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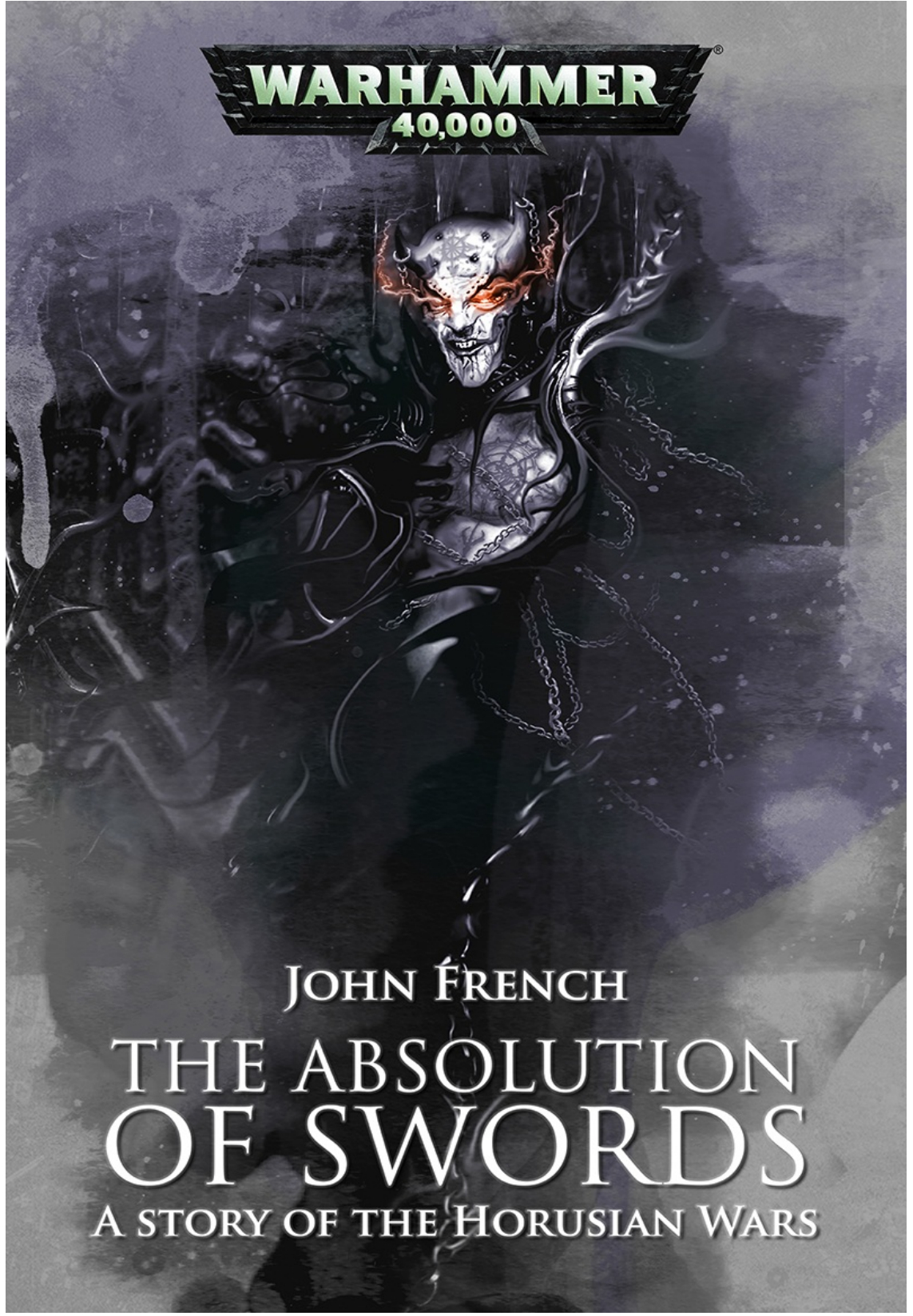
JOHN FRENCH

# THE ABSOLUTION OF SWORDS

A STORY OF THE HORUSIAN WARS



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# THE ABSOLUTION OF SWORDS

John French

*'Claims of innocence mean nothing: they serve only to prove a foolish lack of caution.'*

- Judge Traggat, *Selected Sayings*, Vol. III, Chapter IV.

## I

Snow had come to Crow Complex as night fell. The ice-laden wind spiralled through the stacked domes and spires, reaching its fingers down into the cloisters to ripple the flames of candles. A trio walked through the ragged light, crimson robes dragging over the stone floor. No one stopped them. They passed like shadows beneath the sun. Most of the members of the complex's orders had hidden from the cold as the sun had set. Those few hurrying through the processions saw the bronze hand of the Order of Castigation hanging around the trio's necks, and moved on. One did not draw the attention of the castigators unnecessarily.

The first of the trio was tall and slender, and the fall of the robes made it seem to glide over the floor rather than walk. Brass glinted inside its cowl. The second was heavier-set, and walked with head bowed and hands folded into its wide sleeves. A checked band of white and black silk ran around the hems of its sleeves, marking it as the abbot of its order. The last was hunched, fat, and moved with dragging steps. The fabric over its shoulders bulged, and it clinked as it walked. A length of chain trailed along the ground beneath the edge of its robe. To anyone considering if they should check the trio's progress, this last figure removed any doubts; a weighted penitent was a visible reminder of the

price of sin and the cost of absolution.

The wind tugged at the trio's hoods as they stepped onto the Bridge of Benevolence. A sheer drop fell away to blackness either side of the narrow span of stone. Snow was already settling on the slabs.

'Sweet tears of Terra,' gasped the hunched figure, as a gust cut across the bridge.

The figure in the abbot's robe turned its head slightly towards the hunched figure behind him.

'Your pardon,' said the hunched figure, and then muttered to himself. 'This wind is enough to flay the armour off a tank.'

The trio passed on across the bridge, and towards the looming mass of the High Chapel. Hundreds of metres tall, and over a kilometre across, its size rivalled the cathedrals of other worlds. Twin doors of iron stood closed at the end of the bridge. Plumes of flame rose from vast braziers set to each side of the archway. Copper feathers cascaded down the face of each door.

A pair of guards stepped from niches as the trio reached the end of the bridge. Each wore a brushed-steel breastplate over white robes woven with scarlet flames. Both carried lasguns, the barrels hung with saint coins and water vials. The Ecclesiarchy had held no men under arms since the Age of Apostasy, so these guardians were technically separate from the priests whose will and creed they followed. They were of the Iron Brotherhood, pilgrim warriors who had taken oaths to guard the chapel's sanctity. Of all the souls in the Crow Complex, they were some of the few who would question the right of an abbot to pass where he wished. They levelled their weapons at the trio.

'Entrance to the chapel is barred by order of the prefectus prior,' said one of the guards. 'I cannot open the way, even to your order.'

The trio stood unmoving and silent.

'By whose will do you come here at this hour?' snapped the other guard. 'You are not Abbot Crayling. Who are you?'

'I ask your forgiveness,' said the first of the trio, her voice sharp and clear. The nearest guard blinked, tattooed skulls briefly closing over his eyes. The other opened his mouth to speak.

The robed woman crossed the gap to the guards in a blur, red cloth spilling in her wake. The nearest guard pulled the trigger of his gun. A fist hit the back of his hand. Bones shattered. He gasped air to shout, as an elbow whipped into his temple. He fell, lasgun slipping from his grasp to the snow covered ground. The second guard was slower, his fingers still scrabbling at the safety catch of his

gun as the woman grabbed his collapsing comrade and threw the unconscious body at him. The wind caught the hood of their attacker and the velvet cowl fell back from a slim face beneath a shaven scalp. The second guard toppled, and tried to rise. A boot lashed across his jaw. He slumped to the ground. The lasguns went tumbling down into the abyss beneath the bridge a second later.

