In the depths of the Terran underhive, legendary warriors from the time of Unity fight for survival.
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CONTENTS

Cover
  Dreams of Unity – Nick Kyme
About the Author
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DREAMS OF UNITY

Nick Kyme

We are the thunder,
As I looked down onto the fight below, I knew Kabe was going to die. And I was powerless to do anything about it.

He would not yield. He roared, a broken jaw distorting his shout of defiance. The man trying to kill him remained undaunted. Even when Kabe spat blood onto his war-plate, the gold-clad warrior would not be goaded.

Instead, he levelled his spear and Kabe readied his falchion in kind. The sword’s blade had become a ragged saw, notched by repeated ineffectual blows against the other warrior’s armour. Kabe did not know how to lose. He had never retreated in his life. Even when the oligarchs of Kievan Rus had rained atomics from their black citadel and bathed the Sibir ice plain in radioactive fire, Kabe had advanced. He had fought without rest during the siege of Abyssna, and marched the length of Albia to bring the warlord clans of Hoth Grendal to heel.

‘For Unity!’ Kabe roared, his broken sword aloft in salute.

He charged, but his left leg failed him and he slipped, his body not as stubborn as his mind.

Kabe stopped when the spear impaled him, his armour easily
pierced. The spear haft lodged in his guts, the leaf-bladed edge having punched right through and out of his back on the other side. He dangled there for a moment, blinking dumbly, before the gold-clad warrior kicked his body loose. Silence hung in the air, suspended by shock and disbelief.

Then the crowd roared. Light flooded the arena, a cold and harsh sodium glow that threw grim shadows over a shallow pit of sand and half-crushed bones.

Blood pooled under Kabe’s body. He trembled, still alive, mouth agape and trying to catch air like a landed fish.

‘Damn it,’ Tarrigata murmured. ‘It’s over then.’ The old man standing next to me suddenly looked frail. Perhaps it was the thought of the money he had lost betting on Kabe, or perhaps it was because his ludus had just lost another fighter. His once fine garments had begun to look a little threadbare of late.

I spared him a half-glance as I leaned in to the arena barrier, ignoring the jostling crowd around us. I saw enough grief in his face to suggest his apparent fragility stemmed from something deeper than a blow to his ever-diminishing revenue stream. Fewer and fewer patrons turned up to the fights these days. They had other concerns on their minds, about war, about the killings and the riots. For the rest, this was how they forgot.

The gold-clad warrior advanced, whirling around the spear as he poised to stab down at Kabe.

The crowd roared louder in anticipation of the kill.

‘Heruk, is it over?’ Tarrigata asked, and I felt his thin fingers brush against my naked arm. ‘I can still hear them baying. Is it over? Has that chrono-gladiator not killed him yet?’

‘Stay here,’ I said, and felt Tarrigata’s fingers fall away as I leapt the plate barrier and jumped into the arena. The sand underfoot scattered as I landed.

A few onlookers noticed me and began to chant. I heard my
name and felt the chill of hollow glory that came with it. Battle was glorious, Mount Ararat when Arik Taranis raised the Lightning Banner and declared Unity, *that* was glorious. This was gutter glory. There was no honour is this.

The gold-clad warrior’s spear stabbed down before he realised there was another fighter in the ring. Kabe screamed, the leaf-blade stuck in his thigh. A second thrust pierced his shoulder and brought another scream.

‘If you’re going to kill him, kill him,’ I growled, glowering at the hulking warrior’s back.

We had all suffered enough already. This was needless.

The crowd roared louder, their faces hidden by the darkness now, and I was half-blinded by the glare of sodium lights anyway.

My eyes were better than Tarrigata’s, but they were not what they once had been. I blinked twice, trying to banish the blind spots as the warrior turned. A chrono-gladiator, over-muscled on stimms and sheathed in gold armour plate. I saw a parody of His Adeptus Custodes in the grossly swollen fighter before me and could not resist a smile. Down here beneath the Maw, we were far from the Throne’s light, but we still found humour despite our misery.

The death clock in the fighter’s forehead turned. His owner, Radik Clev, would be close and waiting with a key. Victory for the chrono would see another key turn in the death clock. More life for more life. That’s how it worked with a chrono. I only had meagre honour to fight for. What was that against trying to perpetuate one’s existence?

The spear turned, the change in grip unnecessarily elaborate, and it pointed at me. The chrono’s eyes were bloodshot, the veins threading the sclera describing madness. As the death clock ticked down, its strikes grew louder. Like a heartbeat. He bayed at me, more beast than man. The challenge was deep and vox-modulated enough to make it sound inhuman. But then again, I was not really
human either.

I bared my teeth in a feral snarl, the rekindling of some old instinct, and drew a broad-bladed sword. My thumb activated the disruptor field, which flickered dangerously, once, twice, before snapping to consistency. Heat and ozone filled my nostrils. There was oil and blood, too, but that was coming off the chrono. And Kabe as he bled out. I could see him, reaching impotently for his broken falchion.

‘Should’ve just killed him,’ I said.

The chrono charged.

I rolled, swinging my broad-blade behind me as I made to move. I heard the crowd gasp and felt the spear miss my head by a few inches. Back on my feet, I managed to turn and see the spear before it gutted me. A hasty parry deflected it aside, but I had been lucky. And too slow.

A second thrust almost wrenched away my sword, the strength behind the blow horrific enough to rock me on my heels. I rolled again, old bones and tired muscles beginning to work. This time I came up faster, inside the chrono’s guard and well within the reach of the spear. I hacked at the crease in the chrono’s arm, at the elbow. It wasn’t a bad wound, but his armour was weak in that spot and my blade bit deep. The chrono howled and his grip on the spear faltered. Hard to hold on to something that long and heavy when your tendons are screaming.

He swung the haft crosswise, and though I had prepared for the riposte, it still stung like the impact from a shock grenade and I was smashed across the arena floor.

Cheers erupted from the crowd. I ignored them.

My blurring vision fixed on my enemy.

Bleeding oil and blood, the chrono stomped towards me. He held the spear close to his body and used his other hand to steady it. That would impede his reach. He was six feet away, about to thrust,
when I flung my broad-blade. It spun in the air, the slightly curved edge and weighted pommel enhancing the velocity of the throw. It struck the chrono’s centre mass, breaching the gold breastplate and making a mess of whatever was beneath.

He stared dumbfounded, the spear still poised as if recorded via a pict-feed abruptly set to pause, before slumping to his knees and dropping his weapon. Scooping up Kabe’s sword, I stepped in and swiftly cut off the chrono’s head. The death clock struck zero, presaging a now impotent cardiac impulse that would have killed him on the spot were he not already headless.

As the crowd went insane at the spectacle, hollering and spitting vicarious fury, I retrieved my blade and then knelt beside Kabe to return his.

I looked down at the blood pool and saw myself reflected there. Tall, thickly muscled and wearing leather half-armour, I had a warrior’s bearing. Facial scarring gave me character some said, and shaved blond hair spoke of a military background. My body was unmarked, apart from the lightning bolt tattoo on my left shoulder. My blue eyes flashed with some of their old vigour. I have been told I am handsome by conventional standards. Vanity was never my curse. I have seen it affect others, allies and enemies. It didn’t change how they died. Death is ugly. It makes no allowances for appearance.

‘Brother…’ I said, gently putting the falchion in Kabe’s grasping hand. He seemed to settle, though his mouth still worked in a futile parody of speech.

‘There’s blood in your lungs, Kabe. Don’t try to speak. Be still. It’s almost over now.’

He looked at me and the fear in his eyes changed to something approaching peace.

I placed the tip of my sword against his heart. With my other hand, I touched the faded lightning bolt tattoo inked onto his left
shoulder.

‘The honoured death...’ I whispered. Kabe gave a near imperceptible nod. I thrust, and it was done.

Tarrigata met me on the other side of the arena wall. He looked thin in the stark lights, as if his flesh were partly translucent. He sniffed at the air as I clambered over, head tilted to the side so his left ear angled towards me.

