



NEFERATA

THE CLAW OF MEMORY

DAVID ANNANDALE



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THE CLAW OF MEMORY

By David Annandale

'You are doomed to repeat history,' said Neferata, 'because you are doomed to forget it.'

She looked out upon the conclave, watching the effect as her words sank in, waiting for the first scholar to disagree. She wondered if the objection would be shaped by reason or by fear.

The conclave was taking place in the Ossuary of Rigour. The chamber was a domed semi-circle. Neferata presided over the gathering from a raised throne a few yards forward of the back wall. Inlaid in the dome were the interlaced bones of thousands of past Neferatian scholars. To be interred here was to be granted a singular honour, though Neferata did not bestow the gift without exacting a cost. There was no peace in the dome, no rest. Pain and a consciousness like the dreams of fevered sleep rippled through the bones. Even when it was empty, the Ossuary was not silent. From the dome came the susurrus of half-formed thoughts, of unfinished arguments, of the bitterness of fragmentary controversies. The last breath had been taken, but the last word never spoken. Sometimes, the writhing of the souls was so strong that the ceiling seemed to pulse. Now and then, the extremity of intellectual anguish reached such a peak that bone moved. Perhaps a finger twitched, or a jaw parted slightly. The motion was never great, but it was enough to make stone crack.

When the Ossuary was in use, its imprisoned souls were distracted from the agony of their discontent. The dead, confused and broken as they were, listened to the debates, and were compelled to echo them. The back wall of the Ossuary was a single slab of perfectly smooth, polished obsidian. As the discussions ebbed and flowed, so did phantasmal writing. The dark mirror of the stone glowed with the etchings of ghosts, the dying sighs of ideas. Neferata had little need to look back at the wall. She retained everything that was said, but the mortals before her could always see, at a glance, where the current of the debate had taken them, and what ideas were inspiring the strongest reaction.

In the silence that followed her latest words, she saw worried frowns, and knew that the wall had, for the moment, gone blank. Her declaration had cut deeply into the dead as well as the living. Coming from a mortal, the idea could potentially be refuted as easily as any other. But coming from her, the words had much greater weight, because they were backed by much greater knowledge, and much longer memory.

Even so, she was genuinely curious to see what counterargument, if any, would be offered. Her purpose had been twofold in summoning the conclave. There was a prize she sought, but whether she

achieved it or not was independent of the actual debates. The other reason was scholarly. She had told these mortals, gathered from across Neferatia, that she wished to discuss the implications of the great loss of history that had occurred as a result of the wars of the Ruinous Powers. This was nothing less than the truth.

There were only mortals in this gathering. Sometimes Neferata wished to discuss with vampires only. Sometimes she mixed the living with the undead. On this occasion, she needed the view of mortals. They and the undead experienced time very differently. The passing of a year for those whose years were numbered was not the same as it was for those who could watch the centuries go by as indifferently as they did a minute, and with little change to themselves. It was not that vampires did not forget too, that they did not lose history too, and through her voluminous writing, she took measures against that danger in her own case. But the loss of history for mortals produced a pain whose acuteness led to particular flavour and vintage of thought Neferata valued that uniqueness. Her hunger for knowledge, and the power it gave, was as strong as her thirst for blood.

'You present us with an unresolvable paradox,' said white-haired Geya Balanar. 'If what you say is true, then we will have no memory. And because we have forgotten, we cannot experience the truth.'

'I disagree,' said Alrecht Verdurin. He had not journeyed as far as some of the others. He lived in Enthymia, a small, ancient settlement under the protection of Nulahmia. 'Forgetting is not a wave. It is not a uniform condition.'

'Isn't that what the Ruinous Powers have been? A great wave upon our cultures, extinguishing them?'

'But not entirely,' Starin Javeign chimed in, cutting Alrecht off. 'The forgetting is not total. For tragic errors to repeat - and if repetition troubles us, it is because the repetition is tragic - it requires only that a certain number forget. Those who remember will be too few to prevent the tragedy, but they will witness the recurrence.'

'That is an added cruelty to the doom, then,' said Geya, 'if there is always enough memory to recognise the doom but never enough to prevent it.'

'We are not just talking about history that is to be feared and avoided,' said Mela Turvaga. She was even older than Geya. 'I think our queen's statement is true not only in the specific, but in the broader sense. We *are* doomed to forget. Even without the destruction of our cities, our libraries and our places of learning, and the murder of our sages, we would still forget. What the forces of the Ruinous Powers have done is to greatly worsen what was already happening and is inevitable.'

