

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE EMPEROR'S CHOSEN

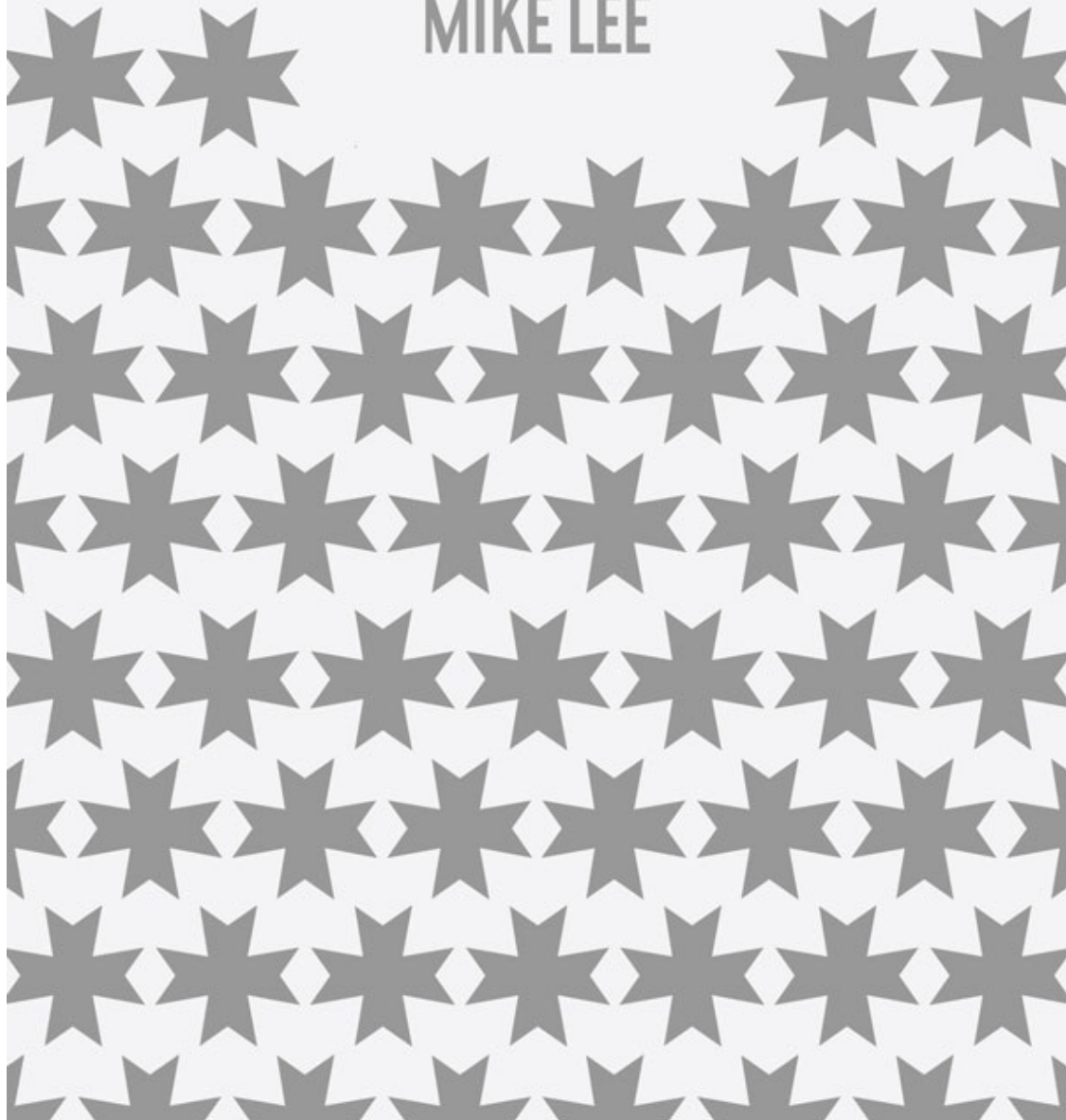
MIKE LEE



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The crusade fleet was eight hours from Sepharis Ultra when the Emperor spoke to Brother Reinhart.

