

WARHAMMER
40,000

HONOUR OF THE SPACE MARINES



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HONOUR OF THE SPACE MARINES
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A SPACE WOLVES STORY

FATESPINNER

Chris Wraight



THERE WERE FOUR of them, moving steadily through the tunnels. The two Rubricae went soundlessly, their massive sapphire shells glinting softly in the darkness. Ramon, Sorcerer Lord of the Thousand Sons, snake-crested, gilt, strode between them.

Phaelias, the lesser sorcerer, brought up the rear. As he went, he observed the way his master walked. It was an oddly fluid gait for such an armoured behemoth, almost human.

Though of course Ramon wasn't human. Neither was Phaelias. "Human" was just a baseline descriptor, one rapidly superseded by both psychic awareness and physical enhancement. The baroque armour they all wore - the fluting, the sigils, the esoteric devices - they were the warning markers, like poisonous animals displaying their toxicity.

'It is close,' Phaelias said.

By then they were three kilometres underground and deep into the foundations of hive-spire Gorgantias Magnificens, Rigo V's principal administrative centre. Far above them, millions of Imperial citizens teemed and bred and mingled, all of them trained from birth to watch out for the xenos, the witch, or the traitor. As a member of Magnus's endlessly fragmented Legion, Phaelias comfortably ticked two of those boxes, and he felt the clusters of souls keenly, dumbly fearful, locked in their rituals of terror and ignorance.

Ramon angled his serpentine helm. 'What do you sense?'

Phaelias paused. The dank tunnels dripped around him, hollow with decay. No mortal human had trodden the paths for centuries. Like so much else in their vast, crumbling empire, they had let this place drift out of the margins of memory, left behind like driftwood against an ebb tide that would never return to the flood.

Or maybe they had reasons. Maybe old, old dreams of terror kept them from scratching too far beneath the poisoned soils of their worlds. 'It knows we are here,' he said, carefully. 'It stirs already.'

'And what does that tell you?'

'That other ears will hear it,' said Phaelias. 'That it places us in danger.' Ramon nodded. The jewelled tip of his staff swayed in the dark as he moved off again. 'We are always in danger.'

Phaelias hurried after Ramon. The Rubricae fell into step again, eerily matching their masters' strides.

'If it is permitted,' asked Phaelias, knowing the probable answer but giving it a try nonetheless, 'what waits for us?'

Ramon was neither a cruel nor a tyrannical master. He had schooled Phaelias fairly and skilfully, generously imparting the more subtle gifts of the Changer of Ways, aiding him in his quest to clamber up the stairway of knowledge. For all that, he had always been close, guarding his secrets just as all the scattered magi of the XV Legion did. They had become a cabal of hoarders and jewel-thieves, nurturing secrets over millennia in the endless hope that one day they would blossom again.

Ramon kept walking.

'That will become clear,' he said. 'For now, please, just follow.'

THE SLATE-GREY LANDER drifted on to the platform like a scrap of storm-cloud cut loose from the sky. Once down, its crew bay doors hissed open,

revealing five backlit figures within. They moved down the ramp with a swagger, clad in Mark VI battleplate adorned with the marks of their infamously hostile ice world.

Thorskir Helstujrm followed his warriors down, clanging an iron-shod staff on to the rockcrete. His armour was as grey as the rest, though adorned with black-edged runes across the ceramite. A glittering psychic hood rose above an unhelmed head, revealing a ruddy, wind-blasted face. Like all Sons of Russ, his jaw was swollen and his eyes were amber.

Waiting for him was a delegation from Gorgantias Magnificens command cadre, dozens of scribes in velvet robes, a hundred honour guard troopers from the governor's own retinue, and three sentinel walkers standing on the edge of the platform with their weapons lowered deferentially. Incense had been churned out of blowers mounted on the spire's flank, but the driving winds of Rigo had already dispersed it.

The governor, a tall man in heavy crimson robes, bowed low.

'Be welcome to Rigo,' he said, gown flapping. 'I am Governor Alexian.'

Thorskir looked at the man coldly. 'You have corruption on your world.'

'So you tell us, but—'

'He has left a trail of ruin across nine systems. He has corrupted and he has destroyed. Now he is here, in your city, and you do nothing.'

Alexian swallowed. 'Since your warning, we have doubled the patrols. Tripled them. We found nothing.'

Thorskir didn't respond. His expression went briefly glassy. His mind's eye receded deep within him. The Space Wolf pack around him did not move, and the wind moaned across the landing stage, clattering the runic totems bolted to their armour.

Then he stirred again, his golden eyes snapping back into focus.

'Below,' he said. 'Your spire has deep roots.'

Alexian looked to those around him nervously. 'There are... proscribed areas.'

'Not to me,' said Thorskir. 'And not to him.'

'Will you heed a warning, then?' Alexian looked almost desperate. 'Do not go.'

Thorskir's face went taut with contempt. 'If you have not the stomach to sniff his spoor, then do not think to prevent me.' He gestured to the rest of the pack, and they began to move out. As they did so, the Rune Priest voxed them over a private channel.

'Ramon is here, brothers,' he told them, confirming in words what his psychic senses had told him. 'Run swift, run hard. We will have his head this day.'

'OPEN THE DOOR,' Ramon ordered.

The iron portal had been laid with reinforcing bars and braced with a network of adamantium secure clamps. The archway above it was cut from solid granite and studded with warding runes of an ancient script - gorphelion - that no mortal on the planet still read. This place had been built before any of the spires had been made, by hands that may not even have been human. The extreme age leaked out of the stone, deadening the vitality around them, stilling the rhythm of Change like water thrown on a fire.

For all that, the power bleeding from the other side was psychically palpable. The closer one got to it, the thicker the air seemed, and the dimmer the sounds of respiration and armour-hum became.

One of the Rubricae grasped the principal iron brace and squeezed. With a shriek of tortured metal, it came away. His counterpart did the same to the next. Then they both smashed their way through the locked barrier, working as silently as ever, ripping aside the twisted metal plates and kicking the shards away.

Ramon and Phaelias followed them in. A rust-red light swelled out of nowhere, creeping across the chamber like unravelling parchment.

The room was barely five metres in diameter. The walls were rockcrete, the floor marble, and every surface was heavy with finger-thick dust. In the centre stood

an altar of bare stone, marked with more ward-runes of obscure provenance. Beyond the altar, set into the rear wall, was a low archway, filled in with what looked like rough granite blocks. A single rune of protection had been scratched into the stone across the joins, deep-etched, hammered by a powerful hand.

Once close, Phaelias felt the full presence of the entity seething behind the arch. It was a mind, a conscious mind, infinitely malicious, scraping against its close bonds, maddened by confinement yet still unquestionably cogent. He opened his consciousness to it, briefly, and gasped.

Ramon chuckled. 'Careful. Strong enough for that yet?'

Phaelias shook his head, clearing it. 'It is... fearsome,' he whispered. He found that the sheer scale of it thrilled him. 'How was it confined? Do we release it?'

Ramon said nothing. He moved towards the rune-wards graven on the altar. Moving slowly, his every gesture stiff with ritual care, he started to destroy them.

Each one resisted for a time, glowing hot like molten iron, pushing back against his whispered words. Every time a ward was broken, the chamber's edges shuddered, as if briefly loosed from physical extension, and the detectable presence behind the archway grew stronger. Phaelias heard its scuttling, its haggard breathing, its spectral heart thudding in the hinterland between reality and delusion, and felt the hairs on his arms prickle.

