

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE LEGACY OF CALIBAN

A HUNT IN THE DARK

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The cell stank of despair. There were ancient blood stains painted on the walls and floor, written in the adrenaline-filled reek of sweat in the air. The red glow of a single guttering lamp barely touched the walls, which were hewn from the raw foundations of the Rock, deep beneath the Dark Angels' space-faring fortress-monastery. Here was not the carved stone and intricate tapestries of the Tower of Angels; here was the naked remnant of Caliban, preserved within countless power fields and held together by graviometric archeotech that perhaps even the Master of the Forge no longer fully understood.

The weight of ten thousand years pushed down on Sammael every bit as much as the millions of tons of architecture above this dismal place.

Stripped of his armour, clad only in a black robe of the Ravenwing adorned with a silver symbol denoting his rank as a Black Knight, Sammael was under no illusion regarding why he had been brought here. The two Deathwing Knights that flanked him, resplendent in full bone-coloured power armour, had treated him as a prisoner from the moment they had taken him from his solitary contemplation in the Reclusiam. By ways unknown to Sammael, and passing no other Space Marine or serf, they had brought him down to the lower levels. Though Sammael could not say where exactly in the dungeons of the Rock the cell lay, he knew well enough the reputation of the place and others like it.

On entry to the Ravenwing he had been initiated into the first of the Rites of the Raven and had learnt of the Fallen. He had absorbed such knowledge without shock. He was not sure why he had not been surprised by the revelation that warriors of the Dark Angels had turned on the primarch and the Emperor during the uprising of Warmaster Horus. It was possible that his suspicions of such an event had brought him to the attention of the Chaplains and ultimately the Ravenwing.

As he had risen through the seven Rites he had learnt more – more about the Fallen and how to hunt them, and more of the arts of the Interrogators that offered them the chance for repentance in cells like this one, dragging forth confession and absolution from bloodied flesh.

A small wooden table and two sturdy chairs were all that furnished the cell; so simple, so domestic in their construction yet given an ominous air by context. Sammael would have felt more comfortable had there been a shelf of torture implements, brands and hooks and knives rather than the plain furnishings, but there was no overt sign of the excruciation suffered by others who had been brought here before.

There was no fear in Sammael as his guards pushed him into the cell and slammed the heavy steel shut behind him. Not fear of torture, at least. He was no Fallen and he could not believe that his battle-brothers would turn their bloody attentions upon him as punishment for the debacle at Kapua. There was no need to extract any account, he would freely tell them what had happened and how the disaster had unfolded.

That was not why he was here, though. There was another reason behind the secret abduction and the intimidating surrounds. The cell was the destination of a journey he had started before Kapua, before Gideon's fall.

The chatter of autogun fire echoed across the wide courtyard, masking the sound of punctured flesh and splintering stone. Only when they had emptied the magazines of their weapons did the firing squad cease shooting, drawing up their rifles to their shoulders in a salute to the armoured Space Marines overseeing the execution. Grand Master Gideon, his black armour overlaid with golden icons and the heraldry of the Ravenwing, gave a signal to their sergeant, who dismissed the troop. The ten defence troopers, natives of Kaphon Betis, filed away, leaving the two Dark Angels with a dozen bullet-riddled corpses.

'A fitting end for traitors,' said Sammael, glaring down at the bodies. 'Filthy xenos-worshippers. The lowest kind of scum, turning on their own kind for the favours of aliens.'

'Misguided for certain,' agreed Gideon. He took off his helm, revealing dark hair and angular features, a scar across his throat disappearing behind the gorget of his armour. He looked at Sammael and shrugged. 'Only a deviant mind could hope for succour from the very creatures that kill and enslave one's kith and kin. Desperate, insane. The eldar plied their evil in Kaphon for many decades before we came. It is a shame that some succumbed to despair and

started to entreat them, but they were a small minority.'

'A tiny group, to be sure, but influential,' replied Sammael. He was aware that Gideon had singled him out to oversee the firing squad, though there were many members of the Second Company that were his senior. It was no secret that the Grand Master had taken a special interest, and there were few that would argue that Sammael did not deserve the recognition and attention he received. Sammael wanted to prove that his superior's faith was well-placed, to demonstrate the qualities worthy of a Black Knight and perhaps, one day, a Master.

'Less than two hundred, but there are many in positions of power. They willingly allowed the eldar to harvest those that looked to them for protection. I am sure the aliens were more than happy to cooperate. Had we not heard rumours of instability and division in this system, the xenos cultists might have turned even more to their twisted cause.'

'By the grace of the Emperor, we arrived and now the threat has been ended.' Gideon waved a hand at the piled bodies. *'These are the last of them. We will depart by nightfall and return to the Rock.'*

'The last?' Sammael was surprised. *'We have not yet caught the ringleader. The so-called Lord Cypher.'*

Gideon's stare was as sharp as the Raven Sword hanging at his hip. 'Where did you hear that name?'

'Chatter from the prisoners. One of them thought they would be saved by a 'Lord Cypher'.' Sammael read consternation in the expression of his superior. *'I have not yet had time to search the planetary records, but I am sure we will unearth this traitorous noble soon enough.'*

'You have not spoken of this to anybody else?' Sammael answered Gideon's question with a shake of the head. *'Good, let it remain so.'*

Sammael felt as though he had done something wrong, but he had no idea what the infraction had been. He sought refuge in formality to hide his confusion. 'If that is your command, grand master.' Apparently the attempt was unsuccessful.

'This is a far graver matter than you know, Sammael,' Gideon told him. At first it looked as though that was all he would say on the matter, but after a pause he continued, his voice little more than a whisper as his eyes darted around the courtyard before settling on Sammael. 'The title is not from Kaphon Betis, it is from Caliban.'

'Caliban? Our destroyed home world? How can that be possible?'

‘Cypher is one of the Fallen, Sammael. More than that. The worst of them, intent on destroying all that remains of the Legion he once served. If he has been in Kaphon there is far more at play here than eldar raids and heretic sympathisers.’

The scrape of footfalls outside the door drew Sammael from his the recollection of when he had first heard the name of Cypher. The cell door opened and two familiar figures loomed large in the corridor beyond: Supreme Grand Master Azrael and Chief Librarian Ezekiel. The two most senior Dark Angels entered in silence and the door closed behind them.