‘Is that Kabe? He stinks. Smells dead already.’

I leaned in close, grimacing with Kabe’s dead weight across my right shoulder.

‘Show respect for the Thunder Legion,’ I hissed through clenched teeth.

Despite my massive advantage in both height and weight, Tarrigata looked untroubled.

‘Pah! You’re gladiators now, Heruk.’

‘Old man, I swear I’ll—’ I began.

‘Fewer customers today,’ remarked Tarrigata, breezing past my hollow threat as if it were a fly landed on his collar to be swatted away. ‘A quieter mob.’

‘Fewer everyone,’ I said. ‘Even the great Thunder Legion can’t draw a crowd, eh?’

‘No crowds to draw,’ said Tarrigata. He sniffed, his withered old nostrils flaring. ‘Fear is in the air. Dark dealings abound.’

I snorted at that, having heard Tarrigata’s conspiracies many times before.

‘Besides,’ the old man went on, a cruel smile on his face, ‘you’re not Legion. You haven’t been Legion since Ararat.’

‘He’s right, Heruk. We are nothing now. Just arena fighters, and Tarrigata our dominus.’

‘We are more than that, Vez,’ I said, looking into the eyes of the
bearded giant who had just stepped in front of me.

Vezulah Vult carried more scars than any warrior I have known or killed. He wore them proudly. As big as I was, he stood a head taller, his torso and shoulders like an inverted triangle.

‘Are we, Dah?’

I scowled. ‘At least we’re surviving. Here,’ I gently set Kabe down, ‘help me with him.’ Around the arena, a few of the crowd had lingered to catch a glimpse of the fallen gladiator but most had already begun to disperse, back to the Maw, back to their own personal misery.

‘Such a waste,’ spat Tarrigata, and rattled the coin purse that he carried looped to the belt around his waist. He shook it three times, listening.

‘It’s light,’ I said.

‘Don’t need you to tell me that!’ snapped Tarrigata, whirling on me. He jabbed a wizened finger to the hollow sockets of his eyes. ‘I might have lost my eyes, but I still see plenty. Touched by Him above, I was,’ he said, gesturing to the thickening smog that blanketed our sky. I followed with my eye and saw the vague shapes of statues looming like gods.

‘Your eyes were burned as an astropath, Tarrigata,’ I said.

‘That’s why you should listen when I say dark things are afoot, even here in the Maw. I have seen them… from the beyond.’

‘And you are hunted just like the rest of us vermin,’ I added.

Tarrigata showed his yellowed teeth with an ugly smile. ‘Aye, but you still serve, don’t you?’

‘The Legion ever serves,’ Vezulah replied. His voice sounded different as he reached for the axe tethered at his waist.

I seized his arm. ‘Hold, brother,’ I told him firmly. ‘The war is over.’

He looked through me at some latter day battlefield, his eyes clouded and unblinking.
‘Kalagann has mustered a host on the wastes…’ He struggled against my grip and I clenched tighter, my old Legion ring biting into his skin. ‘The hordes of Ursh will fall this day!’

A few stragglers amongst the crowd had turned to look at what was going on.

‘The butchers of Sibir will yield to the Emperor!’

‘They already did. Long ago,’ I said. ‘Take hold of your senses, Vez. Look at me. Look at me.’

He turned, blinked once and released his grip on the axe. I released him.

‘Did I drift again?’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘Where to this time?’

‘Ursh, the Sibir ice plain.’

Vezulah looked down as if to calculate what this fresh slip of his sanity meant for the long term.

‘Are you back, brother?’ I asked. ‘In the here and now?’

‘I am… I am.’

I felt Tarrigata relax behind me, and heard the rad pistol he carried under his robes powering down. He’d never fired it and I wondered how much of its degrading energy coil was leaking lethal radiation into the old man, but he wouldn’t be parted from it. The last of the crowd moved on, seemingly disappointed.

A timeworn shanty town lay just off the outskirts of the arena. Known as the Swathe, it stretched for miles across the Outer Palace districts, an agglomeration of broken ships, industry-grade cargo containers, armour plate and anything else that fell from the smog-choked sky. Tarrigata’s hab was the largest in the underbelly, and built to impress. Like the man who owned it, the hab had seen more prosperous times. He was a beggar-king rapidly reverting back to just a beggar.

‘Get him up,’ said Tarrigata, meaning Kabe’s corpse, ‘take what
you can use and burn the rest. I don’t want scavengers coming around.’ He turned, listening again, sniffing at the air.

‘And for frek’s sake, where is Gairok? I should smell the stink of unrefined alc-grain by now. He’s bloody due.’

Underneath an awning outside a granite stoop was a heavy wooden slab. Wood is rare, especially in the Swathe. Tarrigata used it as a mortuary block. He said the wood soaked up the blood, which it did. The slab was run through with dark stains, like a patchy veneer.

Vezulah and I set Kabe’s body on it.

‘The next fight isn’t for a few hours yet,’ I said, breaking out the saws and other surgical tools from a caged rack set up next to the mortuary block. I handed one to Vezulah who began to cut. ‘He’ll be here.’

‘He had better be,’ said Tarrigata. ‘A death and a no-show… I’ll be ruined!’

‘Down here, how will any of us ever tell the difference?’ I muttered, watching Tarrigata climb up the stoop and into his hab.

Vezulah worked. He had already cut away Kabe’s armour, his trappings, and was harvesting the organs now. We were ghouls, those of us who remained. Our continued existence depended on the deaths and successful appropriation of the parts of our former brothers in arms.

As well as being our dominus, Tarrigata possessed the means and craft to transplant those parts. In that respect at least, the relationship was mutually dependant.

Dwelling on the notion of what we had all become, I looked up through a ragged tear in the awning. Yellow cloud cast a filthy pall over everything, but below it I saw the screw-thread circles of the Maw, all the way from uphive to this nadir. If the Maw was the well leading down from Terra above, then the Swathe was the effluvia caught at the bottom.
Factorums and refineries and bullet farms clung to the rings of the Maw like diseased limpets attached to the gullet of a deep sea leviathan. Occasionally, one of these structures would fall, cast down to us dregs, and so the shanties would slowly expand, colonising the basin like some septic growth.

Terra looked very different from down here.

‘I still dream of glory, Dah,’ said Vezulah. His voice dragged me back to the present. I feared he might be slipping again, but his eyes were lucid as he butchered Kabe. Machine parts, as well as glistening organs sat amongst the useless offal. Work, even red work, helped to focus the mind.

He paused, the knife edge dripping, his arms crimson all the way to the elbow. ‘Sometimes it’s hard to determine whether this or the living present is my reality.’

‘I understand,’ I said softly. ‘All too well.’

Deep down, I know. In my marrow, in my cancer-ridden core, I know.

‘The old days are gone, I know that,’ said Vezulah. ‘The days of the storm, of Unity. They were killing days, red days, of war and conquest. Empires kneeled to Him, they kneeled to us…’ He paused, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the handle of the saw but making no cut. ‘I miss them.’

‘So do I, Vez. But we are not what we once were. We have lived too long. It’s just some of us are too stubborn to die.’

I took the machine parts, Kabe’s old cybernetics, and started to wash them down using an old handle-operated pump. The liquid was unfit to drink and irritated the skin, but it got rid of the blood just fine. The organs went into large apothecary flasks, and were preserved in a viscous solution of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde and methanol. This I had learned from Tarrigata.

‘You can take those, now,’ said Vezulah. ‘I can manage the burning alone.’ A furnace stood at the back of Tarrigata’s property.
Kabe’s final rest.

I nodded, hefting the organ flask, then asked. ‘You are yourself, brother?’

‘I am myself.’

‘And if you are ever not?’

Vezulah met my gaze. His eyes looked steady but resigned.

‘Then grant me the honoured death.’

‘The honoured death,’ I replied, and headed for Tarrigata’s hab.

Inside the hab, the darkness took a little getting used to. It was cramped, the ceiling so low that I had to stoop. Tarrigata was a hoarder. He had shelves of machine parts from old gladiators, and jars of briny liquid filled with slowly atrophying organs. He kept everything regardless of its use. I found him sitting at a battered plastek chair, bent-backed and frowning over his counting device.

