

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

VAULTS OF TERRA  
**SANGUINE**

CHRIS WRAIGHT



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# SANGUINE

**Chris Wraight**

I returned to Courvain to find a message from an old friend waiting for me.

First let me clarify the terms - I have had few true friends over the course of my long life, and most of those are now dead. 'Acquaintance' might be a better word, but he was once a little more than that, insomuch we had served together during a testing encounter on the remote agri-world of Gorase and had come to share a limited mutual admiration.

He was not of the ordo. His name was Henrich Tlag, and when I first met him he was a battleship commander in the Imperial Navy. His was a significant and powerful rank, one that at its height saw him command many tens of thousands of souls. I rather envied him back then. I have always been a solitary sort, skulking in shadows of my own making, but have also carried something of a boyish fascination for those knife-prowed cities in space. On the few occasions that I have witnessed a line battleship moving in stately procession through the void, my heart has always missed a beat. A weakness, perhaps; one of many, no doubt.

But he gave it all up, and that was wise. After a century of service, his command extended several times by heroic levels of surgery, he found himself still alive, still sane, still hungry for experience. As he said to me, years ago when pondering his next move, 'Not a problem I expected to have.'

He left the service with that rarest of things, an honourable discharge, and

travelled to Port Luna in a private capacity. This was not retirement, merely a change of direction. He took advantage of old contacts, cashed in significant sums of coin obtained by means left largely unexplained, and began his new life in the mundane but lucrative world of hull brokerage. Not for him the greater predators of the deep, but now the herbivores - the colossal void haulers, the merchant freighters, the galleons beloved of rogues and adventurers.

I lost touch with him after that. For a long time now I have made Terra my home, locked down in the warrens of the Throneworld and knee-deep in its swarming contagions. We can no longer see Luna from the surface, so thick are the clouds of accumulated toxins that wreath us, so perhaps it was not difficult to forget that he was always there, as busy as I was and as physically close - in galactic terms - as we remained. If I had looked up, I might have remembered the starships, the ones that had thrilled my heart years ago, but I never did. All I would have seen were the shifting curtains of grey, reminders of our races long process of cradle destruction.

So when I returned to my chambers following a long and difficult extermination of a deep-rooted cabal in the Mordela slum-pits, it took me a moment to process the name.

'Tlag?' I asked Aneela, my personal coadjutant. 'Henrich Tlag?'

'I activated a five link to your inner rooms,' she said. 'He's been waiting several hours.'

I poured myself a glass, removed my armour, donned fresh robes, and settled to receive the communication.

'Tlag,' I said, smiling.

'Erasmus,' he said.

Few people call me by my given name. It felt strange, then - not impertinent, just strange.

'A long time,' I said.

He didn't linger on pleasantries. 'I'm worried,' he said. I could see his lace over the flickering vid-feed. He had put on weight, and his right cheek was speckled with discreet augmetics. His expression was like those waiting for me in my cells - eyes darting, hands twitching. He was sweating. 'Can you get to Luna?'

'Not easily,' I said. 'What is it?'

'It's... brutal. I mean, it's always been, between us, the guilds. But it's getting out of hand. I've had staff killed, ships burned. They want my operation. They've got their people insinuated into the judges, so no help from them. I think I know who's doing it, but there's no proof, and this really isn't my thing. Contracts,

deals, I can handle. But this is your work.' He smiled, a nervous gesture that didn't last long. 'Could I get you up here, just for a day?'

I could have asked more about these vague accusations, but I found the request strange. There are many private individuals who would welcome the services of an inquisitor, but we do not generally operate at the beck and call of the general populace. Tlag was a powerful and influential man, and that he was resorting to long frayed bonds of friendship was a more eloquent statement of his agitated state of mind than the physical ticks.

'Do you suspect heresy?' I asked.

He couldn't lie to me. Very few people can. 'Not that,' he said. 'Corruption, though.'

'In the dockyards of Luna,' I said. 'I find that hard to imagine.'

He began to see what he was asking then, and I thought I detected embarrassment amid his evident fear. 'I haven't slept much,' he said. 'It's like a war, and I thought I'd fought the last of those. I'm getting jumpy.'

He was being vague. He wanted to talk in person, I could see, but I was still unwilling to probe for more. There was no overt heresy involved, and so this was not something that I could, or ought to, help with.

'I can see that,' I said.

'If things change, will you consider it?'