Azrael gestured for Sammael to remain seated and stood to one side, while Ezekiel sat in the chair opposite. The Librarian’s bionic eye gleamed red, matching the ruddy glow of the lantern. His other eye seemed a pit of blackness, swallowing the light. Sammael felt himself drawn into those depths, and shuddered despite every effort when he saw golden motes of energy within the gaze of the psyker.

‘You will tell me about Kapua.’ Azrael spoke the words without emotion, a flat statement of fact. Sammael answered, but his gaze was locked with the stare of Ezekiel, unable to break the trance the Librarian had set upon him.

‘There seemed little danger at first. We had detected an astropathic call for assistance in putting down a small-scale rebellion on the world of Kapua. We entered the system some seventeen days later and made orbit over the primary world, Kapua Seven. After short conference with the aides of the Imperial Commander, who we were told were overseeing the fighting personally, Grand Master Gideon organised and launched a standard drop assault on the rebel holdings less than fifty kilometres from the city of Vespengard.’

Ezekiel had not blinked, but it was as though he had allowed Sammael a moment of release and the Black Knight took it, turning his attention to the Supreme Grand Master. Azrael’s cold stare was only slightly less intimidating.

‘Describe the rebels,’ he said.

‘Nothing untoward, master. Dissidents led by political opponents of the Imperial Commander, with weapons looted from the stores of the local forces. Nothing to offer significant resistance to warriors of the Adeptus Astartes.’ Sammael shrugged. ‘We took a few casualties, but in a matter of days the strength of the rebellion was broken, their command shattered and their lairs destroyed.’

‘Gideon became over-confident.’ Again it was a statement, not a question.

‘Faced with poor opposition he underestimated potential threats.’

‘I disagree, master.’ Sammael kept his tone level, trying to be critical of Azrael’s assessment and not the man who uttered it. ‘At that time there was no evidence to suggest any foe more significant than the rebels we had encountered.’

‘Perhaps you do not question Gideon’s judgement because it reflects poorly on his later declaration in support of your elevation to the position of Grand Master. If we doubt the first judgement we must also doubt the second.’

The suggestion riled Sammael a little but he did not rise to the baited words.

‘Your judgement will be final, master. I relate the events simply as I experienced them. You wished for me to offer opinion and I did so.’

Azrael nodded in acknowledgement of this defence. He gestured for Sammael to continue.

‘No commander I have served with could have predicted what happened next,’ said Sammael.

The torrent of reports over the vox-network was the closest to panic Sammael had ever encountered in his time with the Chapter. Each measured, clipped message belied the anarchy that had suddenly engulfed the Ravenwing and it was by its mass rather than individual parts that the underlying consternation could be felt.

Sammael understood the shock in those voices all too well. The same sense of dislocation and unreality was raging in his thoughts as bolter fire and missiles screamed down at the Black Knights from camouflaged bunkers ahead.

‘Power armoured enemy, moving through the woods to the west.’

‘Highly accurate heavy weapons fire, we are withdrawing.’

‘Converging fire from ground level and above. Where did they come from? Sergeant! Sergeant?’

‘Is that a Dreadnought, brother? Sector five. I swear I saw a...’

A blast seared through Teranto’s bike just a few metres from Sammael, turning mount and rider into a roiling ball of superheated vapour and molten ceramite. Sammael swerved to avoid the expanding cloud of gas and atomised matter, recognising a multi-melta hit. His shouted warning was lost amongst the din filling the vox.

‘Armoured vehicles, old Legion patterns, breaking through the buildings on our flank.’

‘By the Emperor, traitors everywhere! Rebels have launched massive counter-

attack through the marshalling yards!’

‘Autocannon position, end terrace. Covering fire with grenade launchers.’

‘We need a Nephilim strike, sector seventeen. Heavy armour incoming. Urgent request for air strike! Where is the air cover?’

‘Squadron Astrael reporting. Two Land Speeders destroyed. Request Apothecary retrieval for survivors. Providing cover fire. Enemy are pushing forward, support needed immediately.’

Sammael glimpsed colour ahead: bulky shapes moving through the rubble of a refinery that had been levelled by orbital bombardment. The fortifications around it had shown clear on the auspex scans. Sammael checked his steed’s display again. Still it registered no enemy despite the torrent of fire that had erupted from the supposedly empty bunker line.

‘Some kind of masking shield,’ he said, but nobody seemed to be listening. The Black Knights were each concentrating on staying alive, dodging between mortar bomb eruptions, whickering heavy bolter fire and the stabbing ruby beam of a lascannon. Sammael turned his bike towards this last threat, unleashing a salvo of shots from its plasma talons into the firing pit where the heavy weapon was stationed.

It was then that he saw something that caused him a moment’s pause. The lascannon was no tripod-mounted support weapon as he had expected. It was carried on the shoulder of a warrior in power armour, dwarfing the poorly-armoured rebels.

A Traitor legionary.

Sammael did not know the foe from his deep red livery, but as the enemy Space Marine turned to fire his lascannon the yellow and black sigil emblazoned on his shoulder revealed his former allegiances. A renegade of the Word Bearers Legion. There were others around him – more giants in red armour, some in black, pushing out to encircle the Ravenwing advance.

‘All vanguard squadrons to pull back!’ This last came from Gideon, cutting through the chatter. ‘Withdraw immediately, do not get drawn into prolonged engagement.’

To Sammael’s right the Grand Master pulled his jetbike into a tight turn, pulling away from the refinery and its defenders. Sammael followed suit, the wheels of his mount sending up showers of grits and dust as he hauled Withermare across the broken ferrocrete of the street.

The shots of the rebels and Traitor Space Marines followed them as they sped back up the road, Sammael’s soul heavy with thoughts of failure.

‘Gideon’s response to evidence of the Traitor Legions was to break off the attack. He surrendered what momentum the assault had gained.’

Sammael looked at the Supreme Grand Master and wondered if Azrael was conducting this inquiry to find the truth or was simply seeking to confirm an opinion already formed. The Black Knight spoke up in defence of Gideon. Nobody else could.

