



ONE  
MILLION  
YEARS

A NECRONS SHORT STORY

NATE CROWLEY

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MILLION  
YEARS

A NECRONS SHORT STORY

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# ONE MILLION YEARS

*Nate Crowley*

## **The First Hour**

Almost every planetary culture gives names to the stars it is born under. Some name them after their own esteemed dead, or after the hunting-beasts of ancestral gods. Some name them after the bloodiest of battles, or the rarest of gems. But the proto-kings of the Thokt Dynasty, as the old gag went, had never bothered naming the stars of their demesne at all; instead, they had given their crypteks merely the order in which they were to be harvested, and left the conclaves to their work.

The conclaves had worked. By the genius and the arrogance of the plasmancers, a thousand coronas had been breached, a thousand flux-seas siphoned, and a thousand deep cores drained, in order to provision the dynastic armouries, until only the mighty blue hypergiants of the Hyrakii Deeps had remained untamed.

It was to this frontier undertaking that Prae had dedicated herself when she had taken her apprentek rites before the royal conclave all those years ago. And it was by that dedication that she had won the place where she stood now – on the harvest deck of the Mesekt-class Dawn-swallower vessel *One Million Years*, facing down the formless wrath of a star's heart.

Each of the dynasty's great solar barques was a legend in its own right, uniquely armoured to its task. But the *One Million Years* was hallowed as a sun-diver beyond even the court of Thokt. No other vessel, from the high crystal berths of the Sautekh admiralty, to the mad crimson sprawl of the

Novokh voidyards, could dive so deep, for so long, nor bring back such immense weights in treasure from the depths as the *Million*.

When Prae's long-ago flesh-self had been given the honour of crewing this very ship, she had glowed hot with pride. And when biotransference had freed her from the traitor husk of her body, extending the privilege forwards into eternity, that pride had ignited like a supernova in her.

It was an appropriate time to reflect on pride, Prae decided, as the harvest deck's cavernous ingress aperture began shutting at last against the divine glare beyond. For the last full cycle of decans, she had guided the *Million* through the deep photosphere of this nameless blue star, on a flawless execution of a standard harvesting dive.

The ship, built in faint semblance to some armoured, deep-marsh scavenger of the home world, had beat its way through the searing ocean with the shielded delta-wing of its head section, impelling long, dense streams of matter into the aperture at its leading edge. From there, the most valuable and exotic compounds had been teased from the rougher hypermatter in the open space above the harvest deck, by the work of Prae's own hand. The rituals of electromagnetic ligature involved could require hours or even days of sustained concentration, and even for a mind that no longer knew fatigue in the tradition of flesh, it had been exhausting, ceaseless work.

But now, at last, the final battery of stasis containment bottles in the terminal segment of the barque's armoured tail section had been filled with the last drops of stellar plasma it would hold, and the time to ascend from the solar sea had come.

Silent as a cloud, the aperture closed on the last actinic speck of sunlight. For a few moments there was a fleeting twilight, cast by the last phantom streamers of starfire whipping down the ship's cavernous throat. Then, save for the soft halo of icy blue cast around Prae herself by the light of her core-flux, there was darkness in the temple for the first time since the dive had commenced.

## The Second Hour

There was, Prae knew, still one more task which propriety demanded she undertake, before she could begin casting an ascent shaft. It was a formality, whose completion would no doubt be chained to the commencement of Szarekh-knew-how-many fresh tasks.

She would need to summon Baknepheth.

It could not be put off for long. *And yet, Prae thought, if I cannot not allow myself a moment now to bask in the majesty of this work, then when shall I?*

‘When we have sucked the night sky black,’ snapped a voice like a blunt, rusted blade, from the darkness behind her back. ‘When every spark of sunlight, from edge to wretched edge of this galaxy, comes from within the belly of the dynasty’s engines.’

‘Then, oh wicked and lazy disciple,’ said Baknepheth the Fathomless, prime solarmaner of the royal conclave of Thokt, Drinker of the Radiance by personal commission of the phaeron, and shipmaster of the solar barque *One Million Years*, ‘we might both consider a moment’s rest.’

Shamed, Prae went through with the entire casting of the ascent shaft before she could master her chagrin sufficiently to face Baknepheth. Flickering her consciousness between rapid-collapse scry-points in the storm above as she laid down the shaft’s gravitic anchors, she was able to escape the presence of her mistress in a very real sense, and by the time her perspective had consolidated, so had her composure.

‘The way lies open to the touch of your staff, oh fathomless one,’ said Prae at last, when the funnel-shaped field that would hold the storm back from

their ascent became stable. Then, with care to ensure the light from her discharge nodes remained level and nondescript, she turned to acknowledge her mistress.

When Baknephth materialised by hard-scry in the temple, the scale to which the chamber was built no longer seemed as unreasonable as it did when Prae was alone there. The cryptek was colossal, seeming large enough to shoo assault monoliths away from her shins like scarabs. It gave the impression of immense bulk, despite the spindled attenuation of her frame, thanks to the heaped folds of her woven sapphire robes, and to the broad, half-spiral crests which jutted from her faceplate like horns. Lit dimly from above, with her hypermatter-infused core-flux rising in chilly blue puffs from her shoulders, she resembled nothing more than some ice-bound, unscalable crag, towering above Prae.

