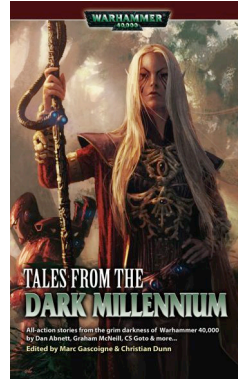


# ***TALES FROM THE DARK MILLENNIUM***

A Warhammer 40,000 anthology

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*From GATE OF SOULS by Mike Lee*

DIRGE WAS A cursed world.

It was a planet of bleak stone and black rock, and it didn't belong in the Hammurat system, of that much the Imperial surveyors were certain. It was a rogue world, one orphaned from its home star countless millions of years in the past, and it had wandered through the darkness of space for millions of years more before being trapped in the grip of Hammurat's three blazing suns. Where Dirge had come from – and what strange vistas it had crossed over the aeons – the surveyors didn't care to know. Its surface was a wasteland of deep craters and jagged peaks, shrouded in thick, poisonous air that howled and raged under the cosmic lash of Hammurat's suns.

What mattered was that Dirge was rich: a virtual treasure trove for the ever-hungry forge worlds of the Pyrus Reach subsector. The planet's crust was thick with valuable metals, radioactives and minerals, and the cometary impacts that had shattered Dirge's surface had brought with them even more exotic elements in amounts never before catalogued. When news of the discovery reached the subsector capital it touched off a frantic rush of prospectors and mining expeditions, eager to cash in on the new world's untapped riches. Within the space of a year, almost two million prospectors, miners, murderers and thieves had come to Dirge to feast upon its riches.

Little more than a year later three-quarters of them were dead.

Seething electrical storms burned out equipment and raging winds tossed fully-loaded ore haulers around like toys. Seismic activity collapsed tunnels or trapped gases exploded under the touch of plasma torches. Men were carved up in backroom brawls over claims too hazardous to mine. The outnumbered proctors mostly looked the other way, pocketing bribes equal

to a year's salary on more settled worlds and counting the days until their transfers came through.

Sometimes prospectors would return to the crater-cities from the crags or the deep tunnels, bearing artifacts of polished stone inscribed with strange inscriptions. When the rotgut was flowing in grimy taverns all over Dirge, men would sometimes go quiet and whisper of things they'd seen out in the storms: strange, corroded spires and dark menhirs covered in symbols that made their blood run cold. No one paid the stories any heed. Prospectors loved to tell tales, and what difference did some strange stones make when there was money to be made?

And so the crater-cities grew, spreading like scabs across the deep impact wounds the comets left behind. Men died by the thousands every day, killed by storms, earthquakes, carelessness or greed. Still more lost their minds from metal poisoning, mounting debt, or simply snapped from the stress of constant danger and merciless quotas from corporate masters dozens of light-years away. They blinded themselves with homemade liquor or wasted away in the grip of drugs like black lethe and somna. Some sought comfort in the words of itinerant priests, putting their salvation in the hands of holy men who took their tithes and sent them back to their dormitories with empty prayers and benedictions.

In the end, nothing made a difference. Until a prospector named Hubert Lohr came down from the crags one day, sold off all his possessions and began preaching a new faith in the bars and back alleys of the crater-cities. Lohr accepted no tithes; instead he offered people the secrets of Dirge. He spoke to broken-down miners, diseased prostitutes and petty thieves and told them of the Lost Princes, who still wandered the void in search of their wayward world. The Lost Princes possessed powers greater than men – greater even than the God-Emperor, who offered nothing but mouldy catechisms and cruel exhortations for the men who lived and died beneath His gaze. Lohr told the fevered crowds that if they made an offering large enough it would shine like a beacon across the void and lead the Princes back to Dirge. And when they returned they would reward the faithful with gifts beyond their comprehension.

By the time the agents of the Ecclesiarchy and the planetary governor realised the peril in their midst it was already too late.

THE BATTERED AQUILA lander had barely touched the plasteel tarmac before Alabel Santos was out of her seat and striding for the landing ramp. Even without the grim badge of the Inquisitorial rosette gleaming upon her breast she cut a fearsome figure in her ornate power armour. One hand rested on

the butt of her inferno pistol and a sheathed power knife hung in a scabbard on her other hip. 'Get the gun servitors ready,' she snapped at the portly, middle-aged man struggling with his own restraints while fumbling for his respirator mask. 'I don't plan on being here long.' Her man Balid bleated something in reply but she paid little heed, her armour's respirator system whining with strain as she headed swiftly out into the howling wind.