‘Grand Master Gideon assessed that we were not in a position to prosecute a successful attack with the speed and decisiveness required. Although it transpired in our later reconnaissance that the Traitor legionaries were no more than a few dozen in number, they had armoured vehicles and heavy weaponry that negated the advantages we had over the rebels. As well as their direct military impact they were also leading the enemy, who numbered several thousand, coordinating their attacks, bolstering their resolve, and had been doing so since the outset.’

‘So it was a trap?’ It was the first question Azrael had asked.

‘I believe so. Gideon also thought that it was likely. Our early successes had been an attempt to lure us into a false sense of confidence so that we might over-extend our efforts. Grand Master Gideon’s swift command to withdraw enabled over ninety per cent of the company to escape the ambushes. Had we stayed to fight, we would have been wiped out.’

‘That is your assessment, Sammael. I have my own.’ Azrael folded his arms, jaw set. ‘Continue with your account. Gideon thought it wise to continue with the attacks even though the enemy were well-prepared in fortified positions.’

‘The Grand Master convened a council of the veterans and the decision was unanimous to continue the offensive. We considered waiting for Chapter reinforcements or the weight of the Imperial Guard, but the risk that the traitors would gain a further grip on the populace, or perhaps escape from Kapua, outweighed the dangers of continuing the campaign.

‘The next phase of fighting vindicated the Grand Master’s decision. Our orbital support had been curtailed by intervention from the traitor’s warships, and our air power seriously compromised. Lacking the firepower needed for a direct attack, the company began a series of supply raids and feint assaults. Over the course of seven days these proved troublesome enough for the enemy to react. The rebels led by the Word Bearers in particular were prone to being lured out of position by these baiting attacks. We later discovered there were also Space Marines bearing unaffiliated black livery, who proved far less headstrong.’

‘To what purpose were these attacks directed?’

‘With precision strategy, we were able to weaken part of the cordon around the city of Vespengard. If the company could breach the city then the enemy defensive line would be rendered worthless. Once the fortifications had been penetrated, forces still loyal to the Imperium could assault Vespengard while the company continued to confound the enemy from behind their line.’

‘A strategy that seems to have some merit.’ Azrael scratched the side of his nose, his attitude seeming to soften for a moment. Then his expression hardened again and the next words rasped angrily. ‘But it was not, was it? Due to imprecise intelligence, the attack ran into fierce opposition. Gideon led the Ravenwing into an even greater trap than the one they had already survived.’

With Nephilim and Dark Talon fighters screaming overhead and Thunderhawks and Land Speeders pounding the buildings and streets along their flanks, the bikers of the Ravenwing plunged towards the heart of Vespengard. Sammael and his Black Knights accompanied Gideon as always, a few metres behind the Grand Master’s jetbike, their steeds leaving dust and exhaust fumes filling the street in their wake.

Missiles from Land Speeder Typhoons raked along rooftops, setting factories, administration buildings and hab-blocks ablaze while the battlecannons and lascannons of the gunships shredded the improvised barricades that had been thrown across the roads along the path of the attack squadrons on the ground. Heavy bolters and assault cannons on Land Speeder Tornados held the rear, keeping the rebels pinned in their bunkers and trenches.

A sudden surge of energy flashed across the auspex display of Withermare. At first Sammael thought it was one of the inner city power stations exploding, but the truth revealed itself half a minute later when a monstrous engine stepped into view at the far end of the boulevard ahead.

The Reaver Titan was a colossus of the Dark Age of Technology, twelve stories high, its vaguely humanoid form obscured by the purple and blue flickering of void shields. The street underfoot cracked and sagged beneath its weight while windows exploded as its void shields touched them, filling the air with glittering shards. The blare of its war horn roared down the boulevard, overloading Sammael’s autosenses and shattering more glass.

The Titan’s original battle colours, black and orange, could still be seen on the war banners hanging from its weapon mounts, emblazoned with a horned skull and flames. Its body was more like living flesh than metal and ceramite, flexing

and bulging with ruddy muscles corded with brass-like veins, protected by serrated, overlapping armour plates. Where once the head and crew deck had been there was now a monstrous daemonic face surrounded by curling horns, its mouth rimmed with whirring chainblades like teeth. Piercing yellow eyes blazed with hideous light as its murderous gaze fell upon the Black Knights. Its right arm was a multi-barrelled gatling blaster, its left a huge fist encased in coruscating black energy that crackled from the tips of its barbed claws. Atop its angled carapace a twin-muzzled turbo-laser swung towards the gunships now converging on its position.

With a blinding flash, the turbo-laser opened fire, giving Sammael no time to wonder how such a monstrosity had been concealed from the Dark Angels augurs and orbital surveys; the reality was that it had. The beam intersected with a Thunderhawk, splitting it from cockpit to tail. As the remains of the gunship rained down on the city the gatling blaster spewed a torrent of shells along the boulevard.

The Black Knights reacted without command, veering hard to the left as Gideon wrenched his jetbike away from the stream of explosions tearing towards the squadron. The turbo-laser fire stabbed out again, incinerating a Land Speeder Tornado racing across the rooftops from the west. Too fast for the Titan's main weapons to target, the Nephilim fighters and Dark Talon interceptors plunged down, opening fire with rift cannons and missiles.

Sammael's last glimpse of the Reaver was of the Titan wreathed in coruscating warp power as its void shields absorbed the attacks of the aircraft. Autocannons and anti-air missile streaked up from the surrounding streets, driving off the interceptors and fighters midway through their attack runs.

'All units, break off attack. Withdraw to assault point alpha.' Gideon's voice was laced with regret. *'All units, withdraw.'*

A moment after the order had been issued a communication arrived from Sergeant Versian leading the rearguard.

'Grand Master, Traitor legionaries converging on our withdrawal sector. Word Bearers and heavy armour have cut off retreat route alpha.'

The news was almost as devastating as a salvo from the Titan. The Ravenwing were trapped inside the city.

Sammael closed his eyes, reliving the moment of realisation. His hearts were beating faster even now, months later. He calmed himself and when he opened his eyes, he found himself locked by Ezekiel's unblinking stare once more.

Azrael's voice seemed to come from a distance, muffled and indistinct.

'Gideon did not form up the company for a forced breakout. He chose to remain in the contested city.'

