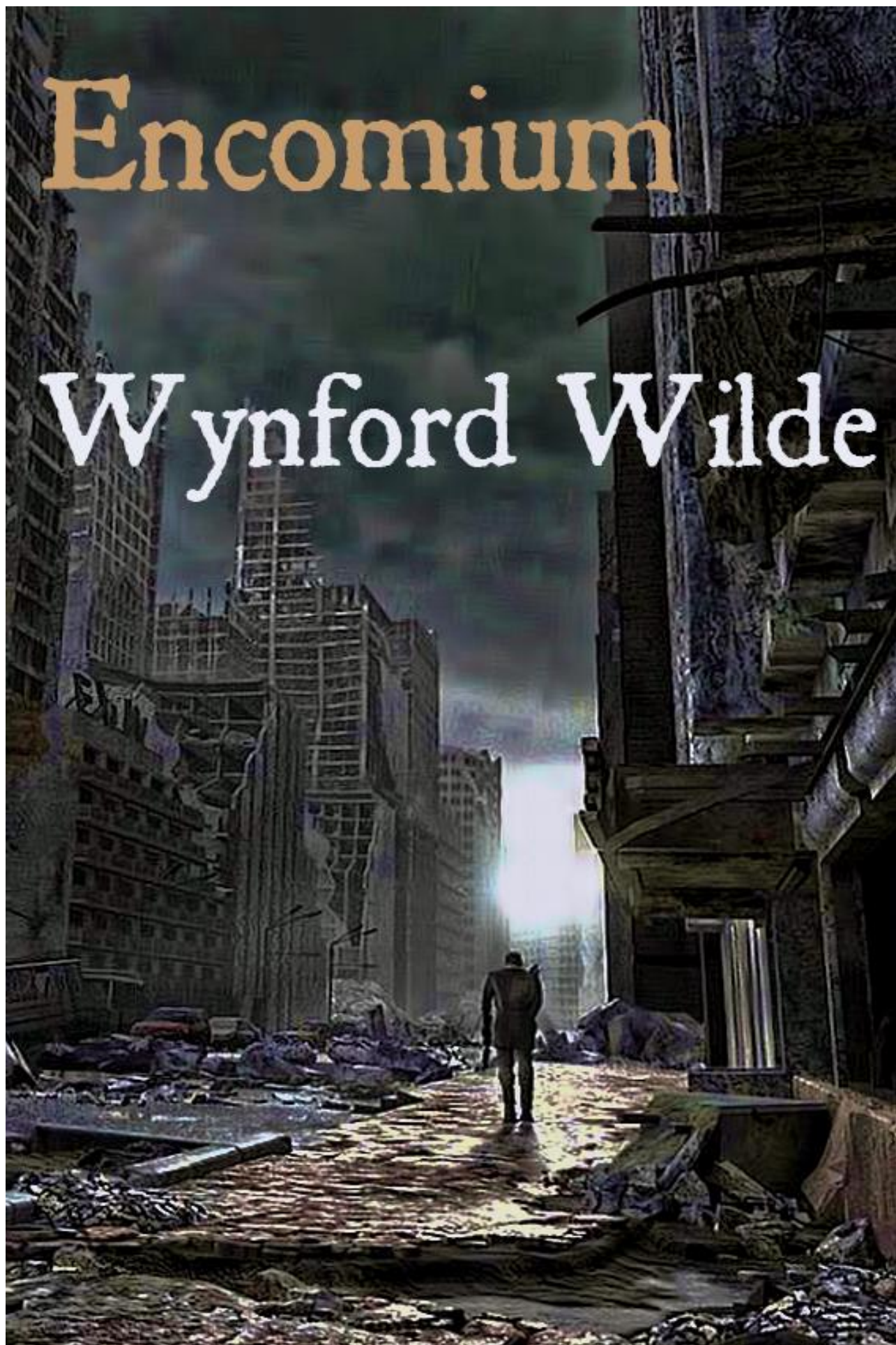


Encomium

Wynford Wilde



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By Wynford Wilde

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Encomium

A Warhammer 40K Story

by

Wynford Wilde

“Master, there are visitors.”

Master Cain looked up from his multiple datapads.

“Who?”

“I think they are... inquisitors.”

“Tell them to make an appointment. And make it for a time I am not here. I share no concerns with bureaucrats and witch-hunters.”

“Yes, master, but ...”

The servant spoke no more. A long-fingered hand extending from a black leather coat grasped the door above the servant's head and pushed it open. Three men entered. They were identically dressed, but it was immediately clear to Master Cain who was the leader. A man like any other, yet unlike any other. He was the most ordinary looking person Cain had ever seen, except for the sense of purpose which he wore like a crown.

“Leave.”

Cain rose unthinking, as if to obey.

The tiniest flicker of a smile bent across the corners of the Inquisitor's mouth.

“Not you.” He turned to Cain's servant. “You. Now.”

He had barely finished speaking before the servant was out, shutting the door behind him as if he were locking a cage on a dangerous animal.

“Please, Master Cain. Sit.” He spoke as if the room were his, and he the host.

