

The Piercing Eyes

By Callum Davis

Every son of Titan knew that this day would come. Magnus the Red, Daemon Primarch of the Thousand Sons, had returned. By the Emperor's grace he had been defeated at Fenris. Just, thought Lushian Adantor. But they all knew that he had not been stopped forever. When the strange machine known as the Speculum Infernus stirred to life again, just as it had when it heralded the Crimson King's return to the galaxy, it did so with grim inevitability.

Lushian knelt in the Augurium, the mirror-walled chamber atop the Silver Pinnacle. Here, the few Prognosticars – his order – worked to predict psychic tremors that heralded daemonic incursions. He opened his eyes and stared at his reflection. Flickering candlelight bathed the room in a warm orange glow, though it was always cold. With each of Lushian's breaths a stream of condensation filled the air. Beads of sweat dripped from his forehead, staining his simple tunic that was already encrusted with salt. Deep lines ran across his forehead, around his eyes and at the corners of his mouth. His face appeared weather-beaten, though he had left Titan only a handful of times over the last few decades. His heavily cropped hair was as white as snow, and his eyes betrayed a life that had faced horrors that would drive mere mortals to suicidal insanity.

Only fifty years old, he thought, though I look like a veteran of a century or more. Such was the life of a Prognosticar.

A silent adept knelt behind him, quill and parchment in hand to note anything and everything. He could make out the goosebumps on her pale flesh, but she didn't shiver, despite thin robes being all that shielded her from the cold. Lushian didn't know her name. Too many of her predecessors had died too soon for him to learn it.

Focus, Lushian thought.

'Again,' he said to the adept, preparing her for what he was about to do. He closed his eyes and attuned all his energy to the sound of the Speculum Infernus. The arcane device hissed and steamed. Strange energies crackled sharply and reams of data-parchment flopped onto the cold floor.

His mind's eye began to see a world wracked by purple lightning that shot into the sky from the ground. He saw plains of glass stretching to a horizon that twisted into vast mountain ranges of razor-sharp

rocks, out of which broke predacious tentacles and bulbous, twitching eyes the size of boulders. He saw rivers of bubbling green magma flowing uphill as pink creatures gambolled and cavorted around them, giggling and pointing as their more unfortunate kin tumbled into the burning streams.

Herds of nomadic, cerulean creatures that were part man, part bird, part beast roamed wastelands far and wide, making war upon each other and upon clans of mutated Humans. Many of these people had put out one of their eyes and, among their number, many had more than one head, while others had additional limbs or had sprouted tentacles. All kinds of half-metal, half-Daemon fauna made their home among crystalline rock formations beneath clouds of aetheric vapour that obscured skies of impossible hues.

Lushian felt a scratching in his mind. He paused. *It could be one of them, he thought, or is it just the woman's quill on the parchment?* He couldn't know.

'I see another world now,' he said. He didn't speak in every vision, every time. He didn't know what compelled him to sometimes describe what he saw. All he knew was that he did, and his Adept knelt ready. 'A barren world. A near-empty desert punctuated by the ruins of a city destroyed long ago. I see the dust of burnt parchment carried by fierce sandstorms that wrack the surface and wear down the remains of devastated pyramids and hab centres, structures that had once been this world's crown jewels.'

But then the visions shifted. He saw throngs of people, gazing up in awe at a towering, winged warrior with skin of crimson. Tears of joy streamed down their faces as they fell to their knees, their hands clasped together as if in prayer. They beseeched and thanked and worshipped.

The image shifted again. He saw the same people, dead, in vast pits, dried blood encrusting their naked bodies, deep knife gashes in their necks. Expressions of incredible joy had changed to ones of terror. He then saw apocalyptic war, phalanxes of azure and gold warriors firing ensorcelled boltguns into fleeing civilians, and flocks of blade-winged Daemons terrorising the spires of Imperial conurbations.

