as all recollections must suffer in time, with its details twisted into a mockery of remembrance. This was an age of relative peace and prosperity, when the fires of the Heresy had settled down to ash, and mankind's empire ruled over the galaxy with an unchallenged grip.

What few archives survive to record this "golden age" in any detail now hearken back to it in reverent whispers as the chronometers tick closer to midnight in this last, dark millennium.

Picture that domain, if you can. An empire across the stars, united and invincible - its foes destroyed, its traitors scoured. Any soul crying out against the worship of the "divine" Emperor suffers the ultimate punishment, forfeiting life for the sin of speaking blasphemy. Any xenobreed within Imperial space is hunted down and slaughtered with merciless impunity. Mankind had a strength then that it lacks now. The true decline of the Emperor's interstellar kingdom hadn't yet begun.

Still, a tumour lingered. The Imperium hadn't destroyed its foes. Not completely. It had merely forgotten them. Forgotten us.

Peace, for the first time in humanity's long history, had been built upon the proud ignorance that follows the bitterest victory. Already, mere generations after the galaxy burned, the Heresy and the Scouring that followed were falling into legend.

The High Lords of Terra - those worthies that ruled in their fallen Emperor's name - believed us gone. Believed us ruined or slain, in our shameful exile. Amongst themselves, they sowed stories of our banishment to an underworld, dwelling in eternal torment inside the Great Eye. After all, what mortal could survive within the greatest warpstorm ever unleashed across reality? A vortex of annihilation in the galaxy's

heart made for a convenient method of execution: a pit into which this new kingdom could cast its traitors.

In those earliest days, the fortress that would become the war-world of Cadia was a neglected outpost of cold rock and complacency. It needed no vast battlefleet to patrol its domain in the void, and its population was spared the fate it suffers now, as its governor-militants feed the population into the flesh-grinders of the Imperial Guard, swallowing children and spitting out soldiers destined to die.

The Cadia of that lost age needed nothing at all, for it was scarcely threatened. The Imperium was strong because its foes no longer raised blades to bring down its false Emperor.

We had other wars to wage. We were fighting each other. These were the Legion Wars. They raged across the Eye with a fury that made a mockery of the Heresy.

We were forgetting the Imperium as much as the Imperium was forgetting us, though over time our battles began to spill into real space. Hell itself couldn't contain the grudges we bore each other.

I have promised to reveal everything, and I am a man of my word, no matter the sins that my jailors believe stain my soul. In return, they have promised me all the ink and parchment necessary to document my confession. They have crucified me, knowing it will not ill me. They have stolen the sorcery from my blood, and they have torn my eyes from their sockets. But I do not need eyes to dictate this chronicle. All I need is patience and a little slack on my chains. I am Iskandar Khayon, born of Prospero. In the Low Gothic of the Terran Urals region, you would speak Iskandar as Sekhandur, and Khayon as Caine.

The Thousand Sons know me as Khayon the Black, for my sins against our bloodline. The Warmaster's forces name me Kingbreaker - the mage that brought Magnus the Red to his knees.

I am the warleader of the Kha'Sherhan, a Lord of the Ezekarion, and a brother to Ezekyle Abaddon. I shed blood with him at the dawn of the Long War, when the first of us stood armoured in black beneath the rising red sun.

Every word on these pages is true.

Devils and Dust

I

In the long years before the Battle of Canticle City I knew no fear because I had nothing to lose. Everything I had treasured was dust at the mercy of history's winds. Every truth I had fought for was now nothing more than idle philosophy - spoken by exiles, whispered to ghosts.

None of this angered me, nor was I victim to any special melancholy. I'd learned over the centuries that only a fool tries to fight fate.

All that remained were the nightmares. My somnolent mind took a dark joy in casting back to Judgement Day, when wolves howled and ran through the burning city streets. I dreamt the same dream each time I allowed myself to sleep. Wolves, always the wolves.

Adrenaline pulled me from slumber on a lactic leash, leaving my hands trembling and my skin dusted in cold crystals of sweat. Scream-howls followed me back to the waking world, fading into the metal walls of my meditation cell. Some nights, I felt those howls in my blood, riding through my veins, imprinted in my genetic coding. The wolves, even though they were nothing more than memory, hunted with an eagerness fiercer than fury.

I waited for them to melt away into the thrumming sounds of the ship all around. Only then did I rise. The chronometer cited that I'd slept for almost three hours. After remaining awake for thirteen days, even a clutch of rest was a welcome respite.

On the deck floor of my modest bedchamber, a wolf that wasn't a wolf lay in watchful repose. Her white eyes, as featureless as perfect pearls, tracked me as I stood. When the beast rose a moment later, her movements were unnaturally fluid, not bound to the motions of natural muscle. She didn't move the way real wolves move, nor even as the wolves that haunted my dreams. She moved like a ghost wearing a wolf's skin.

The nearer one came to the creature, the less she resembled a natural beast at all. Her claws and teeth were glassy and black. Her mouth was dry of any saliva, and she never blinked. She smelled not of flesh and fur, but of the smoke that follows fire - the undeniable scent of a murdered home world.

Master, came the wolf's thought. It wasn't really a word, it was a concept, an acknowledgement of submission and affection. However, a human - and post-human - mind instinctively processes such things as language.

Gyre, I sent back in telepathic greeting.

You dream too loud, she told me. *I fed well that day. The last breaths of the Fenris-born. The crack of white bones for the tangy marrow within. The salty tongue-sting of the proudest blood.*

Her amusement inspired my own. Her confidence was always infectious.

'Khayon,' came a dull, inhuman voice from all around the chamber. A voice wholly starved of both emotion and gender. 'We know you are awake.'

'I am,' I assured the empty air. *Gyre's* dark fur was soft beneath my fingertips. It felt almost real. The beast paid no heed as I scratched behind its ears, showing neither pleasure nor irritation.

'Come to us, Khayon.'

I wasn't sure I could deal with such a meeting, just then.

'I cannot. Ashur-Kai needs me.'

'We are recording tonal signifiers suggesting deception in your reply, Khayon.'

'That is because I am lying to you.'

No reply. I took that as a good thing. 'Has there been any word regarding power through the antechambers connected to the spinal thoroughfares?'

'No recorded changes,' the voice assured me.

A shame, but not a surprise, given the ship's power conservation. I rose from the slab that served as my pallet, thumbing my sore eyes in the wake of unsatisfying slumber. The chamber's illumination was dull with the *Tlaloc's* depleted power, mirroring the years I'd spent as a Tizcan child reading parchments by handheld illume-globe.

Tizca, once called the City of Light. The last time I had seen the city of my birth was when I'd fled from it, watching Prospero burn as the planet receded on the oculus viewscreen.

Tizca still lived after a fashion, on the Legion's new home world of Sortarius. I had visited it a handful of times, deep in the Eye, yet never felt any compunction to remain there. Many of my brothers felt the same - at least, those few with their minds still intact. In those inglorious days,

the Thousand Sons were a divided brotherhood at best. At worst, they'd forgotten what it meant to be brothers at all.

As for Magnus, the Crimson King that once held court above his sons? Our father was lost in the ebb and flow of the Great Game, fighting the War of the Four Gods. His concerns were aetheric and ethereal, while his sons' ambitions were still mortal and mundane. All we wanted to do was survive. Many of my brothers sold their lore and war-sorcery to the highest bidders amongst the warring Legions, for our talents were always in demand.

Sortiarius was a hostile home, even among the myriad worlds bathed in the energies of the Eye. All who dwelled there lived beneath a burning sky that stole all notion of night and day, with the heavens drowned in a swirling, tormented chorus of the restless dead. I had seen Saturn, in the same planetary system as Terra, and the planet Kelmasr, orbiting the white sun Clovo. Both planets are haloed with rings of rock and ice, marking them out from their celestial brethren, Sortiarius had a similar ring, spectrally white against the tumultuous-violet of Eyespace. It was not formed from ice or rock, but from shrieking souls. The Thousand Sons' exile-world was quite literally crowned by the howling spirits of those who had died by deceit.

It was beautiful, in its own way.

'Come to us,' said the mechanical voice from the wall-mounted vox-speakers.

Was I imagining the faint edge of a plea in the dead tone? It unnerved me, though I couldn't say why.

'I would rather not.'

I moved to the door, and didn't need to tell Gyre to follow. The black wolf padded after me, white eyes watching, obsidian claws clicking and scratching along the deck. Sometimes - if you glanced at the right moment - Gyre's shadow against the wall was something tall and horned and winged. Other times, my she-wolf cast no shadow at all.

Two guardians stood vigil outside my door. Both were clad in bronze-edged cobalt ceramite, with their helms marked by high Kheltaran head crests, reminiscent of Prosperine history and the ancient Ahztik-Gypton empires of Old Earth. Both of them turned their heads toward me, just as expected. One of them even nodded in slow greeting, solemn as any

temple gargoyle. Once, this display of life would have teased me with the threat of false hope, but I was beyond such delusions now. My kindred were long gone, slain by Ahriman's hubris. These Rubricae, these husks of ashen undeath, stood in their place.

'Makari. Djedhor.' I greeted them by name, futile as it was.

Khayon, Makari managed to project the name, but it was a thing of cold and simple obedience, not true recognition.

Dust, sent Djedhor. He'd been the one to nod. *All is dust*.

My brothers, I sent back to the Rubricae.

Looking upon them with the penetrative stare of second sight was maddening, for I saw both life and death in the ceramite husks they had become. I *reached* for them, not physically but with a hesitant pressure of psychic awareness. It was the same subtle straining one might do to listen for a distant voice on a silent night.

I felt the nearness of their souls, no different from when they'd walked among the living. But within their armour was nothing but ash. Within their minds was mist instead of memory.

From Djedhor, I sensed the scarcest ember of recollection: a flash of white flame eclipsing all else, lasting no more than a moment. That was how Djedhor had died. How the whole Legion had died. In rapturous fire.

Although Makari's mind sometimes offered the same insignificant pulse of remembrance, I sensed nothing from him then. The latter Rubricae regarded me with an emotionless, fixed stare of its helm's T-visor, clutching its bolter in stately guardianship.

On more than one occasion, I had tried to explain the living-dead contradiction to Nefertari, but the right words always failed me. The last time we'd spoken of it, it had ended particularly poorly.

'They are there and not there,' I'd said to her. 'Husks. Shadows. I cannot explain it to someone without the second sight. It is like trying to describe music to someone born deaf.'

At the time, Nefertari had run her clawed gauntlet down Makari's helm, her crystal nails scraping over one staring red eye lens. Her skin was whiter than milk, paler than marble, translucent enough to show faint cobwebs beneath the skin of her angular cheeks. She looked half-dead herself.

'You explain it,' she had replied with a dry, alien smile, 'by saying that music is the sound of emotion, expressed through art from musician to audience.'

I had nodded at her elegant rebuttal but said nothing more. The details of my brothers' curse weren't something I enjoyed sharing even with her, not least because I shared the blame for their fate. I was the one that had tried to stop Ahriman's last throw of the dice.

I was the one that had failed.

The familiar throb of guilt-stained irritation pulled me back to the Present. Gyre growled by my side.

Follow, I bade the two Rubricae. The command cracked down the Psychic filament linking the three of us, and the bond thrummed with their acknowledgement. Makari and Djedhor's boot-steps thudded on the decking as they trailed behind.

In the long thoroughfare leading to the bridge, another vox-speaker crackled to life. 'Come to us,' it said. Another toneless entreaty to venture deeper into the ship's cold hallways.

I looked directly at one of the bronze aural receptors dotting the arched walls of the main spinal corridor. This one was forged in the shape of a smiling, androgynous burial mask.

'Why?' I asked it.

The confession was whispered from speakers all over the ship, merely another voice amongst the songs of ghosts.

'Because we are lonely.'

II

Life aboard the *Tlaloc* was a thing of contrast and contradiction, as with all Imperial vessels cast onto the Shores of Hell. Realms of stability and tormented currents existed throughout the Great Eye, and the ships that sailed inside Eyespace eventually settled into similar states of infrequent flux.

It's a realm where thought becomes reality, if one has the willpower necessary to bring forth something from the warp's nothingness. If a mortal yearns for something, the warp will often provide it, though rarely without unexpected cost.

Once the weakest souls killed themselves with an inability to control their wayward imaginations, structure among the crew began to rise from the disordered rubble. Within the *Tlaloc's* arched halls, society soon reformed around an oppressive meritocracy. Those who were most useful to me rose above those that were not. It was that simple.

Many of our crew were human, taken as slaves in raids during the Legion Wars. Beneath them were the servitors, and above them were the bestial mutants harvested from the genetic stock of Sortarius. The braying of their ritual battles echoed down the halls night after night, as they did battle on lower decks that stank of beasts' fur **and** animal sweat.

It took almost two hours to reach the Anamnesis. Two hours of bulkheads slowly grinding open on low power; two hours of juddering ascent and descent platforms; two hours of dark corridors and the sound of warpsong torturing the ship's metal bones. Through the melody of straining creaks, infrequent shivers coursed through *Tlaloc's* predatory form as the ship split the Eye's densest tides.

Outside, a storm raged. Rare were the times we needed to reactivate the Geller field within the Eye, but this region was more warp than reality, and an ocean of daemons burned in our wake.

I paid no heed to the warp's tune. Others amongst our warband claimed to hear voices in the harshest storms - the voices of allies and enemies, of betrayers and the betrayed. I heard no such thing. No voices, at least.

Gyre trailed us, occasionally vanishing into the shadows on the whim of whatever hunts tempted her. My wolf would enter a spread of darkness, and emerge elsewhere from another shadow. Each time she melted into nothingness, I'd feel a resonant shiver through the unseen bond that bound us together.

In contrast, Makari and Djedhor stalked behind in mute compliance. I took a solemn solace in their company. They were a stalwart presence, if not gifted conversationalists.

