

WARHAMMER
40,000



MIKE BROOKS

**THE PATH
UNCLEAR**

AN INQUISITION STORY

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CONTENTS

Cover

The Path Unclear – Mike Brooks

About the Author

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Mike Brooks

The dig had once been the site of a tenement block but was now a chewed-up mess of red dirt. Occasional broken-off stumps of pale pillars flecked with pearlescence had been revealed. Alyss thought they looked like giant ribs covered in drying blood.

‘Xenos,’ Aberfell Duscaris said, kicking one.

‘Yes,’ Alyss agreed.

Fell raised a greying eyebrow at her. ‘And how would you know that, scholam girl?’

‘I’ve been studying the inquisitor’s texts,’ Alyss told him archly. ‘How do *you* know it’s xenos?’

Fell snorted. ‘I blew up something similar when campaigning with the Eighty-First Tarradis. Also, if it wasn’t xenos, Jonas wouldn’t have half-killed an astropath to contact us.’ He jumped down into the main dig site, his bionic arm steadying the combi-bolter slung over his shoulder.

‘Who is this Jonas, anyway?’ Alyss asked, following him. It galled her to ask the bluff ex-Guardsman so many questions, but she didn’t want to pester the inquisitor, and the rest of her new companions had their own idiosyncrasies.

‘Harral Jonas, archaeologist,’ Fell replied. ‘One of the boss’ contacts. If he finds something interesting or concerning, then he brings it to her attention. Given how hard we pushed to get here, I’d say she thought he was on to something.’

Alyss followed Fell across the mud. People and servitors were working around the edges and directly in front of her was a large case apparently made of plasteel-bound crystal, across which two people were talking. The man on the left had to be Harral Jonas: unshaven, pale-skinned and sporting a battered hat of dark felt. Alyss had come to know the other well already.

Inquisitor Zaretta Ngiri was tall, graceful and ageless, her dark skin smooth and her hair an almost-pure white cut into a blunt fringe at the front. She favoured sober, dark suits and a high-collared jacket in a vaguely military cut. At her shoulder lurked the imposing, armoured presence of Davis of Rawl, the Crusader sworn to her unto death.

Jonas stopped in mid-sentence and turned towards them, then relaxed when he saw Fell. Ngiri beckoned them closer.

‘Jonas, I’m sure you remember Fell. This is Alyssana Nero, whom I recently recruited from the schola progenium.’

‘Mamzel,’ Jonas greeted her, then turned back to Ngiri and gestured at the case. ‘This is why I asked you to come.’

Ngiri nodded. ‘Fell, Nero. Your first impressions, please?’

Fell looked down. ‘It’s an old sword. Not military, probably not mass-produced at all, actually. Blade just under a metre, hand-and-a-half grip. Looks perfectly normal. I can’t see a power source anywhere, or any manner of crystals for a witch to use it.’ He glanced sideways at Alyss. ‘No offence.’

‘None taken,’ she assured him.

Jonas blinked and looked at her again.

‘Another psyker, inquisitor? Has something happened to Carmine?’

‘No,’ Ngiri replied with a faint smile. ‘Carmine’s excellent at employing brute psychic force, but Nero has a more... intuitive gift.’

‘Would you like me to read the sword, milady?’ Alyss asked.

‘No,’ Ngiri said firmly. ‘Just your eyes for the moment.’

Alyss studied the sword, trying to look knowledgeable. In truth she could see nothing more than Fell had, but she didn’t want to let the inquisitor down in front of her associate so she kept looking... and suddenly, there it was. Not the sword itself, but its surroundings.

‘This is a stasis cabinet,’ she said, looking up, and knew from Ngiri’s nod that she’d got it right. ‘I imagine you have it for fragile relics, but the sword doesn’t look particularly fragile. Why is it in there?’

‘An excellent question,’ Ngiri said. ‘Jonas?’

‘As soon as we found it, the locals started claiming it was the Blade of Saint Aruba,’ Jonas said, wiping his brow with his hat. ‘She led the resistance against xenos slavers here in the thirty-third millennium. Sacrificed herself to kill their warchief, apparently. There might even be something to it, because then the dreams started coming.’

‘Dreams?’ Ngiri asked. ‘What manner of dreams?’

‘Can’t say – never had one,’ Jonas replied, ‘but several of the crew did. They couldn’t describe them properly but I couldn’t get decent work out of them after that – they always seemed distracted, off staring at something. Unrest has increased massively since the sword was found. The governor threw a public holiday in the saint’s honour to quell things, but it’s not done much. Half the population appears to have been overcome by some sort of fervour. You’ve got factory workers downing tools and demanding to sign up for the Astra Militarum then getting ugly when they’re told no. There’s been mysterious deaths. Everyone seems to want to fight for the Emperor, and that’s all well and good, but the timing of it made me nervous.’

‘So you put the blade into stasis?’ Ngiri asked.

‘Yes, milady,’ Jonas nodded. ‘Things have quietened down somewhat since, although not to where they were. I can examine an artefact and try to work out which xenos race might have made it, and even hazard a guess as to why, but saintly relics are outside my field of expertise. I don’t want to stand in the way of something holy, but I wanted to bring in someone with more knowledge.’

‘And did you touch it yourself?’

Jonas barked a laugh. ‘Throne, no! Everything gets lifted from the ground by servitors. You can’t be too careful in xenos ruins.’

They’d just finished the dust-caked trudge back to the inquisitor’s gun-cutter when Jekri approached from the other side of the small craft and threw something at Fell without a word of warning. Fell snatched it out of the air and glowered at the skitarii ranger.

‘What’s this?’ he demanded, examining it. Alyss peered at it and saw a small box of delicately carved wood.

‘A local juvenile presented this to me with the request that it be passed to you,’ Jekri said. ‘Specifically, “the big Guardsman with the metal arm”. They said they had been paid by a tall, thin man to deliver it.’