It was with some difficulty that Sammael dredged up the facts from his memory. The Black Knight had to wonder if Ezekiel was deliberately dulling his senses, or was this simply a side effect of the Librarian's scrutiny?

'Had the company come together and been baulked in the breakout, we would have been exceptionally vulnerable to encirclement. The situation was dire, but we still had the advantage of mobility. By dispersing the company we were able to maintain a moving threat. The Traitors and their war engine could not be everywhere, and if they tried to tighten the trap then it would present opportunities for counter-attack.'

'Surely the battle for Vespengard was already lost, Sammael. What did Gideon hope to achieve by remaining in such close proximity to the enemy?'

'It was the Grand Master's firm belief that the skill with which we had been deceived indicated a superior level of intelligence possessed by the enemy commander. We faced a coalition of forces, and the nature of their purpose in luring our formation onto Kapua suggested a very specific reason why we had been targeted.'

'He thought the enemy commander was one of the Fallen?' Azrael took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'Supposition, nothing more.'

'At the time it made sense, and the possibility of capturing one of the Fallen could not be overlooked. The enemy's only strength was the abomination of the traitor Mechanicus. If the Titan could be overcome, the city would swiftly fall into the hands of loyal forces again and the enemy commander run to ground.'

'A rash decision. It seems uncharacteristic of Gideon to be so foolhardy so soon after being ensnared.' Azrael's voice became more determined even as Ezekiel's stare bore deeper and deeper into Sammael's soul. 'What are you not telling us, Brother Sammael? Why are you holding back?'

'By the Lion and the Emperor, I swear I am being forthright and truthful,' the Black Knight replied, trying hard not to plead. There was no pain, not of the kind he had felt before, but Ezekiel's psychic probing was like tiny lacerations in his thoughts, parting his mind into a thousand pieces to inspect the constituent parts.

Suddenly the sensation ended. Sammael flopped back, realising that he had been hunched forward with every muscle taut. His breath came in short gasps and his hearts thundered in his chest.

'If you insist,' said Azrael, looking unconvinced. 'Gather your thoughts. Do

not leave this cell. We will return shortly.’

Ezekiel stood up and followed the Supreme Grand Master out into the corridor. Sammael tried to relax, taking long breaths to ease himself back into a stable state. Through the open door he could see the pale armour of the two Deathwing Knights.

The Black Knight knew that the departure of his superiors was simply part of the interrogation, perhaps to unsettle him further or otherwise disrupt his thinking. It was hard not to get drawn into the notion that this was a battle of wits, Sammael versus Azrael, trying to prove something out of principle and opposition rather than to arrive at the truth.

Sammael forced himself to calm down. Even if he didn’t regard this as a battle, it appeared that Azrael did, and Sammael had learnt long ago the importance of using any lull in hostilities to regroup, resupply and relax. His interrogators could be back any moment or at any day, but he had to be prepared for either eventuality.

A shout from outside snapped him back to full attention. He was uncertain whether moments or hours had passed. Normally his internal time perception was perfect, to all intents and purposes, even when unconscious – an effect of the gene-crafted catalapsean node interacting with his cerebellum, basal ganglia and other time-sensitive brain networks. The sensation of dislocation was alien and awkward.

‘Stay there,’ barked one of the Deathwing Knights through his vocaliser, disappearing from view as quickly as he had appeared. In the darkness of the corridor, the armour of the other faded from view.

Sammael did as he had been told, suspecting that this was part of the interrogation, a test of his obedience to orders. Azrael had commanded him to wait, so he would wait.

Several more minutes passed before the other Deathwing warrior returned. He recognised the posture of a vox-link exchange between the two guards. There seemed to be some form of disagreement between them. After the exchange, the Space Marine that had left departed again. A few seconds later the remaining Deathwing warrior approached the cell.

‘One of the Fallen has slipped his captivity,’ the Space Marine confided. ‘I’ve been ordered to stay here to watch you, but we both know that would be a waste of manpower.’

Sammael hesitated. Was this a snare constructed to betray disloyalty? It seemed possible, but Sammael could not be sure. If there was actually a Fallen

on the loose in the dungeons there could be untold havoc before he was recaptured. Sammael would rather be damned for something he did than something he didn't, but caution tempered his desire for action.

'Do not remain on my account, brother,' he told the other Dark Angel. 'Assist your brethren.'

The Deathwing Knight nodded his thanks and moved out of sight, leaving Sammael alone in the cell with the door open.

The echo of boots drifted away and then returned, along with other noises; the report of a bolt pistol firing and the rasp of motors and screech of metal. The corridors turned these sounds into drawn-out reverberations, but Sammael recognised their sequence easily enough; a close range shot followed by a brief duel of chainswords.

A patter of bare feet and silence followed, broken a dozen seconds later by a grunted cry for assistance. Sammael was at the door before he realised what he was doing.

He paused at the threshold, his instinct telling him that this was no simulation, his rational mind wary of entrapment. In the end instinct won – it had seen him survive and prosper so far.

'Brother!'

The call came from the right. Sammael had no idea where the cell was, or the layout of the surrounding rooms and tunnels, and he simply headed towards the sound. A quiet, wordless cry took him down a corridor to the right a few metres on and then another to the left. It took some time for him to orientate himself again as it seemed he followed the sound in circles for a few minutes.

He came upon another cell, the wooden door open, the splinters of a bolt impact clear beneath the grille of the window. Just inside lay another Space Marine, his chest plastron rent open by a wicked chainsword hit. Blood spilled from the wound still, too much even for the warrior's Larraman cells to staunch. He flailed an arm towards Sammael, blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

The wound was real and Sammael's doubts about the veracity of the emergency disappeared in an instant.

'No time. Took my pistol.' The Space Marine's arm flopped to the left, pointing down a long corridor. 'Heading towards the Exactatory.'

Sammael had no idea what or where the Exactatory was, but the wounded Space Marine's vehemence made him certain it would not go well if the escaped Fallen reached it. The Black Knight pulled off his robe and tore a strip from the

hem. Using this as a bandage, he pushed the rest of the garment into the armour breach, plugging the wound, and bound it into place.

The Deathwing Knight's chainsword lay just out of his reach. Sammael picked it up and tested the motor. It was still working.

