

The Hound of the Warp

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

Ash'Hy Mok had known pain before, had even embraced it on occasion, but the pain caused by the Phoenix Lord's blade was a new species of agony entirely. Sharper than any natural edge could possibly be, the eldar weapon's ancient power was anathema to those whose flesh seethed with the warp.

His right arm ended just below his ebon black shoulder guard, the jagged bronze trim now spattered red with impossibly vivid blood. Ash'Hy Mok hauled himself across the wetted floor towards the Lazarus Requiem, knowing he had but moments to complete its unlocking or his very soul was forfeit.

Centuries had passed since anyone had spilled his blood.

Even the Silver Skulls warlock, whose agonising death had drawn Ash'Hy Mok's gaze to this auspicious system, had not laid a blade upon him.

The Phoenix Lord's purity of hate was primally potent, something Ash'Hy Mok could almost admire. Even as the opening of the Lazarus Requiem had consumed the entirety of his focus, he'd felt the arrival of her manifold soul and gasped in wonder at such razor-like purpose. Such all-consuming fury!

Flanked by a howling coven of her bone-armoured handmaidens, she slid from a portal of amber light, a triskele blade of black fire cocked at one shoulder, a whip-bladed polearm held out like a lance.

Jain Zar she was called, a deathly warrior-queen from a long extinct epoch of her doomed race. Ceramic-smooth armour encased her lithe form, and violet hair billowed around an elegantly tapered war-mask; beautiful beneath a magnesium sky.

But the radiance overhead was no sky.

And this was no terrazzo floored temple.

The molten heart of the world's core burned all around a peeled sliver of the planet's surface, floating inviolate within a warp-sphere of Ash'Hy Mok creation.

Ash'Hy Mok had come to destroy Velioss, opening the Lazarus Requiem within its heart and offering every soul upon it to the Dark Prince. The polished, lacquered sides of the box were gloss-black and utterly smooth, with the seams of its myriad parts all but but invisible. With each segment of its fiendish complexity he unlocked, he drew closer to revealing the legendary hand of the withered eldar goddess.

And with it in his possession, he would master Fate.

The box hung in the centre of the peeled shard of the planet's surface, its impossible angles and multi-dimensional intricacy confounding even his genhanced senses with its violation of perspective and psychic geometry.

And just as he had come to destroy Velioss, the Phoenix Lord had come to save it. Her flashing triskele blade, its edges wreathed in black fire, sheared his arm from his body in a shrieking blaze of unlight, leaving him sprawled in agony.

His warriors and the daemons of the warp birthed from the Lazarus Requiem's opening rose to his defence. Warriors of bone white and ebon darkness clashed in a swirling melee of blindingly swift blades, psychosonic screeches and lustful howls. Just as beautiful as the eldar in their own way, the Slaaneshi daemons fought with claws instead of blades, teeth instead of pistols. Seeking to inflict wondrous agonies as much as kill.

The Dark Prince had claim on Velioss, but ever the eldar sought to thwart the designs of their ancient nemesis.

That could not be allowed to happen.

Power had been promised, pacts struck and bargains sealed in the currency of souls. *Velioss had to die.* The consequences of failure were too fearful to contemplate. Even death in this moment would not save him from the Dark Prince's spite.

The final configuration of the Lazarus Requiem spun in frenzied agitation, aching to be unlocked, demanding he finish what he started and open the gateway to the Empyrean.

Ash'Hy Mok pushed himself to his knees, his one remaining hand extended before him as he turned the last psychic key in the gateway's last, quivering alignment.

It remained closed, and Ash'Hy Mok felt a soul-deep dread swallow his soul as he heard the Dark Prince's wail of frustration and fury.

How had he failed?

Everything had been done as Moriana's scrolls had instructed. He had spoken the words that were not words, poured the rancid blood upon the Pictograms of Ruin and solved the alchemical wards woven into the Requiem's structure.

How had he failed?

Ash'Hy Mok lifted his wracked gaze and looked into the heart of the nightmarish lattice at the heart of the Lazarus Requiem, seeing a host of unblinking eyes at the centre of a beguiling vortex of unimaginable power.

In their depths he saw endless labyrinths of glassy geometries, crystalline pyramids of enormous scale, and a web of glittering strands of fate that bound all living things.

And then he knew why he had failed.

The Changer of the Ways, the unknowable sentience that lay at the heart of every conspiracy, had gifted much of Ash'Hy Mok's arcane knowledge and made him more powerful than all save Zaraphiston himself.

But the Architect of Fate was a jealous patron, and such a being did not suffer those who served him seeking power from its rivals for men's souls.

