



NICHOLAS WOLF

MIRACLES

A WARHAMMER HORROR SHORT STORY



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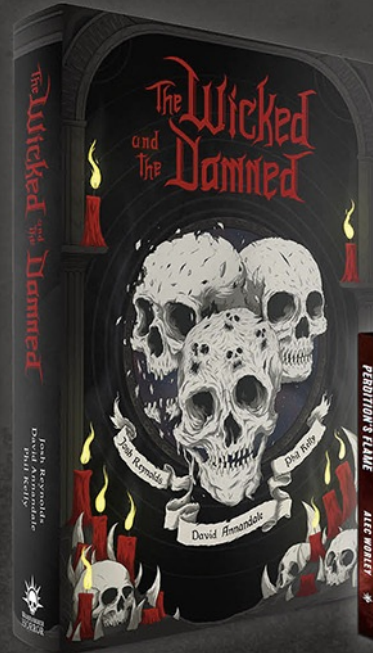
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MIRACLES

Nicholas Wolf

CHAPTER ONE

‘Jacen, would you like to say the blessing?’

I’m jolted from another formless, grey daydream. Night-cycle is falling on Praxis Hive and I’ve spent the last sixteen hours on an assembly line. It takes me a moment to process what she’s said. The faint buzz of amasec isn’t helping. Well, not with this.

Myra. Sweet, beautiful Myra. She’s staring expectantly at me, blue eyes encouraging me to pray. She’s always encouraging me to pray, especially in front of the children. The Emperor is our father after all, she says: they should learn about Him from their own father.

‘Of course,’ I say finally with a tired smile. We bow our heads over our plates: Markus, Arden and little Sophya, making the aquila over our chests. ‘Mighty Emperor, we thank You for Your blessings this day, for light You give us in the darkness. Please protect us from harm, and bless this food, that it might nourish our bodies so that we may continue our service to You.’ I pause. I never know how to end prayers. ‘Thank you,’ I say finally.

I open my eyes. Myra is smiling. Markus and Arden are picking at their food. Sophya is still whispering, eyes closed, as though she’s speaking to the Emperor Himself.

When she finishes we eat.

Our rations are simple, but nutritious: reconstituted grox-meat, carbohydrate sticks and a grey fungus Myra has seasoned to make it somewhat palatable, along with vitamin-gel packets and anti-rad pills to stave off radiation sickness. The walls of our hab-unit are well lined, but the manufactorum overseers prefer to err on the side of caution.

I eat ravenously. We all do. Markus and Arden, eight years old and growing

almost too fast to believe, scoff down their food in between groaning about having the same meal for breakfast. Sophya, already so bright, eats happily, humming something to herself as she chews. Myra eats quickly so she can begin cleaning up the dishes.

Outside the window I suddenly hear the tromping of boots, as familiar as the coming of night.

‘Third patrol tonight,’ I say absently, watching the enforcers through the slits in the window coverings. Within moments the procession of glowering black helmets passes by. ‘There were patrols all around the factory today, too.’

‘Why are there so many, papa?’ Sophya asks through a mouthful of vitamin-gel. I give her the best smile I can summon. ‘They’re here to keep us safe, starshine.’ I don’t mention that three patrols is out of the ordinary, even for our hab-block.

‘I heard they found another body down the street!’ Markus blurts out suddenly.

‘Yeah, and I heard his eyes were cut out, and full of bugs, and—’

‘Enough!’ I bark, harsher than I’d meant to. The room spins a little. I take a swallow of water to chase my guilt, grimacing at the metallic taste. ‘Honestly, where do you two even hear such nonsense?’

The twins look at each other. I know that look. They’re trying to decide whether or not to lie. ‘At the schola,’ Arden admits finally.

I snort and return to the food growing cold on my plate. ‘You shouldn’t believe everything you hear from your little friends at schola,’ I lie. ‘And you’re scaring your sister.’

Sophya gives me her best ‘I’m not scared’ face, but I can see the fear in her too-wide eyes. I can’t blame her. *I’m* scared, even if I can’t let it show.

Myra gets up and begins collecting the dishes, brushing off the morbid talk with the ease of a parent used to quickly changing the subject. ‘Well, do you know what *I* heard today?’

‘What is that, my dear?’ I say quickly, likewise eager to speak of something else.

‘You remember Old Gurn?’

Of course. Gurn Mansk, the blind Guardsman, had been begging down by the cathedral since I’d been a boy. ‘What of him?’

Myra smiles as though in possession of a great secret. ‘He can see!’

‘Huh,’ I shrug, going back to my plate. ‘How did he afford bionics?’

‘No, not bionics,’ Myra urges, setting down the plate she’s washing. ‘It was a miracle.’

I don't mean to raise an eyebrow but I do. 'A miracle?'

'What happened, mama?' Arden mumbles through a mouthful of food.

Markus swallows his food first. 'Yeah, tell us!'

Myra sits down on the edge of the table. The children are instantly enraptured. She's ten times the storyteller I'll ever be. 'Well, I was walking home from the cathedral, and I saw him there, dancing in the street. He said he'd seen an angel in a dream, and when he'd woken up he could see!'

'An angel?' Sophya squeaks.

'An angel from the Emperor! Isn't that exciting?' she says, clapping her hands.

She's looking at me. Expecting an answer. Corroboration. Support. I take another sip of amasec to buy myself a few moments to think of something to say, something that isn't callous or bleak.

Suddenly I'm six years old again, at my father's memorial service, standing in a room not ten feet from where I'm eating dinner.

'The Emperor's miracles are all around us,' I say, remembering a piece of scripture someone had read. 'And if you pray hard enough, miracles will happen to you.'

The rest of the night passes quickly. I sit in my favourite chair, attempting to keep my eyes open until it's time to put the children to bed. I fight the urge to finish my amasec because I know I'll just pour another and I've already had too much. Myra reads to them from a pamphlet she got from the cathedral. Somehow, even at the end of the day, she never seems to lose her vigour.

So like my own mother, before she'd lost her mind.

Eventually Myra's story of Sebastian Thor comes to a close and it's time to put the children to bed. The boys protest, as they protest having to do anything besides run in circles and fight, but Myra tactfully guides them to their rooms with a mother's gentle hand, far more effectively than I would have.

I lead Sophya to her tiny sleeping alcove, and tuck her into bed. I go to extinguish the lumen. 'Goodnight, starshine. Sleep well.'

'Papa?'

I turn.

She's quiet for a long moment, fidgeting with her tattered doll.

How old was she when I made it for her? One? Two?