‘Radik Clev will seek recompense for his loss,’ he told me, before leaning back to take a draw of his *kiseru*. A plume of smoke issued from the long-necked pipe, the hairs in the bowl flaring brightly as Tarrigata sucked at them. ‘In turn, this debt shall come to you.’

‘I am sorry, dominus,’ I said, setting down the apothecary flasks wherever I could find space.

‘You killed his fighter, so there is that,’ added Tarrigata, ‘and you also illegally interrupted Kabe’s bout. For that, too, I must pay.’

‘Again, I am sorry.’

‘Sorry does not pay debts!’ he snapped, and a coughing fit wracked his body.

I went to help but Tarrigata warded me off with a trembling hand. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve when the fit was over, before taking a long, shuddering pull of his kiseru.
‘I will make amends,’ I said.
Tarrigata slowly nodded. ‘Yes, you will. Go into the Swathe. Find Gairok. Bring him here or the organ supply will dry up.’
Such things we must do to survive.
‘You have my word, dominus,’ I said, bowing as I made to leave. ‘I don’t care about your word, or your honour, Heruk. Just bring him. And do it fast.’

A vessel hovered just above the smog layer. Its sleek contours shone golden in the light of uphive. A Coronus grav-carrier. It had come from the Tower of Hegemon on a special mission appointed by Valdor himself.

A single warrior sat within the shadowy hold, alone with his thoughts until that moment, his golden battle-helm in both hands.
‘Ever since Nas’sau have we fought for Terra,’ said a voice through the warrior’s vox-link, the first he had heard in several hours.
He looked up, green eyes as vivid and bright as emerald. The hold doors began to open, admitting light and atmosphere.
‘You know what has to be done?’ asked the voice.
The warrior nodded. ‘I am clear in my duty.’
‘Find them, Tagiomalchian.’
Tagiomalchian donned his helmet, and a flurry of systems flickered to life across the retinal display.
He stood, securing his sentinel blade and storm shield. He then attached a monofilament wire to his armour. It was fed by a long spool bolted to the hold, and mag-locked to the auramite with a dull tunk. Tagiomalchian approached the yawning hold doors, the wire unspooling as he walked. He perched on the edge, cloak whipping in the breeze, and looked down into the smog-layer. His eyes narrowed behind the lenses of his helm.
‘I will find them,’ he whispered, before stepping off into oblivion.

The Abyssna burned. I couldn’t see it, the smoke was obscuring my vision, but I could smell it and hear it. The burning flesh of the soldiers inside, the crack of stone as the walls baked in the inferno and the shrilling of screams. Unity had come.

Thick ash swept across killing fields outside a grand fortress now swollen with the prince’s dead. Their sortie had failed to break our lines and reach our siege guns. The Imperial Army artillerymen, also lost to my sight, had kept up a relentless barrage. Such violent music. My heart beat with it, soaring from its thunderous melody.

Now we pushed, and pushed hard. The Afrik sun blazed. I sweltered in my heavy armour, and the heat from my skin began to fog my visor. Vezulah stood nearby, calling the charge, summoning even greater fury from the Thunder Legion and the heat intensified.

We ran, having left our grav-ships behind, bolters running hot with continued use.

A round clipped my shoulder guard, penetrated and bit into flesh. I snarled, using anger to quash the pain, and looked to the Lightning Banner. It was almost all I could see through the smoke that wasn’t right in front of me.

Somewhere in its vicinity fought the Emperor. Even His presence, remote and unseen, galvanised me. For a few seconds, the smoke thinned and I caught the flash of gold amidst the grey.

‘There,’ said the voice of Gairok behind me, and I felt his gauntleted hand on my arm subtly directing me. ‘Custodians… Lions in the guise of men.’

‘So it’s said.’

‘Shall we show them how the Thunder Legion fights?’ he asked, and I turned to see his toothy grin.
I had no time to admire their bloody skill at arms before the smoke swallowed them again.

‘Aye, brother!’

Gairok laughed, loud and bold, heedless of the bullets coming at us through the smoke. He gestured into the greyness.

‘Then here’s your chance!’

A deep, resounding crack announced the felling of the northern tower.

‘Let us ram a gladius straight down prince cretin’s throat, eh, Dah?’

Then we were running, our entire cohort, as Vezulah sounded a fresh charge.

‘Do you even know his name, Gairok?’ I asked.

Gairok shook his head. ‘So many petty barons, oligarchs and warlords, what does it matter? All will kneel and embrace Unity, or die. Now we show them how.’

The northern tower fell with slow, inexorable grace. It carved through the smoke like a sword, crumbling and disintegrating with every plummeting foot. The crash when it finally struck the ground shook the battlefield like an earthquake, dispersing huge swathes of smoke and revealing our enemy.

Pale-faced and sweating in grey uniforms under brass breastplates and wearing spiked helms, they looked determined but afraid. They ranked up in files and took careful aim.

Sporadic weapons fire scythed from the breach in the Abyssna’s wall. Mainly carbines and the odd energy cannon. Shields raised, our cohort advanced.

‘Let the reaping begin!’ roared Gairok, and I felt his battle fervour infect me.

I swept through the gap in the wall, leaping over rubble and the wounded trapped under it, and set about those who could still fight.

Bellowing, I cut off a rifleman’s head. I caught a glimpse of
Gairok, who cried out, ‘The Afrik sun is hotter in the breach, eh, Dah!’ His blade was reddest of all. Our charge had decimated the defenders. Their ranks buckled, then broke. And then I heard Vezulah shouting. Horns were blowing. Victory neared, but the bloodletting was far from over. I killed two men with a single thrust, impaling both on my sword, but the dead dragged down my arm and I caught a glancing blow to the skull. I felt my helm crack. It had saved my life, but dizziness pushed me to my knees. I spat blood, shook off the pain and nausea, and looked up…

I found myself in the Silo, with a burly, half-armoured warrior standing over me. Gone was the Afrik sun, and in its place the dinginess of a lower Swathe dive bar. The warrior had craggy features, with a bald scar-laced scalp, and brandished a metal hook. It had the look of an improvised weapon.

Gone the power armour he once wore, a studded leather hauberk now served in its place.

‘Gairok…’ I slurred his name as I tried to piece together the fragments of what had happened between leaving Tarrigata’s and this moment.

Rather than strike me down, Gairok offered his hand. His skin shone red in the flickering lumen light.

‘Stand, brother,’ he said. Aspirated blood spattered his face. The veins in his neck bulged, and he breathed with feverish intensity. The grin that cut a white crescent in his features looked forced. Pained.

‘Gairok,’ I said again, standing and looking around. The dead surrounded us, gutted and torn up, all the wretched patrons of the Silo. The sweet, cloying scent of alc-grain mingled with the coppery stench of blood. The floor of the bar shone with it.

‘Did you… did you do this, Gairok?’ I asked, and felt the reassuring grip of my short sword as I slid it from the scabbard.

Gairok blinked, once, twice. His eyes were bloodshot. Sweat
lathered his skin. I saw it almost glitter in the lumen light. His grin became a frown, a rabid beast struggling to comprehend its illness. How far was I from such a fate? The hand that gripped the hook tightened, and I felt my body tense.

He had been vital, strong of mind and purpose. I didn’t recognise the man in front of me.

‘Where are you, Gairok?’ I asked, trying to ignore the blood.

I have never seen him so weak. Gairok held the breach at Abyssna. He fought on the Sibir ice plain when the atomics rained down.

‘The Afrik sun is hotter in the breach, Dah,’ he said, but his mind was absent and his words a pale echo of those spoken to me years ago.

‘This isn’t the Abyssna, brother. Gairok… where are you? Try to think.’

He cast about, lost, searching the dead. None answered. ‘Sibir… No… *hnng*…’ He pressed a hand against his skull as if trying to keep his tattered sanity from spilling out, until his words slurred beyond comprehension.