Soon, just one ward remained, the one carved on the granite wall set under the arch. Phaelias watched Ramon edge closer to the barrier. The Sorcerer Lord placed his gauntlets against its surface, and the lone ward-rune began to glow, just like the others. Phaelias braced himself, speculating on just what order of creature lay on the other side of the arch. He could make a guess, drawing on the arcane bestiaries of warp denizens he had studied in the crepuscular libraries of the Eye: this one was a devourer, a gnawer of men's souls, a seizer of bodies and a wearer of flesh. Though he knew he ought not to, and knew he ought to trust to the fates, he wondered whether Ramon was reckless to release it, for its power was obviously formidable.

Then, just as the last rune was about to shatter, Ramon withdrew the pressure.

He reached for a pouch at his belt and withdrew a fragile object - a golden amulet shaped like a tear. Pressing it against the granite, he re-sealed the ward. The amulet flared up briefly, as if lit from within, sparkling, then sunk into the rune-marked stone, lodged fast as if it had been there from the creation of the worlds.

Ramon leaned close to the arch and whispered a single word into it, his lips nearly touching the granite.

Then he straightened and turned to Phaelias.

'You know what comes next, don't you?' he asked.

Phaelias didn't reply, but Ramon's words made his blood run cold, as if something else were coming now - something terrible, and furious, and savage beyond the dreams of mortal imagination.

THORSKIR FELT THE build-up of energy long before he reached the buried chamber. He raced through the catacombs, splashing in the bilge-water, running hard along with his battle-brothers, his staff swinging like a long-handled axe. As he homed in on the psychic spoor, he prepared his mind for the test ahead.

It felt like he'd been hunting Ramon his entire life. Hel, it felt like he'd known Ramon his entire life, even though the two of them had never met in combat, and the only traces of him had been engraved in the misery of the corrupted, the damned, the dead. The Sorcerer Lord had always been just a fraction ahead, taunting him across a hundred ruined worlds with the deferred promise of confrontation.

No longer. The witch had erred at last, giving away the pattern of his movements, allowing the scry-bones to read it through the vagaries of the warp, allowing him to catch up. Rigo V had swum up out of the murk, the target, custodian of a hidden fear no son of Prospero could resist tampering with. Thorskir had leapt at the chance, burning through the void, driving his Navigator close to madness with the requirement for speed. They had cut the way between the worlds with unaccustomed ease, which only reassured him that he was meant to be there, to catch him at last and bring him to trial by strength.

For all that universe was dominated by power, by strength, there was also luck, and at last it seemed that his had changed.

The Space Wolf skidded round a corner and entered a long tunnel, thick with dust and ankle-deep in foetid water. The roof hung low, draped with old cables and thick with a patina of rust and filth. Ahead of them, at the far end, was a shattered door. Rust-red light spilled from the other side of the barrier.

+For Russ!+ Thorskir sent to his brothers, the hard-edged joy of the kill-urge rising in his gullet.

Then he was in, crashing through into the chamber beyond, shattering the broken edges of the old doors with his armoured bulk and sending the pieces smashing across the floor. His pack piled in behind him, dropping into fire-crouches and sweeping the space with bolter muzzles.

The chamber was empty. Thorskir hefted his staff and flooded the narrow room with light.

An altar lay ahead of them, broken apart. Beyond that lay an archway, intact and marked by a guard-rune.

Thorskir cursed. His inner sense had never lied to him before. He had seen Ramon here, he had felt him. The pack-warriors stood up again, still wary, emanating disappointment.

He withdrew a bird's-skull device from his staff shaft. He pressed it into the dust and listened.

You know what comes next, don't you?

The phrase hissed out - an imprint of the last words spoken there. Thorskir studied the skull's empty eye sockets and watched the way the light within them changed.

'Twelve years,' he muttered, feeling intense, painful frustration boil up within him. 'He was here twelve years ago.'

Vasik, second-in-command, relaxed his combat-stance. 'Your will, then?'

Thorskir drew in a long breath. He replaced the skull device and looked over at the archway. There was a presence behind the wall, the one that had surely drawn Ramon there, just as it had drawn him - shockingly malignant, locked away by only the slenderest of shackles.

Why had Ramon not dismantled the wards? Why had he not finished what he had started?

'What remains here is not for us,' Thorskir ordered, wearily. 'The Inquisition will be informed, and they can clean up what filth remains.'

Vasik nodded curtly. 'It will be done.'

Only then did Thorskir's gaze rest on the amulet. The golden tear was still fused into the granite of the archway, lodged deep, set fast, covered in a thin layer of dust. As soon as he saw it, an old chill ran through his body, one he had forgotten he ever used to have. The chamber seemed to elongate around him, distorting, rippling. For a minute, he heard the muffled roar of the storm on a distant world, echoing from the roof of a cave that hung with moss-draped stalactites.

'Anything else?' asked Vasik, but Thorskir barely heard him. Before he knew what he was doing, he had walked over to the amulet and crouched down over it.

'Priest?' queried Vasik, concerned.

Thorskir didn't listen. The amulet was so familiar, and so beautiful. He pulled the chain free of the wall, admiring the way it sparkled in the palm of his gauntlet. The golden tear tugged for a moment in its mount, as if reluctant to be parted from the granite, then came free with a click.

As soon as he did so, a sharp crack rang around the chamber. The rune's outline broke open, shattering the ward-seal. A growl of storm-wind burst out from nowhere, cold as ice, rousing the dust around them in drumming layers.

Thorskir pulled back just as the archway collapsed in front of him. Something blacker-than-black, a clot of void, pulsed out of the ruins, dribbling across the breach, bubbling like oil.

Thorskir's senses suddenly returned. With a lurch of horror, he hurled the amulet away and brandished his staff. Lighting crackled along its length, sharp and silver, blazing cleanly against the overhanging shadow.

The clot of darkness writhed upward, extruding, twisting, dragging itself into corporality. Thorskir lowered the staff-tip and let rip. Actinic energies, hot with the ozone-stink of thunderheads, shot down its length, speared right at the heart of the inky matter.

'Banish!' he roared, followed up by a stream of Fenrisian wyrd-curses. His pack opened fire, peppering the far wall with bolter-shells and filling the chamber with clouds of powderised stone.

Amid the swirl and the fury, Thorskir was painfully aware of what he had done. What had he been thinking? Why had he done it? He slammed his staff-tip around, generating more storm-force and hurling it into the blackened maw. He felt the wyrd-tempest surge up within him, just as it had so many times before, poised to sweep the daemonic taint clean from the world's face.

But the words, the bolter-shells, the lightning, none of it had any effect. The creature's bloated mass swelled further, steaming and pouring into slopping, wriggling shapes. A mouth cracked open amid the sluices of its rapidly firming flesh, and a single name span out from smoke-tumbled lips.

'Vasha.'

Thorskir stumbled instantly, dropping to one knee. The staff fell from his grasp, his hearts raced into overdrive. Struggling for breath, he reached for the gladius at his belt. He drew it, but the oily tsunami slapped into him, latching on like a slick, dragging at his shoulders and drowning him in boiling strands of effluent. Thorskir's senses went black, his mouth clogged up, his helm-lenses blurred to dark. Acid-burns ran across his skin, and he cried out in primeval pain. He tried to summon up resistance, but he was drained, weak as a child, crippled by the word, the name, the memory.