‘Someone will notice,’ said the hunched man. Neither he nor the figure dressed as the abbot had moved. The woman glanced up at him. The x-shaped henna stain running across her face made her eyes seem like polished jade set in copper.

‘I will add it to my penance,’ she said, ‘but we do not have the luxury of time.’

The fat figure grunted, chains clinking as he shifted his weight. The hunch on his shoulders moved. A slit in the side of his robes opened and a fabric-wrapped bundle slid to the ground.

‘If we are abandoning subtlety I won’t need these,’ he said, pulling chains from under his robe and letting them rattle to the ground. He knelt and unbuckled the straps around the bundle. The fabric peeled back; oiled metal gleamed within its folds. A pair of bolt pistols etched with gold feathers lay beside a long-hafted warhammer, and a sheathed great longsword. Beneath them were ammo clips and a narrow-bladed power sword. He tossed the bolt pistols to the girl with the painted face. She caught them, checked their action and holstered them beneath her robes. He passed the rest out, and for a second the clink of weapons and harnesses chimed against the wind.

The man in the abbot’s robe settled the sword behind his shoulders, stepped up to the doors, and pushed a section of the frosted metal. A small door hinged inwards.

‘Follow,’ he said, and stepped through.

## II

‘You sleep at the other end,’ growled the Pilgrim.

Cleander Von Castellan sighed. He was starting to wish that they had picked a different infiltration location than this forgotten hole.

The cavern he now squatted in had not been made for the purpose it now served. Cleander guessed that it had been a water cistern, feeding the thirst of the first monasteries built when Dominicus Prime had been a barely populated backwater. Now it was a store for the tides of humanity that came to the shrine world. Like everything in the sprawl built by the faithful, it had an acquired name that rang hollow to Cleander’s ear. The Garden of Eternity, they called it.

Pillars marched into the dark holding up a ceiling of cracked plaster. Crude paintings of trees and vines wound up their sides. Sheets of cloth hung from wires strung between the pillars dividing the cavern into a maze of spaces. The light of small fires and oil lamps cast shadows against the fabric screens. Salt deposits glittered where the rough floor met the bases of columns. Glum, unwashed faces had risen and looked down again at Cleander and Koleg as they had passed. There had been no offers of help or friendly greeting to fellow pilgrims. This was the kind of place that bred despair rather than good cheer.

They had eventually found a place in the maze of screens. That alone had been difficult. Every space had a claim on it, and they had to exchange cylinders of fresh water to find somewhere. The commerce that clung to almost every inch of life down here in the Warrens almost made Cleander want to laugh. They had to pay an offering of candle tokens at three shrines for directions to the Garden of Eternity. When they had found the entrance, it had turned out to be a rusted iron door set in a crumbling arch beneath a sculpture of the Emperor as provider. Even then a hooded crone sitting just inside the door had held out her hand for a donation. Cleander had noticed the blunderbuss welded to the metal struts of the crone's other hand, and handed over another token. That the thug of a pilgrim who loomed over them had some claim on the bit of ground he sat on did not surprise Cleander. It was, though, getting on his nerves.

He looked up into the pilgrim's face. The man's head was a ball of scar tissue arranged around a snarl of broken teeth. Tattered fur covered his shoulders, adding to the bulk of the muscles beneath. Layers of stained cloth covered the rest of his body. Red veins spidered the yellow of his eyes.

Cleander tried a smile.

'I am sorry, brother traveller,' he said. 'Is something amiss?'

The big pilgrim raised a hand and jabbed a thick finger towards the other end of the sleeping hall.

'You sleep down there,' growled the pilgrim.

Cleander glanced at Koleg, but his companion's eyes were focused on a point in the distance, his face as blank as ever.

'We have already paid to be here,' said Cleander, and fixed his smile in place. He could almost see heavy cogs turning in the big pilgrim's skull.

'You go—' began the thug.

'No,' said Cleander. 'Like I said, we have paid.' He held the smile in place, his good eye barely flicking as he sized up the thug. Lots of muscle, arms tattooed with tiny, black dots, one for every day spent on pilgrimage to the Crow

Complex, a gang brand from Iago running around the left forearm.

The thug's patience seemed to run out. He stepped back, tensing to lash a kick into Cleander's face. The man's collar shifted down his neck. A circle of faded ink coiled at the base.

'The Tenth Path,' said Cleander quickly. The thug froze. Cleander reached up to his own throat, careful to keep the movement slow, and pulled his collar down. The tattoo was false, but looked real enough: a ragged halo of ink curled around a bare circle of skin. He flicked his eyes at Koleg. The soldier returned the look without expression and bared his neck to show the same mark. Cleander looked back at the thug. 'We are seekers of the Tenth Path.'

The thug looked between them. The other pilgrims sitting nearby had already shrunk back, and made it very clear that they had other things to concern them.

'You,' said the thug at last. 'Follow.' He turned and began to walk towards the far end of the cavern. Cleander stood, lifting the roll of rags holding his possessions and hanging its rope cord across his shoulders. Koleg followed, pulling his coat close about him. The specialist's face was impassive as always, flint-grey eyes moving over the fabric partitions and huddled pilgrims as they passed. Koleg moved with unhurried care, precise and controlled. The dark skin of his scalp glinted in the firelight, the old surgical scars pale lines around the base of his skull. Unless you had spent years in the specialist's company, there was little for the eye to catch in his appearance. Most people tended not to notice Koleg, as though he blended with the banality of life. He was also one of the most dangerous people Cleander had ever known.

They trailed the thug, passing down a corridor between fabric screens. People pulled back from their path, and Cleander could see fear in their eyes in the instant before they glanced away. It was not him that they feared, he was sure. At times he had cowed pirate lords and alien princes, but here and now he was just a man with one eye, a ragged beard and greying hair. Clothed in patched and reeking rags, he looked and smelled just like all of the rest of lost humanity.

'Where are we going?' he asked the thug.

The brute kept walking. 'To see the confessor.'

Cleander felt his gut tighten, but kept his face impassive. A confessor could be trouble. The firebrand priests of the Ecclesiarchy were often dangerous and likely to deal with those they saw as heretics without mercy or waiting for reasons. It had taken him and Koleg three weeks to get this far. They were walking the Tenth Path, down into the dark. Now it might end not in revelation, but in fire.

‘Here,’ said the thug, stopping and pulling aside a panel of weighted fabric. They stepped through. The base of one of the pillars rose from the centre of the space beyond. Worn fabric hung over the rough stone, threadbare carpets covered the floor, and bowls of burning oil stood on poles. There was no sign of anyone else. The thug let the hanging drop, and turned to them.

‘What is the truth of the first path?’ he said.

‘That there can be truth,’ said Cleander without a pause.

The thug looked at him, nodded slowly, and then looked at Koleg.

‘What is the truth of the second path?’

‘That the universe is truth,’ said Koleg.

The thug stared at him.

Cleander held himself still. It had taken a lot of work and more than a little blood to learn the replies they had just given. Those words should be enough to take them one more step, but if the thug asked another question they were in trouble. He felt his fingers twitch, feeling the absence of his digi-rings.

The thug nodded, and moved the hangings covering the base of the pillar. A corroded metal door sat beneath. A heavy lock had been welded to the door and frame. A ragged circle had been burned onto the metal. The thug pulled a key on a leather thong from under his tunic, and slotted it into the lock.