'You won't let the monsters get me, right? The ones Markus and Arden were talking about?'

'Oh, starshine,' I say, going to my knees beside her bed and taking her hand in

mine. ‘There are no monsters here.’

Her face scrunches up in thought. I can see her little mind turning it over, wondering whether or not to trust me. She’s clever, and more observant than I give her credit for. I still haven’t fully accepted that she’s not a baby.

‘Papa, would you pray to the Emperor for me?’

‘Sophya, you know you can pray to the Emperor whenever you want and He will hear you,’ I reply. It sounds like something Myra would say, except she’d sound like she actually believed it.

‘I know, but I want *you* to,’ she protests softly. ‘Please?’

I concede, of course. How could I not? What kind of father wouldn’t pray over his scared little daughter?

I close my eyes and make the aquila over my heart. ‘Oh, glorious Emperor, enshrined on Holy Terra, I humbly beseech You, please let Your immortal light shine down on this bed, and keep it extra, extra safe so that my little girl can sleep tonight.’

She opens one eye. ‘And no bad dreams,’ she interjects.

I stifle a chuckle. ‘And please give her good dreams.’

Sophya smiles. As far as prayers go it wasn’t one of my best, but it seemed to be sufficient. ‘Thanks, papa,’ she says, holding open her arms for a hug.

I wrap her up in a long embrace. Outside I hear the stomping of steel-toed enforcer boots. And, in the distance, screaming.

‘The Emperor protects, my love,’ I whisper as I hold her tightly to my chest. ‘And so do I.’

CHAPTER TWO

‘Shipment arriving. Dock Four,’ the servitor drones. ‘Courier tag 14782-241.’

I’m already jogging towards the loading bay as a ground-hauler groans into the disembarkation hub. I’m never not jogging, running or sprinting somewhere, and I know where and when my shipments are coming in without some lobotomised bullhorn telling me. I’ve been working in this factory since I was thirteen years old, Terran standard, like my father before me.

A Sentinel loading mech clanks towards the lumbering ground-hauler. Its cargo is comprised of battery chemicals and magnetic coils, osmium housing and steel canisters, as it is seven times per day, every single day until the galaxy ends: all the material required to manufacture lasgun power packs. The munitions produced on Entorum supply the Emperor’s armies across the sector. I’m but a miniscule cog in the process, destined to be replaced the moment I can no longer fulfil my duty, but I’m a competent cog, serving the Emperor in whatever limited capacity I’m able.

I tap my data-slate, relaying the updated manifests to the central cogitator that’ll eventually feed the Mechanicus overseer, Magos Ghould, in charge of the manufactorum complex. A message flashes back, indicating that we’re twenty-seven minutes behind schedule for our next outbound shipment, and that as shipment supervisor I’m being held directly responsible.

A percentage of your weekly rations is being deducted. Blessed are those who serve the Emperor in body and soul.

‘Let’s get those crates unloaded!’ I shout to the Sentinel pilot, heedless of my headache. ‘You three,’ I yell to the monotask loading servitors standing mutely nearby. ‘Housings and filaments to assembly line Gamma-426, plasma cells to Rho-86, and Delta-281 for overflow!’

‘Compliance,’ the machines drone in something approaching synchronicity, before stumbling off to complete their tasks.

I sigh deeply, almost too deep, until I feel like my chest is going to explode. Everyone is working eighteen-hour shifts. I can’t remember the last time I slept more than a few hours. We’re working ourselves beyond exhaustion, and we’re still unable to satisfy our daily quota.

Because of the disappearances.

It’s a stupid term, one the local enforcers insist on using when they make their daily rounds to question us about the people who’ve gone missing, or, more commonly, turned up dead, mutilated or worse.

Disappearances.

The term seemed to imply that these people had simply vanished. Like my mother did. The truth, whatever it is, is far more sinister. I can feel it.

‘Jacen, I heard we’re going to miss our quota again.’

I turn around. It’s Tobin. Good old Tobin. His sunken, bloodshot eyes resemble mine. We started working in the manufactorum at the same age, both orphans.

‘We’re behind a little,’ I lie. We’re actually predicted to miss our daily quota by thirty-two per cent, which is more than the acceptable lenience threshold by a considerable margin.

He looks at me. By the Emperor, he looks bad. I can only imagine how I look. I’ve been avoiding looking in the mirror. ‘How are you holding up?’ he asks.

‘Well enough,’ I say through a yawn. ‘You?’

I hear a soft thump in the distance. Several workers look up from our labour, but only for a moment. It’s all we can spare.

He raises an eyebrow. ‘You tell me. How far behind are we? Really?’

I check my data-slate again and rub my eyes. The headache I’ve been fighting all day throws a haymaker behind my eyes. ‘It would take a miracle at this point.’

Tobin laughs mirthlessly. ‘Miracles don’t happen in Praxis Hive.’

‘Myra told me about that blind beggar down by the cathedral. You know, Guryin Mansk, the old Guardsman?’

‘Yeah, what about him?’

‘Apparently he can see now. Says he saw an angel,’ I smile weakly. ‘Sounds like a miracle to me.’

Tobin looks at me strangely. ‘You didn’t hear?’

‘Hear what?’

‘He’s dead.’

I stop. The blind Guardsman had been begging on the same corner by the cathedral since I was a boy. I pass him every day on my walk to the factory. I crawl back through the blurry smears of my memories: I can't recall seeing him the last few days.

'What happened?' I ask hesitantly. Something in Tobin's face tells me I don't want to know.

'I didn't see it happen, just heard about it...' Tobin says slowly. 'People said he was running around screaming. Clawing at his eyes. Saying he'd killed someone. Stuff like that.' He pauses. 'Threw himself under a groundcar.'

'Guryn wasn't a murderer,' I say firmly. 'And he wasn't crazy.'

Tobin stares off into the distance. 'Sometimes a man has to do what needs to be done,' he says quietly to himself.

Suddenly the ground shudders. Hard. Thousands of workers stop moving at once. I stand completely still for a moment, wondering if what I just felt was the throbbing of my feet or something else. Then I feel it again, a tremor passing through the ferrocrete floor.

The shiver of adrenaline courses through me. 'Everybody out!' I shout.

A klaxon belatedly begins to wail. Everyone who isn't a servitor drops everything and stampedes for the factory exit. Magos Ghould's voice blares from the servo-skulls swarming over our heads. No one listens. A massive explosion rocks the factory. The blast wave slaps me to the ground. Feet trample me. Tobin yells something. I hear the growl of flames before I feel the wall of heat rushing towards me.