Then the pain vanished. As suddenly as it had arrived, the rush of wind echoed out, the void-clot guttered away into dregs, the echo of bolter-fire died.

'Priest?' asked Vasik again.

Vasik and the others were all staring, their bolters aimed at him. None of them moved. They were uncertain, locked from moving by some sudden doubt. They had seen what had come out from under the arch and where it had gone.

The thing that had once been Thorskir smiled. It felt the skin at the edges of its mortal mouth rip, exposing teeth that were already lengthening. Somewhere deep inside it, the human owner of its body was already screaming. It would be screaming for a very long time to come.

'Your priest is, I regret to say, no longer able to answer,' the devourer drawled, flexing the curved bone-claws that were already bursting from its gauntlets.

The Wolves opened fire in unison, their aim perfect, the volume of fire devastating, but even so the pain of bolt-rounds punching home was nothing more than a fleeting irritation.

The daemon-priest stretched its arms out wide, drawing in fresh fronds of oily essence, clothed in ragged sheets of void-perfect darkness. It bellowed out its challenge, making the chamber shake, and felt the birth-agony of wings ripping out from its shoulders, and hooves pushing through armoured boots, and fresh bone-spurs scraping along the inside of cracking ceramite. The chamber briefly rang with movement, desperate blade-strikes, and the vomit of a hungry fire.

Then the lights went out, and all was silent save for a long, panting chortle.

PHAELIAS WALKED ACROSS the colonnade towards Ramon's chambers. The sky above was a serene lilac, fading with the cool of the evening. Perethalias was a beautiful world, a veritable garden, albeit one prone to sudden and violent shifts in orbit. Such were the joys and the perils of dwelling in what the Imperium called, with admirably blunt accuracy, the Eye of Terror.

Phaelias was in a good mood. His ascension to Sorcerer Lord had passed off smoothly. His powers were the greatest they had ever been. He felt suffused with them, stuffed with them, as if anything - whether in the world of the senses or the world of the unlocked mind - were now possible.

It was intoxicating, to feel that way. He could understand now, for the first time perhaps, why things had turned out the way they had for his Legion, and what the dangers were for them still. However, for the present he could allow himself a little enjoyment in what had been a centuries-long journey, one which he intended to make last a few more before it reached its end.

He reached Ramon's private gallery and spied his old master standing at the far end of a glass-domed alcove, in a sky-blue robe, a little stooped, observing the movements of the heavens through an antiquated telescope of brass and crystal.

As Phaelias walked up to him he noticed that the robe was in the Prosperine style, of a fashion that had died ten millennia ago. Perhaps its fabric was even original, not a facsimile. You could never be sure - Ramon had ways of sourcing all sorts of things.

'So you achieved it,' said Ramon, turning to greet him. 'You are a lord of our magicks. Well done.'

Phaelias bowed. 'All credit goes to you.'

Ramon waved away the compliment. 'So. Where now?'

'I do not know. The fates will present.'

'That they will.'

Ramon moved away from the telescope, leaving it angled up at the evening sky on its frame. The two of them began to stroll back along the gallery, their soft shoes brushing against age-worn stone.

'Are you aware of the current status of Rigo Five?' Phaelias asked. Ramon smiled. Phaelias guessed that even he, whom they were already calling the Fatespinner, the Shaper of Doom, the Warper of Worlds, was not immune to a little mortal pride.

'Rigo Five,' Ramon said. 'Precious Rigo. Yes, I am aware of its status.' He shot an impish glance at his protege. 'It burns. It has burned for a standard year, and it will burn for another hundred. Once a portal is opened, a door like that, it is not so easy to close.'

Phaelias observed his master's face as he spoke - the lines, worn like cracks in limestone, breaking across a tanned face.

'Oh, the Imperium will struggle on with it,' Ramon went on. 'In time, sooner or later, they will douse the fires. In the meantime, though, we are free to act elsewhere.' He clasped his hands before him. 'It was, in all ways, a satisfactory episode.'

Phaelias remembered how it had been. For a long time, he had had no idea why they had left with their work undone, with the final ward-rune intact and the soul-gnawer still locked in its ancient prison at the base of the spires. He had doubted, in truth. He had speculated that perhaps his master was guilty of hesitation, of not wishing to grasp the dangerous prize for fear of what it might do.

Then, twelve years later, word had come to him of what had happened on Rigo V. It was welcome word, carried across the Ocean from spire to spire, tracing a happy line in the warp like a trail of gold coins strewn on a heaving sea.

They told him that the bloody reign of Thorskir the Painbringer had begun. The Daemon-Priest, amalgam of warp-horror and Wolf, had turned Rigo V into a hellworld, a nightmare of chewed flesh and screaming, one that the Imperium would pour trillions of its mortal souls into before the agony ceased. The dog had followed the scent, panting along it just as Ramon had made him, and then he was snared, caught, left to blunder into the baited pit where a greater predator waited.

'The devourer,' Phaelias mused, remembering. 'If we had opened the gate ourselves, it would have consumed us.'

Ramon nodded. 'It would have tried.'

'Then, if I may, a question.'

Ramon waited patiently.

'The Wolf who pursued us,' said Phaelias. 'He broke the final ward himself, the one you left intact. And, when that was done, he could not defeat the thing behind it, though he was a master of the powers just as we are. How was this

done? They were two chances, were they not? Two slender chances?'

A satisfied glimmer passed across Ramon's lined face, an intimation of content old age, of plans come to fruition and others slowly ripening.

'That,' he said, adjusting the sleeve of his robe and making the pale fabric shimmer like the dawn sky over Tizca, 'shall be my secret.'

THE SLEET LASHED down, cascading down outside the ragged cave-mouth and steaming where it bounced from the stone. The night was wild, but then the nights were always wild on Fenris.

Huddled inside the cave's maw, Nikja pulled her child close to her. He was a sickly infant, one whom the gods clearly wished to have a short life, and the storm made him squeal and bawl. She was exhausted and alone, for the hale of the tribe were still on the long hunt and would not be back for two days. Her meagre fire sputtered in its pit, barely warming the air around it.

Suddenly, the hanging pelts draped over the cave mouth were pushed aside, ushering in a fresh blast of icy, rain-wet air. Nikja rose, heart thumping, still clutching her child. She had a knife in her free hand instantly - blunt from use, but still capable of cutting flesh.

A man stomped inside, shaking the slush from his boots. His shoulders were heavy with furs, and he was massive, bigger even than Erek, the baby's father and the headman of the tribe. Indeed, for a moment Nikja thought it might be him, but as the firelight caught his face she saw that his skin was unusual - tanned, lined, with eyes like sunset.

Nikja stared, knife in hand. He let the hanging pelts fall closed behind him, then looked at her. He had a strange face. It made her want to be sick, though she couldn't say why.

'Who are you?' she demanded, staying close to the fire.

'I have travelled a long way,' the man said, his Fenrisian accented heavily with an odd tang, sounding both tired and wary. 'Can I see the child?' She should have refused him. He was a stranger, and no living man walked abroad when the

storms were full, but somehow, for some reason, it was hard to resist. She let her knife fall, barely hearing the clink as it bounced from the rock floor. Then she lifted the child up and held him out for the man to look at. He scrutinised the infant for a long time, peering into his eyes as if he could see past them and into the child's fevered mind. 'What do you call him?' he asked.

'Thorskir,' she replied, cowed by his manner.