Purple lightning flared overhead, etching the bustling airstrip in sharp relief. Tech adepts swarmed over a long line of parked Vulture gunships, tending fuel lines and reloading rocket pods for another fire support mission over Baalbek City. On the other side of the plasteel tarmac sat a cluster of Valkyrie Air Assault craft, red tags fluttering from the Hellstrike missiles loaded on their stubby wings. A platoon of armoured stormtroopers, part of the Guard regiment's mobile reserve, huddled near their parked transports, cursing the wind and waiting to be called into action.

Santos spotted the permacrete bunkers of the regimental field headquarters just a few hundred metres from the airstrip, the pale colour of the new structures standing out sharply from the dark grey terrain. The guards on duty raised their weapons at her approach, but hurriedly stepped aside when they saw what badge she wore. She cycled through the atmosphere lock then pushed past bewildered and tired staff officers before marching stiffly up to a broad planning table set with an old-fashioned paper map of Baalbek City. Grainy aerial reconnaissance pics were spread across the table, highlighting different city districts. Studying them was a short, broad-chested officer in the uniform of the Terassian Dragoons, surrounded by a pair of staffers and a tall, forbidding woman whose cold eyes glittered beneath the rim of her peaked commissar's cap.

The colonel glanced up at Santos's approach, a curt order on his lips, but his exhausted face went pale at the sight of the gleaming rosette. His gaze continued upwards. The inquisitor's head was held stiffly erect in a frame of brass, lending her stunning features the severe cast of a martyred saint. 'Colonel Ravin, I presume?' she said without preamble. Red light flashed balefully from her augmetic eye. 'I am Inquisitor Alabel Santos of the Ordo Hereticus. What is your situation?'

To his credit, the colonel didn't skip a beat, as though having an Imperial inquisitor arrive unannounced at his headquarters was all in a day's work. 'Two months ago dissident elements among the mining population engineered a planet-wide revolt, overwhelming the local proctors and PDF contingents—'

'I know why you're here, colonel,' Santos snapped. 'I've been reading your despatches since you arrived on Dirge.' She studied the pics scattered

across the table and plucked one from the pile, sliding it over to the colonel. The aerial image showed a mob of citizens surrounding a bleached pillar of bone, their gloved hands raised in supplication before the blasphemous sigil at its peak.

‘You aren’t dealing with dissidents,’ Santos replied coldly. ‘They are something altogether worse.’

Colonel Ravin and the commissar eyed one another. ‘They call themselves the Cult of the Black Stone,’ the commissar said. ‘That’s all we’ve been able to learn so far.’

‘Then I shall educate you further,’ Santos said, leaning across the table. ‘This is the symbol of the Word Bearers, colonel.’ The inquisitor rapped the pict sharply with her knuckle for emphasis, causing the staff officers to jump. ‘The Ruinous Powers have taken an active interest in Dirge, and I have reason to believe that one of their greatest champions is at work in Baalbek City. I’ve come halfway across the subsector to find out why.’ And to stop him once and for all, Emperor willing, Santos thought grimly. You have much to answer for, Erebus.

Colonel Ravin’s pallor deepened. ‘But that’s... that’s incredible,’ he stammered. ‘Traitor Marines? Here? How do you know this?’

‘Because it is the Inquisition’s business to know such things,’ Santos snapped, turning back to the pict. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the colonel stiffen, then with an effort she reined in her temper. You have enough enemies without needing to make more, she reminded herself.

‘It’s all in the reports, colonel,’ she explained. ‘I’ve been studying every status report, Administratum log and Ecclesiarchal dictum filed from Dirge for the last six months.’ Santos picked up one of the pict’s: it showed the planetary governor’s palace in Baalbek City. Like all city structures, it was low, broad and windowless, built to withstand the frequent cyclones that swept over the crater wall from the wastelands. The resolution of the pict was good enough that she could recognise the impaled figure of the planetary governor, suspended on a girder among an iron forest set on the palace roof. The inquisitor set the pict aside and reached for another.

‘Four months before the uprising, merchant ships were reporting strange surveyor readings in the vicinity of the system’s far asteroid belt,’ Santos continued. ‘The local port authority dismissed the reports as pirate activity, but curiously, there was a dramatic drop in pirate attacks in the system over the same time period. Shortly afterward, orbital traffic control detected a number of unidentified flights into and out of Dirge’s atmosphere. Again, these reports were passed off as smuggling activity, but I have another

theory – a Chaos warship entered the system and is likely still here, hiding in one of the system’s asteroid fields.’

Santos studied an image of cultists dragging bloody corpses from a burning dormitory towards the base of one of the cult’s sacrificial pillars. She set it aside with a frown of contempt. ‘Then there are arrest reports from the local Arbites headquarters. In the days leading up to the uprising several cult figures were arrested and when put to the question they described their leaders as armoured giants – the “Lost Princes”, according to one of the prisoners. The cultist described the greatest of these princes as a god among men, who wore the skins of his foes as testament to his power and bore a mighty talisman of his gods’ favour.’

