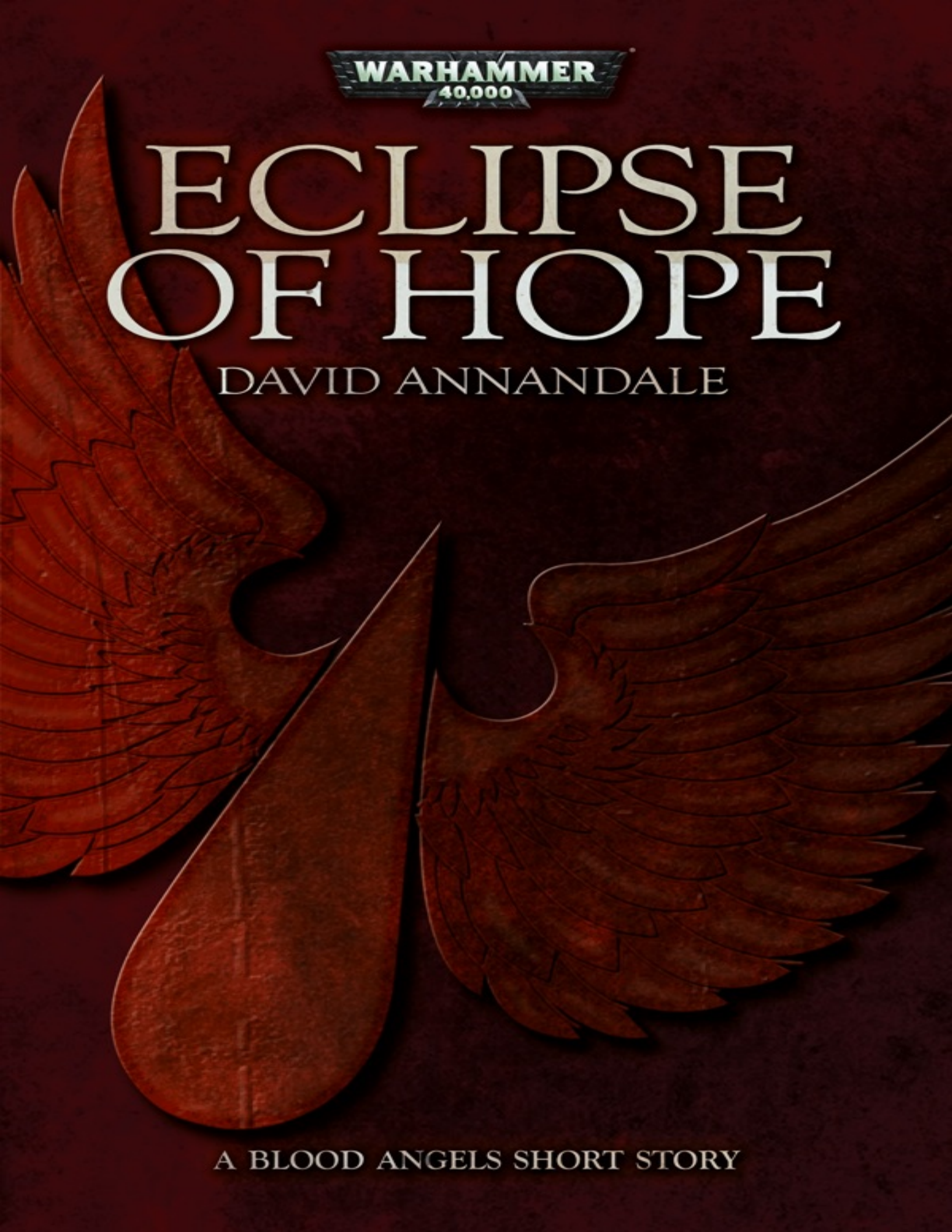




WARHAMMER
40,000

ECLIPSE OF HOPE

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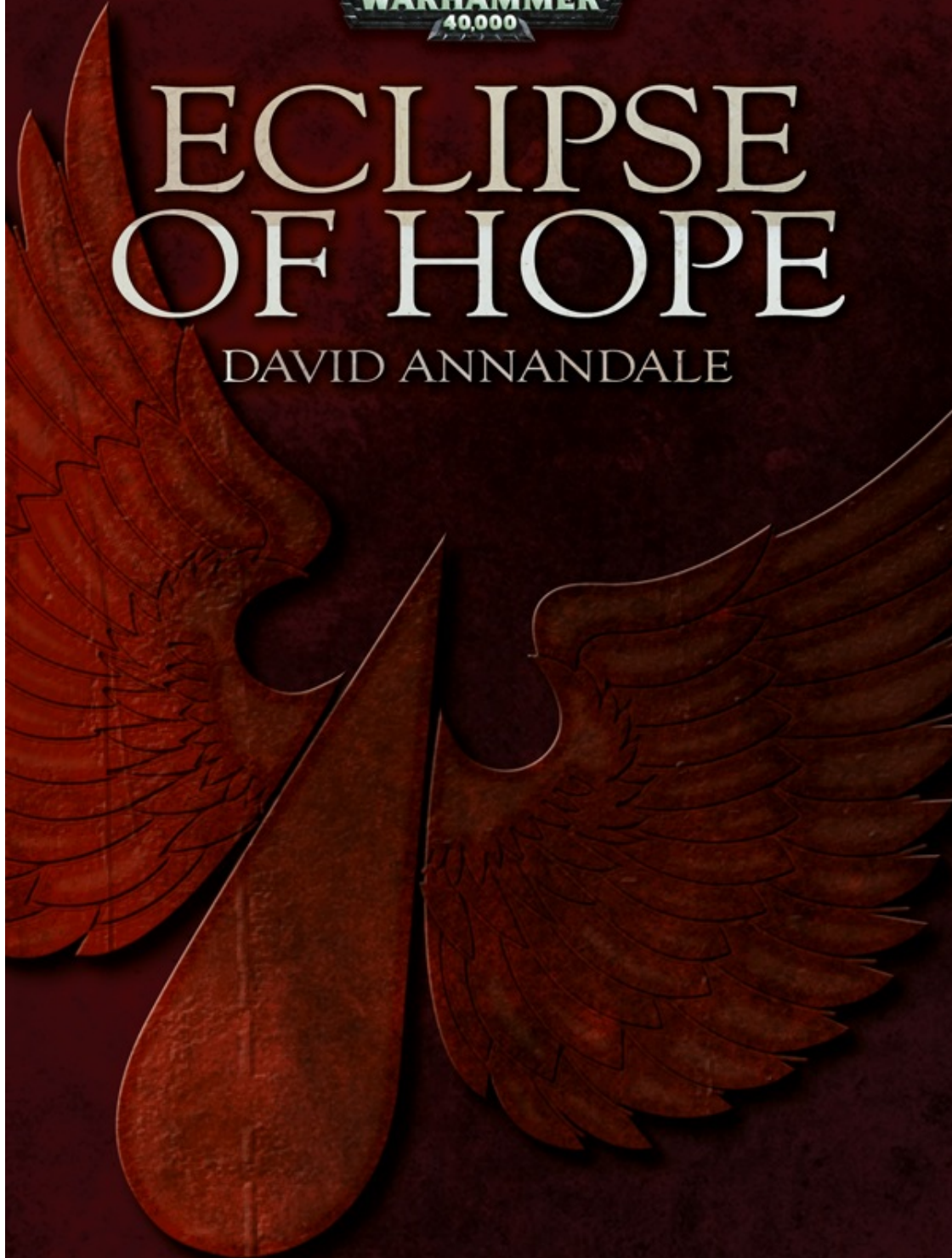


A BLOOD ANGELS SHORT STORY

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A BLOOD ANGELS SHORT STORY

ECLIPSE OF HOPE

by David Annandale

I stand in the middle of a field of corpses.