I rolled the goblet around in my hand. 'It's good to hear from you,' I said. 'Maybe soon? I have much to keep me here - you understand that.'

He nodded, weakly. He did. I might have felt a twinge of remorse, watching his features fall, but also some irritation. The request demeaned us both, and a less forgiving member of my order would not have tolerated it.

'Remain in touch,' I said, before closing the link.

Why didn't I leave it at that?

I don't know. For the next few days, the conversation nagged at me. I had not lied to Tlag - I had many tasks to detain me, but every so often, in the rare lulls between intense activity, I would remember my old friend's voice, and the memory of it would prey on my mind.

I asked Aneela to run a quick check on activity in the Luna shipyards. Tlag's guild was still operative, and doing well, as far as I could see. Those docks are vast, and had once held the reputation of being the most immense single construction in the entire galaxy. I don't know if that was true - there are many other candidates - but the important thing was this: it was a prize worth fighting

for. Controlling new vessel construction within even a small subsection of Luna's yards would be worth terrifying amounts of money and prestige. If Tlag had overstepped the mark, had somehow engendered the hostility of a rival shipping guild, that would entangle him with serious and lethal individuals.

Against my better judgement, I attempted to make contact again some days after our exchange, with no success. I made further intermittent attempts to establish a link over the next two, and in the end became concerned at the lack of response. Perhaps some of this was residual sense of loyalty, perhaps some of it the long postponed desire to escape the gasping toxins of the Throneworld for just a short time.

But I had a sense, too. You develop it, over time and with experience. My remit had always been wide, and I was proud of this. Threats to Terra came from all quarters, and if the paramount dockyards were about to enter a protracted period of internecine warfare then that, I considered, was worthy of some investigation.

The next day I met Revus in the briefing chambers in Courvain and gave him his orders. Then I left him, concluded other outstanding business, some of it time-consuming, and at last went up to the hangars. I instructed Aneela to send a final message to Tlag's coordinates, informing him I was travelling to Port Luna after all and would expect to meet him on arrival.

I took one of my own transports, piloting it myself with only a crew of witless servitors for company. I might have brought an armed escort, but truth be told it was good to escape the press of other souls for just a short while, and I had little fear of what I might encounter ahead. They said that Luna had a rough reputation, like all voidports, but I guessed it would be little compared to the squalor lurking in the vaults of Terra. I wore my armour, carried my rosette in view, and bore my long-service sidearm, a Gerhard-pattern laspistol. I have never liked las-weaponry, despite its advantages of near-silence and light weight. I have always preferred something that recoils in the grip, that gives an indication of solidity when firing, and the weak flash of a concentrated light beam, though undeniably effective, has never given genuine satisfaction.

The passage up to orbital level was unremarkable - a journey I have made a thousand times. I negotiated the cordon of battle-stations and customs cutters, weaving lazily between the thousands of heavy carriers in their holding patterns, all waiting to disgorge rotting innards into the greedy mouths of waiting storage silos. I ignited my transport's main void drives some distance from the outer defence grids, and after a short, unhurried journey through relative isolation, the dirty grey orb of Luna emerged on my forward augurs.

There is a supposition - possibly heretical, as most suppositions are - that Luna was originally formed of the same matter as Terra, forged from part of some long forgotten cosmic collision. I find the theory easy to entertain - both orbs are waterless, arid, dusty rocks, choked by their ancient conurbations and scarred with the marks of ancient infernos. They are twins in all but size, though it seemed to me that Luna's architects had attempted to catch up with a series of gargantuan docking plates that stretched far out into the void. From far out it wasn't quite clear how enormous the constructions were, and it was only when I saw a miniscule dot move across an adamantium vane that my sensors told me was an Oberon-class battleship that I truly began to gauge the scale.

I began to make arrangements for docking, and was pleased to find a series of recorded greetings from Tlag waiting for me. I took the coordinates and fed them to my slaved servo-navigator, who guided the transport into its allotted berth with mute efficiency.

Ships were everywhere. Despite the long years and the slow wearing of my soul, it was impossible not to take pleasure in that. Slender system-runners, their engines glowing blue, nestled among bulbous cargo conveyers and heavy-plated Arbitrator suppression craft. There were Navy frigates at higher anchors, their carcasses glittering with the pinpoints of a hundred arc welders, and beyond them the heavy monsters - grand cruisers, battleships, coffin ships - all bearing the proud gold livery of the Emperor's infinite fleet.