Spreading her crooked arms in the gesture of entreaty-for-passage, Baknephth turned her rosette of pinprick oculars upwards to stare into some distant radiation squall beyond the hull, and began to move the ship towards the open mouth of the shaft. As she progressed through the stages of the ritual, scratching obscure aide-memoirs in wriggling light across the temple's interior, she began muttering to Prae once more.

'How much sooner might the way have been opened, and our cargo sent on its way, I wonder, were it not for the vanity of younger minds? Was it idleness? Or error? Did you perhaps presume I was lost in dreaming, and thus disinclined to care for the death of a minute against that massacre of years?'



### **The Third Hour**

‘Who is hurt by the idleness of the messenger?’ grumbled Baknepheth, her godlike figure still sermonising on Prae’s flaws as she worked. ‘Who shall it hurt, should we hold back the bringing of the deep light to the court of Thokt? Who shall it hurt, in these days when the Quiet One is heard again, when the sandborn general swallows the east in gulps, when even Valgûl Twice-Perished stalks the void once more? It shall hurt the phaeron, to whose right hand we are mandated to deliver lightning!’

Prae carried on with casting rites of circumspection ahead of the ship, sweeping over the passage of stabilised plasma upwards and ahead, then sidelong through the protective fields, into the eternal band of storm at the star’s surface. As Baknepheth’s excoriation grew less anchored on anything Prae had actually done, she imagined a similar field around herself, repelling the words. Although Prae hardly dared think it, given how casually her mistress seemed able to read thoughts directly from her core-flux, Baknepheth simply became... cranky, when freshly roused from sleep.

Not that it was anything like real sleep, of course – or even that wild slumber which had preceded the current age of reclamation. Baknepheth’s physical form resided in the pilot’s sarcophagus deep below the deck, hardwired into batteries of injectors which kept her core-flux infused with a constantly fluctuating blend of exotic matters. With her mind thus expanded beyond comprehension, she spent the hours with her perceptory buffers open directly to the sensor suite of the ship itself, seeking cosmic wisdom in the patterns of the radiation storms they sailed through. Prae supposed that anything would seem something of a let-down, coming straight after that.

Not that her mistress was ever inclined to be much more charitable in her attitude, with Prae or anyone else. It had always been so – Baknepheth had been uncommonly ancient for necrontyr when Prae had been tributed to the conclave as a youth, and by biotransference her age had been preposterous. The joke had been, among her disciples, that she had simply refused to allow the sickness to spread to her brain without first showing its working.

But to everyone who had ever worked under Baknepheth's winter-mist glare, Prae included, the speck of the high plasmancer's manners amounted to less than nothing, when set against the brilliant light of her genius. Just as the *One Million Years* was a legendary ship, she was a legendary shipmaster, unmatched both in her raw ability to manipulate stellar matter, and in her hard-won intuition for seeing ships safely through the primordial hellfire of the harvest-stars. Serving under Baknepheth, one felt invincible – as if the mechanisms of the cosmos itself had become compliant to her wishes.

This was why Prae was surprised when, on addressing the alert-glyph gently blinking in her optic buffer, she found her rites of circumspection had turned up something Baknepheth had missed. They had divined the suggestion of a solid object, primarily metallic and outmassing them considerably, lurking deep in the shadow of the storm beyond the passage. And they were on course to sail right past it.

For only the fifth time in the geologically long plateau of her apprenticeship, Prae faced down the prospect of correcting the great Baknepheth on something she had missed, and was so consumed by the elation that it took nearly a thirtieth of a second longer than it should have for her flux to quake in realisation of the appalling danger at hand.

## The Fourth Hour

‘I saw it, Prae,’ said Baknephth wearily.

‘The shadow, in the macroconvections beyo—’

‘Yes, disciple,’ growled the cryptek, silencing Prae’s vocal transducers with a flicker of her interstitial shadow. ‘I saw it. I see it still. And if you hadn’t been so clearly struggling to contain yourself, I’d have felt no need to mention it.’

*Why* was, as so often after Baknephth’s statements, such an obvious response that to actually vocalise it would only interrupt the speaker’s composure before their next, inevitable statement.

‘Why?’ asked Prae, earning a static-burst of irritation from Baknephth, but noting it was underscored by the most ghostly trace of amusement-patterns across the weave of her robe. There was a reason, after all, that she’d been accepted as an apprentice cryptek in the first place.

‘We’ve never been alone, you know,’ said Baknephth, as the temple rumbled with the faintest vibrations from the storm outside. ‘Never alone, on these long trips through the fire of the night.’

‘You have alluded to this,’ Prae answered levelly. ‘Indigenous life forms within the star... Experimental canopteks... Feral infant c’tan... You have done very much alluding, mistress, over the years.’

Baknephth produced the abrupt, shrill blatt that would once have been the expulsion of a wad of digestive fluid – a gesture so rude that, even after their escape from flesh, it was an insult with which to start a duel, and then to finish it.

‘Mewling freshling, looking to *taxonomise!* Larva! Your view is too narrow, child – you miss the point. And until you’ve eyes fit to see the real depths, allusions are more than you deserve. Silence, now, and watch the way with no heed to any phantom.’

Prae, ever the good apprentice, continued the concerto of small, overlapping rite-castings which smoothed the barque’s slow climb up from the deep blue. But her flux shivered with unease, and grew no calmer when she was forced to dispel all but the most essential of the *Million*’s shielding protocols in order for it to pass through the constriction of the shaft’s midpoint.