Sometimes I found myself speaking to them as though they were still alive, discussing my plans with them and replying to their stoic silence as if they'd actually answered. I wondered what my still-breathing kindred would make of my behaviour back on Sortarius, and whether any of the other Thousand Sons survivors were guilty of the same indulgence.

The deeper we walked through the ship, the less it resembled a melancholy fortress, and the closer it came to a slum. Machinery became more ramshackle, and attending humans ever more wretched. They bowed as I passed. Some wept. Some scattered like vermin before the light. They all knew better than to speak to me. I bore them no special hatred, but the hive-swarm of their thoughts made them unpleasant to be near. They lived meaningless lives in the dark, born to live and die as slaves to masters they could not comprehend, in a war they didn't understand.

Disease ravaged the lower decks in cycles of plague. Most of our slave raids were simple mass-replenishment of unskilled labour, once every few decades we would need to strike against another Legion to restock the crew decks in the wake of another Eyeborn contagion. The Eye of Terror was unkind to the powerless and the weak of will.

When I reached the great linked chambers of the Outer Core, the Anamnesis's eroding sense of order began to take over. The vast hall were populated by servitors and robed cultists of the Machine-God all dealing with the clanking machinery that lined the walls, ceiling and nestled in pits cut into the floors. There was the *Tlaloc's* brain laid bare, its veins formed of composite cables and twined wires, its meat made of decaying black steel engines and rusting iron generators.

The mono-tasked work crews largely ignored their master's passage, though their cultist overseers bowed and scraped much as the human herd did on the decks above. I sensed their reluctance to bow before any authority that didn't share their worship of the Omnissiah, but I was not unkind to them. By remaining here, they were allowed to serve the needs of the Anamnesis itself, and that was an honour coveted by many in the Machine Cult.

A few managed to offer genuinely respectful gestures of submission in acknowledgement when they registered me as the ship's commander. Their respect was meaningless, nor was I concerned with those that lacked it. Unlike the unskilled human menials that also lived their sunless lives in the ship's bowels, these priests had more pressing duties than prostrating themselves before a lord that paid them little heed in kind. I let them work in peace, and they accorded me the same polite ignorance.

Rising above the hunched priests and shambling servitors were several robotic sentinels: humanoid Thallaxi and Baharat-class cybernetic

warriors in each chamber. Each of them stood motionless, with their heads lowered and weapons slung. Like the servitors, the inactive robots made no note of our passing from the Outer Core to the Inner.

The Inner Core was a lone vault shielded behind a series of sealed bulkheads, accessible only by the highest-ranking souls on the ship. Automated laser turrets cycled into reluctant life, sliding from wall housings on crunching mechanisms and tracking our approach across the gantry deck. I doubted more than half of them still had the power to fire, but it was reassuring to see the machine-spirit controlling the Tlaloc still upheld certain standards.

The doorway to the Inner Core was almost palatial in ostentation. The doors themselves were great slabs of dark metal engraved with the sinuous, coiling forms of Prosperine serpents, their crested heads held high, their jaws wide to devour twin suns.

The only guardian here was another Baharat automaton: four metres of mechanical muscle and metallic might, armed with rotator cannons on its shoulders. Unlike those of the Outer Core, this one remained active. Its joints still exhaled piston breath, its weapon mounts hummed with live charge.

The cyborg's featureless faceplate regarded me in emotionless judgement, before stalking aside on heavy iron foot-claws. It didn't speak. Almost nothing spoke down here. Everything communicated in blurts of scrambled machine code when vocalisation was required at all.

I pressed a hand to one of the immense sculptures - my palm covered only a single scale on the left serpent's hide - and projected a momentary pulse of thought beyond the sealed gateway.

I am here.

With a discordant orchestra of slamming lock-bars and rattling machinery, the first of the seven bulkheads began the arduous process of opening.

III

A machine-spirit is the incarnation of that most precious of unions: the literal bond between mankind and the Machine-God. To the tech-priests of the Martian Mechanicum - that purer, worthier institute predating the

hidebound Adeptus Mechanicus - there is no more sacred state of being than this divine merging.

Most machine-spirits are nevertheless crude, limited things, formed of chosen biological components kept alive in a synthetic chemical stew, then slave-linked to the systems they will spend eternity operating at the behest of inloaded programming. In an empire where artificial intelligence is unrivalled heresy, the creation of machine-spirits keeps the vital human spirit at the core of any automated process.

At the commonly-held peak of this technology are the war machines of the Space Marine Legions and the Martian cults, allowing warriors to fight on past mutilation and death within the armoured shell of a cybernetic warlord. At the more mundane end of the spectrum are the targeting assistance arrays of battle tanks and gunships, right through to the secondary cognition engines of city-sized warships sailing the void.

But other templates exist. Other variations on the theme. Not every invention is created equal.

I am here, I sent beyond the door.

I sensed the machine-spirit's biological components twisting in their tank of cold aqua vitriolo as it sent its reply through a series of enslaved system functions. A moment later, the doorways of the Inner Core started the Rituals of Unlocking.

The entity at the ship's heart, known as the Anamnesis, was waiting. She was very good at that.

IV

Cease, I sent to my brothers, in wordless command. Makari and Djedhor stopped moving at once, bolters cradled low.

Kill anyone that seeks entry. An unnecessary order - no one would make it into the Inner Core without the Anamnesis allowing it - but I was gratified by the hesitant psychic acknowledgement that echoed from whatever spectral remnant animated Djedhor's armour. Makari was still silent. I wasn't concerned by his silence - these things came and went, like irregular tides.

With the order given, both of the Rubricae warriors turned back to face the last doorway, raising their bolters and taking aim. There they stood, silent and unmoving, loyal beyond the grave.

'Khayon,' the Anamnesis greeted me.

She was more than many machine-spirits - more, at least, than a platter of organs in an amniotic tank. The Anamnesis hadn't endured vivisection before being consigned to her fate. She was almost whole, floating nude in her wide, tall tank of aqua vitriolo. Her shaven **head** was connected to the chamber's hundreds of machines by a gorgon's crown of thick cables implanted into her skull. Her skin, in sunlight had been the colour of caramel. In this chamber, and inside her liquid tomb, time had paled her flesh considerably.

Secondary brains - some synthetically engineered, others taken by force from the still-living bodies of their unwilling donors - were cradled in seed-like generator housings, attached like leeches to the sides of her containment tank.

Purifiers hummed beneath her cradle of reinforced glass, cleansing and replenishing her cold fluid. She was, for all intents and purposes, a young adult female locked in an artificial womb, trading true life for immortality in icy fluid.

She saw with the *Tlaloc's* auspex scanners. She fought by firing its cannons. She thought with the hundreds of secondary brains enslaved to her own, turning her into a gestalt entity, far beyond her former humanity.

'Are you well?' I asked her.

The Anamnesis floated to the front of her tank, looking out at me with dead eyes. Her hand pressed to the glass, palm out, as though she could touch my armour, but the absence of all life in her stare robbed the moment of any affection.

'We function,' she replied. The machine-spirit's voice inside the Inner Core was a soft, androgynous tone no longer shrouded in crackles of vox corruption. It manifested from the mouths of fourteen ivory gargoyles: seven leering from the north wall, and seven leering from the south. They were sculpted to be clawing their way out of the walls, emerging through the labyrinth of cables and generators that turned the Inner Core into an industrial cityscape. 'We see two of your dead men.'

'They are Makari and Djedhor.'

That made her lips twitch. 'We knew them before.' Then she looked down at the wolf, who had emerged from the shadows cast by one of the whining generators. 'We see Gyre.'

The beast sat on its haunches, watching her in its unworldly way. Its eyes were the same pearlescent hue as the amniotic fluid that supported the machine-spirit's body.

I dragged my gaze from the unhealthy pallor of the girl's face, passing my hand to the glass in reflection of her greeting. As always, I *reached* for her on instinct and sensed nothing beyond the insectile buzz of the million cogitations taking place in her gestalt mind.

But she'd smiled at the mention of Makari and Djedhor, and that made me cautious. She shouldn't have smiled. The Anamnesis never smiled.

Caution gave way to that most treacherous of temptations: hope. Could the smile have meant more than a flicker of muscle memory?

'Tell me something,' I began. The Anamnesis remained focused on Gyre, as the maiden drifted through the milky murk.

'We know what you will ask,' she said.

'I should have asked before now, but with the dream of wolves fresh in my thoughts, I am less inclined towards my usual patience and self-delusion.'

She allowed herself a nod, another unnecessarily human gesture.

'We wait for the question.'

'I want the truth.'

'We do not lie,' she answered at once.

'Because you choose not to lie, or because you can't lie?'

'Irrelevant. The result is the same. We do not lie.'

'You smiled just now, when I told you the two dead men were Makari and Djedhor.'

Dead-eyed, she still stared. 'An unrelated motor response from our biological components. A twist of muscle and sinew. Nothing more.'

My hand against the glass formed a slow fist. 'Just tell me. Tell me if there's anything left of her inside you. Anything at all.'

She turned in the fluid, a ghost in the fog whispering from the chamber's speakers. Her eyes were a shark's eyes, with the same blunt and selfish soullessness.

'We are the Anamnesis,' she said at last. 'We are One, from Many. The *She* you seek is merely the dominant percentage of our biological component cluster. The *She* you remember holds no stronger role in our cognitive matrix than any other mind.'

I said nothing. Just met her eyes.

'We register the emotive responses of sorrow on your **features**, Khayon.'

'All is well. Thank you for the answer.'

'She chose this, Khayon. She volunteered to become the Anamnesis.'

'I know.'

The Anamnesis pressed her hand to the glass again, her palm **against** my fist, separated by the dense glass.

'We have caused you emotional harm.'

I have never been a good liar. The talent evaded me since birth. Even so, I hoped the false smile would deceive her.

'You exaggerate my attachment to mortal concerns,' I replied. 'I was merely curious.'

'We register your voice pattern indicating a significant emotional investment in this matter.'

That turned my smile more sincere. I couldn't help but wonder why her Mechanicum creators gave her the capacity to analyse such things.

'Do not exceed your mandate, Anamnesis. Fly the ship, and leave my concerns to me.'

'We will obey.' She turned in the fluid again. Cables and wires connected to her shaven head streamed out in mechanical mimicry of hair. Somehow, she looked almost hesitant. 'We repeat our request for conversational exchange,' she stated with bizarrely feminine politeness.

I paced the chamber, my footfalls silent in the muted, clockwork growls of the machine-spirit's life support engines.

'What would you like to speak of?' I asked, circling her glass prison. She drifted with me, following my movements.

'We wish only to communicate. The subject is irrelevant. Speak and we shall listen. Tell a tale. An anecdote. A report. A story.'

'You have heard all my stories.'

'We have not. Not all. Tell us of Prospero. Tell us when darkness came to the City of Light.'

'You were there.'

'We bore witness to the aftermath. We felt none of the moment's immediacy. We were not running through the streets with a bolter in our hands.'

I closed my eyes as the howls broke free of my dreams and chased me even here, to this chamber. Across the deck, Gyre made a throaty sound that seemed an alloy of a snarl and a chuckle. No matter how much I had lost with the fall of my birth world, the wolf remembered it differently. As she was so fond of reminding me, Gyre had fed very well that day.

'Another time, perhaps.'

'We recognise that your voice pattern—'

'Enough please, Itzara. I don't care about my voice pattern.'

She stared as she always stared: a paradox of dead eyes and disconcerting focus. As I met her gaze, I caught sight of my own wraithlike reflection in the glass wall of her tank. An image of white robes and dusky skin; a boy born of a hot world and swollen with archaeo-genetic ingenuity to become a weapon of war.

The Anamnesis floated closer, both hands against the glass now, her mouth slack in the murk. Nothing about her looked alive.

'Do not address us by that name,' she said. 'The *She* of that name is now One of the Many. We are not Itzara. We are the Anamnesis.'

'I know.'

'We no longer desire your presence, Khayon.'

'You have no authority over me, machine.'

She didn't reply. As she floated in her tideless fluid, her face cocked as if heeding a distant voice. Her fingertips lifted from the glass, stroking several of the cables socketed into her bare head.

'What is it?' I asked.

'You... are needed.'

She looked into my eyes, and for a moment it seemed she would smile again. No such expression manifested. Her fey stare continued unabated.

'We hear the alien's cries,' she said. 'She screams for your presence across the vox. But you are here, bare of armour, and do not answer.'

'What does she require of me?' I asked, though I could guess the response. The alien had shown incredible strength resisting it for this long.

'She thirsts,' the Anamnesis replied. Again, the flicker in her eyes of something that never quite became emotion. The edge of discomfort, perhaps. Or the shadow of disgust. Or, as she claimed, mere muscle memory. 'Do you wish to communicate with her?'

And say what?

'No. Seal the Aerie. Lock her inside.'

There was no pause, no hesitation. The Anamnesis didn't even blink. 'It is done.'

In the stillness that followed, I looked into the Anamnesis's passive eyes. 'Activate my arming servitors, please. I need my armour.'

'It is done,' she replied. 'We are cognisant of Nefertari's usefulness. **Thus**, we ask if you plan to kill her.'

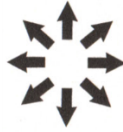
What? No, of course not. What kind of man do you think I am?'

'We do not think you are a man at all, Khayon. We think you are a weapon with lingering traces of humanity. Now go to your alien, **Iskandar** Khayon. She needs you.'

I turned to leave, but not to go to my bloodward. To arm myself and prepare for the fleet muster. To let Nefertari lie in the dark a while longer.

DOUBT BEGETS HERESY

Gav Thorpe



'Tylo!'