Things were purer out here. The dregs of Terra's atmosphere were gone, replaced by the hard, thin air generated by Mechanicus processors. The stars glittered brightly. Throne, how I missed *stars*. We are deprived of so much, having them obscured from view by the residue of our decaying, choking industrial conurbations.

I reflected then that I needed to broaden my vision a little. I had been moping for too long, lost in my work lest old memories come flooding back with too much fervour.

I looked out at the serried warships again, the vastness of their void-homes, and tried to concentrate on why I had come.

I made my way to Tlag's quarters. The streets of the port were crowded, though less crushing than Terra's narrow and clogged arteries. The permanent night sky hung over us all like a cavern roof. The buildings here were old, crusted with grey dust, monumental in scope and deeply military in design.

Some distance from my destination, I received an unscheduled transmission.

'My Lord Crowl.' Tlags voice was just as nervous as before. 'May I beg you to indulge me - something has happened. Will you come to the berthed *Pride of Xerxes*? I can send you the coordinates.'

I accepted the change of plan, and altered my route. It took some time to negotiate the interlocking grid-pattern streets, and I eventually commandeered the tracked ground-car to speed up the process. Port Luna was far vaster than I had conceived of, and this was just a tiny portion of it - Tlag's own realm, set hard amid the fiefdoms of his rivals. I saw immense towers rising into the black night, each festooned with the motionless banners of the rival shipping guilds, and perceived at once how furious the competition must be between them. No doubt hired guns strode those streets, and almost all the persons of note wore some kind of armour or had entourages of bodyguards. They were not a threat to me, of course, but perhaps some danger to servants of a lesser order, and it made the place seem febrile.

In due course I arrived at the docked *Pride of Xerxes*, a mottled old slab-hulled galleas caked in engine-muck. It hung out at the end of a long spar, and the void surrounded it on three sides, making it appear as if we were flung into the heart of nothingness. Tlag greeted me at the end of a swaying gantry.

He was swathed in furs over a jerkin and hose of velvety fabric. He looked ill. He looked old. I barely recognised him at first, and it took a moment to calibrate the slack-fleshed magnate I saw before me with the younger man I had known on Gorase.

He had no such hesitation, and clasped me by the hand. 'My lord,' he said, his face pale. 'Thank the Throne you came. I do not take this lightly. It is His will that you are here.'

'You do not look well, Henrich,' I said.

'No time,' he said, looking back and forth. 'This way, this way. *This* is why you had to come.'

We passed inside the carcass of the great ship, watched over by teams of armed guards, some human-normal, some barely more than gun-servitors. The interior of the galleas was rank, smelling of bilges and flaking rust. Tlag prattled on as we delved further inside, passing down through the lattice of mouldering decks. This was one of his guilds ships, he said, back from a long stint in the void running munitions for a Navy cordon out in the subsectors antispinward border. Its condition reflected the arduous nature of the tasking, and it had only been pulled back for refit when the engines threatened to clank out completely. It was due to remain in port for a year or more, he explained, and teams of maintenance

drones and tech-priests had been scheduled to move in to begin the long process of stripping-down, tearing-out and building-back.

'*Had been?*' I asked.

'Yes,' Tlag said, unhappily. We reached a heavy bulkhead. On the far side was a vacuum door, oxidised and scratched. A single porthole of armour-glass punctured its smooth outward curve. It was closed, and guarded by two attendants with autoguns held openly. They regarded me with as much nervousness as their master. 'I did nothing, once it was found,' Tlag said. 'I can't do anything else now, of course. You'll see.'

He moved towards the door, punched in a keycode and pressed his thumb against a blood-cycler. The vacuum door unlocked, unsealing with a gasp of escaping atmosphere, and swung inward.

We entered, the guards remained outside. The chamber was a standard airlock, capable of housing perhaps thirty souls. Most void-vessels over a certain size have such compartments, built to allow the crew a place of refuge in the event of catastrophic decompression. This chamber would have had internal oxygen tanks secreted somewhere, capable of lasting for many hours, perhaps days - long enough for a rescue if other parts of the ship could be salvaged.

Aside from the two of us, though, only one soul inhabited the chamber now, but he was far from needing its services. His body had been hacked apart, his limbs splayed wide across a blood-dark floor. His face had been mutilated into a pulp of muscle and bone, his hands taken, his heart cut out. Marks of cultish origin had been daubed in dried blood across the chambers inner walls, though I did not recognise the precise sigils.