Fell’s eyes widened in alarm. ‘And you just threw it at me?’

‘Enginseer Lentzen has determined it is not dangerous,’ Jekri said, with the momentary sideways tilt of its head that Alyss had come to associate with a shrug.

‘Regardless, be more careful,’ Ngiri cut in. She turned to look at Fell. ‘Well?’

Fell flipped the box open and frowned, then emptied something small and shiny out onto his palm and dropped the box. Alyss caught sight of a thin chain and two rectangles of metal before Fell closed his fist, his jaw working in apparent

anger.

‘Ident-tags?’ Alyss asked.

‘These were Katzeed’s,’ Fell said, his voice low and dangerous. ‘One of my squad from Abram’s World. When the... when we killed the Manchewer.’

‘*You* were part of that squad?’ Alyss exclaimed. She’d heard of the heroism of the Astra Militarum kill team that assassinated the monstrous ork warboss who had devastated half a dozen Imperial worlds. She’d also heard that only one of them had survived. ‘You never told me you were part of that!’

‘The Emperor guided my arm,’ Fell muttered. He shifted his bionic, possibly unconsciously. ‘One of them, anyway. Besides, I had help.’

Ngiri pursed her lips thoughtfully. ‘For these to resurface here and now... Are we being taunted?’

‘There’s something else,’ Alyss said, picking the box up from where Fell had let it fall. She pulled out a scrap of paper and passed it to Ngiri. ‘Milady? This looks to be a signature.’

Ngiri took the paper and nodded, turning it over in her hands. ‘Indeed. There’s nothing else on here. I wonder why it was included.’

‘Someone wants us to go running around on a wild grox chase,’ Fell growled.

‘Then let us oblige them,’ Ngiri said decisively.

Surprised, Alyss looked up at her mistress. ‘Ma’am?’

‘I know that look in your eye, Fell,’ Ngiri said. ‘You want to get to the root of this, and I can’t say I blame you. However, I need to study the blade Jonas found and speak to Governor Steban. Take Alyss, Jekri and Hurzley and hunt this down. Just make sure to do it with your eyes open.’

Fell rolled his neck, producing an ugly cracking sound. ‘Eyes open and guns loaded, as always.’

Alyss looked from one to the other. ‘If whoever sent this means us harm then won’t we be walking into a trap? Surely they’ll be prepared for our response?’

‘They may *predict* it,’ Fell countered. ‘They won’t be *prepared* for it.’

The sun had set, but the eastern sky still held a rich glow. The tenement blocks of Verbaden City’s central slums were stark silhouettes in the distance, and in sharp contrast to Alyss’ surroundings. Grand Triumph Way was a wide boulevard lined with ancient trees, gene-spliced to always be in flower. The manses here belonged to Verbaden’s wealthy, each one set back from the street and surrounded by gardens. To Alyss, still adjusting to her new life outside the austerity of the schola progenium, it seemed ridiculously extravagant.

‘You can almost taste the money,’ drawled Alfrett Hurzley, dropping down from the flatbed at the rear of their groundcar. He gave a short whistle and his cyber-mastiff Razorfang joined him with a whirr of servos. The Adeptus Arbites had been with Ngiri since she’d recruited him in the aftermath of a xenos incursion on a mining planet some three years previously.

‘You’re sure this is the right place?’ Fell demanded of Sef Lentzen, who was acting as driver. The diminutive engineer muttered a binaric swear word.

‘Owner is listed as Phinius Speltmann of the local Merchant’s Guild,’ Lentzen said. One of his mechadendrites reached out of the cab window, proffering a data-slate displaying a hololith of a narrow-cheeked, pale-skinned man. ‘Handwriting analysis confirms ninety-four-point-five per cent probability that is the name signed on the paper, which is of the specific type used locally for important documents such as large trade deals. Furthermore, examination of public records shows Speltmann’s name is linked with the consortium that funded the dig, albeit somewhat indirectly. That is, however, in accordance with his reputation as a wealthy recluse—’

‘A “yes” would have done,’ Fell grunted, slotting a magazine into his combi-bolter. It was a brutal weapon with a flamer attachment, and only his bionic arm allowed him to fire it without dislocating his shoulder.

‘“Yes” would have been inaccurate—’

‘Jekri, are you in position?’ Fell voxed, cutting Lentzen off.

‘*Affirmative.*’

‘Then we’re moving in.’

The manse’s gates were a black lattice of plasteel three times the height of a human and secured by a heavy, automated bolt. Fell clamped a melta-charge to the main lock and stood back.

‘One question occurs,’ Alyss said to him.

‘Which is?’

‘Why would a merchant guild tear up a trade deal document just to provide their own signature?’

‘Very good, Nero,’ Fell replied with a slight smile. ‘Let’s find out, shall we?’

The melta-charge fired with a *whoomph*, instantly reducing the centre of the gate to slag. Lentzen sent their sturdy groundcar forwards, striking the gates and throwing them wide open, then revved the engines and withdrew again. Fell sprang through the gap and sprinted up the gravel drive past beds of turquoise rock-roses and under the trailing tendrils of the local trees, which looked to Alyss like giant cephalopods. Hurzley followed, shotgun clamped under his arm

and Razorfang loping at his side, while Alyss brought up the rear with her finger hovering near the trigger of her laspistol.

They were barely halfway to the manse when Alyss stumbled, momentarily overcome by a flash behind her eyes and a familiar surge of nausea.

‘Gun!’ she yelled, a moment before an alarm began trilling and an automated cannon rose up out of the undergrowth ahead of them. Alyss recognised it as a heavy stubber variant just as its automated targeting sensors focused on the closest threat and opened fire.

Her warning had potentially saved all their lives. Fell dived sideways into an evasive roll while Hurzley’s sharp whistle sent the cyber-mastiff bounding forwards. The security gun’s barrel locked onto Razorfang, its shots kicking up gravel as it tried to track the fast-moving patrol dog. The moment of distraction was all Fell needed: his combi-bolter roared once and the explosive shell slammed into the ammunition hopper. The resulting explosion blew the stubber apart and sent pieces of metal spattering into the surrounding foliage with a noise like a short but extremely violent rain shower.