Cleander took a step forwards.

The thug paused, hand still on the unturned key. ‘How found you the path, brethren?’ he said.

A chill ran over Cleander’s skin. He licked his lips, mind racing through all of the intelligence Viola had compiled for them on the Tenth Path. This was not a question that they had encountered. The question might have been one of the cult’s ritual challenges, or it might be simple curiosity. Either way there were more wrong answers than right.

‘By many steps, brother,’ said Cleander carefully. There was an extended moment in which he held the thug’s stare. The man’s gaze twitched.

Cleander yanked the bedroll off his shoulder. The thug’s fist lashed out. Cleander ducked, hand scrabbling at the roll of rags in his hands. The thug reached under the layers of his tunic and pulled a length of chain from his waist. Barbs glittered on the edges of the sharpened links. The thug swung. Cleander ducked again, hand reaching inside the bedroll. The weapon hit the floor, and snapped back into the air. Koleg was moving behind the thug. The chain whipped out. Cleander jerked aside. A barb caught his right shoulder and bit deep. The thug yanked, and Cleander lurched forwards, pain rushing through

him. Blood spread across his tunic from his shoulder.

Cleander could see Koleg stepping up behind the thug, right hand wreathed with blue lightning. The thug's lips pulled back in a grinning snarl. Rows of hooked metal teeth glinted in his mouth. He yanked the chain again. Cleander went with the force of the pull and slammed his knuckles into the thug's throat. The man staggered, choking. The barb ripped from Cleander's shoulder. Fresh pain burst through him, but his hand had found the grip of the needler hidden inside his bedroll. He pulled the pistol free as the links arced down again.

Blue arcs enveloped the thug's head. His body jerked, muscles spasming, jaws clamping down on his tongue. Blood poured down his chin. Cleander saw Koleg's fingers closed around the base of the man's neck. The polished armatures of the shock-gloves shone as they discharged power.

'You shoot now,' said Koleg.

Cleander brought the pistol up and squeezed the trigger. The gun's hiss was lost under the crackle of electrical discharge. The toxin sliver hit the thug in the right eye and he dropped, muscles still twitching as he hit the floor.

Cleander stepped back, breathing hard. Shadows were moving behind the fabric hangings. Shouts echoed off the cavern ceiling. Koleg dropped to one knee and pulled grenades and weapons from under his coat, laying them on the floor in neat rows.

'That was not optimal,' said the soldier.

'At least we know we found the right place,' replied Cleander.

Cleander ripped open the rest of his bedroll. Objects tumbled out as blood scattered from his wounded arm. He grabbed a falling injector with his good hand and smacked it into his shoulder next to the wound. The cocktail of numb, spur and blood coagulant poured into him an instant after the needle punched through his skin. He let out a sharp breath. Koleg looked up at him, and tossed him a compact filter mask. Cleander caught it and shook the straps free. Koleg already had his mask on, his eyes hidden behind a slot visor set in a white ceramic faceplate. A short chrome cylinder projected from each side of the mask's chin.

'How long until they find us?' asked Cleander.

A shadow loomed next to one of the hangings. A chain blade roared to life, and sliced down through the fabric. Cleander brought the pistol up and put two needles into the shadow. The figure dropped, ripping the hole wide as it fell, chain blade growling in its death grip. Another shape was moving behind it. Cleander could see the shadow of a handgun. He shot again, heard a noise from

behind him and spun, putting another shot into a silhouette.

‘Secure your mask,’ called Koleg, his voice flat and metallic as it came from his own mask’s speakers. He held a pistol with a short, tubular barrel. The broken breech of the weapon was wide enough to swallow a shot glass.

Cleander pulled the mask over his head, the rubber seals pressed into his face. The world beyond the photo-visor became a twilight blue. More shadows were moving beyond the screens. He heard the clunk of a gun arming.

‘Secure,’ he shouted, hearing his own voice echo flat from his speaker.

Koleg nodded, dropped a grenade shell into the pistol launcher, and closed the breech with a flick of his wrist.

Gunfire ripped through the fabric screens. Cleander dropped to the floor as the bullets sawed through the air above him. The torn hangings swayed and his eye caught the flash of muzzle flare. He sent three needles into the space behind the flash, and the gunfire stopped. Koleg, unmoved, aimed the pistol launcher up and pulled the trigger. The grenade thumped into the air, hit the ceiling above and burst in a grey cloud of gas. The spent casing spun to the ground as Koleg cracked the launcher, and dropped another grenade into the breech. He fired again, the shot arcing high over the fabric hangings, then again and again, in a quick, remorseless rhythm.

Grey and cyan fog rolled through the cavern, sinking from the roof, spreading between the cloth hangings. For an instant there was a muffled lull in noise. Then the screaming boiled up, rending the air as terror ripped from a hundred throats. Weeping and shouting blended with the cacophony, as the hallucinogen and terror gas flooded the cavern. Inside his mask, Cleander gulped the sanitised air. It tasted slightly metallic.

Koleg bent down and began to gather up the rest of his equipment, then shrugged into a twin shoulder harness. A macrostubber sat in the left holster, and the pistol grenade launcher went into the empty right holster, the grenades into loops and pouches across his chest. Cleander scooped up his own collection of trinkets. Two heavy rings went onto each hand, a power dagger in a sheath onto his left forearm, and a patch over his left eye socket.

Koleg moved over to the door in the pillar base. The thug’s key was still in the lock. Around them the sounds of panic rolled with the spreading fog. Cleander clicked a switch on the side of his mask, and his view through the visor snapped into cold black broken by splashes of red and yellow body heat.

‘We proceed?’ asked Koleg, drawing his macrostubber pistol from its holster. Cleander moved up next to him, and gripped the key. The lock turned smoothly.

Cleander felt the door shudder as bolts thumped back into the frame. He pulled it wide. A flight of stairs spiralled down into the dark. Traces of green warmth moved in the blue-stained cold of Cleander's sight.

'We proceed,' he said and stepped through.

### III

Prior Prefectus Gul paused as he crossed the threshold of the western sub-chapel. Candles burned on the altar dominating the far end of the long chamber, filling the nave with the warm glow of flames, but leaving the rest to shadows. The candle in Gul's right hand lit a circle of floor around him, but then slid off into the quiet gloom. Lumn had stopped three paces behind Gul, and waited, head bowed, arms folded in his wide sleeves. His face was wide, the flesh soft beneath his tonsured hair. In the low light the grey of Lumn's robes seemed like folded shadow.

'Wait for me in the south transept,' said Gul. Lumn bowed his head even lower, then turned and moved away into the darkness of the chapel's main vault. Gul watched him go for a second. Lumn was his Silent Acolyte, an order whose entire existence revolved around serving the spiritual leaders of the Crow Complex. Conditioned to obedience and secrecy, the Silent Acolytes completed their novitiate training by having their tongues cut from their mouths. They were supposed to be utterly trustworthy, and Gul had never had reason to doubt Lumn's devotion. But trust was a coin made of false gold.

Gul stepped into the sub-chapel, and let the quiet of night gather around him. Like the rest of the High Chapel, it was almost deserted. During the day, Dominicus' sun would rise through the sky, and its light would fall through the chapel's windows and crystal dome, illuminating the faithful. Once the sun began to fall, the prayers faded and those who had been granted a place at twilight prayer left the chapel to sleep in silence. Only the members of the order of the Eternal Light moved amongst the pews and pillars, tending the candles that burned in the one hundred and eight shrines. As the second most senior brother in all the orders of the Crow Complex, Gul was one of the only other souls who saw the High Chapel in the dark.