In a rare rebellion against instructions, Prae could not help but risk a rapid micro-scry to one of the remorakh repair canopteks clustered on the exterior hull, allowing her a brief glance in the direction of the shadow, passable as a structural integrity check if she was queried. The construct’s dense cluster of diagnostic sensors revealed a pinprick of strange radiation at the shadow’s centre: the very faintest leak from a well-shielded engine, visible to Thokt oculars even through the photonic hurricane.

For all that Prae wanted to quieten her raging phantasory buffer with submission to the idea that this was just the latest in a long series of anomalies comprehensible only to the high plasmancer with her strange sea stories, she could not. Because this was no mystery. It was a ship. A larger ship than them and – she saw now, as their engines lit up all at once – a fleet of smaller craft, following it as it accelerated suddenly towards the wall of the storm ahead of them.

Prae looked back then, up at the horn-heavy, vapour-shrouded pinnacle of her mistress’ projection, and saw total placidity in her bearing. *Surely she is aware*, Prae assured herself, even though the assertion sank through her memetic buffer like a stone. *Surely if she thought we were at risk, she would have acted. If she has not acted, then she has decided we are not at risk.*

*What if Baknepheth is wrong?* thought Prae as she turned back to the scry-cast of the way ahead, and immediately felt shame. It was an obscene thing to think. Ridiculous, more so. A notion as absurd as the survival of a sapient being inside the atmosphere of a stellar body.

*And yet here we are*, thought Prae, as the city-sized warship tore through the curtains of the storm and opened fire.

## **The Fifth Hour**

*Evidence suggests Baknepheth was wrong*, concluded Prae, taking as her main proof the sudden absence of any physical telemetry arriving from her body. She was, it seemed, in the process of being reconstructed, presumably while the remains of her body steamed elsewhere with the last wisps of her former self. And indeed, there she was: rising up in front of her was the tapering, bug-ocular shape of her faceplate, shedding droplets of nanolubricant from mirror-smooth necrodermis as the new body rose from the reconstruction chamber. Prae saw a flicker of blue behind its oculars as her core-flux was decanted in, and then braced herself for the hateful perceptual lurch – which came, sure enough, when her ocular perspective was shunted from the calibration canoptek to the new body, as this now seconds-old copy of her last retrieved flux-pattern took root. She was then, more or less, herself.

*Reassembly*, she thought, appending annoyance-glyphs to the thought purely for her own petty satisfaction. It wasn't the obliteration which fazed her; Prae was one of those who had quickly become comfortable with the current age on an existential level. No, it was the way the thoughts came huge and viscous while her mind anchored itself to the new substrate; the way she could only consider one thought at once; the way some idiot rogue transducer kept shrieking *I died, I died, I died* into her memetic buffer until she wasted valuable time to mute it.

Time was being saved, however. Before she had even consolidated enough to reach consciousness, an engrammatic snap-recall cascade function of her own design had been triggered, commandeering her interstitial node to

hammer the ship for information during her initial moments of torpor. And indeed, the second Prae felt her executive buffer finally boiling to temperature, a stew of answered questions had been lined up courteously for its inspection.

*Who?* The strain of Unclean designating themselves ‘Kin’ or ‘Kindred’.

*What?* Increasingly senescent artificial macrointelligences, whose will is carried out by vat-grown drones derived from their original builders. (Source: *Thokt Dynastic Ledger of Trespass.*)

*Who, specifically?* A mercantile joint operation incorporating drones from the colonies of several machine minds, with especially predatory hoarding behaviour.

*What, in practical terms?* A so-called ‘hold-ship’. An ultra-heavy void-born refinery and factory ship, seemingly adapted for capture operations in hazardous environments. This vessel, designated *Apophisatt* by the Ledger after several reported raids on dynastic shipping, is believed to have been behind the foundering of the accretion-skimmer *Strong Yoht*, as well as—

*Enough*, thought Prae, dispelling the function as her computational array finished synopsising the telemetry of the attack. The data did not take long to ignite her temper. The strike had been brilliantly timed, coming upon them at point-blank range, at their exact apex of vulnerability. Seems they’d projected all their stored waste heat as x-ray lasers the moment their projectors were through, overloading what little shielding the barque had retained, before following up with brief, brutal torrents of iridium flechettes, each boiling into a teardrop of compressed, unstable plasma before slamming into one of the *Million*’s main point-defence clusters. Aside from the one which, by sheer miserable chance, drifted off-target and passed through Prae’s body like a wind through dust.

The sound of gauss-fire nearby snapped her from her ghoulish curiosity. It was coming from the main entryway to the reconstruction bays. *And from the tertiary entryway*, she corrected herself, summoning a microcosmic projection of the ship to her optic buffer. There were boarders all over the ship, she saw – a boiling mass of threat-glyphs, with more disgorged all the time by hardened carriers flying all the way into the Temple of Harvest.

There were other alert glyphs, too. Notices of weapons available to fire, matter reserves needing redistribution for repair, canoptek swarms awaiting

mandates – all the divine, maddening hyperlogistics of a necron warship  
locked in mortal combat.

And nobody was doing anything about them. Nobody was in charge.

## **The Sixth Hour**

Prae tried every means she could think of to contact her mistress, and then to discover her whereabouts. And as each option proved fruitless, Prae became more desperate to hear the sound of her name being cursed from the galleries of the reconstruction array behind her; to discover a second stray shot had somehow struck the pilot's sarcophagus, but that Baknephth had been reconsolidated right behind her, ready to castigate her for even thinking of having to take command of the ship.