We were summoned, and so we have come to Supplicium Secundus. We are winged salvation, but we are a terrible, final salvation, and our wings embrace the horizon with fire. We are the Blood Angels. To confront us is to die, and death is my remit, my reality, my unbounded domain. I have known death, and defeated it, claimed it as my own. To my cost, to my strength, death is my one gift to bestow, and I am nothing if not generous. But today, my liberality is unwanted, unneeded.

Undone.

The dead on the plain are uncountable, and not a one of them has fallen by my will. I emerged with my brothers from the drop pod to be confronted with this vista. There is, it must be said, a certain perfection to it. This is no mere slaughter or massacre. This is not a battlefield where defeat and victory have been meted out. This is death, simply death. The plain is a vast one, stretching to the distance on three sides, ending in the blurry hulk of Evensong Hive to the north. The skyline is smeared not by distance, but by smoke. It is thick, grey flecked with black, a choking pall of ash. It is the lingering memory of high explosives, incinerated architecture and immolated flesh. The fires have burned themselves out. There is a meaning to this smoke. It is the smoke of *afterwards*. It is the smoke of *finished*. It is the smoke of the only form of peace our era knows, the peace that comes when there is no one left to die.

Wind, sluggish and hot, fumbles at my cloak, breathes its last against my cheek. It pushes at the smoke, making the grey stir over the corpses like an exhausted phantom. There is no sound. There are no trees to rub leaves in a susurrus of mourning. There is no tall grass to wave a benediction. The ground has been chewed into a mulch of mud. Wreckage of weaponry and of humanity is slowly sinking into the mire. In time, all memory of the events of Supplicium Secundus will vanish. Smoke lingers. It does not last.

There is no order to the dead. There is no hint of this having been a war. There is no division between armies, no demarcating line of the clash. There is only brother at brother's throat. By bolter, by sword, by cannon, by hands, this has been the pure violence of all against all. The full panoply of Supplicium's population lies, stilled, before me. I see civilians of both genders, and of all ages. I see the uniform of Unwavering Supplicants, the local planetary defence force.

I see the proud colours of the Mordian Iron Guard, now covered in mud.

We are here because of the Iron Guard. It was their General Spira who called out to us. His message was fragmented and desperate. We have not been in contact with him since that first cry. I look at his men who have killed each other, and doubt that we shall hear from him again.

Over the vox network, reports arrive from the other landing sites. Supplicium Secundus is a compact world, dense in composition and with a handful of small habitable zones at the equator. In each of these areas, a hive has arisen, and it is just outside these hives that our strike forces have landed, a multi-pronged attack designed to inflict simultaneous punishments on the enemy. Sergeant Saleos calls from Hive Canticle, then Sergeant Andarus from Hive Oblation, then Sergeant Procellus from Hive Anthem. It is the same everywhere: endless vistas of death. We came because of heretical rebellion. We came because the Iron Guard was overmatched. We have found only silence.

Behind me, the Stormraven gunship *Bloodthorn* sits on a clear patch of land. I am in the company of Stolas, Epistolary of 4th Company, Chaplain Dantalion, Standard Bearer Markosius and a tactical squad led by Sergeant Gamigin. Standing a few metres to my left, the sergeant scans the landscape with an auspex. Nothing. Frustration radiates from my battle-brothers. Their hunger for the bloodshed of combat eats at them. Their bolters are still raised, seeking absent targets. They are angry at the dead. Our standard rises above the plain, proud but still in the dying wind, a call to a battle that is long over.

'This is a waste of time,' says Stolas.

'Is it?' I say.

At my tone, Stolas snaps his head around. 'Lord Mephiston,' he begins, 'I—' I cut him off. 'Do you know what has happened here?'

'No, I—'

'This is something you have seen before?'

This time, he does not try to answer. He simply shakes his head.

'Mordian has slain Mordian,' I point out. '*All* the Mordians are slain. That gives me pause.' I turn from Stolas, losing interest in the reprimand, refocusing

my thoughts on the madness before me. And madness is what it is, I realise. Insanity. There is no logic, and this is the flaw in the tapestry of mortality. My eyes range over the infinity of bodies. The perfection I see is, in truth, only the perfection of abomination. 'We are not wasting our time,' I say, speaking more to myself than to Stolas. 'There is a mystery here, and it bears the mark of Chaos.'

Something flickers in my peripheral vision. I look up. Movement in the smoke. A figure approaching. A man.

His movements are jerky, random, yet purposeful in their energy. He cuts back and forth, advancing in no clear direction until he catches sight of us. Then he runs, pounding towards us over the backs of the fallen. He pistons his legs with such force that I can hear the snap of bones beneath his feet. His arms are outstretched as if he were running to embrace us. He emerges from the smoke. His teeth are bared. His face is red, his tendons popping. He is snarling with incoherent rage. What manner of man would charge, so unhesitatingly, and so completely alone, against the Adeptus Astartes? And what manner of man would do so unarmed? Only one sort: a man completely in the grip of madness.

He leaps on Sergeant Gamigin, biting and clawing and spitting. The man cannot possibly hope to break through the Blood Angel's armour. Gamigin stands there, bemused. After a minute, he hauls the man off and holds him out by the scruff of his neck. The snapping, feral creature is a Guardsman. His uniform is in tatters, but enough of it remains to identify him as a colonel.

With a sudden clench of his fist, Gamigin snaps the man's neck and hurls him to the ground. He stomps on the officer's head, smashing it to pulp. Over his helmet's vocaliser comes a growl that is growing in volume and intensity.

'Brother-Sergeant?' Chaplain Dantalion asks.

Gamigin whirls on him, drawing his chainsword.

'*Sergeant.*' I use my voice as a whip. Gamigin pauses and turns his head. I step forward and hold his gaze. The lenses of his helmet are expressionless, but mine are the eyes without pity or warmth. I see the taint of the warp gathering around Gamigin like a bruise. The madness that has descended upon him is not the Red Thirst. It is not the manifestation of the Flaw, though our genetic curse may create an increased vulnerability. The tendrils of the warp bruise are deeply tangled in Gamigin's being. There is no salvation for him except what he wills himself. 'Give us space,' I tell the others. 'Take no action.' I do not draw my blade. 'Gamigin,' I say, then repeat his name twice more.

The growl stops. His breathing is heavy, laboured, but suggesting exhaustion, not frenzy. He sheaths his chainsword. 'Chief Librarian,' he says. He shakes his

head. 'Forgive me. I don't understand what happened.'

'Try to describe it.'

'I felt disgust for the officer, and then a blind rage. All I wanted to do was kill everyone in sight.'

The silence that follows his statement is a heavy one. I have no need to point out the implications. The madness that killed Supplicium Secundus still lurks, seeking purchase now in our souls. I let my consciousness slip partially into contact with the everywhere non-space of the warp. I anatomize the energies that flow about me. I find the mad rage. It is a background radiation, barely detectable, but omnipresent. The planet is infected. The disease that killed its population has a pulse, an irregular beat like that of an overtaxed heart. I pull back my awareness back to the here and now, but now that I have seen the trace of the plague, I can identify its workings. It scrabbles at the back of my mind. It is an annoyance, barely there but never absent, scratch and scratch and gnaw and claw. It wants in, and it will work at us until, like wind eroding rock, it has its way. It is in no hurry. It is now as fundamental to the planet as its nickel-iron core. It has forever. If we stay here, given enough time, we will all succumb. This is not defeatism. It is realism. A Blood Angel can and must recognize inevitable doom when it is encountered. The doom we face, coded into our very genes, is just as patient, just as certain of its ultimate victory.