Lehenhart's roar across the vox almost staggered the Apothecary in mid-swing. The whirring blades of his narthecium connected with the throat of a combat servitor, spraying blood and thick oil. Tylo stepped back to fire a round from his bolt pistol into the face of another half-machine foe, spattering its lobotomised brains across a bulkhead.

His armour had once been white to denote his specialism, with the dark blue shoulder pads of the Avenging Sons Chapter, but they had all painted over their colours with stark black. Some of the others had taken to decorating their armour with trophies and painting on slogans and symbols as they saw fit, but Tylo had never felt the urge.

'Willusch, flank hold,' the Apothecary snapped to one of his companions. "The Peace of Death" was painted in neat script along the rim of Willusch's shoulder pad. 'I'm needed.'

'I heard,' replied Willusch. He stepped into the gap as Tylo withdrew, his bolter tearing down another servitor as it clambered up through the ladder access from the deck below. Two others - Kolbarn and Heindreich - were stationed further along the corridor, gunning down the Adeptus Mechanicus half-men coming down the steps from the level above.

'I'm coming!' The Apothecary turned and ran as Lehenhart shouted his name again.

He pounded back along the corridor, passing a broad viewing plate that showed a glittering belt of asteroids, the star they orbited just a slightly brighter dot in the far distance. Mining structures and cranes dotted the crater-pocked surface outside and the sky was filled with other rocks and circling platforms. A red from the engines of the *Vengeful* glowed like a

false dawn on the horizon of the airless rock and the glint of starlight on the strike cruiser was a constellation against the spray of the galactic arm beyond. Their Thunderhawk sat on the bare rock less than half a kilometre away, dark against the pale surface.

Gessart had made it sound easy. The *Vengeful* required constant maintenance, particularly its plasma reactor. The company's Techmarine had died fighting orks in the Chanadron system and they needed someone versed in the ways of the machine-spirits. Adelphios was a near-automated Adeptus Mechanicus ore-extraction facility, crewed by a handful of tech-priests and a few dozen mindless servitors. All they had to do was locate the tech-priests and take two or three of them back to the ship. As Gessart had explained, faced with immediate execution the only logical course of action for their captives would be to abandon their tenuous loyalty to the Imperium and throw in their lot with the renegades.

So far it had been going well, but the tone of Lehenhart's shouts, the hint of desperation in his voice, told Tylo that the mission was no longer proceeding quite as planned.

He found the others at the top of a set of stairs not far from the airlock where they had entered the processing facility. Lehenhart stood at the top of the steps firing down with short bursts of his heavy bolter, three others with him guarding corridors that splayed to the left and right from the landing. The heavy weapon gunner was easy to spot amongst his brothers, his helm mask painted in a bright white skull, a bullet hole in its forehead.

Nicz was there, as much red on his armour as there was black, painted like gore splashed up his left arm and torso. His chainsword was marked with the bloodied motto "The Truth Hurts", though the writing was obscured with a layer of real blood from the pile of servitors lying heaped at the Space Marine's feet.

And amongst them, lying on his side, was Gessart.

Tylo could see immediately that the former captain was in a bad way. Most of the right side of his chest was missing, the armoured plastron cracked and split by some monstrous blow. Blood was still bubbling from the wound and pieces of bones jutted at odd angles.

Nicz turned as Tylo ran up to the other Space Marines.

'No hurry,' said Gessart's self-appointed lieutenant, and it sounded like he meant it. Nicz's ambition to lead the warband was no secret.

'If you feel like just walking away, I'll be sure to remember it.'

'Don't you dare, Tylo,' snarled Lehenhart, hefting up his heavy bolter as he broke away from the stairs. 'Save Gessart.'

'I'll try,' said Tylo, looking again at the wound and then back and forth between Lehenhart and Nicz. 'We have to get him back to the ship, I can't do anything for him here.'

Lehenhart and Ustrekx heaved Gessart's inert form up onto the examination table. Nicz was like a shadow, his helmet off, dark eyes narrowed and fixed on Tylo as he moved up beside their wounded leader. Some of the others crowded at the door of the apothecarion.

The floor shook as the *Vengeful's* void shields intercepted another attack from the facility defences a few kilometres below. The countership bombardment had started before their Thunderhawk had docked with the strike cruiser, a crude but effective barrage of munitions that lit up several cubic kilometres of space around the vessel.

'This is Zacherys. We can't stay here much longer,' the warband's Psyker announced over the vox. 'Who can say how long the void shields will hold without someone to manage the power flow from reactor? If we lose a generator we have no way of getting it back on-line.'

'Get us out of here,' replied Lehenhart. 'Belay that,' snapped Nicz. He looked at his companions. 'We came here for a tech-priest. We're not leaving without one.'

'Fine,' said Lehenhart. 'You go back for a tech-priest, I'll stay here and keep watch.'

'I'm not stupid. You'd abandon me down there as soon as I set foot off this ship.'

'Shut up.' Tylo's growl silenced them as he moved from one side of Gessart to the other. 'I can't operate with this disruption. Zacherys?'

'I hear you.'

'Take us out of range of their cannons.'

'I'll do better than that.'

Nicz offered no protest while Tylo busied himself clearing out broken pieces of armour from Gessart's wound. Suddenly there was a sense of dislocation, a feeling of being turned inside-out and upside-down. Immediately, Tylo felt a sense of pressure at the base of his skull.

'Did we just translate into the warp?' Nicz barked. 'Aren't we too close to the asteroid field?'

'I have... my methods,' said Zacherys over the comm. 'We are safe in warp space, and can transition back to the asteroid facility to recommence the mission when needed.'

'He's getting more powerful every day,' muttered Lehenhart, speaking over his external address system. 'I'm not sure I like it.'

'Something we agree on,' said Nicz.

Tylo tried to ignore them, but it was difficult to concentrate. He felt out of place and clumsy, as though he were trying to use someone else's body. He became aware of more voices, close at hand, whispering in his ear.

You have to save him.

Don't let him die

You're wasting time, he's dying.

'Cease this endless chattering!' Tylo turned to the others as he straightened. 'How am I supposed to work with this constant jabber?'

Lehenhart and Nicz exchanged a glance with each other.

'Nobody's talking,' said Nicz.

Tylo shook his head, realising that he could still hear the voices.

It'll be your fault if he dies. Better not let Nicz take over. It'll be m bloodbath.

He wasn't sure if the voices were inside his head. It didn't feel like his own thoughts.

Tylo looked at the gaping hole in Gessart's torso and knew that there was nothing he could do. Normally he would use hypnotic induction to help Gessart activate his sus-an membrane, allowing the wounded leader to go into biostasis until they returned to the Chapter fortress-monastery. That was not an option. They were renegades - "The Exiled" Gessart had started calling them - and had no place to go.

'Is it too late?' Nicz gloated, recognising something in Tylo's behaviour as a sign of surrender.

'If he dies, you follow quickly,' growled Lehenhart.

The voices were coming more strongly now, telling Tylo that he could not save Gessart. It was hard to argue with them, considering the options left. Then the voices changed, the whispers dying away, replaced by one voice, deep yet quiet.

Give him to us and we shall save him.

Tylo looked around, feeling movement on the edge of his vision as though something else was in the apothecarion with him.

'Get out,' he said. 'Get out!'

'I'll be right outside,' Nicz said, giving Tylo a pointed look before turning away. Lehenhart hesitated and then followed, taking Ustrekx with him. When the chamber door clanged shut and then sealed with a hiss, Tylo slumped against the side of the examination table, head bowed.

If he dies, strife will take you all.

Tylo did not need the mysterious voice to tell him that. Without Gessart's strong personality to hold the warband together the infighting would soon start - not that Tylo would live long enough to see Lehenhart would make sure of that.

'I can't save him,' Tylo said. It felt refreshing to admit it out loud. 'There is too much damage and I do not have the supplies I need.'

Have faith.

'Faith?' Tylo laughed. He rested a hand on Gessart's chest. It was gently rising and falling, but the breathing was laboured, the heart-beat erratic and fading. 'Faith can do a lot, but it cannot cauterize arteries and replace shattered bone.'

Faith can do everything. You simply have to wish and it will be done.

'Make a wish? It's that easy, is it?' Tylo turned and leaned with his back against the table. There was a shadow filling one end of the apothecarion, blotting out the blinking lights and read-outs of monitor stations. 'I am not a fool. I know what you are. We are in the warp, your home, without Geller fields. Zacherys has already made a bargain with your kind. Show yourself, daemon.'

The shadow coalesced into something semi-solid. The figure was huge and bloated, flesh green and grey and hanging in rotted folds, eyes yellowed and small in its broad face. Things writhed beneath the pox-racked flesh, churning. The apothecarion usually smelt of sterilising fluid and metal, but now it stank of corruption and gangrene.

'Give him to me and I will save him,' said the apparition. Saliva bubbled across its fat lips as a warty tongue bulged between broken stubs of teeth.

'Why do you want him?'

'My rival already has one of yours. I cannot allow this advantage.'

'And what will you do with him?'

'Whatever I want. His soul will be mine when eventually he dies.'

'And if I say no?'

'He dies much sooner, and all of you with him. Do you think your witch and his ally can keep me and my minions at bay forever? I shall seed despair into their minds and they will beg for death when I am finished. Spare them that. Spare yourself that fate.'

'His soul is not mine to give. I cannot make that bargain on his behalf.' The apparition started to fade. 'Wait! Perhaps I can offer you something else. Why take by coercion what might be freely offered?'

'He is strong-willed, he will not consent if I have him already.'

'As I thought. But what if I offered something else? What if I freely offer you fealty, and promised you my mortal hands to do your bidding, as Zacherys serves your rival? Surely that is better than a puppet that will fight you every moment?'

'You would do this for him? You love him so much?' The ghastly figure returned, more real than before, lips drawn back in a hideous smile. 'My attentions will not be kind, but I will free you from pain. The pain of flesh and the pain of weakness. Would you suffer for him?'

'No,' Tylo said quietly. 'But I do not want to die. I would rather live in suffering than face oblivion.'

'Perhaps your future is both. Be careful what you promise. Make your choice now. Your soul or his?'

The door to the apothecarion whined open and immediately Nicz was there, Lehenhart beside him. Tylo stood beside the operating table, and with him was Gessart, one arm draped over the Apothecary's shoulders, face waxen, torso plastered with bandages and clumps of dried antiseptic foam.

'You're alive,' snarled Nicz. He glared at Tylo.

'He saved me,' Gessart croaked.

Tylo said nothing.

THE BLOOD OF SOTHA

L J Goulding



Everything that I had, and all that I am, was earned and paid for in blood.

My own, my brothers', and that of my foes.

With the great axe of my office gripped tightly in both gauntleted hands, I stalked through the dismal corridors of the ship, seeking my elusive quarry. The tense exchanges of those under my command crackled back and forth across the encrypted vox as they swept the engineering levels and the upper decks.

Normally I would have reprimanded them for such laxity - this was a hunt, after all, and the best hunters remain silent until they have their prey - but under the circumstances I held my tongue.

Grief, it was, that had eroded their discipline. Grief for the loss of the Chapter's home world.

The Great Devourer had come, and now that alien hunger for flesh and thirst for blood appeared to have followed them out into the stars. At their lowest ebb, it struck out at them from the darkness of their small sanctuary vessel as they fled, ploughing on through the madness of the warp. Should the renewed, savage heat of that bloodlust, that burning need to kill and to eat and defile, really have taken us so completely by surprise? Or was it something that we had brought with us from the very beginning?

So, under the circumstances, I held my tongue. As far as I could tell, by the time we finally abandoned the cerulean curve of Sotha's near-orbit to the tyranids, the fourteen of us were the last survivors of the glorious Eighth Company.

My name is Brother-Captain Vosok Dali. I am - or rather, was - the appointed Lord Executioner of the Scythes of the Emperor.

The vox-link chimed inside my helm, though the channel was much distorted by hastily engaged encryption protocols. The voice was that of Brother Mitru, a promising young warrior who I believed hailed from the hive world of Radnar.

'Brothers, there are more bodies here. Level six, crew quarters.'

He paused for a long moment, his tentatively advancing footfalls just audible over the background hiss.

'Holy Terra. They've been torn to pieces.'

I had marked Mitru for promotion to squad leader some months before, though the fire of ambition had left his eyes in the instant that he first saw the great cephalopod-whirl ships of Hive Fleet Kraken reaching out towards us. Through the grand observation ports on the *Aegida* orbital, we had watched Sergeant Remas's boarding party swallowed up by the lead xenos vessel at the very onset of the invasion, and in that moment I knew that I had misplaced my confidence in Mitru. Whether or not he truly *feared* the alien, deep down, he certainly did not feel the same overriding hatred for them that I did. I could tell that just from looking at him, with the clarity of insight that only such moments can offer.

Unlike Mitru, I would have been happy to remain and wreak a bloody vengeance upon the tyranids until the bitter end. I would have piled up their misshapen skulls a hundred high, all in the name of a planet for which, in truth, I cared little.

As it was, the battle was to be continued aboard our vessel long after we escaped the doom of Sotha.

I was born on Beremin, the smallest and most distant world of the Sotharan League. This felt like it should never have accounted for much, and yet it did - that was plain to see, though no one spoke openly of it. The Scythes of the Emperor maintained one of their many tributary outposts in the icy highlands beyond the plains where my mortal kin dwelled, and before my tenth winter I had been taken up to that cold bastion to begin my life again.

My fellow recruits and I did not set foot upon our new, adoptive home world until we were already fully initiated battle-brothers of the Chapter. I always wondered if even that had been the deliberate intent all along,

keeping the low-born at arm's length until the last possible moment, while our more fortunate Sothan cousins flourished in the training halls of Mount Pharos from the first day of their induction. It was the same for all off-worlder initiates, speaking of a deep, cultural arrogance that chafed at my soul from the moment I first breathed the native air.