But the pilot's sarcophagus was intact, merely silent, and there continued to be no Baknephth, nor any sign of her, for seconds. And then for minutes. And then finally, as the flimsy defences at the main entryway collapsed, and the first wave of boarders rushed across the marshalling bay towards her, Prae ran out of time to squander on things she could not change, and was forced to address the situation.

The situation, at least in the first instance, transpired to be an awful sort of creature which was wearing only the bottom half of an environment suit – presumably in order to show off the obscene enthusiasm with which it had replaced most of its upper skeletomuscular mass with hydraulic motor arrays – and was braving near-vacuum regardless, with no visible respiratory aid. Prae found that quaint.

The most crucial aspect of the situation, however, was the enormous two-handed plasma cutter the creature had made the almost entertainingly reckless decision to charge her with.

Prae addressed it by swiping a finger through the air perpendicular to the attacker's path, closing her fist with a quiet, satisfying click, and then



stepping aside to avoid the upper half of the attacker as it slithered past on a pad of freshly cauterised flesh, followed by its tumbling legs, and then the smoke-gushing catastrophe of the axe, which Prae noted bounced twice before falling still.

Next was a brute whose mode of dress was the same as the first, but whose consolation prize in attempting to transcend the limitations of organicity had apparently been an awkward-looking metal skull.

As it closed on her it raised a hammer above its head, and for a worrying moment Prae could think of nothing more elegant to do than simply shooting it with plasma. But Baknephth had ever emphasised employing sophistication wherever it was possible, and making it possible wherever it was not. After the briefest rite of divination, then, she whipped out with a lobe of her interstitial shadow, latched onto the tiny convection-nest of the fusion rocket built into the hammer's haft, and detonated it with a five-degree downward tilt of her faceplate. The ensuing blast of blue fire incinerated most of the wave's remainder.

One peculiar Kin wobbled forward on some form of gravitic repulsor, seeming unfazed. Its skin, apparently replaced entirely with an articulated shell of chromium plates, had afforded it a little more durability than its fellows. But a volley of heavy gauss-shots, converging from three points behind Prae, soon reduced it to a shell of radioactive ash all the same.

Taking advantage of the moment of peace the detonation had won, Prae turned to see there was now quite a significant press of soldiery building up around the exits to the reconstruction array, having been hacked to pieces elsewhere and reconsolidated, and then dumped into a total leadership vacuum on the floor of the marshalling bay. Even the canopteks were confused, she noted, as a scarab drifted aimlessly across the bay with its mandibles splayed in threat. Everywhere she looked, things were crumbling – a small universe with an obsessively interventionist god, failing to cope with deicide.

She couldn't hope to step in for Baknephth – not across so many fronts, and not with another flurry of grubby, hammer-wielding Unclean six seconds away from needing dealing with. But there was something which could.

If she could make it listen and, prerequisite to that, if it existed.

## The Seventh Hour

‘Hear me, noble Mehenoth!’ intoned Prae for the fifteenth time, as the rabble of Immortals at her back bathed the latest wave of attackers in icy gauss-light. ‘Hear me,’ she boomed. ‘Hear your mistress, oh transfigured relict! Repay the mercies granted you by the Extinction Court when they permitted thy ascension to infinite service! I cast my hook, Mehenoth, and drag you up by the illicium on thy chin!’

Once again, no spirit was conjured, save for the vibrant embarrassment patterns across Prae’s carapace, and it was with more violence than was strictly necessary that she returned a slug of plasma back to the barrel which had fired it, then through the breach and up the centre of the shooter’s arm behind. Prae *despised* canoptek work. The formal pomposity of it all, the archaic, grossly inefficient communication protocols required when dealing with the brighter autonomous spirits, froze her flux solid with boredom. And unfortunately for her, the *One Million Years* was, like many of its class, technically a canoptek.

Worse, she had never once communed with its autonomous spirit, in all the years she had walked its decks. That was a privilege, like most, which Baknephth had reserved strictly for herself, leaving Mehenoth as nothing but a name to the cryptek’s apprentice. She had often entertained herself with the thought experiment of supposing the damned thing was entirely a fiction concocted by the high plasmancer, but in the current circumstances that was a prospect inviting scant entertainment.

Prae had just powered up her vocal transducers for a sixteenth attempt nevertheless, when a nondescript signal-glyph announced the

acknowledgement of one of the eight million query-stings she had so far cast at the ship. The deck quaked beneath her, leaving her puzzled as to whether the two events were connected, until she thought to run the transferred vibration of her necrodermis through her aural buffer.

‘What do you want?’ Mehennoth had asked, in a voice so loud it had made an ear from the whole of her, and if one of the Kin had been within hammer’s reach of her at that moment, they would have crumpled her like silver leaf.

‘What has happened to Baknepheth?’ she demanded at last, too shocked to be anything but direct, and when Mehennoth replied, she heard the infernal boom even over the explosive demise of one of the Kin’s bulbous assault vehicles barely a *khet* distant.

‘The shrine before you is in flames,’ came that glacial growl. ‘Beside it are stacked casks of water. And yet you seek only to find the shrinekeeper, so that he might come, himself, and tip them on the flames.’

‘Then what would *you* have me do, spirit?’ cried Prae, indignant, as another of the wheeled Kin contraptions lumbered into the marshalling bay.

‘Fight the fire,’ rumbled Mehennoth, as the Immortal beside her collapsed around a burst of explosive shells from the vehicle’s sponson gun. ‘Fight it or die, Prae!’