I crouched down, tasting the familiar copper tang in the air, together with the other smells of fear and murder - expelled urine, faeces, dried sweat. A human's end is rarely dignified, whatever we might hope for ourselves, and we generally depart as we arrived - stinking, bloody, our bodily functions brutally exposed.

'When did you find this?' I asked.

'Two nights back. But he could have been here for days. The ship's been cordoned.'

'Who is he?'

Tlag looked miserable, hanging back, wringing his hands. 'That's the thing. Look at the robes.'

I did so, what was left of them. They were draped in sodden tatters over the cut flesh, black with blood, but I could see they had been rich, once - silks and furs and crystalmesh. The cadaver wore a belt of spun gold, studded with gemstones

in the form of tiny eagles. A stole of ermine still clutched at his shoulders, matted now but evidently once very fine.

'This is Jodka,' Tlag said. 'Nefam Jodka.'

I knew the name from my researches. Three major cartels controlled the void-traffic in this sector of the Port - the Herial Vo Combine owned by Ariete Nuim, the General Transit and Conveyance Corporation of Nefam Jodka, and the Frateris Lupax brotherhood of Tlag himself. If Tlag was correct then one of the three most powerful figures in this network of mercantile realms lay dead, moreover within one of his rival's own ships.

'Tlag...' I began.

'I did *not* do it,' he stammered, pacing back and forth. 'You must believe me. You know me, Crowl. You know I have my weaknesses. I do have them, surely, but not this. This was the problem.' He came to squat beside me, almost pulling at my armoured sleeve in his agitation. 'You know I had had threats. You know members of my brotherhood had been killed. Of course I suspected Jodka's people, but I never had proof. I had taken precautions, I had called you, I had called others, but I did not resort to this.'

At that stage I made no attempt to gauge the veracity of his claims. I estimated what the murder would mean, were Tlag's story true. He would have eliminated one of his rivals, potentially decapitating a hostile trading guild at one stroke. If he could capitalise on that, he might absorb Jodkas contracts and resources, placing him at an advantage against his remaining competitor, Nuim. Or it might go another way - the rules of such games were generally complex, and slaying the head of the cartel himself would likely bring some kind of unified response, perhaps from Nuim, operating in concert with Jodka's vengeful lieutenants. The judges might even turn a blind eye, were they to see the matter as one of private retribution.

And of course there was the matter of the ritual markings. That would not go down well with any investigating body, were it to come into the open. If Tlag were telling the truth, then I could understand his fear. If he were not, then he was playing a risky game to involve me.

'You found him, just like this?' I asked.

Tlag nodded. 'The door was sealed,' he said. 'You understand? Totally sealed. It could withstand a bolter volley, that casing, and it's not been touched.'

'Who had the access code?'

'Me.' Tlag smiled ruefully. 'I keep the codes. No one else. I had to be careful.'

I looked over the corpse. It was a mess, little more than a collection of loosely

related limbs and sinews. I looked around me, at the dirty walls of the vacuum chamber. Tlag was right - they were thick, hewn from hardened alloys, resistant to most forms of attack. Whoever did this had come in through an open door.

I stood up. Coming to Luna felt like the right decision, then. The ritual marks were enough for it to fall under my purview, and I took some grim satisfaction in the fact that my original sense had been correct.

Tlag was looking at me still, expectant, his sallow flesh glinting under the single lumen. He was not sweating now, despite the heat of the galleas' interior, though his fear was still palpable.

'I'll look into it,' I said, trying not to adopt the tone I used with ordinary suspects, and possibly failing. 'You won't leave Luna, I'm sure.'

He shook his head.

'Who else knows?' I asked.

'We've kept it quiet, so far,' Tlag said. 'The guards are psycho-conditioned - they won't tell.'

'No reaction from Jodka's organisation?'

'Not yet.'

'Then that is something,' I said.

I could understand his predicament. Report this to the authorities, and he'd soon find himself inside an Inquisition fortress, given those marks. That didn't mean I approved of his conduct. Our friendship, such as it was, was the only thing keeping me from bringing him in myself, and that was a frail thing to rely on. We have few true friends, in my vocation, and there are several very good reasons for that.

'I did not do it,' Tlag said again, fervently. 'This has been done to destroy me.'

'Calm yourself,' I said, already turning my mind to the possibilities, before turning to leave. 'As I said, I'll look into it.'

