

THE HORUS HERESY®

THE BOARD IS SET

Gav Thorpe

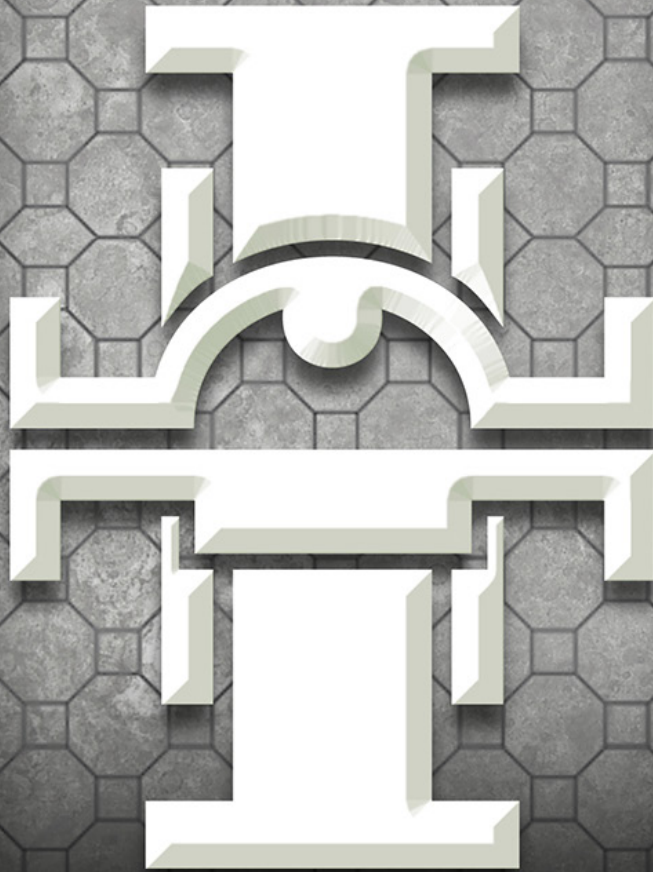


*As the Traitor fleet nears Terra, Malcador engages
the Emperor in a game of tactics.*

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‘The Wolves will be here soon.’

Eirich Halferphess, Astrotelegraphica Exulta, frowned at Malcador’s statement, his yellowed skin creasing like a discarded rag.

‘We detect no approach of the Rout. Have you had word from Russ?’

‘I misspoke,’ said Malcador, bowing his head in apology as he leaned his staff against the broad battlement, crossed his arms and looked out across the vista of fortifications and warriors. ‘I was referring to the Luna Wolves.’

‘You mean the Sons of Horus,’ said his companion, the co-head of the Higher Tower of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

‘That lacks any poetry.’

The astropath grunted and shrugged.

‘You are right. The traitor fleet is days, perhaps hours away from arrival,’ he said.

They stood atop the pinnacle where Eirich and his cohort of soul-bound psykers delved into the mysteries of the warp and rode the light of the Astronomican to send and receive messages from distant worlds. Just as astronomers used to place their observatories on high points to escape the miasma of light pollution, so the astrotelepaths gathered in the Higher Tower far from the psychic shields that emanated from the Imperial Dungeon in the heart of the

Emperor's fortified domain.

'There is a cacophony that comes with them,' continued Eirich. Stubble marked his chin and cheeks, when usually he was meticulously clean-shaven. His green robe was a little dishevelled also, telling a tale of tension, sleeplessness and constant activity that was continued in the red rims of his eyes. 'At first we thought it was simply backwash, warp static. There are dozens of ships, after all.'

'Hundreds,' Malcador quietly corrected. 'Thousands, perhaps.'

'Indeed.' Eirich coughed nervously, another recent tic he had developed, along with fingers fidgeting at his rope belt. Malcador absorbed it all without comment, but the strain of seeking the traitors in the warp had taken a heavy toll on all of the warp-scryers under the Sigillite's demesne. 'But it is not warpwash. It is the empyrean itself, a psychic resonance that travels *with* the traitors, not caused by them.'

'What's the business, that such a hideous trumpet calls to parley the sleepers of the house? Speak, speak!'

Eirich scowled in confusion at the Emperor's Regent. Malcador sighed. 'Great alarums. The heralds lift their clarions to their lips and announce the arrival of their treacherous lord.'