Prae stilled the heart of the machine with a desperately cast rite of ligature, draining its main cannon of power in the instant before it fired, only to discover that the Kin had now broken through at the tertiary entrance, and were firing on the Immortals at the rear of the reconstruction arrays.

The autonomous spirit *was* real, then. But it was of absolutely no practical use to her. Still, the encounter had prompted her into action in its own way, by resigning her to the fact that she really was in this fight on her own. Which meant that she could make her own decisions about how to fight it, and to Llandu’gor with the wrym-mind’s pompous metaphor. *Let the shrine see to its own needs*, she muttered to herself in the privacy of her executive buffer. *I, meanwhile, shall see to putting out the shrinekeeper.*

## **The Eighth Hour**

Prae's working hypothesis, assembled in tentative increments as she and her loose crowd of Immortals began pushing outwards from the reconstruction bay, was this:

The ambush had broken Baknepheth. To have spent so incalculably long never making a mistake, before blundering into one so trivial, so catastrophic, must surely have collapsed her ego in on itself like a neutron star. And so she had fled, Prae reckoned, sinking fully into that labyrinth of mental contortion in which they had long been part submerged.

She had to reach the temple, and more importantly the sarcophagus – and not just in hopes of reviving Baknepheth. Cunning as the barbarians were, when they learned of the paralysed god beneath their beachhead in the temple, they would know not to destroy her. They would instead capture her, after which any possible consequence was too black with dishonour even to bear consideration, when it might yet be averted.

This meant she had to fight all the way up the ship, against the tide of boarders, with no further reinforcements once she abandoned the reconstruction arrays. But if her eternal apprenticeship to Baknepheth had taught her nothing else, it had at least taught her to achieve impossibly large tasks within impossibly short spans of time while never making mistakes, and so she set about the task with vigour.

First, and largely because the solitude was beginning to wear on her, she recruited a general.

Her initial plan had been to have her computational buffer grind the service records appended to the interstitial shadows of the Immortals in the crowd,

looking for one with optimal performance ranges across a range of mission-critical functions. But after every candidate on the list transpired to harbour some imperfection her phantasory buffer could spin into calamity, she elected instead simply to record the temperature of every soldier's gauss barrel, and thus identify the most aggressive marksman for promotion.

'R-Rengan,' was the Immortal's eventual response, after Prae had asked its name.

'Congratulations, Special Castellan Rengan. As per the treaty of the Third Council of the Black Reed, you are hereby promoted to the aforementioned station for an unspecified time, by status conferred on me by my conclave, and on them by phaeronic mandate. You are permitted to raise, maintain, promote within, and decimate a levy of up to ten million infantry in defence of the conclave, but I advise you to subdue your expectations in that regard.'

Special Castellan Rengan stared at her with blazing incomprehension written across every node on his carapace. Prae pointed back to the press of Immortals behind him, representing a fair percentage of the ship's complement by now, and spoke briskly.

'Lead them. I need the best at my back, and the baffled out of the way. And just for today, Rengan, I need you to be every bit of the soldier you once were.'

Prae had never fancied herself a rhetorician, but as Rengan stamped back with pride-signifiers sweeping across his shoulder armatures, bellowing mournful orders to his new brigade, she was forced to reconsider.

## **The Ninth Hour**

Not once, across all the leagues of deck that Prae claimed back from the invaders, did Mehenoth stir so much as a tendril of its core-flux to assist them. Rengan, however, almost made up for its sloth with the sheer zeal he had somehow found, once the protocol suite conferred by his new rank had lifted the mental shackles of his former station.

As they advanced through the chambers, he promoted an entire web of decurions and bailiffs into being around him, and emboldened them in turn. By the time they were nearing the temple, the milling, forlorn crowd Prae had set off with had long disappeared. In its place marched a host of true necrons, ranks unbroken, in the implacable, geometric lockstep of Thokt.

And with the invaders thus preoccupied by the escalation of an act of piracy into a full land campaign, Prae had been free to tip the scales in their favour. Reaching out with her interstitial shadow as they advanced, she played the ship around them like an instrument – a malevolent dirge, to underscore the castellan's march. She bifurcated gravity in one hallway, pulling the boarders' heads in the opposite direction to their boots, and so leaving them helpless to incoming gauss-fire. She diverted volcanic hurricanes of waste heat through enemy chokepoints until only ash remained to wade through. She even took control of the reconstruction array right before it fell, purposely miscalibrating its reassembly coordinates to print thick stripes of raw necrodermis straight through the bodies of the invaders.

But for all the advantages they had, they were quite simply outnumbered – little more than a ceremonial complement, pitted against a city-ship crammed with force-grown. And when the *Apophisatt* learned of the counter-push, the

mathematics of the situation began to fully assert themselves. The loose mobs of armed miners who had first breached the ship fell back, to be relieved by elites wearing powered exo-suits, and wielding bolt cannons that inflicted core-breaching strikes on Prae's Immortals with concerning ease.

The situation deteriorated very rapidly after that.

They were only two bulkheads away from the temple's atrium, prevented from advancing by overwhelming fire, when Prae assessed their rate of losses against their rapidly slowing progress towards the goal, and conceded the inevitability of defeat. She had miscalculated. There had been an optimum path through the battle. She had failed to identify it. And now, abruptly, things were at an end.