Cain sat. There were two chairs opposite Cain's desk, and another two against the wall. The leader sat in one of the chairs beside the desk. The other two men ignored the chairs and stood halfway between their leader and the door. The leader sat silently for a moment before speaking.

“You are a cataloguer?”

“Yes.”

“And what does this mean?”

“I am responsible for ... order. I keep things as they should be.”

“How?”

“In another age I would have been called a mathematician.”

“A mathematician. And what is your area of specialisation?”

“I ... ahhh. May I see some identification, please?”

“Of course.” The Inquisitor handed over a holocard ID and gestured to his companions to do the same. The holos showed identical facial features to the three men who stood before him. Cain held the cards a foot or so from each of their faces, and the cards ran a confirming retinal scan.

The men were Inquisitor Luther Korvan, and Interrogators Callan Grimes and Alex Ryder.

“Thankyou. My area of specialisation is n-primes. Prime numbers divisible by nine.”

Interrogator Grimes snorted. “There is no such thing. The definition of a prime number is that it is divisible only by itself and one.”

Master Cain eyed him for a moment before replying. “And the definition of parallel lines is that they are equidistant at every point. Yet the body of mathematics which gave us space travel is entirely built on the theory of intersecting parallel lines.”

“So these numbers exist?” asked Inquisitor Korvan.

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Five. That we know of.”

“But there may be more?”

“We suspect there are seven.”

“Seven. And these numbers. They are special because...?”

Master Cain looked at each of the three men in turn, as if weighing them in his mind. He sighed and then nodded slightly.

“They are the words of undoing.”

Interrogator Grimes snorted again, as if stifling a laugh.

“Explain,” asked Inquisitor Korvan.

“Everything in the universe – matter, energy, distance, even vacuum, is defined by numbers. Everything is linked together, related in ways we barely understand. Mathematics defines those relationships. The words of undoing dismantle those relationships. Reality is undone. The result is chaos, emptiness, unending void.”

The Inquisitor’s head tilted slightly to the left.

“And are you also familiar with the Encomium? The inverse of the third word of undoing?”

Master Cain’s face drained of colour.

“How can you know of this?”

“We are not without resources of our own. We know of it, but we do not know it. Nor do we wish to. But you do.”

“Yes.”

“Then you will speak the Encomium for us.”

“Over whom.”

“Arretus Falkreath.”

“I will not. How dare you ask such a thing? A monster. A man responsible for thousands, millions of deaths. The man who almost fanned the Horus Heresy back into full life. I will not!”

“You will.”

The Inquisitor’s will was strong, like that of a spider waiting for its prey. He waited, powerful and still. But Master Cain was also strong, his mind tempered by years of meditation on the most aggressively irrational numbers ever discovered. He was silent for a moment, then asked:

“Why do you want this?”

“Falkreath is dead, but he is not contained. Anyone with the knowledge and the will to do so can use the Encomium to bring him back.”

“Anyone? Anyone?” Master Cain was incredulous. “You speak as if there were thousands. In all the universe there are no more than half a dozen who have the knowledge to do so, and none with the will.”

“The human will,” said Inquisitor Korvan, “is a feeble thing. Easily changed. Especially by pain.”

“Threatening me will serve no purpose.”

“We? We are no threat to you. But look at this.”

Korvan flicked his fingers over the surface of a datapad and handed it to Cain. He glanced at it and recoiled, almost dropping the datapad. The screen showed the barely recognisable body of man, torn to pieces, spattered over a room much like the one in which the four men were now sitting. The face was still intact, steel grey eyes glaring out, unseeing.

“This is your colleague, Vento Survetus.”

“I know who it is,” growled Cain. The anger in his voice was as deep and threatening as a thunderstorm at sea. The two Interrogators leaned back, as if suddenly realising they had underestimated the power of the small dark man behind the desk.

“I apologise for shocking you,” said Inquisitor Korvan.” But there are those who would raise Falkreath, and destroy anything and anyone to do so. Survetus was the first they visited. He resisted, in the face of terrible pain, at the cost of his life. You might do the same. But would all of you?”

“Is he the only one?”

“So far. We heard of his death only five days ago. He had been dead for three when we reached him. We left Eidos two days ago to come to you.”

“What of the others?”

“Our resources are limited. You were the closest. We will visit the others if we must, if they are not already dead, or turned.”

Master Cain rose to his feet. He walked to a small gold frame which hung on the wall beside a set of shelves covered with data-spheres. It was a 3D capture of a woman in the prime of youth, golden-haired and full of life. Her face brightened into a wide smile as he drew near, and she reached out a hand toward him.

“My wife,” said Master Cain. “She was murdered six months after we were married. I have often been tempted – I have never loved again. But I would not. I would not bring her back, angel though she was, and now you ask me to bring back this... this monster?”

“He is a monster,” said Inquisitor Korvan. “Perhaps the most dangerous heretic since Horus himself. But death did not destroy him utterly. You are strong. You may not fail. But one of you will. Falkreath will return from Chaos. The only hope for the Imperium is that we return him before his remaining krelarchs can do so. That we contain him, learn from him, keep him secure, unknown.”