He liked the night. It was a sea of calm in the constant whirl that was the governance of the monastery complex. That you could only hear yourself think when this supposed place of peace was empty, was an irony that struck him every time he stepped into the High Chapel. Not that he ever thought of it as a place of true peace, nor of the blessings that were given within its walls as

anything but empty lies. The Imperial Creed was a doctrine of blood and greed, and bloated power feeding on the fear of the faithful. The Emperor did not protect, and never had. He was a man who did extraordinary things, who had earned the Imperium he had created, but a man none the less. For all his power, one might as well take a hook and line to the sea and fish for truth as pray to the Emperor for deliverance, enlightenment or mercy.

Gul had not always known that the Emperor was not divine. Once he had been like all the other credulous fools. Now he held the truth locked inside his skull, hidden by competence and masked by piety. He could smile at a grossly fat prelate exhorting starving pilgrims to beware the lure of gluttony. He could watch the preachers dole out blessings while the devotional servitors followed them to collect coin from the grateful. He could do these things because he knew the truth. That core of secrets locked inside him gave him a strength that the Imperial Creed never had. He was a heretic, and he was blessed to be so.

He stepped towards the sub-chapel's altar, glancing at the candle that marked the time. His rendezvous with his contact in the Tenth Path was not until the next division, but he liked to arrive first. It gave him comfort, a veneer of control over what was happening. Besides, it gave him time to think. His footsteps echoed softly under the gaze of the stone saints lining the walls. It had been sixty days since his last meeting, and he had not expected to be summoned again so soon. Had something changed? What would be asked of him? Was there something wrong?

He was a pace from the altar when the candle flames rippled. A breath of cold air touched the back of his neck. He whirled around, eyes going to the arch he had entered through.

There was nothing there, just the distant light of torches falling in the main transept. Cold air gusted past him again, and the candles on the altar guttered. Somewhere a door banged shut. The air was still again, the dark in the sub-chapel almost total now. Footsteps echoed behind him, and Gul turned.

'Who is there?' he called, and the stone echoed back his voice in fading whispers.

'...is there?'

'Who...'

'... there... there... there...?'

The afterglow of the extinguished candle flames clung to his retinas as he turned and stared at the dark.

'Prior Prefectus Aristas Gul,' said a voice from behind him. He whirled back,

eyes wide, mouth dry.

Fire sparked in front of him. Gul flinched, but the flame held steady, a single tongue of orange in the black. The image of a hand holding a burning taper formed next to the light, and then the flaring light caught the outline of a hooded figure. Black and white checks ran around the sleeves of the red robes.

‘You should not be here,’ snapped Gul, his voice ringing high. He could feel cold snaking down his skin. ‘I demand—’

‘A scholar once told me that humans lit candles in prayer before they even knew they were not alone in the cosmos,’ said the robed figure. The hand holding the taper reached out, and put the flame to the wick of a candle. The fire caught. ‘Before they knew that their gods were lies, they still drew hope from that one small act.’

Gul felt his mouth open to call out, but the words caught before they could reach his tongue. The robed figure turned. The bronze hand hanging on the robed man’s chest glinted. Gul’s frozen mind finally registered the colours and details of the figure’s robes. He could see the hilt of a sword and the butt of a gun projecting up behind the man’s hood.

‘You are not Abbot Crayling,’ he said, anger overcoming fear. ‘You are not of the Order of Castigation. Who are you?’

A swish of fabric jerked Gul’s eyes to the arched doorway at the other end of the chapel. A slender figure in red robes stood outlined against the glow from beyond. Her hood was down, and he could see the ruddy ‘X’ crossing her face beneath a shaved scalp. A heavy step rang behind him and a hunched figure appeared from the dark, muscles and fat rippling under crimson fabric as the man hefted a double-handed hammer.

His skin felt tight, his blood a racing beat of ice in his flesh. Fears and possibilities formed and spun in his mind: discovery, betrayal, escape. He should run. He should make for the small door behind the altar and flee. He should call out. Lumn might still be close enough to hear him. But he did not move or speak. Instead his mouth repeated the last words they had spoken.

‘Who are you?’ he breathed.

The tall man with the sword across his back reached up and lowered his hood. The face beneath was young and strong, long black hair pulled back in a topknot above hard, dark eyes.

‘I am Covenant,’ said the man, ‘and I am here to offer you a chance of absolution.’

## IV

Cold darkness swallowed Cleander as he descended the spiral stairs. The world was painted in blue in his infra-visor. Only he and Koleg stood out, their shapes yellow and red with warmth. They had closed the door into the sleeping cavern, and had been descending for long enough that they had left all light far behind. After a while he had switched to dark vision, but there were no scraps of light for it to gather, just a grey blur at the edge of sight. He had switched back to the blindness of infra-vision, and moved by touch, left hand running over the rough stone of the wall.

‘These catacombs run deep,’ he muttered after a while.

‘A fact that we knew at mission briefing,’ said Koleg.

Cleander shivered, suddenly wishing that he had something more substantial than pilgrim rags to keep him warm. ‘It should not be this cold – there are no air currents, no running water. So why is it getting colder?’ he said. Koleg hesitated behind him. He turned, and looked at the soldier. Koleg’s shape was a bright rainbow of body heat.

‘The temperature is stable,’ said Koleg. ‘It isn’t getting colder.’

Cleander felt himself become very still. Ice ran over his skin. In his eyes the colours of the infra-sight swam, switching and blurring. His teeth rattled against each other in his mouth. He turned back to the darkness beneath the next step. He reached out for the wall. His fingers slid into empty air. He flinched, but kept his hand extended. The cold bit into his bare skin. He moved his hand to the side, breathing slowly. His fingers touched stone. It felt warm, as though it had been warmed by the sun.

‘There is a door on my right,’ he said, carefully. ‘Follow the direction of my right arm.’

Koleg moved close, hand macrostubber levelled, one hand on Cleander’s shoulder.

‘Ready,’ said Koleg.

Cleander’s right hand flexed on the grip of his needler.

‘Moving,’ he said, and stepped into the waiting emptiness beyond the door.

A deeper chill washed over him, as though he had stepped through a cascade of water. The view in his infra-visor flashed, bubbles of yellow and red heat popping against blue. He snapped the visor to normal vision. For a moment the black remained pressed against his eyes. Then light began to sketch a reality around him. A blue-green glow spread up columns framing eight openings set to

either side of a long chamber. The columns supporting the arches were carved from a stone that glistened like glass. A long pool of liquid ran down the centre of the floor, its surface a black mirror. Cleander stepped forwards, and Koleg moved past him, pistol levelled, tracking between each of the archways.

‘This is it,’ said Cleander. ‘This is where they were bringing us.’

‘This is the target?’

Cleander did not respond. His eyes flicked over the chamber. For a second he thought had seen something sinuous move under the stone surface of the wall, as though it were a sheet of glass opening on an ocean.

‘Who was it that the big lug said he was bringing us to see?’ said Cleander, softly. He was suddenly wishing that he had argued for a different approach in tackling the Tenth Path, an approach that included a platoon of his household mercenaries. Or a Space Marine strike team.

‘The confessor...’ said Koleg.

Cleander turned to answer, and stopped. A tall, hunched statue stood under a white shroud at the far end of the chamber. The fabric stirred as though in a breeze. The scent of crushed flowers and spoiled meat brushed Cleander’s senses. Rage bubbled up inside him, staining his thoughts red. Whispers chirped at the edges of his mind, promising things he never knew he wanted. He shut out the thoughts and sensations.