'No,' hissed Ash'Hy Mok. 'I am your faithful servant!'

Tearing agony ripped through Ash'Hy Mok as a slender, bone-pale spear haft burst from his chest. He looked at the blade in wonder, its structure harmoniously curved. It would be no disgrace to be slain by such a weapon.

He felt Jain Zar's presence at his shoulder, a weight of ages and suffering; laced with the charnel horror of millennia of the souls she had consumed to sustain her existence.

'You are a fool, sorcerer,' she hissed. 'Arkhona will burn the galaxy!'

And then the Lazarus Requiem opened.

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The Immaterium bloated into the heart of Velioss. The Dark Prince's daemons chorused their ecstasy as the warriors who served Ash'Hy Mok became phantoms of ash, burned from existence by an onrushing tsunami of warfire.

The eldar fared no better.

Not even their preternatural speed could save them, and even as Ash'Hy Mok was borne up by fate's consuming fire he laughed at their screams. They fled for the web-gate that had brought them to the world's heart, but the Dark Prince would not be so easily cheated of his soul-dues.

Spirit stones flared to cinders in the blaze and Slaanesh laughed as their their wretched souls were loosed. Their screams were unending, as would be their torments at the hands of the very power they had birthed.

Jain Zar was the last of the aliens to die, her body shrieking as her armour came apart in a clatter of glowing fragments. Swirling, multi-coloured light billowed from within as the host of souls within were silenced. Her weapons and armour flew into the eldar web-gate as shockwaves from the portal to the Immaterium tore ever wider. The molten core of the planet churned at the cancer in its heart, shuddering in primordial agony and splitting the world above asunder.

Even as the warp swallowed him, Ash'Hy Mok laughed as he felt Velioss die, its bones shattering into void-borne fragments of dead rock.

The Dark Prince would devour every screaming soul upon this world.

Including his.

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A sense of time stretching. Snapping. Reassembling, but out of joint. Events flowing in an acausal fashion. Reaction no longer following action, a fractured narrative of existence.

Ash'Hy Mok had no perception of when the world changed, just an awareness that it had.

His body must surely be dead, for Velioss was gone and this was the Immaterium. The warp was no place for flesh and bone, only spirit and soul.

And yet...

He felt pain. Indefinable until he followed it to its sources. A burning canyon torn through his chest and a void where his arm ought to be. Blood coiled in slow, slippery arcs from the wounds. Each gem-like droplet rippled with life, unnaturally fecund in this place of dark miracles, where every breath was laden with potential.

How long had passed since the doom of Velioss?

Ash'Hy Mok had no sense of time's passage, but what else could he have expected in a realm where such concepts were as meaningless as mortal conceits of right and wrong. To traverse the warp was so be cast adrift on time's ocean, a leaf in a hurricane, where a moment could stretch to infinity or a thousand lifetimes pass in the blink of an eye.

Yet there was purpose to his movements, an implacable will guiding him as fair winds might carry lost souls on the seas. He was being borne away from Velioss, and the distant howl of a thwarted god promised a debt that would never be forgotten.

Where this apparently fair wind might guide him he neither knew nor cared. That it was *away* from Velioss was what mattered.

Ash'Hy Mok kept his mortal eyes shut tight. Only screaming lunacy awaited those who stared too long into the warp, and he had madesses enough. The voices that muttered in the darkness of his shadow were enough to convince him of that.

Sometimes he allowed himself to think they were the souls of those his sorcery had consigned to the warp. At other times they seemed more akin to the tutelaries once conjured by the dead sorcerers of Prospero. They babbled and gossiped, they argued and advised, whispering secrets wrapped in nonsense, wisdom masked by insanity.

They yammered and gabbled to him now, whispering in a torrent of interleaved voices. Some accusing, some hateful, some pleading and others laughing maniacally. He could make no sense of it, until one voice cut through them all.

One voice that spoke his name.

Ash'Hy Mok knew that voice.

It had condemned worlds to die, had cursed the names of gods and led all the legions of the lost and the damned to glory and blood.

Silver lines, parallel and bright as mercury cut the darkness behind his eyes, the meat of the Immaterium sliced open by a talon that once belonged to an all-too mortal god.

These blades had taken the life of a demi-god brother and all but ended the False Emperor of Man. Redolent with such potent blood, they effortlessly reached through immeasurable distances of space and time.

The warp was quick to seize on this breach in the veil between worlds, but it churned in fury as it found itself denied passage. A will of unbending power stood in the breach, bound to a titan in the blackest armour and bearing the favour of all the powers that claimed dominion of the Immaterium.