The difference is that we can leave Supplicium Secundus and its disease behind. I am loathe to do so without discerning a cause, however.

Then a voice sounds in my ear bead. 'Chief Librarian?' It is Castigon, captain of 4th Company. He is aboard the strike cruiser *Crimson Exhortation*, which awaits us at high anchor.

'Yes, captain.'

'Do you concur with the other reports? There are no survivors?'

I glance at the dead colonel. 'That is now the case, yes.'

'Is it possible for you to return to the ship?' Castigon does not give me orders. He would never be so foolish. But his request is not unreasonable.

I hesitate, thinking still that perhaps some revelation might await us in the abattoir of the hive before us. 'Is this a matter of urgency?' I ask.

There is a pause. Then: 'Possibly.' I sense no deliberate vagueness on Castigon's part. He sounds genuinely puzzled. From his tone, I would say that he has chosen his answer carefully. After a moment, he speaks again. 'We have found the Mordian fleet.'

Found. The fleet should not have needed finding. It should have been in

constant communication with us. But there was none when we arrived in the system, and no immediate sign of other ships in orbit around Secundus. ‘There is an ominous ring to your words, captain,’ I say.

‘It is in the nature of this day, Chief Librarian.’

The Supplicium System is perched on the edge of extinction. This is nothing new. It is its very nature. There was once, against all sense, a colony on Supplicium Primus. The small planet is perilously close to the sun, but its gold deposits are vast. Its rate of rotation is the same as its revolution, and one face burns in an eternal day, while the other is forever trapped by night. Along the band of its twilight, a temperate zone permitted habitation until six centuries ago, when a solar storm of terrible magnitude stripped Primus of its atmosphere.

Secundus and Tertius, larger, more distant, and with stronger magnetic fields, weathered the storm, preserving their atmospheres and their civilizations. But here, too, humanity’s grip is precarious. The orbits of the two planets are very close, but fall on either edge of the range of temperate distances from their star. Secundus is arid, Tertius frigid. But the Imperium is filled with worlds far more hostile, and they are held for the eternal glory of the Emperor. The Supplicium system has called for help. It must be heeded.

It was. Help came.

And failed.

Aboard the *Crimson Exhortation*, I stand with Castigon in the strategium. There are many tacterium screens offering information, but our attention is focused on what we can see through the great expanse of armourglass at the front of the bridge. The hololiths and readouts render the meaning of the view clear, but there is a terrible majesty to the unfiltered, uncatalogued, raw vision before us.

The Mordians were but one system over when Supplicium Secundus cried out for help, and so they came. Now their fleet is dead. Its ships move, tumbling past each other along mindless trajectories. Some have collided. Even as we watch, a Sword-class frigate, turning end over end with slow grace, slams into the flank of Lunar-class cruiser *Manichaeon*. The smaller ship breaks in two. Its halves float away, shedding debris. The *Manichaeon* has taken a solid blow amidships, but continues its sluggish momentum, its course barely altered.

There is no flare of engines anywhere in the fleet. There are no energy signatures of any kind coming from the ships. This is why the fleet was invisible to us at first. It has become, in effect, a tiny belt of iron asteroids. I look at the

tacticarium screens. There is evidence of inter-ship combat. Some of the hulls show signs of torpedo hits and lance burns. Not all, though. In truth, very few. What killed the fleet took place inside the ships.

Castigon despatched squads aboard the *Crimson Exhortation*'s Thunderhawks and Stormravens with the mission to board ships, where practical. The warriors engaged in this task know what we found on the surface of Supplicium Secundus, and they know about the ongoing risk of the plague. They will steel themselves against the temptations of anger. They will hold themselves in check. As the reports come in to the strategium, however, the caution begins to seem excessive. Though the background whisper of rage is ever present, basic discipline is enough to hold it at bay because there are no triggers. The fleet is empty. No troopers have been found. The Mordian army, to a man, descended to Secundus to slaughter itself. All of the bodies on the ships belong to the naval crews, the slaves, and even the servitors. The doom is so powerful, even the mindless succumbed to killing frenzy. As below, so above. Each vessel boarded unveils another tale of mutual carnage. There is nothing left in planetary orbit but dead flesh and dead metal.

'I have never seen the like,' Castigon confesses.

'Neither have I.' The deaths of worlds and entire fleets, yes, I have seen such things. I have been instrumental in bringing about the annihilation of heretical solar systems. But this massacre is different in kind. The only weapons involved appear to have been those borne by the servants of the Imperium, who turned their arms on each other. We have not seen the smallest hint of an opposing force, which makes the enemy all the more dangerous. There *must* be an enemy. What we have seen cannot be due to chance. A warp-thing very like a disease has been spread across Supplicium Secundus and the intervention fleet. I cannot bring myself to believe that it arrived spontaneously. It was brought here. It was unleashed.

'I am recalling the reconnaissance squads,' Castigon says. I nod. He is right to do so. There is nothing more to learn here. I am now given to doubt whether there would, after all, be anything on the planet worth finding.

The question is rendered moot as the last of the gunships is docking with the *Crimson Exhortation*. There is a sudden explosion of vox traffic coming from Supplicium Tertius. The transmissions are bedlam, but the clamour of voices is clear because of the uniformity of the message. Tertius is screaming for help. The *Exhortation* receives pict feeds whose images shake, swerve and break up altogether. They are documents whose very assembly is the expression of

desperation. They bear witness to riot, terror, madness. The streets of the cities are turning into massive brawls, the inhabitants swarming over each other like warring ants. Chaos (let me call it by its name) is spreading over the planet like a slick of promethium. The rapidity of the infection is remarkable. When we arrived in-system, we were in contact with the spaceport on Tertius, and there was no hint that anything was awry. Now, a day later, as we race to leave the orbit of Secundus and ride hard for Tertius, I know that we could well be too late. So does every warrior aboard this vessel. We know this, but we shall not allow it to be so. If will alone could move our ship, we would already be at anchor over the planet.

Castigon tries to hail one control node after another. Spaceports, planetary defence force bases, the lord-governor, working his way down to whatever nobles or commanding officers are mentioned in our records of Tertius. He is forced to give up. Order is rapidly collapsing on Tertius. It occurs to me that the only minds we might save from this disaster will be our own.

The transmissions become more troubling during our journey to Tertius. Between the close orbits of the two planets and their approaching conjunction, our voyage is a short one. It is also far too long. The clamour rises to a shriek, and then the voices plummet into a far louder silence. The pict feeds vanish too. Before they do, they grace us with a mosaic of paroxysm.

As the *Crimson Exhortation* streaks towards a world now covered by an ominous calm, Castigon gathers his officers in the strategium. Stolas and the others create extra space for me around the tacterium table. I exist, for them as for myself, in a sphere of shadow. I think of it as symbolic, but it appears to have a real force. The living, either pushed or recoiling, are distanced from the unknowable thing in their midst. I am the resurrected and the recently born. The body that was Calistarius walks. The mind that animates it is Mephiston. Calistarius was no more than than a prologue to me.

Stolas asks, 'If all communication has ceased, are we not already too late?'

Castigon does not hesitate. 'Collapse will precede extinction,' he pronounces. 'It will take some weeks for even the most determined population to kill itself. Crisis has befallen the people of Tertius under our watch, and we shall not fail them.'