He knew what this was; the warp was close, shivering just beyond the skin of reality, feeling for a crack through which to pour. To others, even that touch would be enough to force them to their knees, eyes wide but seeing nothing. Cleander had touched the warp and seen its true face many times, and though he knew better than to think himself immune to its promises, he also knew himself well enough to see those promises as empty. He was not a good man, he was very far from a good man. He knew the power of wealth and lies, and enjoyed using both. He cared for few, and saw most people as expendable and worthless at best. He had no ideals, and his few beliefs all had a price. These were facts that he had never denied, but they were not weakness; they were armour against false desire.

Koleg swayed where he stood, and then moved forwards, gun raised. Cleander stepped to follow, and then paused. He glanced up, and then back to the pool of water running down the centre of the room. The ceiling above was vaulted stone. Perhaps it had been the crypt of one of the first temples raised on Dominicus Prime, now buried deep beneath the mountain of stone that was the Crow Complex. Handprints covered the ceiling, hundreds of handprints in dried, dark

liquid. Cleander paused.

‘Koleg,’ he said, carefully.

‘Yes?’

‘The pool,’ said Cleander. Koleg snapped a glance at it, and then back to the space beyond his gun.

‘I see it,’ said Koleg.

Cleander stepped forwards, kneeling slowly. He stared at the black gloss surface. The water beneath was black, and Cleander could not tell if that was because he could not see through it, or if it was perfectly clear and he was looking down into an abyss.

‘It reflects nothing,’ he said, and reached out to touch it.

‘What are you doing?’ called Koleg.

‘The confessor,’ he said. ‘That is what is supposed to be down here. The first steps of damnation are always wrapped in the costume of piety – isn’t that what Josef keeps on saying? So when all those lost souls come down here, they come to confess. And why do the pious confess?’ His fingers were just above the surface. ‘To be washed clean.’

He touched the water.

Circles spread across the pool, struck the sides and rebounded. Water lapped over the edges.

‘Is this wise?’ said Koleg as he moved next to Cleander.

‘No,’ said Cleander, and the word was a puff of white in the suddenly freezing air. ‘But if I was wise I would not be here in the first place.’

More water was splashing out of the pool as its surface began to chop and heave. A low moan ran around the chamber, and Cleander looked up for a second. When he looked back, it was into a face floating beneath the surface of the water. He leapt to his feet. Koleg spun.

The face was pale, the flesh fat under blue-veined skin. Silver hair swirled around it, billowing in the water. Its mouth was open, tongue pink between white teeth. The eyes were closed as though in sleep, or peaceful death. Cleander tried to move, to bring his needler up, but he was frozen in place, eyes locked on the image forming beneath the waves. A torso appeared beneath the face, then arms and legs. Lines of stitched scars criss-crossed flesh. Silver tubes ran into the tips of its fingers and ran off into the depths. Cleander’s heart was a paused beat in his chest. The face in the water opened its eyes. He had an impression of colour swirling around ragged pupils. Ice was spreading across the floor from the pool edge.

+Help,+ said a voice that echoed in Cleander's skull. +Help me.+

He felt his limbs moving, felt himself bend down to the water, reaching beneath to pull the figure out into the air.

+Free me.+

'Von Castellan!' shouted Koleg, close but so far away. 'Stand back, now!'

+Please,+ whispered the voice in his head.

A hand gripped Cleander's arm and yanked him back. He swore, surged up, confusion and anger roaring through him. Koleg shoved him away, and Cleander's eyes cleared.

Figures stepped from the black spaces of the archways. Tatters of soaking cloth hung from them. Jagged circle tattoos slid over the exposed skin of their arms and necks. Darkness shone from the marks, shredding light, fuming night. Grey ash powdered their faces. Their eyes were closed, and frost breathed from their lips. Serrated knives and barbed chains hung from their hands.

Koleg fired. A tongue of flame ripped from the macrostubber. The shroud covering the shape at the end of the chamber billowed, and the lost pilgrims, who had found their way along the Tenth Path to a revelation that they could no longer escape, leapt forwards in a blur of sharp edges.

## V

'What are you talking about?' said Gul, his eyes wide as he stared at Covenant. He could feel calm draining from him. 'This is a gross violation of—'

'The Tenth Path,' said Covenant softly.

Gul breathed out, mind racing through what was happening.

Covenant turned back to the altar, reached out, and lit a second candle from the first.

'Three years ago someone came to you and asked you to help him keep a secret,' said Covenant. 'He said to you that he saw a connection between you both, a shared vision of the truth. You were scared. You wondered how someone could know thoughts you had never spoken to another soul.'

Gul felt his hands start to tremble.

'Are you...' he said. 'Are you with him?'

'He said that you were right, that the faith you had turned from was false, that there was nothing divine in the universe beside what we made, that to believe otherwise was to create your own prison. He said that everything you had been told was a lie.' Covenant's eyes stayed fixed on the twin candle flames. 'And then he asked you to serve, to help others who saw the truth, to protect them, and

give them aid and shelter. And that is what you have done, prior. You have found ways of hiding people, of diverting funds, and deflecting attention from a cult that you have never seen.'

Shock shuddered through Gul. His head was spinning. Anger flared up, hot and bright.

'You don't know what you are talking about,' he snarled. 'You really have no idea what you are—'

'The Inquisition,' said Covenant. 'The man who came to you said that he was of the Inquisition.' He raised his hand, and opened his fingers. Luminous lines spread across the palm as an electoo lit.

Gul stared at the glowing image of a stylised 'I' broken by three bars across its middle. It was a sigil he had only seen once before, and then, as now, its implication stole every thought from his skull.

'And the Inquisition is something that I know very well,' said Covenant.

'But he *was* of the Inquisition,' Gul heard himself say.

Covenant gave a single slow nod.

'Yes.'

'Why did he... need me?'

'Because he needed someone to protect the seed he planted here until he could harvest its flower.'

'I don't understand,' said Gul. 'He was an inquisitor, and he said that I served humanity. Yet if you are an inquisitor how can you condemn me for doing his work?'

'Because everything you have believed is a lie. The Tenth Path are not lost souls that share your misguided heresy. They are a coven devoted to darkness and ruin. What you have sheltered and protected is a cradle of monsters.'

'I don't believe you...'

'Yes, you do,' said Covenant.

Gul felt the shaking start at his feet, and roll up through muscle and skin. Something in him wanted to shout that he was innocent, that it was just another layer of lies. But something in Covenant's voice cut through that tissue of comfort. He felt his knees begin to fold.

A strong hand caught his shoulder and steadied him. Gul glanced behind him and saw a scarred face in the shadow of a hood, and realised that the fat man with the hammer had stepped behind him without a noise.

'Steady,' growled the man softly. 'Remember what you were, prior. Face this with courage.'

Gul blinked, confused, but felt his back straighten and some strength return to his limbs. Covenant remained still, gaze fixed, face expressionless. Gul felt moisture on his cheek, and raised his hand to touch his face.

*I am crying*, he realised. ‘What...’ he stammered. ‘What can I do?’

‘Before dawn comes the Tenth Path will be no more. There is nothing more you can do to aid or condemn them. But the one who began this, the one who deceived you, he lives, and above all else he fears what you can give me.’

‘I will tell you everything,’ said Gul.

A breath of cold air stirred his robes, and prickled his skin. ‘I...’ he began to say, but Covenant’s head had jerked up, eyes moving across the shadows beyond the altar.

‘How many ways in are there?’ growled the fat man behind Gul.

‘What?’ stammered Gul. ‘The main arch, the priest’s door, and—’ the words caught in his throat as he realised what the draught of air meant. ‘And... and the way through the undercroft.’