For the first time since I was a child I truly pray with all my heart and mind and soul. I pray to the Emperor because I don't want to die, because I want to see my children again.

But the Emperor doesn't hear me, as I knew in my heart He wouldn't.

Ravenous flames engulf me, roaring so loud it drowns out the screaming of thousands of men burning to death.

CHAPTER THREE

I'm awake.

My eyes open. I'm sitting at my kitchen table. But it's a different table, even though it's the same kitchen. Different photographs on the walls. I get down from my chair. It's taller than I remember.

I look down at myself. I'm a little boy.

The kitchen is dark but for a single dim lumen casting long, deep shadows. A fly buzzes past my head, stirring the rank, humid air. I hear a soft scrabbling sound in the darkness, a murmur, like a distant voice.

'H-hello?' I call quietly to the shadows.

'Hello, Jacen,' says a familiar voice.

My mother steps into the lumen light.

'M-mother?' I stammer.

She's exactly as I remember her on the night she left, auburn hair pulled back, wearing a white dress. 'Be at peace, Jacen,' she says with a warm smile.

I run up to her on the tiny legs of a six-year-old and throw my arms around her knees. She doesn't smell like I remember, but I don't care.

'Mother,' I say again. By the Emperor, just *saying* her name feels divine. 'Mother... I'm... I was hurt. I think I'm dead.'

'Be at peace, Jacen,' she says again. 'Do not be alarmed. You are not dead.'

I look around the familiar walls of the hab-unit, exactly as I remembered them as a boy. 'Am I dreaming?'

'No.'

I feel a creeping sensation of unease working itself up my spine. 'You're not my mother,' I say. 'My mother is dead.'

'She is not dead,' she replies sweetly. 'Just... elsewhere.'

‘So what are you?’

My mother smiles the type of smile she often did before the bad days, before the visions. ‘The Emperor sent me.’

I peer at the thing claiming to be my mother. Her form blurs more the harder I stare at her, as though rebuking my mortal gaze. I think back to the local cathedral, to the stained glass windows depicting avatars of righteous fury vanquishing foul abominations in the name of the Emperor. As though reading my thoughts I suddenly see the suggestion of wings and a halo of holy light.

I’m speaking to an angel.

I fall to my knees and bow my head, unable to do anything but. ‘Holy Angel...’ I begin, having no conception of how I plan to finish my sentence. I resolve to press my forehead against the ground before it. Sweat drips into my eyes. Something buzzes past my ear.

‘Rise, Jacen,’ my mother commands. I obey. ‘Do not fear me. It is by the Emperor’s grace, through me, that you stand here at all.’

‘What do y—’

Mother smiles. ‘I saved you from death today, in the manufactorum.’

A miracle.

Myra was right.

‘I... I don’t...’ I stammer. I sound ridiculous; I can’t tell if I’m speaking to my mother or an avatar of the Emperor. I’d care more if I weren’t so overwhelmed.

‘You were saved for a reason, my son,’ she says, putting a hand on my shoulder. ‘A purpose only you can fulfil.’

‘There must be some mistake,’ I say. ‘I can’t be... I mean, I’m not...’ I trail off. I’m not what? Worthy? Capable? I’m a husband who can barely stay sober enough to remain on his feet in the factory and tuck his kids into bed at night.

My mother gives me a scolding look. ‘Do you suggest that the Emperor Enthroned makes mistakes?’

‘No!’ I yelp. ‘I would never! I just... What use would the Emperor have for someone like me? I’m not holy, or brave. I’m... broken.’

‘Because of your mother,’ the Angel says.

‘Yes,’ I mutter weakly. ‘Because of you.’

‘Your prayers to the Emperor have not gone unheard,’ the Angel replies with a reassuring nod. ‘Not a one. He is aware of your suffering, for He sees all from the Golden Throne.’

The same creeping nausea worms through my gut, leaving me shivering. ‘What... purpose am I to fulfil?’

Mother smiles sweetly, too wide. ‘This world is doomed.’

I can’t help but tremble at its voice. ‘What do you mean “doomed”?’

‘I will show you.’

The Angel reaches out a hand, somehow both gently and faster than I can prepare myself for. It touches my forehead. Agony, like a metal spike being hammered through my skull, floods me.

And then I see.

I see Praxis burning in living fire that gives no light. I see shadows with the faces of monsters slinking through the darkness, feeding on a hive world as it dies. I see men and women running, screaming, tearing at their bodies as crawling *things* gnaw through their skin. I see the blood of innocents forming rivers in the streets as the skies turn the colour of clotted vitae. I see the insane carving their bodies apart while thorny monsters praise their mutilation. I see the corpses of children piled in rotting mountains that blot out the sun.

I see Myra, crying out in agony before a blood-drenched nightmare that devours her hope. I see Markus and Arden pulling their eyes from their skulls so that they don’t have to see.

I see.

I see.

Sophya.

The vision ends. I suck in putrid air like a drowning man.

‘By the Emperor!’ I choke out. My throat is on fire, like I’ve swallowed poison. I double over, vomiting across the floor. ‘What... was that?’ I finally gasp.

‘But a taste of the fate that awaits this world, and every soul in it,’ the Angel says in my mother’s ‘you’d-better-take-this-seriously’ tone. ‘Unless you stop it.’

I can’t close my eyes. Every time I blink I see echoes of that horrible reality etched on the backs of my eyelids. ‘But how can *I* stop it?’ I gasp. ‘I’m nobody.’

‘So were many of the Emperor’s saints. The divine may do its work through anyone, no matter how small. But first...’ The Angel pauses. ‘You must prove your devotion. To the Emperor.’

‘My devotion?’

The Angel’s form seems to blur in the lumen light. ‘The Emperor has heard your prayers, Jacen Hertz. He has also heard your skulking disbelief, your unrepented sins. The power to save this world, and your family, cannot inhabit a broken vessel.’

I cling tightly to my mother’s leg. ‘I’ll do anything!’ I cry out, unable to think of anything but the vision. ‘Anything!’

‘Bring me the heart of the child you love most.’

I stop.

The world stops, not just me. The Angel’s words are like being doused in ice water. Its form blurs once more as my childhood home spins back into focus.

‘No.’

My mother’s face twists in a frown, the kind she made when she’d started hearing voices. A resonant growl thrums from everywhere at once, pressing against my ears. ‘You refuse?’ she says, still smiling brightly.

I push away from her. My eyes sting with tears. ‘*I can’t!* You’re... you’re asking me to... to...’