‘Nice shot,’ Hurzley commented.

‘Nice spot,’ Fell said, acknowledging Alyss. He was already back on his feet and pressed on towards the manse, weapon held at the ready. Alyss hurried after him and after a few more seconds, they were standing in front of the imposing, three-storey home of Phinius Speltmann. It was clad in the dark, local stone with a front door that looked to be made of wood.

‘Door?’ Fell asked Hurzley.

‘Two blisters in the archway,’ Hurzley replied, checking his auspex. ‘Probably anti-personnel mines.’

‘Windows?’

‘Look clear.’

Fell shrugged. ‘Window it is.’

The bolt shell smashed the crystalflex into razor-edged splinters. Fell used his metal hand to punch more of it inwards, then vaulted through with Hurzley and Alyss on his heels.

They were in a dining room containing a long oval table surrounded by richly upholstered chairs. The ponderous tread coming from the hallway, however, did not sound like a dinner guest. The door slammed open to reveal a heavysset humanoid figure, a large-bore shotgun clutched in one hand and the other replaced by a whirling chainblade.

‘Imperial Inquisition!’ Fell snapped at the combat servitor.

For answer, the servitor raised its weapon and fired.

It was too slow – Fell hadn't assumed his words would hold it and had already brought his weapon up. His snap shot pulped the construct's right shoulder instead of its head, but the impact caused the shotgun shell to blow a large chunk out of the ceiling rather than his chest.

'Down!' Hurzley yelled. Fell hit the floor and Razorfang pounced, latching metal jaws onto the servitor's forearm and yanking it aside, causing the next shot to discharge into the floor. The servitor raised its chainblade but Hurzley's own shotgun shell shattered the weapon, scattering rending teeth everywhere.

'There's another!' Alyss shouted as a second appeared. She threw herself down behind the table and a blast thundered into the wall where she'd just been standing, blowing a hole as wide around as her waist and showering her with plaster. She saw the servitor's feet change position as it turned towards Fell and Hurzley so she sprang back up, levelled her laspistol and pulled the trigger.

The combat servitor had fired first, its shot booming out and catching Hurzley in the chest, blowing the ex-Arbites backwards off his feet. A moment later Alyss' shot burned its way clean through the construct's skull and it staggered sideways, but to her horror it remained standing and turned to target her again.

Fell's return shot obliterated its head. Even a combat servitor's heavily altered processes still required some form of working brain to function, and the construct toppled to the floor in an abruptly motionless heap. Alyss shifted her aim towards the first threat only to see the cyber-mastiff finish ripping its shotgun arm off in a spray of blood and coolant before Hurzley, firing from his prone position on the floor, blew a hole right through its chest. The servitor crashed backwards through a sideboard and didn't move again.

'You alright?' Fell asked, looking back at Hurzley.

'Winded,' the other man grunted, peering down at the now-dented armaplas of his chestplate. 'Alyss?'

'Fine,' she answered, calming her breathing again. She eyed Fell's combi-bolter with some envy. Unsubtle though the weapon undoubtedly was, there was something to be said for its sheer brute force.

'Jekri, any rats bolting?' Fell voxed, stepping over the bodies and easing out into the hallway, weapon at the ready.

'*Negative,*' the skitarii ranger replied. They were covering the rear of the property, and had Alyss been a betting woman, she would have wagered that Jekri's arc rifle would end any attempted flight. Fell jerked his head to give the all-clear and Alyss followed him out of the dining room.

“‘Wealthy recluse’,’ Fell quoted grimly. ‘Let’s see what he’s got to hide.’

The manse seemed deserted, right up to the second floor. Alyss opened doors onto a study, a personal gymnasium and a sitting room with shelves of ancient-looking books of real paper and decanters of amasec without finding anyone, alive or dead. She could, however, detect a distasteful scent.

‘I smell corruption,’ she said. It was faint but it was there, rank yet sickly sweet.

‘Razor has something, too,’ Hurzley confirmed, checking the readouts from the cyber-mastiff’s olfactory sensors.

Fell grunted an acknowledgement. ‘One more door on this floor. Let’s see if it provides any answers.’

The door in question was the largest and most ornate yet: a monument of dark wood carved into an exquisite representation of Holy Terra and its system, down to the last moonlet and planetary ring. It was securely locked.

Fell blew it in without a pause.

The wood splintered and he burst through the remains, his combi-bolter tracking in a cover pattern. Alyss followed and found herself in a large, airy bedchamber with decorative support beams and wide windows overlooking the grounds, a bed easily large enough for four full-grown adults, and the more pressing issue of a body lying face-down on sheets soaked red. Alyss turned its head to one side and immediately recognised Phinius Speltmann from the hololith, his cheeks even more sunken in person.

‘Dead,’ she said, checking his pulse. She rolled the merchant onto his back and the arms flopped like the limbs of some gelatinous deep-water creature. ‘No rigor mortis. Time of death would be six hours ago at most.’

‘Stabbed?’ Hurzley asked, pointing to the front of the man’s blood-stained shirt. Alyss tore the fabric aside to reveal a small puncture wound in Speltmann’s gut.

‘A gut wound like that wouldn’t kill him for hours, maybe days.’ She peered closely at it. ‘A basic medi-kit could have patched him up, there’s no way a rich man in his own home should die from this.’ She frowned. Hadn’t Jonas mentioned mysterious killings?

‘Here’s the source of the signature,’ Fell said from the other side of the room where he was studying a wall housing many framed pieces of paper. The glass protecting one had been smashed and the bottom of the paper torn away. ‘They look to be contracts, a wall commemorating his great business successes.’ Fell spat and kicked the leg of a chair. ‘Why send a message to me, a message with *personal significance* to me, just to... to taunt us about the murder of a trader I

don't know?'