‘Severita,’ called Covenant.

‘I feel it, lord,’ came a woman’s voice from close by the arch into the main chapel. ‘Something is here.’

‘What is happening?’ hissed Gul.

‘A watcher,’ said Covenant. ‘The man who you served would have sent a servant to watch over you, to make sure you did not stray.’ The breath of cold air was stronger now. The candle flames rippled.

‘Where is the entrance to the undercroft?’ said Covenant.

‘Here,’ said Gul, taking a step forwards without thinking. A warm glow had filled him suddenly. ‘It’s just behind this part of the altar. There is a trick to it,’ he said, and felt a smile form on his face as he spoke. ‘A trick lock that releases a panel. I have often wondered why anyone would conceal such a thing. As an amusement, perhaps.’ He laughed. His mind was clear. There was nothing to fear. Everything was simple. He just needed to show them where the hidden door was. He heard the one called Covenant shout something, but the words were distant, soft, meaningless. All that mattered was the next step he needed to take.

A thin figure stood before him in the shadows. Pale robes hung from it, a hood hiding its bowed head. Recognition sparked in the fog of Gul’s thoughts.

‘Lumn?’ he said, and felt the warm dullness of his thoughts shift as he frowned at his Silent Acolyte. ‘What are you doing here, boy? I said to wait in the south transept.’

Lumn did not answer, but raised his head. The face beneath the hood was

Lumn's but its eyes were holes, and for an instant Gul could not see the chapel, just the dark and stars swirling against the blood- and violet-stained sheet of night.

Then something lifted him from his feet and spun him over, as gunfire tore through the air.

## VI

Cleander brought the needler up and squeezed the trigger twice. Toxin splinters hissed into the nearest pilgrim's throat. The man crumpled, the chain in his fist whipping out with the last of his momentum. Cleander ducked. The chain whistled over his head. Another pilgrim was on him before he could stand. A knife sliced across his forearm. He flinched back, and shot the pilgrim in the face.

'Koleg!' he shouted.

More figures were coming from the arches on either side of the chamber. Two ran at Cleander. Neither had hands. Hooked blades projected from the stumps of their wrists. The first swung at him. He ducked under the blow, came up and levelled his closed fist. The digi-weapons in his rings fired. A stream of plasma hit the hook-armed figure, and blasted him into a cloud of ash and screaming heat. Another man came at him, hook arm arcing down towards his head. Cleander stamped his foot out, felt bone break under his heel, and the pilgrim was falling backwards. He rammed the muzzle of his needler into the man's face and squeezed the trigger three times.

Cleander raised his head, breathing hard. A mass of figures was pouring from the arches, eyes closed, weapons reaching.

'Koleg!'

'Down!' shouted Koleg.

Cleander dropped.

Koleg's macrostubber purred thunder. The first rank of pilgrims fell, torsos almost cut in two by the deluge of rounds. Koleg panned the pistol left, scything into the crowd of bodies. Blood puffed into the air, scattering across the black surface of the mirror pool. The macrostubber clicked dry.

More pilgrims were scrabbling over the bodies of the dead, teeth bared, eyes twitching beneath closed eyelids. Cleander stood as Koleg levelled his pistol launcher and fired. Fire burst across the far side of the chamber. The visor in Cleander's mask blinked to near black. Gasping cries rolled with the roar of the inferno. Limbs thrashed in the blaze. As his visor switched to mundane sight, he

could see mouths moving in snarling faces as the flesh cooked from skulls.

Cleander moved forwards, needle pistol in both hands. Koleg was snapping a drum into his macrostubber. The surface of the pool was a mirror of flames. The fire coiled in the air, tongues spiralling together, roaring with the screams of the dying. The grey shroud covering the statue at the end of the chamber caught light, and dissolved in a curtain of ashes. The thing – that was not a statue – stood tall and shook itself free of cinders.

It had started as a human, or perhaps many humans. It looked like a man, but a man so tall that its shoulders touched the ceiling. Its skin was the white of marble. Rows of red eyes ran down its cheeks. Muscles bunched as it moved, and blood seeped from the iron bolts hammered into flesh. Chains circled its limbs and the links rang as it stepped forwards. Cleander knew what it was, though he wished with all his heart that he did not. It was a host to the powers of the warp, a conduit to the hungering beyond. It was a creature of Chaos.

The air in the chamber reeked of sulphur. The creature took a juddering step forwards. Koleg fired. The creature raised a hand. Cleander had an impression of long fingers and sharpness. Time stuttered, and the bullets melted in the air. Sparks and metal droplets scattered onto the surface of the pool. Koleg dropped the macrostubber, his hands a blur as he reached for the grenade launcher. The creature roared. A spear of fire ripped from between its teeth. Koleg dived aside as fire washed where he had stood. The creature dropped to all fours, and leapt through the blaze.

+Help me...+

Cleander heard the voice in the back of his head. He took the last step towards the ice-crusting pool, and looked down. The figure was still there, just beneath the surface. Ghost light blazed in its eyes. Its hands were moving, paddling weakly, tugging against the silver tubes linked to its fingers. He could see its lips moving, could see teeth glinting like pearls beside the wound where its tongue had been.

On the other side of the chamber, Koleg was rolling over, the right side of his body on fire. The creature from beneath the shroud stretched back to its full height. The air shimmered around it. Cleander could feel heat radiating from it. The figure in the pool was writhing under the ice, and he could see an echo of the warp creature's movements in the desperate thrashing. They were connected, the host creature and the body tethered in the pool. He should do something now that he understood that fact, he should...

+Help...+

Sensations were spinning through Cleander's skull. He felt his gun drop from his fingers. Everything was a rolling cloud of competing voices from his memory: his father shouting at him, the leaden disappointment in his sister's eyes, the stillness of Covenant.

+Help—+

He punched his hands through the water's surface. Ice cracked. Wet warmth surrounded his arms, soft and thick, like blood. He touched flesh, gripped, and twisted, and he felt something snap. Time blinked.

And then he was falling forwards into the dark embrace of the water.

## VII

Gul hit the floor. Air thumped from his lungs. He rolled over and gasped. There was a slow quality to everything, as though his mind were a jammed chronometer catching up with time. He was on the floor next to the tier of pews that ran down the right of the chapel. The atmosphere was bright with explosions. The place where he had been standing in front of the altar was ten paces away. Something had picked him up and flipped him through the air like a hand batting away a toy. Lumn stood in the dark beyond the altar. Except it was not Lumn.

The young man's face was a mask broken by black holes where his mouth and eyes had been. Colour and shape distorted around him, light casting shadow, shadow burning with light. Bolt rounds burst in mid-air around him. Shrapnel tore the wood of the seating. Splinters spun out. Lumn turned his head towards Gul, and stepped forwards. Covenant stepped across his path. Light haloed the inquisitor, and the air in front of him shimmered. A wall of invisible force blasted from Covenant. Broken pews tore from the floor. Lumn met the wall of force with a raised hand. Light shattered just beyond his palm. A shockwave rolled outwards. Gul felt his ears pop.

To his left he could see the woman with the marked face vault onto the pews, fire blazing from her bolt pistols. One of the bolts stuck Lumn in the shoulder and punched him off his feet in a spray of shrapnel and blood. Covenant was moving, the great sword sliding from his shoulder in a single blur of sharpness and activating a power field. Lumn hit the floor, and the sword descended above him. He vanished. Covenant's sword struck the floor. Stone sheared into shards.