'I see death, fire and blood everywhere.' Lushian spoke again, as if his tongue were not his own to

control. 'Enormous Daemon Engines rampage unopposed, tearing down buildings, goring and stamping people to death. The screams and cries of the Daemon Engines' victims are punctuated by the laughter and hoots of frolicking Daemons that run amok, setting fire to homes, chapels and cathedrums...' He stopped.

Those who managed to avoid death at the hands of these monsters suddenly fell to the ground as they fled, before lurching back up. Lushian could hear their bones crack and snap as they spasmed unnaturally, contorting into horrifying positions. He knew their screams of agony would haunt him for the rest of his life. The contortions became more rapid. The victims' skin changed colour a dozen times, shifting from yellows to reds to purples to blues. Thick spikes burst from their skin before warping into other deformed shapes. The mutation was so rampant that many devolved into nothing more than sickly gloop.

This sight changed as quickly as it had appeared. Lushian saw argent and viridian knights fighting side by side, slaying the heinous minions of the Archenemy in droves along the winding, cobbled streets before an almighty pyramid, whose peak stretched into a hellish sky. Then he saw the same knights dead, their bodies picked over by wretched mutants and evil sorcerers. He saw a warrior that could only be Supreme Grand Master Kaldor Draigo, standing triumphant over the corpse of Magnus the Red, the Titansword buried to the hilt in the Daemon Primarch's skull.

'Adept, note the presence of the Supreme Grand Master,' he said.

The vision warped. This time Draigo was impaled upon the Blade of Magnus, a hundred warriors in bloodstained silver armour cut to pieces and scattered around him.

Such confusion, thought Lushian. No matter how hard he tried, this mess of sights was impenetrable. Contradictory circumstances buffeted his every attempt to gain clarity at what events might transpire. That he had seen Sortarius, Prospero and neighbouring worlds was of little doubt. Slaughter and misery had become inevitable on the Crimson King's return, but what was the significance? Lushian's mind ran over the horrific events he had witnessed. The sight of thousands of corpses piled in vast killing pits kept returning to his thoughts.

He felt a jolt of stinging pain at the heart of his mind. *Sacrificial victims*, he thought. *A ritual? For what?*

Suddenly he was buffeted by more visions, each wilder than the last. Cruel, malignant faces and devastating wars flashed through Lushian's mind, preventing him from focusing on his thoughts of a ritual. He had encountered such things before in his time as a Prognosticar.

I sense your presence, foe, he thought. *Know that your efforts only point me closer to the truth. What you distract me from, I know you fear me knowing.*

'Unless that is exactly what I wish you to believe, little knight,' chortled a malicious voice.

Lushian hesitated. Never before had a servant of the archenemy pierced his mind in such a way in this chamber.

'With undaunted courage we shall prevail, no arcane magicks shall overcome us. We are the bearers of victory!' Lushian recited from the Cantic of Absolution. Instantly he felt his mind calmed by the familiar, soul-strengthening words. 'Heavenly blessings are laid upon us, the warp is ours to tame. Though sorceries shall be against us, all are banished to the void.'

Lushian returned to his scryings. He saw the pits and the bodies. He saw cloaked and hooded priests bearing wave-bladed daggers before the visions disappeared, replaced by those of hideous, biting, screeching nightmares and monsters. They reached out with clawed hands as if to grab hold of him. He generated a pulse of psychic energy, blasting the creatures away in a haze of golden light. They screeched in pain, shielding their ink-black eyes from its gloriousness.

'Though spell or Incantation blocks us, the Emperor shall see us Victorious,' Lushian said aloud. 'No Hex can overcome our determination, our resolve is strong as steel.'

He saw the cloaked priests. He saw the blood of victim after victim burst from roughly cut dagger slashes. Every priest's hands were covered in the rich fluid and, though he could not see the murderers' faces beneath their heavy cowls, he could tell that they bore broad grins. *Disgusting creatures*, he thought.

Lushian watched as knife after knife was discarded by the priests, their blades dulled through overuse. Without so much as an iota of lost time, kneeling acolytes handed them fresh sacrificial weapons with which to brutally murder their next victims.