'They moved fast,' Alyss commented, frowning. 'To get that paper to us so soon after killing this man...' She paused. Something wasn't adding up, and after a moment realisation dawned. Speltmann hadn't been dead for long enough to be the source of the corruption she and Razorfang had smelled.

Or at least, not through his death.

She tore the trader's shirt back further and grimaced. The skin around his shoulders was reddened and bore weeping pustules.

'Could be a skin condition,' Hurzley commented, although he didn't sound convinced. Alyss rolled the body back onto its front and pulled the shirt down to reveal Speltmann's back.

'Still think it's a skin condition?' she asked, swallowing back the taste of bile in her mouth. The sores here were larger and angrier-looking, and the most prominent formed a disturbing pattern across his shoulder blades.

'Emperor's grace,' Hurzley growled, making the sign of the aquila. Alyss realised that what she'd thought was a smell was at least in part the psychic spoor of Speltmann's corruption, although now she was this close to the body, the rotting flesh around his sores certainly had its own disgusting odour.

'Huh,' Fell grunted. He'd crossed the luxuriously carpeted floor to stand at Alyss' shoulder and was now looking down at Speltmann's body. 'Oh, that's not good news. That changes the game.'

'It does?' Alyss asked, looking up at him.

'I don't think we were being taunted at all,' Fell said, scanning the room again as though expecting an unpleasant surprise at any moment. 'I think we were being warned.'

'Warned of what? This wretch?' Alyss said, releasing Speltmann's shirt and wiping her hands on her fatigues.

'There's never just one, that's the problem.' Fell pointed at a small, dark tattoo of unpleasantly flowing lines at the base of Speltmann's spine. 'I'm not Karamazov, but that looks like a cult symbol to me.'

'So we've got a dead, rich cultist killed by a wound that shouldn't have been fatal, in his own bedroom that was locked from the inside and protected by security we had to destroy just to get here,' Hurzley said flatly. 'That shouldn't be possible.'

'He could have known the killer,' Fell said, 'but that wouldn't explain the locked door.' He looked thoughtfully over his shoulder at the balcony. 'The window's a potential way in and out.'

‘You’d need a grapnel,’ Hurzley commented. ‘Or a jump pack. It wouldn’t be subtle.’

‘We should report in,’ Alyss said, reaching for her comm-bead.

‘We search the place first,’ Fell corrected her, slinging his combi-bolter behind his back. ‘Let’s find out *what* we’re reporting.’

It took half an hour before the cyber-mastiff detected a strong scent coming from what proved to be a hidden door in the wine cellar. The passage behind it sloped steeply downwards and was roughly hewn, clearly not the work of Imperial engineers.

‘Nero?’ Fell asked, shining his luminator into the tunnel. ‘You’ve got almost as good a nose as the dog.’

Alyss grimaced as she got a whiff of effluent. ‘I’d say it leads to the sewers.’

‘And if Speltmann had a secret passage to the sewers, that suggests there’s something down there we need to see.’

Fell called up a schematic of the system to his data-slate and activated his comm. ‘Jekri, Sef. Speltmann’s dead and a heretic. Killer unknown. Get back to the inquisitor and warn her that we’ve got suspected cult activity. We’re following a lead and going underground.’

The stench in the sewer was overwhelming, even behind a respirator, and the only light was from their luminators. Filthy moisture dripped from the arched ceiling and oozed from walls, and the narrow service paths bordering the main channel were slippery and treacherous. All in all, it was one of the most unpleasant places Alyss had ever set foot in.

‘You’re sure it can’t smell anything?’ Fell asked Hurzley again, staring disapprovingly at his cyber-mastiff.

‘It can smell *everything*, that’s the problem,’ Hurzley replied testily. ‘This is probably the highest concentration of biological odours on the planet. There’s nothing it can scan for that isn’t already surrounding us.’

‘Wonderful,’ Fell muttered, sweeping his combi-bolter around. The luminator affixed to it revealed nothing but dark, unmarked stonework. ‘Any ideas?’

‘Let me try,’ Alyss said. She closed her eyes and concentrated as she’d been taught. One by one she blocked out the sensations of the clothes on her skin, the faint liquid sounds of the sewer and, finally, the stench of the place. Thus centred she began to push her mind outwards, searching. Fell and Hurzley were two sparks of intellect, tangible mainly through familiarity; Razorfang was an odd, subdued glow where the remaining hunter’s instincts still registered faintly. She

ignored them and searched further, trying to look everywhere at once but not focus anywhere in case she missed something...

There. A whiff of corruption. *Now* she focused, trying to get a fix on it. This wasn't a physical smell creeping in through her concentration, she was sure of it. This was something different, a sense of wrongness that her mind was interpreting in a familiar way.

She raised an arm, not certain of where she was pointing but knowing it was correct. 'That way.'

Fell didn't ask her if she was sure. When she opened her eyes he was studying the schematics. 'Can you hold the connection while we move?' he asked, his voice buzzing oddly in her head.

Alyss wobbled a nod. Her head felt loose on her neck. 'I think so. It affects my other senses, though, including my balance.'

'Make sure she doesn't slip,' Fell told Hurzley. 'All right, let's see what else is down here.'

The access hatch to the purification centre didn't open when Fell slapped the activation rune. 'The hydraulic cables must have been cut from the inside,' he growled. 'Someone doesn't want anyone official getting in here.'

Hurzley peered doubtfully at the hatch. 'We could shoot through it, but we'd probably kill ourselves with the ricochets.'

Fell was already pulling another melta-charge out of his tactical webbing. 'A good thing we don't have to, then.' He clamped it to the hatch and set the timer with a practised flick of his fingers. 'Stand back.'

Alyss closed her eyes, but the actinic flash seemed to burn through her eyelids. When she opened them again there was a large hole in the middle of the hatch, the edges now glowing cherry-red, and dim light spilled out from beyond.