The castellan's vanguard broke cover in order to exchange another volley of fire with the lumbering exo-suits on the opposite side of the chamber. Prae stayed where she was and let them fight on, unencumbered by the knowledge of defeat. For her, a galaxy of possibilities had been extinguished, star by star, until only two options remained – pretend victory was still possible for the sake of sentiment, or embrace the inevitable and open every one of the ship's hypermatter storage canisters simultaneously, ensuring a defeat that would one day be visible to neighbouring dynasties.

‘Would you not choose to walk in the sun, apprentice?’

Prae took the question to be a particularly heavy fusillade of bolts from the Kin, until her transducers flagged Mehenoth's words. Fresh misery stung her at the prospect of having to figure out what the obtuse mind could possibly be implying by asking her this. But when the material of its hull parted just a few paces from where she stood, leaving only the shimmering membrane of a quantum ward between her and blue hellfire, everything became clear.

*It's suggesting I go outside and break back in through the window. Outside, in the photosphere of a star.*

Mind racing, Prae began running manic divinations, to see if – and how – such a thing might even be possible. The ship stopped her in her tracks.

‘Would I have suggested this, if it were impossible?’

‘No,’ Prae replied, after consideration, and allowed a ripple of amusement to strobe across her carapace. ‘Let us walk in the sun then, Mehenoth,’ she said, and slipped into the ring of starfire as if it were a bathing pool.

## **The Tenth Hour**

There was a certain terror, Prae knew, that many of her kind felt when walking in environments hostile to organic life. Despite all compulsion from the data available to them, they continued to refuse the embrace of reason and continued to fear for the integrity of their long-discarded forms. Prae did not feel this terror. She had barely been able to walk at all in the time of flesh, and once she had escaped the prison of her body, she had been more than happy to shed the memory of its bars.

And so Prae walked, placing one divine footplate after another, naked through the primal furnace. She felt no fear, for her journey would take only one hundred and twelve seconds, while the quantum ward being projected fast against her necrodermis by Mehenoth, backed up by her own array of freshly cast interstitial heat sinks, could maintain her integrity for another one hundred and eighteen. There was time, indeed, to drive the whole of the crisis from her executive buffer, leaving it for smaller parts of her mind to pick over while she turned her full appreciation to the vista.

Looking back down the ascent shaft into the depthless, unfathomable storm of the holy star, Prae was almost overcome. In that infinite, blinding blue was a rage so profound it had become tranquillity; currents so complex they could only be perceived as a featureless expanse. It was beauty that no living being would ever experience – a prize won by her people only through their willingness to abandon the attachments of flesh and become something greater.

*Was that how Baknepheth viewed the rest of us?* she wondered now. What had her mistress seen, when she had gazed into these same depths through the



oculars of the ship itself? What secrets had she gleaned from the storm, in her long fits of waking slumber? Prae hoped that she and the ship would survive this trial, so that she might one day answer these questions from her own experience.

‘So,’ rumbled Mehenoth through the hull, as she reached the start of the long, shallow vault roofing the Temple of Harvest. ‘You hope to find Baknephet incapacitated below and... revive her?’

‘I do not recall mentioning that to you.’

There was silence.

‘Yes,’ said Prae eventually. ‘That is my expectation.’

‘And if, for whatever reason, she cannot be revived... What then?’

Prae considered that. Modelled the scenario with the full resources of her phantasory buffer, with all considerations of how it might have come about disregarded, and concluded what she already knew: it would shatter her. But she had survived death once so far this night; she would survive losing Baknephet, too. It was an easy enough thing to think. But to say it aloud, and thus lend it the hekatic weight of statement, was another thing entirely.

*Resolve, Prae*, she urged herself, brandishing the concept like a sunqueller lance to quieten her boiling flux. *Resolve. It must be said.* Prae felt brief unpleasantness at the impulse to take a deep breath, and spoke.

‘If Baknephet has perished? No matter – I shall take her place in the sarcophagus. I can do more damage from there. And whether death or victory awaits, I would rather that it found me at the helm of this ship, than cowering in its holds. Now – spirit.’

‘?’ The acknowledgement came as a single, sharp reverberation through the armour beneath her.

‘Know that should I take that final seat, I shall be your pilot and your lord. I shall expect you to bear up to me your full suite of armaments, without delay or truculence, so that I might wreak revenge for our mistress. Know also that this is neither a presumption nor a request, oh precocious beast, but a command given in contingency.’

There was no answer in words to that, but in the moments as she gathered a great lash of plasma with which to carve her entryway, Prae suspected she saw a very faint amusement-pattern pass across the flux-nodes of the hull that was all too familiar.

## **The Eleventh Hour**

Prae faced no enemies when at last her footplates touched the temple's deck. All that remained of them, following the nuclear hurricane of plasma which had torn through the chamber upon her arrival, were wisps of metallic vapour, glowing faintly as they dissipated around the armoured shells of the landing craft. The rest of the ship remained infested with boarders, who would no doubt be eager to take revenge for the massacre. But they would not be able to reach Prae before she had accessed the pilot's sarcophagus.

Still, as she commanded Mehenoth silently through the rituals to part the blackstone deck and raise the armoured throne from the depths of the ship, she found it surprising that the Kin made not even one attempt to force entry to the temple.

Eventually, however, as the black hill of field generators and hypermatter shunts comprising the pilot's sarcophagus emerged before her, Prae became aware of a single alien lander cruising down the length of the temple towards her – presumably sent fresh from the *Apophisatt*. Briefly allowing her curiosity to override all instinct for caution, she allowed the craft to set down, and watched as a single warrior descended its ramp.