He speaks for us all. We come to Tertius not as Angels of Death, but as Salvation.

'We must destroy the obscenity,' Sergeant Gamigin says, his voice soft yet edged with righteous anger. It is the anger that will do battle with rage. He has

felt the touch of the enemy, and will retaliate with a passion fuelled by justice. He, too, speaks for us all. Whatever foe is attacking Supplicium, be it xenos or daemon, we will find it, and we will exterminate it so utterly, not even its memory shall remain.

And then, in the next second, it finds us first. The collision alert sounds. Helmsman Ipos bellows orders. The ship moves ponderously to evade. We all face forwards. We witness our near destruction.

The *Crimson Exhortation* has come upon a dark ship. It is even more massive than the strike cruiser. Utterly without light, it is a deeper night against the void. It passes over us, and for minutes we are swallowed by a presence that is both shadow and mass. When this happens, when we can no longer see the stars, there is no sense of movement, no sense of the passing of this great vessel. Instead, there is only the great weight of total absence, and it is easy to believe that we have entered an eternal night. The bottom of the stranger's hull brushes the top of our spires, shearing them off. But then the ships part, ours shuddering as Ipos fights to make her angle down just a little bit faster, the other coasting on with dead serenity.

Damage is minimal. The *Exhortation* comes around, and the scanning begins. The other ship appears to be drifting. It is without power, and the augurs find no trace any sort of radiation. 'From the Mordian fleet?' asks Stolas. 'Perhaps the crew succumbed to the rage plague as the ship tried to leave,' he continues.

'No,' I say. I am unsatisfied. The coincidence of our near-collision nags at me. It is simply too improbable. In the vastness of the void, for two specks of dust to encounter one another, something more than chance must be at work, and this ship cannot be just another tomb of Guardsmen.

The configuration of the ship, beyond its great size, is difficult to make out at first. This is not just because of its darkness. Though it is solid enough, there is a profound vagueness to the form.

'That is a battle-barge,' Ipos calls out, startled.

He is correct. He is also wrong. The shape is, it is true, based on that of an Adeptus Astartes battle-barge. But there are insufficient details, and much that is there seems wrong. The silhouette is distorted. The hull is too long, the bridge superstructure too squat, the prow so pointed and long it is a caricature. No matter how much illumination we pour onto the ship, it defies the eye. It will not come into proper focus. 'No,' I say. 'It is not a battle-barge. It is the memory of one.' I mean what I say, even if I am not sure how such a thing has come to be. I am not speaking metaphorically. What drifts through space before us is a ship as

it would be imperfectly remembered.

Then a detail that is not blurred comes into view. The ship's name: *Eclipse of Hope*.

'It's a ghost,' Dantalion says.

I frown at the terminology, not least because it seems to be accurate. The *Eclipse of Hope* is known to me. It is known to all of us. The battle-barge disappeared during the fifth Black Crusade. Five thousand years ago. Worse: the ship was a Blood Angels vessel. I dislike its existence more and more. Its presence here cannot be a coincidence. The power necessary to orchestrate this 'chance' encounter is immense.

'Is it really the—' Gamigin begins.

'No.' I cut him off. 'That ship is destroyed.' It must be, after five millennia in the empyrean. The thing that bears the name now is a changeling, though at a certain, dark level, it is intimately linked with the original. Somehow, the collective memories of the *Eclipse of Hope*, or the memory of a single being of terrible power, achieved such potency that an embodiment has occurred. Its manifest solidity is extraordinary. I have never known a warp ghost to have so much material presence. It must represent a concentration of psychic power such as has never been imagined. It...

I turn to Ipos. 'Can we plot the trajectory of this ship's passage through the system?'

'A moment, Chief Librarian.' Ipos appears to slump in his throne. I can see his consciousness slip down the mechadendrites that link his skull to the machine-spirit and cogitators of the *Crimson Exhortation*. On the bridge, navigation servitors begin chanting numbers in answer to unheard questions. After a few moments, Ipos returns to an awareness of the rest of us. The results of his efforts appear on a tacterium screen. If the *Eclipse of Hope* has maintained a steady course, she passed near Supplicium Secundus, and through the centre of the Mordian fleet.

'Captain,' I say to Castigon, 'that is the carrier of the rage plague. Destroy it, and perhaps there will be something to save of Supplicium Tertius.'

The phantom remains dark as the *Crimson Exhortation* manoeuvres into position for the execution. The immense shadow does not change direction. Its engines do not flare. No shields or guns flash to life. It coasts, slow leviathan, serene juggernaut, messenger of mindless destruction.

No. No, I am wrong. I am guilty of underestimating the enemy. There is nothing mindless here. The spectre of a Blood Angels battle-barge unleashes a

plague whose symptoms might as well be those of the Red Thirst. There is a hand behind this. There is mockery. There is provocation that warrants a retaliation most final. But how to find the hand behind this horror?

That question must wait. The *Eclipse of Hope* is the paramount concern. It has almost destroyed an entire system through its mere presence. If its journey is not stopped, untold Imperial worlds could fall to its madness. The *Eclipse of Hope* must die a second time. Today. Now.

How? I wonder.

The *Crimson Exhortation* is in position. On Castigon's orders, Ipos has taken us some distance from the phantom. The strike cruiser is great dagger aimed at the flank of the battle-barge. Beyond the *Eclipse of Hope*, there is nothing but the void. Supplicium Tertius is still some distance away, but Ipos has placed it safely at our starboard. It is important that there be nothing for a great distance in front of us except our target. Castigon has ordered the use of the nova cannon.

'Conventional weapons will do no harm to a warp ghost,' I tell him.

'It is solid enough to have hit us,' Castigon replies. 'It broke iron and stone. It can be broken in turn.' He turns to Ipos. 'Helmsmaster, are we ready?'

'In a moment, captain.' We have never had the luxury of so passive an opponent on which to use the gun. Ipos takes the opportunity to triple-check all of his calculations and run through his instrument adjustments one more time. When he finds no errors, he signals Castigon.

I can feel the build-up in the ship's machine-spirit. It is excited to be using this weapon again. The nova cannon is a creation of absolute power, because it destroys with absolute efficiency. We are merely its acolytes, awakening it from its slumber whenever we have need of its divine wind.

'Fire,' Castigon orders.

The deck trembles. The entire ship vibrates from the forces unleashed in the firing of the nova cannon. The weapon is almost as long as the hull. The recoil jolts the frame of the *Exhortation*. The cannon is not a weapon of precision, but the shot is as close to point-blank range as is possible with the cannon without destroying ourselves in the process. The projectile flashes across the void, injuring space itself. It hits the *Eclipse of Hope* in the centre of its mass. There is a flare of blinding purity. It is at this moment that the cannon warrants its name. The explosion reaches out for the *Crimson Exhortation*, but falls short. Even so, there is another tremor as the shockwave hits us. We have hurled one of the most powerful weapons in human history at the *Eclipse of Hope*.

It doesn't notice.

The dark serenity is undisturbed. The ghost ship continues its steady drift towards Supplicium Tertius, bringing its plague of final wrath. The bridge and the strategium of the *Crimson Exhortation* are silent as we stare into a future haunted by the *Eclipse of Hope*. Within hours, one ship will have extinguished all human life in a system. It will have done so with no weapons, no struggle, no strategy. Its mere passage will have been enough. And if the phantom should reach other, more crowded systems? Or cross paths with a fleet in transit? Vectors of contagion, visions of hell: my mind is filled by the plague spreading its corroding influence over the entire galaxy.