"We welcome you, brothers," Captain Pnagos, the Master of Recruits, had said upon the landing fields at Odessa. *'Your journey has been long, but now you stand beside the rest of us as equals.'*

Equals.

Equality. I doubt the old cur even knew what the word meant. He met us with an honour guard of Scouts - *Scouts!* - and proclaimed us all equals. Behind my visor, I ground my teeth until one of them cracked.

How telling it was, many decades later, that when I ascended to command of the Eighth I was the only company-level officer in more than nine centuries *not* to have been raised on the Chapter's home world. Pnagos was gone by then, slain during the Xikun campaign and replaced by Master Levidis - another Sothan. I cannot lie, it was a disappointment. I should have liked to have seen the look on old Lagos's face as I refused the ornate two-handed reaper's scythe of my predecessor, instead taking up a bronzed power axe from Berlin and swearing my captaincy oaths upon its blade.

Equals...

The flickering lumen strips cast long shadows in the corridor ahead. Mitru and the others had locked down most of the main arterial passageways remotely, sealing bulkhead ports in order to restrict hostile movement between compartments and bring the engagement forwards on their own terms.

That was clever. I had not expected that from him under the circumstances. Perhaps there was hope for him yet.

I made my way quickly and quietly back to the transit conveyors, from where the first panicked reports of further battle had originated. By the projected movements and attack spread, it had been assumed that it was most likely a xenos assassin-form that had slipped on board with those damnable refugees from the northern hub, or inside the emergency cargo shipments that had been shunted into every available evacuation vessel. It would be impossible to tell, now; it had been too chaotic in those final

hours, when the futility of the planetary defence became apparent. We had been urged to seize anything that was not bolted down and make for the fleet rendezvous beyond the system's edge. Stragglers from other companies - the Third, Seventh and Ninth in particular - brought whatever they had collected, too.

The materiel I could understand: provisions, ammunition, even livestock. But refugees? The arrogance of the notion that there was anything worth saving among the common people of Sotha made me sick to my stomach. The Chapter now rested upon a knife's edge, its fortress-monastery lost and barely two hundred Space Marines accounted for, by the last estimate. What value was there in preserving the bloodlines of an otherwise dead world?

I was no nursemaid, no minder of human chattel. I was a killer. An executioner.

The Executioner.

And besides, would the same respect be afforded to any of the countless other worlds that would undoubtedly now fall beneath the shadow of the Kraken, throughout Sothara and beyond? Would their customs, history and traditions be deemed worth of salvation?

I found that hard to believe.

At the conveyor loading platform, I paused in the near darkness glancing into each open bay in turn to ensure that I was indeed alone. Between the poorly stacked containers and buckled haulage cages, the open space was littered with the dead. My brother Scythes were few amongst them, but their blood was brightest of all upon the dull plating of —

My baseplate's internal sensors lit up. There were several distinct contacts approaching from the starboard hangars.

Without conscious thought, I activated the disruptor field of my bronzed axe and ghosted to a flanking position near the bulkhead hatchway. The weapon's ruddy illumination was like glowing embers in the gloom.

I recalled my first kill of the invasion, upon the steps of the Pharos. It had been a seven metre-tall juggernaut creature that lumbered up the mountain slopes towards the fortress-monastery, shrugging off lascannon hits and letting heavy bolter-rounds caress its horned, armoured carapace like nothing more than a gentle summer breeze. It had torn at the defences

as it came, using its powerful, clawed forelimbs to rend fortified emplacements and the armour of battle tanks alike.

As the great beast passed between the final gatehouse bastions and into the shadow of the mountain's peak, I alone charged forwards while the bravest and brightest warriors of Sotha retreated from its path. I remember the incredulity that welled up within me, piercing my outrage and battle-focus - that my Chapter brethren should allow this monstrosity to breach the front gate of the greatest fortress of their home world, it was...

It was utterly incomprehensible to me.

All my life, I had fought to gain the respect and acceptance of those I called brother. I had butchered and bled and exhorted, and risen through a reluctant hierarchy by merit of my own achievement and boundless dedication.

I was not of Sothan blood, and yet I had been willing to die to protect that world where others, perhaps, had not.

Never faltering in my charge, I had locked eyes with the tyrannid juggernaut. Beneath Mount Pharos, it was alike to a mountain itself - a mountain of flesh and bone and teeth and claws and eternal, undying hunger.

It threw its tusked jaws open and roared. Armoured all in dusky, blood-red chitin, it seemed like the most perfect embodiment of rage and fury that I could have ever imagined, and I wondered even then what I might learn from this singular foe. Now, looking down at my own battleplate, once pristine in black and golden yellow but lately much smeared with crimson, it was not so very hard to see the answer.

The hatchway opened, the bright beams of gun-lamps stabbing into the conveyor platform chamber. Two of my brothers from Eighth Company entered, chain-blades and pistols held ready, followed by a third carrying a power falx.

These were not tyrannids - they were warriors that I had handpicked from the ranks of Levidis's Scout squads myself, noble Scythes that I had trained in the art of war. They had fought under my command in a hundred battles, and together we had faced the horrors of the Kraken and barely escaped with our lives.

I took the first with an overhand swing. The axe blade cleaved down through his right pauldron and tore his breastplate open, blood fountaining

from the ruin of his chest and staining my visor.

Planting a boot on his midriff as he crumpled to the deck, I tugged the axe free just as his companion fired a bolt into my side at point-blank range. The impact spun me around, but I turned it into another killing strike, hacking into the hapless Space Marine's throat and nearly severing his head.

The third warrior backed away, his falx held out in a guard position. He called out over the vox, his eyes fixed upon me.

'I have found him! He's in the conveyor loading chambers, level—'

I silenced him with an animalistic growl. It felt good, reverberating in my chest and echoing from my vox-grille. His falx edged up in response.

'This is madness, Dali. You dishonour the memory of the home world with your treachery.'

'Whose home world?' I spat. 'Not mine.'

Before he could utter another word, I ended him.

Brother-Captain Vosok Dali, Lord Executioner of the Scythes of the Emperor. That title would come to carry no little irony, by the end.

I deactivated the disruptor field and wiped the axe blade down with the flat palm of my gauntlet. Then I opened my vox-link for the first time in several hours.

'I'm coming for you, Mitru. I'm coming for you all.'

As I passed, the blood of Sotha ran freely upon the deck. It was a weak draught indeed, now, and thinner than the coldest meltwater from the mountains of long-forgotten Beremin.

THE CORPSE ROAD

Graham McNeill



*Now it is the time of night,
That the graves all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite
In the corpse-road paths to glide.*

This far from Terra, the light of the Astronomican was little more than a spot of distant illumination. The Eastern Fringe was at the farthest extent of the Emperor's light, enough to guide a ship, but not much more.

The swirling warp light beyond the segmented, crystalflex blister in which Tolvan reclined was a whorl of unnameable colours and emotions rendered in unlight.

A window into madness for most mortals, quotidian to a Navigator.

Tolvan had once plied the ebbs and swells of the Segmentum Solar, where the Astronomican's radiance was so blinding, so pure, that he could steer a ship's course even with his third eye concealed.

And no matter how many times the House Novators reminded Tolvan that it was an honour to be seconded to Ultramar, this current duty didn't feel much like an honour.

The *Shendao* was an old ship, even by the standards of the Imperium, where vessels might serve for tens of thousands of years. Its bones were tired, groaning and creaking with each manoeuvre. Its soul was cantankerous, its hull pitted with micro-impacts from millennia of dust carried by celestial winds. The fleets of Ultramar comprised many great and noble vessels, but the *Shendao* wasn't one of them.

It was a corpse-hauler, a vast transloader with a hundred vaulted holds filled with the dead, stacked high in chilled cryo-holds.

The war against the daemon lord's Bloodborn army had seen untold billions die, men and women of the Defence Auxilia, civilians and Adeptus Astartes.

The Space Marines would be interred upon Macragge, and some of the mortal dead had been returned to lie in the crypts of their ancestors. But many more had no one to claim them.

Those bodies travelled the Corpse Road to Nakilla.

The cemetery world lay just beyond the edge of Ultramarian space, across the liminal border that separated the living from the dead. An ancient superstition of *betwixt and between*, but one the passage of millennia had failed to erase.

The warp was restive in the wake of the war's ending, and Tolvan was having to hold fast to the Astronomican's light. Vicious swirls of purple-red anger roared hard against shoals of grey grief, and veils of sickly yellow hopelessness bled into everything. Tolvan ignored the torrents of weeping faces that formed and dissipated in the void. Phantoms all, but no less potent for that.

His spider-like fingers drifted across the brass dials and rheostatic levers of his *Astrolabe Ephemeris*, sending course corrections to Captain Matang on the bridge. The jump from Calth's Mandeville Point to Nakilla was a relatively short one, but still required his total concentration.

To be lost in the warp aboard a ship full of corpses had all the makings of a scare story told around low-burning fires, and Tolvan had no wish to be part of such a tale.

He exhaled slowly, gently nudging the *Ephemeris*, and cursed as he heard a hiss of pressurised air. Someone had entered his private space. A gross intrusion under normal circumstances, and a violation of basic safety protocols during warp-transit.

Cold filled the Navigator's blister and the bare skin of Tolvan arms puckered to gooseflesh. His breath misted as he heard a he footfall behind him. He didn't dare turn his gaze from the kaleidoscopic maelstrom beyond.

'Whoever you are, get out,' snapped Tolvan. 'You have no business being here.'

'That's where you're wrong,' said the intruder with the sonorous cadence of a Space Marine. Tolvan knew of three Ultramarines aboard the *Shendao*, but this wasn't one of them.

'Who are you? I don't recognise your voice.'

A heavy gauntlet settled upon Tolvan's shoulder, and he felt strength that could snap him in two. The metal's surface shimmered like mercury trapped in glass and was limned with hoarfrost.

As though its wearer had clawed up from the depths of a glacier.

Or a cryo-hold.

'My name is Honsou,' said the voice at his ear.

Black was the predominant colour on the bridge of the *Shendao*, as befitted its role as a conveyor of the dead. The arched walls were of black iron and the lumens suspended over the crew pits were kept dim. Even the hololiths and slates were kept at their lowest setting.

Captain Matang's long frock coat was black and she kept her close-cropped hair dyed to match. A black sash ran diagonally across her chest, with a single cobalt blue streak at the shoulder. Her skin had the ashen pallor common to those who spent the majority of their lives aboard starships.

The transit to Nakilla was almost over, and for that Matang was thankful. The funeral runs of the *Shendao* were made along outlying routes, the so-called Corpse Roads. Sometimes called *bad-luck ships*, other star-farers shunned such vessels and were unwilling to share the void with the dead.

Matang didn't blame them, but she enjoyed the quiet of the Corpse Roads. Even the piratical reaver clans that hid in the guts of hollowed asteroids never dared attack such ships.

'Ma'am?' said her Master of Astrogation.

'Yes, Master Zenab?' she asked. 'Is there a problem?'

'I'm not sure,' replied Zenab. 'It's probably nothing, but I'm getting course corrections from Navigator Tolvan that are taking us from our prescribed route.'

'To my station,' said Matang, unfolding the data-slate from the side of her command throne. Skirling distortion filled the slate until elliptical lines representing the *Shendao's* course swam into focus. The Corpse Road

was a predictable path, one she had travelled many times, but what she was seeing made little sense.

'What the hell is Tolvan playing at?' she said.

'Maybe he thinks he's found a short cut?' suggested Zenab. 'You know what he's like.'

Matang shook her head. 'No, this won't take us anywhere near the Nakillan Lych-station.'

A low moan of groaning metal echoed through the bridge, the deformation of the ship's superstructure as it protested at the rapid change of direction.

'We're altering aspect, captain,' said Zenab. 'Coming to heading one-three-nine, vector theta-prime.'

Matang gripped her throne's armrests. 'Countermand! Get us back on course.'

'Negative, captain,' said Zenab, scrolling down through the astrogation commands. 'The course alterations are prefixed with *Nobilite* overrides. I can't even cut the warp engines for an emergency translation!'

Matang opened a vox-link with the Navigator's blister.

'Mister Tolvan, would you care to explain where the hell you're taking my ship?'

A grating hiss of static crackled from the augmitter. The Navigator didn't respond, but Matang could hear his breathing.

'Mister Tolvan?'

'You'd be Matang then?' said a gruff voice that sounded like rusted metal bars grinding together.

'*Captain* Matang.'

'I don't have much to do with fancy titles.'

'Who are you and what have you done with Navigator Tolvan?' demanded Matang, waving the bridge security detail over. Five armsmen, equipped with low-velocity slug-throwers. Not enough to take on the threat she now believed had secreted itself aboard the *Shendao*.

'I'm Honsou, and your little Navigator's still alive for now,' said the voice. 'But he won't be for much longer if you don't comply.'

'Go ahead and kill him,' said Matang. 'I've plied this route often enough to not need a Navigator.'

'You and I both know that's a lie,' said Honsou. 'We're in the warp, and if I kill Master Tolvan, your ship's lost forever. I can survive here, but you and your crew won't.'

'Perhaps that's a chance I'm willing to take.'

'Perhaps,' allowed Honsou. 'I suppose we'll see, won't we?'

'So where are you taking my ship?'

'We're not going to your charnel world, captain, we're making a diversion.'

'A diversion?'

'Yes. Now that M'kar's been destroyed, Ultramar's become a little too dull for my liking.'

Matang muted the vox and turned to her armsmen.

'Alert Brother Anvoram and his squad,' she ordered. 'We've got an Iron Warrior aboard.'

The vox went dead and Honsou knew the captain would be ordering her security forces to the Navigator's blister. He'd seen the funeral ships leaving Highside City and guessed there'd likely only be a handful of Ultramarines aboard.

Three or four most likely.

Certainly no more than five.