He had spent the long day amongst his battle-brothers, first honing his fighting skills in the confines of the strike cruiser's practice ranges, and then venerating the spirits of his wargear with rites of maintenance under the watchful eye of Techmarine Amalthus. Afterwards, the Fighting Company had gathered for evening prayers, and then Chaplain Karst had sent them to their cells, to recite the Litanies of Hate and meditate upon the battle to come.

Reinhart gave himself over completely to the task, as he did all his other duties to the Chapter. He had been an initiate for less than a year, and was keen to prove his worth to Karst and Castellan Vorhalt. For hours he knelt in his cell, hands clasped in the sign of the aquila, purging his mind of any hint of weakness or doubt. Only once his thoughts were pure, and his spirit brimming with righteous zeal, did he offer up a single prayer to the God-Emperor of mankind.

In the midst of my enemies, grant me courage. In the moment of decision, grant me wisdom. In the face of death, grant me strength.

And there, in the darkness, the Emperor answered him.

Moments later, Reinhart emerged from his cell. His eyes were wide and still half-blind from the wonders he had seen. The initiate paused a moment upon the threshold, composing himself, then made his way swiftly through the cruiser's ancient passageways.

He found Chaplain Karst in the ship's reclusiam, kneeling before a shrine to holy Sigismund.

'I have had a vision,' Reinhart said, the words coming out in a rush.

Karst said nothing at first, his scarred head still bent in prayer. Then the Chaplain drew a deep breath, flexing his armoured shoulders, and rose smoothly to his feet. 'Tell me,' he said.

Reinhart paused. Though the details were still etched laser-sharp in his mind, it was difficult to put it into words. 'I was praying, and the Emperor appeared to me,' he said. 'He wore golden armour, and held a fiery sword in his hand. His

wargear shone with the light of the sun.'

Karst did not react. His dark eyes bored into the initiate's soul. 'Did you look upon his face, brother?'

Reinhart bent his head. 'I could not,' he answered. 'I did not dare.'

The answer seemed to satisfy the Chaplain. 'What else did you see?'

'I saw... so many things,' the initiate said. 'I saw the foe that awaits us on Sepharis Ultra. I saw the renegades who serve him and the daemons who do his bidding.' Reinhart shook his head. He still could not believe the rest. 'I... saw what I must do to defeat him.'

It seemed impossible. He still could not quite bring himself to believe it. 'I am only an initiate,' he said to Karst. 'How can this be?'

The Chaplain reached out and laid a hand on Reinhart's shoulder. '*Deus Imperator vult*,' he said gravely. 'Because the God-Emperor wills it.'

A green icon in Reinhart's helmet display counted down the seconds to impact. At the last moment, he breathed out, relaxing his body into the shock harness just as the drop pod struck the surface of Sepharis Ultra.

The landing alone would have killed a normal human outright, even with the shock harness in place. Reinhart hardly even paused. He was moving the instant the harness disengaged, charging down the descending assault ramp into the maelstrom of war.

A tidal wave of sight and sound crashed over him. Streams of crackling lasgun fire snapped back and forth across the battlefield, punching through billowing clouds of ochre dust and leaving streamers of static lightning in their wake. Boltguns hammered, spitting fiery streaks of rocket-propelled shells that burst in miniature thunderclaps when they found a target. Renegade troops, many clad in mismatched pieces of flak armour, ran in every direction, firing as they went. The fighting company's orbital drop had taken the enemy completely unawares, sowing panic and confusion amongst their ranks.

Reinhart's vision had dictated a change in strategy for the Black Templars. Instead of landing in the highlands overlooking the renegade host and engaging them in a conventional assault, Castellan Vorhalt had chosen to drop the company into the midst of the enemy. The tactic had but one objective: to give Reinhart the best chance possible to fulfil the task that the Emperor had set for him. If he failed, his brothers would pay a terrible price.

Reinhart had spent the rest of the night in the strike cruiser's reclusiam, while Karst stood over him and read from the Litanies of Hate. An hour before the

drop they were joined by Techmarine Amalthus and a solemn procession of servitors, bearing the sacred wargear of the Emperor's Champion.