'What heralds? Now is no time to speak in your mysteries and riddles, Sigillite.'

'It does not matter,' said Malcador, dismissing himself and Eirich's concerns with a waved hand. He took up his staff and gazed at the Astrotelegraphica Exulta, measuring his mettle. 'Cease your deep watch. There is no more to be learnt in this way and your people must have rest. There will be even greater challenges in the days to come.'

'But what of Horus?'

'He is coming. We can neither turn aside his course nor stall his arrival. Better to be strong to receive him in the right fashion, yes?' Malcador turned and headed along the rampart back towards the tower. His next words were for

himself. 'And when he arrives, there is not a living soul on Terra that will not know it.'

For nearly seven years a labour force of more than a billion souls had worked beneath the tireless genius of Rogal Dorn, building the most daunting fortress in the history of humanity. And yet as Malcador traversed the Imperial Palace, heading deep towards the Imperial Dungeon, the activity was as noticeable as the day it had begun.

The praetorian took nothing for granted. Even now, on the very cusp of the greatest battle for mankind's survival, he left nothing to chance. Thousands thronged the passageways moving supplies to just the right batteries and storehouses, or deployed cannons and blades to guardhouses as Dorn finessed some arc of fire or incorporated the last dregs of industry from foundries that would soon fall cold.

Malcador was more sanguine, although far from complacent. As he had told Halferphess, events had been set in motion that would not be steered by the placement of forty more shells in the rightmost tower of Gate Forty-Two in the Lower Maiyla Periphery.

The Sigillite had once read a theory that the tiniest of acts could have profound, devastating consequences; that stepping on a beetle in Chuzu could somehow precipitate a chain reaction that led to hurricanes devastating the Floridal Isles. The theory had been expounded upon at great length with many mathematical symbols and equations. Yet that was before knowledge of the warp had become widespread. The warp - and the beings within it - cared nothing for causality. They shaped fate on a far grander scale. Destiny was as malleable to their manipulation as the flesh of their followers.

The future of the Imperium would be decided here, within these walls, but not by weight of fire or placement of big guns. Yes, those things would shape the nature of the confrontation that had to happen, the grotesque bloodshed,

the price that had to be paid to bring matters to their head.

The warp heralds had it right. Their psychic clarions were not just an announcement, they were a challenge from the darkness itself. 'Here is our champion,' they cried. 'Kneel before him or perish.'

Not Dorn nor Vulkan, Sanguinius nor Jaghatai would beat Horus, not now that his ascension was almost complete. Together? Perhaps. But Horus, for all the weakness in his soul now exposed, was not a fool. He had always demonstrated the ability to set the field to his need, making victory look easy. The challenge was for one alone, the one that made him.

The thought agitated Malcador. Ever since the collapse of the webway endeavour, his hopes for mankind had been eroded. There was only one that could defeat Horus, and only one that Horus wanted to defeat.

And Horus had never picked a fight he could not win.

Shoulders hunched, jaw clenched, Malcador sped his descent, a clammy fist of foreboding gripping his heart.

The door opened at the approach of the Sigillite, ancient wood swinging open to reveal a small antechamber, not far from the far grander entrance to the Imperial Dungeon. The timbers closed quietly behind him as he stepped over the threshold and waved a hand, brands springing into flaming life in the sconces around the walls.

The plaster was cracked in places, the mural that had been on them little more than a memory of faded colour. The tiles of the mosaic floor were similarly indecipherable, worn almost smooth and colourless by generations of passage across them.

There were no other doors and the only furniture was two high-backed chairs facing each other across a circular table. Upon the table was an octagonal board of granite and pale marble beside a light wooden box, and upon the geometric spaces were set twenty playing pieces.

Malcador placed his staff against the back of the chair, sat

down and regarded the game pieces thoughtfully. They were all plain, spindle-like shapes at present, of lifeless grey. On one side of the table waited a deck of thin crystalline wafers, the back of each marked with the Sigillite's rune. He picked up the top card but it was blank, as he knew it would be.

Malcador put the cards back and as he raised his eyes they came upon a figure seated opposite. He was tall, the hood of a scarlet cape about his shoulders. His expression was stern but not cruel, utterly unremarkable but for the potency in his eyes. His hair was dark, pulled back in a short scalp-lock. In the flicker of torchlight the skin might have been suede, tough and worn by a long and uncaring life, but not a line of age marked it - in stark contrast to Malcador's own weathered and withered flesh.