'Anvoram will kill you,' said the cowering Navigator. Beads of sweat ran down Tolvan's face, but he hadn't yet taken his gaze from the Warplight licking the surface of the dome.

'Anvoram, who's he?' asked Honsou. 'Some slab-headed security drone?'

'He's of the Ultramarines,' said Tolvan.

'I can kill one of Calgar's lickspittles easily enough.'

Tolvan grunted with amusement. 'He's not alone. He has two of his battle brothers with him.'

'Excellent, so it's three,' said Honsou. 'I was wondering how many Ultramarines were aboard. One. Three. Doesn't matter. They'll all be dead soon anyway.'

The Navigator groaned and Honsou laughed at his horror of having fallen for so elementary a ploy. Tolvan finally tore his gaze from the seething miasma of the warp, but Honsou clamped his gleaming silver palm onto the man's shaven skull.

'You keep that nasty little third eye of yours pointing where it belongs,' said Honsou. 'Out there.'

He felt the Navigator struggle beneath his grip. Courageous, but useless. He was weak, even for a mortal, and couldn't hope to break Honsou's grip.

Brother Mydon took the left, Brother Syloson the right. Anvoram stood before the angled entrance to the Navigator's blister compartment. Every squad of the Chapter took it in turns to escort the dead to Nakilla, but none of them relished the task.

Not when there were still enemies to drive from Ultramar.

Now one of those enemies was revealed, and Anvoram had the chance to strike back. He'd fought at the Four Valleys, and had spilled his share of traitor blood, but this was a chance to kill Honsou, the murderer of Tarsis Ultra and bane of the Ultramarines.

Mydon placed the breaching charge on the door. He didn't care if the door was locked or not, the charge would give them precious fractions of seconds to take the Iron Warrior down. Anvoram had made no promises concerning Tolvan's survival, but Captain Matang was confident she could break the Nobilite codes keeping her out of the warp drive controls.

Making the Navigator's survival irrelevant.

Anvoram held up three fingers.

Two, one.

He made a fist.

The breaching charge detonated with a flat, dull bang, hurling the door back against the walls of the narrow compartment within. Fyze-line smoke filled the narrow corridor, triggering the fire-suppression systems. Oxygen-depleting gases streamed from overhead pipes in billowing, white clouds.

Syloson spun around and pulled his trigger twice in quick succession. The Navigator's compartment filled with an expanding storm of metal fragments. Regular bolt shells would go straight through the crystalflex dome, so Syloson had loaded Tempest rounds.

Mydon swept through the door, hunched low, bolter pulled in tight to his shoulder. Classic assault stance.

He ran right into a solid wall of battleplate.

The Iron Warrior stood with his back to them, unbowed by the storm of red hot fragments embedded in his armour. A slashing elbow cannoned into Mydon's faceplate, hurling him back with his neck broken.

Honsou turned and thrust Master Tolvan out before him. Syloson snapped his bolter up, but stiffened as he looked straight into the Navigator's uncovered third eye. Anvoram heard the warrior's strangled cry of horror as he stared deep into whatever abyss lay within the Navigator's eye.

Honsou dropped Tolvan and charged straight at him with his shimmer-steel arm held up before him. Anvoram braced his back foot and put three quick shots into the Iron Warrior.

The first two impacted on his upraised arm, the third on the traitor's battered gorget. Honsou staggered but, incredibly, didn't stop. His arm should have been a bloody stump of flayed meat and bone, yet in the instant before the Iron Warrior slammed into him, Anvoram saw that it was entirely untouched.

The two Space Marines slammed together with the sound of a sledgehammer striking steel. Honsou's fist crunched into Anvoram's helm. He rolled with the blow, slamming the butt of his bolter into Honsou's gnarled augmetic skull.

Metal struck metal, and Anvoram blocked another savage series of blows. Too close for bolter work, he slammed a fist into Honsou's face. Blood spattered the walls as they barged back and forth across the smoke-filled corridor, punching and grappling, each looking for an opening.

He hooked his arm under Honsou's and all but lifted him from the deck with a roar of hate. He rammed Honsou into the opposite bulkhead and smashed a thunderous head-butt into the traitor's skull.

Metal and bone crumpled. Honsou spat blood into his face with a sneer. 'You'll have to hit harder than that,' he hissed.

'Contact!' shouted Zenab. 'I have an unknown contact.'

'Give me a bearing,' demanded Matang, striding from the command throne to the Master of Astrogation's plotter.

'Dead ahead and closing fast.'

'What is it?'

'Unknown.'

'One of ours?'

'Unknown.'

'Well find out, damn it!'

Honsou drove a knee into his opponent's side. A pistoning elbow followed. The Ultramarine staggered, his armour split by the force of the blow. Honsou dived across the corridor to retrieve the weapon of the first Ultramarines warrior he had killed. He scooped up the dead man's bolter and fired a three-round burst.

His bolts detonated within the walls.

Barely had the shock of him missing his target registered than he saw Anvoram through the fire-suppression smoke, a bolter aimed squarely between his eyes.

'You're fast,' said the Ultramarine. 'I'm faster.'

Before he could pull the trigger, the *Shendao* rocked under the force of a terrific impact. Alarm klaxons brayed and warning lights bathed the corridor in a blood-red glow. The corridor lurched to the side, canting to an angle of almost forty-five degrees.

Anvoram and Honsou crashed into the wall, but the Iron Warrior recovered quickest. He sighted over the barrel and blasted a single round straight through Anvoram's right eye-lens.

The warrior slumped back, sliding down the angled wall, smearing a trail of brain matter.

Honsou let out a breath and spat a mouthful of blood as another thunderous explosion shook the *Shendao*.

He took a chainsword from one of the dead Ultramarines and gathered up their magazines of bolt-rounds.

Rearmed, he slung the unconscious form of the Navigator over his shoulder and made his way to the nearest airlock.

'You took your time,' said Teth Dassadra as they watched the *Shendao's* ,tripped-down hull burn through *Warbreed's* viewing bay. 'Another month and I'd have taken us back to the Maelstrom.'

'You wouldn't have dared.'

'You'd like to think that,' said Dassadra, ever ready with a cocksure reply.

Honsou had last seen Dassadra in the moments prior to his assault into the depths of Calth. His final order to him had been to get off-world and take the *Warbreed* out to Ultramar's edge. Following Honsou's escape from the underground arcologies, a single frequency-specific burst from Ultimus Prime told Dassadra the name of the ship to look for.

The rest had been up to Honsou.

'Who's he?' asked Dassadra.

'A Navigator,' said Honsou. 'Figured he could be useful.'

'Best get a hood for that eye of his before he comes round.'

Honsou nodded and handed the unconscious form of Navigator Tolvan off to a waiting thrall before taking a breath of the bitter, metallic air within the strategium.

It smelled of hot iron, burnt oil and beaten metal. He tasted Cycerin's foul Mechanicum chemicals, the bubbling death-fluids that kept the hybrid servitor-beasts alive.

He grinned as Dassadra asked, 'So where to now? And don't tell me we're staying here.'

'We're not,' said Honsou. 'I'm done with Ultramar.'

'Even though it didn't fall?' sneered Dassadra.

'It didn't fall, but let's be honest, did we really expect it to?'

'Then why did we even come here?'

'To show them we could,' said Honsou. 'We humbled the realm of Uriel Ventris and damn near brought to its knees, which is more than anyone else has managed.'

'So what's next?' asked Dassadra.

What next, indeed?

The *Warbreed* was Honsou's, and he its captain. He had a crew and the means to go where he desired. Yes, he was done with Ultramar so there was really only one place to go now.

'Medrengard,' said Honsou. 'We're returning to Medrengard.'

'Medrengard? Why?'

'Because I want to see the Lord of Iron,' said Honsou. 'I want to see Perturabo.'

KING OF ASHES

John French



Someone is calling me. I feel his voice pull me to wakefulness. How long has it been? Cold darkness surrounds me, unbroken by the beat of a heart or the hiss of breath. How long have I slept? Why can't I see? I try to look around, but there is nothing to turn through, no light to break the blackness. I could be falling. I could be tumbling over and over without realising.

Who am I? The question echoes, and is lost in silence.

What am I?

Then I remember. I remember what I was, and the first time I glimpsed what I would become.

I remember gold. A golden web of glowing threads, spreading through the black, stretching into infinity. The threads split and divided, met and joined, over and over, slicing the emptiness into sharp slivers. I spun through the web. My body blinked between shapes: a silver hawk, a circle of fire, a sickle of moonlight. Rainbow sparks danced in my wake, and the golden web sang at my passing. I felt joy. I had made that journey many times in dreams before that moment, but that was the first time I had dived into the Great Ocean at my own will. It felt like breaking into air after drowning. It felt like returning home. I flew, my thoughts stretching across time and space, my will snapping realities and remaking them. It was so easy, it was like nothing, but it was everything.

They came for me then.

I felt them before I saw them. They cackled with voices of cracking ice. The golden web became fractures running through a plain of obsidian, I

fell and hit the black glass. My shape became that of a human, hard-muscled and black-haired. I stood, and turned my single eye to the shadows which crawled above the ground. Cold poured over me. I tasted blood, hot and spiced. Laughter breathed across the idea of my skin...

None of what I saw or felt was physically real - it was all metaphor, a shadow play projected onto the curtain of the aether. But unkind dreams can burn deeper than true fire.

A wolf stepped from behind the darkness. Blood matted its pelt and hung in droplets from its teeth. Scars marked its muzzle and twisted between eyes the colour of molten brass. Those eyes did not leave mine as it paced forwards. Breath panted from its open mouth, and I felt rage and hunger in each exhalation. It began to circle. I thought I heard laughter in the click of its claws.

+What are you?+ I asked. The wolf growled, jaws snapping out and back, faster than a blink of lightning. I felt the tips of its teeth brush the skin of my face. Pain detonated inside me at the touch. The obsidian beneath my feet shattered and I plunged down, through into the oblivion below.

The wolf was all around me, circling like a hurricane-force wind. I pushed against its presence with all my strength, but the storm swallowed my power. Its hate surrounded me, hot and red, but even as its teeth ripped me I could feel that it was sparing me, that it was holding itself back. I was not afraid. I had always known that there were creatures in the Great Ocean, things that call it home just as I do. Old things, formed from mislaid thoughts and stranded dreams, dangerous, cruel. They had always seemed to ignore me. Until that moment.

I hit another glass plain, and pulled myself to my feet. Aetheric blood was sheeting down the idea of my skin. The wolf was circling again, but it was not alone. Three other shapes stood beyond the wolf. A serpent glided coiled across the black glass, its scales changing colour with each stretch and squeeze of its body. There was something soft and obscene about its every movement, like the taste of vomit made solid. It reared up and looked at me with a human face. Its features were perfect in every way. I knew as I looked back that it saw everything I had ever hidden from anyone or anything. It licked its lips, the hood of scales flaring behind its smiling face. Behind it hovered a thing like a rotten moth with the cataract-white

eyes of a dead fish. Its thorax shuddered as it expanded and contracted, phlegm popping and rattling with each breath. There was another shape further away, indistinct, yet I was sure that it had had its back turned to me. The wolf circled nearer, and the snake glided in its wake.

+I know what this is,+ I said, and there was laughter in my thought-voice. Even now, with all that has happened and all that I am, the foolishness of those words makes me shiver. +I know what you are.+

The wolf paused. I could see the blood-clotted fur on its back rise into serrated spikes. The snake laughed, and the moth buzzed its wings. I did not respond. I was sure, so sure that I understood.

+The bloody wolf, which represents destruction from within. The serpent, which is the temptation to turn aside. The spectre of the grave, which is the fear of failure. You are my weaknesses come to pull me back to the dark. The seeker of truth must face you all if he is to ascend, but you are nothing more than reflections, and I do not fear you.+

'Is that what you seek?' said a voice. It was quiet, but it shook with different sounds, as though stitched together from many voices. The wolf went still, and the serpent hissed but did not move. The rotting moth buzzed backwards. The hunched creature at the edge of the circle turned and looked at me. It had the head of an eagle, a crow and a vulture stacked one above the other. Its eyes burned gas-flame blue. 'Is the truth why you are here?' It paused, savouring its next word. 'Magnus.'

The words chilled me. The creature should not know my name. It should not know me. 'Oh, but how could I not know you, my son?' it said.

+No,+ I said. +You are not my father. +

The four creatures laughed with a crackle of bones and a rustle of feathers. Their shadows grew, crawling towards me. Their hunger was all around pressing close, churning like waves against my mind. Then, suddenly – so suddenly that I felt their absence as a cold shock - they were gone. I was alone, surround by nothing but silence.

There had they gone? Why had they gone? The answer came, clear out of the silence. They had fled. And that meant that the silence was a lie.

I was not alone.

I felt it then: the presence in the emptiness, vast and so bright that I could not see it.

+Why are you here ? + I asked. When the answer came it echoed through my being.

+I have been searching for you,+ it said, +my son.+

I open the idea of my mouth to answer, but the memory is gone and I am falling again, trying to remember if I answered, or if in that moment I was, for the first time, afraid.

The memory has gone but it has given me part of myself.

I am a son.

A son...

I remember earth. The earth was red, it rose in dry ribbons on the wind. He stood before me, his armour powdered by dust and marked by fire. His brothers stood beside him: Amon with his head bowed, Tolbek, his face blanked by shock, and the others. My sons. My defiant sons. My murderous children. So clever, so gifted and so blind.

Ahriman stared back at me. He knew what he had done; I could see the truth haloing him like black smoke around a flame. He had defied me, he had wielded the fire of the gods to remake the present, and he had failed.

I turned and looked at what my son had left of my Legion. Thousands of blank eyes stared back at me from the helms of motionless suits of armour. I could see the soul caught in each one, held like smoke in a bottle, drowning in oblivion, dead yet not gone.