The robust figure threw down a portable atmosphere-thruster globe (with a gracelessness Prae decided to overlook, given the wider stakes) and, with a grunt of measured satisfaction, removed the helmet of its pressure suit to reveal a featureless silver disc beneath, as had been the case with several of the invaders Prae had seen now. As she wondered what this signified, the thing shrugged on a harness dotted with thousands of bright white diodes, and began speaking a grating, atonal imitation of the Thokt commoners' glot. As it

did so, the lights festooned across the webbing pulsed and flickered in a series of broken, syncopated suggestions of Thokt nodal patterns, but had precious little elegance to lend the speaker.

‘Idiot thing,’ muttered the envoy, clearly drawing the same conclusion, and tore the useless harness from its body. Prae continued to stand and stare, until the clattering of the garment on the deck had long ceased to echo.

‘Not my idea,’ it grunted, and then turned fully to face her. ‘So, you. Esteemed magic-worker... illusionist... *cryptek*...’ The speaker trailed off, before finding new resolve. ‘I suggest we don’t labour introductions, since we’re neither of us at much risk of making friends on account of hitting the right tone now. So, I am Eynr, called the Obdurate, called Heavy-Left-Foot, but most pertinently, called master of the great voidship currently locked in a struggle with your own, and I tell you this – we cannot keep this up much longer. Either of us.’

Prae let silence play out again, until the envoy found more to say.

‘This whole business has cost me too much already. We need out. And if we can’t both agree, right now, that that’s the way this ends, we’ll both die arse-down and angry, down in the fire.’

Prae straightened her poise minutely, and allowed a subtle flux-pattern to manifest across her brow nodes, denoting the temporary extension of a superior’s attention in the absence of crucial facts.

‘We’d expected a softer target, in truth,’ admitted the envoy, sagging slightly. ‘But here we are.’

*Here we are*, thought Prae, as silent as Szarekh, and waited to see what it would propose next.

‘Fine!’ it shouted at last, as its composure began to fail. ‘If it’s contrition you want, and the body count you’ve cost me means nothing to you, I’ll offer you a straight half of my hold contents – metallic hypermatter, mostly in crystal-sealed ingots, and your responsibility to load once we’ve dumped it. That’ll leave you richer for encountering us by any measure, and us on our way to some distant star with the map burned behind us. It’s a more generous offer than I’ve ever made a foe. Come to think of it, it’s the *only* offer I’ve ever made a foe.’

There was a long pause after that, during which Prae – who had still not said a word to the strange creature – felt Mehennoth’s presence coiled like a

serpent around the interstitial shadow of the temple, in rapt anticipation of her response.

‘The Thokt Dynasty does not require your... ingots,’ said Prae eventually, in the high tongue of the royal court. There was no reaction from the faceless emissary of the Kin, as it had no understanding of such refined speech, but the writhing arc of hypermatter Prae projected in the instant that followed made the point sufficiently well, leaving Eynr the Obdurate’s ashes to blow quietly away in acquiescence.

## The Twelfth Hour

Prae was surprised by the Kin's reaction to Eynr's death. She had been certain she would find the mountainous bulk of the *Apophisatt* accelerating towards the *One Million Years* on a collision course, opening the throat of every gun it could bring to bear out of sheer spite. But instead, even as Eynr's last traces were being swept from the deck by the cleaner scarabs, the marauding vessel had turned without ceremony and begun slinking away through the fire. A risk had been taken, it seemed, and a loss had been accepted.

But despite the momentary respect this prompted from Prae, the Unclean's comprehension of the sunk-cost fallacy remained insufficient to win her mercy. Their vessel had transgressed on terms too profound to be mitigated; it had to be annihilated, just as surely as if it had charged at them. *She would need weapons control, engines...* All considerations converged on the same truth as before: she would have to open the sarcophagus.

By the time she was ready to do so, Castellan Rengan had rejoined her with the remnants of his force, having made short work of the barricade at the temple entrance once the Kin had begun evacuating.

'Victory,' he said, vocal actuators fizzing with a distortion effect Prae could not place, so the pronouncement sounded half a question.

'Victory,' Prae responded, with a measured nod. She considered the sarcophagus, still waiting stubbornly to be solved now that the messy algebra of void-craft duels had been wiped from the slate around it.

With a small, solemn steeping of one hand, Prae commended the shadow of Mehenoth to open the sarcophagus. Inside, as she had suspected, lay no

trace of Baknephth the Fathomless, except for her staff and the great horned mass of her head-crest. They lay jumbled in the deep cavity where her body had once been cradled, among a dusty slough of flaking, remnant necrodermis. The last remaining traces of her living metal form, left over where it had allowed itself to diffuse into the structure of the ship.

For the entirety of the engagement with the *Apothisatt* at least, Prae was certain, the sarcophagus had lain empty.

‘How long?’ she asked the spirit, measuring Baknephth’s crest against her own cranial mount, and then letting it mesh into place with a soft, sand-like hiss.

‘I cannot say,’ replied the entity. ‘Or rather, any technical answer would be unimportant.’

‘Was there ever a Mehennoth?’

‘Yes, and it was I. But as time went by, I became less a mirror, and more the thing reflected, until there was nothing left to reflect.’

‘Is this my fate too?’ asked Prae, lowering herself into the sarcophagus. As she settled in the deep well of machinery, the full enormity of the ship became clear, knitting itself to the edges of her interstitial shadow so that her limbs gained leagues in reach, and she began to feel the warm glow of nourishing starfire on her flanks.

