

Death Mark

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

The cards before Madrona were wafers of stiffened vellum, threaded with psycho-active crystal filaments sourced from the basalt slopes of Varsavia's largest volcano. They thrilled to his touch, even through the silver gauntlets of his battle plate, and he felt the power within him stir.

With the death mark so close, a reading was unwise, but Sergeant Sachar had insisted.

The central card laid upon the splintered corbel displayed the Emperor reversed, crossed with the twin Lightning Rods.

'A foe of terrible power,' he said, his eyes closed as the sense of the cards filled him. 'A bearer of the Warp. His every step is rich with the misery he has wrought.'

Madrona laid a card to either side. Even with his eyes closed he felt their identity.

'The Blade in the Night. The Eye of the Archenemy.'

'A kill mission and a target from the ancient days,' hissed Sachar from behind, concealed amid the convergence of structural support girders holding up the shattered roof. 'You were right.'

'Two cards remain,' said Madrona.

'The cards of chance and certainty,' said Sachar. 'You can tell which is which?'

'Only the greatest Prognosticators can divine such truths,' said Madrona.

'Our lives depend on it,' snapped Sachar. 'Deal again.'

'No. The death mark is approaching. The slaughter that has drawn him will set the cards to screaming wildly differing possibilities.'

Sachar did not reply, but Madrona could feel his frustration at such lack of certainty. The Prognosticators of the Silver Skulls had been reading the tides of the future to direct the campaigns of his warriors for millennia, and to hear one speak of uncertainty was anathema.

‘For all we might wish it to be, prognostication is not a precise art, brother sergeant. It shows us the path, but even the best of us cannot know where that path ultimately leads.’

‘It has led us here, Brother Madrona,’ said Sachar, nodding down at the charnel house of the cathedral floor. ‘Squad Kyanite will live or die by your vision.’

The cavernous space in which the ten warriors of the Silver Skulls were concealed had once been the city’s grandest cathedral, a monolithic fane dedicated to the glory of the Emperor in his aspect as the eternal crusader.

A thousand pyres smouldered hundreds of metres below them, the remains of the temple’s last defenders. The preachers and worshipers had fought the warriors of the Archenemy hard, but against gene-forged traitor legionaries, there had been no hope of survival. Tortured beyond mortal endurance and burned at the stake, their corpses sagged on iron fetters, the meat of their bodies now a fatty gruel pooled at their feet.

The silver of Madrona’s battle plate was muted, its lustre dulled by the smoke and ash of that layered each of them after weeks spent infiltrating the enemy-held city. He reached across his breastplate to touch the deep blue gemstones set within the eye-sockets of the skull on his shoulder guard.

A Prognosticator normally stood apart from his battle brothers, but Madrona had chosen to replace the Carnelian gemstones of his skull icon with Kyanites wrought on Gildar Secundus. Sachar had appreciated the gesture, as had the warriors of his squad. It bonded them even as Madrona led them towards an uncertain future.

The sergeant drew his blade and Madrona savoured the raw, feral edge of his battle-lust. Ascension to the ranks of the fighting companies of the Silver Skulls bred out many things from the Varsavian tribes, but taking savage joy in bloodletting wasn’t one of them.

‘How much longer?’ asked Sachar. ‘It sits ill with me to remain in this cursed place longer than we must. It offends me to see the sacred halls of the Emperor profaned.’

‘Cool the fire in your blood, Sergeant,’ advised Madrona, gasping as a spasm of soul-sick evil twisted in his gut. ‘The death mark is here. The Black Sorcerer approaches.’

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‘Murder is a poor substitute for willing sacrifice,’ observed Ash’hy Mok, picking a path through the blackened pyres filling the cathedral, ‘but it has its uses.’

The death screams of the Emperor’s lackeys still echoed in the aether, lingering notes of desperation, agony and terror. Only a pitiful few had clung to their faith in their last moments, the rest so consumed by pain as their flesh slid molten from their bones that they cried out to any god who would listen to deliver them from agony.

The sorcerer’s robes were cut from fuliginous cloth, edged in subtle teals and woven with azure runes suggestive of hooked and predatory talons. The base of his bladed staff traced geomantic patterns in the slurry of congealed fat and bone coating the tiled floor. Corposant licked along its length, idiot warp scraps drawn like moths to a candle and slithering through cracks in the veil.

They flickered and died as soon as they were born, an instinctual hunger for souls drawing them to their own dissolution even as they glutted on slaughter.