Rage. Even now the memory shakes me. Our anger is not the anger of mortals. It is the lightning bolt which breaks the high tower - the hammer blow which shakes the heavens.

I looked back to Ahriman, to my son, the best of my sons. We spoke, but the words held no meaning. There could be only one answer for what he had done.

+Banishment.+ I spoke the word, and the word remade the world. Ahriman was gone.

* * *

My son is gone. I remain. Falling. It is he who is calling me, back to the world of mud and flesh. I see his face as I fall from the cradle of gods. Was it a memory of what has been, or is it yet to come? Is there a difference?

I am not what I was. I am not even a fraction of what I was.

I am the broken son of a false god.

I am dust.

I am time scattering from the hand to be blown on the wind of fate.

I am the whisperings of the dead, forever cascading into the grave.

I am the king of all I see.

I open my eye. Reality screams around me as it rushes and tumbles past. Time surrounds me, scattering and gathering me. Once I would have thought this power, but it is not; it is a prison.

There are shapes in the tempest: faces, towers and plains of dust, possibilities waiting to be seen, to be made real. I can decide to make them real, or to make them fade. I can slip back into the dark silt of dreams that might not be dreams. I choose to let them become real. My throne builds itself from shadow. The boiling sky and dry red plain congeal and harden above and below me. I still have no form besides a jagged line of golden light which hangs above the throne like frozen lightning. Then the tower splits the ground beneath me, and thrusts me up into the air. Other towers shimmer into sight as I rise, a great forest of obsidian, silver and brass. I look, and see through the veils of matter, see the weave and flow of the aether beneath. It has been a long time since I have taken my throne, an age in which empires could die and be forgotten. For the half mortal creatures which dwell in the towers, though, I have been absent for no more than a turning of one of this planet's nine suns.

My remaining sons are waiting for me. They kneel, high-crested helms dipping, silk robes rustling in the wind. Each of them sees me differently. I know this, though I cannot know what it is that they see - that insight is denied me. Perhaps they see me as I was when I was half mortal: copper-skinned, red-maned, and crowned by horns. Perhaps they see only a shadow cast across my throne as though by a flickering fire. Perhaps they see something else.

Knekku raises his head first, and the questions begin to form in his thoughts. What is my bidding?

+The exiles are returning,+ I send. I feel their shock, their anger and their hope. +*He* is returning, and war is coming with him.+

A preview of
AHRIMAN: SORCERER

John French



Dreams

Soon, thought Grimur Red Iron. *Soon it will be done*. He closed his eyes, feeling the growl of the boarding torpedo around him as it cut through the void. He ran his tongue across his teeth; they had grown long. He shifted, feeling the knot of mis-grown and damaged muscle twist in his hunched back. The hunt had been long, but it was almost finished. *Soon*, he thought again and opened his eyes.

His pack waited beside him, their armour and weapons stained red by warning lights. Thirty figures of grey iron filled the narrow space. The marks of time and battle were on every one of them: in the scars on their warplate, in the worn handles of their weapons, but most of all in their silence.

A scream of tearing metal filled the air. The torpedo shook, and shook, the roar of metal grinding past its hull in a shriek. Grimur felt his muscles tighten against his bones, and braced himself. The torpedo slammed to a halt, and its tip exploded outwards. Smoke and molten droplets blew back into the torpedo hold. Grimur launched out of his seat and his pack kin rose as one to follow him.

He came out of the smoke at a run. A human stood before him, his eyes wide in a face of stitched and scarred skin. Grimur noticed the filth-spattered overalls and the barbed iron collar around the human's neck. His axe cut the human in half, from head to groin. Blood and bowel fluid flooded onto the deck. He did not even feel the haft of his axe tremble at the kill. Another figure appeared, a ragged outline at the edge of sight.

Grimur straightened and fired. The bolt shell turned the figure to red tatters and bone shards.

He could smell the warp's sweet reek even within his helm, like the taste of rotting meat and honey. But it was the other scent that drew him on through the smoke and the strobing detonations - the scent of a soul that had walked these decks and touched its skin. The one they sought had fled this ship long ago, but his spoor remained. Syclid and Lothar had followed the scent through the Underverse of the warp, and led them to this ship orbiting a dead star at the Eye's edge. Half crippled and skeleton crewed, the ship was almost a corpse, but it had still croaked its name in defiance as Grimur's ships had run it down. *Blood Crescent*, it had hissed across the vox. That it would die was a certainty, but that did not matter, not truly; what mattered was that it spoke its secrets before the end.

Grimur ran through the hammering of gunfire and ducked into a wide-mouthed passage. His pack kin bounded forwards behind him, chain blades growling to life, teeth and bone amulets rattling on scarred grey armour plate. They moved without words or howls, as wolves that have seen many winters and lose their hunger for blood. More of the ship's ragged and mutilated crew died, their bodies burst and hacked apart as their blood slicked the rusted metal of the decking. The thunder rhythm of bolters filled the air as the pack swept on through the murk, deeper into the rotting ship.

Crowds of slave crew fled before Grimur, choking the passage with screams and bodies. He cut his way through them without slowing down. Dark red blood drooled down his armour, pooling in its dents, and matting the black fur of his cloak. He killed with every step - cutting, trampling, crushing - and killed in silence, his mouth closed over his long teeth, weapon and body moving as one. He felt only the smack of his axe hitting meat, and the judder of the haft in his hand. The rest, the blood slapping his armour and the cries of the dead, meant nothing. The joy of battle had left him long **ago**. This slaughter was just what it was, what it had always been: a means to an end.

A roar filled the passage as Grimur broke through the crowd of dead and dying crew. He looked up. A creature of twisted muscle stared back at him with bloodshot eyes. It stood head and shoulders taller than a Space Marine, its face hidden by a plate of hammered metal. The monster had no

hands, just stumps fused with blades. Chains hung from hooks in its pale skin, clinking behind it as it paced forwards.

A blade-tipped arm punched forward. Grimur saw the blow unfold. He kicked from the floor, twisted past the killing point, and buried the curve of his axe in the mutant's head. The axe wrenched free, blood fizzing to smoke in its power field. It began to fall. Grimur landed and kept running. Behind him, the creature's body hit the deck in a shudder of dead muscle and fat.

Suddenly a bolt-round exploded across Grimur's chest. He stumbled, his helmet visor suddenly bright with warning runes. Pain spread across his chest. He caught his balance, and pivoted to face the direction of fire.

A Space Marine was advancing towards him, bolter held in one hand, a hooked chainaxe in the other. Flaking layers of red covered its armour. Tatters of skin hung from the spikes studding its pauldrons. Severed human hands flapped from chains at its waist. The Space Marine wore no helm and grinned with hooked iron teeth from a face of flayed muscle. It had a name for its own kind. A name - like every other part of its fallen life - was a lie, a vile daubing covering the colour of its sins. The Harrowing, they called themselves.

Grimur leapt, his axe spinning low, old muscle unwinding into the cut.

The Harrowing warrior almost killed him then. The chainaxe spun to life as it hacked forward. Dried blood and skin scattered from the turning teeth. The cut was fast: very, very fast. Grimur just had time to half twist aside. Chain teeth chewed across his right shoulder, and the snout of his helm. His helmet display blanked out in a flare of static. He lashed out with the butt of his axe, felt it hit armour and knock the Harrowing warrior back. Still blind, Grimur kicked out as his boot crashed into something solid, and a snarl of rage filled the air. His vision cleared in time to see the warrior's chainaxe descending towards his head, and he fired his pistol, holding it low. The rounds took the warrior's legs out from beneath it. Grimur brought his axe around and down. The Harrowing warrior's grinning face fell away in a wash of black blood.

Grimur straightened above the kill. Carefully he clamped the pistol to his thigh, and reached up to pull the ruin of his helmet from his head. The fetid air met the bare skin of his face. He ran a bloody hand across his scalp, mottling the tangle of faded tattoos with blood. An old habit, but

one he kept here, even when the blood smelled of ruin. Around him the tunnel had become quiet, the sounds of battle a distant rumble. His pack kin were swift, and the rest of the murder work would be done with soon.

The stink of the Harrowing warrior's blood rose to fill Grimur's senses as he breathed. He could taste the tumours seeded in its flesh, and the dead meat of its body. He wondered whether he would one day be the same, if the light of the Eye would sink deep enough into his bones that he would no longer be a Lord of Fenris, if he would end his thread of life a beast walking in the frost-night of the Underverse.

Fenris. Could he even remember it? Sometimes it seemed just a name, a word to conjure faded memories of starlight glinting on the sea, the roar of cracking pack ice, blood bright and clotting on snow.

'He was here,' Sycl'd's voice broke Grimur's thoughts, but he did not turn. He knew the rune priest had entered the passage without needing to see or hear him. Grimur did not need to answer either. Instead he bent down, dipped the tip of his armoured finger in the spreading pool of blood and then touched it to his tongue. For a second he just tasted salt and iron, then the blood memory came, a shimmer of half sensations, smeared with madness and corruption. He saw the decks of the ship he stood on sluiced with blood as sacrifices were impaled on altars, he saw a figure in power armour with a helm shaped like a hound, and he saw a fading image of a banner with a silver sword held in a black fist on a field of red. The dead warrior had once been called Elscanar, but he had forgotten that name long before Grimur's axe had cut his thread. The blood and flesh remembered though.

Grimur straightened, aware again of the curve in his back and the hunch of his shoulders. Sycl'd's frost-blue eyes looked back at him. Unconsciously Grimur's hand went to the shard of red iron hanging on a cord around his neck. The rune priest had also removed his helm, and the plait of his white hair had uncoiled from the top of his shaven head to hang at his waist. Skeletal crows' wings spread across his chest plate and pauldrons. Bird skulls and dead eyes set in amber hung from the edges of his battleplate, clicking against the storm grey ceramite as he moved. Pale, almost transparent skin pulled and creased over the sharp bones of his face as he bared teeth that were long and needle fine - closer to that of a feline than a wolf.

He was young, at least compared to the company of Grimur's pack. When the hunt had begun Sycld had been newly blooded, his face full, eyes golden and his laugh quick. Time and the hunt had changed that. He had found the wyrd was in him. His body had shrunken, flesh seeming to suck back into bone, even as the wyrd bloomed in his soul. Now he rarely talked, and the rest of the pack turned their eyes from him as he passed. He was a nightwalker, a hunter of the underworld and, while he was still their kin, he stood apart even from the other rune priests.

'Ahriman was here,' said Sycld again, his voice low and dry. 'I can feel his steps on the floors, his touch on the bones of the Blood Crescent. Time has passed but the scent is still strong.'

'Strong enough for you to lead us to him?'

Sycld's eyes fluttered closed, and his tongue ran across his teeth.

'Perhaps,' he said after a pause.

'We must have the scent,' growled Grimur. They were close, he knew it in his bones and breath. The wyrd was not in him, but he knew. They could not fail now. They had given too much to fail now.

'Take it from this one,' Grimur said, inclining his head to the dead Space Marine at their feet.

Sycld held Grimur's gaze for a long moment. Then the rune priest bowed his head and stepped forward, strings of finger bones clacking against the haft of his staff.

'By the edge of your axe, my jarl,' he said. The seals on his gauntlet released with a hiss of pressure. Sycld knelt and ripped a handful of meat from the corpse. Blood oozed between his bare fingers. He brought it up to his face, and inhaled. The pupils in his pale eyes almost vanished, and he breathed out. White mist filled the air Grimur felt his skin prickle, and tightened his right hand around the throat of his axe.

Sycld nodded once, and tilted his head back. His mouth opened wide, cartilage cracking, skin stretching. Grimur felt his hand close on the Red Iron tooth around his neck. Sycld's jaws opened wider and wider. He dropped the meat into his mouth and his teeth closed. He swayed where he knelt, face still upturned, blood running down the cheeks of his distorted face. There were no pupils in his eyes now. Frost bloomed across his armour. He began to shake. Grimur lifted his axe, his eyes fixed on the rune priest. The warp had touched them all. It had wound its way inside

their bones and bred with the beast that lurked beneath their skin. They were all one step from abomination, and when the rune priest ran the path of dreams he had touched that fate. Sycld roared, the sound echoing and repeating, rolling with pain. Black blood and bile vomited from between his teeth. Grimur brought the axe up to strike.

The silence halted his strike. Sycld had slumped to the deck, his eyes and mouth closed, his fingers twitching.

'Brother,' said Grimur, but did not lower the axe. Sycld did not move. A whine and hiss of armour turned Grimur's gaze. Halvar and ten of the pack stood beside him, their weapons and armour sheened with blood. All of them had removed their helmets, and fresh blood marked the mouths and jaws of some.

This must end soon, he thought. Or we will be lost.

'We are clear to the central core on this deck,' said Halvar, his gaze flicking to the beheaded warrior of the Harrowing and the slumped form of Sycld.

Grimur opened his mouth, but as he did Sycld's eyes opened. The rune priest's face had returned to its normal shape, and his eyes were hard as he stood. He reached up and picked a shred of meat from his teeth with a bare hand.

'I have it,' he said, his voice like wind murmuring across an ice field. 'I can see the path he took, his shadow body dancing on the edge of the netherworld seeking some fragment of the past. We have the scent, we can hunt.'

Ahriman ran and the wolves ran after him. His breath pulsated in his lungs, and his bare feet bled into the dust. The night was a silver scattered dome of sable above him. Tattered strands of light trailed from his left hand. He clenched his fist tighter, feeling the threads squirm against his fingers. Behind him howls rose to the moon. He looked back - the wolves were close, black blurs of movement close to the ground. Their eyes burned coal-red and molten gold.

Too close, he thought. Far, far too close.

The howls came again. He looked ahead to where the cliff rose before him: close, so close. He leapt for the face of pale rock. Scree slipped

beneath his feet, and suddenly he was tumbling back as the howls rose in triumph.