The *Eclipse of Hope* must be stopped. If nothing in the *Crimson Exhortation*'s arsenal will avail, then one alternative remains.

'I will lead a boarding party,' I announce. 'The vessel must be killed from within.'

'Can you walk in a ghost?' Castigon asks.

'It is solid enough to have hit us,' I echo.

'If that is the source of the plague,' Dantalion muses, 'then entering it will be fraught with great moral peril.'

'Most especially for a Blood Angel,' I add. The Flaw will be sorely felt in this situation.

The Chaplain nods. 'The threat does seem rather precisely targeted.'

'That is no coincidence,' I say. 'It is also a risk we must run.'

Castigon nods, but his expression is doubtful. 'How do you plan to kill a ghost?' he asks.

'I will discover that in due course.' I turn to go. 'But shouldn't one revenant be able to destroy another?'

We do not use boarding torpedoes. We cannot be sure that they would be capable of drilling through the spectre's hull. Instead, the *Bloodthorn* transports my squad to the *Eclipse of Hope*. This is to be an exorcism. On board with me, then, are Epistolary Stolas, Sanguinary Priest Albinus, Chaplain Dantalion and Techmarine Phenex. Sergeant Gamigin is present, too. He was insistent upon coming, even though it seems that this mission requires a different set of skills. He has faith enough, however, and having been touched by the dread ship's influence, he is hungry for redemption.

I sit in the cockpit with pilot Orias as the *Bloodthorn* approaches the landing bay door of the battle-barge. The door does not open. This is not a surprise. What is striking is the way in which the details of the hull resolve themselves.

They become clearer not because we draw nearer, but because we are looking at them. The sealed bay door has a material presence it did not a few minutes ago. I am aware, in my peripheral vision, that the surrounding hull is still blurry.

Orias has noticed the same phenomenon. ‘How is this possible?’ he wonders.

‘It is feeding on our memories,’ I answer. ‘We know what a battle-barge looks like. It is supplementing itself with our own knowledge.’

I can see the anger in the set of Orias’s shoulder plates. His resentment is righteous. We are witnessing a monstrous blasphemy. Still, we have also learned something. We know more about how our foe works.

Then the unexpected does occur. The door rises. The bay is a rectangular cave, dark within the dark. It awaits us. It welcomes us. We must have something it needs, then. This, too, is valuable to know. If it has needs, it has a weakness.

‘This forsaken vessel mocks us,’ Orias snarls.

‘It is arrogant,’ I reply. ‘And arrogance is always a mistake.’ Show me your weaknesses, I think. Show me your desire, that I might tear you in half. ‘Take us in,’ I tell Orias. ‘Drop us and depart.’

The next few minutes have a terrible familiarity. The gunship enters the landing bay of a battle-barge. I pull back the bulkhead door. We wait a few moments, guns at the ready. Nothing materialises. We are simply staring at an empty bay.

‘I do not appreciate being made a fool of,’ Gamigin grumbles. His bolter tracks back and forth, aiming at air.

‘Guard your temper, brother-sergeant,’ I tell him. ‘See with how little effort the vessel encourages us to anger.’

We disembark. The banality of our surroundings makes our every move cautious, deliberate. We trust nothing. I am first on the deck, and the fact that it does not reveal itself to be an illusion without substance is almost a surprise. The rest of the squad follows me. We step away from the gunship and form a circle, all approaches covered. The emptiness is full of silent laughter. We ignore it. Our enhanced vision pierces the darkness, and all we see is ordinary deck and walls. The known and the familiar are the danger here. Each element that is not alien is a temptation to a lowered guard. Then, as Orias pulls the *Bloodthorn* out of the bay and away from the *Eclipse*, the darkness recedes. Light blooms. It is the colour of decay.

The light does not come from bioluminescence, though I see their strips along the ceiling. It is not a true light. It is a phantom of light, as false as anything else about this ship, a memory plucked from our minds and layered into this

construct of daemonic paradox. As we move across the bay towards its interior door, the space acquires greater solidity. The ring of our bootsteps on the decking grows louder, less muffled, more confident. Did I see rivets in the metal at first? I do now.

By the time we reach the door, the constructed memory of a battle-barge loading bay is complete. I am no longer noticing new, convincing details. So now I can see the weaknesses of the creation. The ghost has its limitations. The bay seems real, but it is also empty. There are no banks of equipment, no gunships in dock. There is only the space and its emptiness. The *Eclipse of Hope* could not make use of our full store of memories. 'I shall have your measure,' I whisper to the ship. Does it, I wonder, know what it has allowed inside. Does it feel me? Is it capable of regret? Can it know fear?

I shall ensure that it does.

As we step into the main passageway off the bay, the attack begins. It is not a physical one. There are no enemies visible. There is nothing but the empty corridor and the low, sickly grey light. But the ship embraces us now, and does more than feed off our memories. It tries to feed us, too. It feeds us poison. It feeds us our damnation. Walking down the passageway is walking into rage itself. We move against a gale-force psychic wind. It slows our progress as surely as any physical obstacle. It is like pushing against the palm of a giant hand, a hand that wraps massive, constrictor fingers around us. It squeezes. It would force self-control and sanity out. It would force uncontrollable anger in, and in, and in, until we burst, releasing the anger once more in the form of berserker violence.

I feel the anger stir in my chest, an uncoiling serpent. The bone-cold part of myself, that which I cannot in conscience call a soul, holds the serpent down. It also takes further measure of the ship. There are still limits to the precision of the attack. That is not the Black Rage that I am suppressing. It is too mundane an anger. It is potent. It is summoned by a force powerful enough to give substance to the memory of a battle-barge. But it is not yet fully aligned with the precise nature of our great Flaw. That will come, I have no doubt. But we have the discipline to defeat anger of this sort.

I glance at my brothers. Though there is tension and effort in their steps, their will is unbowed.

Stolas says, 'The light is becoming brighter.'

'It is,' I agree. Despite our resistance, the ship is growing stronger. Our mere presence is giving it life. The light, as corrupt as it was in the bay, has assumed a

greater lividity. We can see more and more of the passageway. The ship cements its details with more and more confidence. The greater visibility should make our advance easier. It does not.

The phantom's mimicry is uncanny. With every incremental increase of illumination comes a further revelation of perfect recall. This is the true ghost of the *Eclipse of Hope*. We are travelling one of the main arteries, and the phantom has a complex memory to reconstruct: stone-clad walls and floor, gothic arches, vaulted bulkheads. They are all here. Even so, as accurate as the recreation is, it remains a ghost. There is something missing.

Phenex's machinic insight gives him the answer first. He raps a fist against the starboard wall. The sound of ceramite against marble is what I would expect. Yet it makes me frown.

Albinus has noticed something, too. 'That isn't right,' he says.

'There's a delay,' the Techmarine explains. 'Very slight. The sound is coming a fraction of a second later than it should.'

'The response is a conscious one,' I say. 'It is a form of illusion. That wall is not real. Your gauntlet is banging against the void, brother.'

I spot Gamigin staring at his feet, as if expecting the surface on which he walks to disintegrate without warning. If we are successful here, he may not be far wrong.

From behind his skull helm, Dantalion casts anathema on the ship. His voice vibrates with hatred.

'Save your breath,' I tell him. 'Wait until there is something to exorcise.'

'There already is,' he retorts. 'This entire ship.'

'Have you the strength to spread your will over such a large target?' I ask him. 'If so, you have my envy.'