Then he came at me with the hook, eyes wild, spitting froth.

‘Unity!’ he cried, barely articulate, a moan of despair as much as it was a remembered shout of triumph.

I blocked the overhand blow with my forearm, though Gairok’s strength was ferocious. With the other hand I slid out my short sword and rammed it deep into my brother’s chest. He struggled at first, madness lending him strength, until I carved and carved, and the blood and innards sluiced out onto the dirty floor. Gairok grew limp and I cradled his body to the ground to stop him from falling.

As he lay there amidst the dismembered corpses of his madness, I gently withdrew my blade.

Blood bubbled in the froth on Gairok’s lips. It reminded me of Kabe.
He blinked again, and I saw some lucidity return in his eyes.

‘We were… not meant… to last.’

The last of his life choked out of him and I held him until it was over. There was blood on his Legion tattoo and I wiped it away before I could no longer hold up my head.

I knew Kabe, I had fought alongside him as a sword-brother, but Gairok had been my friend. I wept for his passing, choking to death in some dirty Swathe bar.

‘Where is the honour for us?’ I asked the darkness, but silence answered.

My own words came back to me then.

_We have lived too long._

I got to my feet, heavy with grief, and hauled Gairok onto my back. I wouldn’t leave him here, not like this. Something was wrong with us. I hoped Tarrigata would know what to do.

Tagiomalchian descended through a cloud of smog. The monofilament wire held him steady, thin enough to be invisible to the naked eye, robust enough to harbour a load many times his weight.

Drawn up over armour, the falsehood Tagiomalchian wore kept him hidden from sight.

A counter cycled down on his retinal display. When it hit fifty feet, he disengaged the mag-clamp and fell the rest of the way to the ground. A tiny grav pulse built into his armour cushioned his landing and he rose up from a crouched position to cast his gaze across the vast shanty town before him.

‘Landfall achieved. I remain undetected,’ he said, the sound of his voice baffled by the ambient neutralisers built into his helm array.

The same voice from the Coronus replied, similarly shrouded.
Only Tagiomalchian could hear it.

‘Target location identified,’ it said over the vox. A hololithic schematic overlaid the terrain Tagiomalchian saw through his retinal lenses. ‘Your quarry is in the Swathe.’

‘Status request.’

‘Covert.’

‘Duration?’

‘As long as possible. Until detected.’

‘Kill or capture?’

‘Kill. And eradicate all trace.’

‘Confirmed. Request data inload.’

It took a few seconds. A small beacon lit up on the hololithic render.

‘Deeper than I thought,’ Tagiomalchian murmured, not intending to be heard but the baffle also focused vox-audio to the listener.

‘It’s a warren, Tagiomalchian, and there are rats lurking within.’

‘Then I had best start digging.’

Sump harvesters plied the chemical soup coagulating at the edge of the Swathe. Their nets and hooks dragged and snapped for salvage. Smoking ragsticks, coughing up their cancer-ridden lungs, slowly dying from the toxins in their blood, they gave no heed to the golden warrior striding in their midst. They didn’t even blink.

Gairok was a heavy burden, and it took several hours to reach the arena. As I neared the outskirts, I saw the smoke. Tarrigata’s hab was in flames. Laying down Gairok’s body, I drew my sword and ran. I thought it might be the work of Radik Clev, retaliation for what I had done to his chrono-gladiator. Upon entering the shanty town, I knew it wasn’t revenge. Madness reigned here. I found the dead. Eviscerated, beheaded and dismembered, they littered the place, ripped up like a butcher’s leavings.
A pressure began to build behind my temples and I pressed a hand to my head to ward it off. Pain, like a fathomless dive into a deep ocean, threatened to put me down, but I resisted. I smelled smoke, from Tarrigata’s hab, from the Abyssna and struggled to tell which was real and which was not.

A chill pricked my face, but I knew the atmosphere in the Swathe was sweltering. I remembered the Sibir ice plain and dared not look up for fear of seeing the atomics falling again. Then I was at Ararat, bellowing with Arik Tyrannis as he raised the Lightning Banner.

And then Hy Brasil and Ursh and Albia.

My skull throbbed. The dreams of Unity were relentless, and I powerless to command them.

In the end I focused on my sword, and held it tight across my body, thinking of its solidity, its permanence, its reality.

I resurfaced from the dream, sweating, skin burning with fever. I was on my knees, a watery pool of sick in front of me. I spat the taste of it from my mouth and hurried to Tarrigata’s hab. As I kicked down the door, heat and smoke assailed me. I hadn’t seen Vezulah during the frantic rush through the shanty and wondered if I would find him within, blood-mad like Gairok had been. I plunged inside, holding my breath, and warding my face with my forearm.

A few of the shelves had collapsed, either in the heat or during some struggle that had preceded this mess. I hacked through one, vaulted another until I found Tarrigata on his side, choking from smoke inhalation.

He turned his head at my approach. Fear contorted his face. He cried out, a pathetic, plaintive sound, as I swept in and gathered up his frail body into my arms. Thin fingers raked at my skin like needles. He fought, but with the strength of an enfeebled child.

‘Be still,’ I warned him, ‘or we’ll both die in this shit hole.’

His struggles eased, either at the sound of my voice or because he
had used up what fight he had left. The fire was rising, spreading across the walls and ceiling. It crawled like a mudslide, hungrily devouring everything it touched. I heard shattering glass and realised the flasks were slowly cooking off. The chemical mixtures within would act as an accelerant.

Cradling Tarrigata against my body, I smashed headlong through the back of the hab and kicked through the rear door to emerge on the other side. We had barely made it six feet when the old shack and furnace exploded, sending up a plume of fiery debris and smoke into the air.

No crowd had gathered. Everyone was either dead or in hiding.

I carried Tarrigata clear and set him down on an old threadbare chair. Its arms were missing and patches of the synth-leather had flaked away to reveal mildewed sponge beneath. His breath rattled, and his skin looked so pallid that I knew he didn’t have long.

‘Where is Vezulah?’ I asked him firmly.

The old man’s head lolled to the side and I gently grasped it by the chin, turning it to face me.

‘Tarrigata, you’re dying. I’m sorry. But I need to know.’

Sudden urgency gripped him and he lurched towards me, mouth working but the words struggling to come at first. I leaned in, so the old man could whisper his truth into my ear.

‘He’s… he’s coming.’

Then he slumped back, sagging like a deflated lung and stirred no more.

‘He’s not. Vez is gone.’

I looked down and saw he had pressed the rad pistol into my hands. I didn’t know if he meant for to use it on myself or Vezulah, but I took it and put it in the empty holster attached to my weapons belt.

I tore a strip of cloth from under my armour to wrap around Tarrigata’s eyeless sockets. Tying the blindfold in place, I took a
deep breath and laid my hand upon his forehead.

‘You old bastard, you tried to stop him didn’t you?’
Standing, I looked down on Tarrigata’s withered body. Death had diminished him.

‘That’s my burden now. I’ll stop him. I’ll end it.’

Tagiomalchian swept unseen through the narrow alleyways and tunnels of the Swathe. He moved swiftly, the locator beacon flashing in his retinal lens growing closer with every second. In the distance, black smoke plumed into the sky, casting a funerary pall.

He found the first real evidence of his quarry at a dive bar that had been transformed into a charnel house. The heady stench of low-grade alc-grain and cooled viscera invaded his nostrils. He let it. As an Ephroi he had been trained to seek out evidence. He smelled transhuman blood, then engaged the internal vox.

‘Could be Legion,’ he said, ‘those who escaped the purge.’
‘Proceed with caution.’

Tagiomalchian nodded to himself. He knelt down to turn over one of the ragged bodies. His eyes drew to slits behind his retinal lenses.

‘That’s interesting…’ It looked like a burn mark in the shape of–

A nagging sense of wrongness made Tagiomalchian turn. He had barely reached for his sword when he was smashed off his feet.

I followed the trail Vezulah had left. It wasn’t hard, and I wondered if in some part of his still-lucid mind that he wanted me to find him. To end him. I hoped I could, I hoped I could stave off the madness that had turned Gairok and Vezulah too.