‘The Emperor knows what He asks,’ the Angel says. ‘Do you think you’re the first person to have to make this choice? Do you not think He felt the same as you do when He sacrificed His sons to prevent this same darkness from swallowing the galaxy?’

My eyes brim with tears. ‘Why the heart?’ I finally spit out.

Why not the eyes, or the lips, or the tongue?

‘Well, it doesn’t matter!’ I scream at it, so loud my throat clenches. ‘I’m not killing my daughter!’

‘The choice is yours alone to make,’ my mother says grimly. ‘I am only a messenger. Either you accede to the Emperor’s test and cleanse your spirit in your daughter’s blood, or you watch as your world and your family dies. You have until morning.’

The weak lumen light splutters and dies, drowning the kitchen in shadow. The Angel sinks back into the darkness, leaving only two glowing eyes to regard me as the world fades away.

I open my eyes.

I’m awake.

Burned flesh and voided bowels.

I’m alive.

Antiseptic and lubricant.

I shouldn’t be alive.

Wailing screams and animal howls.

Where am I?

My eyes trace the astringent sterility of a medicae wing, roiling in complete chaos. Blackened wrecks of steaming flesh are stacked two to a bed, mewling prayers to the Emperor and begging for death. Corpses choke the floor and there

are far too few blankets to cover them all. Sisters Hospitaller and medicae servitors scramble between the dead and the dying, overwhelmed, out of control. Priests, confessors and acolytes provide what succour they can. The laspistol crack of the Emperor's Peace being administered on the doomed barely penetrates the cacophony.

It's like the vision from my insane dream, in microcosm.

Through the chaos, like sinister islands in a roiling sea, I see enforcers.

Clad in glossy black carapace armour and clothed in ebon robes, these are no ordinary troopers. They shoulder through the insanity of the medicae wing, faces hidden behind glowering rebreather masks. They exude menace as they sweep through the room, grabbing survivors and hauling them away to places unknown.

I see an enforcer sergeant stop to interrogate a flustered Sister. She turns and points in the direction of my bed.

Oh no.

Before I can think or react the enforcers swarm over to me. Within moments I'm completely surrounded by hulking bodies and glaring helmets. Gloved hands grab me.

'You're coming with me,' the lead enforcer growls, turning my blood cold as ice.

'I-I can't,' I stammer. 'I was in an accident. I'm hurt.'

I can't see the enforcer's face, but I can somehow tell he's giving me a strange look. Only then do I actually look down at myself.

Just like in the dream, there isn't a scratch on me.

The enforcers hustle me into a makeshift interrogation room that might've been a supply closet. It reeks of antiseptic and machine lubricant. Two of them guard the door, shock mauls shouldered but not activated. In the confined space I can hear them breathing heavily. Then it hits me.

They're afraid.

The enforcer sergeant points to a chair in the centre of the room.

'Sit,' he commands. I obey.

With a tired sigh the lawman removes his helmet. Beneath is a face every bit as stern and intimidating as his mask: grey and scarred, with piercing eyes beneath a furrowed brow. He sits across from me, glaring, until I can feel sweat breaking out on my forehead.

Finally he blinks, settling into his seat and consulting a data-slate. 'Jacen

Hertz,' he says, scrolling through something on his slate. 'You're a lucky man.'

I don't feel lucky. The room feels stifling. Fecund. Like in my ridiculous dream. 'What happened?' I ask.

'Sub-level plasma generator suffered a critical failure,' he replies in a clipped tone. 'Manufactorum was completely destroyed.'

'By the Emperor...' I whisper. My father worked in that factory. I've spent more of my life in that building than I've spent everywhere else in the world. And now it's gone. 'How many...?'

The sergeant raises an eyebrow. 'Dead? Hard to tell. The servitors will be combing the wreckage for weeks, but with the degree of incineration it'll be up to our best estimation. Tens of thousands.'

I try to think of something to say, some words to encapsulate the shock and horror. Nothing comes to my lips.

'And then there's you,' he growls, his voice dropping to an icy pitch. In that moment I understand that this is a man who has killed people.

'Wh-what do you mean?'

The enforcer shrugs his armoured shoulders, but there's nothing innocent about the gesture. It looks mechanical. Rehearsed.

'Factory power plant melts down, pretty much everyone and everything in a mile radius gets turned to dust, and then we find you without a scratch on you.' He leans forward, resting his elbow on his knee. He looks like a servitor trying to appear human. 'You understand why I'm a little curious.'

I fight the urge to shift uneasily in my seat. I'm suddenly acutely aware of the lawmen behind me. I hear the sound of leather-clad fists tightening on weapons. A fly buzzes past me. I smell the stink of sweat.

And the odour of sulphur.

'What are you implying?'

'You've had a hard life, Jacen Hertz,' the sergeant says, switching to a voice I believe he thinks sounds amicable. He glances again at his data-slate. 'Mother, Lynne Hertz, suspected psyker, kills father, Corbin Hertz, then vanishes. Son, Jacen Hertz, sent to take his father's place in the manufactorum the day he turns thirteen years Terran standard...'

'My father wasn't murdered,' I interrupt.

The sergeant raises an eyebrow. 'Pardon?'

'My mother didn't kill my father,' I repeat slowly, angrily. 'He killed himself. The night she left.'

The enforcer looks back at the data-slate. I see an eyebrow twitch as his eyes

scan the file. 'If that's how you remember it.'

'And my mother wasn't a psyker,' I add hotly.

The sergeant gives me a long, blank look. I can tell he's mulling a difficult thought but I can't determine what it is.

'Indeed,' he says finally.

Something in his tone sets my teeth on edge, even though I know he's wrong. 'How do you know all this?'

'I'm a sanctioned investigator, my mandate comes from the planetary governor himself,' he says flatly. 'Do you think there's anything that goes on in my district that I don't know about?'

The implication leaves me feeling nauseous. 'My mother went crazy and my dad killed himself over it,' I say quietly. 'That doesn't make me a criminal.'

The sergeant's icy blue eyes grow wider. Too wide. 'That kind of thing, especially at a young age... it does things to a man,' he says. 'Might make you snap one day. Maybe blow up that old manufactorum, for example.'

'You think I--?'

The enforcer surges to his feet, sending his own chair clattering to the floor. 'This may or may not surprise you, Jacen Hertz, but in accordance with the Lex Imperialis I have the Emperor-mandated authority to kill you, in this very room, whenever I damn well deem it. It also may or may not surprise you that today I am *very* low on patience. So you are going to tell me everything you know, right this very moment, or I will judge you in contempt of my investigation and you shoot you in the head. You have until the count of three.'