“Yes,” said Master Cain, “I see the sense of it.”

The Encomium could be said anywhere. Amongst those few who knew of it, some believed it would work only if pronounced in the exact place where the person had died. Cain knew this to be untrue. Every part of the universe was linked, every part equidistant to every other part, like parallel lines which intersected nonetheless. But if Falkreath was to be summoned from the currents of the Warp, it had to be done somewhere far from any settled place. A dead world.

Tarsis Ultra. It was Master Cain’s suggestion. The others readily agreed.

Tarsis Ultra had been a civilised world. Like many other developing worlds, it had been ravaged by wars which were not of its making. Ultimately it was seeded with the Heraclitus Virus by Warsmith Honsou and all life was choked, erased from its surface. Some infrastructure remained, but Tarsis Ultra was visited now only by occasional study groups. The virus was gone, its atmosphere had recovered enough to be breathable, but the nutrients that had made it an agricultural centre had been consumed by the plague, and it had never been viable as a mining planet. It would never be settled again. It was perfect.

It took Inquisitor Korvan only a day and half to gather supplies and collect the small crew he needed. Four Ultramarines borrowed from the company on Eidos, two engineers to construct an iron/plasma cage to hold the resurrected Falkreath, the ship's crew of Master, two navigators, an engineer and two servant/deckhands, along with Korvan and his interrogators, and Master Cain.

Two days after the Inquisitor walked into his office, Master Cain lay enveloped in an inertia dampening pod as the graceful Imperium Dawnstar cruiser lifted gently into the air, and then, like a startled animal, raced into the sky. Once out of Florin's immediate gravitational field, Cain pulled the small lever that opened the pod doors, and stepped into the body of the cruiser.

The ship's master and navigators, more accustomed to space flight than he, were already seated at their consoles, the navigators focussing into the trance-like state that would enable them to see the vital few moments into the future they needed to guide the ship through the swirling mist of madness that was the Warp.

The ultramarines' mass was so great that they would need to remain locked into their secure pods in the cargo bay throughout the journey. The cruiser's engineer and deckhands were busy around the ship.

Korvan and the interrogators stepped out of their dampening pods. The ship's master checked the monitor which displayed the navigators' vital signs and brainwaves, then glanced at them, seated either side of him, as a final confirmation. He activated the mechanism that generated a small black hole directly in front of the ship, then the second mechanism that generated an equal gob of anti-matter and fired it at the black hole. The reaction tore a hole between our universe and the Warp. A violet maw opened in front of the ship, sending out wisps of madness like probing fingers. The ship's master punched the thrusters and pushed the ship out of reality into chaos.

Master Cain felt a momentary clutch of terror, and dismissed it. The sense of loss, of separation, was harder to dismiss. Florin was a haven, a home of higher learning, supported by farming communities. It had been his home since he arrived there as a student thirty years before, and he had not left it since his wife had been killed. Even if he did return, he knew his life would be changed, that there could be no going back from what he had been asked to do.

Then, seemingly only a few moments later, the shipped popped back into reality, and Tarsis Ultra lay directly ahead.

"Where now?" asked the ship's master.

"Do you have a map of the surface?" asked Cain.

A detailed survey map appeared on a large screen at the side of the cabin. Master Cain looked.

“Here. This city. Impara. There is a plaza in the middle of the city big enough to land this ship. A building on the northern side has a large underground storage area. It is secure and well-hidden.”

“You have been there?” asked Inquisitor Korvan.

“Yes.”

Korvan nodded to the ship’s master. He tapped the image of the city on a smaller version of the map at his console, and the ship began its descent into the thin cold atmosphere.

The master needed to intervene only in the very last stages of the landing, moving the ship deftly between long abandoned buildings, and bringing it down in the middle of a large square. The square was surrounded by tall buildings, and looked as if it had once been open parkland. Nothing grew there now, and nothing moved.

The master ran routine atmospheric and temperature checks before opening the cargo bay door.

“The oxygen nitrogen balance is OK. No harmful trace gasses. It’s cool, and the atmosphere is thin. About what you would expect at 16,000 feet above sea level on an Earth standard world. Take oxygen bottles. You may need them.”

The ultramarines rumbled from their secure pods and out onto the rough ground. The others waited, and let them do their job. They checked for traces of any other ships, of any other life forms nearby, any energy sources or unusual temperatures. Nothing. The world was deserted.

The ship’s crew helped to load the materials for the iron/plasma cage, along with two fusion units, onto two three-metre square d-grav platforms. One of the fusion units would power the cage; the other would provide heating and any other energy Master Cain, Korvan and his men or the ultramarines might need. Food and water, spare oxygen, compressible mattresses, a portable toilet and basic medical supplies were piled on top.

Master Cain pointed the group towards the building he remembered, about three hundred metres to the North. He thought it would take no more than twenty minutes to get there and another twenty to find their way into the underground storage space.

The engineers expected to need twelve hours to construct and test the cage. Inquisitor Korvan confirmed with the ship’s master that he expected to be back within twenty-four hours. The ship’s crew would remain with the ship, and alert Korvan if there was any movement, or if any other ships approached.