The man nodded, as if that confirmed something he already knew. He pulled a golden amulet from his furs, and gave it to her. Nikja held it up to the firelight, and it turned slowly, glittering. It was shaped like a tear. She had never seen anything so beautiful, and it made the bone trinkets Erek had given her seem hopelessly crude. Thorskir reached out for the gold, his griping suddenly quelled. His little eyes never left the tear's outline.

'A gift,' said the man. 'Hold it over him, every night, when you sing to him. It will make him strong. You want him to be strong, yes? One day, if you do this, the Lords of the Mountain will surely come for him.' Nikja looked up, suddenly afraid. 'I cannot take it.'

'You can,' said the man. 'Fear not - I will come to collect, one night when the sleet blows and the child is a man. For now, enjoy the use of it.' He pushed back against the hanging pelts, and the frigid wind howled in. Then he hesitated. 'Thorskir. That is not his name, is it?'

'It is,' she said.

'But you have another one. One that only you use.'

Again, it was so hard to resist. Every question, every soft fragment of speech, it compelled her to open up. She knew it was wrong, and that Erek would be angry if he found out, but then she looked at the spinning tear of gold and her lips seemed to open by themselves.

'I do,' she said.

'Tell me.'

She could feel her pulse racing. She wanted to vomit again, and sweat burst out

across her forehead. 'I named him Vasha, in my heart,' she mumbled, and suddenly felt wretched, as if some terrible secret had been given away.

The man with the strange eyes looked at her. 'Vasha. A good name.'

'Why must you know it?'

'Because a name is a powerful thing,' he said. 'It raises the weakest and humbles the mightiest. Keep it secret. Tell no one of it.'

'Wait!' For some reason, she wanted to stop him leaving now. Once he was gone, all she would have would be the cold and the silence and the long wait by the faltering hearth. 'Will you not stay?'

He shook his head, smiling dryly. 'This is a place of danger for me.'

'Then why did you come? Who... are you?'

He considered that. 'An instrument. For now, look to your son.' The lined face became sadder. 'I place on him a powerful doom. That is my task, to twist fate, to trace it through the wearing ages, like a spinner at the loom. Believe me, by the end of this, when the thread is played out, all the galaxy will know his name. Sister, I tell you truly: they will fear it.' Then he was gone, the pelts swinging, the hiss of the ice-rain playing across the storm's wind.

Nikja looked down at her child. An eerie feeling of calm came over her, and the nausea faded. Thorskir, cradled in the crook of one arm, was still transfixed by the amulet in her hand.

She smoothed his sweat-matted hair back from his brow.

'Such kindness,' she whispered, looking at the fine working of the gold and wondering how much it was worth. On Fenris, where all things were in flux, it was nigh-priceless, and she would have to guard it carefully, keep it to herself. 'Praise the Allfather. Not all men are liars and brutes.' She kissed her son on his forehead, feeling warm for the first time in weeks.

'Perhaps fate has smiled on us,' she told him, rocking gently. 'You will be a great lord of warriors, just as I prayed you would be.'

The fire spat. Outside, the wind hammered at the door.

'Perhaps,' Nikja said, her worn features creasing into a tired smile, 'our luck has changed at last.'

A BLACK TEMPLARS STORY

CIRCLE OF HONOUR

Guy Haley



THE SETTLEMENT WAS a foreign object encysted in the forest, crowded by gigantic magenta gynosperms. The sky was a ragged hole two hundred and fifty metres above, heavy with the storm. Through foliage dying from exposure to the wind, the many storeys of the layered ecosystem could be glimpsed. Amid this profusion of xenos life, the homes of men were drab things of plascrete, entirely alien to their setting. This was Bornvel, a backwater outpost of the Imperium. A place of heresy.

Initiate Brusc of the Xereus Crusade stopped his finger on the trigger of his boltgun. The clarity of the moment lent the slight friction of his gauntlet against the trigger an intolerable weight. He was intimately aware of the grains of dust from the white rain grinding between the metal surfaces. The tendons of his finger were tensed, the ending of an existence a fraction of a millimetre away. Such a small distance between life and oblivion.

'Please,' said the woman kneeling in the mud, her arms protectively around her children. 'Please.'

Pale rain pounded on Brusc's armour, running from its every curve in gritty rivulets. The rain plastered his hair to his scalp and ran into his eyes. It puddled in the hollow at the top of his cuirass, spilling from there in a fidgeting runnel. His tabard was heavy with the rain's silt load, the insignia whitened as if soaked in plaster. A finger of cold wormed its way downward across his chest, the sticky feeling of fresh foam sealant creeping behind it. There was a tiny breach in the heavy plastek of his neckseal. A small wound inflicted on his wargear when his

helmet had taken a hit had forced him to discard it.

All the universe telescoped inward. This world, this rebellion, his life, her life, all reduced to one fragment of time - a moment that hinged upon the mechanisms of his weapon, and the will that would set it into action.

Thick smoke rose from the settlement. They had hit the church of the Returning Emperor at the centre first. Other buildings had been targeted and destroyed. They burned only briefly. The downpour put out the blazes, dousing the fury of the Space Marines and sending it out as black fumes to be lost in the towering forest.

The woman and children wore the plain robes of the cult. Only she looked up at the Space Marine, her offspring - a boy of around sixteen standard Terran years and a girl of about six - were bent double, prostrate in the mud. Hands over their faces, they appeared to be praying. Perhaps they were.

His hesitation encouraged the woman. She licked her lips free of the silty rain. 'We did not know we had done wrong, please. We repent! All we wish to do is follow the Emperor. If we honour him incorrectly, teach us,' she pleaded. 'You are an honoured Angel of Death! Have mercy, teach us. Please, please.' She clutched at her motionless children. The boy moaned.

Brusc kept his unwavering aim on the woman. His mind dispassionately ran through what would happen to her should he perform his duty. The firing pin in his gun would detonate the initial propellant charge of the bolt in the chamber. This low-yield explosive would push the round from the barrel at sub-sonic speeds. Once free of the gun, the main propellant load would ignite, accelerating the bolt - in essence a miniature missile - twice the speed of sound over a space of half a metre. The momentum alone would blast the woman apart. After impact, the tiny machine-spirit of the munition would trigger the main charge upon the detection of a preset mass. That might be in her body - should enough of it survive the initial hit - if not, the ground. Either way, the woman would be split open, her innards spread between one point six and two metres around her. She would cease to resemble a human being. The shrapnel would probably kill her children instantly - he calculated sixty-three per cent likelihood for the boy, and seventy-four per cent for the girl. If not, they would die shortly after from their wounds. These probabilities were not good enough. Despite the

preciousness of his ammunition, he would also spare a round for both of them, heretics though they were. He would not let them suffer. He was not a monster.

A flight of Land Speeders streaked overhead, grav-plates buzzing. Distant heavy bolter fire sounded from the edge of the town as they banked around. The lesser barks of bolt pistols blurted through the rain. Somewhere, someone was screaming.

Rain poured down his arm, running along the oath chain binding his bolter to his wrist. Drops pattered hurriedly from the links into the milky slur of the street, as if eager to be at one with it.

With one squeeze, he would turn that mud red. It was his duty. It was his oath.

And yet he did not fire.

THE HUMAN PRIOR of Majesty's monasterium bade Brusc halt before the door of the sanctum. He raised his staff, and intoned the ritual request.