It reminded Malcador of an ancient tale of a cursed portrait, but before he could say anything his companion spoke.

'Would you like to be Warmaster?' asked Revelation.

Malcador arranged the red pieces before him, but his opponent shook His head before He was finished.

'No, we start at the beginning,' He said. A calloused hand started placing the pieces in the spaces at the centre of the board, forming a cluster around a rectangular gap the same size as the crystal cards. When all was arranged, the pieces shifted colour, turning a deep blue.

Malcador picked up the cards and shuffled them.

'Why do you do that? They are all blank for the moment.'

'Habit,' Malcador admitted with a chuckle. He continued all the same, sliding the cards into each other with deft fingers before riffling them together with a flourish. One of many inconsequential skills he had taught himself over a long life that had, until relatively recently, been mostly spent in isolation.

He laid the cards into the slot and then studied the board, elbows on the hard table.

'Like the cards, they are all the same,' remarked

Revelation. 'It does not matter which you pick.'

'It should,' grumbled Malcador. 'It feels like it should. Every decision has consequences.'

'Yes, but you have already chosen - you simply need to admit that to yourself.'

With a grunt, Malcador laid his finger on the sculpted tip of the piece closest to him - the same as he always did whenever they played from the outset. At his touch the surface of the piece rippled, becoming a figurine. It was rendered abstractly, so that the arms and legs ended in smooth nubs rather than hands and feet, giving the figure no front or back. Only the face possessed any detail. Faces, in fact, one looking in each direction.

The Twins, it was called.

The Sigillite lifted the top card with thin fingers and turned it over. Colour swirled across the psycho-reactive crystal, coalescing into the many-headed Hydra.

'All places and none,' said Malcador. He set the piece in the home squares directly in front of him.

Revelation touched a piece, and under His attention it transformed into a raven sat upon a broken skull, talons digging into the bone. The revealed card turned black and Revelation moved His piece to one side also.

'The shadows conceal,' He announced with a grim expression.

In Malcador's fingers the next card was a glossy red like fresh blood. He set a piece in one corner where it became a warrior, scarred and down on one knee. 'The King of Nothing.'

A hooded assassin, cloaked in tatters, and a card of a blindfolded spectre. 'The Blind Darkness.'

'The Hawk Soars.'

'Lord of the Clouds.'

'The Chosen.'

They continued, activating each piece in turn, scattering them to their true starting positions as dictated by the cards. When all was arranged, ten figurines each, the game

began in earnest. Having adopted the part of Warmaster, Malcador's was the first turn. He hesitated, fingers hovering over the piece that had become the Lord of Hearts, a noble figure clad in armour, held aloft on the shoulders of two companions.

'What has occurred cannot be changed,' he announced. 'We have played it out a hundred times.'

'Humour me.'

'The traitors are on their way. They will be in the Solar System before we finish. We do not have time.'

Revelation sat back, hands folded in His lap.

'Then why did you come?' He asked. 'Am I to be a distraction from your woes?'

'I wish to find answers, as ever,' said Malcador. 'I seek your wisdom, your insight.'

'Why?'

It was such an unexpected question that the Regent had no reply for a short while.

'I...' He looked into the inscrutable expression of his lord and wondered if He already knew the answer. Revelation sat impassive, the embodiment of patience. Malcador swallowed hard, confession welling up inside. 'I am afraid.'

He picked up the Lord of Hearts. The figure seemed so noble.

'It does not start with that piece,' said Revelation. 'What is the cause of your fear?'

This time the answer came swiftly and easily.

'Failing you,' said the Sigillite.

'Not death?'

'If I am dead, I am beyond regret. To live with failure would be a torment.'

'Would it reassure you to know that if you fail to defeat Horus your regret will be short-lived? One might even say fleeting.'

'An instant or an eternity makes no difference.'

'Play,' insisted the Lord of Terra.

Malcador replaced the Lord of Hearts and his fingers

moved to the Chosen. He slid it next to the Lord of Hearts. He revealed a card, a golden-haloed eye. 'Awakening,' muttered the Sigillite. Both pieces turned red as he set the card to one side.

Revelation moved the Hydra back to the centre and took a card. An ancient set of scales, in perfect balance. 'Division,' He announced. The Twins piece became two, each identical. Without hesitation He set one before Malcador and the other in front of Himself.