Razorfang bounded through first, spurred on by Hurzley's whistle. Fell followed with a diving roll that cleared the molten edges and brought him up to his feet in a firing position. Hurzley followed more slowly, encumbered by his carapace armour but simultaneously protected by it. Lacking the cyber-mastiff's agility, Fell's battle-honed reflexes or Hurzley's armour, Alyss clambered through carefully to avoid burning herself.

They were in an artificial cavern filled with towering silos and skeletal gantries, a place that Alyss guessed acted as some sort of recycling or processing facility for the city's sewage, though what the end product could have been was anybody's guess. It was unlikely to be checked on unless something went wrong,

and had enough space between the tanks and on the walkways for a sizeable crowd to assemble and even to live, for a while.

Which appeared to be exactly what had happened.

‘What in the Emperor’s name...?’ Hurzley said in horror, staring up at glyphs daubed on the silos. Even from this distance Alyss could make out renditions of the eight-pointed star, as well as other, less familiar and far less wholesome symbols, and she felt anger surge within her that anyone had dared make such blasphemous marks in this place. She felt the pressure of it in her head, too – a crawling tide of low-level psychic filth that buzzed, hummed and threatened to eclipse everything else.

It would have killed her had Hurzley not abruptly pulled her behind him.

‘Hostiles!’ the ex-Arbites snapped as a shot spanged off the aquila on his shoulderpad. Alyss saw a figure on a gantry some distance away. Hurzley thumbed a switch on his shotgun to select an Executioner round, raised his weapon and pulled the trigger. A moment later the shell’s tiny robot brain had found its mark and their assailant fell backwards with a scream.

He wasn’t alone, however. From out between the support struts of the nearest silo lurched a ragged band of several dozen men and women wielding autopistols and crude clubs, screaming blasphemous war cries. Alyss fired at them but her shot flew wide, distracted as she was by the buzzing in her head.

Fell simply hurled a frag grenade into their midst.

The explosion flung them to the ground, clothing torn and flesh shredded. Fell walked towards them almost casually obliterating skulls with bolter shells as the heretics writhed and mewled in pain. Alyss watched in grim satisfaction as they died, but caught Fell’s arm as he was about to execute the last.

‘We should question him,’ she said urgently. ‘Look around. I see filth, I see graffiti, I see discarded food wrappers...’ She paused, looking at a pile of fire-blackened bones several metres away that she strongly doubted had belonged to any animal, and felt nausea surge in her gut. ‘There must have been more of them. Where did they go?’

‘And why are these ones still here?’ Hurzley put in.

‘We’ve faced cultists before,’ Fell remarked. ‘These barely put up a fight. I think we’ve found the dregs.’ He pulled his Inquisitorial rosette out and knelt down on the injured heretic’s chest. ‘Do you know what this means?’

Even in the grip of debilitating pain from his grenade wounds the man’s face paled and his eyes widened in terror as he saw the symbol.

‘No! No, please!’

‘Where are the others?’ Fell demanded. ‘Why did you remain?’

The heretic’s eyes darted desperately from side to side, but no help came. ‘Too weak... Not worthy...’

‘Not worthy of what?’ Fell snapped. He brought his combi-bolter up into the man’s view. ‘I can give you a single shot to the head or I can pulverise your limbs and leave you to bleed out. *Where are the others?*’

Hurzley’s vox crackled and he cursed under his breath as he listened. ‘General alert. There has been a cultist uprising in the city. Even the governor’s palace is under attack from a mob. I suppose that answers your question.’

Fell shook his head. ‘It’s a diversion.’

‘How do you know?’ Alyss asked, although she harboured the same suspicion.

‘I’m no witch, but you don’t survive war if you don’t learn to follow your gut sometimes.’ He got back to his feet and aimed his combi-bolter at the heretic’s left knee. ‘Last chance, scum. Where are the others? What are you not worthy of?’

Alyss had seen a man’s will break before, but never as sharply as this. Whether through pain, fear, insufficient faith in his false gods, or a combination of all three, the heretic began weeping and his voice rose to a desperate shriek.

‘The sword! The sword, the sword, *the sword!*’

Fell looked over his shoulder at Alyss. She nodded grimly – his words had the ring of truth.

‘Damn,’ Fell muttered. His bolter shell ended the heretic’s existence in a moment and he activated his vox. ‘Inquisitor! They’re coming for the blade! Do you read?’

There was no answer except the crackling of static enforced by the metres of rockcrete above them. Fell swore and turned to Hurzley. ‘What about the city’s local channels?’

‘We’re locked out,’ the ex-Arbites said. ‘Transmission’s been restricted to the military, and I don’t have time to break in.’

Fell let out a wordless snarl of frustration. ‘We need to get back to the dig site, as fast as possible.’ He pulled out the data-slate and scanned the schematics, then pointed towards a hatch on the far side of the chamber. ‘It shouldn’t be too far. That way.’

This hatch was easily openable by hand from the inside, and Fell hauled it aside to let them through. Then they were back into the foetid darkness of the sewers, making the best pace they could across uneven footing and looking for the access ladder that would allow them to regain the surface.

‘We’re missing something,’ Alyss said suddenly, realisation dawning now she wasn’t concentrating on guiding them to the purification station or surrounded by its brain-fogging aura.

‘Well?’ Fell demanded, splashing through a noxious puddle.

‘We still don’t know who killed Speltmann, or how!’ Alyss said urgently. ‘We still don’t know who sent those ident-tags, how they got them, or why they wanted us to go to Speltmann’s manse!’

Fell grunted in apparent frustration. ‘Is this really the time, Nero?’

‘Yes!’ More and more, Alyss was convinced that her point was vital. ‘There’s a third player here! Someone is manipulating us!’