My mind races. I can't breathe. 'I didn't do anything!'

His bolt pistol is in his hand. 'One.'

He's going to kill me.

My stomach churns. I taste bile. 'I didn't do anything!' I scream.

The cold metal barrel presses against my forehead. 'Two.'

I'm going to die. I'm going to die, right here, right now. 'I didn't do anything!' I sob. 'I j-just want to go home!'

The sergeant kicks his chair hard enough to twist the metal. I hear the sound of the hammer cocking back. 'Then how do you explain the fact that you're sitting here, talking to me, instead of being scraped off the wreckage like everyone else in that factory?' he bellows. 'How?'

Tell him the truth, Jacen.

The enforcers approach behind me. I hear the sound of the sergeant's gloved finger squeezing the trigger. 'It was a miracle.'

After an eternity the sergeant holsters his weapon. Frantic breath gasps out of me. I ignore the warm wetness running down my leg.

‘A miracle?’ the sergeant sighs.

Suddenly I’m back in weekly service, Myra and Markus and Arden and Sophya at my side, listening to some priest whose name I can’t remember, preaching to me about the Emperor’s miracles all around me. He might have been the same priest who spoke at my father’s funeral.

‘I was saved by an angel,’ I say, swallowing my own sense of disbelief.

The sergeant raises a grizzled eyebrow. ‘Really? And what makes you so damned special?’

You were chosen, Jacen.

I don’t have an answer. I don’t have an answer to any of this. I’d been trying to figure out where the Emperor was in my life from the moment my mother, jabbering like a lunatic, ran out of the house into the darkness of the hive and never returned.

I don’t have an answer, or at least not one that makes sense.

You’re the only one who can prevent the darkness from consuming this world, Jacen.

The hairs on my neck stand up. ‘Hello?’

‘What?’ the sergeant snaps.

Skinless nightmares flaying men alive.

I whirl around. There is only myself, the investigator and his two enforcers. ‘Who said that? Do you hear that?’

The sergeant moves so fast I don’t even realise it until I try to draw in a breath of surprise and can’t. His hand tightens around my throat. I hear armour servos whirr over the buzzing of flies. My feet leave the ground.

Shrieking children drowning in boiling oceans of blood.

‘I’ve persecuted the Emperor’s foes longer than you’ve been alive, boy,’ he growls. His voice is a cold fury. I see it in those grey, steely eyes. ‘His justice is like a scouring flame. There’ll be no shadows for the wicked to hide in.’

The sergeant slams me into the wall hard enough to dent the metal. I collapse to the floor, coughing, wheezing. The enforcers tower over me as I struggle for breath. The light of the interrogation room flickers. The smell. I can’t breathe.

Like haunted carrion on a battlefield that never ends.

The sergeant stares at me for a long moment as I lay on the ground retching and gasping, studying me. ‘Get him out of my sight,’ he growls suddenly, mechanically.

Gloved hands grab me by the shoulders. The door clicks open and I'm shoved out into the hallway. I see the sergeant muttering into his vox-bead, his dead eyes lingering on me as the door slams shut.

He's not letting me go.

He's following me.

CHAPTER FOUR

I flee the medicae facility as quickly as is humanly possible.

Clattering orderly servitors attempt to record my information on reams of parchment as I pass through each wing of the hospital, but I run past each one without saying a word. The lobotomised menials do nothing to stop me. The Sisters are too concerned with saving lives to realise mine was just threatened. I feel the eyes of enforcers tracking me as I all but sprint into the streets. I can't see anyone following me, but I know they're there, watching me.

Only when I'm out in the streets, turning left and right at random, losing myself in the shadows of the hive, do I allow myself to actually breathe. The air is hot, hotter than it should be at this time of day. It smells of sulphur and ash. The explosion?

How far away was it?

How long was I in the medicae?

I wander, eyes on my boots, seeing nothing but ferrocrete passing beneath my feet. It doesn't feel real. None of it does. This morning I was kissing my wife and children goodbye and walking to the manufactorum, fully prepared to spend the majority of my day building power packs. Now the manufactorum is gone, most of the people I know are dead and a damned enforcer thinks I'm somehow responsible?

You need to focus, Jacen.

'Shut up,' I say aloud. 'You're a dream. You're not real.'

I trudge through the darkening streets of the hive, turning this way, then that way, drifting into a grey rumination and letting my feet guide me on the familiar path home. I pass into a tunnel, and the glow of the street-lumens fades to black, black as skies bleeding madness across the world. In the shadows I see glowing

eyes watching me, following my every movement.

Why do you doubt what you've seen?

'Because it's insane!' I snap, walking faster. 'I mean, angels, miracles... I just... it's all just...'

It's not that you don't believe, Jacen. It's that you fear what the Emperor has asked of you.

'I'm not going to kill my daughter!' I yell, loud enough for my voice to echo. Onlookers give me a strangely knowing look and scuttle away, murmuring to each other.

I pull my coat tighter around my shoulders and all but run for home. A darkness is setting in, painting the hive in a gloom that not even the street-lumens can touch.

You saw what awaits them, should you fail.

The vision. I can't escape it; even when I blink I see it. The urge to gouge out my eyes is kept at bay only by my desire to look upon my wife and children again. But still it's there, embedded in my heart. Even trying to not think about it twists my stomach into nauseated knots.

'Why does it have to be her?' I ask, feeling tears brimming in my eyes. 'Why?'

Power requires sacrifice, Jacen. The Emperor is promising you the power to save a world, and the rest of your family. Such power does not come without a price.

'Then the Emperor is evil!' I shout, fighting back tears.

His ways are mysterious. His plans are beyond fathoming to mortals.

I pass by the cathedral. Enforcers patrol nearby the spot where Old Guryn used to beg. There's an area cordoned off, next to an impounded groundcar. I see enforcers glance up at me as I walk by, eyes tracking me.

'Did you do this to Guryn?' I ask.

You concern yourself with matters beyond your comprehension, Jacen.

'You showed him, didn't you?'

The festering corpses of my children stalk the streets where I once played.

'No!' I scream out loud. I see more eyes turn towards me. I duck into a dark alleyway. I glance over my shoulder: I'm being followed. I know it.

I'm gasping, panting, heart racing. It's so hot. I can't close my eyes. All I see is death, and misery, and suffering, and horror, and—

You can prevent all of this, Jacen. Just bring me her heart.

'I can't do it,' I whimper. My head is pounding. My knees are weak. 'I can't.'