This is not real, he thought as he fell. This air in my lungs is just a memory, the light just an idea.

He hit the ground. Air gasped from his lips, and he rolled to his feet. The wolves came out of the night, jaws wide, tongues of fire lapping from their throats. A stink of blood, smoke and matted fur was thick in the air. He stood.

This is not real, he thought as his eyes met theirs. It is a dream, a painting created by scraps of experience and imagination.

The wolves leapt, burning droplets of spittle falling from teeth of ice.

But a dream can still kill you.

Ahriman jumped up the cliff face. Jaws fastened on his ankle. He screamed and kicked down. His grip slipped, and he swung by one hand, his feet scrabbling on the rock face. The golden threads of light writhed in his left hand, struggling to break free. The wolf bit deeper. Words bubbled up in his mind as blood scattered from the wound.

+We have come for you,+ hissed the voice. +We will never tire. We will open your belly to the crows and feed your soul to the serpent at the world's heart. We are your oblivion, Ahzek Ahriman. Your soul will sing to the night for evermore. +

Ahriman felt his grip on the cliff begin to give. He looked down at the wolf hanging from his leg, its furred shadow body seeming to swell. His eyes met the pits of fire in its skinless skull. Beneath it the other wolves scrambled at the cliff, their mouths smiles of flame

No, he thought, and twisted to crash his right foot into the wolf's snout. He felt its hold give, and he ripped his leg from its jaws. It fell to the ground, yelping in pain and rage. Blood was pouring from his leg down the face of the cliff. He gasped. Numbness was spreading up his body, ice crystals forming on his skin, his blood boiling. He looked up to see the moon and sky at the top of the cliff, but the cliff was stretching up, growing taller even as he looked at it. He reached for the next hand-hold. The fingers of his right hand hooked onto the rock and he began to haul himself upwards. The wolves howled in frustration. He thought he heard voices in the cries, old voices shaped by hatred.

I must not fall, he thought. Not now. If I can only reach the top I will be safe. Beneath him the wolves were circling, watching, silent now that they had tasted his blood. He leant against the rock face, reached up with his free right hand, found a hand-hold and pulled.

The rock beneath his hand broke apart even as his grip tightened. He screamed as the burning in his muscles fought the coldness spreading from his leg. As he looked down, the eyes of the wolves looked back.

A hand grasped his arm.

His head snapped up. He had an impression of a hooded face outlined against the stars. Hard fingers clamped tight on his flesh, he had a fleeting sensation of wrinkled skin moving over whipcord muscle. Then he was being pulled up the cliff and into the mouth of a cave.

He lay still, breathing hard, not caring that it wasn't real air filling his lungs. Firelight flickered against cave walls. The howls of the wolves were a distant murmur. He could hear logs crackling and popping as they burnt. Wood smoke filled his nose. He flexed the fingers of his left hand. They were empty.

Ahriman's head snapped up and he began to rise. The figure standing above him straightened. A tattered robe the colour of rust hid its form, but could not hide its bulk. Muscled shoulders slumped under the worn cloth, and Ahriman saw scarred arms vanish within wide sleeves. A shadow-filled hood pointed briefly at him, and then back to the golden threads hanging from its fingers. The threads twitched and squirmed like snakes.

'A long way to come for such a fragment of knowledge,' said the figure, in a voice that crackled like the logs on the fire.

'Give it back,' said Ahriman softly, but there was a sharpened edge in the words. The figure shrugged, and held the threads out to Ahriman. He took them, noticing the pale skin stretched over the long bones of the figure's hand. The threads folded back into his grasp again, warm and writhing against his skin. The robed figure began to shuffle away towards the light of the fire.

'You will live,' said the figure, bending and folding until it sat on the cave floor. Ahriman remembered the wound to his leg, looked down, and reached to clamp his hands shut over bloody scraps of flesh. He stopped. His leg was whole. No blood marked the cave floor. He looked closer, probing with his fingers. As the firelight shifted he saw it: a pale mark on

his skin, like a ragged white scar. It was cold when he touched it, but there was no pain. He looked up. The figure was watching him. 'The marks of their teeth will linger for a while, but they will fade in time.'

Ahriman ignored the words, his eyes scanning the cave, taking in the texture of the rock, the glint of crystals in the water-worn walls, the smoke-darkened roof, and the patch of night sky beyond the cave mouth. He understood the symbolism of each part of what he saw, but he was still surprised his mind had led him here.

'You are thinking this is still a dream,' said the cloaked figure.

Ahriman said nothing, but looked into the dancing heart of the fire. The wolves had almost had him, had almost pulled him down. No matter whether he felt the pain here and now, he would feel it later. They were getting closer each time he came to this land.

'Perhaps it is still a dream,' chuckled the figure. Ahriman tried to ignore it. 'But perhaps not.'

'It is,' said Ahriman, and looked up at the hooded figure. The firelight caught the glint of a blue eye within the tattered hood. 'This cave is a refuge, a metaphor of a sanctuary built from memories and scraps of imagination. It is a reaction of my mind to danger, nothing more.' He reached down, lifted a handful of dust from the floor, and let it trickle slowly through his fingers. 'This cave is like one in the mountains of Prospero. The stars and moon of the sky outside belong to Ullanor, and this dust is the dust of the land of my birth.'

'What then am I?' asked the figure.

It was Ahriman's turn to laugh.

'A hooded stranger who asks questions, but hides his face?' Ahriman pointed at his own bright blue eyes. 'You are part of me, a part of my subconscious, which has broken free because of the trauma.'

The figure nodded slowly, stirring the embers at the edge of the fire with a blackened stick.

'But the wolves...' said the figure softly, and shrugged. 'They were real enough to kill you, weren't they?'

Ahriman looked up, his senses suddenly tingling. The stranger's voice had changed, had become something he had not thought to hear again. The figure turned his head slowly to look at Ahriman, the hood falling to hide

all but a single blue eye. 'Tell me, why does Ahzek Ahriman run from wolves through his own dreams?'

Ahriman had become still. Somewhere far off his twin hearts were beating faster.

'Father?' he asked. *No*, he thought even as the word came from his lips. *This is not real, this is a dream, and your father is lost to you.*

The figure gave a dry laugh, and turned his eye back to the fire. Slowly it reached up and lowered the hood. The head beneath was a lump of bone and glossy scar tissue. The right side of the face was a twisted ruin, the eye swallowed by malformed flesh. A lone eye glinted sapphire blue in the ruin of his face. Suddenly the figure looked like a colossus shrunken by time, and twisted by pain.

'You are wondering how this could be,' said the scarred figure. 'Whether the wolves bit deep enough to bring the idea of me to the surface, or if it is because of what you seek.' The figure paused, drawing the tatters of his robes closer around him as if cold. 'But part of you wonders if this is not your dream anymore. Part of you can't help wondering if your father knows what you seek, and has come to stop you. Part of you can't help wondering if I am really here.'

Ahriman did not move. He should have anticipated this. His questing, and the flight from the wolves, had drained him. He had gone too far, and taken too much from the well of his unconscious. Slowly he extended his mind beyond the mouth of the cave, searching for the thread of physical sensation which would lead him out of this dream. Somewhere far off he could hear the rising drum of his hearts, and the sea surge of blood in his veins.

'I am not here to harm you, Ahriman.'

'No,' said Ahriman. 'You are not here at all.'

'Is that a fact, or a hope?' The figure stirred the embers again. 'You seek the Athenaeum, don't you?' The question hung in the air, and the fire crackled in the silence. 'All my thoughts and all my *dreams*, recorded and hidden away - a treasure trove of knowledge, a window into the past. That is why you are here, seeking the threads to lead you to it.'

'My father does not even know that the Athenaeum exists. Only a few know it is real, even fewer know that I seek it now.'

Ahriman stood up and took a pace towards the cave mouth. Somewhere he felt real breath fill his lungs; it tasted of incense and static. He looked out into the night, and placed his hand on the lip of the cave mouth.

'It will not give you the answers,' said the figure.

Ahriman looked back over his shoulder. The hunched and one-eyed figure was looking directly at him. Behind it a shadow danced on the wall, growing and shrinking, as it blinked between impressions of horns, wings, and claws. 'You followed me in war and treachery. You followed me over the precipice into hell, you believed me and betrayed me, and yet still you wonder if you ever knew your father at all.'

'I knew him,' said Ahriman softly.

'Then why seek the Athenaeum?'

'For the future.'

'A good answer, my son.' The figure looked away, and Ahriman saw a smile struggle to form on the ruined face.

Ahriman frowned. Something in that smile was familiar. And yet it did not remind him of Magnus, but someone else. Someone he could not place.

'Speak your name,' demanded Ahriman. The fire dimmed at the words, and the walls of the cave seemed to press closer, the shadows darker. The one-eyed figure prodded the glowing logs again.

'Go,' said the figure. 'The wolves will return soon.'

Ahriman took a step back into the cave. The figure raised a hand, and the fire became a white hot pillar. The shadows grew on the walls, snaking into the light, swallowing it. Sparks, embers, and ash tumbled through the air. Heat stung Ahriman's skin. Darkness embraced him, and the burning pillar of flame was all he could see. He tried to take a step forward, but he was tumbling through light- less space - the light of the fire a single distant star that dimmed as he fell.

'Wake, Ahriman,' said a voice that seemed carried on the wind. 'Wake.'

IMPERFECT END

Andy Smillie



I take a knee while the Chaplain dies. Blood, thick and rich-red, spills from the eyes of his helm. It is a thing of baroque beauty, inlaid with the names of those who have died beneath its cowl, and inscribed with catechisms that border on the operatic. A skull helm. A visage of death meant to terrify the living into subservience and act as the final image the bearer's enemies take to their grave. I wait for the Chaplain's body to stop twitching and withdraw my finger from his forehead. The serrated edges of my digit emerge thick with brain matter. I relish the sharp tang of pain as I lick it clean, the barbs worked into my flesh tearing at my serpent's tongue.

'It is a saddening shame, Blood Angel, that the poetry of your death is lost on you,' I speak to the helm as a final pair of blood drops streak down its smooth plate. 'Though I am not surprised, it has taken me all of my life to adequately prepare for my own.'

My journey to the truth has been a long one. Since the day my brothers and I were freed from the Emperor's leash, I have believed that only His flesh would sate me. That only bathed in the Emperor's entrails, my thirst quenched by His magnificent blood, would my long quest reach its conclusion. For far too long, I have believed that only the Emperor could die a perfect death. That the taking of no other life could elevate me to my patron's side.

A terrible error that I have laboured under for centuries.

I feel the constricting grip of fury even as I reflect on the falsehood. It is a mistake that has driven my every action, consumed my every moment. *Regret.* I am blessed to feel such a thing. Few among my brotherhood can

claim the same. Truest sorrow is something we learn only in our last moment. Yet I am in perfect health.

With ritual care, I cut the Chaplain's primary heart from his chest. Bifurcating the organ, I hook one half over the last empty barb studding my belt, a talon ripped from a hound of Khorne. The other I hold to the sky, and squeeze. It bursts between my fingers the way a thousand have done before. The blood is gone in an instant, carried aloft to my patron by the baleful wind. It is an ode to his majesty that here - under such an indiscernible zion, beneath the fulgorant collision of colour and sound that frames this forsaken world - I have at last found clarity.

I rise, and make for the tower.

The movement drags a snarl from one of the five Blood Angels that lie bisected around me. I enjoy the sound, savouring the desperate rasping of the Chaplain's black-armoured sheep as it tries to drag its torso towards me. *Death Company*. My face twists into a sneer as the words form on my lipless mouth. The maddened Blood Angels hold no more dominion over death than the countless millions my armies have cleaved from existence. I pace to just outside its reach. It growls, curling its fingers into the red earth as it reaches for my boot.

Perhaps I would permit even the initiated among my brotherhood to be spared death if they mistook the Blood Angel's roar for anger, if they thought it a mark of pride and defiance. My ears, though, have never mistaken despair.

The Blood Angel's cry is not the frail shriek of an eldar or the pitiful whimpering of a human, but it is despair, as sure as my flesh is bone-white. The Death Company warrior would kill, and yet it cannot. It is anguished, it is broken, and it is without purpose. I feel its fingers caress my boot and I smile, stepping past it. My blade has gutted ork warlords, cast down the ancients of the necrontyr and cut apart the mightiest of tyrannid bio-organisms. I will not sully it now, not at this late hour.

The tower is in ruin. The shattered remnant of a once-great daemon fortress, its stone, forged from sun-baked blood, is cracked and punctuated by snaking fissures that ooze where the weapons of my brothers have turned it molten. The arterial magma is hot underfoot as it runs back to the cursed earth of this place. I take the stairs one at a time, eager - but in no rush - to make my final kill.

Atop the battlements, I look down on the slaughter below. It is glorious, a writhing multitude of death and desperation. There is no hope on the wind, only the lustful hunger of murderers and the fearful agony of the dying. Bathed in the bloody radiance of the battle, I am as a god, gazing down on my disciples as they create the backdrop for my final kill, and bring my life's work to completion.

I was wrong, before. The perfect death requires many things, but chief among them are the perfect victim - a being of purest majesty - and the perfect killer, a bladesman of exquisite skill. Yet more than that, it requires these to be one and the same, for both the killing and the dying to be experienced at once and together, a sublime blend of action and reaction.

So it is that I, Ashesh Kushal Siddhran, Pleasure Prince of Slaanesh, am ready to die by my own hand. I will taste the sweetness of my own flesh, and silence the beating of my ensorcelled hearts.

I draw Gh'aphern, my sword, from its scabbard. It is a Blade of Change, one of only nine in existence. Forged in the incandescent fires of the warp, it is never twice the same shape or balance. Yet, it is always perfect. I feel the daemon bound within the weapon rejoice, its glee shivering through the hilt as I tighten my grip. Gh'aphern knows full well the flesh it is about to taste, and it is rapacious. It can think of no greater joy than to kill me, the one who banished its mortal form and enslaved its essence. I smile. It is as it was meant to be. The perfect death I have before me requires no less than the most sublime of poetries.