'At this date of the year four hundred and twenty-six, millennium forty-one, Terran checksum one, in the tenth millennium of the most holy and beneficent Emperor's reign over the scattered scions of mankind at this time of the third hour of the second watch of the eighty-ninth day of the Madrigal Crusade and upon this, the most holy vessel strike cruiser Majesty, blessed be its name and purpose, Brother-Initiate Brusc of the Black Templars Chapter, rightful and most noble heirs to the Primarch Rogal Dorn, may his name ever be sacred, and his most holy champion Sigismund, makes a presentation for his inclusion to the most honourable Brotherhood of the Sword. He would take upon himself its responsibilities and its honours, its oaths and its vows.'

The prior rapped five times upon the doors to the Sanctum of the Majesty. It was a broad entrance, peaked at the apex of the arch, wherefrom glowered the judging face of some long dead ecclesiarch. Brusc had been through that door thousands of times, but today it had a doomy significance that made it novel and disquieting. The preacher was careful not to strike the bold red Templar's cross emblazoning the doors, though his staff made no mark upon the black-and-white checked plasteel that surrounded it. 'How does the temple answer?'

From speakers carried by cyber-cherubs fluttering overhead, a deep voice replied, 'Your entreaty is heard, Prior Godwine. Brother Brusc is expected. His presentation is accepted.'

Locks disengaged loudly and the doors parted. Air hissed with slight pressure difference as the seal was breached. Warmer air - redolent of incense, blood and sweat - blew from within.

Prior Godwine bowed, the lengths of the sacred maniple wrapped about his left arm brushed the floor.

'As you command, so I obey, Lord Chaplain Hrollo. Praise be.' The abbot stood and sketched the Templar's cross in the air before his face before turning to Brusc. The Space Marine bowed low and the prior dipped his forefinger and index finger into a silver vessel hanging at his waist. With sanctified rose oil, he drew the Templar's cross upon the crown of Brusc's head.

'You have the blessing of the Emperor, Lord Brusc,' said the prior. 'You may proceed. Praise be.'

Brusc rose, the servos of his armour whining on the edge of hearing. He towered over the human priest. The marks of failed second-stage implantation marred the man's skin. It was a wonder he still lived. 'Good luck,' said the prior.

Brusc nodded once. Ordinarily he might have a quip for the man; he was ever being reprimanded for his less than serious nature.

Not today.

He entered the Sanctum as solemn as a High Lord.

NEOPHYTE BRUSC GHOSTED over the moors under a mercilessly open sky, his light scout armour flickering with the false-image camouflage of cameleoline. Heather-like plants stretched off in every direction, heavy with small, tight blue flowers. Their twigs were slight but tough, closely packed and springy to walk upon. Brusc skimmed his feet carefully through them to avoid breaking the stems. He peered through the heather, avoiding the coarse sand or soft peat that would easily take a footprint. This manner of walking slowed the

squad, but the xenos were fine trackers. Whatever the Black Templars could do to obscure their trail, they did.

The four neophytes and their initiate leader did not speak but moved cautiously, eyes watching for the xenos' avian spies when not searching the ground.

Neophyte Parsival laid a hand on Brusc's shoulder. He pointed towards the sun. Hiding in its glare was a deltoid shape.

'You do it, brother. You are the better shot.'

Brusc lowered his visor over his eyes and raised his sniper rifle. The goggles adjusted and compensated for the sunlight, revealing a large, four-winged bird. Brusc zeroed in, and stroked the trigger. The gun's report was a gentle snap, generated by a needle-thin laser beam superheating the air.

The creature's wings folded and it plummeted into the heather. Blue flowers jerked and the avian was gone.

'Good shot,' said Parsival quietly.

'Well,' breathed Brusc. 'I think we can safely say they know we are coming.'

'That they will, neophyte,' said Brother-Initiate Amund, their mentor on this mission. 'Speed will serve us better now than stealth.'

The Templars covered the remaining three kilometres to the edge of the valley swiftly. They fell on their bellies ten metres from the brow of the hill and crawled to the brink.

Many unexpected valleys broke the moorland, steep-sided and deep. They were almost ravines, walled with crags of grey rock that sparkled with veins of quartz. Thin streams knifed along the bottoms, brown and swift. Trees gathered thinly round the boggy land that lined the streams, thickening into forest as the valleys deepened. This valley was no different.

Despite their earlier observation by the aliens' pet, the Black Templars had arrived unannounced. Spindly legged xenos went about their mysterious business. Their camp was split into three collections of tents, clustered on those

rare patches of ground both flat and dry. Like their pets, the aliens were hexapods. They utilised all six limbs to propel themselves, rearing up their front third when they needed to bring their foremost paws - somewhat akin to hands - off the earth and into employment. Their throats sported crimson wattles, their skin was elsewhere smooth and pink where it was not banded brown with natural, keratinous armour plates.

'Filth,' spat Parsival. 'I've not seen such degenerates before.'

'Oh,' said Brusc mildly. 'And your career in our order is already long and glorious.'

Parsival elbowed Brusc hard below the pauldron, where his arm was unarmoured. Once there were such amity blows, but rivalry had made them sharper. The longer they had been members of the Chapter, and the more their fellow recruits dwindled in number, the more they had grown apart in temperament.

'Silence,' whispered Amund. 'Concentrate on your task, or my report to your knights will not be favourable.' The initiate scanned the valley. 'Neophyte Lothic,' he asked. 'Give the squad a good course of action.'

'Assassinate their leadership and retreat,' Lothic replied instantly. 'We are ordered here on a disruption strike, and are well placed to execute our orders and be away before the xenos can respond.'

'Those are indeed our orders,' said Amund. 'You listened. Praise be.' Parsival disagreed. 'We should deploy two of us there.' He pointed at a crag whose top extended above the lip of the valley. 'One there and one there,' he said, indicating two other locations. 'I'd say work our way around the head of the valley, attack from two sides, but they have many of their eyes here.' A long perch was in the middle of the camp. The aliens' metre-high birds were tethered to it, hoods over their eyes. 'We risk discovery the longer we take.'

'If speed is of the essence, why then not attack from one place?' asked Amund.

'We will sow confusion amongst them. They are primitive, with little knowledge of firearms. They will locate us slowly if we are dispersed. Should one group

attack, then the other pair may offer fire support. We can then withdraw once their leaders are dead. It is a balance. Expediency versus perfection.'

Amund pursed his lips and nodded. 'A not entirely foolish strategy, Neophyte Parsival. And what will my role be in this?'

Brusc spoke before Parsival could respond. 'Your role, brother, is to watch over Parsival, and ensure he does not slip and fall in his excitement.'

Amund scowled. 'Your levity is rarely welcome, Neophyte Brusc. You shall be disciplined for this when we return.'

Brusc's crooked smile vanished from his face.

'Now, perhaps you have something better to add? If not—'

'Actually, brother-initiate, I do,' Brusc interrupted. Amund motioned for him to continue. 'Parsival's split fire pattern is sound, although I would advise the placing of the second group further along the valley lip. The xenos will see us quickly enough, if they get their hawks into the air. Moving a little further out won't take much longer. I agree with Parsival that the further apart we are the better.'

'So you suggest caution?'

Brusc's smile returned. 'No, I advise that we finish every last one of them!'

'Those are not our orders,' said Amund reasonably. There was invitation to disagree in his voice. 'Thirty-six of them and five of us. Are these good odds?'

'Thirty-six alien filth and five Black Templars, brother. We are a forward group acting partly under our own initiative. This escalation of our goals is fitting, given the circumstances, and achievable.'