A shadow rose above Gul. He looked up. Lumn stood on the tier above him. Black smoke coiled from where the bolt round had ripped away his shoulder and half of his face. Worms of pale light burrowed through the bloody flesh, and Gul

realised that muscle and bone were bubbling up to fill the wound. The edges of Lumn's form were like a ragged cloak blowing in the wind. The pews crumbled to glowing ash around him. He pointed at Gul and his hands seemed to grow, spreading through the air like the shadows reaching from flame. Pain exploded in Gul's chest. Ice formed on his lips as he screamed.

The fat man with the hammer charged from behind Gul, muscle surging under fat as he spun his warhammer. Lumn raised his hands, and to Gul they seemed to be claws of hooked bone. The man swung the hammer, roaring, face locked in rage. Claws and hammerhead met, and suddenly Lumn was going backwards, shadows coiling around him, and there was blood mixing with the embers.

Bolt rounds exploded against the shadows around Lumn. Gul could see the woman with the bolt pistols leaping across the chapel. He heard words lift into the air between the roar of her guns. 'Blessed father of mankind...' the voice rose high and clear, echoing from the high roof. 'May my hands be your talons...' Fire blistered the gloom.

The man with the hammer glanced over his shoulder.

'Get up! Move!' he shouted at Gul, as Lumn stepped from the fire of the explosions, and punched his clawed hand into the man's side. The man gasped, eyes wide, blood on his lips. Lumn lifted him from the floor.

'For I am your Seraph...' The woman leapt across the last yards between her and Lumn, pistols still firing.

Lumn's head turned towards her. His face was a mass of red flesh, his eyes holes in a bloody skull. Lightning and blue fire lit the dark, and the woman was crumpling to the floor, the words of her prayer lost on her lips. Lumn threw the man with the hammer across the chapel, and stepped forwards, his form flickering like the frames of a faulty pict feed. He no longer looked like the young man who had walked at Gul's side for three years. He no longer looked even human. His body pulsed with wet sinew and cold fire as he reached out for Gul. The clawed fingers closed over Gul's mouth. Sharp claw tips bit into his cheeks as Lumn pulled him off the floor like a child lifting a broken toy.

+Silence,+ hissed a voice in Gul's thoughts as he saw blackness fold around him.

The sword blow severed Lumn's arm at the elbow. White light flooded Gul's eyes as the power field flared. A cry filled the air, rising higher and higher. Half blind, Gul had time to see Lumn reel back, blood pouring from the stump of his arm. Covenant followed him, turning with the weight of his sword as he cut. Lightning flashed, and Lumn, or whatever had called itself Lumn, was falling, its

blood burning as it scattered through the air.

## VIII

The memory came to Cleander as he drowned.

*'How many choices do I have?' he had asked.*

*Covenant had held Cleander's gaze for a second, dark eyes unblinking.*

*'There is always a choice.'*

*'Information or execution?'*

*Covenant shook his head.*

*'Execution is kindness in this universe, Duke Von Castellan, and you know nothing that I want to know.'*

*'So?' Cleander had said, raising his eyebrow. 'That is supposed to be your threat? You should work on your technique.'*

*'You are not a coward, and you are not unintelligent, so please do not insult my intelligence by saying that you don't understand what I am saying.'*

*'Obliteration...' Cleander had said at last.*

*'For you,' said Covenant, 'and for your family, and everyone you ever knew and cared for. Those that are not found will be hunted for all time without hope of forgiveness.'*

*'You can't do that. No one can do that.'*

*'I can, and you know that I can,' said Covenant.*

*'If I am the man you say I am, then you should know that I don't care about anyone else.'*

*'But you do.'*

*Cleander had not replied for a long moment, and then nodded once at the inquisitor.*

*'What is the other choice?'*

Hands gripped his back and hauled him out of the dark. He broke the surface of the water, gasped for air, and vomited. Water and bile poured from his mouth as he coughed and heaved air into his lungs.

'You are alive,' said Koleg from above him.

'Your...' Cleander vomited again. 'Your observations are as insightful as ever.'

'It was intended to reassure you.'

'Good...' gasped Cleander. The world in front of his eyes was smeared with grey and pain. 'Good...'

He rolled over and tried to sit up. The chamber was quiet. Flames still crawled over the heaped corpses, and a layer of smoke was gathering beneath the roof

and flowing through the archways into the spaces beyond. The pool of water stirred with the waves from Cleander's exit, but it was just water, its surface reflecting the devastation in rippled fragments. A corpse floated close to the edge of the pool, its head waving on its broken neck.

'Where is the... monster?' he asked.

'The host creature fell when you broke the neck of the thing in the pool,' said Koleg. He pointed at the far side of the pool where a heap of skin lay on the wet stone like a discarded coat.

Koleg shifted his weight, and Cleander noticed that the soldier was holding his right arm against his body. His scorched mask and visor hung around his neck, and glossy burns marked the side of his face. Not for the first time, Cleander wondered if the alterations made to Koleg's brain removed pain or just the man's ability to feel the emotion of being in pain. He felt his own hands begin to tremble.

'It was as Covenant expected,' said Koleg, nodding at the floating corpse in the pool. 'Another warp conduit and symbiotic possession, just like on Agresis.'

'Yes, yes... just like it,' said Cleander, not really listening. His limbs felt numb and his head was swimming. 'Help me up.' Koleg reached down with his good arm. Cleander gripped the arm and pulled himself up with a stream of swearing. He swayed on his feet, looked around the floor, frowning. 'Where is my gun?' Koleg held it up. Cleander nodded, took it, and began to limp towards the arch that led to the stairs.

'Where are you going?' called Koleg. 'This area will need to be cleansed.'

'Someone else's problem, someone else's job. I am going to somewhere where the transmitter will be able to reach our lord and master, and then...' he trailed off, pausing, blinking. He thought of the reflection he had glimpsed in the surface of the pool before he had touched its surface: a man with dark hair and beard, his skin marked by time and scarred by blades, one eye a pit, the other a flicker of black under his own gaze. 'Then I am going to drink more than is necessary, and then, I guess, I am going to wait to hear where I will next serve my penance.'

He limped on to the arch, before turning and looking back. Koleg stood where he had been before, face unreadable in the light of the cooling fire.

'Are you coming?' asked Cleander. After a second Koleg gave a nod and followed him.

## IX

Gul turned his head, blinking at the sunlight. Blue sky curved in a dome above him. The chair beneath him was carved from driftwood. Slabs of smooth stone ran away from him until they met the sea. Waves lapped against the stone edge, sending spray into the air to cool the warm breeze. Beyond that, the sea was a wide band of deeper blue beneath the sky. He knew where he was, knew that if he looked behind him he would see the tower of Solar Truth rising from the land like a shard of broken glass. He also did not know how he could be there. It had been three decades since he had last been in this place, since he had left his home to follow his faith. He turned to look behind him.

‘This is very pleasant,’ said a voice in front of him.

His head snapped around. A woman sat in front of him. At a glance she looked young. Red hair rose in the wind around a slim face. Her eyes were dark, her mouth tilted in a smirk. A silver carafe and two crystal goblets of amber wine sat on a stone table between them. He noticed that the goblet nearest the woman was almost empty, as though she had been drinking from it for a while. The green silk of her robe shimmered in the sunlight as she picked up the goblet and brought it to her lips.

‘Try it,’ she said. ‘It is worth it.’

Gul frowned. Memories of the chapel on Dominicus Prime pushed into his thoughts, the flash of gunfire, and the sound of screams rose, but they seemed distant, unconnected to him and unimportant.

He picked up the goblet and took a sip.

‘Where did you get this?’ he breathed. ‘They never let this vintage out of the arch-prior’s personal cellar.’