‘Someone’s always manipulating us!’ Fell snapped, stopping and rounding on Alyss so sharply that she nearly lost her footing. Behind her, Hurzley clattered to a stop as well and she heard the skittering of Razorfang’s claws on wet brickwork. ‘Welcome to the real world, Nero! If you serve the Inquisition as long as I have you’ll learn that there’s always another layer of shadows, there’s always a hundred agendas that you don’t even know about! All we can do is try to serve the Emperor to the best of our abilities, and right now that means—’

‘You know,’ Alyss said, shocked. Fell’s bluster was a front; she sensed dishonesty coming off him like waves.

‘What are you—’

‘You know who’s behind this,’ she insisted, and saw his eyes narrow above his respirator. ‘You know who the third player is!’

‘Fell?’ Hurzley asked from behind her. ‘What’s she talking about?’

‘Throne-damned witches,’ Fell muttered.

Alyss suddenly became very aware that the luminator allowing Fell to see her was strapped to the top of his combi-bolter, and her mouth went dry.

‘*Fell?*’ Hurzley demanded more forcefully. Razorfang’s robotic growl began to rise.

The ex-Guardsman raised one hand in a placating gesture. ‘Easy, Hurzley.’

‘Easy, nothing,’ Hurzley said, and racked his shotgun. ‘If the girl’s telling the truth then you’re telling lies, and that means you’re a threat. Out with it.’

Fell’s eyes closed for a moment, then opened again, weary and resigned. ‘I don’t *know* who’s behind it, and that’s the truth. But I have a suspicion.’

‘Well?’ Hurzley said.

‘Eldar. They’re the only ones I can think of who might have been able to steal Katzeed’s tags from her body.’

Alyss felt her eyebrows shoot upwards. ‘Eldar? Why? How?’

Fell glared back at her with eyes like shards of knapped flint. ‘Because unless I miss my guess, without them I would be dead and the Manchewer would have razed Abram’s World to the bedrock.’

Alyss frowned, confused. ‘They helped you slay the warboss?’

‘No, Nero,’ Fell said, shaking his head. ‘*They* slew the warboss.’

Alyss felt as if she’d been struck in the chest with a power maul. ‘But you—’

‘We’d underestimated the orks’ numbers and strength,’ Fell said coldly. ‘They were monsters, Nero. My kill team was annihilated and I’d lost my arm, I was practically passed out from pain and blood loss and about to die when suddenly...’ He shrugged. ‘Suddenly the greenskins were fighting someone else. I couldn’t follow what was happening, I was barely conscious, but *something* wiped out the bastard’s command. I never saw how they got there, how they left, or who they were. I managed to vox that the orks were now leaderless and our counter-charge got to me in time to save my life.’

‘And you took the credit for it?’ Alyss asked, aghast.

‘That wasn’t my idea!’ Fell protested. ‘I told the story truly to my commander, but what were we supposed to say? The sector needed to hear that we’d saved them so that’s what they got told, and the general swore the few who knew the truth to secrecy.’ His lip curled. ‘And now I’ve broken that oath, to convince you that I’m no traitor while the inquisitor’s in danger.’

Alyss frowned. ‘Does the inquisitor know?’

‘Of course the inquisitor knows!’ Fell snorted. ‘You think an Ordo Xenos inquisitor would be taken in by that story? Those events were what drew me to her attention. I told *her* the truth, of course. From my vague descriptions and her own knowledge, she surmised the eldar had intervened against the orks, although if she knows why, she never shared it.’

‘And now they draw us into an ambush?’ Hurzley said.

‘Or sought to warn us,’ Fell argued, waving an arm in the direction of the surface. ‘They sent us after a nest of corruption, we were just too slow. If the xenos act against us then rest assured, I’ll take a piece of them.’

Alyss nodded slowly. She was ashamed she’d thought Fell a traitor, but also angry that one of the great Imperial victories she’d been taught about was a lie. Yet she could see why the lie had been created.

She shunted her warring thoughts aside. There would be time enough to confront them later. Assuming she survived.

The access ladder brought them up through a maintenance hatch and into the

utter mayhem that had engulfed Verbaden City. Light poles had been destroyed but flickering flames from vandalised buildings cast shifting shadows, and robed and masked figures flitted through them, whooping with grotesque mirth.

‘This way,’ Alyss said, getting her bearings. She activated her comm-bead. ‘Inquisitor, do you read? What is your situation?’

‘*We’re defending the dig site,*’ Ngiri replied after a second, to Alyss’ immense relief. The inquisitor sounded tense but calm, despite the shouts and gunfire in the background. ‘*The cultists appear focused on reaching the blade.*’

‘We’re coming,’ Alyss said as the three of them and Razorfang sprinted down a street. ‘We’re only about a block away.’ She cast a glance over her shoulder at Hurzley, who was labouring under the weight of his armour and dropping behind.

‘Go on!’ the ex-Arbites puffed as his cyber-mastiff fell back to match its master’s pace. ‘We’ll get there as soon as we can!’

‘Just you and me for now, then,’ Fell said grimly, and lengthened his stride. Alyss accelerated to keep up, and together they pelted past blank-faced windows and piles of refuse until they reached the gaping hole in the city that marked the location of the dig site. Alyss could see robed figures swarming into a depression in the ground a hundred metres or so away, but the earth between her and them was criss-crossed with dig trenches too wide to simply jump across.

‘I thought I was done with trench fighting,’ Fell grunted, unslinging his combi-bolter and dropping down into the nearest. ‘Come on, Nero!’

Alyss followed him, listening to the shouts, screams and gunshots on the air and trusting that Fell’s military instincts would guide them along the right path. He barely slowed when they came upon cultists, gunning them down from behind before the heretics even realised they were there, and so when he skidded to a halt in the red mud, Alyss collided with his broad back.

‘By the Emperor...’

Alyss got a momentary impression of a monstrous figure filling the trench in front of them before Fell’s combi-bolter spat a burning cloud of promethium. The weapon bathed the apparition in liquid fire for one, two, three seconds...