The d-grav platforms were unlocked. Two of the ultramarines tugged them out of the cargo bay. The violent alien growth caused by the Heraclitus virus had left scars on the land which even thousands of years had not been able to erase. The park was pockmarked with deep gullies, pits and overhangs. It might have taken twenty minutes to travel the three hundred metres if they had nothing to carry, but the settings on the two d-grav platforms had to be altered constantly to follow the steep shifts in the ground, and the journey took over an hour.

The massive doors to the building Master Cain had described were still intact, a testament to the skill of their builders. They were open, but only far enough for a single man to pass. The ultramarines pushed at them, trying to make space to admit the d-grav platforms, but they were jammed solid.

“Move back.”

The others moved at the ultramarine’s bidding, back about twenty metres to where the unbroken paving ended, and the wild upheaval of alien earth began. The ultramarines’ targeting lasers focussed on the three huge hinges which held the door in place. There was a flash, then a brief moment of silence. Then the hinges tore apart with a scream and the heavy door fell inwards and hit the floor like thunder.

The ultramarines crunched over the fallen door and shone lances of blue light around and up into the high atrium. Not searching for life – there was none, but for danger from lights or lifts or other objects which might have been loosened by the sudden movement.

Once inside, the group stopped for a moment to rest and to initiate one of the fusion units. Lights flared from the front of the d-grav platforms. The lobby of the building was cavernous. Dead escalators ran to a mezzanine floor some sixty feet above, and a bank of elevators lay along the back wall.

“There are doors to a stairwell behind the elevators,” said Master Cain.

They assumed whatever had been stored in the long-deserted warehouse below the building had been taken to and from there by cargo elevators, and had been prepared to find the control unit and re-activate the lifts using one of the fusion units. But the doors and the stairwell were easily large enough to accommodate the d-grav platforms, and easy enough to navigate. Master Cains’ estimate of twenty minutes to find the storage area was more accurate than his estimate of the time to reach the building.

The storage area was truly vast. At least a hundred metres in length, some fifty metres wide, with ceilings over twenty metres high. Ancient crates, tools and machinery cluttered the floor space, so that only about a third of the floor area was free.

Lights were strung around the sides of the space. The brightness heightened the shadows. The floor became a tapestry of brilliant light, odd hulking shapes, and utter darkness. The light revealed ramps at odd intervals around the edges, some leading up, some down.

“I am sorry,” said Master Cain. “I didn’t know about the ramps. They might have been easier than the stairs.”

“I thought you said you had been here before,” said Inquisitor Korvan.

“I have,” said Cain “But we didn’t have lights like this, and we only explored the first few metres. We were more interested in signs of life on the surface, whether agriculture could be restored.”

Korvan looked at him quizzically.

“Well. Never mind. We are here, and the stairs were not a problem.”

Korvan called one of the ultramarines, and walked with him around the space he wanted cleared for the cage. The cage would be a cube, about five metres in each direction. Korvan wanted ten metres of clear space around it. The plasma flux which would flow through it would be powered remotely, with a flexible beam fired directly from the fusion unit. Cables could be cut, and it was imperative that nothing interrupt the flow of power once Falkreath was returned.

The ultramarines began to move crates and machinery to the sides.

“This will take a couple of hours, and the cage another five or six for the engineers to construct and test. Get some sleep if you want.”

“Thank you. I might walk first, check one or two of the ramps, get something to eat.”

Korvan nodded, but his attention was elsewhere now, focussed on the growing clear area where the cage would be constructed. He called his two interrogators and they walked to the edge of growing space. Master Cain could hear Interrogator Grimes’s voice raised at one point, but it was none of his concern, and he turned and walked back to the d-grav platforms.

Master Cain took a multi-purpose light, one that would focus sharply over a long distance, but could also provide a wider ambient light if needed. He picked up a couple of nutrient bars and some water, a small oxygen bottle, and a small pocket lasgun. There was almost certainly no danger here, and the lasgun would do little more than annoy anything it was fired at, but Cain felt more secure with it tucked into his pocket.

He looked around the storage area. About thirty metres left of the stairwell from which they had entered was a wide ramp that sloped downward. Shadows moved around the ceiling of the upper part of the ramp, projected from the ultramarines as they carted machinery and crates out of the centre of the storage space. Master Cain shone his flashlight down the ramp. There was a steady decline of for about fifty metres, and then blackness. Cain could not see whether the ramp turned or opened up into another space. He unwrapped one of the nutrient bars, took a few mouthfuls of water, and strode down towards the darkness.

An hour later he returned, and after a few minutes in the portable toilet, unfolded one of the compressible mattresses and lay down. He read from a datapad for five minutes and then closed his eyes. He fell asleep almost instantly.

“We’re ready.”

“What?”

“You’ve been asleep for five hours. We are ready.”

Master Cain shook himself awake.

“Give me a second to wake up. Can I have some coffee?”

Inquisitor Korvan nodded. Cain got up, visited the portable toilet, and took an instant heat coffee from the d-grav platform. He snapped the tab on the top, waited a second, and pulled off the lid. The smell of freshly ground espresso drifted up and he smiled.