He had a weapon, but no armour. Not much use against a well-aimed bolt-round, but better than nothing at all. It was impossible not to feel a little trepidation at the thought of cornering a dangerous, armed foe with no protection, but he quelled the sensation. Doing so brought back another memory of Kapua.

The Titan seemed even larger than before, its carapace clearly visible over the intervening buildings, the miasma of the void shields extending higher still.

The shields flared and crackled from impacts as elements of the Ravenwing unleashed plasma and missiles and shells at the enormous war engine, but the energy field generators held firm, protecting the daemon machine from harm.

It did not matter; the assault was simply a diversion to allow Sammael and his Black Knights to close within the void shields, from where they would unleash plasma blasts and armour-piercing grenades. A trio of attack bikes with multi-meltas followed thirty metres behind the command squadron, ready to finish the task.

Sammael had faced many foes, and he trusted the judgement of his superior as much as he trusted the artifice of the armourers who had forged his war-plate and maintained Withermare. Yet looking up at the half-daemonic behemoth gave Sammael pause. All the armour in the world would not stop the beam of a turbo-laser. He felt like a gnat going up against a First Company Terminator.

The Titan's war sirens blared again as it swept its energy-wreathed fist towards a Land Speeder, trying to swat it like a fly. The pilot was too good, dodging the attack even as the gunner continued to rain fire onto the Titan from the skimmer's assault cannon.

The enemy had too much faith in the power of their totemic war machine. Although it was capable of destroying super heavy tanks and levelling buildings, it was just one machine, and its size restricted it to the widest plazas and thoroughfares. As much as the Ravenwing were not best suited to city fighting, the Titan needed infantry support even more, to watch its back against an attack just like the one led by Gideon.

None of which made Sammael feel better about riding full speed towards the ancient colossus with nothing more than speed and skill to protect against

attack. He checked again that the plasma talons were charged and activated the targeter to lock on to the huge war engine.

The Titan started to turn.

Sammael watched as the ponderous machine's torso started to swing towards them over the roofs, and a few seconds later a foot crashed through the corner of a building. The cumbersome movements were slowed further in the Black Knight's perception as the baleful eyes of the daemon-possessed machine glared down at the approaching bikers.

With similarly tortuous slowness, the gatling cannon swivelled on its mount.

'Grand Master!' Redevere barked the warning but there was no response.

'Master Gideon, we have been detected' said Sammael. 'Evasive manoeuvres?'

'Full attack speed. It can't target us at full speed,' the Grand Master replied calmly.

The Titan was less than three hundred metres away now. Sammael accelerated, keeping pace as Gideon's jetbike flashed along the boulevard towards their target.

Two hundred metres.

'We'll be inside the minimum ra—' Gideon's words were lost in the roar of the gatling cannon.

Shells the size of groundcars slammed into the boulevard and surrounding buildings, one every half a second, tearing up massive chunks of ferrocrete, pulverising plastek, twisting metal supports. Fire engulfed Sammael as a shell detonated just ahead, lifting Withermare twenty metres into the air.

For a moment he felt weightless as the force of the explosion and gravity equalised. In the cloud of debris he could see other riders and mounts spinning through the dust and fire. Taking a breath, Sammael plummeted groundwards and a second later Space Marine and steed slammed into the shattered surface of the road.

Sammael survived the impact, head ringing, and watched as the fusillade continued, pounding across the neighbouring streets, driving back the rest of the Ravenwing attack. The blur of shells against the cloudy sky came closer again, hammering into a five-storey habplex to Sammael's right. Billowing smoke and rockcrete grit, the front of the building sheared away.

The last thing Sammael saw was the Titan, turning away to confront the rest of the company, moments before the wall of masonry obscured everything and buried him in a welter of grinding shards and thunder.

Sammael had tracked the Fallen enough times that he had a sense for the Hunt. The dungeons of the Rock were an unknown labyrinth but the Black Knight headed in the direction indicated by the wounded Space Marine. There were signs that he was on the right trail: doors broken open; droplets of blood on the floor from an injury the escaped prisoner must have suffered in his duel with the Deathwing Knight; the distant pad of feet echoing down the corridors.

It seemed like an age had passed, and many kilometres, since Sammael had first left his cell, and although the Rock was large and he had ascended and descended several levels, something did not feel right. He wondered if his prey was a psyker, subtly manipulating his perception of time or distance.

This thought brought a strange stab of reality. Or rather a hyper-reality, as though acknowledging the possibility of psychic attack increasing the defences that had been implanted in his mind by the Librarians and the Chaplains. Everything suddenly appeared clean-edged, as if Sammael had pushed through a fog.

He could hear laboured breathing, still some distance away. His own breathing was slow and regular, like his heartbeat, showing none of the exertion or stress he had undergone since the interview had begun. The calm of the hunter had claimed Sammael, focusing body and mind onto a lone objective: capturing the escaped Fallen.

Sammael stopped, alert to danger, and thought back over what he had seen in the previous minutes. He had never been in this part of the Rock, as far as he knew, not even when escorting a prisoner to the handover with the Deathwing. Yet despite this there was something familiar about his surroundings. Sammael realised that he was still being manipulated.

The cross-roads of corridors he was in had smooth stone walls, mortared, the floor lined with pitted flagstones. It reminded him of the chambers higher up in the Tower of Angels. More specifically, he seemed to be in the passageways outside the Reclusiam. And the tunnel he had just run down a few moments before, metal grilles underfoot, ferrocrete bulkheads, that had been aboard a starship. And before that, the earthy smell of the caves of Glodinium where he had fought orks four decades earlier.

Everywhere had been pieced together out of fragments of his memories.

Had he moved at all since leaving the wounded Deathwing Knight? Was the psychic attack because he was close to his foe? Sammael raised the chainsword, thumb lightly touching the ignition stud.

The air wavered and parted like a pair of curtains, revealing the dry, roughly

hewn stone of the Rock. There was a cell door just ahead, letting out the flickering light of candles onto the uneven tunnel floor. A shadow briefly eclipsed them and Sammael heard the flap of bare feet. He padded forward, weapon at the ready.

Reaching the door, he looked into the cell. There was a bulky figure hunched over in the corner, wearing a tattered Chapter robe. Bone-white, the colour of the Deathwing. The Space Marine stood up and turned to look at Sammael, chainsword in one hand, bolt pistol in the other.