You have to. For them.

‘How do I know this is real?’ I say to myself. ‘How do I know I’m not losing my mind, like... like my moth—’

Jacen, look at me.

‘W-what?’

LOOK AT ME.

An icy shiver runs through me at the insistency of the Angel’s voice.

I turn around, slowly. Staring from the shadows behind me are two glowing eyes. Flies buzz around me. I smell sulphur and voided bowels, curdled blood and burned flesh.

Time is running out, Jacen. Bring me your daughter’s heart, or your world will burn.

CHAPTER FIVE

My hab-unit is dark when I return home.

Power still hasn't been returned to the worker's hab-block. Most likely weapon production has already shifted to other manufacturing facilities across the hive, requiring power to be rerouted to ensure that the Emperor's tithes are not late.

I slide in through the door and stumble through the familiar darkness to the kitchen.

I'm going to do it.

I have to do it.

Every time I blink I see the Angel's vision haunting me, howling abominations defiling my family over, and over, and over as they beg for death. Every microsecond is torture. Still I make my footsteps as slow as possible as I shuffle my way towards the kitchen.

Damnation, it's hot.

I come to the kitchen, as dark as it was in my vision. I fumble past my dinner, wrapped in sealant, to the spare bottle of amasec I keep hidden in the cabinet. Before I know it I'm gulping down the burning spirit like a man dying of thirst. The first pull is hard. The second goes down easier. I remember the night my father died... no, the night he killed himself; he was so drunk he could barely slur his words.

Wasn't he? What had he wanted to tell me?

I wish I could remember.

The third drag banishes the worst of the bad thoughts. The familiar faux-focus of drunkenness settles on me. I clench my jaw as the haze narrows my vision and makes me forget my horror.

'Jacen!'

I whirl around. An electro-torch illuminates the room. Myra is sitting at the kitchen table, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Her beautiful face breaks into the widest smile I've seen since the days when our children were born. She jumps up from the table, throws her arms around me in a tight embrace and buries her face into my chest. Her cheeks are wet.

'I thought you were dead,' she whispers. 'What happened?'

'The manufactorum generator exploded,' I say flatly. 'Sabotaged, I guess.'

She makes the sign of the aquila over her chest. 'By the Emperor,' she whispers. 'I've been listening to the vox-net, they're saying thousands are dead. Are you okay? Are you hurt?'

'I'm not hurt,' I say, unable to hide my own disbelief. 'I'm fine.'

She wipes her eyes with her sleeve. 'How? They said the manufactorum was completely destroyed.'

I pause, seeing the form of the Angel in my mind as though it's standing in my kitchen, urging me to fulfil the Emperor's test.

'It was a miracle.'

Myra gives me a strange look. Then her face breaks into a contented smile. 'We were all praying for you. Sophya most of all. The Emperor has answered our prayers.'

I feel the tears brimming in my eyes. I grit my teeth to keep my jaw from trembling and hold her close to me so she can't see my face.

'I'm going to kiss the children goodnight. Why don't you go to bed, I'll be there in a moment and tell you all about what happened.'

Myra hugs me and kisses me, warmly, deeply. I never want it to end.

'I love you, Jacen,' she adds as she walks out of the kitchen.

'I love you, too,' I say to the shadows after she's already left. I take a final swig of amasec to force down the lump in my throat. I stumble towards Sophya's bed.

To do the Emperor's bidding.

I stumble through the darkness towards the kitchen, hands slick with blood.

'Angel!' I call into the darkness. 'Angel, I've done what the Emperor demands!'

Silence greets me.

'Angel!' I cry out again. 'Angel, show yourself!'

'I'm here,' a sweet voice says behind me. She's here. She's always been here.

Elsewhere.

'I did it...' I say, swallowing back the tears. 'I did... what you asked...'

Two hearts fall from my hands.

‘Myra...’ I whisper. ‘She heard Sophya. She didn’t understand. I had to do it.’

‘You did,’ she says from the shadows. ‘And you did *marvellously*. Better than I could have expected.’

‘I didn’t want to...’ I say to the shadows. ‘I... I didn’t ask for any of this. But I did it. Now what happens?’

‘What do you mean, Jacen?’ the Angel asks pleasantly.

‘You know what I mean!’ I snap angrily. ‘How is the Emperor going to... you know, use me to save this world?’

The Angel pauses. ‘Oh, the planet will be saved...’

My mind races. What had I been imagining would happen? Something... divine? Holy? ‘But... how? When?’ I ask, feeling the blood on my hands begin to clot. Flies buzz around me. Nausea twists my gut.

‘When enough sacrifices have been made, Jacen,’ the Angel says behind me. ‘When rivers of blood drown the world, and the corpses of the innocent blot out the sun.’

My daughter’s blood, my wife’s blood, is drying on my hands. My sons will be scarred for the rest of their lives, just like I was. The horror of what I’ve done crashes down on me again, and again, and again.

I suddenly feel my mother’s gentle hand on my shoulder. ‘There, there,’ she coos, her voice suddenly changing, deepening. ‘I understand. Some of us are chosen for great and *terrible* things...’

I slowly open my eyes and look behind me.

The hand on my shoulder is a malformed claw, chalk-white flesh and cracked, jaundiced talons. Her arms are too long, her body gaunt and withered. Her mouth is a grinning lamprey maw of serrated fangs weeping corruption. Her eyes are sunken pits, buzzing with flies.

This isn’t my mother. This is *something* wearing my mother like a skin.

‘...Just like I was.’

My mouth stretches in a soundless scream as the monster draws me into a loving embrace. Witch-light blazes from her rotten eyes. The laughter of madmen and the wailing of the damned fills my skull. The abyssal horror of the warp yawns before me, a thousand times more terrible than the haunting vision I’d seen before.

Salivating.

Hungry.

Eternal.

‘And now, my son,’ the creature that was my mother hisses as it consumes me,

'we can be together forever.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Wolf is an author, artist and occasional musician. He's written science fiction for several publications, and his work includes the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'Reborn' and 'Negavolt' for Black Library. He lives and works in Arizona, with his family.

An extract from *The Wicked and the Damned*.



The sky was on fire.

As beginnings go, I think it has poetry. We were at war – when are we not? – and the world was burning beneath us. Beneath me. The air tasted of smoke and the heat pressed down on me, like the hand of the God-Emperor. My ears were ringing, but I could hear men screaming, up and down the trench-line. They were always screaming. Crying and wailing. My regiment was mostly made up of cowards and children, much to my chagrin.