I did not want to see him after that. I felt conflicted, and went my own way, travelling back into the busy heart of the port. I took another ground-car and headed upward, travelling out of the berthing zones and into the mansions and palaces of the more exalted members of this littoral, marginal community. The dust was everywhere, fine and drifting, collecting at the bases of the impressive constructions, clogging the intakes of my vehicle. Everyone I witnessed seemed to be connected to the void in some way, whether through their Navy uniforms or their trader's garb or their distorted, muscle-wasted general condition. Despite the Mechanicus' centuries of toil, Luna's gravity was still a fraction below Terran

standard, and it made everything seem somewhat dreamlike.

I might have enjoyed it, if Tlag's revelation had not been made. As it was, I paid no attention to the panoply of the abyss around me, and headed for an imposing row of cargo warehouses. They were at least fifty metres in height and far broader - great tomblike shells that marched along a dusty, lamplit street. Soon the crowds thinned and I found myself isolated again. The warehouses were owned by Tlag's cartel, and bore the canids head emblem in battered lozenges over the heavy slide-doors.

I reached the terminus of the series and looked up at the last of the sigils, contemplating why Tlag had chosen that emblem. As I was doing so, I detected movement close by. I turned to see a figure wearing some kind of enclosed body armour and carrying an ugly carbine in gloved hands. He stood before me fearlessly - which gave his identity away.

'Revus,' I said. 'Anything to report?'

My captain of storm troopers removed his facemask and took a breath of dusty, artificial air. Revus disliked leaving Terra at all, and his habitually sour expression was made even less agreeable by the stink of an alien terrain. Even having sent him on ahead by a faster route than I had taken, he had not had much time to work.

'A little,' he growled, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, then spitting into the dust. 'Tlag's become wealthy. Few indications of abject corruption, no arbitrator records, and truly, amazingly wealthy. But then they all are - Jodka and Nuim are the other guild heads.'

'Jodka's dead.'

Revus raised a grey eyebrow. 'Oh.'

'Tlag says he didn't do it,' I said. 'But it happened on his ship, inside a sealed vacuum chamber, and there are cult marks over the body.'

'Recognise them?'

'No. Any movement within the Herial Vo clan?'

'I haven't been here long.'

'But they're not arming yet?'

'I'll ask around.'

'Do that. But keep an eye on Tlag too. I don't want him harmed, and I don't want him to leave.'

'And you, lord?' he asked. 'What's next?'

I pondered that for a moment, though in truth there was only one sensible course. 'The other one of the three still alive,' I said. 'Nuim. She has a mansion

here, I imagine - if you've gained your bearings, captain, perhaps you can direct me.'

The opulence was distracting, even for one used to the elaborate pleasure-domes of the Throneworld. I had known that controlling private fleets was lucrative, but had perhaps not understood just what a path to obscene riches that control could be. Nuim's chambers were decked as extravagantly and as grotesquely as any Terran princeling's, with glassy marble floors and baroque realwood panelling and chandeliers of flame-captured crystal. Drapes of thick silk hung from plaster ceiling roses, lit by floating suspensors and perfumed by wafts of thick synth-scents. The inverse relationship between good taste and extensive coin was demonstrated once again, I thought to myself.

I hid my distaste. I waited to be received. There were some good things in Nuim's straggling collection - some Luis XII-era pieces, a few scattered trinkets among the gaudy filth - enough to hold my attention until my host had prepared herself. Perhaps she was rehearsing lies. I did not mind it, if so - there were few of those I could not see through, so it was her time she was wasting.

Eventually I heard a soft bell peal somewhere in the heights, and ivory-masked servants glided down glistening steps to take me to their mistress.

I met her in one of her many receiving chambers. The room might have been a scriptorium of some sort, for the walls were lined with thick, gold-inlaid spines. It may have been an unworthy thought, but I suspected few of the books had ever been enjoyed. For our many sins, we live in an Imperium where books are routinely burned, often stockpiled, but rarely read.

Nuim stood to greet me. She was thin, almost painfully so, the skin of her face stretched back across a high-browed, bird-like visage. She wore a tight-wrapped gown that glittered with scale-like sequins, overlaid with a gauzy chasuble. Her flesh was pale and stone-smooth, and her eyes were ringed with heavy lines of kohl.

'Inquisitor Crowl,' she said, extending a hand towards me, which I took in greeting. 'I am not familiar with the name.'

'I'd be surprised if you were.'

'I know many members of your ordo.'

'Really. Then you'll know why I'm here too, I suppose.'