The god in black spoke again, and his words were terrifyingly clear.

'I am not done with you, sorcerer,' said Abaddon.

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The Despoiler they called him. The Arch-Heretic. The Damned One. In ages past, men had once known him as Ezekiel, but such men were all dead and consigned to the forgotten ages, many by the Despoiler's own hand.

Ash'Hy Mok's flesh felt cold and hard, inflexible and horribly *solid*. After so long a time – *or was it the briefest instant?* – adrift in the warp, where change was the norm and constancy anathema, his body felt entirely too heavy and too real.

Here he was flesh and bone, wrought by long-forgotten science to be an apex killer, an angel of death. But in the warp he could be so much more...

'Sorcerer!' snapped a voice like a dagger's cold blade.

Ash'Hy Mok opened his eyes, wincing as harsh reality pressed in around him with its unbending angles and rigid hierarchy of form. He recognised his surroundings immediately.

The strategium of the *Vengeful Spirit*, the Despoiler's flagship.

His senses were assailed by physical stimuli; hot oils, decaying flesh, blood and – most potent of all – fear.

Fear saturated every breath taken here. Fear guided every action and haunted every heart. Fear was everything; and the being that was the focus of that fear now stood above Ash'Hy Mok, framed in the crimson light bathing the strategium.

A god amongst warriors, a tyrant and a liberator.

He was Abaddon the Despoiler, the son of Horus, the inheritor of the galaxy and lord of the Ruinous Host.

His aquiline face was cruelly angled, with a hooded brow and sardonic lips, his porcelain pale skin striated with black veins. Armoured in black and bronze, his ubiquitous topknot was unbound, framing his part-shaven skull in midnight black strands of hair.

But it was his eyes that drew Ash'Hy Mok's attention.

Eyes that had once beheld an age of legends, a time when gods had walked among their people. A time when the galaxy had burned as Mankind's worth hung in the balance and been found wanting. Abaddon had tasted bitter defeat, and the ashes of that fire still clung to his soul like widows' weeds.

Where lesser warriors had broken or turned their hate inwards in bitter reproach, Abaddon had returned even stronger. Tempered by defeat and made wise by hardship, he had learned the lessons taught by loss and wrought them into a singular purpose that would eventually overturn the galaxy.

'Get up,' said Abaddon.

Ash'Hy Mok struggled to obey, feeling a gut-deep nausea that was utterly new to him. His post-human physique was immune to such things, but wrenched from the warp into realspace was a sensation few survived.

He reached down to push himself upright before realising his arm was missing. The wound had long sealed, though he had no memory of any healing process.

Just how long had he drifted in the warp and what else might he not remember?

He looked down at his chest, where the Phoenix Lord's blade had cloven his heart and lungs. No wound remained, only a jagged seam across his breastplate. Whatever power had returned him to the Despoiler, had also undone the catastrophic damage to his body. He struggled upright, the last words he had heard on Velioss ringing in his ears.

'Arkhona will burn the galaxy...' he said.

'What does that mean?' demanded Abaddon.

'It was the last thing the Phoenix Lord said before she died. Before Velioss was destroyed.'

'A Phoenix Lord is dead?'

Ash'Hy Mok nodded. 'A warrior queen with a banshee wail.'

'Then your mission to the Kharon system was not a total failure,' grunted Abaddon. 'But eldar riddles are for another day.'

The Despoiler feigned indifference, but Ash'Hy Mok saw the Phoenix Lord's words had lodged deep Abaddon. His interest was piqued, and that realisation, together with the whispering voices, made Ash'Hy Mok bold.

'It was not a failure, my lord,' he said. 'The Imperials will no longer be able to resupply their fleets at will.'

Ash'Hy Mok lifted the stump of his arm and said, 'It may have cost more than I intended, but it was no failure.'

Abaddon spun and the talon he had torn from the corpse of his fallen father glittered in the blood red light. The killing blades punctured Ash'Hy Mok's breastplate and lifted him from the deck without effort.

Abaddon's eyes bored into him.

'Not a failure?' said the Despoiler. 'You were to *bring* me that world, sorcerer, not destroy it. With the resources you promised to seize, the Blackstones would already be in my possession. Or did you forget the oath you swore when I granted you leave to pursue your warp-visions to Velioss?'

The voices whispered in his ear, cautioning restraint.

'No, my lord, I did not forget,' said Ash'Hy Mok.

'Arkhona's time will come,' said Abaddon, turning away and gesturing to a hololithic sector map of worlds on fire, system-wide void engagements and an entire sector poised on the brink of defeat.

'The Gothic War awaits,' said Abaddon.