'But there are still memories,' Alrecht insisted. 'History is not lost altogether.'

'That is a truth so partial as to be almost meaningless,' said Neferata. 'If I find a broken tiller washed up on the shore, can I then declare that the ship has not sunk? Your memories and your histories are lost day by day. Consider even your family's history. Is your line unbroken? Then you may pass down traditions and memories from one generation to the next. But you pass them down imperfectly. Details are forgotten, meanings are misinterpreted. With every ancestor who dies, there is someone else whose knowledge can no longer be consulted. And so little by little, what is passed down becomes distorted, vague, and a lie.'

'But you remember,' said Alrecht.

'Vampires forget too.'

'But *you*. my queen, *you* do not.'

'Don't I?' Neferata smiled, to show she was not denying what he had said.

'I do not believe that you *ever* forget,' said Alrecht

'If this is so, what flows from that?'

'Then no history is truly lost. What we think we have lost can be recovered, through your generosity.'

Neferata laughed. 'Alrecht Verdurin, you are transparent. I have respect for your work as a sage, but not for your work as a politician. But even if I were as you would invite me to be, your reasoning is still flawed. History is more than a simple act of recall. History is interpretation. What I perceive to be the meaning of an event on one day may be very different from what I believe the next day, and different again the next year, and the next century. Where is your history now? Which of my interpretations would you wish me to give you? But your faith is touching. I wonder how you think I preserve and keep order in infinite memory.'

Alrecht worried he had said too much. He did not want to attract the wrong kind of attention from Neferata. But if he were silent during the conclave, that would draw her suspicions even more certainly. He had meant what he said. His best disguise, he thought, would be to participate as fully and honestly as he could in the discussions. Neferata's smile after the last exchange worried him, though. It felt too pointed. So he contributed less as the night wore on.

This was the second night of the conclave. The debates had been running without pause since it had begun. Neferata did not tire and had been present throughout. The mortal sages needed to rest. There were more than two hundred of them altogether, and though the Ossuary was always crowded, there was also a steady trickle of participants making their way in and out of the chamber. Scholars rose discretely from the rows of stone benches to leave in search of food and drink, or to sleep for a few hours in one of the cells in the halls leading to the Ossuary.

Alrecht waited a few more hours before he withdrew. The conclave would be ending before long. This was his moment. He could not leave the Palace of Seven Vultures until Neferata had dismissed her sages. Neither could he imagine returning to the Ossuary, and feeling her gaze, after he had done what he planned. He had to act while he knew where she would be, and then leave the palace right away.

He rose, timing his departure so that he was just a few steps behind another scholar, and he made his way out of the Ossuary. He turned left and walked down the hall, glancing in each of the cells as if he were looking for someone. He put more and more distance between himself and the other sages. When he reached the far end of the hall, he was alone. Without looking back, without speeding up, walking as if he knew where he was going and had every right to go there, he turned into the branching corridor.

There was no one here. He moved faster now, as quickly as he could while keeping silent. At every intersection, he clung to the shadows and peered around the corners, watching for guards. The further he went, the more confident he became that he would not be seen. He was seeking the way to Neferata's private library, and there would be no guards there, because that tower of the palace was hidden by the Mortarch's arcane arts. The grand library of the Palace of Seven Vultures was renowned across Neferatia and beyond. The private one, though, was a profound secret. As far as Alrecht knew, no one but Neferata was aware that it existed.

No one except the Verdurins.

Neferata was right about the decay of family history. Alrecht did not know how many generations back it was that his ancestor Karlet found the way into the library. He did not even know if the discovery had been the result of a search or lucky chance. It had been, Alrecht thought, so long ago that the defences of the library must have changed greatly. No other Verdurin had been able to find the way in since, yet every few generations, one of them tried. The family was a small one, its means

modest. The Verdurins were not nobles. They were small merchants and scholars, and their most revered ancestor had committed a single act of theft. Karlet had seen wonders in the library. What those wonders were grew with every retelling of his legend. Alrecht doubted everything about the stories except for two things. He believed that the library contained limitless knowledge, and he believed that it was true that Karlet had been inside. He believed the first thing because he had to. His family's entire history was shaped by the belief in the power that knowledge would grant. He believed the second thing because he had proof. Karlet had stolen a single sheet of parchment from the library.