The Armour of Faith was magnificent, a masterwork of martial craft, its plates etched with elaborate wards to protect its wearer from harm. Ribbons of parchment, some hundreds of years old, were affixed to breastplate and pauldrons with seals of red or golden wax, proclaiming holy oaths sworn by his predecessors in ages past. Reinhart had added his own, fixed with red wax to the breastplate, just over his primary heart. *I shall uphold the honour of the Emperor, no matter the cost.*

Yet as glorious as the armour was, it paled in comparison to the weapon he held in his hands. The greatsword was nine thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight years old, wrought in the forges of distant Mars and consecrated at the foot of the Golden Throne itself. The blade and its two-handed hilt were black as night, offset by a fiery ruby the size of a raptor's egg set into the sword's pommel. The jewel symbolised the blood shed by the Emperor at the Battle of Terra, ages past. The blade represented the Emperor's justice: cold, implacable and absolute.

The renegades call themselves the Lords of Desolation, Karst had told him. They are led by a sorcerer from the Word Bearers named X'hal Urus. He is the black heart of the enemy host, ancient and wicked beyond human ken. A thousand worlds have burned beneath his feet. Take this sword, Brother Reinhart, and make an end of him. The Emperor has shown you the way.

And so he had. The details still shone mirror-bright in Reinhart's mind. The Emperor had shown him how the duel would unfold. X'hal Urus would die, his armoured body split asunder by the power of the Black Sword – and then, an instant later, so would Reinhart. The sorcerer's blade would pierce his side, its power snuffing out his life force like a candle flame.

You have been chosen, brother. With X'hal Urus dead, his daemons will return to the warp, and our victory over the renegades will be assured. The fate of Sepharis Ultra lies in your hands.

Reinhart's fingers tightened around the hilt of the Black Sword. His battle-brothers were at his back, boltguns hammering. Ahead, he could see grim, armoured shapes looming through the swirling dust – the traitor Space Marines of the Lords of Desolation. They were led by a towering figure in baroque, ornamented power armour, his broad shoulders and bare, misshapen skull wreathed in arcs of flickering, unholy fire.

X'hal Urus advanced on the Black Templars. A huge sword of jagged, dark-

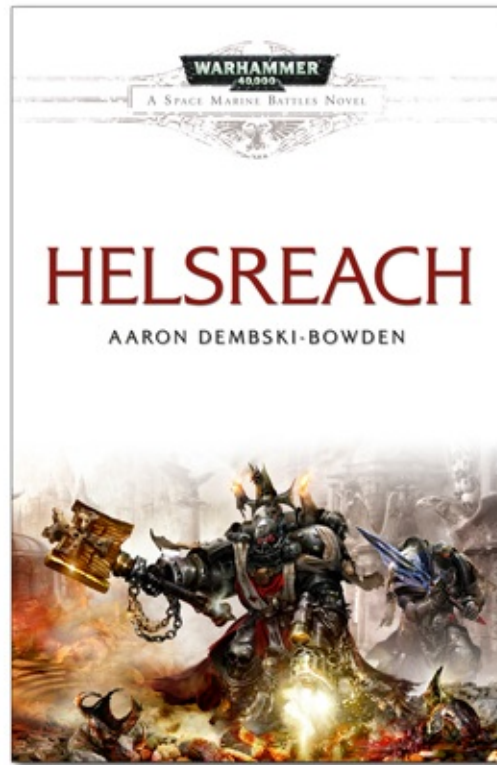
grey metal was raised in challenge, daring the servants of the Emperor to try their skill against his own.

Brother Reinhart raised the Black Sword in reply. He felt no fear, only grim certainty, and a kind of savage joy.

'Deus Imperator vult!' the Emperor's Champion cried, and made an end of the scourge of a thousand worlds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Together with Dan Abnett, MIKE LEE wrote the five-volume Malus Darkblade series. Mike has contributed to almost two dozen role-playing games and supplements over the years. His credits for Black Library include the Horus Heresy novel *Fallen Angels* and the Time of Legends trilogy 'The Rise of Nagash'. An avid wargamer and devoted fan of pulp adventure, Mike lives in the United States.



When the world of Armageddon is attacked by orks, the Black Templars Space Marine Chapter are amongst those sent to liberate it.

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