“Whoever invented this was a genius.”

Korvan and his interrogators may have agreed, but they gave no sign of it, waiting with barely concealed impatience till Cain finished his coffee.

“You have what we need?” asked Cain.

Korvan nodded. He and Cain walked into the cage. A high table sat like an altar in the middle of the floor, lights flooding from above. Korvan placed a few hairs on its polished surface.

“Show me the plasma, please,” said Cain.

“Why?”

“With what you have asked me to do, I think I am entitled to know that Falkreath will be contained when he returns.”

Korvan did not argue. They walked out of the cage, and he signalled to Interrogator Ryder, who was stationed at the fusion unit. Ryder flicked off a safety switch, then lifted a plastic cover and pressed a button to begin the flow of power to the cage. A stream of bluish lightning crackled from the fusion unit to the plasma generator above the cage. A wall of shimmering light fell, clinging to the iron bars. Cain took a wrench out of his pocket and threw it at the plasma. It disintegrated instantly.

“OK. Turn it off. And the cage door?”

Korvan nodded to Ryder, who once again flicked the safety switch to open the plastic cover, then pressed the button to stop the flow of power. The blue lightning died instantly, and the shimmering wall of plasma danced down the iron bars to the floor and stopped.

The cage door had a bio-key, locked to Korvan. Only he could open it. He slammed the door shut, then passed the key to Cain. Cain put it in the lock, but no matter how he turned it, the door would not budge. Korvan took it from him, slid the key into the lock, and it opened easily to his touch.

“Very well,” said Master Cain. “It will take me five minutes. It will take another five minutes for the parts of the number to coalesce. Leave me.”

Korvan left the cage. The four ultramarines were at full attention now, one on each side of the cage. The others watched and waited.

Master Cain sat on the ground on front of the high table. He was a psyker. That was not so unusual. But the talent that made him a cataloguer, one of only six known to exist, was not only that he could see briefly into the future, but that he could project thoughts, patterns, numbers into that future, to a specific point in time and space. Only those who could do this could study and use the n-primes.

Early attempts to study the violently irrational numbers inevitably caused the death of those who discovered them. As soon as the number was fully formed in the mind, the subject was undone, mind and body. Six hundred years ago a student had successfully formed the 3rd n-prime. The entire city of Vasta and half the continent it ruled was destroyed. The Scholastica Psykana sent investigators. Since then, about one in twenty thousand of those sent to Terra to train as astropaths had been found who could be trained to study and project the numbers. Projection beyond the 2nd n-prime was forbidden. Use of the Encomium was forbidden.

Numbers. Ordered, structured, multi-layered. Nothing could be further from chaos. Yet it was the fringes of chaos, the power of the Warp, that allowed a cataloguer to reach through time, coursing through its deadly mists just as a ship's navigator did. First Cain built the structure, the first plenum of the Encomium, the inverse of the third n-prime. Then the chaos, the door to the Warp, was opened by the power of his rigidly disciplined mind. The path was seen, and the first plenum was sent.

The second plenum. The complex number meshed together in Master Cain's mind, and held. The door opened again, the path found, the number sent. Then the third plenum, the final part.

Master Cain stopped. Nothing had been done yet which could not be undone. The number would not coalesce with just two parts. What he had done so far would simply melt away. To send the third part of the number to the same point in space and time was a choice from which there was no going back. Even he could not see far enough ahead to know the full consequences of that choice.

But he had been convinced by Korvan, convinced of the rightness of this action, convinced that what he was about to do would save the Imperium from years of war.

He saw the path. The third plenum darted through the mists of the Warp.

Master Cain rose to his feet.

"It is done."

He walked out of the cage. Inquisitor Korvan closed the cage door behind him and shook it to check. He and Cain walked to where Ryder was standing at the fusion unit. Grimes was stationed on the other side of the cage. The two engineers who had built the cage had already been sent back to the ship.

Ryder flicked aside the safety switch, lifted the plastic cover and pressed the button. The bolt of bluish lightning shot across the storage space to the plasma generator, and an instant later the cage was covered in a sparking curtain of light.

They waited. Three minutes. Two. Then one. Master Cain was shaking.

"Are you scared?" asked Korvan.

"Yes."

"You are right to be."

Ribbons of colour began to form inside the shimmering wall of plasma. Then, almost instantly, a naked man was visible on the table. Master Cain had seen his face a hundred times or more in newscasts. Jovial. Charismatic. Deadly. Arretus Falkreath.

The Encomium had worked. Cain did not know whether to be relieved or horrified. He turned to Inquisitor Korvan.

“What now?”

A click sounded behind him. Cain twisted and saw that Ryder had flicked the safety switch and was lifting the plastic cover over the switch that controlled the power to the plasma generator.

“What are you doing?”

Ryder grimaced, an ugly cross between a smile and growl.

“What I came to do.”

There was no time to say anything more. Cain pulled the tiny lasgun from his pocket and fired. The glop of yellow plasma struck Ryder in his left thigh, almost severing his leg. He toppled, striking at the power switch and missing as he fell. Blood was spurting from his leg. He would bleed out in minutes.