Dantalion will not appreciate my tone. That is not my concern. What *is* my concern is that my team be as alert and focussed as possible. The ship inspires anger, and I do not think it cares in what direction that anger is expressed. Dantalion's hatred of the *Eclipse of Hope* is normal, praiseworthy, and proper. It is also feeding the vessel. Unless we find a target that we can overwhelm somehow, the Chaplain's broad, sweeping anger will do us more harm than good.

We are making our way toward the bridge. This is not the result of considered deliberation. We exchanged looks at the exit from the landing bay, and of one accord set off in this direction. There is nothing to say that we will find what we seek there, or anywhere else, for that matter, on this ship. But the bridge is the

nerve centre of any vessel. We seek a mind. The bridge is the logical place to begin.

It troubles me that we are taking action based on nothing stronger than a supposition. I cannot detect any direction to the warp energies that make up the *Eclipse of Hope*. There does not seem to be any flow at all. I understand the nature of the immaterium. I know it better, perhaps, than anyone in the Imperium, save our God-Emperor. Yet the substance of the *Eclipse* defies me. It appears inert. This cannot be true, not with the intensifying light, the consolidation of the illusion, and the gnawing and scratching at our minds. There is something at work here. Perhaps I can find no current, no flow, no core because these things do not exist yet. The effects of the ship are those of a field, one that may extend the entire length and breadth of the vessel. 'It isn't strong enough yet,' I mutter.

'Chief Librarian?' Albinus asks.

'The ship is still feeding,' I say. 'We cannot be sure of its full nature until it has gorged. Perhaps then it will act.'

'Then we can kill it?' Gamigin asks.

I nod. 'Then we can kill it.'

Down the length of the battle-barge we march. We ignore the side passageways that open on either side. We stick to the direct route, always pushing against the ethereal but implacable rage. Our tempers are fraying, the effort needed to suppress flare-ups of anger becoming stronger by the hour. And there is more. There is something worse. The more I strain, the more I find traces of an intelligence. It does not drive the ship. It is the ship itself. It is as if this were truly a revenant. The knowledge is frustration, hovering at the edge of tactical usefulness, a buzzing hornet in my consciousness. If the ship is sentient, then I must cut out its mind. To do that, I must locate it. But the *Eclipse of Hope* is still too quiescent. It is a beast revelling in its dreams of rage, not yet prepared to wake. It torments us. It does not fight us.

The walk from the bay to the bridge is long. There is no incident, no attack. The march would be tedium itself, were it not for the slow, malevolent transformation of the ship around us. We are presented with the spectacle of the familiar as evil, the recognizable as threat. The more the ship resembles what it remembers itself to be, the more we are seeing a manifestation of its power. The light is brighter yet. The growing clarity remains in the nature of a bleak epiphany. There is nothing to see but death, embodied in the form of the ship itself. Everything that presents itself to our eyes does so with a cackling

malignity, pleased that it imitates reality so well. It does so only as a show of force. Everything that appears can be taken away. I am sure of this. The ship is a dragon, inhaling. The immolating exhalation is imminent.

We are one deck down, and only a few minutes away from the bridge when the dragon roars. The light dims back to the grey of a shroud. The ship now has a better use for the energy it is leaching from us. It is awake. The sudden explosion of consciousness is painful. The ghost turns its full awareness upon us.

Can a ship smile? Perhaps. I think it does, in this very second.

Can it rage?

Oh, yes.

The *Eclipse of Hope* hates, it angers, it blasts its laughing wrath upon those beings who would dare invade it, the intruders it deems little more than insects and that it lured here in its dreaming. It has fed upon us, and now would complete its feast with our final dissolution.

Dissolution comes from the walls. For a moment, they lose all definition. Chaos itself billows and writhes. And the ship can also sing. The corridor resounds with a fanfare of screaming human voices and a drum-beat that is the march of wrath itself. Then the walls give birth. Their offspring have hides the colour of blood. Their limbs are long, grasping, with muscles of steel stretched over deformed bones. Their skulls are mocking, predatory fusions of the horned goat and the armoured helm. Their eyes are blank with glowing, pus-yellow hatred. They are bloodletters, daemons of Khorne, and the sight of their arrival has condemned mortal humans beyond counting to a madness of terror.

As for my brothers and myself, at last we have a foe to fight. We form a circle of might and faith. 'Now, brothers,' Dantalion says. 'Now this vessel of the damned shows its true nature. Strike hard, steadfast in the light of Sanguinius and the Emperor!'

'These creatures, sergeant,' I tell Gamigin, 'you are at full liberty to kill.'

It takes him a moment to respond, unused to any expression of humour on my part. 'My thanks, Chief Librarian,' he says, and sets to work with a passion.

The bloodletters wield ancient swords, their blades marked by eldritch designs and obscene runes. They come at us from all sides, their snarls drowned out by the choir of the tortured and the infernal beat, beat, beat of a drum made of wrath. The music is insidious. It pounds its way deep into my mind. I know what it is trying to do. It would have us march to the same beat, meet rage with rage, crimson armour clashing with crimson flesh until, with the loss of our selves to the Flaw, there is no distinguishing Blood Angel from daemon. The bloodletters

open their fanged maws wide, tongues whipping the air like snakes, tasting the rage and finding it good. They swing their swords. We meet them with our own. Power sword, glaive and chainsword counter and riposte. Blade against blade, wrath against rage, we answer the attack. Monsters fall, cut in half. The deck absorbs them, welcoming them back to non-being. And for every foul thing we despatch, two more burst from the walls.

War is feeding on war.

‘This will end only one way,’ Dantalion says at my side. His brings his crozius down on a daemon’s skull, smashing it to mist. ‘It will not be our victory.’

He is not being defeatist. He is speaking a simple truth. The corridor before us is growing crowded with the fiends. They scramble over each other in their eagerness to tear us apart. They will come at us forever, created by our very acts of destroying their brothers. Bolter fire blasts them apart. Blades cut them down. And where two stood, now there are ten.

‘We cannot remain here,’ says Albinus.

Even as he speaks, the ceiling unleashes a cascade of bloodletters. They fall upon us with claws and teeth, seeking to overwhelm through the weight of numbers. We throw them to the ground, trample them beneath our boots. I feel the snapping of unholy bones and know I have inflicted pain on a blasphemy before the daemon is reabsorbed.

Dantalion staggers, gurgles rasping from his vocaliser. He must have looked up at the wrong moment. A bloodletter has thrust its sword underneath his helm. With a snarl of effort, the daemon rams the blade home, piercing Dantalion’s brain. Our Chaplain stiffens, then falls. Gamigin roars his outrage and obliterates the bloodletter with a single blow of his chainsword.

The rage grows. We fight for vengeance now, too. The harder we struggle, the closer we come to dooming ourselves. The onslaught of bloodletters is a storm surge, and the faster we kill them, the faster they multiply.

‘To the bridge,’ Gamigin calls out. ‘That is our destination, and we can make a stand there for as long as it takes to exorcise this abomination.’

‘No,’ I answer. ‘Not the bridge.’ With the phantom now fully awake, I have looked at the tides of its thought. We are on the wrong path. The core of this memory-construct is not the bridge. It is, rather, a place of much knowledge. ‘The library.’

The ship hears me. Until this moment, its strategy was one of venomous attrition, grinding us down in stages, feeding on the ferocity of our skill at destruction. Then I announce our goal, and things change. The *Eclipse of Hope*

now desires our immediate deaths. To the torrent of daemons, the walls and ceiling add their own attack. The corridor distorts beyond the most delirious memory of a battle-barge interior. Hands reach for us. They are colossal, large enough to clutch and crush any of us. They are veined, the hands of a statue, and though they are stone, they seem to flow. They are not a memory; they are a creation, the spectre of art, their reality created from microsecond to microsecond. They are scaled talons, both reptile and raptor. They are clawed and hooked, with barbs on every knuckle. They are the concept of *ripping* given embodiment, but they are massive too, and what they do not tear into ribbons, they will smash.