I did not like this woman. She did not hide her power, which I found tedious. She had the decency to be afraid of me, but masked it poorly with bombast. I wished to tell her then what I thought of her baubles and her finery, and just how

much it would protect her if I chose to exercise my prerogatives.

'I do not,' she said. 'Perhaps you will enlighten me?'

There was no trace of a lie in her words. 'I take an interest in warfare. Open or clandestine - tales of it reach my ears sooner or later.'

Nuim sniffed. 'Petty warfare, in this place, it must seem to you.' She moved stiffly to the side of a great writing desk, piled high with ledgers and parchment bills of lading. 'That is all we have here, petty warfare. You must speak to Tlag, if you can stomach it, or Jodka. They are the instigators of it. They make their complaints, and I make my money. I trust you will see that, the longer you remain here.'

Perhaps she truly did not know Jodka was dead. I could have pressed the point, probing for weakness, but chose a different tack.

'I know Tlag well,' I said.

'How unfortunate for you,' she said.

'You do not see eye to eye, then?'

She sniffed again. 'Is this a formal action, inquisitor? If so, then announce it, and I shall bear my arms for the pins.' She leaned against the side of the desk, and her sequined gown shimmered. 'Tlag is a fool playing at a game he barely understands - the Navy is not the mercantile fleet. Jodka is a sadist whose appetites will ruin him. If I spent half of what he does on organ-renewal then I could hardly maintain this place to the standard you see now. He is an addict. Who knows how he preserves himself? There are rumours. I could tell you some, if you like, though I doubt you'd credit them.'

I ran my eyes over Nuim's shelves as she spoke. Amid the stacked tomes and the glass-fronted cartographs were weapons, most hanging in front of inlaid mahogany panels. Those were the most interesting things in her rather indiscriminate collection. They spanned the centuries, and were all artisanal specimens. I admired a Thor-dynasty Ecclesiarch's longsword, engraved with what I could see were the catechisms of Saint Clara of the Blessed Fever. Beyond that were a pair of daggers, sculpted into smooth hook-curves and bearing the marks of the old makers house of Freveill. Above those wicked blades was a single firearm, hung over a panel of rough-cut black granite. It was a long-barrelled revolver. The grip was inlaid ivory, the chamber adorned with a rippling serpent motif. It was exquisite, and my gaze lingered on it covetously for a moment.

But only for a second. Beyond it was something of greater interest - a piece of archaeotech I had rarely seen within the precincts of the ordo, let alone in the

hands of a civilian, no matter how powerful.

'Is that a teleport homer?' I asked.

Nuim followed my gaze. 'It is the receiver portion,' she said.

'And you have the counterpart locus generator?'

'As I said, inquisitor, is this a formal action? Do you wish to take me down to your dungeons? If so, perhaps you might tell me what this is about.'

Now her bravado was sounding hollow. For all her front, she was neither reckless nor ignorant. It was fortunate for her, perhaps, that I had seen and heard enough. Indeed, I had guessed her role in this from the very start, but it had been useful to have confirmation of my earliest suspicions.

I bowed as gracefully as my atrophied muscles would allow, and sent a silent command to Revus.

'You'll work it out, I think,' I told her.

'Is that it, then?' she asked as I withdrew.

By then I had turned away and was walking.

'By no means,' I said. 'I'll see you again very soon.'

It took a long time to make my way back to Tlag's quarters. As I walked, breathing in the thin air and tasting the thin dust, I looked above me at the towers and vanes standing proud into the eternally black sky. Terra itself was visible over the jagged horizon, a grey semicircle marked with black bands. I was struck by the foulness of its visage, and the extent to which our kind had ruined what had been, they said, a lustrous blue-green orb of particular beauty. You didn't notice it so much, down in the filth itself - it took a certain level of abstraction to see the truth.

A good motto, I thought. I would try to remember it.

Tlag hadn't left his chambers since I'd left him back at the dock quarter. He looked a little better, perhaps, though still sallow and sickening.

He rose from a thick real-leather armchair as I entered the room. A fire crackled in the grate, emitting no heat from its hololithic flames. Behind him were three huge windows, iron-barred and paned with thick crystalflex.

'Did you discover anything, lord?' he asked, virtually wringing his hands.

He was in the same robes as before - thick, padded with furs. I found another armchair and sat in it. It was quite astoundingly comfortable, and I resolved to find out where it had been made. Courvain was a draughty old shell, and I had neglected its comforts for too long.