“Don’t move!” Cain shouted, moving towards him. One of the ultramarines had begun to trundle from its station, its weapons now trained on Ryder.

“No, Cain, you don’t move.” Korvan’s calm, almost hypnotic voice came from behind.

Cain ignored him. A shot from behind grazed Cain’s shoulder. Korvan had fired at him.

Now Cain stopped. He turned back.

“What are you doing? Ryder was trying to release him.”

“Yes. And he will succeed.” Korvan crossed the few yards between them and pressed a short handled projectile gun into his side.

“I have never been a good shot,” sneered Korvan “but even I cannot miss from here. Keep still”

In a supreme effort of will, Ryder dragged himself up the console of the fusion unit. Holding himself up with one hand, he flicked aside the safety switch, pushed the cover aside and pressed button to shut off the power.

Cain hurled himself at the floor, firing back at Korvan. He missed. Korvan raised his gun to shoot, but a plasma gun fired from behind him, catching him at the base of the spine. He dropped to the floor, his legs still, his upper body writhing in agony.

The crackle of lightning running from the fusion unit to the plasma generator stopped. The room was silent for a second. The shimmering curtain of plasma around the cage faded and disappeared. Falkreath sat up on the high table, legs dangling towards the floor, and smiled.

Ryder dropped to the floor, gasping with pain and exhaustion. He pulled a gun from his belt and aimed it at the fusion unit's control panel. Cain fired another bolt of plasma at him and caught him in the left shoulder. Ryder fell back, but Cain was a second too late. Ryder's weapon fired, and the fusion unit control panel erupted into flames.

The man who had shot Korvan walked to him and kicked his pistol away.

"Could you have cut that any finer?" asked Master Cain, angrily.

"I am sorry. I thought they would wait until they were back on the ship."

"Who are you?" Korvan was paralysed, but his voice was as strong as ever.

"This is the real Inquisitor Korvan," said Master Cain. "He left my office about an hour before you arrived."

The imitation Korvan thrashed on the ground, unable to get up or move his legs.

"You have lost," he said. "Chaos is the end of all things, the purpose of all things. Everything else is illusion."

As he spoke, thin fibres of purple seemed to grow from his body and reach out towards Cain and the real Korvan. Cain raised his little lasgun and fired a single glob of golden plasma into his skull. His head bloated for a second then fell apart. The trails of purple chaos disappeared instantly.

"You know," said Cain, "I can understand why people turn. There is real power in the darkness."

"Are you tempted?"

"No! Horrors, no! All the power it offers is an illusion in the end. There is nothing real there but death and despair."

"Have you ever killed anyone before?" asked Korvan.

"No."

"Are you OK?"

Master Cain thought for a moment. "Yes. If you or I had not killed him he would have killed us, and then perhaps found some way of releasing Falkreath."

"All he needed to do was reach the cage and the key would have turned in the lock," said Korvan.

They turned to look at the cage. Falkreath smiled and waved, looking for all the world like a harmless stranger in a bit of trouble. Grimes had held his position on the other side of the cage, and had an impressive looking weapon trained on Falkreath. Cain had almost forgotten him.

"Grimes?" he asked.

“Grimes is one of my oldest friends,” said Korvan. “We asked him to infiltrate a group of Falkreath’s remaining krelarchs five years ago. It was through him we learned of this plan.”

“So Falkreath is secure?” asked Cain.

“Oh yes, I think so. Whatever else he is, whatever gifts he may have brought back from the Chaos, he is a physical being, and as long as the cage is intact he cannot escape.”

As they were talking, a thin fibre of chaos plasma reached out though the bars of the cage. It flicked around for a second as if looking for something, then darted towards the nearest ultramarine. The ultramarine staggered as if it had been struck by a massive hammer, then righted itself. It turned towards the cage, raised its targeting lasers, and fired bolt after bolt of liquid light into the top corner of the cage. The other ultramarines turned almost instantly and fired at their possessed comrade. He fell, the flesh and blood of his head and upper body mingling with the molten slag of his helmet and armour.

It was too late. The bars of the cage had melted into nothingness where the laser struck them, opening a hole easily large enough for a man to fit through without touching anywhere that molten metal still dripped hissing onto the floor. Grimes had turned with the other ultramarines to fire at their now dead brother. That moment of inattention was all Falkreath needed. He leapt through the breach and raced towards the nearest ramp. Grimes, Korvan, Cain and the ultramarines loosed a wall of intense laser fire after him, but he dodged between the bolts as if he were a shadow. When he reached the edge of the ramp he turned and raised his right hand. A shimmering wall of violet plasma spread from his fingers. Where the laser bolts struck it, their energy seemed to be channelled down into his body. Korvan shouted for firing to stop. There was a moment of grim silence, then Falkreath laughed and bowed towards them as if to say “Thank you, what an amusing performance,” then disappeared down the ramp into blackness. Grimes and one of the ultramarines raced after him.

“Now that,” said Korvan, “I did not expect.”

“Are we in trouble?”