There is a hand descending directly above me. It becomes a fist. The ship would see me pulped. It is showing me that it knows fear. It believes I can do it harm.

I shall prove it right.

The consciousness that holds the ship in this simulacrum of reality is not the only force capable of creation. The warp is mine, too. I walk in a ghost, but I am the Lord of Death. My will shapes un-matter, gives direction to the energy of madness. The air shimmers as a pane of gold flashes into being over our heads. The ceiling's hands smash into it and break apart. I pour my essence into the shield. I turn it into a dome. The daemons caught along the line of its existence are bisected. Then the dome surrounds us. Its perimeter extends a bare metre beyond our defensive circle.

I am channelling so much of my will into maintaining the shield against the hammering assaults of the bloodletters and the fists of the walls that I am barely present in my body itself. Yet I must walk. We cannot stay here. I must reach the librarium.

'Chief Librarian,' Albinus says, 'can you hear me?' Albinus knows me best of those present. More properly, he knew Calistarius well, and seems to have taken on a quest to understand the being that rose from his friend's grave. Albinus's goal is laudable, if hopeless. Even so, there are times when he does seem to have some real insight into the realities of my being. When I nod, he says, 'We must move. Can you walk and maintain the shield?'

The blows of the enemy are torrential. Given time and strength, they will smash any barrier. The phantom is very strong. I must maintain my focus on the reality of the shield. I speak through gritted teeth: 'Barely.'

He nods. 'Then let us take our turn, brother,' the sanguinary priest says.

Brother. I am rarely addressed by that word. With good reason. Calistarius was

a brother among others, to the degree any psyker can truly be accepted in the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes. But Calistarius is dead, and when Albinus says *brother*, he is addressing a shade, one with far less substance than the hellship in which we fight. Calistarius will not return. Mephiston walks in his stead. I am a Blood Angel. I would destroy any who would question my loyalty. But *brother*? That bespeaks a fellowship that is barred to me.

Let that pass. Albinus is correct in the matter of strategy. ‘Agreed,’ I manage. ‘Show us our route,’ he tells me.

I turn back the way we came. The effort is huge. I am holding back not just dozens of simultaneous physical attacks, but also the entire psychic pressure of the ship. Turning my body is like altering the rotation of a planet.

Albinus moves in front of me. The rest of the squad takes up a wedge formation. I relax the shield. It becomes porous, but doesn’t evaporate completely. I can reinforce it at a moment’s notice. The squad charges forwards to meet the rush of the bloodletters. Stolas creates his own shield. The epistolary is a powerful psyker. I have seen him devastate lines of the enemy with lightning storms worthy of myth. But he is not what I am, and though we move in an environment woven entirely of the warp, our powers are not increased. The ship is a parasite that has swallowed its host. So the shield Stolas raises slows the bloodletter horde, but cannot stop it. Our blunt spearhead collides with the foaming tide. We shove our way through the daemonic host for a dozen metres before their numbers threaten to swamp us once again. I snap the shield back to full strength, giving us space and a chance to regroup. When Albinus gives me the signal, I pull back into my physical self, and we move forwards.

This is how we advance. It is our only way, a painfully slow stutter of stops and starts. We travel thousands of metres in this manner. The tally of our slaughter lengthens with every step, and every butchered daemon, every act of wrath, is another drop of psychic plasma for the *Eclipse of Hope*’s unholy engines. Our journey through the ship will be the path of our damnation if I am wrong about what I will find in the librarium.

We wend our way deep into the heart of the ship. The repository of archives, history and knowledge is not in a spire, as it is on the *Crimson Exhortation*. Rather, it waits on the lowest deck, a few hundred metres fore of the enginarium. To guide us there, I follow rip tides of the warp. The phantom is awake and blazing with power. It cannot hide the patterns of its own identity now, any more than a human could will away the whorls of fingerprints. By acting against us, the *Eclipse of Hope* exposes itself to my scrutiny and my judgement.

We reach the library. A massive iron door bars our passage. Its relief work is an allegory of dangerous knowledge. It announces what lies in the chambers beyond, and it warns the uninitiated away. Tormented human figures fall in worship or agony before immense tomes. Daemons are not represented in the art – no Imperial ship would sully itself with such an image. Instead, the danger is depicted as twisting vines and abstract lines that tangle and pierce the figures. The risks that lurked in the archives of the original library must be merely the shadows of what awaits now. On the other side of the door lies the consciousness of the ship. I can feel the pulse of its fevered thoughts beating through the walls. The rhythm matches that of the drums, still pounding and echoing through the defiled corridors. Are the thoughts the source of the demonic march, or does the music come from a darker place and a greater master, shaping the mind of the ghost? I have no answer. All I need is the destruction of both.

Is that all I desire? No. It is not. But desire is a treacherous master.

‘Albinus,’ I manage, the shield still at full strength.

‘Chief Librarian?’

‘I will need Stolas.’ The strength in that chamber will be massive. We must hit it with all the power we possess.

‘We will stand and hold,’ Phenex says.

‘For Sanguinius and the Emperor,’ Gamigin adds.

The wedge formation faces down the corridor. My fellow Blood Angels have their backs to the door. Once Stolas and I cross that threshold, their only defences will be physical. It will be enough. They will hold back the ocean of Chaos with bolter and blade for as long as Stolas and I require to triumph or fall.

I lower the shield. I grasp the ornate bronze handle of the door. When I pull, I encounter, to my surprise, no resistance. Is this surrender? I wonder. Or perhaps the ship is marshalling its resources for the true fight about to begin. No matter. Stolas and I enter the library. The door swings shut behind us. The boom of iron against stone has a different quality to it than the sounds in the corridor. It takes me a moment to identify what has changed. The answer comes as I take in the sights of the library.

This chamber, and this chamber alone, is real.

Stolas and I move through a vast cavern of damned scholarship. We are funnelled along a path between towering stacks of scrolls, parchments and tomes. The path takes us towards an open space at the heart of the chamber. This is not a recreated memory. This is not a product of the warp, or at least, not in the same sense as the rest of the ship. The chamber itself is of familiar construction.

It could be a librarium on a true battle-barge. There is a fresco on the domed ceiling: a vision of Sanguinius, wings outstretched, sword in hand, descending in fury, bringing light and blood to the enemies of the Emperor. But the fresco has been defaced. Huge, parallel gouges, the claws of some giant fiend, cut diagonally through our primarch. Runes have been splashed in blood over the painting. I look away from the obscenity. I have no desire or need to read it.

(Ah, says a whisper in the furthest recesses of my mind. *Can* you read it, then?)

I sense that the stacks have changed since the ship vanished five millennia ago. They are huge. The volume of texts is astounding. The stone shelves are bursting with manuscripts. The floor is littered with lost sheets of vellum. Some curator has been at work here, accumulating works with obsession but little care. And yet there has been care enough to preserve the librarium itself after the rest of the ship has died. This space is the grain of sand around which a daemonic pearl has formed. The mind of the ship needs this core of reality in order to give a semblance of the same to the phantom. It must be the key that has allowed the *Eclipse of Hope* to escape the empyrean and spread its plague through the materium.