I thought of Tarrigata, of the old man choking half to death as he fled for life. I could not reconcile with Vezulah being responsible for that. Even drifting as he often did, Vezulah would not have
raised a hand to the old man. But perhaps he didn’t know. The dreams, I had felt them. Vivid, persuasive. The desire for past glory was an effective blindfold.

I ran through the Swathe, getting fearful looks from its inhabitants. The dregs lingered here in the deeps and they wanted to be left alone in misery and squalor. Some brandished weapons, ready to defend their sorry lives, but they were empty threats. Others took refuge in their hovels, hunkering down and shutting their eyes, as if waiting for a storm to pass.

In an ancient part of the district, I found a Legion mark carved into a stone stairwell. The old lightning bolt led me downwards into a catacomb. I knew this place. It was called the Flood, the deepest part of the Swathe. Ancient columns streaked with grime rose up to a curved and vaulted ceiling. It had been beautiful once, but as with so many things age had stolen its glory. Parts of the Flood had collapsed, surrendering to the agglomerated weight of the levels above. I clambered over a sloping heap of debris, slewed across my path like a bulging sack had split its stitches and spewed into the main thoroughfare, its contents left to sit where they may. I seldom came here. I had no cause, but wondered what Vezulah’s might be.

‘Is this our last battlefield, brother?’ I asked of the dark, and was surprised when it answered.

‘I have fought my last battle already, Dah.’

I found him leaning against the curved catacomb wall, a hand across his stomach holding everything in. Something wet and dark gleamed between Vezulah’s trembling fingers. His broken axe lay next to his body, the blade acid-burned in two.

‘Vez…’ I knelt down beside him. He looked deathly in the flickering glow of the overhead phosphor lamps.

‘Are you armed?’ he rasped.

I frowned, about to gesture to my drawn sword and the broad-blade strapped to my back when I realised Vezulah was blind. A
milky sheen covered his eyes, and there were burn marks around the sockets and across his face.

‘Acid…’ he said, correctly assuming the reason for my silence. ‘Forgot they could do that.’ He laughed, but the effort cost him. ‘He gave them all the gifts, didn’t He. And left us to fester and rot.’ He reached out and grabbed my arm, fumbling with his blindness. ‘We should not have lasted this long.’

I held his head to the light, trying to examine the ghastly injuries to his face. He resisted as if ashamed of his condition. ‘The gut wound is fatal,’ he hissed, teeth clenched with a sudden flare of pain.

‘Who did this?’ I asked, and let him go. I peered into the darkness but found no attackers lurking. ‘They were among us, Dah,’ he said. ‘Hiding in the Swathe. I fought them. They ran and led me here. Left me to die.’ He grimaced, and I felt the pull of Vezulah’s mortal thread growing taut.

‘Who, brother? Who hid from us?’ ‘A mark, red-raw, like a brand…’ He pointed to his left cheek, his finger lathered in blood. ‘They said his name. Said…’

I grabbed his armoured collar, and wrenched him to me. ‘Tell me, brother! Let me avenge you.’ ‘Said… he is coming.’ Vezulah let out a long shuddering breath, and it was over. I had been wrong. Vezulah hadn’t slaughtered the settlement or left Tarrigata to die. But someone had.

Head bowed, I shut my eyes and felt the heft of the rad pistol against my leg. I considered drawing it. My fingers closed around the grip. A single shot, if it could still fire. Left temple.

I opened my eyes and let the pistol go. ‘For Unity…’ I muttered, and laid my Legion ring in Vezulah’s lap.
‘The enemy within.’ A mark, a name. That’s what Vezulah had said. I had heard stories, most of them from Tarrigata. War was coming. Some said it had already arrived, that traitors were among us.

At the faint clash of steel I looked up.

I got to my feet and ran through the catacombs, chasing the sounds of battle.

Tagiomalchian limped into the catacombs, ignoring the pain beneath his cracked auramite armour. A shredded falsehood lay somewhere in his wake. The cloak had proven ineffective against his quarry, which had sensed him by unnatural means. Its blood, or what passed for blood, slicked the edge of his sentinel blade. The weapon weighed heavy in his grasp. So did the shield on his back, and he knew that the creature had hurt him. But he had also hurt it.

‘Mark my location,’ he said into the vox.

‘You sound injured.’

Tagiomalchian gritted his teeth. ‘Mark it.’

A brief pause suggested another enquiry was coming, but in the end it didn’t materialise. Instead, a different interrogative.

‘Are you close, Tagiomalchian?’

‘I am.’

‘Is it them?’

Few knew of the attack on the Throneworld by the Alpha Legion. In the end it had been contained and the immediate threat neutralised. Concerns remained. There had been ‘incidents’. One at the Plaintive Reach watch station had been difficult to suppress. Rumours had leaked out into the districts. Madness swept throughout Terra. The Warmaster was coming. Sympathisers had sprung up in the populace. Cults. A purge had been ordered, a cleansing fire in the face of the oncoming corruption.
The harbingers of that corruption stood before Tagiomalchian. ‘It’s them,’ he said, and shut off the vox.

Tagiomalchian had emerged into the flickering light of a subterranean hall. The tunnels had led him here. An icy chill touched him even through his armour. The hall’s original purpose had been obscured by time and invention. An old bathhouse, perhaps, its rusted copper pipes still visible but only partially intact. A pair of handle-driven pumps shaped into the mouths of heraldic gryphonnes fed a deep basin, but were seized in place by decay. Flaking filigree spoke of mythic seaborne beasts but those artistic images had been perverted.

Something more ancient and primal stood in this place now. Torches burned eagerly in iron sconces, letting off a cloying scent of fouled meat and sour milk. A rimy scum of blood, not water, ringed the edge of the basin where a symbol had been crudely drawn in a tarry black substance. Candles guttered, clumped like overgrown weeds. Their waxy stems gave off the stink of animal fat.

Tagiomalchian raised his sword. Gilded whorls and ornate intaglio caught the light. A crackle of energy ran up the blade.

A short row of steps led up to the old bathhouse dais. Dark streaks ran down the grimy stone. It waited for him here, as he knew it would be waiting ever since it had tasted his blood. A ragged black cloak sat around its armoured shoulders, draped over scaled war-plate the colour of forgotten seas. Strange, organic spines poked through its sackcloth mantle. It needed no weapons. Its fingers ended in long talons that had tasted Tagiomalchian’s blood. It had been a legionary once, but now something else had taken residence in the mortal flesh it wore.

‘Abomination,’ declared Tagiomalchian, unhurried as he climbed the steps and so calm he could have been commenting on the weather. His gaze stayed on the legionary, but he was also aware of
the robed figures by its side. Eight men and women. Though they were hooded, and stood over several bodies in the basin. Partly clotted blood rimed the drainage grate, clinging to the metal and darkening the rust at the edges.

The robed figures each bore the brand of the hydra on their cheek, so did the dead. Willing sacrifices. Each mark looked freshly made and raw, just like the one Tagiomalchian had seen in the dive bar before he had been attacked.

A ritual circle had been drawn in the black tar. He was to be sacrificed. The Emperor’s blood flowed in his veins, potent and preternatural. That had meaning for these depraved creatures and the thing they served.

Amongst the robed supplicants, a demagogue stepped forwards.

‘He is coming,’ the woman uttered, without zeal as if she were simply speaking a fact.

‘Lupercal,’ the rest replied.

‘Lupercal,’ the cultists chimed as one.

‘Lupercal,’ echoed the legionary. He spoke in two voices in opposite registers. Then he leapt at Tagiomalchian.

I heard the crash of metal hitting stone, the sound of an armoured body borne down by something bigger and heavier. Flickering torchlight beckoned at the tunnel edge and the hint of a larger chamber began to come into being.

I smelled the ice plains again, heard the wind and fought to keep the old dreams at bay. Whatever had had its way in the Swathe, had killed Vezulah and led to Tarrigata’s death was here. I alone could reckon that debt and avenge the dead.