The Sigillite tried to move the Perfection to safety - represented by an immaculate-looking diamond - but Revelation played 'Ambition' and a tiny but ugly flaw appeared in the depth of the gem.

'You always cheat,' said the Regent. 'You control the cards and I do not.'

'Do I?' Revelation did not seem amused. 'Or does it simply seem that I do?'

'They are attuned to you and you alone,' said Malcador. 'Who else would make them change?'

'Perhaps it is because you only see them that way. It could be your interpretation that is repetitive. Or maybe the game is rigged against you, as you claim. If that were the case, why do you insist in playing me?'

'Because you have never yet shown me the final play. You always end the game before a victor has been decided.' Malcador cleared his throat. 'We have run out of time. If you have a plan, it is now that you must reveal it.'

'What if I told you that I did not know how to win?'

'You are more powerful than Horus, even now.'

'That is not what I said. Sometimes I play the game as Warmaster and you are the Emperor. It does not change the game.'

Frustrated, Malcador snatched up the Perfection and used it to sweep aside the Iron General. The opposing piece tumbled, the head crowned with sunbeams rolling across the board.

'Clumsy,' said Revelation. He picked up the two

transmorphic pieces and set them back in the wooden box beside the board. 'Perhaps I will fix that later when I have some time.'

The Regent's card was the Great Tempest. In a flurry of moves, his pieces cut a line through his opponent's, separating them into three enclaves. The Chosen, aided by Grand Visions, and the King of Nothing moved pincer-like on the Uncrowned Monarch while the Blind Darkness pinned the Double-Edged Blade into one corner of the board. Revelation removed the Angel from harm's way but Malcador played Temptation upon it, sliding the card beneath the piece so that it was held in stasis.

Several of Revelation's pieces were now surrounded, with only one avenue of escape. Malcador indicated an angle from Revelation's home spaces, where the Invincible Bastion was held in reserve, having been returned there in the opening turns.

'I do not understand why you never play that move.' The Regent pointed to a position behind the Lord of Hearts that would see his capital piece trapped against its own companions.

'I shall indulge you, this time,' said Revelation, as He moved the Invincible Bastion up to the Lord of Hearts. He nodded for Malcador to turn the next card. He took the sliver of crystal and turned it over. The face clouded, turned into a bluish-green and then resolved into the shape of a Hydra. At the same time, both of the Twins turned red, joining the Warmaster. Immediately Malcador saw that he could move one of them into the space that had been occupied by the Invincible Bastion, forcing a capitulation.

'Now you cheat on my behalf!' Malcador's indignity raised the briefest of smiles from Revelation.

'Whatever made you think there was only one Hydra card?' He picked up the next four and fanned them towards His regent, each of them showing the same design of the many-headed dragon.

Before Malcador could make the move Revelation quickly

reset the board to its previous layout.

‘But that is not my play,’ He declared, slipping the Shadow from where it was being encircled.

‘You have abandoned the Anvil,’ pointed out Malcador, gesturing to the lone figure left amid a handful of his pieces.

‘Yes, but you know what happens next.’

With a sigh, Malcador played the only move available to him, bringing the Blind Darkness back into play to remove the Anvil. He took the piece off the table as Revelation flipped over the next crystalline wafer, showing the Return. Revelation reached into the game box – a box Malcador knew to be empty – and placed a fresh Anvil piece on the board. Eyes fixed on the Sigillite, Revelation slipped the Return back into the deck and, contrary to his earlier barb, shuffled the pack.

Sighing again, Malcador considered his next move, as if Revelation would leave him any choice.

The game continued as it had done each time before. Malcador tried to vary the course of his moves, to capture pieces previously denied him but a turn of a card or a cunning play by Revelation always set the pieces back into the positions they had occupied many times previously.

Revelation tried to push the Library into Malcador’s home squares, forcing him to play Misdirection and Falling Blade together, temporarily taking control of the Hungering Wolf to intercept the move. On the other side of the board the Angel, Uncrowned Monarch and Double-Edged Blade routed the Chosen and the King of Nothing. Some delaying moves by Revelation with the Blind Darkness caused temporary havoc until the piece was captured. In the meantime, the centre of the board had been all but swept clear of pieces and cards. Only the Shadow roamed free, its power much curtailed with the attachment of ‘Doubt’ shortly after its escape from the early offensive.