“I don’t think so. Falkreath may have realised I have a ship; I could not have arrived here without one, but he has no way of knowing where it is. His moments in the ultramarine’s mind will have been enough for him to find the Dawnstar. We just need to get it off the ground before he reaches it.”

He called to the two remaining ultramarines, and tapped a communicator pad on his sleeve.

“Dawnstar, this is Korvan. Respond.”

There was a brief crackle then five seconds of silence.

He tried again. “Dawnstar, this is Korvan. Urgent that you respond immediately.”

There was no response.

“How well do you know the ship’s master?” asked Cain.

“Well, I thought. Whatever has happened there, and whatever the cost, we need to stop that ship getting off this planet with Falkreath on board.”

“How long before he reaches the Dawnstar?” asked Cain.

“If we cannot stop him, and if he gained a clear impression of its location from the ultramarine, perhaps forty minutes.”

“And then another half hour to prep and get out of the atmosphere,” said Master Cain. He hesitated, then spoke again. “The fourth word would be certain.”

“Do it,” said Korvan. “Make it fifty minutes. Once it is done, take one of the ultramarines and follow Falkreath. I will take the other, get my ship and collect you.”

One of the ultramarines picked up Korvan and placed him on his shoulder. They sped towards the ramp which Cain had entered some seven hours before. The remaining ultramarine reached for Cain.

“Wait.”

Master Cain sank to the floor. No one, as far as he knew, had ever done what he was about to do. He closed his mind to everything around them. Years of practice meant he could achieve a state of perfect stillness in only seconds. He formed the first part of the fourth n-prime, and projected it into the space above them, fifty minutes into the future. Mind clear again and empty. The second part. There – a clear path through Chaos to where it would mesh with the first. Then the third part, formed and guided through the same violet labyrinth.

In less than an hour the fourth word of undoing would coalesce in the square above them. The entire world would be destroyed, and nothing could stop it.

“Now!” Cain shouted to the ultramarine. The huge cyborg lifted him easily and perched him on its left shoulder.

“Where?” it asked

Cain looked around.

“The ramp to your left takes us up into the middle of the square. We should be at the Dawnstar before Falkreath is half way across the square.”

“I thought you said you didn’t remember the ramps,” said the ultramarine.

“I lied,” said Cain, and then they were off, speeding towards the ramp, down momentarily into darkness, along a long wide corridor illuminated only by the ultramarine’s searchlight, then up and up and finally out into the thin atmosphere and pale sunlight.

Cain looked around. The Dawnstar was about thirty metres behind them. Ahead, about one hundred and fifty metres away, between them and the buildings, he could see Falkreath as he leapt and clambered over the tangled alien earth towards the Dawnstar.

“Get to the ship,” said Cain. “Wake or release the ship’s master and crew, whatever has happened, and get the ship ready to go. If Falkreath gets within fifty metres of the ship, either leave or destroy it.”

The ultramarine turned and was gone.

Master Cain turned towards Falkreath and waited.

After no more than a minute Falkreath saw him waiting, and laughed.

“Who are you, little man? An academic, dragged from your ivory tower into a fight that is not yours. What can these witch hunters offer you? Do you think they care for you? That they would not see you dead in a second if it suited them? I can give you power beyond measure.”

Now it was Master Cain’s turn to laugh.

“I know what it is you offer Falkreath, and it is not power or hope or purpose, just emptiness and horror.”

Falkreath stopped his forward motion, as if taken aback.

“Ahh,” he said. “So you have some wisdom. What you say is true. Death and blackness are all that await us. So? All the more reason to take pleasure while we may. And if some must die, well, who are most humans but cattle for us to feed on?”

Cain said nothing.

“Very well,” said Falkreath. “Have it your way.”

A violet filament stretched from Falkreath’s outstretched hand and reached for Cain’s mind. It wrapped itself around his neck and head. For a moment he was dizzied. The pressure was immense, and it was as if his own voice and mind were telling him just to be reasonable, to do as he was told and that everything would be just as he wanted, that he could have everything he wanted, even his wife. “Yesss...” the voice seemed to hiss in his skull, “Even your wife.”

But Falkreath had miscalculated. The discipline of years of mental training were enough to enable Cain to resist, perhaps not for long, but the mention of his wife, his beloved wife, drove him to anger, and this anger reached back along the tendril of chaos to Falkreath, and stung him like a whip across the face. Cain was released, and Falkreath staggered backwards.

At that moment, Korvan’s ship plunged to the ground, landing heavily but safely to the right of Falkreath. A ramp dropped open and Korvan and the ultramarine shot out of the ship. The ultramarine began to fire at Falkreath. Instantly Falkreath turned towards them. Violet flame shot from his hands into the ultramarine, who gasped and dropped for a second before rising and firing

at Korvan and his ship. The ship erupted into flames, and Korvan was thrown ten metres over the torn soil of the square towards Cain.

Interrogator Grimes and the other ultramarine appeared out of the building behind Falkreath. The ultramarine loosed gobs of liquid plasma at his tormented comrade, who was still firing at Korvan and Cain. The ultramarine spun around to return fire, but was stuck full in the face as he did so, and fell to the ground in a puddle of gore and molten metal.