He had the face of Sergeant Belial, one of the Deathwing Knights and long-time duelling opponent.

‘You can never best me,’ Belial sneered, saluting with the chainsword. ‘You are a lesser warrior.’

‘You can never best me,’ Belial said solemnly, raising the training blade to the salute. He did not seem to take pleasure in the lecture, but felt compelled to pass on the lesson. ‘You hope that a moment of genius will best a more efficient, superior swordsman.’

‘It takes only a moment to win,’ replied Sammael, replicating the salute.

Around them the rest of the Tenth watched. The honour of being this year’s Company Seneschal, the Scout Blademaster, was to be decided again. Belial had held it for the last six years, and Sammael had been the defeated finalist for the last three. Before Belial’s arrival, Sammael had been Blademaster for seven years.

The two of them lowered their weapons to the guard and started to circle, eyes fixed on each other. Sammael darted a feint towards Belial’s right shoulder and then straightened his blade, aiming for the throat. Belial batted aside the thrust with the flat of his sword and stepped back, waiting for the next attack.

Sammael checked his next lunge as he moved his weight forward, but Belial would not be baited. Sammael stepped to the right, lowered his left shoulder and then turned sharply back, slashing his sword at Belial’s knee. The other Dark Angel’s sword was there to meet the attack, easily blocking the blow. Some might say it was with contemptuous ease, but there was nothing but respect and sincerity in Belial’s expression as he parried yet another attack, eyes focused on the tip of Sammael’s sword.

Gritting his teeth, Sammael forced himself to hold back, trying to tempt Belial into the offensive. Sammael was convinced he had the greater hand speed, and would win if he could draw his foe into an attack-parry-riposte sequence, but

Belial was ever precise in his movements and tactics, never over-extending himself. It was as infuriating as it was successful.

Sammael let his guard drop for a moment, leaving an opening to his left side, ready to dodge should Belial make the attack, but his foe still would not take up the offensive stance.

'You are too good to leave such opportunity by chance,' Belial said quietly. 'Unlike many, I will never underestimate you.'

'Dull,' snapped Sammael, launching a blistering series of strikes towards the head and chest, forcing Belial back step by step to the edge of the circle. 'Dull, dull, dull! You have no élan, brother!'

'And you have no patience,' said Belial, slipping aside from Sammael's last strike, the edge of his practice blade scoring a red welt across Sammael's left cheek, nearly breaking the bone.

Sammael staggered back, blood filling his mouth. His anger flared, directed not at Belial but himself.

Though his pride was hurt, Sammael raised his blade in salute.

'You are the Blademaster once again, brother.' The loss hurt more than Sammael's jaw, but there was form to be observed. 'I am again my own worst foe. But the honour is well-deserved.'

'Too much show,' Belial told him, returning the salute. 'Always looking for the glorious victory, risking defeat in doing so.'

The memory had been more than simple recollection. It felt as though he relived the duel with Belial, and every other duel fought between the two Space Marines. Coming back to his senses, Sammael found himself alone in the cell and wondered why the Fallen who had taken the face of Belial had not killed him.

He still had the chainsword and concluded that the vision of Belial had been a phantasm, conjured in his mind by the renegade, rather than a glamour upon the Fallen himself. Sammael was no expert in psychic matters, but as a Black Knight he had learnt enough to understand the wiles of the Librarians that had turned against the Emperor and the Lion. The escapee had to be close at hand to use that kind of mind-altering power, perhaps even within sight, and that gave Sammael confidence. His prey was getting desperate, his power weakening through use or his injury.

Leaving the cell, Sammael followed the trail of blood droplets to the left, past several tall archways, heading up a spiral stair to the level above. His prey must

have gleaned something of the dungeons and the upper levels from the mind of the wounded Deathwing Space Marine, and the further the Fallen ascended the closer he came to the Tower of Angels. Although this brought the fugitive nearer capture Sammael could not avoid thinking about the consequences of a Fallen Angel running loose in the Chapter monastery.

Most of the Chapter was, as usual, away on deployment at various warzones nearby, but there were still several dozen battle-brothers in the Tower of Angels, Space Marines that had not been brought into the smaller cadre of warriors that knew the truth about the Dark Angels' ancient history. If the Fallen confronted them it would cause untold harm, perhaps irreparable damage to the cohesion of the Chapter. The Dark Angels survived only by considered introduction to the Hunt and the true nature of the Chapter's fight during the Horus Heresy. Should the bulk of the battle-brothers learn that truth, should they be aware of the deception that had cloaked their learning since they had been brought to the Tower of Angels, it would finish the Chapter.

Spurred by this terrible thought, Sammael broke into a run, sensing that he was close on the heels of his prey. Along another corridor and down another flight of steps, the chase brought him onto a balcony above a large space where several passageways joined.

The far end of the balcony was blocked by a wooden door, which was being subjected to heavy chainsword blows by a semi-naked figure. Wary of being tricked again, Sammael dashed in to the attack, seeking to land his first blow before his target knew of the danger.

Some sixth sense warned the Fallen, who spun around, chainsword locking teeth with Sammael's weapon in a clash of sparks and screeching metal. The parry threw Sammael back a step, but he lunged again, driving the whirring chainsword at his opponent's gut. This attack was also turned aside, and it was only as he raised his weapon for another strike that Sammael looked at his foe's face.

He stared into the dead gaze of Gideon.

'You were not worthy,' the former Grand Master told him, skin peeling from his bones, a maggot chewing its way out of a bloodless eye. 'But for the happenstance of survival, another would have been leader.'

'Not true,' Sammael snarled, slashing his blade at the impostor's throat. Gideon turned the clumsy blow aside and counter-attacked, swiping at Sammael's chest and shoulders, forcing him to retreat along the balcony. Even though he knew it was a false apparition, Sammael could not help but think he

was fighting the shade of his dead mentor.

Sammael saw that it was not a chainsword his opponent wielded but the fabled Raven Sword: the badge of the Ravenwing Grand Master.

