

A Promise Fulfilled

By Andy Clark

'A ship approaches, my master!' The cawing voice shattered Amhot's trance as surely as a brick thrown through a sheet of glass. The Sorcerer opened his eyes with a heavy sigh. He allowed the strands of empyric energy that he had gathered to unravel, releasing them to flow back into the endless ocean.

'Tharckk, we have had this conversation more than once,' he said, rising from his knees. The actuators in his turquoise and gold power armour whirred as he moved, and his cloak flowed around him, scintillating through different hues like the plumage of some strange avian. He turned his gaze upon Tharckk, who stood awkwardly in the door to the meditation cell. The Tzaangor's beak hung half-open and his golden eyes were wide, an expression Amhot had learned to interpret as shameful.

'My master... I am sorry...'

'If you pull me from my trance without the proper ritual, the results could be catastrophic,' Amhot said. 'The power that my lord Magnus has gathered in this realm is beyond comprehension. Today I was weaving but the barest strands, easily pacified and released. Had I been channelling greater energies...?' He let the statement hang unfinished. Amhot had long ago learned that, when dealing with the ungifted, a good ominous yet unspecific threat hit home far better than attempting to explain the specifics of his craft.

Even in the realm of the Crimson King we cannot escape the clutches of ignorance and superstition, he thought, bitterly.

Tharckk had fallen to his knees and was now pressing his bestial face to the floor. He was emitting a crooning sound that Amhot knew denoted great displeasure, or possibly fear.

'I have blasphemed! I will do penance!' he croaked. Amhot crossed the chamber in a few strides and gently lifted Tharckk's beak with the butt of his staff.

'There will be no need for that,' he said, forcing his impatience not to creep into his tone. 'You mentioned a ship, Tharckk?'

'Yes, my master. A ship has come!' The Tzaangor scrambled up, his blue and white robes flapping about his wiry, half-avian body. 'Acolyte Sharhra spoke with its captain. It is docked upon the spur. The Rubricae guard it. Its passengers await your pleasure.'

Amhot took a deep and slow breath, then nodded.

'New arrivals? They are late. Thastep's seeing suggested that this ship would reach us days ago. Unless, I suppose, that ship was lost altogether, and these are our next guests presenting themselves instead...' Amhot mused. 'The empyrean is fickle, Tharckk. We can but strive to read its shifting currents.'

'Yes, my master,' Tharckk said, with what Amhot suspected was more reverence than comprehension.

'No matter, let us welcome them,' said Amhot, sweeping from the chamber with Tharckk close behind. The Sorcerer had walked the halls and chambers of this isolated tower for months now, and could have navigated its winding stairways and arched passages with his eyes closed. Still, he opened his senses to every detail.

Amhot soaked in the crumbling texture of the stonework and the smooth cold of the white marble columns. He listened for patterns in the echoes of his armoured footfalls as they receded into the fortress' depths. He tasted every chemical tang, every droplet of sweat and wisp of incense that hung upon the recycled air, and allowed it to inform him as the Changer of the Ways saw fit. Such was the way of the Cult of Knowledge; there were secrets in all things, and wisdom to be gleaned from every waking moment. One simply had to open one's eyes and see.

Yet our enemies will not see, he thought to himself, with an uncharacteristic flare of anger. They cannot. Their ignorance is so deeply ingrained that it has become as natural as breathing. That is why we shall defeat them, in the end. That is why their most gifted flee to us for sanctuary.

By the time Amhot reached the atmospheric exchanger shrine, he had gathered a coterie of Tzaangor and golden-masked cultists who clutched autoguns and curved daggers. Many displayed the Cyclops' Mark, as it had come to be known of late; they had put out their own right eyes in imitation of the Crimson King, as a sign of their devotion. Amhot found the practise distasteful, but had to admit that it showed great dedication. The Crimson King represented hope to them, or what passed for it in this dark age.

Two acolytes hurried forward to commune with the shrine's controls. They muttered prayers to

its machine spirit as they pressed runic keys and adjusted gem-inlaid dials until, with a hiss and a wash of cold air, the shrine's inner door opened. Amhot stepped into the shrine and his coterie came with him. Through the armaglass panel in its outer door he saw a long spit of pipe-inlaid stone that jutted out from the asteroid to form a natural void dock. It was open to the vacuum, the scattered stars and the striated, many hued nebulae of the Prosperan Rift wheeling all about it. The shadow of Amhot's armoured tower was thrown along the spit in hard relief by the light of Carmoch's Star, burning bright at its back.