...and then it came screaming through and swatted Fell so hard he flew backwards, the combi-bolter sailing out of his grip and clean out of the trench.

Alyss had seen an Adeptus Astartes once – this thing was bigger. She thought for a moment that it was some sort of ogryn before she caught sight of its face and realised with horror that the creature was a mutated human, swollen beyond all biological norms into a raging block of muscle. Its teeth had been replaced

with triangular metal blades, so sharp Alyss could see specks of blood on its lips from where it had cut itself, and it reached for her with huge hands tipped with bone-white talons. Alyss raised her laspistol and fired on full-auto, but the barrage of shots had no appreciable effect other than eliciting a roar of rage and setting a rune flashing, warning her that her power pack was nearly expended. The mutant moved with shocking speed for something so huge, and she only just managed to duck a swipe that would have taken her head off. She back-pedalled desperately, nearly tripping over Fell's groaning form.

'Down!'

Alyss threw herself into the mud as a shotgun blast took the thing in the shoulder, drawing a gout of black ichor, and Razorfang flew at it. The cyber-mastiff struck the mutant in the chest, steel jaws snapping, as Alfrett Hurzley stormed past Alyss, still unloading shotgun shells.

The mutant grabbed the cyber-mastiff and wrenched its head clean off, then snatched Hurzley up and dashed him down back-first across one monstrous knee with a sickening cracking noise. The ex-Arbites' body flopped bonelessly as it was cast aside. Alyss raised her useless laspistol again and commended her soul to the Emperor.

Something flickered into view overhead, roughly human-sized but leaping with a thoroughly inhuman agility and grace. Its outline was oddly blurred and its appearance distracted Alyss for what would have been a fatal second, had the new arrival not landed on the mutant's back and plunged a thin tube attached to its forearm into the creature's neck.

The mutant thrashed wildly for a moment, then landed at Alyss' feet with a crash and didn't move again. Its assailant hopped nimbly off, the apparently disparate pieces of its form rushing together into a cohesive whole.

Tall. Lithe. Clad in shifting diamonds of colour, its face hidden by a distorted, grinning mask. An alien-looking pistol in one hand and the other empty save for the strange device strapped to the back of its forearm, bulbous at one end and thinning to a point where it extended out over the wrist.

An eldar.

It looked at Alyss and she met its eyes for a second, mere gleams in the shadows but still deep and unreadable. Then its mask tilted towards her in an apparent nod of acknowledgement before it turned and launched itself into the air with a keening war cry.

'After it!' Fell gasped, staggering up to his feet, bleeding from claw wounds and his flak vest shredded. Alyss cast a momentary glance at her fallen comrade,

then turned away. The living needed her now.

Robed corpses littered the trench floor in ones and twos, ripped apart by the alien's exotic weapon or simply dead, although Alyss guessed that if she inspected those bodies she'd find a small puncture wound such as that in Phinius Speltmann's gut, or the back of the huge mutant's neck. Certainly, the xenos seemed no friend to the Ruinous Powers.

When they got to the main dig site, Alyss fervently wished that a few more had joined it.

There were cultists everywhere, surging forward to assault an improvised barricade of packing crates and power loaders. Alyss saw the incandescent discharge of Ngiri's plasma pistol, heard the crack of Jekri's arc-rifle, and felt the psychic blow that swept half a dozen attackers off their feet and into the mud wall. Carmine must have been tiring, though, as three picked themselves back up almost immediately. Even as she watched, howling deviants hauled Sef Lentzen out from behind the barricade and set about clubbing him to death. The rest would be overwhelmed in moments.

'My power pack's nearly out!' Alyss warned, dropping a heretic with her laspistol. Fell pulled out two more frag grenades and hurled them into the mob, sending bodies flying, but Alyss could tell it wasn't going to be enough.

'I've got one krak left!' Fell panted, weighing it in his hand. 'Can you see anyone who looks like their leader?'

Their intervention hadn't gone unnoticed. Cultists were looking around to see where the grenades had come from, and their gazes fixed on Alyss and Fell. It would reduce the amount trying to breach the inquisitor's barricade all at once, Alyss supposed. Perhaps their deaths would be of use.

Then the eldar reappeared.

It was a blurring shadow that darted, spun, whirled, cavorted, and left death in its wake. Necks were snapped, torsos were shredded by a lethal stream of projectiles from its pistol and bodies fell spasming from the slightest kiss of its bizarre forearm weapon. The cultists wavered as this new threat cut through them, and for the first time, Alyss saw Davis of Rawl's power sword slay a heretic trying to scale the barricade with no new attacker coming to replace them.

The horde turned in on itself, but to no avail. Autogun shots punched through other heretics, clumsy blows smashed a neighbour's ribcage instead of connecting with their target, and in the middle, the eldar wove its dance of death. Alyss watched in awe as the cultists floundered, like a wheeling flock of avians

blundering straight into the jaws of a predator in their midst. By the time they realised it was hopeless, it was too late. The last few scattered and tried to flee, but now Ngiri had advanced out from behind the barricade. Davis skewered one cultist, the inquisitor's own power sword claimed another, and Jekri shot down a third. One fled blindly straight towards Alyss; Fell simply punched the man in the face with his bionic arm so hard Alyss heard the cultist's neck break.

'Your assistance is appreciated,' Ngiri called to the eldar. The inquisitor had apparently had either the time or the foresight to don her customised suit of power armour and she looked largely unscathed save for a cut on her forehead.

The grinning mask turned towards her and the eldar spoke, its mellifluous voice flowing oddly around consonants. 'I tried to warn you. I tried to make you see for yourselves.'

'And we thank you,' Ngiri said, inclining her head. 'I wonder if—'

'You still lack comprehension,' the eldar said, cutting her off. 'Your stupidity is dangerous.'

It flowed across the ground between them and drove its forearm weapon at Ngiri's chest before anyone could react.