Occasionally it seemed as though Revelation played to

lose, His positioning making Him vulnerable for a short time before it was revealed that move by move Malcador became encircled until he had no option left but to attack directly, initiating the second phase of the game.

There was no choice but to act aggressively now. Though the Warmaster held the numerical and positional advantage, Revelation held a hand of cards, as yet unplayed; Malcador's current draw were all spent save one. He laid it down on the Lord of the Clouds.

Malcador blinked and checked the card again. It was different from their previous games, depicting not the defiance of the Wall but a maggot eating its way out of a stylised heart.

'Corruption.' The word came to him unbidden and he said it quietly, unsure what to think. He looked up, realising that for some time - hours perhaps - he had been focused wholly on the board. Revelation studied the pieces where before He had been casual, offhand almost.

Going through the motions, thought Malcador. Indulging me.

He was rapt now, eyes moving from one piece the next, fingertips pushing down into the table, the immaculate fingernails pale against the lacquered wood.

'What has happened?' asked Malcador.

'Play on.' Revelation did not look up.

'The game has changed. Why have you changed it?' Malcador felt a yawning gulf opening up in front of him. It was for answers that he had come, but suddenly he was wary of that knowledge. In truth, he had expected everything that had passed so far - perhaps he had simply been seeking comfort in the familiar exchanges before everything would be thrown into the anarchy of war.

'What does it mean?'

Revelation broke His attention from the pieces and for just a moment Malcador thought he saw a hint of sadness. It was gone in a heartbeat, perhaps had never been there at all, replaced by a flinty glare. Revelation barely moved His

lips as He spoke, teeth gritted as His eyes bored into the High Lord of Terra, each word enunciated sharply.

‘Play. On.’

Malcador’s next moves were half-hearted, playing for time as he tried to assimilate the events of the last few minutes.

‘You are not trying hard enough, Warmaster,’ said Revelation, eyes flashing with anger. ‘If you do not win, you are damned.’

The Regent paled, not sure whether his Master referred to him literally or in his adopted role. He was never sure how much Revelation really knew, or had known, of the events that had spiralled since Horus had stepped from the path of loyalty. He had the maddening ability to appear both informed and enigmatic in equal measure, but at that moment the affectation – if it could be called such a thing – did not irritate Malcador as before, but terrified him. His gut shrivelled at the notion that Revelation was moving into uncharted waters as ignorant of the outcome as the rest of them.

He had thought the game would be a way for the embattled Emperor to impart His plan for the defence of Terra and, ultimately, the defeat of Horus. It had not been the first time Malcador had received guidance through the cards, allowing his master to contact him whilst remaining focused on His task upon the Golden Throne. Now the Regent watched the immortal ruler of humanity intently studying each move and realised that the game might well be the means by which Revelation would devise His strategy.

As Warmaster he had to test Revelation’s thinking every bit as much as Horus would challenge it in real life. If he did not...

‘I cannot do this,’ he said, straightening as he pulled his hands back from the board.

‘What would you give for me?’ asked Revelation, once more laying His hands in His lap, His attention focused on

the Sigillite.

'My life.'

'You have already given that.'

'My death, if you wish to be pedantic.'

'What of your soul?'

'You say that no such thing exists.'

'We are short on time, allow me a little metaphysical shorthand. What is your soul worth to you?'

'I still do not understand the question.' Uncomfortable under the scrutiny of his lord, Malcador started to consider the board again. 'I cannot play like Horus, I do not have his mind, his motivations.'

'Then I will assist you.' Revelation reached into the game box and His fingers reappeared holding a new piece, one never seen before. It was shaped like a jester of the most ancient days, complete with gormless expression. Real, tiny cap-bells tinkled as Revelation shook it. 'This is you, Malcador. The Fool. I have used you for millennia to suit my own purposes and before the end I will discard you without a second thought.'

'I know what you are doing,' said Malcador. 'You think to make me angry, like Horus.'

'You exist only to further my ambitions, a callous on the toe of history and nothing more,' said Revelation, not making the slightest sign that He had even listened to what Malcador had said. 'You are just an invisible, nondescript foundation stone in the edifice that will be my undying glory. I have lied to you from the very first moment, and all that you believe of me, of the universe and mankind's part in it, is fiction. I have manipulated you, abused you and I will toss you away without a single shred of care. One of my legionaries has more consideration for a bolt that he fires than I do for you, Malcador.'