The rad pistol slapped at my thigh as I ran. The broad-blade felt leaden in my grasp, old muscles protesting even before this last battle. I ignored the pain and activated the disruptor. It flared then
failed. I tried again, still running, about to break through an archway and into the light. It flickered and held. The actinic crackle running along the blade tanged my mouth as though an electric current had just been laid across my tongue.

I breached the cordon of light and saw a golden warrior on his back, and a thing that defied understanding hacking at him with dagger-length talons. I knew the warrior, if not by name. A Custodian of the Emperor. I had fought beside them during the wars for Unity.

He half turned at my approach, expecting another enemy, but powerless to do anything about it if I was. His faceplate was impassive, but his struggle was far more obvious. The beast, the part- legionary, part-mutant that thrashed at the Custodian paid me no heed at all.

The eight figures on the bloody dais above them did and turned at once, opening their robes to reveal long, curved blades. Cultists.

*Tarrigata, you old bastard. You were right after all…*

Howling madness, they came at me.

I gutted the first, impaling him on the end of my sword. The disruptor field blew the body apart. Skin, bone and organs evaporated. The others seemed undeterred despite the spattering of gore. As I hacked the arm off one, I felt a blade cut into my bicep. It went deep and I stifled a growl of pain. Never show your weakness, the arena had taught me that. Another blade bit into my back. Now I roared. They had me surrounded. I felt the dreams of Unity pull at my mind. If I drifted now, I died, and so did the Custodian. Weakened, he struggled to fight back. The beast gored at him like prey it had brought down from the hunt. A few more minutes and it would be over.

I swung my arm, feeling a solid hit and the sharp crack of bone as one of the cultists flew like a broken spear haft and crashed somewhere out of my immediate sight. Holding the broad-blade
one-handed, I drew my short sword and staked another into the ground. Despite his mania, the wretch began to wail.

I finished off the partly dismembered cultist next, my skull splitting hers open like an egg. A wild slash of my broad-blade brought death to another, a disembowelling blow that sluiced the ground with his guts. Stamping on the one I had staked a moment before left two still standing.

The first rushed me, curved blade swinging. I extended a savage kick into his torso hard enough to penetrate the ribcage and snap through the spine. My boot came through his back and I had to shake off the ragged corpse. The last, the leader I think, slit her throat rather than face me, her body falling off the dais and into the empty basin to join the other bodies below.

Now the beast turned and in its gaze I saw something fathomless and evil. And I knew, in my marrow, it was no beast. At least, not of the natural order. All the stories I had heard, of the darkness coming to Terra, of the pacts made with beings older than the Imperium, I believed them.

Evil was amongst us, defying the Emperor’s rule of order. And I served the Emperor. I always have. I always will. It is my oath. It is the thunder and the lightning.

It threw the Custodian aside, casting him off like tough meat forgotten in preference of a sweeter kill. I brandished my sword.

‘For Unity!’ I roared.

We charged at each other, man against beast.

It struck like a tank, smashing me off my feet. My sword had barely cut a groove in armour that resembled arachnid carapace only many times more robust.

I staggered up, sword as heavy as a tombstone, skull pounding.

*The Sibir ice plain…*

*Smoke drifting from the Abyssna…*

Shaking off the dreams, I scarcely parried a slashing talon. It had
prodigious strength, the repelled blow nearly jolted loose my shoulder, but its presence felt... wrong. A deeper malaise, more than just physical pain began to wear at me. Old voices of the dead, visions of carnage yet to come. My own ignominious death, sacrificed to some entity from beyond…

I cried out, and realised its talons ripped at my flesh, taking a butcher’s fill. I swung, cutting off a hand or a claw. The appendage flopped to the ground, flipped from back to front and then scuttled, spider-like into the shadows.

Such horrors, I had barely seen the like.

I backed away and knew I was dying, not from the wasting of my limbs and mind, but from the wound it had dealt. I felt it. I knew it.

I barely had the strength remaining to lift my sword. I had dropped the other blade. It had scattered away into the same shadows where the spider-hand had sought refuge.

I slashed wildly, trying to hold off the beast. It laughed at my efforts, its voice inhuman enough to set the hairs on the back of my neck on end. Then I reached down, out of instinct or by design I could not be certain, and felt the grip of the rad pistol. The mark of Unity pressed against the palm of my hand as I wrenched it loose of the holster, not knowing if it would even fire.

I clenched the trigger.

A focused burst of intense radiation struck the beast in its torso. The mortal shell it wore shuddered. It sagged, momentarily weakened. In that moment I swung the broad-blade with every ounce of my strength and cleaved through shoulder, through torso, through neck. It should have been dead, but instead it mewled and staggered, its plaintive wailing enough to set my teeth on edge.

Then I fell, unable to stand any longer and felt the depth of my failure.

‘For Unity,’ I spat, blood lacing my phlegm.

‘For Unity,’ said the Custodian, risen up behind it, his great
golden blade splitting the beast’s head in two.

A second thrust of that perfect sword pierced where the heart should be, the beast now prostrate on the ground. A shriek tore from its mouth grille, a ghastly and inhuman sound. Tarry smoke issued from the joins in its armour like a guttering candle starved of air.

‘Is it dead?’ I asked, sunk to my knees and leaning heavily on the pommel of my sword.

The Custodian looked at me and I felt the weighing of judgement in his wary gaze. At length, he nodded.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes. You have my thanks…’

‘Heruk,’ I said, recognising the pause as an invitation, ‘Dahren Heruk.’

‘Thunder Legion?’

It was my turn to nod.

‘I thought your kind were all dead.’

‘We are. Near enough.’

‘Tagiomalchian. I am in your debt, Dahren Heruk. Terra is in your debt.’

‘Then I have one favour to ask of you,’ I said, raising my hand to stop Tagiomalchian from sheathing his sword.

He looked at me, that impassive mask as unreadable as a statue, but then I saw the slightest nod.

As the grip of mortality closed about me, I felt the dream. Smell and taste at first, but then I began to hear the cheers of victory as the Lightning Banner was lifted into the sky. I stood upon the slopes of Mount Ararat, Kabe and Gairok and Vezulah at my side.

Reality grew fleeting though I heard the soft clank of Tagiomalchian’s armour as he came to stand behind me, and the scrape of his blade as he brought it aloft.

‘Give me the honoured death,’ I said, and the cheers rose louder.

*Unity! Unity! Unity!*
I closed my eyes as tears of joy flowed down my face, and whispered.
‘For Unity…’
And heard the blade fall.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels Old Earth, Deathfire, Vulkan Lives and Sons of the Forge, the novellas Promethean Sun and Scorched Earth, and the audio dramas Censure and Red-Marked. His novella Feat of Iron was a New York Times bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, The Primarchs. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including Rebirth, the Space Marine Battles novel Damnos, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel The Great Betrayal and the Age of Sigmar story ‘Borne by the Storm’, included in the novel War Storm. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.
An extract from *The Buried Dagger*. 
As the Siege of Terra draws ever closer, Mortarion and his sons finally meet their destiny in the darkness of the warp.
The Reaper of Men had grown weary of the screaming.

The cries from a million throats, the ceaseless cacophony of it, now fatigued him. He had long since become jaded with the pleas of those he killed, be they babbling streams of words as the doomed begged for pity, the foolish and furious curses of the fatally enraged or the endless, irritating wail of those who wept brokenly.

There was, at least, a small mercy to be had here on the surface of Ynyx. The monstrously poisonous atmosphere of the manufactory planet meant that every soul who toiled upon the world had no mouth with which to cry out. From the instant of their birth, the machines of the magos biologis sealed shut the apertures upon the faces of the human populace, organo-printing protective membrane masks over lips and nostrils. The workers were implanted with grilles and nutrient intakes, along with countless chem shunts and protective grafts, these enhancements and alterations sufficient to make them immune to the toxic fog that belched continuously from the core of the mineral-rich
world. The people of Ynyx could only communicate via vox transmission, their voices muted in all other senses, and so it was that the Reaper of Men could walk in silence among them if he simply tuned them out.