The writing on the parchment was in no language Alrecht could read. The runes, perfectly and elegantly shaped, had never been deciphered, though the Verdurins had tried for centuries to solve their puzzle. It was this effort that had gradually pushed the family closer and closer to poverty, as all pursuits except the scholarly fell away. Alrecht would be satisfied if all he took away from the Palace of Seven Vultures was a key, even just a hint, that would unlock the secrets of the parchment. In order to do that, though, he had to find the library, and he had to get in. All of Karlet's other descendants had failed. Most had simply returned home in disappointment, their souls eaten away by the doubt, that Karlet had ever succeeded. Some vanished, and their disappearances kept the faith in Karlet alive, as did the parchment, the greatest of heirlooms, passed down from parent to child along with all the confusing, contradictory, frustratingly incomplete family lore.

Alrecht thought he would succeed. Things would be different for him because of the risk he was taking. He had the parchment with him. It was hidden inside the lining of his robe, nestled against his chest. No one had ever taken the parchment from the vault in which it was kept. Nothing could ever be allowed to happen to the Verdurins roost precious treasure. The idea of bringing the parchment to the palace had first come to Alrecht ten years ago. He had weighed the decision every day since then. Finally knowing that if he failed, he would only be remembered as a traitor to the family, he decided the risk was worth taking. What use was the parchment without a key? None. What had it ever done for the Verdurins other than being the source of obsession? Nothing.

Everyone had failed but Karlet and what was different about Karlet? The presence of the parchment. Alrecht knew the logic made no sense. Karlet did not have the parchment *before* finding the library. It was the fact that the relic was present in Karlet's story that was enough for Alrecht. He had no sound reasons to think he was right. But he was convinced he was.

Within minutes of leaving the Ossuary of Rigour, he *knew* he was right.

There was no way to know where the library was. Karlet's legend said it was hidden in a tower. If that was so, there was nothing in the exterior of the palace that would suggest which one. The other inheritance of the Verdurins, accumulated over the generations of failed searches, was a map of much of the interior. That was as useless a heritage as having the parchment sealed in the vault. They were hardly alone in knowing their way around the palace. Having a sense of where he was would be essential when he wished to leave, but it did nothing to help him find the library.

The parchment was helping him, though. He felt it begin to pull once he left the Ossuary behind. He followed where it wanted to go, and the pull became stronger. Now it was so powerful, he thought the parchment might tear through his robe and fly down the halls on its own. It was behaving like a dowsing rod. It wanted to return to the library, and it was using Alrecht as its tool to get there. He was happy to submit to its will.

He was almost giddy as he ran from shadow to shadow, down one corridor after another. His footing was sure, though it was growing hard to see. Wall sconces were becoming rare. The halls were thick with darkness. This was not a region of the palace anyone but the queen would have

reason to enter. He stopped to catch his breath at one intersection. He squinted, looking back and forth. The damp stones of the walls were phantoms to him now. The gloom pressed against his eyes, clammy and smothering.

Alrecht didn't know where he was. He was too deep in the maze of the palace. His knowledge of Neferata's home, he now realised, was hopelessly superficial, a trap in itself. He wondered if he should turn around.

He looked back the way he had come. It was as dark as the path forward. Even if he made it as far as the previous intersection, he didn't know where to go from there. He was lost.

He would have panicked, but the tugging of the parchment was so strong, it submerged his fear. *I'll find my way out*, he told himself. *Karlet took the parchment, and he found the way*. The logic was as flimsy as his reason for bringing the parchment. No matter. He had been right to do that. He would be right again. He was close to finding the library. Conviction and obsession held the fear at bay.

Alrecht moved on through pitch darkness. The stone under his palm felt uncomfortably like the rough flesh of some reptilian beast. The air was musty and dank, as if he were heading into a region of the palace that was never used, and was mouldering in neglect. *This is another defence*, he thought. Alrecht wondered why there had been no barriers to him. He had not stumbled over any wards. If the floor dropped away ahead of him, he would have no warning. The simplest trap would kill him.

He kept moving. The floor was solid. There were no traps. He turned yet another corner, and the darkness lifted. There was a door ahead of him, tall, iron, outlined by a thin glow the colour of angry blood. Alrecht approached it. There were shapes in the iron, but the light was too dim for him to make out details. There was a suggestion of wings, of dark movement arrested in metal. He felt a gaze upon him. He swallowed hard, and pushed the door open.

The chamber beyond was suffused with the dim red glow. Tens of thousands of books lined the curved walls of the tower, and a staircase spiralled up the wall to the full, dizzying height. Alrecht stumbled into the library, craning his head back. There was too much to take in. The tower of books seemed to extend to infinity. He approached the shelves nearest to the door. The bindings looked odd, yet horribly familiar. He reached out and touched a spine, then recoiled from the feel of a corpse. The bindings were human flesh. He shuddered, swallowing bile.