Amund nodded. 'See here, our sharp-tongued warrior might make a fool of himself, but he has the making of a true crusader. If presented with an opportunity to further the Emperor's plan, we should take it.'

Recklessness is a fool's trait, and brings the fool's reward of death. But ours is

not a timid order. Where it is possible to attack, to advance, without undue risk, then it is our duty to do so. Those are our ways. Brusc reminds us of them. Praise be.'

'Praise be,' responded the others, some more enthusiastically than others.

In five minutes the neophytes had worked their way into position. They waited, tense with expectation. Often in their impatience they looked from their gunsights to the place where their leader was hidden, indistinguishable from the heather in his cameleoline. Long minutes, then hours, saw the yellow sun track painfully through the sky. Small biting insects vexed them.

When the sun westered, shining from behind the Black Templars Amund finally gave the order to open fire.

The aliens were preparing their evening meal and were taken unawares. The first shot belonged to Parsival. The alien's head jerked back and it half turned, half reared as its left-hand leg set folded underneath it. With a sinuous motion, it toppled onto the short turf. The sound of the sniper rifle was a clack as quiet as a kicked pebble, and the fiend's death went unnoticed for vital seconds. Annoyed Parsival had beaten him, Brusc dropped two more in quick succession. 'He should have gone for the falconer,' he said, and cursed the lack of a clear line of sight to this most prominent target from his own position. By the time the second of his marks had died, the camp had erupted.

The xenos ran about, greatly agitated. They snatched up weapons slender, stone-tipped spears and atlatls to cast them, along with those few guns of low technology treasonously supplied to them by the Hamadad Collective. Their falconer whipped the hoods and leashes from his charges and had several of the large avians into the air before his brains were finally blasted out. The birds flew unerringly towards the neophyte's position. The aliens followed the line of their falcon's flight, pointing and hooting to the hilltop. Running on five limbs, the sixth holding their weapons free of the ground, the aliens galloped up the hill towards the Space Marines quicker than horses.

Brusc drew a bead on one heading right for him, and a dark shape blurred past his scope and his shot went wild. He rolled over to see the avian arresting its ascent to swoop down at him. Four wings buffeted the Scout, talons raking his

face. He held his rifle crosswise over his chest as the bird scabbled for his fingers with its claws. Brusc slammed it with his gun butt. The bird let out a piercing shriek and flapped away erratically, its wing injured. But the creature had bought valuable time for its masters. The xenos Brusc would surely have killed crested the ridge. A sweet stink came with it. Brusc discarded his sniper rifle and launched himself backwards, pulling his bolt pistol free. The things were as quick in their reactions as they were on their feet, and his opponent knocked his gun out of his hand with a slash of its spear. Brusc hurled himself at the alien. They grappled, Brusc's head pressed horrifically close to its broad face. They locked eyes, his clear brown to its widely set pupil-less black orbs. Hatred blazed equally from both.

The aliens were devilishly strong, and Brusc found himself grasped tight by its foremost two sets of limbs while it reared to its full height on its back legs. He shoved back, and they fell down the steep slope together. The creature rolled itself into a tight ball, its hooves and hands ripping at the Space Marine trapped inside the circuit of its body. They bounced rapidly to the valley floor, landing with a splash in the stream. Brusc wrenched out his combat knife and buried it to the hilt in between the thing's armour segments. It convulsed once, squeezing him painfully, then flopped open. Brusc pushed the corpse aside.

A couple of the aliens had made the valley brink, where they duelled with Brusc's brothers, and many more littered the slopes. He watched one jerk backwards, a huge crater in its side leaking yellow fluid, felled by Amund's bolt pistol.

One came at him, feet splashing in the marsh. Brusc reached for his own pistol, but found an empty holster. His knife remained in the dead xenos. He searched the ground for a weapon as the alien came at him, brandishing a stone axe as big as a man's torso.

The mud dragged at Brusc's boots as he reached for the dead alien's spear. Both projectile and atlatl had fallen into the bog, but still he snatched the spear up. It was proportionate to the alien's size, too big for a human. Nevertheless, Brusc used it expertly, fitting the spear to the caster and hurling it with deadly force right into the alien's eye.

The creature tumbled over, skidding to a stop in front of Brusc.

The noise of battle was dying. Of the three dozen aliens, only ten remained, and half of these were running. Shots rang out uselessly from the creatures as they fell back. They were unused to such weapons, and they were of poor quality. Two more died from sniper shots before the xenos made it around a kink of the valley and to safety.

Victory was shouted from the valley sides, but Brusc was silent. His attention was fixed upon an amulet hanging from his second kill's neck; a piece of exquisitely carved amber. The work seemed too fine to have been made by such brutish hands. He bent forwards to pick it up, his hatred for the creatures replaced by curiosity.

'Hold there, brother,' said Amund, approaching from behind. He squelched into the bog. 'We do not take trophies from the likes of these. This is xenos work, unclean. Unfit to adorn a member of the Adeptus Astartes. Let the serf recorders take what they will for the Museum of Eradication. Brothers and neophytes shall not touch the work of the alien - that is the rule of our order.'

Brusc looked at his leader. He withdrew his hand.

'A good tactical choice, Neophyte Brusc,' said Amund approvingly. 'This world is closer to enjoying the holy tread of human feet, thanks to you. Soon these things will be extinct.' He gestured around the battlesite. 'Now aid your brothers in gathering this filth up. Burn them all.'

BEFORE HE WAS permitted into the chapel, Brusc was stripped of his armour. He was taken into a plain antechamber he had never set eyes on before. Monks from the Monasterium deep in the bowels of Majesty waited for him within. They swarmed him, their faces pictures of furious devotion, and chanted the orisons of hatred as they tore at his oath papers, their fingernails scrabbling on his armour.

The tabard he had so carefully prepared for the ritual was wrenched from him, the fine embroidery of his name, crusades, worlds he had scoured and foes he had killed were torn to shreds. 'This is the mark of an initiate. You aspire to a higher order,' said the human preacher who ripped it free. Brusc kept his eyes ahead, emotionless.

Another took a sharp flint and gouged a scratch across the Templar's cross adorning his left shoulder pad. 'Black for the brothers, red for the Inner Circle!' The monk slit his palm open and smeared his blood over the cross.

From the other, his parchments of supplication were ripped.

'Kneel!' the lead preacher commanded. 'In the name of the Emperor, kneel!'

Brusc did so. Armoury servitors clumped out of alcoves, the fine keys and screwdrivers upon their multiple arms whirring. The servitors disengaged his armour's bolts, unclasped the points, and the monks roughly took his battleplate from him. Then they scourged his bare flesh with whips, each serf naming a failing of Brusc's before he struck. He bore the stings of their weak blows without complaint or reaction.

When they panted from their exertions, they left. Shortly after, Brother-Chaplain Hrollo entered the room.

'Are you ready?' he asked gruffly. He wore his full war regalia: ornate power armour bedecked with skull and bones, some representations cast in plasteel or carved into the ceramite, the others relics of his honoured predecessors bolted to the larger plates. The cant of the Templars was chased into the burnished black surface in red gold. Brusc had never seen Hrollo's face, only and always the helmet cast in the shape of a skull.

Brusc stared ahead still.

'Yes, Brother-Chaplain.'

'Then I will begin,' Hrollo said, laying a heavy hand upon Brusc's head. 'In omnibus operibus tuis in conspectu Imperatoris,' intoned the Chaplain in richly rolling High Gothic.