“Shield grenade!” shouted Korvan to Grimes. “Shield grenade!”

At the same time, Korvan and Grimes both threw blue metal orbs towards Falkreath. They landed within a few metres of him, and instantly walls of light grew from where they had landed, bent towards each other and locked together, forming a sphere of energy around him.

“How long will that last?” asked Cain.

“Ten minutes, if we are lucky,” replied Korvan.

He and Cain ran towards the Dawnstar. The ultramarine appeared at the bottom of the ramp. They rushed past him and into the ship.

“What the hell happened to the ship’s master and crew?” asked Korvan.

“Nothing,” said the ultramarine. “They were playing cards and didn’t hear the communicator.”

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” said Korvan. “The entire Imperium at risk because some idiots were playing cards!”

Falkreath was secure for the moment, but he was testing the strength of the shield. Purple scars appeared on the walls of light. Then a violet finger pressed its way through the shield, flicked around as if sniffing for something, and shot towards the ultramarine who was carrying Grimes across the broken ground towards the Dawnstar. The ultramarine crashed to the ground. Grimes fell from his shoulder. The ultramarine tumbled over a wave of soil and rock and landed heavily on Grimes’s body. Even from the Dawnstar Korvan and Cain could hear the crunch as the massive cyborg landed on top of him. Grimes was dead.

“Callan! No!” shouted Korvan.

The ultramarine slowly rose from the earth and turned to fire on the Dawnstar, but the ship’s master was now at full attention, conscious of his earlier lapse, and already had the ship’s cannon trained on the stricken soldier. He fired, and a glowing hole appeared in the ultramarine’s chest.

The one remaining ultramarine wheeled itself into its pod in the cargo bay, the Dawnstar’s ramp thudded shut, and the craft lifted gently into the air. The violet scars on the walls of the energy shield holding Falkreath grew angry and then burst, and Falkreath stood alone in the middle of the wild corrupted earth. He reached up towards the Dawnstar and chaos streamed towards the ship, but it could not reach them, and faded into nothingness.

“How long do we have?” asked Korvan.

“About six minutes.”

“How far away do we need to be?”

“6,000 kilometres. More to be safe.”

Korvan paled. He turned to the ship’s master.

“Is it possible?”

“For the Dawnstar, yes, for us, maybe. It is five minutes of fifteen standard gravities of acceleration.”

“Go!” shouted Korvan.

The last ultramarine was already strapped into his pod in the cargo bay. Korvan and Cain raced for the inertial damper bays at the rear of the cabin. The master and one of the navigators followed, while the other navigator swiped and tapped on the Dawnstar’s control panel.

“Five seconds!” he shouted, then leapt from his seat towards the dampers. His coat caught on the edge of his chair and he fell to the floor. He righted himself quickly, but it was too late. The Dawnstar turned and hurled itself into the sky. The navigator’s body was thrown heavily into the back wall of the cabin. Blood and mucous oozed from his fractured skull.

Five minutes later the thrusters stopped, and Cain, Korvan and the others stepped out of their pods. The ships’ master looked at the control panel.

“We are 6,600 kilometres from the planet’s surface.”

“It is enough,” said Master Cain.

Thirty seconds later they watched as a third of the planet simply disappeared, as if an invisible giant had taken a bite from an apple. Tarsis Ultra began to collapse, oceans and continents breaking over the edge and falling into the massive hole. The planet wobbled on its orbit, and began a slow spiral downwards towards its sun.

“Is he gone?” asked the ship’s master. Korvan looked at Cain.

“Oh yes. There is no coming back from that. There is nothing left, even for chaos to recover.”

“Thank the lights of heaven for that,” said the ship’s master. “Where to now?”

Korvan looked at Cain again.

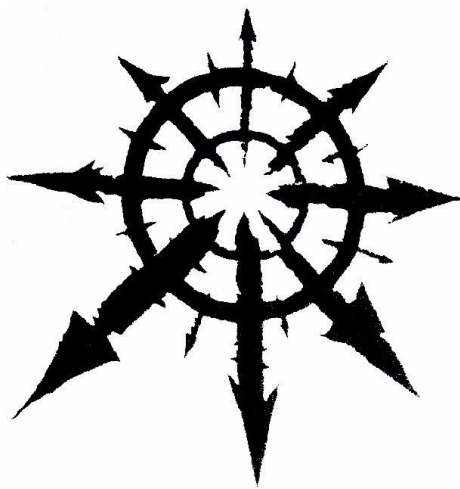
“Back to Florin? Or is it time for a change? I need some new team members. Someone with your skills would be invaluable.”

It was a moment before Cain spoke.

“Since my wife was murdered I have felt unsettled, as if my research meant nothing, as if I were merely filling in time, wasting my life. I would not mind the chance to do something different, perhaps to make the universe a safer place.”

Korvan smiled.

“Then welcome, Interrogator Cain.”



Thank you for reading Encomium by Wynford Wilde. This story is the first in a planned series set in the Warhammer 40k universe, retelling the adventures of Interrogator, soon to be Inquisitor, Marcus Cain.