Swallowing hard, the Regent reminded himself of what he had just said - that Revelation was trying to elicit an emotional response.

And yet when he looked into the gaze of Revelation, he

saw only implacable, unflinching truth. He had never harboured dreams of glory or even ambitions of temporal power, but Malcador had believed himself valuable. He had taken strength from being counsellor and... advisor to the greatest intellect the human species had ever created? An aid to the most gifted psychic being ever born? Companion to an immortal who had lived a thousand lifetimes?

'I see that you are starting to understand.' A hint of a sneer marred Revelation's expression. He gestured towards the pieces set between them. 'My sons were taken from me, whispered to during transit to set dark thoughts in their minds. Temptations. Lies. Propaganda. Tell me, Malcador the Sigillite, how many times have you resisted the efforts of our enemy's lures?'

The Regent did not answer, for the Dark Gods had never attempted to sway him. They had occasionally, and very recently, sought his death, but that was not a distinction he uniquely held.

A brutal, short bark of a laugh made him flinch.

'You thought yourself too loyal? Your faith in me unshakable? They did not try to recruit you because you have nothing to offer them.'

'I have created much for you, in your name,' said Malcador in a wavering tone, searching for clarity. 'There would be no Imperium without my efforts.'

'*In my name.*' Never had three words sounded so scornful. 'You are a master of tax collectors and clerks. No Imperium without you? No Malcador without the Imperium, you mean. What justification would there be to keep you around without your countless army of bureaucrats to sustain you? Even my Remembrancers - poets and pict-takers - contributed more to the Great Crusade than you did.'

He felt a tear roll down his cheek, his whole body quivering with shame. Malcador looked at Revelation with silent pleading and was rewarded with a contemptuous sigh.

'Some call you my left hand.' Revelation held up the five

digits and wiggled them. 'It is true. That is all you have ever been, an extension of my will. I twitch a thought and you act. I care nothing for the hopes and fears of my little finger, and less still for yours.'

Malcador opened his mouth but could think of nothing to say.

'Do not stare at me like some docile ruminant. You said you fear failing me, but the truth is that you know that you already have. You cannot even bring yourself to hate me when I need you to.'

Revelation tossed the playing piece aside. It shattered against the wall. He did not even spare a glance for the discarded fragments.

There was no hint of remorse in His hard stare.

Malcador looked at the splintered pieces of the Fool. Betrayal slid a hot knife in his chest. Its fire spread, enflaming his anger. And one thought burned hotter than any other: that Revelation thought he might care about any of what He had said.

'I have never harboured ambition or sought glory,' growled the Regent, his fingers moving to the King of Nothing. He thrust it directly towards the Angel defending the Emperor's home squares. 'You seek to wound a pride that does not exist. But you think it does, and that is your shame, not mine. It is your pride that will undo us all, not mine.'

He turned the top card. The picture that resolved upon its surface showed a mountain of bodies with a hound at its top, muzzle red with their blood.

'Massacre,' snapped Malcador.

With all semblance of empathy stripped away, Malcador's next moves were swift and direct, happily pairing off his own pieces against Revelation's, sacrificing them if need be. As much as the Regent pushed hard, Revelation disassembled, robbing him of control of his own figurines, diverting them from their planned courses and even

matching them against each other with a timely play of 'Internequine Feud'.

Having lost command of the Perfection, Malcador countered with a picture of a weeping mother. 'Unspeakable Suffering,' he announced, shocked by the satisfaction he felt as he pulled away the Warhawk from its position next to the Invincible Bastion. He *really* wanted to win, to prove the lie of Revelation's affectation of infallibility.

Even so, however strongly he pressed to have an overwhelming advantage in the Emperor's base positions, his opponent always seemed to spare a card to bring another piece into play from elsewhere on the board. Turn by turn a ring of attacking pieces converged around the rear of Malcador's positions: the Hungering Wolf, Uncrowned Monarch and Double-Edged Blade were all poised to strike.

'I win in my next move,' declared Revelation, dropping the 'Salvation' card in front of His Regent. Malcador looked at the portrait writ in the coloured crystal, unmistakably that of Roboute Guilliman.