The ferrocrete duckboards buckled beneath me as I pushed myself to my feet and fumbled for the laspistol on my hip. The mud – we'd taken to calling it 'the soup', for obvious reasons – beneath the duckboards was boiling from the heat of the barrage. The trench was sloughing into a new shape around me as I - stumbled towards the nearest screams. The walls bubbled, bulging outwards or collapsing inwards. The ferrocrete frames of the line were cracked and pushed out of joint. Sometimes whole sections of the line – and everything in them – vanished into the soup. Like they'd never existed at all.

War is a hungry beast, and it gobbles its prey. A regiment can die in a moment, triumph can turn to tragedy, victory to defeat. Only by maintaining discipline can the hunger of war be held at bay. But discipline, like ferrocrete, can crack and burst, and vanish under the mud, unless someone tends to it.

Men moved around me, but I barely saw them – grey shadows, uniforms coated with mud and ash, environment masks giving everyone the same inhuman features. I didn't often wear my mask, despite the way the heat bit at my lungs and sinuses. I wanted them to see me. To see my face. To see that I wasn't like them. They needed to be reminded of that. I needed to be reminded of that. Standards – discipline – had to be maintained.

Coughing, I stumbled down the line, shoving men aside. They didn't protest, or I didn't hear them if they did. They saw my face, the black peaked cap, the coat – stained with mud though it was – and they knew me. Knew who I was,

what I was. And they straightened at their positions. They went quiet. Like good soldiers.

But where there are good soldiers there are bad soldiers. There are always bad soldiers, in every regiment. The lazy and the cowardly. The unscrupulous and the mad. The God-Emperor saw them, and I saw them too. I had been trained my whole life to see them. To see the signs of faltering courage in a man, sometimes before the soldier in question even realised it. And then, to act.

Cowardice could spread like an illness, if left unchecked. And not just cowardice. Licentiousness, disrespect... these found fertile soil in untended souls. If not dealt with, they could bring a regiment to its knees. Cripple it, or even destroy it.

But not that day. Not then, with the sky burning with chemical fire and the trenches turning to soup around me. The screaming was bad for morale. Bad for the regiment. And I knew my duty.

Las pistol in hand, I swept down the line, moving quicker. The longer the screams went on, the worse the effect would be. Another lesson learned in the schola progenium. They'd taught me so many valuable things, there. I give thanks to the God-Emperor every night for those times, gruelling though they were.

The trenches I passed through were irregular canyons of mud, bolstered by support slabs of ferrocrete. In places, pre-fab bunkers of stone and metal had been sunk into the mud, their regimental markings obscured by grime and damage. Heavy environment netting had been strung over the tops of some places, in order to keep out the worst of the inclement weather. It didn't work here – it rarely worked anywhere. But we strung it regardless, as the manuals insisted. We dug our trenches to regulation depth, despite the mud, and set our guns and placed our emplacements.

There is a right way to do things, and a wrong way. I know this. Another lesson, and one I took readily to heart. The right way was the way the God-Emperor wished it to be. The wrong way was the way of heresy, of disrespect and ill-discipline.

Armaplas firing pavises lined the top of the trenches, and men lined up behind them, standing on overturned crates or ferrocrete slabs. The sound of las-fire split the air as the soldiers vented their frustrations on the unseen enemy. It was always the same – during or just after a barrage, they would expend valuable charges from their lasrifles. The officers had given up trying to stop them from shooting at ghosts.

An odd word, that. Ghosts. But appropriate, I think, given our foe. They pounded us from afar, rarely daring to draw close. Rarely deigning, I should say. I couldn't remember a day without their guns. Without that hateful rhythm. Even when they were silent, the air echoed with them. I couldn't escape, even in sleep. If not for my training, I might well have been driven mad by it.

Some, among my charges, had been. The incessant bombardment ate away at their simple psyches, breaking their minds and spirits. When that happened, I had to be quick. I couldn't allow the weakness to spread.

I reached the source of the screams after a few moments of laboured stumbling, and shoved my way through the grey crowd of masked loiterers. 'Back to your positions,' I growled, shoving men against the sides of the trench. 'Get back. Back!'

They muttered darkly, their voices muffled by their masks, but they knew better than to argue. Arguing with a commissar was the equivalent of sleeping beneath a battle tank – one could get away with it, but only rarely.

When the space had cleared, I saw the screamer. He was young, and had torn his mask off, exposing milk-pale features and eyes so blue that I thought at first he'd suffered some injury. His uniform was splattered with mud and ash, and his weapon was nowhere to be seen. A medical corpsman crouched beside him, the caduceus on his shoulder plate faded and all but scraped away. The screamer did not appear to be injured. I holstered my weapon.

'Why is he screaming?'

The corpsman looked up at me, eyes wide. He mumbled something, his voice muffled by his mask. I had never met a corpsman of any use. I shoved him aside and caught the screamer by the collar. He thrashed in my grip, boneless, like a worm. He babbled nonsense in that slurring dialect of Low Gothic shared by most of the regiment. I had never bothered to learn it, as most of them eventually figured out the right way to talk.

'On your feet,' I said, dragging him upright. 'Answer me.'

His hand flapped uselessly at the wall of the trench, where bones were being squeezed from the mud like excrement. Skulls and femurs and shattered ribcages. The refuse of the battlefield. The mud cooked the dead, if the corpsmen didn't get to them first. It boiled away the meat and muscle, leaving only bone. I paused, taking in the sight.

Sometimes, when the trenches clenched just right, the bones surfaced. They poured down and pooled across the floor of the trench. Most were reabsorbed before the trench settled, but sometimes they remained. I shoved the man back

and plucked a steaming skull free of the soup. I held it up before him.

‘This? This is what you’re screaming about?’ I caught him again, before he could turn away. He was a coward, then. Like all of them. What use is a soldier that can’t face death? Like a gun that won’t fire.

The air shuddered as the dull crump of enemy artillery sounded. The trench shook and twisted as men lost their footing or fought to brace the ferrocrete slabs that held the bulk of the mud at bay. Fearful eyes darted in wild circles behind masks. A babble of voices rose. Between the mud and the screamer’s wails, they were on edge.

Discipline had to be maintained. And I had to be the one to do it.

I caught him by his flak armour and dragged him close. ‘Be quiet,’ I said. ‘Quiet!’ But he didn’t stop. Perhaps he couldn’t. I am no expert in the ways of the mind. Perhaps his had broken in such a way that the world about him had been reduced to something so infinitely terrifying that he could think of no other option than to scream and scream and scream... the noise of it was like a knife, digging into my head. Worse than the guns, almost.