The only sound was the rumble of the planet’s breath, forcing its way up through geothermal vents in the black landscape all around him, that and the steady crunch of brittle glass beneath his heavy plasteel boots. Scattered all over the battlefield, more numerous than the ragged remnants of dead bodies from the pre-invasion shelling, were endless numbers of empty cylindrical vials. Drug ampoules by the thousand, discarded by the Ynyxian defenders. Whatever effect they had brought – blissful oblivion, docility or merely resistance against the swirling churn of atmospheric contaminants – it counted for nothing. This world’s populace would be dead by nightfall, and it would not matter.

The cold ember of his familiar, obdurate resentment pushed him forward, one heavy and echoing step after the other, over the oily ebon sand towards the
great citadel that was his objective. At the edges of his supremely enhanced vision, the Reaper of Men was aware of his praetorians marching in lockstep with him, each at a distance of seven by seven paces, all carrying their weapons across their chests in a blank mirror of his own aspect.

Held at rest against one of his shoulders was a skeletal scythe that was sooty with dried blood and tainted fluids. His other gauntleted hand wandered often to the heavy, drum-like shape of a unique, master-crafted energy gun hanging at his hip. Like the warrior himself, everything about his weapons was beyond human scale, built for the grasp of giants and demigods. Even his chosen guard, huge as they were, could not match his scale. Only two beings had ever stood taller than the Reaper of Men; the first had died at the hands of the second. As to the fate of the second…

In time, that question would be answered. The old, bitter ember stirred anew at the thought, but the giant stifled it before it could grow. Such things were a distraction. His mind was supposed to be here, at the march through Ynyx’s polluted dusk,
not picking at this deep-rooted, forever unhealed wound. There would be time enough to nurse his lingering hate in the days ahead.

He cast a glance over his shoulder plates. Out past his hooded bodyguards, marching in lines behind them, came the body of his war band. Battle-captains and commanders, the striding forms of Dreadnoughts and Terminators, and rank after rank of legionaries in grimy, slate-coloured armour. He advanced with them at his heels, for they would never dare to march into battle without him at their head, even on as pitiful a killing ground as this one.

His Legion. His Death Guard. His unbroken blades.

They were all that occupied him now. His sons were the only thing he saw clearly, as the haze of the great insurrection led by his brother seemed to coil ever thicker around every deed, every thought in mind of the Reaper of Men. With his warriors, in battle, he came closest to clarity – or something like it.

He marched on, into the twilight and towards the great shadow cast by the citadel. The tallest
structure for kilometres in every direction, it protruded from a great axial canyon that ringed the upper hemisphere of Ynyx. Thousands of such depthless chasms fractured the planet’s surface, vanishing into hellish pits kilometres deep where toxic smoke exhaled from the roiling core. The ashen matter vomited up from below was the source of the world’s fortune, laden with rare and precious heavy metallic elements that the manufactora of the Imperium sucked in and reprocessed. The refinery engines – lumbering city-sized arachnids of tarnished brass and grey iron – sat atop the richest of the vents for decades at a time, draining them dry before moving on to fresh pastures.

Few places on Ynyx had any permanence except the great citadel, built on the ancient site of the planet’s first colony landing. Formed of sapphire-dark stone dragged up from the abyssal depths, it was both palace and monument. The blocky, brutalist architecture of its design was as stark as a grave marker, its mere presence acting as a statement to the universe beyond. We have built in this unliveable place and ripped out the riches at its heart, said the citadel. We have done this in the
name of the Emperor and Terra.

The Reaper of Men had his orders to cast it down, of course, but Mortarion would do so more because he wanted to. Because to do so would be to destroy one more possession belonging to his absent father, and in the act, find a few grains of satisfaction.

Movement at the edge of his helm’s auto-senses brought the primarch of the XIV Legion back to the moment, and he looked in the direction of the alert icon. Curious, he stepped off the line and wandered towards an impact crater blasted into the dense, clumped basalt sand. Behind him, he heard the clatter of a thousand troops halting, but he paid it no mind.

In the crater there were three humans who against all odds were still alive. Ynyxians, and not soldiers but civilians. Their physical alterations meant it was difficult for Mortarion to tell which of the genders they fell into or how old they were. Each wore the hood and eye-mask typical of their people, the feed tubules of their sealed mouths coiled in bunches against spoiled nutri-feed packs they carried around their necks.
They were so very afraid of him. He imagined that he could taste the odour of it in the ashen air. Mortarion had deliberately left his breath filters open wide so that he could drink in the noxious atmosphere of the spoiled world, and now he took in a great gale of it, feeling the subtle burn of the pollutants as they attempted to scar his mighty lungs. Unprotected, the weak bodily tissues of these humans would have melted to slurry before they could fully inhale, but for the Reaper of Men, the lethal air of Ynyx was no distraction.

He watched them, looking through the lenses of his helm, searching their faces for an understanding that would never emerge. It was a fruitless endeavour; these pitiful creatures were no different from the others. No matter how many he found on whatever planets, none of them could see past the fear. That same terror, buoyed up by the same hate simmering away just below it. They would never know him. They could not.

In those desperate, beseeching faces, he saw something familiar – the stirrings of a memory recalled by similarity. The Reaper of Men quickly
smothered the moment, irritated by the conceit of it.

Mortarion moved, letting the action happen of its own accord. His free hand drew the heavy energy weapon from its holster, and the device reacted, powering up the moment its gene-lock registered his touch. The Lantern, as the gun had been named, turned towards the figures cowering in the pit. They reacted, silently raising their hands in a gesture of warding. If they were screaming, he did not hear it.

A brief pulse of searing white light erased them from existence, their bodies becoming a faint trace of vapour in the moment of discharge. The Lantern’s shrieking power atomised the survivors and turned the surface layer of the crater into a bowl of fused fulgurite. He turned and marched away, leaving the newly formed glass crackling and hissing as it cooled.

What he had done for them was a mercy, a quick death. He knew all the kinds of dying, and to end by the Lantern’s flame was a better way than many. Mortarion had given them a gift.

He forgot the humans as he marched on, the image
of them slipping away as his thoughts returned to more martial matters. The primarch allowed his gaze to rise along the line of the darkened, windowless citadel, and the questions that had been nagging at him since the Death Guard arrived on Ynyx returned.

Why did Horus send me here?

Mortarion drew in another deep, tainted breath. There was little of tactical value to the manufactory world and the storehouse moons that orbited it, and less still to the other spheres of rock that circled the watery white light of Ynyx’s sun. The Death Guard had found the chem-loaded combat helots who defended the planet to be a perfunctory and unchallenging foe, rolling over their positions with the Legion’s signature tactic of inexorable advance. Tearing this planet from the control of the Imperium and denying it to the Emperor was a task that could have been accomplished by a handful of battle cruisers and lesser companies. The vast force and numbers that the Warmaster had bid Mortarion to bring to Ynyx was nothing short of overkill.

It vexed the Reaper of Men to be ignorant of Horus’
true reasoning, and in the void where answers ran out, he was wont to fill the gap with suspicion.

Mortarion knew of Horus’ dalliances with the beings of the warp, the things that called themselves the Ruinous Powers. These monstrous intelligences craved gifts of death and bloodletting, and while Mortarion did not speak openly of it, he was aware that among his rebellious brothers there were some who were all too eager to appease them. Worlds burned in mass sacrifices, and arcane horrors were committed as if such acts could court the favour of these… things.

He wondered, had Horus sent the Death Guard to exterminate the population of Ynyx as part of such a bargain?

Am I simply his tool in this?

Behind his breath mask, Mortarion’s pallid lips twisted in a grimace. Once, it would have been nigh-impossible for the primarch to think ill of Horus Lupercal. Now, his corrosive distrust had eaten away at that certainty. And perhaps that was fated. Over countless years and hard-won, bitter
experience, the Reaper of Men had learned that in the end, he could only completely trust his own counsel.