Behind Ash’hy Mok, sorcerer of the Black Legion, came eight warriors in warplate of midnight black. Bronze stars upon their shoulder guards and breastplates glittered in the firelight, their lustre dulled by bloodied ash. A hundred-strong pack of mutant devotees in tattered robes followed Abaddon’s warriors like scavengers shadowing an apex predator.

‘Your cruelties are as inventive as ever, sorcerer,’ said Kastagar, glancing at the pyres, ‘but this world has been long since been bled dry. Why do we linger?’

‘We linger because I choose to,’ said Ash’hy Mok. ‘This world may have little left that can serve the Despoiler, but there is much yet that can serve the immortal powers of the warp. Knowledge won through suffering and pain...such choice secrets should not lightly be discarded.’

‘You speak as a philosopher, but I speak as a warrior,’ said Kastagar. ‘One whose life is forfeit if I do not return to the Warmaster with ships filled with slaves and supplies for his crusade host.’

Ash'hy Mok shook his head. 'There is...something here that yet vexes me, Kastagar, a sense of potential yet unrealised. Besides, you have slaves by the million and enough war-plunder to wage a crusade of your own.'

Kastagar increased his pace and halted their march with a growl, the red of his helm's eye-lenses flaring in anger.

'Aye, and with every day our ships remain in orbit, the greater the danger of Imperial retribution. The Warmaster does not tolerate delays, and our crusade is in dire need of fresh worlds to supply the upcoming crusade into Imperial space. We must go, and we must go now.'

Ash'hy Mok hammered his staff against the flagstones, and a blizzing corona of lightning burst from its point of impact. The corpses chained on the pyres threw back their heads and screamed, blue fire flaring from heat-fused jaws.

Kastagar stepped back and his warriors formed a circle, their weapons raised.

'Who are you, Kastagar, to order me?' hissed Ash'hy Mok. 'I am the Warmaster's seer, his mystic counsel and his link to the powers of the warp. Do you fancy that your victories here make you indispensable? That you might walk with one upon whom the gods have turned their gaze and berate him as an equal?'

Power coruscated along Ash'hy Mok's armour, pellucid flames of violet fury. The lenses of his beaked helm blazed with the light of aborted stars and a dark corona of immaterial energies leeches from the warp thickened around him. Muttering *things* pressed at his back, drawn by his anger and pressing upon the veil between worlds.

With a gesture he could release them, and they would tear the presumptuous warrior of the Black Legion to shreds before he could blink.

Kastagar saw his death in Ash'hy Mok's eyes and dropped to his knees, arms raised before him in supplication.

'Forgive me, lord,' he said. 'All shall be as you command.'

'You are but my servants.'

‘We are but your servants,’ agreed Kastagar.

His body ablaze with warp-energies, Ash’hy Mok’s senses were preternaturally sharpened. The fire blazing from the mouths of the corpses filled the cathedral with lambent light from the Empyrean.

It illuminated the silver-armoured warriors dropping from the roof space an instant before they landed.

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Madrona fired his jump pack the instant before he slammed down on the flagstones. The marble shattered under the impact, sending a cloud of dust and fragments pluming around him. His sword and pistol were in his hands an instant later. His first shot punched through the helm of a traitor warrior, his second detonated within the chest of a ragged wretch behind him.

Sachar landed a second later, swiftly followed by the gleaming warriors of Squad Kyanite. As if the rapid descent from the rafters had cleansed them of their concealing ash, their armour shone brighter than ever.

Surprise was total, six of the Black Legion were already dead, killed at the instant of landing. The last few fell back to the sorcerer’s side, knowing their fate was sealed.

The cards sang in the leather pouch at Madrona’s hip, and powerful currents of warp energy surged through his flesh with every breath. The death-marked sorcerer was limned in fire, bearing a staff ablaze with psychic force.

His robes and armour were black and etched with hair-fine inscriptions of glittering blue, catechisms of dark power and unholy dogma. The sweeping wings of his helm spoke to his true nature, the unweaving of his mortal flesh and its reshaping by the tides of the warp.

‘I name the unclean and abject creature of loathing,’ cried Madrona, hacking his sword through a pair of howling blood-cultists. ‘A death mark of the Silver Skulls is upon you.’

The monstrous sorcerer laughed, the sound tearing through Madrona like a grand mal seizure. 'I am Ash'hy Mok of the Black Legion,' he said, 'death is *mine* to lay upon others.'