‘The Chaos champion you spoke of,’ the commissar declared. ‘Who is he?’

But Santos shook her head. ‘I dare not speak his name. I’ve placed your souls in peril just telling you this much.’

One pict after another showed cultists at work around hab units and municipal buildings across the city, carting out truckloads of debris and hauling them away. After the fourth such image she began to line them up on the map table in chronological order.

‘If the prisoner was to be believed, there were no less than five Word Bearers present on Dirge, including the Chaos lord. That’s an astonishing number for such a minor world.’

‘Minor?’ Ravin said. ‘Dirge supplies more than half of the industrial materials used by forge worlds across the subsector.’

‘The Word Bearers don’t make war according to the *Tactica Imperium*,’ Santos declared. ‘They don’t think in terms of lines of supply or resource interdiction. They fight for souls, spreading terror and debasement from world to world like a cancer. Dirge, however, is both isolated and sparsely populated. From their standpoint, it’s a poor target.’ The inquisitor studied the line of images and her frown deepened. ‘Colonel, why did you order these images taken?’

Ravin looked over the picts and waved dismissively. ‘We were trying to gauge the extent and composition of the enemy fortifications based on how much material they were excavating. Those work teams have been at it day and night since before we got here.’

Santos straightened. ‘Excavations.’ The inquisitor felt her blood run cold. ‘These cultists aren’t using floor panels and wall board to build fortifications, colonel. They’re hollowing these buildings out to dig for something. That’s why the Word Bearers are here. Why he is here. The rebellion was just a diversion so they could search the planet without

interference.’ Her hand was trembling slightly as she snatched up the last pict in the line. The time code in the corner indicated that the last excavation had begun almost three days ago. No new excavations since, she realised. They must think they’ve found what they’re after.

‘Colonel, I require the use of your mobile reserve and a flight of Vultures,’ Santos declared in a steely voice. ‘I’ll brief the platoon leader en route.’

THE BUILDING HAD formerly housed the local tithe assessor’s office. Only three storeys tall, square, windowless and slab-sided, the structure was built like a treasure vault, which wasn’t far from the truth. A small army of servitors and stooped scribes had toiled night and day within its cold, gloomy cells, recording the profits of the mining cartels and the independent prospectors and assessing the Emperor’s due.

Now the square outside the building was piled with the guts of the Imperial tax collection machine. Large, ornate cogitators stood in drunken ranks, their wooden cabinets splintered and their brass gauges tarnishing in the corrosive air. Drifts of torn cables and mounds of flooring and wall board were plucked and pushed by the restless wind, and a pall of glittering dust swirled endlessly in the harsh construction lamps erected by the work crews outside the building.

Glass crunched like brittle bones beneath Erebus’s armoured boots as he stepped through the narrow doorway. Just beyond the threshold a tiled floor extended for less than a metre before ending in a jagged cliff of permacrete and steel.

The miners of Dirge knew their trade well. Working day and night, they’d completely torn out the first two floors and the building’s two sub-levels. Tangles of shorn wiring, crumpled metal ducting and shreds of wallboard hung like man-made stalactites from the gutted ceiling, painted white with a layer of grit that sparkled in the harsh light of the construction lamps.

All work had stopped in the pit below. More than two dozen men set aside their tools and prostrated themselves on the rocky ground at the Chaos Lord’s arrival. Erebus looked out over the fruit of their labours and was pleased.

Once the sub-levels had been removed the miners had dug another three metres into the grey, ashy soil before they’d found the first of the black stones. It had taken another day of careful work under difficult conditions to lift away millions of years of rock-hard encrustations that had covered the strange symbols carved into their surface. The work had gone slowly

because the delicate sonic brushes would run out of power after only a few minutes in proximity to the rocks, and because the workers' brains disintegrated from prolonged exposure to the symbols themselves. Even from where Erebus stood he could feel the power of the warp rising like black frost from the surface of the accursed objects.

On the orders of Magos Algol, the tallest of the stones had been pulled upright again. It rose five metres into the air, casting a long, misshapen shadow across the excavation site. The surface of the object looked crude and rough-hewn, but the symbols carved into the rounded surface were sharp and precise. They climbed the stone in a kind of spiral, following the rules of a language that had died out before the birth of mankind. At the top of the stone the symbols ended at the base of a perfect sphere, haloed by an arch of stone wrought in the shape of twining tentacles.

Erebus smiled, revealing pointed teeth and the fearful demeanour of a cruel and vengeful god. The Chaos lord was clad neck to foot in the imposing armour of a Space Marine – but where its ancient engravings once extolled the might of the Emperor of Man, it now preached an altogether different faith. Blasphemous runes and symbols of ruin pulsed sickly from the Traitor Marine's breastplate and the edges of his pauldrons, and the skulls of defiled Imperial priests hung from a brass chain around Erebus's neck. Psalms of vengeance and depravity were scribed in blood upon the tanned hides of fallen Space Marine heroes and stretched between barbed spikes across the Chaos lord's pauldrons and from hooks at his waist. In his right hand Erebus held aloft a talisman of fearsome power – the dark crozius, symbol of his faith in the Chaos Gods.