Amhot glanced around at the cultists surrounding him. The same two acolytes were working the controls again, preparing to close the inner doors and banish the spirits of air, sound and solidity from its confines. Not one of them so much as glanced at him. They showed no suggestion of nerves.

How completely they trust me, he thought, and was surprised to find that the notion made him uncomfortable. Something about it seemed slavish to Amhot, and the Thousand Sons were not slavers. *What patterns might I read in their burst and drifting bodies?* whispered another part of his mind. *What wisdom might I glean from the passing of their mortal sparks?*

Amhot banished that thought with a pang of shock. Too many of his brothers had lost their sanity by walking down just such paths to knowledge. He would not count himself amongst those lost souls.

He raised his staff and chanted a string of complex syllables that seemed to turn in upon themselves and repeat, until their jabbering echo filled the chamber. Even as the exchangers hissed and the air spirits screamed away into the void, Amhot's sorcery wreathed him and his retinue in a shimmering dome of altered reality. The outer doors yawned like an Ork's jaws and the remaining air whistled away into the void. Killing cold and flesh-rupturing, airless nothingness rushed greedily in to take its place. Amhot and his acolytes were untouched.

'Come, let us greet our new arrivals,' said Amhot, and set off along the spit at a steady stride. His followers stayed close, making sure they remained within the protective aegis of his sorcery, and didn't allow the vast wonder and terror of the void to distract them from their duty. Amhot smiled in approval. If he

allowed himself to, he might lose himself in the study of the surrounding cosmos for days at a time. He had done so more than once, and was pleased that his acolytes, though mere mortals all, showed the restraint to avoid such a snare.

Amhot allowed himself a single glance back at the sorcerers' tower to which he had been assigned when the Crimson King had begun his great endeavour. Tall, twisted and strangely incongruous where it loomed against the glimmering starfield, it was sheathed in coral blue armour plates. Ethereal flames wreathed its conical peak in a whirlwind of ever-changing greens, blues, pinks, purples and searing yellows.

The Sorcerer turned back towards where the new arrivals' vessel waited, anchored by heavy chains and fuel pipes to the machineries of the spit. Amhot was pleased by their arrival, yet he felt the weight of the looming choice like a stone in his chest.

The Sorcerer strode up the armoured gangway ramp that had been lowered from one of the vessel's many outer doors. He took a moment to study the craft, a much abused trading frigate of some mongrel Imperial design. The craft's original shape had been lost beneath an accretion of repairs, scavenged components and what looked like battle damage.

It has changed, as all things must change, he thought.

Raising his staff, Amhot rapped its butt against the outer door. He struck the ritual nine times. Only once that was done did the door slide upwards to admit the Sorcerer and his retinue.

Amhot released his spell as the ship's exchanger shrine did its work. He tasted the sweat-stale air and the sharp empyric tang of a craft long at warp. The inner door opened and there stood Ashpharim Dheyl. Once, this man had stood amongst Amhot's own circle of acolytes. Now, like the ship aboard which he plied the stars, he had become something else.

'Saviour,' said Amhot, with a nod and a wry smile.

'My master,' Dheyl replied, his blue robes rustling and his amulet shimmering as he bowed low.

'You have successfully shepherded another band of acolytes into the realm of the Crimson King.'

said Amhot. 'You have my thanks. They are of an auspicious number?'

'Fate provides, my master,' replied Dheyl, his own smile hard amidst his clipped white beard. He met Amhot's gaze with his single eye and did not flinch. 'They are ten in number, just as the Primarch predicted. Always ten in number by the time our journeys bring us to the towers.'

'They have... developed?' asked Amhot.

'They have, my master, or they have perished in the attempt,' Dheyl replied. Amhot saw the ghost of something unpleasant flit across his former acolyte's expression, and wondered what horrors the nascent psykers had unleashed or endured during their perilous journey. He was always amazed that any of the shepherds' dangerous cargoes made it to the borders of Magnus' realm alive, yet almost every ship survived, and almost always they bore ten surviving pilgrims, or some multiple of that number.

Auspicious, thought Amhot again, and felt the weight in his chest grow heavier. He did not relish this.

'Where are they?' the Sorcerer asked. Dheyl bowed and gestured towards an open bulkhead nearby, where crimson illumination shimmered from within.

'Follow me if you would, my master,' he said, and led the way into the chamber beyond. Amhot entered at the head of his retinue and, as he had known it would, his sudden appearance triggered gasps of fear and surprise amongst the pilgrims.