The more he dwelt on the possibility, the more it seemed to grow to fit the facts. Mortarion himself had dared to peer into the lore of these warp-beings, the creatures that some named daemons.

In the skies above the ruins of glorious Terathalion, he had looked into the face of such a monster for the first time, named it and interrogated it, for what little that had been worth. That had been the turning point, he reflected, the moment when he could no longer dismiss these aberrations out of hand.

The primarch’s long-dead foster father – the corrupted and callous being who had named him, the one he thought of when that notion came to mind – had taught him many lessons as he grew to adulthood, not least of which was the value of knowledge as well as endurance.

If you know the truth of something, then you can destroy it, his foster father had said. And that is all you need to hold true power.
Mortarion was learning a new truth, page by page, step by step, scroll by scroll. The witchery and sorcerous cankers he hated so much were widespread in this new and changed war, employed openly by Horus, that arrogant braggart Magnus and the rest of them. He detested the psykers and the warp-things with such an inchoate fury that it was impossible for him to find words to encompass the emotion, and he loathed his brother primarchs for lowering themselves to have congress with such creatures.

But Mortarion was a child of blighted Barbarus, and no sons and daughters of that death world lived long enough to walk erect if they were not pragmatists. Hate was all well and good, but it could not outdo obstinate reality. Hate alone did not make walls fall. And so, in the space between his repugnance for things tainted by the immaterium’s gelid hand and his need to win the war inside his own soul, Mortarion had grudgingly found a place to accommodate these horrors.

One of them, in particular, that wore the face of an old friend.
Mortarion paused once again as he entered the remains of a rubble-strewn plaza before the citadel, and his thoughts returned to his grand shuttle, moored a few kilometres away in the blasted landing zone where the Legion’s invasion force had made planetfall. The vessel, a war-barge named Greenheart, was a segment of his flagship that could operate as an autonomous command-and-control nexus if the mission required it. It could be parked in orbit and set to direct bombardments or pacifications, hard-landed in target zones or, as in this day’s circumstances, used to light the way towards a decapitation strike.

Greenheart carried cannons more powerful than most ships its size, volkite tech and displacer guns that could batter cities, but Mortarion rarely used them. His thoughts held not on the potential of those devices, but on the power of the weapon chained up in a stasis-null cage on the barge’s lower decks.

Even now, the primarch was uncertain that he had made the right call in bringing the caged beast with him, wondering if it would have been more prudent
to leave the thing in the dungeons of his flagship, the Endurance.

It had begged, in the end. Begged him to take it along, begged Mortarion to drop it from the sky and let it eat all life it found on Ynyx, just as it had done so well during the battle for Molech.

‘Let me serve you,’ it said, in a grotesque parody of the warrior-son Mortarion had once known. ‘Let me kill them for you, gene-father.’

He refused, of course. That would have been too easy. What value would there have been to bring his Legion here, only to let the daemon with the face of Ignatius Grulgor do the deed for them?

Was that part of the plan? A manoeuvre to push Mortarion closer to the path laid out by the Ruinous Powers?

The creature, twice dead and resurrected by his primarch’s own hand, was a weapon unlike any the Death Guard had ever employed, even at the height of their powers in toxin warfare. Wherever it walked, life turned to blackened ruin and disease. A
tempting dagger to wield, Mortarion told himself. Far too tempting.

Perhaps, when this day was done, he might abandon the daemon with Grulgor’s face on this cracked and broken world. Perhaps he might gather the papers and scrolls, every pict-slate and data crystal containing the lore of these warp-things, and pour them into the abyss of Ynyx’s deepest chasm. Be rid of the ideal of them and fight on to Terra as he was meant to.

We could return to the purity of warfare, he told himself. As the inexorable, unstoppable force that makes the galaxy tremble to hear our approach.

But even as the possibility crossed his thoughts, Mortarion knew it was already being betrayed. Pragmatism did not flinch from using the most horrific of tools, even if the abhorrence of such works was great. The ends justified the means, and there would eventually come a day when such tools were no longer needed.

Then, they would not merely be discarded. They would be expunged from existence.
‘My lord?’ The voice did not come over the vox-network, but was instead carried by the thick, foetid air.

The Reaper of Men turned and with a nod from his tarnished helm, his Deathshroud praetorians parted to allow a lone figure in battleplate to approach him.

The primarch’s equerry inclined his head as a wary salute and paused, eyeing the citadel tower.

‘Speak,’ rasped Mortarion.

‘The enemy appear in no rush to meet us.’ Caipha Morarg gestured towards the great obelisk. ‘Auspex readings show no visible entrances around the lower level of the citadel, and no signs of enemy activity. I would ask, lord, how you would have us proceed.’

‘You are mistaken,’ he told the legionary. ‘They are here. They are watching us.’ As the hoarse words left his mouth, Mortarion took a step further into the empty plaza, and deliberately triggered the ambush he knew was waiting for them.
All around, the fractured flagstones and the clogged black sand ranging beyond them trembled and shook underfoot. Clawed fingers sheathed in polycarbonate burst forth like the shoots of obscene plants seeking sunlight, and human bodies shelled by carapace armour and deep-pressure mining rigs erupted from where they had been buried. The last battalions of Ynyx’s defenders had willingly allowed themselves to be interred beneath the metallic sands so that they might spring this trap upon the Death Guard.

What foolish ideal do they cling to? Mortarion gave a grave shake of the head. Did they actually believe I would not intuit their plans? Do they think they have a chance?

He had no need to give the order to fire. His legionaries were already killing, the rancid air vibrating with the smacking concussion of bolter fire. At his side, Morarg used his pistol to behead a human in a mining exo-frame, blasting flesh and skull into crimson slurry through the heavy rad-plates of the machine the attacker wore like an oversuit. Spinning drills and whirling cutters
buzzed and clattered as the mechanism stumbled on a few more steps, sporadic neural impulses from the dead man within still pushing it forward.

Mortarion gave it a desultory backhand blow with the flat of Silence’s blade, his towering scythe flashing briefly in the bleak daylight. The exo-frame cannoned away under the force of the impact, ricocheting off the high outer wall of the citadel. It sank to the flagstones in a sizzling heap, leaving inky marks on the rock.

He ignored the storm of bolter fire and clashing metal at his back and marched on, meeting nothing he considered to be resistance as he crossed the last few metres to the wall. Surrounding him, his Deathshroud wove shapes in the air as their blades cleaved any of the Ynyxian troopers who dared to stray into range. Emerald-hued lances of fire rippled from flame projectors mounted on their gauntlets, as powerful chem-munitions discharged into the mass of the enemy ambushers and melted them where they stood.

Morarg trailed at the primarch’s heels, his helmet bobbing as he looked to and fro. They reached the
foot of the impregnable citadel, and if there had ever been an entrance to the tower here, it had been sealed away so cleanly that the rock appeared to be carved from a single gigantic piece of obsidian.

‘There is no way in…’ muttered the equerry.

‘Patience, Caipha,’ admonished Mortarion, reaching up to detach a handful of globe-like censers from a bandolier that hung across the brass-and-steel expanse of his chest-plate. Each of the orbs was drilled with thousands of holes, and within alchemical philtres and fluids of great potency nestled in permeable sacs.

Mortarion brought the cluster of globes up to the breath mask that covered the lower part of his gaunt, pallid features, and rolled them in his long fingers, stirring the volatiles within. Wisps of thin white smoke issued from the pits in their surfaces, and he inhaled them, savouring the lethal bite of the chemicals. Then, with a flick of his wrist, the Reaper of Men hurled the orbs at the wall of the citadel and watched them shatter against the stone.

The hyperacidic fluids within spattered across the
black rock, instantly softening the surface into something waxy and frangible. Mortarion counted silently to seven and struck the weakened wall with the heavy pommel at the base of Silence’s shaft. The stone cracked like glass. He hit it again and again, until the blow had torn open a ragged gash large enough for two Dreadnoughts to walk through abreast.

‘Follow,’ growled Mortarion, and he advanced once more, his pace as careful and as steady as it had been during the march from the landing zone.

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