The air was choked with dust and smoke and the afterwash of heat from the detonations was causing havoc with Sammael's autosenses. At first he thought he had been buried completely, but as the smog started to drift, he saw that only his legs were pinned by a cracked stanchion that had fallen across the road. A few metres away another fractured buttress lay over the crumpled remains of Withermare. Leaking coolant had frosted the rubble around the crushed motorbike, making it appear as though the machine had been flattened by the club of a mythical frost giant. A little further away, patches of lubricant burned with green flame, adding to the sensation of the otherworldly.

Two buildings had collapsed almost in their entirety and the roadway was pocked with twenty metre wide craters from the gatling cannon impacts. The charge chamber of a plasma talon had detonated not far away, turning the surrounding ruin into a glassy molten splash. The beams of the turbo-laser flashed across the reflected surface, reminding Sammael that the Titan was not far away.

An internal sweep of his armour's systems confirmed that the damage was light and Sammael was able to kick away the tangle of broken masonry and plasteel struts without much effort. He pushed himself to his feet and the full import of what had happened struck him.

There were broken mounts and riders scattered across the roadway, some almost completely buried, others smashed to pieces by direct shell hits. He adjusted his vox to a company-wide channel and a flood of disheartening reports crackled through the ether to his ear. The Titan had repulsed the initial attack with ease and left the company scattered again, individual squadrons doing their best to elude the enemy. Heavier vehicles were pressing from the perimeter and, along with the Titan, dominating the open spaces and wider roads. This had forced many of his company brothers into the narrower streets and alleys, where enemy cultists were able to use the dense terrain and their numbers for effective ambushes.

Sammael couldn't raise the Grand Master on the vox and he cast about the ruins for any sign of his commander. It seemed that he was the only Black Knight to have survived the Titan's fusillade as he inspected the black-armoured bodies littering the debris.

His autosenses picked up the thrum of an anti-grav motor off to the left. Something had veered off the street and broken through a plaster wall. Stepping through the gap, Sammael found Gideon's jetbike half-buried beneath a collapsed ceiling, jerking and thrashing as its skim motors malfunctioned.

An arm stuck out of the tons of masonry another couple of metres further on. Forging up the sloping rubble, Sammael attacked the pile with his hands, pulling off pieces of shattered rockcrete and dragging away sheets of plastek insulation.

He revealed Gideon's left arm and head. Neither moved. Doubling his efforts, Sammael dug out the Grand Master's torso, tossing aside a chunk of masonry that weighed almost as much as himself, his armour boosting adrenaline-fuelled strength.

Gideon stirred a little, fingers flexing, but Sammael knew that his mentor was far from well. There was thick blood splashed across the sharp stone and the masterfully crafted artificer armour of the Grand Master was cracked and buckled in dozens of places.

The hand flapped uselessly across Gideon's faceplate. One side of the helm was heavily dented. Realising his commander's intent, Sammael bent down and turned the helm, breaking the seal. With a hiss of air, he pulled the helmet free, revealing Gideon's bruised and blood-soaked face. Pieces of his skull showed through the wound in the side of his head and his ear was nothing but a gristly smear along his jaw.

The Grand Master slowly nodded and forced a smile, showing blood-flecked teeth.

'I knew you had survived. The brothers were right, you were born for greatness.'

'What are your orders, Grand Master?' asked the Black Knight. 'Do we continue the attack or withdraw?'

'I cannot say,' whispered Gideon. Groaning with pain, he freed his right hand from the rubble, presenting the Raven Sword to Sammael. 'The company is yours to lead.'

With that final effort, Grand Master Gideon, veteran of six centuries of war, died.

'No! I am right. You chose me.' Sammael checked his retreat and brought his sword up to deflect his foe's next attack. He was surprised to see that it was not a chainsword in his grip, but the hilt of the fabled Raven Sword.

Gideon's tattered face twisted into a hate-filled snarl as the dead Grand Master

launched a flurry of attacks.

‘You are not worthy to bear that sword,’ Gideon insisted, raining blow after blow against the meteoric iron of the blade. ‘Too rash, too clumsy, too weak. They are all better than you. Impatient, ill-disciplined upstart!’

The words had lost their venom. Sammael remembered the look in Gideon’s eyes as he had presented the Raven Sword as his final act. It had been relief. Relief that for Gideon the Hunt was over. He had been a good Master of the Ravenwing, but it was not the fate of warriors to die in peace. Sammael had seen something else in his mentor’s gaze, something that now leant strength to his sword arm.

Pride. Pride that it was Sammael who had lived to take the blade. It had been Gideon’s intent, surely, to name Sammael his successor in better times. It was not happenstance, it was not luck that Sammael had been the one chosen by Gideon, nurtured by the Grand Master for many years.

‘I earned this,’ Sammael whispered. ‘It is mine.’

The Raven Sword gleamed as Sammael countered dead Gideon’s next blow. The Black Knight grabbed the hilt in both hands and twisted his wrists to deliver a riposte. The top of the blade sliced across the forehead of his dead mentor, spilling not blood but maggots and filth. Sammael felt nothing as he sliced again, cutting open his foe from throat to ear.

Still Gideon would not fall. The reanimated corpse dribbled thick blood from rot-ravaged lips and lunged forward, seeking to pierce Sammael’s chest. Sammael moved, allowing the blade to penetrate his shoulder, but in doing so he opened up the space for a swing at his opponent. With one last slash of the Raven Sword, Sammael cut Gideon’s head from the shoulders.

Still the thing was not wholly dead. From the ground it spat its hate at Sammael.

‘Tell me, coward, how you despoiled my legacy! How did you survive when I did not?’

‘I was no coward, nor braver than you,’ Sammael replied. ‘Just better.’

Sammael connected his vox to the command broadcast via Gideon’s downed jetbike. He took a deep breath and then issued his statement.

‘This is Sammael. Master Gideon is dead. The rest of the Black Knights are dead. I am assuming command of the Second Company. Orders to follow.’

Sammael’s priority was to get mobile again so he could see for himself what was happening. The Titan had directed its attention elsewhere and he was able

to scour the rubble for a functioning steed. He recognised the markings as the bike that had belonged to Redevere. There was no sign of the former owner beneath the tumbled ruins.

Mounted and moving again, he pieced together what had happened from the bike's auspex records. The Titan must have detected the energy signature of the Black Knights' plasma talons, and calculated that they were the greatest threat despite the diversionary attacks. It had deliberately exposed itself to the assault, luring Gideon into the charge before turning to fire its gatling blaster.