There were ten of them, stood in two ranks amidst the crimson glow of alchemical candles and sacred sigils. Each wore frayed blue robes and a simple golden bracelet at each wrist. Each stared back at him with a single left eye, their right lost to the livid scars left by the Saviour's blade. Made up of both men and women, they were ragged and malnourished specimens, like most Imperial citizens, but Amhot could sense the raw power within them. It mingled with their fear and their determination to be worthy.

'Welcome to the realm of the Crimson King,' he said, spreading his arms wide. 'You who stand before me are the gifted few. You are the next step along Humanity's path to ascension. My lord Primarch recognises your worth, your power and your value, as I do.'

Amhot saw them relax just a fraction at that, and felt genuine sorrow at what had to come next. His eyes roved across their faces, many of them young

yet seamed with the lines of too many cares, too much suffering. To have come so far, their strength was undeniable. *That one, a telepath*, he thought, glancing at a wiry young woman with a labourer's build. *Perhaps trying to sense my intentions. That one a beast-wyrd... that one psychokine... powerfully so... and you... oh, that is rare...*

Which would it be, he wondered? Time for the fates to answer him.

'I regret that one last test lies before you, before the Crimson King can offer you sanctuary,' said Amhot, and saw them tense again. Their expressions were wary now. They had learned how cruel this galaxy could be, and that was good. Magnus needed neither fools nor dreamers. 'Ten of you there are, yet nine may pass the borders of this realm. The tenth shall travel no further. There must be sacrifice to protect this sanctuary. All must be willing to give of their flesh, their blood and their gifts if they wish to be part of what lord Magnus seeks to build. Tell me now. Who amongst you will surrender yourselves as sacrifice? Who will fall, that their comrades might fly?'

They shifted awkwardly. Some looked crushed, others angry. On a few faces he saw calm acceptance and, for those brave few, Amhot's respect grew immeasurably.

For an instant, he thought the young telepath was going to step forward. She glanced at the tall lad next to her, swallowed with a dry click, then opened her mouth to speak.

He got there first, and as he did Amhot felt the power writhe inside him. *A summoner*, thought the Sorcerer. *A channeller of Daemons. Yes, you are rare indeed, and powerful enough for my purposes. Fate provides...*

'Take me,' said the summoner, stepping forward.

'Cheng, no!' said the girl, snatching his sleeve. Cheng turned and gently prised open her grip.

'You've given enough, Sia,' he said, glancing at her empty socket and then away. 'I... you've seen what my gifts do. I can't live with these nightmares forever, and these other cowards aren't about to give up their lives for the Crimson King.' Cheng glared around at the other pilgrims. Some met his gaze. Some looked away. 'I won't let you fall when safety is so close, not when it could be me instead.'

Amhot felt strands of destiny spiralling out from this defining moment. He all but saw the golden

light of fate illuminating the paths these men and women would walk from this moment.

'Cheng, no, you can't,' she said, but Amhot stepped forward and laid one armoured hand gently upon the lad's shoulder.

'He can, and he has,' said the Sorcerer. He knew that from the moment these pilgrims took ship with their Saviour, Cheng's fate had been sealed. The girl choked back sobs as Deyhl led them all away, out of the chamber and back to their meditation cells.

Amhot looked down at his sacrifice and saw defiance, sorrow and fear in the lad's gaze. But there was a kind of peace there, too, and the Sorcerer welcomed it.

'Make this count,' said the lad as Amhot drew his curved dagger and spoke the words that lit its blue gems with fire.

'Magnus the Red will make every sacrifice count,' said Amhot. 'It is by your blood, and the blood of those like you, that the enlightenment will come. By the deaths of those we sacrifice are the soul wards kept strong.'

'That is good,' said Cheng and closed his eyes.

I truly hope so, thought Amhot, and drew back his knife.

Mere minutes later, Deyhl's ship decoupled its void anchors and retracted its freshly reblessed fuel hoses. Amhot watched the craft as it nosed away from the spit and out into open space, then turned its prow for the shimmering stars that marked the realm of the Crimson King. It lit its engines and began to pull away, and as it did so Amhot's eyes strayed to the new flicker of green-blue flames that danced amidst the hurricane of the warding beacon atop his tower.

Magnus will make every sacrifice count, he thought again as he watched the soul-wards flicker and dance, just one beacon in an ensorcelled boundary that stretched across the stars. *We all will.*