'You've seen much, little knight,' said the voice, returning. 'But you know not what you see. What is true? What is false? To the Lord of Change all is both and neither.'

'No despicable treachery will thwart us!' Lushian called back. 'We are the Emperor's Chosen!'

Nine individuals, clad in armour of polished azure and gleaming gold, wearing high-horned helms and wielding long staffs topped with evil symbols, stood in a circle. They each waved their hands in an identical fashion, weaving gusts of potent empyric energies that seemed to flow from the pits, which filled with more and more corpses as time went by. The strain in their efforts was obvious to Lushian, but not one wavered beneath the tension corraling so much raw power.

Magnus the Red stood at their centre. Resplendent in perfectly made golden armour decorated with finest lapis lazuli, to look upon him Lushian knew was to look upon evil made manifest. Thick, powerful legs were at once vaguely humanoid, but ended in wickedly clawed feet like those of ancient reptilian megafauna. Vast wings stretched out behind him, as wide as those of a combat aircraft, shimmering rich fuchsia and violet in Sortiarius' ever-shifting light, melding seamlessly with a spectrum of cobalt, sapphire and turquoise. Psychic power roiled thickly around his large, taloned hands. He manipulated it with the casual concentration of a true master, with no doubt in their ability to create wonders beyond the wildest dreams of the uninitiated.

Hatred burned in Lushian's heart. *Monster. Traitor. We will have your head on a spike on Titan's battlements if it takes us ten thousand years*, he thought bitterly, clenching his palms so tightly that his nails pierced the skin beneath.

The voice chuckled. 'Such bitterness! Do you not feel the slightest twinge of awe? Do you not feel the seed of envy beginning to sprout, just a little? For that you would be forgiven, little knight.'

'The Emperor shall guard our Souls!' Lushian answered. 'No damnation shall bring us low!'

Lushian felt his energy begin to drain. The voice's psychic assault upon him was powerful. Almost any besides a Grey Knight would likely be slain by it. He

held firm, willing himself to delve into the vision one more time. Every shred of information was needed if the Grey Knights were to respond appropriately and in time.

He looked upon the entire ritual. Tens of thousands of Magnus' followers watched as the sacrifices continued. A vortex of power emanated from the pits of death. The hordes cheered, screeched, moaned and brayed. They cried praises to Tzeentch and to Magnus. They called for the death of their enemies. They called for blood. They called for the material to become the immaterial.

What is all this for? he wondered. What evil will this make? What terrible harms will this cause? Lushian's eyes turned back to Magnus. His hatred demanded it. *With all my hearts, all my mind and all my soul, I wish death for you. Your memory shall be scoured from the galaxy along with all your foul sons and pathetic minions. By the hands of the Grey Knights this shall happen, and we will smile.*

Lushian stared. Magnus stared back. The Daemon-Primarch's remaining eye bore into Lushian's soul.

'Adept! Withdraw!' Lushian managed to cry out, before the pain overwhelmed him and everything went black.

Lushian jerked opened his eyes, breathing heavily. His hearts were pounding, his lungs pushed to extremes to keep up with his body's demand for oxygen. He was lying on his back, drenched in freezing sweat and wracked in searing pain. He gritted his teeth, trying to stand up, and he tasted copper.

He remembered the Adept and looked around to where she had knelt. All that remained of her was a burnt-out husk, her small hands still in the position of clutching the quill and parchment, though nothing remained of her notes. He paused for a heartbeat, lowering his head in a gesture of respect.

'You performed your duty,' he said. He gave no more thought to her after that. She had done what the Chapter had asked, and paid the price they all knew possible. Whether she had stayed out of choice or could not escape in time, it made no difference.

'This ritual must be stopped,' Lushian said, shakily getting to his feet and wiping his sodden brow with the back of his hand. He felt as if he had aged another fifty years as he made to leave the chamber.

Must it?' said the voice, devoid of all humour. 'Do not be so sure, little knight.'