I had to silence him. For the good of the regiment. For the sake of discipline. I dragged him towards the collapsed wall of the trench, and the bones. He tried to twist away, hands flapping at my arm. Weak blows. Weak mind. Weak link. I tossed the skull I held aside, and drove him face-first into the tide of bones.

‘Idiot,’ I snapped. ‘Coward. The dead can’t hurt you. But I will, if you don’t stop this foolishness.’

He struggled in my grip, whining. The corpsman had fallen over and scrambled back, and the others were watching. Staring. I wanted them to. I wanted them to see that there was nothing to be frightened of here. Nothing except me.

His scream changed, became a wail of desolation – a child’s cry. Weak, as I said. Too young for the battlefield, perhaps. But the God-Emperor had chosen him – had brought him here. The least he could do was show some courage. That was all He asked of His servants. The courage to do what was necessary, whatever the cost. I said this to him, to them all, as I held him there, in the mud, ignoring his struggles. The opportunity to impart a lesson was not to be ignored, even amidst the confusion of an artillery barrage.

His struggles grew more frenzied. I forced him deeper, until the bones were tumbling over my arms and slapping against my chest. His boots caught me in the shin as his hands dug futilely into the mud either side of his head. He clawed at the wall of the trench, still screaming, though I could only hear the barest edge of it over the guns.

And then, all at once, he went still. It was so sudden, I almost released him. But I didn't. I held him for a moment more. Maybe two. I had to make sure, you see. He needed to understand the crime he had committed. Cowardice was the weed in the garden of victory. Fear, the vice of the weak. And I would suffer no weakness in my regiment.

When I finally hauled him back, it was clear that I had overestimated him. He had been weaker than I had imagined. I knew, in that moment, that I had done him a favour, and it annoyed me. Weakness was to be punished, not rewarded.

He was a deadweight in my hands and I let him fall. His body crashed to the duckboards and lay unmoving. His blue eyes, wide and empty, stared at nothing. I felt the gazes of the rest settle on me like hands and I turned, meeting their bewildered stares unflinchingly.

‘What are you looking at?’ I said, softly.

They said nothing. Could say nothing. Their lives were mine. To weigh and judge as I saw fit. And they knew it. Even as they knew I would not judge them unfairly. Some commissars might – petty tyrants, hiding behind His authority. But I was not one of them. The God-Emperor's hand was at my shoulder, and His light in me.

Sometimes, I wondered if they could see it. If they can see it. The light, I mean. Or were their souls too simple to perceive such glorious luminescence? A question I have often asked myself, if I'm being honest. Am I blessed among the faithful? Or is such grace the common burden of humanity, shared by all, whether they realise it or not?

I confess, it troubles me.

But at that moment, I was not thinking of grace or light. I was thinking of the dead man at my feet, and the way his eyes stared up past me, as if seeking the stars. Blue eyes. No one in the regiment had blue eyes. I know, because it is my job to know such things. When everyone wears masks for the majority of a thirty-six Terran standard-hour day, you learn to recognise them by their eyes. By their voices, and the way they walk.

I recognised him, I thought. Not by name. But his eyes... had they changed? Minor mutation wasn't unheard of, in such conditions as these. Another sign of weakness. His crimes compounded themselves, even in death. Or perhaps there was some toxin in the air, or in the soup, that had changed him. The thought sent a chill through me, and I admit, I glanced then at the mask hanging from my belt, and cursed my bravado.

It was only because of this momentary failing that I saw the locket. A little

thing of gold. It had escaped his armour during his struggles. It lay across his unmoving chest, the tarnished gilt all but obscured by filth. I reached down and tore it loose.

I let it dangle from my fingers and spin, and I saw that there was a catch to it. Something inside, perhaps. A secret thing. Secrets were another crack in the wall of discipline. Soldiers were not allowed secrets. Their lives were best kept simple and uncomplicated – scraped sharp and straight, like the edge of a bayonet.

More weakness. Another crime for the tally. His death was more justified with every passing moment, and I felt a flush of satisfaction. The God-Emperor had guided my hand, as He had done so many times before.

‘Get him up,’ I said. The corpsman knelt beside the screamer as I studied the locket. Despite myself, I was curious. I wondered what it held. A picture, a message – something else? I closed my hand around it. ‘What are you waiting for? I said get him up.’

‘He’s dead,’ the corpsman said, in a hollow voice.

‘I know. I know a dead man when I see one.’ I stuffed the locket into my coat. ‘It’s just as well. The penalty for contraband is the same as that for cowardice... summary execution. The sentence has been administered.’ I looked around. ‘The rest of you, get back to your posts.’

The corpsman looked up at me. His gaze was unreadable. Brown eyes. Placid. A soldier’s eyes. ‘What about him?’

I looked down at the body. ‘Feed him to the soup.’

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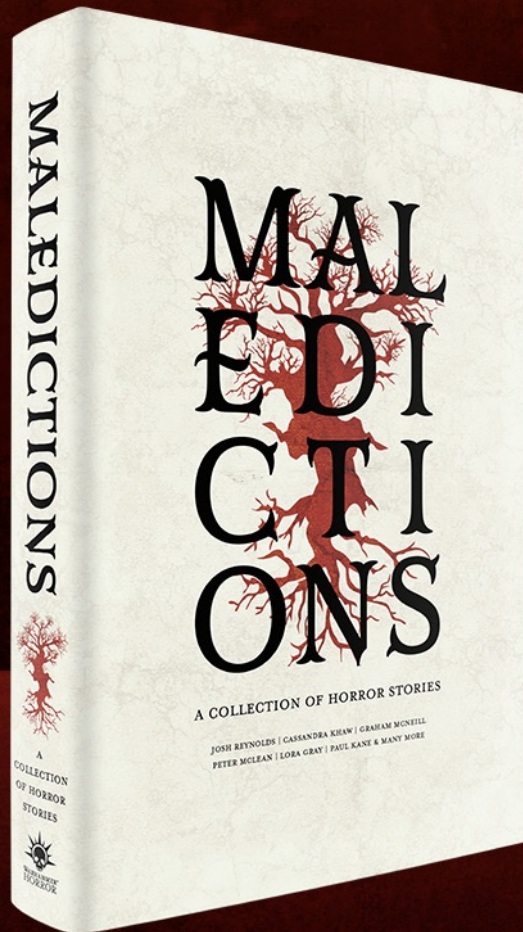


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Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Mikhail Savier.

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ISBN: 978-1-78999-738-5

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