'In the sight of the Emperor are all my deeds,' responded Brusc, his voice little more than a whisper.

'Imperatoris sunt verba audiente toto,' continued the Chaplain.

'In the hearing of the Emperor are all my words,' said Brusc.

'In cogitatione tua pietas Imperatoris,' said the Chaplain.

'My devotion is in the thoughts of the Emperor.'

'Tu quoque filius eius vindicem. Tu quoque filius eius militem.'

'I am his champion, I am his soldier.'

'Dignus es fides?'

'I am worthy of his trust,' said Brusc.

'Et vos accipere stabit?' asked Hrollo.

'I accept the challenge gladly.'

'Ita fiat. So be it. Praise be,' the Chaplain concluded. 'Brother Brusc, initiate of the Black Templars Chapter, son of Rogal Dorn, you may enter the Circle of Honour. Praise be to His name, and to His holy mission.'

'LEAVE HIM!' SAID Mekal. He tugged at Garsanhuk's sleeve. 'He has failed the test.'

Garsanhuk looked helplessly at his friend, Ketekehan. He had expected that not all of them would survive the trial, that they would die in the Forbidden Lands of Fergax. Seeing it was another matter entirely. Ketekehan was unconscious, his leg swallowed by a pit in the sparse grass and impaled upon a gleaming spike of rustless metal.

'They left it here, the star warriors. He did not see it. It is a part of the trial. He is not worthy!'

'If we leave him, he will die,' said Garsanhuk. Already Ketekehan's skin had gone a ghostly white, and Garsanhuk's hands were red with his blood. 'His bleeding will not stop.'

'He will die anyway, even if we save him!' said Mekal. 'The star warrior said there was only death or success. No other way. He knew this as well as you or I

do.'

Garsanhuk got to his feet reluctantly. The pit in the sandy soil was shallow and filling with blood.

'Come on now,' said Mekal, encouragingly. 'We are aiding each other. This is a rare thing. Do you think Jukal or Velatahan will help each other?' Garsanhuk shook his head slowly.

'See! I feel sorry for Ketekehan. He is my friend also. But we are different, hey? We are as good as brothers. That's why we'll win. We're going, you and I. We're going to join the war in the stars! Brothers forever?' Mekal held out his hand.

Garsanhuk smiled wanly and grasped Mekal's forearm. 'Brothers forever.'

'Come on! It's getting late. If you feel sorry for him, offer him mercy.' He patted his knife.

Garsanhuk looked from Mekal to Ketekehan. 'I can't.'

'How many throats have you cut?'

Garsanhuk shrugged. 'Ten?'

'Then why not eleven?'

'Because this is Ketekehan, not some driftspinner from the woods!' Mekal shook his head. 'Gar, Gar, Gar! Always ready with some joke or other, but underneath the bluster you're soft. This is a kindness. The krossovore will get him. Do you want him to be eaten alive? Because I don't. If you won't, I'll do it.'

Mekal pulled out his own knife, a fine weapon forged by his father, its furniture carved from the tooth of one of the ferocious predators of Fergax. He slit Ketekehan's throat adroitly. The other boy did not wake. The pulse of blood from his neck was sluggish.

'Nearly dead already anyway,' said Mekal. He stabbed his knife into the ground to clean it before he sheathed it. 'But it is better to be sure.' He set off at a jog. 'If we hurry, we'll make the third marker by nightfall!' he called back.

With a backwards glance for their dead friend, Garsanhuk set out after Mokal.

A PLAIN RING of sand fifteen metres across in a room of unadorned metal - that was one manifestation of the Circle of Honour. A single strong lumen globe shone directly above it, lighting the sand as bright as any desert, but leaving its margins in shadow. There in darkness stood hooded Black Templars. This was the other manifestation of the Circle of Honour - the Sword Brotherhood to which Brusc aspired. Here were the Crusade's mightiest warriors and officers, and they waited in judgement.

They parted ranks to allow Brusc into the ring. His and Hrollo's footsteps spoiled the perfect surface. The armoured Hrollo sank deep into the sand. Brusc less so, naked but for a loincloth.

Hrollo held up Brusc's hand. 'Here is an aspirant to the inner circle of our Chapter. Is he worthy of the challenge?'

'Aye,' said one.

'He is.'

'Yes,' said another.

One after another the Sword Brethren gave their consent. None bar the crusade's three Chaplains wore armour. Their faces were hidden by black hoods. Half-blinded by the harsh spotlight, Brusc struggled to pick out the individual heraldries embroidered upon the tabards below their red Sword Brothers' crosses. He knew them all, of course. Somewhere among them would be Brother Castellan Adelard, his one-time mentor, and the crusade's second-in-command. Only then did Brusc notice that there were twenty-three brothers there, not the twenty-two he expected.

'It is decided. He is worthy,' said Hrollo, when the last brother had spoken. A Chapter-serf, one who had voluntarily undergone the removal of his eyes and ears so that he might serve this most august body without betraying it, came into the ring. He knelt and held up a longsword in a rich scabbard. For a pommel, it had a Templar's cross cast in brass and was sized for the giants of the Space Marines, but otherwise it could have been a knight's weapon of ancient Terra.

'This is the Sword of Challenge, hallowed by the blood of failed aspirants to our order. You will only ever hold its like within this circle. Be honoured. Now draw it, and test your mettle,' commanded Hrollo.

Brusc did so. He tested the weapon's heft and balance, and sighted down the plain steel edge. It was a very fine blade. He pressed the crossguard to his lips and kissed it, muttering a quick prayer to the Emperor. He took up a guard stance, blade gripped in both hands up by his right shoulder.

'Send in his opponent!' called Hrollo. He held up his crozius arcanum and let it fall, stepping to the side of the ring. 'To first blood! Praise be!'

The twenty-third brother stepped forwards, and pulled down his hood.

'We meet again, brother.'

'Parsival?' asked Brusc. His guard wavered.

'Surprised to see me, art thou?' Parsival said mockingly. 'The test must be completed to certain forms. Brothers forever, we used to say on Fergax. Who better to test a man than those closest to him?'

A pair of serfs came forwards and removed Parsival's robe. Underneath he was dressed as Brusc, naked but for his loincloth.

'They brought me here especially for this trial. I am one of them now, had you not heard? I am ahead of you now as I always was.' Parsival smiled. He had always been colder, more driven than Brusc, even when he had been Mekal. But an arrogance had bloomed in him that Brusc did not like. 'Twenty years it's been since we fought side by side.' Parsival took an axe and a spike-headed flail from the arming serf. 'Shall we see what you have learned?'

With that he launched himself at Brusc. He held the flail back, bringing the axe down hard towards his one-time friend's head. Brusc parried it fluidly and circled back.

'I am the match of you, Sword Brother or not,' said Brusc. He was not as sure as he appeared. Who knew what Parsival had learned himself in the last two

decades?

Parsival spun the head of his flail round until it whooshed noisily. 'I have outgrown your skill at arms.'

Parsival swung with the mace, entrapping Brusc's sword with the weapon when he parried. The axe followed. Brusc was ready. Taking a swift backwards pivot he yanked the flail from Parsival's hand, moved aside from the axe blow. Parsival was pulled forwards, leaving him at the mercy of a hard strike from the pommel of Brusc's sword.

Parsival fell down, stunned. Blood welled from his head, though the wound was quickly staunches by the blood-gift of the Emperor.