The inquisitor's power armour held, so instead of being pierced by the xenos weapon she was hurled backwards into the barricade by the force of the blow. Davis of Rawl lunged, power blade crackling, but he was plucked off his feet and hurled through the air to collide with Carmine, who had just started to raise his force rod in an attempt to bring the eldar down. Jekri's arc-rifle spat bolts of energy but the eldar flipped into the air, easily evading them. Alyss raised her laspistol but the fiend was simply too fast, too blurred to target.

At least with her eyes.

She closed them, forcing the calm to come, blocking out the shouts of alarm and pain from her comrades. Her precognition, always a nebulous, unreliable ally, flickered just beyond her reach. She felt her physical body grit its teeth as she reached for it, forcing it to do her bidding.

There. The eldar's path seemed to slow, traced out through her brain in glowing lines. Nothing was certain, nothing was ever *certain*, but she could read where it was most likely to touch down next. She forced her muscles to move, felt them strain as they struggled to catch up with her racing mind.

'Fell!' she shouted, the words booming and echoing in her head. She pulled the trigger, felt the lasbolt leave the weapon, heard the buzz as the powercell died.

But her shot blew straight through the eldar's knee from behind as it landed, sending it sprawling.

Alyss opened her eyes and the world seemed to speed up again. Fell primed his krak grenade and threw it, faster and more accurately than anyone with an arm of flesh and blood. The eldar was already rising, but for once it wasn't quite quick enough. The grenade struck it and detonated, the potent explosive force concentrated in one place, and suddenly the eldar's left leg was nothing but a few ribbons of meat.

It collapsed, shrieking, but twisted around to aim its pistol at Fell. Then Davis of Rawl severed its hand with his power sword, raised his blade again and plunged it through the alien's spine. It spasmed and keened, yet somehow still clung to life.

'The sword!' the eldar spat desperately, its shaking mask turning towards Ngiri. 'Destroy the sword!'

'The sword?' Ngiri repeated. She wrenched a part of the barricade aside and strode through it to where the stasis cabinet rested.

'Destroy it!'

'I'm not as stupid as you think,' the inquisitor snapped, giving the eldar a withering glance. 'I had doubts about this the moment I saw it.' She flicked a switch and the stasis generator powered down. Suddenly Alyss heard a song, a sickening crystal disharmony that pricked her thoughts but disappeared when she tried to concentrate on it. She shook her head, trying to clear it.

'Ma'am? The sword... That's no sacred blade.'

'Not sacred to the Emperor, anyway,' Ngiri replied, sliding the point of her power sword under the Blade of St Aruba and flicking it out. The blade landed in the red dirt. 'I wanted to see how events played out, however. Alyss, you're certain the xenos has the truth of it?'

The song was rising. Alyss nodded, trying not to retch. 'I am, milady.'

Ngiri raised her plasma pistol and fired repeatedly.

The ravaging bolts of energy tore into the blade, melting and warping it, finally blasting it into nothing. The song was replaced with a howl that assaulted Alyss' mind, a bellow of fear and loss and thwarted rage that felt as if it would leave her brain bleeding. The dying eldar hissed in response, and as the cry faded as though it were falling into an abyss, Ngiri turned back to it.

'I've been wanting to talk to one of you ever since I learned of your intervention with the Manchewer.' She looked with distaste at the blood-slicked ground where the eldar's leg had been, at Davis' power blade that still transfixed its body, then down at the chip in her armour where she'd come so close to death. 'I fear the conversation may not now be a cordial one.'

The eldar laughed weakly. 'Death comes for me. Soon I shall be beyond your reach.'

Ngiri pursed her lips. 'I believe you. But even your corpse and possessions will have academic value.' She sheathed her power sword and gestured at Fell and Davis.

'Put it in the cabinet.'

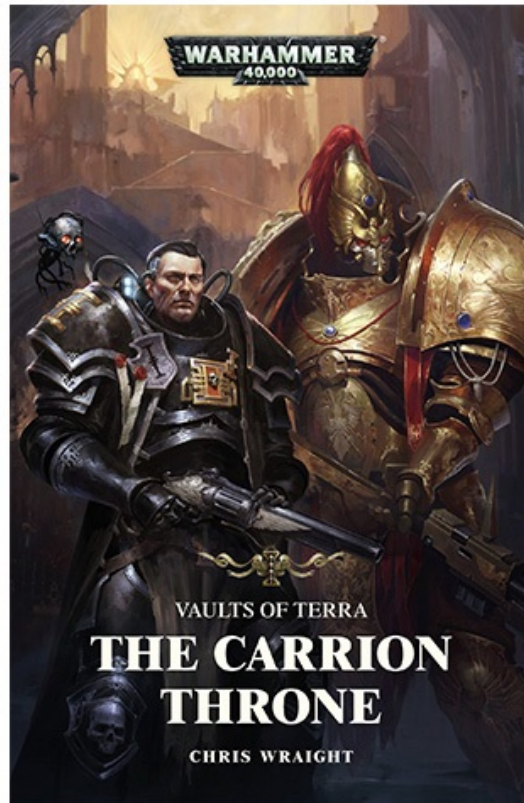
The eldar thrashed its head, but could make no other movement as Davis and Fell dragged its limp body to the stasis cabinet, then hoisted it up and stuffed it inside. Xenos blood immediately began staining the clear sides as it continued to bleed to death from its grievous wounds. Alyss' ears could hear nothing but its laboured breathing, but she could sense the dying creature's mounting horror as a silent scream.

At least, until Fell closed the lid with a snap and Alyss was left with nothing but the stench of blood, and echoing silence in her mind.

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Mike Brooks was born in Ipswich, Suffolk. He moved to Nottingham when he was eighteen to go to university, and has stayed there ever since. When not working for a homelessness charity, he plays guitar and sings in a punk band, enjoys walking in the British countryside, and watching football. He also finds time to write, and is a published SF author. *The Path Unclear* is his first story for Black Library.

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