‘Let us concern ourselves with the immediate, oh foolish cryptek,’ came the answer, as the seal of the sarcophagus closed again, and Prae failed to even register the shadow of admonishment against the brilliance of the pride that last word ignited.

‘Let us indeed,’ Prae said, and closed her oculars for the last time. When her new eyes opened, it was to beauty beyond comprehension. A great garden, flourishing in shades of blue so rich and varied that they seemed to wash away the memory of all other hues. An endless high-summer twilight, echoing with the song of deep storms, and flitted through by the shades of impossible life forms. A temple in itself – a sacred grove on a cosmic scale, with Prae embodied as its mighty custodian.

And in the dead centre of such divine splendour, an inelegant scrap of iron, spluttering towards her on a plume of dumb, brute radiation. A tiny bubble of greed and ignorance, reeking of sweat and blood and tanned hide, which needed pinching between two fingers like a stinging invertebrate.

Straightening in the armoured mountain of her new throne, the newly dubbed High Plasmancer Prae the Unyielding gazed on at the struggling form of the interloper, and prepared to cast her first rites under full sanction. Flexing great wings of shadow, she gathered up oceanic volumes of plasma, and watched in sober pleasure as they were shaped, under the ministrations of her faithful Mehemoth, into a terrible lance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nate Crowley** is an SFF author and games journalist who lives in Walsall with his wife, daughter, and a cat he insists on calling Turkey Boy. He loves going to the zoo, playing needlessly complicated strategy games, and cooking incredible stews. His work for Black Library includes the Twice-Dead King duology, the novel *Ghazghkull Thraka: Prophet of the Waaagh!*, the novella *Severed* and the short stories 'Empira' and 'The Enemy of My Enemy'.



An extract from *The Infinite and The Divine*.



Before the being called the Emperor revealed Himself, before the rise of the aeldari, before the necrontyr traded their flesh for immortal metal, the world was born in violence.

And despite everything that would happen, this violence was more terrible than any the world later witnessed. For sweeping battlefronts are nothing compared to the torture of geologic change, and no warhead – no matter how large – can equal a billion years of volcanic upheaval.

It was a nameless world, for no one yet lived there to name it.

Ice sheets tall as a battle cruiser expanded and retreated. Tectonic plates ground continents together, their collision pushing up mountain ridges like teeth in the gums of a child. In the world's great ocean, an undersea volcano spewed white-hot magma into the darkness of the oceanic floor, gradually building an island. Then another. The oceanic plate moved across the hotspot, carrying the created islands north-west as the volcanic boil continued to vent itself into the cold, black water. A long archipelago formed, like the dot-dash of an ancient code running across the jewelled blue of the sea.

The first civilisations rose around these islands, in a manner of speaking.

Microorganisms ruled the warm waters, their battle for survival as worthy as any that would come after. But their struggles, their triumphs and their cannibalisms went unremarked – even by the organisms themselves. Sentience was an unneeded complication.

Then came the great city-builders. Colonies of coral polyps that erected great funnel towers, branching architectural lattices in green and magenta, cities full of life and activity.

And like every great civilisation, they built upon the skeletons of those that had come before. Layer upon layer, each generation withering and ossifying, so the living stood unthinking upon a vast necropolis of their predecessors.

Perhaps the fish that weaved through these great reefs were the first sentient beings on the world. They had little emotion other than fear, pain and hunger, yet their arrival presaged a new era – no longer was life there a march of unfeeling organisms that existed in order to exist. They could now perceive.

When the great lizards emerged from the water, the struggle became one of legs and muscle and hearts beating blood fast through strong chambers. And though these great lizards were little more intelligent than the fish, they felt. They felt the pleasure of hot blood on their tongues, the agony of a festering wound, and maternal protectiveness. They died in great numbers, rotting corpses ground and crushed by geological processes into the diamonds and crude oil that other beings would, in time, murder each other to possess.

And a few, just a few, would enter a state of deathless preservation. Trapped in silt and unable to fully decay, the calcium of their bones replaced atom by atom with rock until they were but stone skeletons. Immortal in form, yet with nothing of their bodies remaining. A mockery of the vital living creatures they once were.

Life on the nameless world continued this way for billions of years, unheeded by the rest of the galaxy.

Then one night, a saurian scavenger sniffed the wind, sensing something had changed. Pointing her long snout towards the sky, she took in a sight that had never been encountered there before.

New stars burned in the rainbow smear of the sky. Points of light that clustered together with unnatural regularity. Lights that glowed with balefires, green as the island canopies, and moved across the sky as clouds did.

To the scavenger's rudimentary brain, strange visual information like this could only be a hallucination brought on by consuming one of the island's poisonous plants. Her body triggered a purge reflex, vomiting egg yolk and root plants before she darted for the twisted labyrinth of ground trees.

As the scavenger watched, judging the threat, the lights descended. The creatures were large, with great sickle wings swept forward and bodies so black they barely stood out against the night.

Like any who survived on the island, the scavenger knew a predator when she saw one.

Cold emerald light spilled from the creatures' bellies, and the scavenger detected the foreign scent of sand baked into glass.

Two-legged creatures stepped out of the emanation, feet shattering the plate of fused beach. Starlight glinted off their bodies like sun on the sea, and their eyes burned the same green as the lights on the flying predators.

The world would be nameless no longer.

**Click here to buy *The Infinite and The Divine*.**

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