Sammael recalled his last question to Gideon, one that he now faced. Did they stay or withdraw?

The Titan still dominated Vespengard and if the Ravenwing exited the city it would take a lot of effort and lives to retake it. The Titan was really the only thing stopping the company controlling Vespengard, nothing else the enemy possessed was fast enough or powerful enough to keep the Ravenwing contained. Weighed against that was the fact that it was a Titan and one assault had already failed.

The first matter was to steady the company following the recent setbacks. Issuing his orders in the same clipped, calm tone he had heard from Gideon so many times, Sammael started to wield the Ravenwing as if it was his own, trusting to the squadron leaders to interpret and carry out his orders according to their individual situations. The Ravenwing prided themselves on their independence of thought and Sammael was not going to fight against that nature.

Land Speeders and aircraft concentrated their attack runs on the Titan, keeping it occupied in the central part of the city. They were fast enough to elude its counter-fire, and the enemy still had not moved in other units to support the war engine against these attacks. It seemed they thought it was so powerful that it could fight anything by itself, but they were wrong. Sammael would show them just how wrong.

Sammael brought in Darkshrouds to cover the movements of the bike and attack bike squadrons. Under the utter blackness of the ancient shroud generators he brought the company together in the warren of streets, warehouses and marshalling yards that dominated the western part of the city.

Although utter destruction had been prevented, there were few facts to lighten Sammael's mood. He had received word from the Implacable Justice in orbit that the battle-barge had detected two more traitor vessels emerging from the cover of an asteroid field. There would be no orbital support for the moment while the

ship engaged these new foes.

Thirty per cent of the company's warriors were dead or too badly injured to fight. The two remaining Thunderhawks were used to evacuate them from the contested city. A similar proportion of machines were also destroyed or damaged, but a hasty reorganisation brought some semblance of structure back to the force, matching functioning mounts with capable riders. Sammael now appreciated fully the many days of training he had undergone on bike, Land Speeder, attack bike and aircraft and the versatility of the company's tactics proved its worth now.

Concentrating on the grander strategy, Sammael left it to his subordinates to implement the improvised reorganisation. His time was better spent drafting fresh orders and assimilating the latest intelligence reports from the Land Speeder recon sweeps and the last orbital augur scan.

When order had been restored, Sammael made the decision he had been delaying for the best part of a day: to fight or leave.

To admit defeat, to preserve life only to expect others to sacrifice theirs for the victory abandoned, was not in Sammael's mind. It would be an insult to the Dark Angels that had already made the gravest sacrifice. Worse, it would be a condemnation of Gideon's decision to attack – a condemnation that Sammael did not feel.

Gideon's reasoning had been right even if his execution had ultimately proved to be flawed. Sammael would now perfect the plan.

The attack began with Darkshrouds circling the city centre to come at the enemy from the north, moving as though they were screening an attacking force. At the same time Land Speeders and attack bikes approached from the east, fighting their way through some of the more lightly contested streets.

Both manoeuvres were a diversion.

Sammael and a few of the company's best riders roared towards the Titan through the blazing remains of the central power station, turned to a ruin by the Titan's bombardments. Here plasma reactors and burning power lines masked the energy signature of the half a dozen bikes approaching at speed. Only the best could negotiate the tangle of molten ferrocrete and shattered plastek, the undulating turns of roadway and cratered earth. Where Gideon had launched a massed attack, Sammael sought victory with just a handful of warriors. It was counter-intuitive to take on the Titan with less firepower, but it was the only way Sammael could see that the Titan's sensors could be fooled.

Their timing was perfect. The Titan was turning to the east, moving away from

the faint attack in the north, just as Sammael and his squadron burst from cover.

Static blurred and fizzed at Sammael's autosenses and his skin crawled as he crashed through the half-seen boundary of the Titan's void shield. Point defence turrets of heavy stubbers and autocannons opened fire from the body of the Titan but the bikes were coming too fast for the weapons to track, their fire trailing across the pocked ground behind the charging riders.

Forming a line behind Sammael, shells screamed past just centimetres away, and the squadron raced along just a couple of metres from the Titan's leg, riding one handed. They threw melta-charges as they passed, the magneto-clamps of the anti-armour bombs attaching to the Titan's artificial skin.

A bestial roar of annoyance split the sky as Sammael peeled away. More turret fire cracked the air around the commander as he sent the detonation signal.

Sammael turned to see the chain of explosions tearing through the armour and struts of the possessed Titan's lower leg. Oil and ichor poured from the wound like blood while the half-organic matter within fractured, toppling the Titan sideways.

A plaintive wail of war sirens heralded the Titan's fall as it ploughed into a burning factory and disappeared in a plume of dust and fire.

A moment later an explosion like a star being born tore out the heart of the city, levelling buildings as a dome of plasma rose into the air. A half-circle of golden energy burned itself into Sammael's memory.

The vision faded as Sammael staggered back, looking to steady himself against the balustrade. Instead of carved stone, he felt his spine touching wood, and as his vision cleared he found himself staring into a single golden eye.

Reality resolved from his swirling thoughts. The cell reasserted itself into his conscious mind, along with the chairs and the table.

Ezekiel leaned back and nodded, finally breaking his gaze.

'The test is passed,' the Librarian announced.

Sammael shook his head, trying to clear the last vestiges of the nightmare that had been visited upon him by the psyker. His eye caught the look of Azrael, who was standing to one side as he had been all this time. Sammael's memory, his real memory, welled up like a spring, filling in the last few minutes; he had not moved from the chair the whole time.

'Congratulations,' said Azrael. He smiled, the expression full of warmth and pride. 'Gideon's choice was wise. You are worthy of becoming Grand Master.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost*, as well as the novellas *Corax: Soulforge*, *Ravenlord* and *The Lion*, which formed part of the New York Times bestselling collection *The Primarchs*. He is particularly well-known for his Dark Angels stories, including the *Legacy of Caliban* series, and the ever-popular novel *Angels of Darkness*. His Warhammer 40,000 repertoire further includes the Path of the Eldar series, the Horus Heresy audio dramas *Raven's Flight* and *Honour to the Dead*, and a multiplicity of short stories. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. He lives and works in Nottingham.

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