'Nuim, your rival,' I said. 'She has a teleport homer. It was in separated

companion pieces, but it looked operative to me. That solves the problem of your vacuum door.'

Tlag's eyes widened. He thought on that for a moment, remaining on his feet before the fire. 'Would that be possible?'

'Eminently, for someone skilled enough. There would be risks, of course, but she struck me as a woman who knows when to take them, and when not to.'

Tlag frowned. 'Then she could have taken Jodka inside, killed him, and escaped again without damaging the unit.'

'That's right,' I said. 'But may I ask you a question, Henrich?'

'A question?' Tlag asked. 'Of course.'

'When did you stop calling me by my given name?' I leant back. The upholstery coped with the weight of my armour well. Truly, this was a remarkable chair.

'Did I?' Tlag looked confused.

I shot him a dry smile. 'You've been Nuim's guest before, I'm sure. You'll have seen it - she didn't keep it secret. Perhaps that put the idea into your head.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Yes, you do.' I moved my gauntlet slightly, ensuring I had ready access to my laspistol. 'Nuim didn't kill Jodka. Trust me, I can detect dissemblance in most people, and there was none in her. I doubt she even knew he was dead. And that is not surprising, of course, because, as you and I both know, he isn't.'

Tlag maintained the pretence for just a moment longer. He didn't have much choice, I suppose, but to cling to the slim chance that I might be wrong.

'The small things,' I said, untroubled by that possibility. 'The details. You used my title rather than my name. Those implausible cult markings. Come now, that's my *vocation*.'

Even then, he didn't crack. That was welcome - it gave me a chance to expostulate a little more. Emperor forgive me, I indulge the sin of pride too often, but it is good, from time to time, to set the cards on the table.

'The attempt to cast Nuim as the architect was artfully done,' I said, 'but allowing her to speak was dangerous. She told me of Jodka's fondness for rejuve alterations. That settled it. You didn't sweat, even in the hold of that ship. You're not really ill, are you? You're covered in synthskin. Oh, don't look so horrified - it's not your face to use, Nefam.'

Finally, the feigned ignorance fell away. The man grinned, and it was unpleasant to see my old friend's features distort around another man's expression.

'Fair enough,' Nefam Jodka said, reaching for his own weapon. 'It was a decent

attempt.'

'When did you kill him?' I asked.

I had spoken to the real Tlag from Terra, so knew that the corpse in the vacuum chamber could not have been more than a few days old. Jodka must have killed him as part of the feud that Tlag had feared was escalating, picked up my subsequent unanswered messages to him, realised I would come to Luna to investigate his disappearance, then devised this ruse to hide the crime. He had done well, to organise such a deception in such a short period of time. Then again, these people had almost infinite resources.

'It hardly matters,' Jodka said, drawing a slender laspistol and pointing at my forehead. 'You should never have left Terra, inquisitor.'

'Would you have been Henrich Tlag forever, then?' I was genuinely curious. 'Or just for long enough to see me off?'

'You'll never know,' he said, and fired.

I should be clear, here. It is quite impossible to move fast enough to evade a lasbolt aimed at that range. The time taken to send a mental command to one's muscles is comparable to the time taken for the loosed stream of energy to strike home. Even an Angel of Death would have struggled to react in time, and I did not possess anything like the reactions of those holy warriors.

So it is fortunate that Revus was a good shot. The room's crystalflex blew a fraction before Jodka was able to squeeze the trigger home, throwing scattered shards across the chamber floor. My captain, being ordo-trained, chose his moment perfectly, and never missed. His volley punched into Jodka's flabby, over-enhanced body, hurling him to the parquet and sending his weapon spinning out of reach.

I got up from that truly exceptional chair and pulled my own laspistol from its holster. All the while Revus hung somewhat comically on a length of wire on the far side of the broken crystalflex, making ready to pull himself through the hole he had just created. Jodka was gurgling blood, trying to claw himself away from the both of us.

I took my time. I could see the man's synthetic skin curling away from the features below, making him look like some grotesque amalgam of Jodka and Tlag. I thought back to the corpse of my friend in the vacuum chamber, to its desecration in the cause of deception, and speculated on whether those injuries had occurred before or after death.

'She was right, your rival,' I said, standing over the wounded Jodka. 'These are petty wars.'

I pressed the trigger on my laspistol. Nothing happened. A faint snap from the power pack made the thing jump in my grip, and a curl of smoke escaped through the upper casing.