A broad ramp, wide enough for two men to walk abreast, had been built from the ground floor to the base of the excavation. Its steel supports quivered slightly as Erebus descended slowly into the pit. His black gaze was fixed on the standing stone and the orb at its summit.

Erebus stepped unflinchingly into the stone's twisted shadow. The darkness that fell upon him was unnaturally cold, sinking effortlessly through the bulk of his daemonic armour. The Chaos lord felt his shrivelled insides writhe at the icy echo of the warp, and Erebus welcomed it, spreading his massive arms wide. His mind filled with visions of the Seething Gulf, the ocean of mad wonder that the servants of the false Emperor called the Ocularis Terriblus. It was the font of godhood, the birthplace of universes. Amid the roiling sea of unfettered power, Erebus beheld a swollen red orb that glittered like a drop of congealing blood. He heard the cries of multitudes, the chorus of supplication sung at the feet of his unholy master, and he longed to join his voice to the song. Lorgar! His



mind called into the void. The time draws nigh, unholy one. Soon the gate will swing wide!

Erebus chuckled to himself, the sound echoing in the cavernous space and causing the cultists to tremble in fear. He turned to the assembled multitude, his eyes alighting on two figures kneeling apart from the storm-suited labourers. One was a hulking giant in red armour similar to Erebus's own; the frail, elderly man hunched next to the Word Bearer looked as slight as a children's puppet, all slender sticks and grimy rags, too fragile to touch.

The Chaos Lord favoured his servants with another dreadful smile. 'Arise, Phael Dubel,' he commanded gravely. 'And you, Magos Algol. Blessed are you in the eyes of the Gods Who Wait.'

The magos rose to his feet with an agility that belied his frail and aged appearance. His skin had the grey pallor of a corpse, his thin, wrinkled lips pulling back from gleaming steel teeth in an avaricious grin. His dark robes, once decorated with the fur mantle and chains of a Magos Archaeologis, now bore lines of depraved script that spoke of his allegiance to the Ruinous Powers. Algol's eyes glittered like black marbles in the shadows of his sunken eye sockets, bright with forbidden knowledge and reptilian cunning.

Dubel, one of the Chaos lord's chosen lieutenants, bowed deeply to his master and stepped to one side, turning so that he could keep the assembled workers and the open doorway in view at all times. One hand rested on the butt of his holstered bolt pistol. The other, clad in a fearsome, outsized gauntlet called a power fist, opened and closed in an unconscious reflex, as though the weapon hungered for a victim to crush in its grip.

Magos Algol walked a careful path around the sharp edges of the stone's shadow, looking up at Erebus with a calculating smile.

'You see, great one? It is just as the Book of the Stone described,' Algol's voice was harsh and quavering, like the sharp note of a plucked wire. 'I told you we would find it here.'

Erebus regarded the towering stone greedily. 'Have you deciphered the runes yet, magos? Does it tell us where the Orb of Shadows lies?'

'In time, in time,' the magos said, raising a wrinkled hand. 'The runes require careful study, great one. Their meanings, if interpreted without proper care, could be... explosive. But,' Algol added quickly, 'it does indeed speak of the orb. You will have the answer you seek.'

'Then do not let me keep you from your work, blessed magos,' Erebus said to the man. 'Inform me the instant that you have deciphered the text.'

The magos bowed to the Chaos lord and approached the stone, his hands fluttering eagerly as he began to contemplate the inscriptions. Erebus

joined his lieutenant. 'Send word to the Throne of Pain,' he said quietly, referring to the cruiser hiding in Dirge's outer asteroid field. 'We will return to Ebok as soon as Algol has uncovered the location of the orb. Then our work will well and truly begin.'

Dubel looked back at the looming stone, his black eyes lingering on the sphere. 'Once we have the orb, what then?'

'Then we seek the Temple of Ascendancy,' Erebus replied. 'I believe it to be on Fariin, in the Elysiun System, but the orb will tell us for certain.'

The Traitor Marine stiffened, fixing his master with a suspicious stare. 'Ascendancy? You seek to follow the same path as Lorgar?'

Erebus returned his lieutenant's stare. 'I? No, Dubel. I am but a humble servant,' he said enigmatically. 'Perhaps I seek to blaze a path for Lorgar to follow me.'

Dubel's eyes widened in shock. Before he could reply, however, the ground shook beneath a drumbeat of thunderous explosions as Imperial rockets slammed into the side of the hollowed-out building.