The revulsion faded quickly. Knowledge and power drew him on.

He did not know where to begin. The runes on the spines of the volumes were the same incomprehensible markings as on the parchment. Where should he look to find a key?

What if there isn't one?

He mustn't let himself believe that. He mustn't give up on centuries of his family's singular hope.

Alrecht reached out for a book at random. At the last moment, he jerked his hand away as if burned. The thoughts contained between the covers seemed to be leeching out of the binding. The air was charged with a dark storm waiting to strike. The knowledge here was that powerful.

Who do you think you are? he thought. *Leave this place. You cannot hope to master what is here. We have been lying to ourselves for every generation since Karlet.*

He stared at the books, raising his head again to follow the spiral of power. He noticed now that the markings on the spines were clearly made by the same hand. Neferata had written everything he saw in this chamber. The wealth of thought before him was overwhelming.

Leave, he thought again.

He did not. He refused to give up on the family's dream. He refused to be the one to kill it. Somewhere in here was the key to the parchment.

Alrecht turned away from the wall. In the centre of the library stood a lectern. The stand was one of Neferata's victims, mummified and held in a position of eternal agony. An open book rested on the lectern, an invitation to the curious. Alrecht wondered if this was how Karlet had stolen the parchment so long ago. Tingling with anticipation, he approached the lectern and bent over the book. The page it was open to was blank except for a single sentence This, Alrecht could read without a key.

RETURN WHAT IS MINE.

Alrecht gasped. He wanted to flee but was frozen in place

'You seem disappointed,' said Neferata.

Alrecht looked up. The Mortarch of Blood was walking down the staircase, her movements unhurried and graceful. She wore the same black robes as she had at the conclave, but in the crimson light of the library, runes glowed on them, identical to the ones on the parchment, whipping Alrecht with silent mockery.

A monster glided down the stairs just ahead of Neferata. A dark, heavy shroud covered a body of bones and ghostly essence. A horse's skull protruded from the cloth, its empty eye sockets fixed on Alrecht. It clutched a long glaive, its notched blade carved with sigils. An unfelt wind stirred the tattered edges of the shroud. The jaws of the skull parted slightly, as if it would speak to Alrecht and promise him terrors.

'You are the first of your family since Karlet Verdurin to have entered the Claw of Memory,' said Neferata. 'You would be right to think that means you are also only the second mortal to set foot here. For Karlet's crime, I cursed your family. You have laboured in futility ever since. But none of Karlet's descendants brought the stolen page within my reach until you. So I must shape your fate differently. I hope you will not be disappointed.' She gestured at the horror that accompanied her. 'This is the first part of your reward. For this glaivewraith stalker, there is no one in this realm as important as you.' Her teeth gleamed.

Alrecht staggered back from the lectern. His robe caught on a spike protruding from beneath the book. The tortured face of the mummy screamed mutely at him. He tried to pull free, and it was as if the tome were holding him fast. Alrecht reached inside his robe as he struggled and pulled out the parchment. He threw the page at Neferata. It fluttered in the air and fell only a few feet from the lectern.

Alrecht wrenched himself free, tearing his robe, leaving a long strip of cloth hanging from the lectern. He ran for the door to the Claw of Memory. It had opened easily for him. Now it remained stubbornly closed. Sobbing, he yanked at it, too terrified to look back and see what was coming for him. His neck prickled in anticipation of the touch of a blade.

Then the door ground open. As Alrecht slipped through, he did look back. He saw Neferata holding up the cloth to the stalker. Then he was running.

The glow from the Claw of Memory followed him, lighting his way. He ran without thought or plan. He thought he had been lost before. Now, he truly was. Everything was lost to him.

He did not know how he got out of the palace. His flight was a blur of dark corridors and the distant laughter of Neferata ringing in his ears. But he was out, and in the streets of Nulahmia. He could think again, though that only increased his terror, because he knew why Neferata had not killed him in the Claw of Memory. She had chosen to toy with him. It would have been a mercy to die in the library. Instead, that *thing* was going to come for him. He would live with the torment of dread until then. He could feel the spectre's approach, picture its unhurried, relentless glide towards its appointment with him. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

But maybe he could end the curse. Perhaps he could redeem the centuries of futility, his family's unending expiation for Karlet's theft. Alrecht had failed his ancestors, and they had failed too. He swore he would not foil his son. Alrecht would give Lorrone and his descendants the legacy of a true history, one they must never forget.