‘Oh, we have the means to get almost anything we like,’ said the woman. ‘But in this case I got it from you, Aristas.’ He looked up at the sound of his first name. The woman smiled, and gestured at the sea and sky around them. ‘Just like I got all of this from you.’

Gul stared at her.

‘Who—?’

‘You can call me Mylasa,’ she said before he could finish the question. ‘Do you like it? It was one of the few places in your head that you remember with happiness. Seemed like a good place for you to have this moment. Shame it could not be longer, really.’

‘What?’

‘I – or should I say *we*, because what is life but not being able to do anything without it being at someone else’s bidding – have just searched your mind, prior.

I have stripped down all of the memories I could find, and where I needed your help, I have inflicted pain and nightmares on you until you told me – there I go again, of course I mean us – until you told *us* everything we needed to know.’

Memories came into focus in his head.

‘Covenant...’ he breathed. ‘You are with the inquisitor.’

‘Yes,’ she nodded, and took a sip of her wine. ‘And before you ask, the pain and the screaming are over. We are done. *You* are done. I removed the memories of what I did. This is a... oh, I don’t know... a gift, a kindness to ease my torturer’s soul.’ Mylasa put her goblet down on the table, filled it again, and took a gulp, then sighed.

‘If you have inflicted pain on me, but I cannot remember it, then what is to be my true punishment?’

‘You are a heretic, prior, but you are not an evil man. There is actually a difference, but don’t tell anyone. You are just a fool and very unlucky.’ She looked over her shoulder at the waves rolling across the sea.

‘So the chapel, Lumn, Covenant, it all happened?’

‘Some time ago, in fact,’ said Mylasa. ‘It took a while to make sure that we had every detail of what you knew.’

‘The Tenth Path...’ he said. ‘I had no idea. I don’t even...’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘But innocence proves nothing, as someone very perceptive once pointed out. You were used, prior, and so you suffer.’

‘By the man who came to me before,’ he said, ‘by the man who claimed to be an inquisitor.’

‘Oh, he was an inquisitor,’ she said, and he noticed that the smirk had gone from her lips. ‘Inquisitor Goldoran Talicto, in fact – Scion of Gorgonate Collegium, Scourge of the Nine Stars of Nix.’

‘But...’

‘There are truths in the universe, prior, truths so big that to know them is death or madness. The first truth is that every whisper of daemons that thirst for souls and torment – those whispers are just a shadow of the greater truth. There are creatures that wish to enslave mankind, creatures so powerful that it is easiest to call them gods and their avatars, daemons. To know this truth is to be condemned to death, prior.’

Gul felt cold prickle his skin despite the warmth of the sun.

‘How can that be true?’

Mylasa continued as though she had not heard his question. ‘The second great truth is that those who are meant to protect us from such forces are divided as

much as they are united. And sometimes – once upon a blessed rare age – one of them falls to something worse than divergent opinion. They become a slave to their own view of mankind’s salvation.’

‘And Inquisitor Talicto is one such–’

‘He used you to protect one of his projects. The Tenth Path were sheltering and nurturing a psyker that they had bonded to a host that acted as a conduit for the... things from the warp. It was crude, and luckily was largely a failure.’

‘I didn’t know,’ he said.

‘We know, and we know everything that you did to protect the Tenth Path. Those details will help us to condemn Talicto in the sight of his peers.’ She raised her goblet as though in a toast. ‘You have served the Emperor well.’

‘Is that why you are talking to me?’ he asked. ‘As thanks from Covenant?’

She laughed, covering her mouth as though choking on her wine.

‘No, I am doing this myself. Covenant would tell you none of this.’

‘But why tell me anything?’ he asked.

‘Because if you know secrets, sometimes it is good to tell someone who will never be able to break your trust.’

Gul frowned. He was feeling dizzy. The sun was warm on his skin. He could smell the salt spray from the sea.

‘And what is this? A dream? An illusion?’

Mylasa looked at him for a long moment, and then stood, turning away to face the sea.

‘Drink the wine,’ she said. ‘It is really very good.’

## X

+It is done,+ said Mylasa. Cleander flinched at the sound of the psyker’s thought-voice. He would really rather have not been there, but Covenant had insisted that they all gather in the cell where they had been keeping Prior Prefectus Gul in the weeks since Dominicus Prime.

Cleander glanced at his sister on the other side of the room, but Viola was looking at Covenant, her face emotionless beneath the plaited ivory of her hair. Covenant himself stood at the foot of the slab, robed in grey. Josef stood next to him, the preacher’s face mottled with fading bruises, a servitor hovering above his shoulder, gently pulsing blood into his neck through transparent tubes. That Josef was alive at all was a miracle, but perhaps that was the benefit of piety. Koleg leant against the wall to the side, posture and face utterly unreadable. Severita knelt to the side of the prior, the hilt of her sword clasped between her

hands, head bowed. The low sound of the ship's engines rumbled through the quiet. They were all waiting, he realised.

'He's dead?' asked Josef, eyes on the body of the prior shackled to the steel slab.

+Yes,+ replied Mylasa. Cleander looked at her reflexively, and then turned away, with a wince. Metal encircled the psyker's neck and head. Bulbous tubes hissed steam into the air, and bundles of wires snaked between blisters of chrome. Her face sat in the mass of machinery like a strangled pearl. Withered limbs hung from the machinery like the mane of a jellyfish, hovering just above the ground. Static crackled around her in oily flashes.

'One less for the edge of your sword, Severita,' said Cleander, hearing the hollow sneer in his voice. The penitent sister did not bother to look up from her prayers. 'Was he expecting another form of forgiveness, I wonder?'

+He died without pain, and with a memory of kinder times,+ said Mylasa. +In this age that is absolution enough.+

'Something for us all to aspire to,' snorted Cleander.

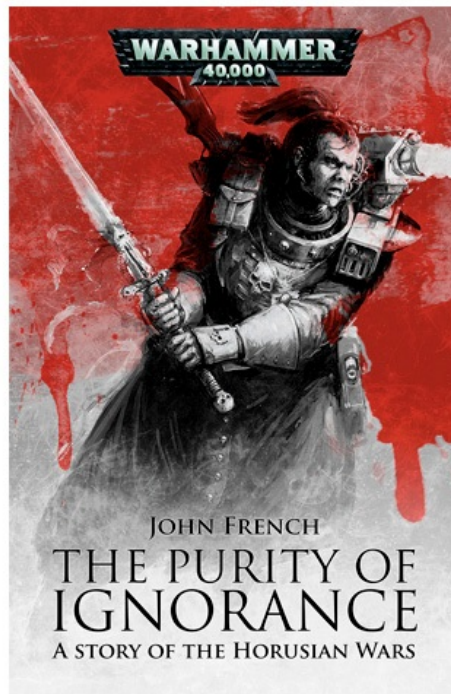
'We have what we need,' said Covenant. Every eye in the chamber moved to him. He was still looking at the body of the prior. 'A conclave of war has been called on Ero. Talicto will be there. And there will be a reckoning.' He looked up, eyes moving slowly over each of them around the slab, and then turned and walked away. The others followed after a second. Cleander lingered, looking down at the dead heretic.

'A kindness...' he muttered, and snorted. 'I think I would rather take the cruelty of life.' He shifted the eyepatch over his empty socket and walked away, leaving the dead to silence.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John French** has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novels *Praetorian of Dorn* and *Tallarn: Ironclad*, the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile*, *Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*. For The Horusian Wars, he has written 'The Absolution of Swords', 'The Purity of Ignorance' and 'The Maiden of the Dream'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

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