The centre of the librarium has become a dark shrine. There are four lecterns here. They are huge, over two metres high, created for beings larger than Space Marines. They are wrought of a fusion of iron and bone, the two elements distinguishable yet inseparable, a single substance that shrieks the obscenity of its creation. The designs are the product of nightmare: intertwining figures, human and xenos, all agonized, their mouths distorted that they might howl blasphemous curses at a contemptuous universe. Sinuous coils, both serpent and whip, scaled and barbed, weave between and around the bodies, carrying venom and pain. I think I see movement in the corner of my eye. I look at the forged souls more closely. I was not mistaken. They are moving, so slowly a year would pass while a back is being broken. But they are moving. And they are suffering.

The lecterns are coated in thick layers of dry, blackened blood. Here, too, there is movement. Slow, glistening drops work their way down the frameworks, adding to the texture of torture with the same gradual inexorability as the growth of stalactites. I raise my eyes. The blood is coming from the books.

The books. These things cannot be truly be called by that name, no more than the Archenemy can be called *human*. They are gargantuan, over a metre on each side. They rest on iron and bone, but they are bound in iron and flesh. Metal thorns pierce their spines. The sluggish gore crawls, drip by endless drip, down

the pain of the lecterns. The flesh of the covers has not been tanned into leather. Rather, it is black and green and violet. It is in a state of ongoing, but never completed, decomposition. It is also not dead. There is a just-visible thrumming, as of flesh taut against the stress of torture.

Through the walls, I can make out the muffled beat of combat. There is not much time, but I must be cautious. I must be sure of my actions, or I will doom us all. I must be so very, very careful, because of the other thing in the chamber. There is a dais in the very centre of the librarium, surrounded by the four lecterns. I have avoided looking closely at it, thinking perhaps my first glance deceived me, and if I turned away, the illusion would vanish. It has not.

‘Lord Mephiston...’ Stolas begins. He is transfixed.

‘I know,’ I tell him. I turn and face what has been waiting.

Spread out on the dais is an ancient star chart. It is on fading, brittle parchment. The map is the only part of this monstrous exhibit that has always belonged to the librarium. My finger traces the name of the system depicted: Pallevon. Then I look up.

A statue sits on the dais. There is nothing grotesque about its material. It is simply bronze. It does not move. It does not cry out.

It is me.

The figure stands with weapons sheathed and holstered. Its expression is calm. It should not exist. Yet it is as real as all of the other objects in this room. It is not a ghost, but it haunts me like one.

I have been manoeuvred like a piece in a game of regicide. The ship’s desire to kill me when I declared the librarium as my goal was a feint. It simply reinforced my determination to reach this point. For a moment, I am blinded by a red haze of rage. Then the cold darkness within me recognizes the trap, and dampens the fire. I pull back.

‘What does this mean?’ Stolas asks.

‘It means we were expected. It does not mean that our mission changes.’

‘And this?’ he points at the star chart.

‘Another lure.’ We must ignore it.

Stolas peers more closely at the statue. ‘Look at the eyes,’ he says.

I had thought the gaze was neutral. I was wrong. The eyes look just to my left. I turn in that direction to stare at one of the lecterns. I approach it. The book, immense, pulsing with the pain of its knowledge, waits for me to turn back its daemon-wrought cover.

Stolas turns around, taking in not just the four massive tomes, but the rest of

the collection as well. ‘So much knowledge...’ he says. His vocaliser turns the whisper into a wind of static.

‘Dire knowledge, all of it,’ I say.

‘Think of what we could do to the enemies of the Imperium with such insight,’ Stolas argues.

He does not need to tempt me thus. I feel that draw on my own. I reach out to the book before me. I open it.

There is a moment. A fraction of a second so minute as to defy measure. I experience it, notwithstanding: a fragmentary impression of the being who last touched this book. A towering horned shadow. Eyes that burn crimson with malevolence and knowledge and... something else... a memory, a memory so specific that it is a weapon aimed at the soul of the Blood Angels. A memory that leads to a future that crushes our Chapter in a clawed fist.

The shard of vision vanishes. In its place is a yawning promise. The book is abyssal. It will tell me all. Whatever questions I have, they will be answered. Omniscience is within my reach. There will be no more mysteries. All of the past, all of the present, all of the future – everything will be made known to me.

My identity made clear. What is it that lies coiled in my depths? I shall know that, too.

The means to total illumination, and total power, are not complicated. I simply need to start reading.

The pull is beyond any concept of temptation. I am in the gravitational jaws of a black hole. The event horizon is long past. There is no escape, and why should I wish it?

Yet I do. I refuse. My will pushes back. It is the will that pulled me from the Black Rage, that raised me from the my tomb of rubble. It is the will that shapes the energies of the empyrean to my ends. Power? I am the Lord of Death. What is that, if not power most dread?

Is this will entirely my own? Is it entirely *me*?

No answer. No matter. I see the room with clarity again, and step back from the book.

To my right, Stolas is clutching one of the other tomes. I call to him, but it is far too late. His face is wracked by dark ecstasy. He turns his eyes my way, eyes that have become a glistening black. His body is shaking. His speech is slurred. ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘Oh, you must know...’

‘No, brother,’ I tell him. ‘We must not.’

The shimmering in his eyes leaks down his cheeks. The tears become tendrils.

The tendrils become worms. He is lost.

Did the accursed book promise me power? Let me show it what power means. I call the warp to me. I force it to do my bidding. I accumulate the energy within me until the straining potential threatens to tear me apart. And when I am ready, as time ticks from before the act to the act itself, I know that the *Eclipse of Hope* has its own terrible moment. It senses what is about to happen. It finally does know fear.

I strike. And there is nothing but fire.

I burned the librarium to ash. I was the centre of a purging sun. When I was done, the mind of the ship was but a memory itself. Mine. Stolas, too, was gone, incinerated. Though I know his soul had already been taken, I know also that my inferno destroyed his body and his gene-seed. His trace and his legacy are gone forever, and his name, then, must be added to the register of my guilt. I left the scoured chamber to find my brothers standing in an empty, dark corridor. The bloodletters vanished when I killed the mind.

The vessel is inert once more.

But it has not vanished. Even now, after we have returned to the *Crimson Exhortation*, and nothing alive and sentient walks the halls of the *Eclipse of Hope*, the ghost ship remains intact, an apparition that will not return to the night from whence it came. The crisis on Supplicium Tertius has abated. The survivors are no longer killing each other. So the ship no longer appears to be a carrier of plague.

But we cannot destroy it. The fact of its continued existence will haunt us with the possibility of further harm. It is a memory that refuses to be forgotten. So, too, are the books. Those are my personal ghosts. I fought the temptation. I destroyed the unholy. But what might I have learned? What if I could have absorbed those teachings and stayed whole, unlike Stolas? What if the absolute self-knowledge from which I turned was the door, through darkness, to salvation?

What have I thrown away?

I will think on these things. But not now. There is something more immediate to confront. The being that launched the *Eclipse of Hope* on its voyage has not finished with us yet. We are still being moved on the regicide board. The *Exhortation* has received a message. A brother, long though lost, has returned to us.

He awaits us in the Pallevon system.

As our great ship rushes us to a destiny five thousand years in the preparation,
I attune my mind to the empyrean. I am not surprised to hear, grinding over the
flows of the warp, the sound of eager laughter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day, DAVID ANNANDALE dons an academic disguise and lectures at a Canadian university on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games, shaping his students into an army of servitors awaiting his signal to rise. He is the author of several thriller and horror novels and the acclaimed short story 'Carrion Anthem' for Black Library. He lives with his wife and family and a daemon in the shape of a cat, and is working on several new projects set in the grim darkness of the far future. Visit him at www.davidannandale.com.



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