Sachar lunged towards Ash'hy Mok, his pistol blazing and sword swinging for the sorcerer's neck. Ash'hy Mok spun his staff and a tracery of indigo light burned the armour from Sachar's body in the blink of an eye. Madrona had an instantaneous glimpse of the sergeant's skeletal structure before even that was boiled to vapour.

The blood cultists mobbed the Silver Skulls, emaciated ghouls with dead eyes, clawed fingers and yellowed teeth. Swords reaped them by the score, but their purpose was never to fight the Space Marines, merely to clog their blades and empty their guns of killing shells.

Madrona kicked through the mob and moulded the power that had marked him since birth into a lance of killing fire. He unleashed it through the blade of his sword and roared with savage joy as the argent flames engulfed the warrior the cards had marked for death.

The sorcerer vanished in a magnesium-bright conflagration, and Madrona heard his piercing scream. He swept his blade left and right, playing the blinding fire across the remaining warriors of the Black Legion.

They fell to their knees, wracked by Madrona's righteous fire. Its heat was vengeance, its light that of the Emperor himself. Even as it faded, and Madrona tasted the bitter ash of its use, he saw it hadn't been enough.

Ash'hy Mok remained unbowed and untouched.

He and a Black Legion champion were all that remained of the traitors, but their armour bore not so much as a blemish from Madrona's cleansing fires.

'You have power, little mystic,' said Ash'hy Mok. 'A lifetime of drawing from the warp has given you strength.'

Incorporeal winds billowed around the sorcerer as he rose to his feet, the dark energies playing about his staff and armour more vivid, more elemental, than before.

‘But I have woven the warp and weft of the Empyrean for a thousand lifetimes, and you wield nothing I cannot endure.’

Madrona reached deep within himself for more power, but he had little left of worth. But he had one thing that a damned soul like Ash’hy Mok did not.

He had *brotherhood*.

‘Warriors of Varsavia!’ yelled Madrona. ‘Lend me your strength, your blades and minds both!’

The Silver Skulls formed around their Prognosticator, and Madrona felt the purity of purpose wrought within their gene-forged bones. None were psychically gifted, but their very presence renewed him.

‘We place the death mark as one!’ yelled Madrona.

They charged.

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Ash’hy Mok cupped the psyker’s heart in his hands, watching the pattern formed by the blood droplets in the carven palms of his gauntlets.

‘What does it tell you?’ asked Kastagar, his voice bubbling and wet where the side of his helm had melted into a fused mass of bone and steel and flesh. The revealed skin was leathery and scaled, indigo blue and reptilian. The revealed eye was yellow and dotted with multiple pupils. A favoured son, then. Perhaps one not to so lightly dismiss in future.

‘It tells me that I now understood the source of the vexation keeping us bound to this world when all sense dictated we leave. I did not know it, but I was waiting for these warriors.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of what brought them here,’ said Ash’hy Mok, holding up a ripped leather pouch from which a number of scorched cards spilled.

‘Imperial Tarot?’

‘A version of it, yes,’ agreed Ash’hy Mok, nodding at the body beneath him. ‘A primitive variant similar to that once practiced by the Night Hunter. A brute means of reading the tides of the warp, but that it drew them to me is what is of most interest.’

Kastagar grunted, a bovine, animal sound.

‘You flatter yourself.’

‘Not so. This psyker knew me, claimed I was marked, but the death he saw was his own. He came to slay me personally. I would know what he saw that drew him to try and end me.’

Ash’hy Mok dropped the heart back in the ruptured, empty vault from which he had torn it. Blood splashed. The droplets landed amid the spatters at the sorcerer’s feet and he grinned as he saw the alignment of curves and lines, ovals and ellipses.

He drew in a breath, feeling the surge tides of the warp fill him. He recognised stars wheeling in their universal dance, a procession of galactic vistas passing before him in the blink of an eye.

And then he saw it, an arrangement of systems and planets, a conjunction of alignments that matched the blood pattern in the ash of murdered faithful.

A name came to him, one he had known from the age of the fallen Warmaster’s time. A world of little consequence as far as he knew, but that these warriors had come to kill him for what he might do there gave it fresh significance.

‘What are you seeing?’ Kastagar asked.

‘I see a world,’ said Ash’hy Mok. ‘A world ripe for reaving, a world rich in secrets. A world worthy of offering to the Warmaster.’

‘Where is this world?’

‘In the northern marches,’ said Ash’hy Mok. ‘A world named Arkhona.’