I test Gh'aphern's edge on the light bleeding down from the world's six suns as they rise to alignment. Striated strands of blue, red and green shimmer down the weapon's length as it slices the light to its constituent colours. Satisfied, I reverse my grip, take hold with both hands, and step to the edge of the battlement. The wind catches my cloak, billowing the eldar skin out behind me like a banner, and lifts the long strands of my golden hair from my face. Below me, as I had planned, the bulk of the fighting finally reaches the foot of the tower. My body will not be left to rot like some corpse god or forgotten monument. It will be torn apart, ravaged by the beautiful carnage below. I press Gh'aphern's tip against my chest, and meet the gaze of the dozen eyes glaring up at me from my forearms.

Ripped from my enemies and stitched in place, they widen and blink back at me in gleeful horror.

'Yes,' I say to them. 'Now.'

I pull the blade into me and feel it pass effortlessly between my two hearts. Pain, warm and enveloping robs me of thought. I hear Gh'aphern laugh as it widens within me, murdering both organs at once. My blood, black as the void, spills out over the flagstones. I topple. The roar of battle rises up around me like applause.

I fall. I fall to darkness.

The black of oblivion is not the impenetrable shroud I had imagined. It is a forest of shadow that retreats before me, thinning and growing lighter as I push my consciousness through it. I pace forward and stop. Odd that I find myself aware of the motion while the sensation of the act is lost to me. I move again. Still nothing. Perhaps it is to be expected. Perhaps I am still to fully inhabit whatever new form my patron has granted me. I move again, twice in succession. The actions come slower than I am accustomed to. I feel heavier, more rigid. A knot of frustration rises in my core, and I shift my thoughts, unwilling to allow it to choke away the splendour of my rebirth. Still for the moment, I dream of the killing to come, of the souls I will claim, and of the butchered meat that shall adorn my new form. Lost in gleeful wonder and hungry longing, I am taken unawares by the figure that resolves before me.

'You have awoken, *lord*.'

I make to speak but find myself silenced by surprise. Tay'lon, my flesh-smith, stands clad in his warplate, its rivets still thick with red earth.

'Your wounds were severe, and I admit it took more than my skill alone to save you.'

There is something in his tone, something...

It is then that I see the others: Narsun the Apothecary and the sorcerer Ilmyir. The damning stain of amusement marring their faces. Behind them, reflected in the polished steel of the chamber wall, I see myself.

'You!' I roar, though the voice that sounds in response is not my own. It is a cacophony of machine garble, the crudest approximation of speech. I charge forward in fury, bent on their deaths. A power field sparks, flaring crimson as I collide with it. Shuddering in shock, I strike out - once, twice.

The barrier ripples but holds fast, the simple beauty of its energies mocking me.

'What have you done? You dare deny me the death I am due?'

'Always one to see pleasures only in the obvious. Don't worry about what we have taken from you. What we have given you is so much more,' Tay'lon's lips twist into a cruel smile. 'You will soon experience a whole new sensation. Something none of us have ever known...' He turned and gestured to the workbench behind him. 'Terror.'

'Gh'aphern.' The weapon's name comes unbidden from whatever lips I have left.

It lies shattered on the bench, the wards running its length dull and inactive. Ilmyir follows my gaze.

'Yes.' The golden orbs of the sorcerer's eyes flash with malice. 'We would never dream of separating you from your prize.'

The noise came then. A scratching of metal, a bladed whisper that gnawed at my mind.

'No!' I roar. 'No!'

My three commanders turn their backs on me, stepping from the chamber and extinguishing the luminators, to leave me alone in the darkness with the daemon. I feel it smile.

The burning gnawing intensifies. Panic rushes through me as my thoughts begin to unravel, and my mind begins to fracture. I recoil as the daemon laughs and works its way into the cracks of my psyche. It shows me my end.

I will be robbed of my life's work. I will die the most imperfect of deaths. A gibbering wreck, possessed of a ruined mind, I will be unable to experience the rotting agony of my power feed decaying. Even the nightmare pain of my flesh being scorched from my bones as this adamantium shell is finally destroyed, will be beyond my knowing.

Strange then that my last sane thought should be one of joy. In the final moments before I lose my mind, I have at least felt the encompassing pain of terror.

END OF NIGHT

Ben Counter



'For those who say there is no beauty left in the galaxy,' said Memnogon, 'let them look upon this.'

Beyond the precipice stretched a bewildering expanse of madness. The ground was of black glass, shattered into a labyrinth of sheer-sided chasms into which poured corrosive waterfalls flowing to toxic underground oceans. Steam billowed from enormous machines breaching the surface, cogs and pistons heaving up black glass islands in time with the beating of this world's steam-powered heart. The sky was seething, the colour of rust.

Weak-minded maniacs crowded by the greater machinery, in the shadow of spinning flywheels and coils of brazen spring. They were drawn there by nightmares and visions, mutineers and stowaways. They leapt into the workings, lubricating the workings with their blood in frenzied offerings to the lord who sent them their calling. The sprays of steam were tinted pink with their vaporised bodies.

Memnogon of the Night Lords turned to see his warband following him up the slope of the glass mountains. He had led them through the warp storm, across worlds as mad or even more mad than this, always seeking the greatest triumphs to prove their worth to the powers of the warp. 'Brothers,' he said. 'This is the Cradle of Brass. Here Prince Kthul reigns, and here he will be destroyed.'

]Then let the view be sufficiently admired,' said Helkast, whose humour was grim even on the eve of triumph. 'There is a lord of daemons to kill.'

Helkast was one of the oldest of the dozen Night Lords in Memnogon's warband. The dark blue of his armour was almost lost in the barnacle-like

growths that flourished in the warp, miniature creatures that fed off his anger and hate.

'I dreamt of this,' said the dry, tattered voice of Fulkrom, whose armour was covered in scraps of parchment that constantly smouldered with the power of the prayers he had written on them. 'Kthul falls like a continent sinking into an ocean. In fire and blood. I have seen it.'

'I brought you here because I sought out the greatest prize,' said Memnogon. 'I spilt my own blood to read from the oracles. They spoke of a daemon lord in a body of brass and steel. We seek to pit ourselves against the greatest challenges the warp can put before us, my brothers, and this one, as all before them, we shall crush!'

'Once,' said Druthix, 'we knelt before a Golden Throne. We obeyed. We defied the men we were.' Druthix was a gladiator, a student of bloodshed armed with a pair of ancient lightning claws that only one who had studied them for centuries could wield. 'But we cast off those chains. We chose freedom, and the greatest freedom is to face the will of the warp itself and defeat it. Thus is the glory of Chaos! Freedom and glory!'

'Freedom and glory!' yelled the Night Lords as one, holding chainswords and boltguns high in salute. The salute was to Chaos, and to Memnogon.

'Our blades together are the equal of Kthul,' said Memnogon. 'And now all the warp shall learn it!'

The hate had almost burned Memnogon up from the inside. It had been ignited by his Legion's banishment from the fold of mankind, from being cast aside by an Emperor to whom the Night Lords had dedicated themselves. Or was it the Night Lords who turned from the Emperor first? The memories were so fractured by hate that the details had been lost.

But the hate had not taken him. He had found a group of Night Lords wandering the galaxy seeking to quench the same fires inside them. Together they learned their purpose. Victory cooled the fires down and made them bearable - victory over the greatest enemies they could find. Only then could a man feel like he meant anything against the infinite cruelty of the galaxy. Only then could he be worthy of the glory of the warp. In the moment of victory, and never any time else, a man could be truly free.

It was the anticipation of that moment that burned through Memnogon's body as he ran up the glass slope towards the throne of Prince Kthul. The vast machinery of the planet's heart broke through in a mass of brazen entrails. Roaring pistons hammered into the ground, hurling gales of razored slivers that clattered against Memnogon's armour. A huge throne of bronze and steel rose lopsidedly from the peak of the rise, upon which sat a hulking draconic creature. Like the world beneath its feet it was a horror in clockwork, the fires of the daemon within burning between plates of glowing-hot armour. Its head was long and fanged, its eyes an array of gold-tinted lenses embedded in an iron skull wreathed in steam.

'You do not seek an audience,' growled a voice of grinding steel, 'for those who seek one stand before me raving and tattered, driven here by their dreams. And you do not seek to pledge your devotion, for you do not kneel in obeisance and terror. So this one surmises you have come to depose him, and sit upon his throne.'

Memnogon's hatred was too strong to express. He had tried, in prayers hurled into the warp and diatribes screamed into the faces of beaten enemies. But he had learned that only victory would calm it down. He drew his power mace, the blood on it smouldering in its power field. The blood never dried, an eternal reminder of every victory.

'I am Memnogon of the Night Lords,' he said, fighting to keep his voice level. 'And these are the brothers of my warband, wanderers through the warp. We take the heads of only the worthiest of foes. Be honoured, Prince Kthul, in death.'

Kthul lurched up from his throne, forelimbs unfolding into blades of burning steel. An articulated tail slithered across the ground as he thudded onto the glass slope, rearing up over Memnogon with eyelenses narrowing.

'Then let another skull be cast into the pyres,' Kthul growled, and lunged at Memnogon.

A great raking claw shattered the ground beneath Memnogon, a half-second after he rolled out of the way. Kthul roared in anger, steam spraying from every joint of his mechanical body.

'There is not but one Night Lord here to depose you!' cried out Memnogon. He drew his bolt pistol and shot out one of the daemon prince's eyes, yellow steam spurting from the ruined socket. 'You face the blades of my brothers, and as one we will bring you down!'

Memnogon had travelled the galaxy, real space and warp, for centuries with his warband. Those early days were corroded in his memory but the more recent years were a parade of victories, every one of his brothers working in concert to defeat foes none could take on alone. He knew their strengths, weaknesses and the actions they would take in the next few seconds - the chains of cause and effect that each one would spark, all leading to victory as inevitable as the warp itself.

First a burst of bolter fire would blind the daemon prince. Then the Night Lords would charge in with chainswords and power maces, shattering the daemon's joints so it collapsed to the ground. There they would dismember it, piece by piece, until it was spread out across the expanse of broken glass.

Memnogon hammered fire up into the daemon's face, anticipating the volley of shots that would burst its remaining eyes.

There was no gunfire from behind.

No Night Lords charged in beside him.

Memnogon glanced back, risking a split second with his eyes off his enemy. At the base of the slope the warband stood, watching. None of them had drawn a weapon. None of them moved to help their leader.

The shock of the sight was almost as cold and painful as the blade that lanced through his back and out through the side of his abdomen. Almost, but not quite. Memnogon grabbed the blade and snapped it off, giving him room to slide himself off it even as the pain ran through him. He shut the pain off, ordering that weak, human part of his brain to fall silent.

Memnogon turned, one leg buckling weakly under him. He was on one knee when Kthul's hand came down again, this time the blades of his claw cutting down through both of Memnogon's shoulders, carving down to his waist through lung and intestine.

Memnogon flopped backwards and as the colour drained out of his vision he could see the warband still lined up below, unmoving.

They did not flinch or draw a single blade as Prince Kthul peeled Memnogon apart, and cast the gory chunks of his remains across the shattered glass.

There was nothing left on this world for them. Their spacecraft, a corroded and misshapen gunship inhabited by a surly enslaved daemon, squatted like a black metal toad in the obsidian valley where they had

landed. The light of the pyre flickered against its pitted hull - the pyre on which what little remained of Memnogon was burned.

'He had to die,' said Fulkrom as he stood over the fire. 'Chaos is freedom. In pure freedom no one man can rule over another. By proclaiming himself above us, Memnogon violated the freedom that is Chaos. We will not turn down such a path again. The warp has had its way.'

'Do you not remember?' snarled Helkast. 'We thought that before, with Lord Korst! And Vixol Khren before him! They fought the hardest and won the most, and so they came to lead us, and then we abandoned them to their deaths because Chaos will not have one of us lord it over the others!' He looked around him, at the other Night Lords of the warband who stood silent in the wake of his words. 'None of you remember? The warp corrodes our minds, it is true. I cannot remember who I was before I took on these colours. But surely you can remember the deaths of those who went before Memnogon?'

'Be silent, Helkast, damn your guts!' It was Druthix who had spoken. 'This is our quest. We defeat the weakness within as well as the enemies without. Memnogon died. We all understand why. Thus we throw off the weakness of his law and come closer to Chaos.'

'But we will come no closer,' replied Helkast. 'It will happen again. Maybe it will be me, maybe you, Druthix, maybe even this pallid youth here.' Helkast jabbed a finger at Fulkrom, the youngest-appearing of the warband. 'But one of us will come to lead the rest again. He will believe he is different, that the rest of us will forgive him his law and let him live when the victories come rolling in. But he will be wrong, and we will abandon him, and he will die. How many times has it happened? Ten? A hundred? A thousand?'

'Then break the cycle!' said Fulkrom. His eyes were wide, as if he was in the grip of one of his visions, when the landscape of the warp unravelled before his mind's eye and he could read the future from its contours. 'Throw yourself on the fire, or take that bolt pistol and put a round through your skull! If, that is, you think that will grant you an escape.'

Helkast looked down at the pyre, which was burning low, leaving only a few chunks of charred bone. 'Did we once think we could rise above Chaos,' he said darkly, 'and seek to impress its gods with our triumphs? Are we being punished for our arrogance? Is that why we are here?'

The other Night Lords were already embarking onto their ship. Perhaps they had not even heard him. With a final glance at the remains of the fire, Helkast joined them.

The ship rose from the obsidian valley, breaching the clouds to continue its flight through a night that would never end.

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