'A turn too late,' Malcador replied, his expression grim as he realised the meaning of what he was about to do. He whispered the next word as he turned a card depicting a bloodied white feather. 'Sacrifice.'

With shaking fingers he picked up the Angel and removed it from the board, leaving an opening in Revelation's defence. His fingers gripped another piece, about to move it into the space. A piece he had been holding back for just that occurrence. The last to have been given to him, though in reality it was the first Revelation had put into motion.

The Lord of Hearts.

'Wait.'

The single word, softly spoken, stopped Malcador as surely as a roared command. Still with the Lord of Hearts poised to claim victory, the Regent looked up.

Revelation stared at Malcador, seizing him with His dark

eyes. The Regent was not sure what he saw in there, aside from tiny reflections of himself, haggard within the shadow of his hood, cheeks glistening with the streak of tears.

'I win...' croaked the Sigillite, but as he returned his attention to the board to place the King of Hearts, there was another piece occupying the space he had to take.

The Fool.

'In ancient days, the Fool could say anything to anyone - in theory, at least,' Revelation said. He smiled and warmth flooded through Malcador to see the expression, but then both the smile and his moment of hope faded. 'It was the Fool's task to remind kings and queens that they were mortal, and weak, and not above any other. In the parlance of a later time they existed to speak truth to power, to defy authority and, most importantly, puncture tyranny.'

Malcador choked on his next words, not sure what to say. Even at the instant that he collected his thoughts, a distant ripple flushed through his mind. It stank in his nostrils, and brought the thunder of a great storm to his ears, prickling skin and psychic sense alike.

He felt the rift opening, tearing apart reality at the edge of the Solar System. A chorus of infernal clarions screeched across his othersense.

'The Warmaster has arrived,' he said, though he knew his opponent could not fail to know also. He looked up but the chair opposite was empty.

'To whom do you speak, master?'

The voice of Latdava was like a hammer on a pane of glass, shattering the wall of concentration that Malcador had erected around himself. He glared towards the door where the functionary stood, fingers making clumps of her white robe as she stared fearfully at him.

'How long have you been here?'

'Several minutes, master,' the functionary told him. 'The Astrotelegraphica Exulta sent me with word that the traitor fleet will breach the warp-veil within the hour.'

'And why do you stare at me like that? What have you

seen?’

‘You, master, playing the game by yourself. You turned the cards and moved the pieces with terrible contortions of the features.’ She wrung her robes a little more and her eyes moved to the table. ‘What does it mean?’

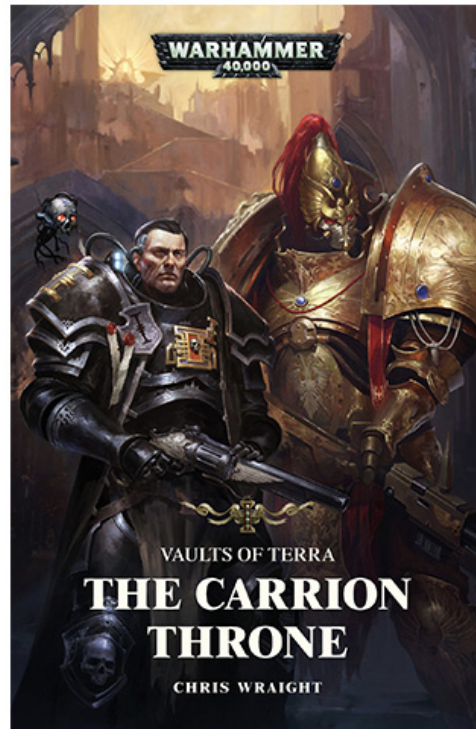
Malcador was not sure as he followed her gaze, seeing the pieces arranged at the endgame, the Lord of Hearts still in his hand. Yet where the Fool had been was now another piece, uniquely golden, shaped as a crown.

Beside it lay the last crystal card, its image that of an eagle tearing out the throat of a serpent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the New York Times bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, as well as several audio dramas including the bestselling *Raven's Flight* and *The Thirteenth Wolf*. He has written many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*, *Jain Zar: The Storm of Silence* and *Asurmen: Hand of Asuryan*. He also wrote the *Path of the Eldar* and *Legacy of Caliban* trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. In 2017, Gav was awarded the David Gemmell Legend award for his Age of Sigmar novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

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