Nulahmia surrounded him with shadow. Every darkened alley and every gaping threshold of every house and every vault threatened to reveal the stalker. He moved as quickly as he could, running when he had the breath. He stuck to the great boulevards, hiding himself in the crowds. He tried to measure his progress against his memory of the hunter's unhurried movement. From stables at the western wall of the city, he paid for a horse and rode the beast to exhaustion. The wind in his ears was the keen of air through the skull of the glaivewraith stalker, and if he listened more closely than he dared, he would still hear Neferata's laughter.

Alrecht reached his house in Enthymia the following night. At the door, he looked around for the gliding, shrouded form. It was not upon him yet. 'Let there be time,' he muttered. 'Please, let there be time.' He did not know to whom he was pleading.

He slammed the door and barred it, though he knew the gesture was useless, and ran past his startled wife to his study.

Hallaya followed him. 'What is it?' she asked. 'Did you succeed?'

'Lies,' he told her. 'All lies.' He sat at his desk and snatched up a quill and a handful of vellum sheets. 'Where is Lorrone?'

'In bed. Asleep.'

'Lock his door, and this one.' He grasped Hallaya's hand. 'I'm sorry,' he said, tears coursing down his cheeks. 'I'm so sorry. My time has come. This is the last thing I can do for you and Lorrone. I love you both so much, and that is why I must do this.'

Hallaya ran from the room, and Alrecht turned to his task. He wrote frenziedly. There was too much he had to say, too much to explain, in order to bring this to an end. His hand shook, and his writing was a barely legible scrawl. Words came out in a jumble. He had no time to shape a careful argument. Each moment might be his last. When the door opened again, he yelped and dropped the quill.

It was Hallaya, come back to lock the door on this side.

'No!' Alrecht said. 'You have to leave me! You mustn't be here when it comes!'

'When what comes? I don't understand.' She came and threw her arms around him.

I don't understand. That was his fear. That was the terror that surpassed even that of his coming end - that she would not understand, that Lorrone would not understand, that no one would understand. His life had been in vain. His death might be too.

Alrecht pulled free of Hallaya's embrace. 'I have to write this,' he said. 'I have to finish.'

The door flew off its hinges. The glaivewraith stalker floated into the room, its blade pointed at Alrecht's heart, its eye sockets empty yet filled with dreadful purpose.

Neferata entered the boy's bedroom. Lorrone Verdurin couldn't have been more than eight years old. He was sitting up in bed, holding the rough woollen blanket up to his chin. His eyes were wide with fear, but when he saw Neferata, wonder suffused his face too.

Neferata smiled and shut the door, muffling the screams and the sound of ripping coming from Alrecht's study. She walked over to Lorrone, sat on the side of his bed and stroked his hair. 'Don't be afraid,' she said. 'You are safe.'

'Who are you?' the boy croaked. 'Are you a queen?'

'I am. I am *your* queen. And I have come with a gift for you. And a secret.'

The screams stopped. The glaivewraith stalker had completed its task. Now there were only Hallaya's sobs.

'Do you want to know the secret?' Neferata asked Lorrone, distracting him from the sounds of his mother's distress.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Tomorrow, your mother will tell you things about your father, and she will be wrong. She will try to understand, and try to help you understand, some things your father has written. She will not be able to, because they cannot be understood. I am sorry to tell you this, but it is the truth.' She soothed and mesmerised as she spoke. The child stared and nodded. 'So that is the secret. No matter what people say, remember that there is nothing to understand in your father's writings. You must turn all of your thoughts to my gift... Would you like to see it?'

Lorrone nodded again.

Neferata opened a scroll tube and removed the parchment inside. She gave it to Lorrone. 'This,' she said, 'is one of my most precious treasures. When you are wise enough, you will come to know what it means.'

She had to fight back laughter as she told the great lie. The second purpose of the conclave was fulfilled. She had lured Alrecht Verdurin to the palace, and he, at long last, had been the member of his clan to bring the stolen page with him. The archives of the Claw of Memory were complete once more. But the punishment of the Verdurins would not end. They had paid for Karlet's theft with generations of futile effort. Now they would have a new page to drive them to madness, one she had written for them. The runes on the parchment had no meaning, but they seemed to. They gestured towards a great revelation that did not exist. And Lorrone's childhood memory of this night and his encounter with her would grow and poison all his descendants to come.

She leaned forwards and kissed the boy's cheek. 'Study and grow wise,' she whispered, 'until the day comes when you can read your gift.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade* and *Castellan*, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *Neferata: Monarch of Blood*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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