Revus, now fully inside, snorted a laugh. I looked down at the damned thing. It had never actually failed me before, not in twenty years of use, and yet I had never loved it. That had always been an omission. I had been waiting for the right counterpart for too long.

'That rather spoiled the moment,' I said to Revus.

Then I put the weapon aside, flexed my gauntlets, and reached down to finish the job.

It took two days to regularise the details with the local authorities. The judges were remarkably incurious about the sequence of events and its consequences for Luna, all the more so once they saw my credentials and realised who they were dealing with. I have always found it amusing to see fear creep across an Arbitrators face, may my soul be preserved.

I recovered Tlag's remains and researched contact details for what little kin he still had, in the hope that they could be returned to the most appropriate place. I delivered a detailed testimony of Jodka's crimes in the probably forlorn hope that something might be done about them under the Lex Imperialis, though all parties to the affair were so intertwined with Luna's political stratum that I fully expected the usual - careful covering up, a few more bodies discovered in the old warehouses, some readjustment of procedures to accommodate changes in personnel, then life going on as usual. There was no heresy here, just an all-too-human hatefulness.

After all had been put in order, Revus and I headed to the voidport for the journey home. I was in a sombre mood, feeling that I should have acted earlier or not at all. Revus was his normal equable self, judicious enough not to make even what passed with him for conversation.

She was waiting for me in front of the lowered ramp of our transport, standing on the rockcrete with a retinue of heavily armed bodyguards. Nuim looked even thinner than before, if such a thing were possible, though her gowns were just as fine.

'Leaving, inquisitor?' she asked. 'I thought you wished to speak to me again.'

I was not in the mood to engage. 'Didn't seem necessary,' I said.

'Perhaps not. But, wittingly or not, you have rendered me some service. Jodka is gone, Tlag - my commiserations - is gone. His contracts remain. Business will

be good for me, I feel.'

'I don't think you needed much help,' I said.

'On the contrary. We all need help.' She clicked her fingers, and one of her ivory-masked adjutants came forward carrying an open case. I recognised the contents immediately - the artisan-crafted pistol, the one from her scriptorium. Its lines were perfect, its pedigree evident. 'I saw you look at it, inquisitor,' she said. 'It was a greedy look, and you were unguarded enough to let it slip. See, I was watching you, too.'

Almost alone in her entire sprawling collection, that thing was truly beautiful. I could not help myself. I took it, held it, turned it against the light. It might have been crafted for my hand, such was the cool weight of it in my grip.

'What is it called?' I asked.

'Sanguine,' she said. 'There is a tale to its making.'

I looked up at her, and saw that she was amused, though not through cruelty. Perhaps I had underestimated her. I had already lost one acquaintance on Luna; to gain a replacement, a powerful one, might be some compensation.

'I would like to hear of it, some day,' I said.

Nuim nodded. 'You know where I am,' she said.

Then she was gone, her entourage trailing behind her like a pack of trained canids. Revus and I watched her go.

I could tell Revus disapproved. He was anxious to get back to Terra, to its smog and its crowds.

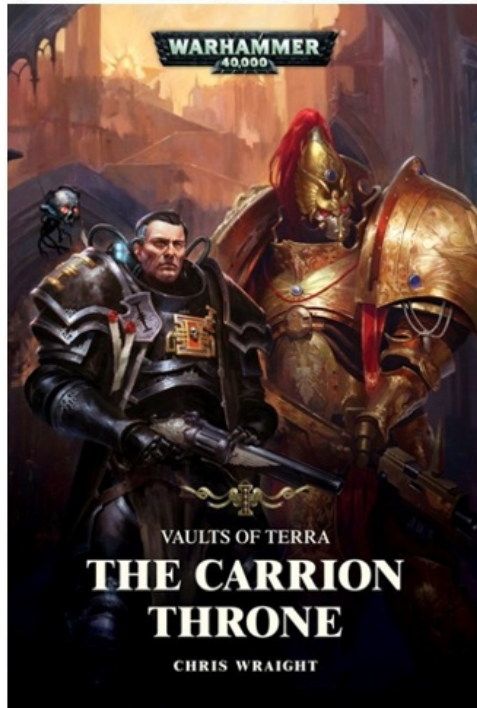
'You'll keep it?' he asked, doubtfully.

I studied the serpentine figures on the silver. Of course I would. It would outlast me, this thing - I was just one of its many custodians.

'We'll see,' I said, walking up the ramp.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chris Wraight** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.



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