'You might be right. Perhaps you are the better Black Templar, dear Parsival,' said Brusc, looking down at his friend. 'But we both know I have always been the better warrior.'

'The test is decided. Brusc has triumphed, and swiftly,' said Hrollo. 'Praise be!'

'Praise be,' replied the knights of the Inner Circle.

Brusc reached a hand down to Parsival. After a moment's hesitation he took it. 'Well fought,' said Brusc. Parsival managed a grudging nod of acknowledgement.

'Long have we watched you. By your skill at arms here, you have proved our assessment of your abilities correct. Now, you have one last test to pass,' said Hrollo.

The Circle of knights parted and the Chaplain gestured to a slim door they revealed. It was as plain as if it were the portal to a prison cell.

Brusc looked to the faces of the Sword Brothers and war-priests around the challenge circle, but they looked away from him. Only Hrollo's ruby helmet lenses stayed upon his face.

Brusc took a deep breath and tipped his sword forwards. The flail rattled down its length and fell to the floor. The door opened at his approach and closed

behind him, sealing him into a thick gloom.

The room on the other side was also circular and bare of adornment but smaller than the first. A larger door faced the small entrance. In front of it stood a Dreadnought, Ironclad class. The hard lines of its armour were picked out by the light of two flambeaux leaning out from the walls on chains. Otherwise, the room was unlit.

The Dreadnought was inert. His name was engraved deeply into scroll work upon the sarcophagus: Cantus Maxim Gloria. Honour scrolls and a prayer cloth were affixed all over the machine. The Templar's cross worked in the red and black of the Sword Brotherhood - repeated over and again upon his joints. The mounts for his carapace weapons gleamed bare, but his arms had been mounted for reasons of balance. On the left it carried a power fist and on the right a hurricane bolter, both lavishly worked with Cantus's deeds and name. The crusade honours that covered its shoulder plating were perforce rendered small, such as Cantus Maxim Gloria's honourable history. They referred not only to the current occupant's accomplishments, but to those of the men who had been entombed within before him, stretching back to the dawn of the Imperium

Brusc dropped to his knees, his sword point down upon the floor. This was the crusade ancient, and one of the oldest living members of the Black Templars. Once a Templar was granted this ultimate respect, he gave up his prior existence. Thus, few knew who the warrior was interred within, but all were in awe of his wisdom.

With a rumble, the machine's engines started. With a jerk like a man emerging abruptly from sleep, Cantus came online. The chambers of his hurricane bolter clicked as internal systems checked its status. He rose higher as the hydraulic systems in his limbs pressurised and his fibre bundles contracted. It looked from side to side, then leaned forwards over Brusc, power fist whirring.

'You are the reason I have been awoken from my long slumber,' said Cantus.

'I assume so, crusade ancient. The mysteries of initiation are not revealed until they are undertaken.'

'Hrrrn.' Cantus's growl from his vox amplifiers might or might not have

conveyed humour. 'I have been told of you, Brother-Initiate Brusc. You are light of tongue, if heavy in honour. It is your doom to be judged by me. Will you hear my verdict?'

'I will, brother ancient.'

'I fear you shall not like it, brother.'

Brusc's blood, still running hotly from his test in the ring, chilled instantly. He looked up at the Dreadnought. The armaglass slit in the sarcophagus glowed an eerie green, like the eyes of a dog in low light. 'What do you mean?'

'Heh, you forget your manners in your shock. You know what I mean!' said the machine. 'You are not worthy to join the Sword Brethren, not yet. Do not despair. You are strong of arm and will. But it is not yet your time.'

'But, why?' said Brusc. He felt no outrage, which surprised him. 'I beat Parsival... Is it my faith? Is it my—'

The Dreadnought shifted its weight, an unconscious movement that recalled Cantus's time as a man. The noise of his foot on the deck as he resettled himself rang loudly.

'It is not your faith. Your faith is strong, Brother-Initiate Brusc. Nor strength at arms the only qualification for acceptance to the Circle. Remind me of our motto, Black Templar.'

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' shouted Brusc, the words pouring from him with pride and at full war volume. They boomed in the chamber.

'Yes, yes!' Cantus leaned back slightly. 'These words were not lightly chosen, initiate. Our creed is to pursue the enemies of the Emperor to the ends of the universe, to never cease in spreading the reach of His holy light. You are his instrument. Does a sword have a conscience? No! It is thrust where the warrior who bears it wills it to go. You are a sword in the hand of the Emperor. That is what it means to be a Sword Brother. Not only to be a master of the blade, but to be the blade of the highest, most holy master - the Lord of Mankind - and to act unthinkingly under his guidance. I have reviewed many of your battles, watch the pict captures of your helm. There is yet too much mercy in you. You! are not

an arbiter, but the deliverer of judgement. Remember that, and your next admission to this room will prove more successful.'

The door behind Cantus Maxim Gloria squealed open.

'Now depart, Brother-Initiate Brusc. Wakefulness is taxing, and my sepulchre calls to me. I have been otherwise impressed by the deeds I have witnessed and if half what the others say of you is accurate, then I am proud to fight beside you.'

Cantus turned, an awkward manoeuvre for so noble a machine. One foot remained in place as the other stumped about in a half circle. He rocked from side to side as he moved. Once he had attained a half rotation, he walked from the room, his giant feet banging thunderously upon the deck. Brusc's face fell.

It took some time before he had gathered himself sufficiently to go back into the Place of Challenge and face the others.

THE WOMAN STARED into Brusc's eyes. As far as he could tell, this sect had done little to deviate from the norm of the Imperial Cult. He had seen far more divergent churches tolerated. Why were they here?

His conscience troubled him. He had taken an oath. There were to be no survivors. The heretics were to be expunged. At least these would have a clean death. Already the Ministorum preachers that dwelt aboard Majesty were building great iron fire cages to purify those who had strayed from the true path.

The credo of his order was that of crusade - the liberation of worlds and the expansion of the Emperor's realm. Instead, he was upon an Imperial world, about to execute frightened children in their mother's arms. Who was he to deliver their judgement? Let some other dirty their hands. His gun wavered. Gritting his teeth, he brought it back to bear on the woman, before giving up completely.

With an explosive exhalation, he put up his gun. His cheeks burned with shame.

'Get out of here,' he said hoarsely. 'Go on, repent. Be true to the teachings of the one true faith until the end of your days, or as I stand here before you I swear I shall hunt you down and kill you all.'

The woman let out a sound halfway between a sob and a laugh. She pulled herself from the quagmire. With frantic, shaking hands, she pulled her catatonic children up after her.

'Thank you, thank you!' she said.

'I do not want your thanks!' said Brusc. 'Get out of here!'

They staggered into the sheeting rain, slipping in the mud and disappearing out of sight around the side of a monolithic forestry machine.

With the weakness of his mercy leaden in his chest, Brusc returned to the fight.

A SALAMANDERS STORY

THE BURDEN OF ANGELS

Nick Kyme



MORTALS CALL US angels. Our wings are of fire and our wrath is terrible to behold, but there is nothing supernatural about us. We are flesh, blood and bone. Neither vaunted nor immortal. Yet, we are both awed and feared like beings of true light.

I once believed there was one amongst us, he who was descended from the deific, that could claim this mantle. Noble beyond reproach, ageless and wise, if asked I would have said he was a true angel. It was not until the day, when I saw his mask slip and then the mask beneath it also fall away, that I learned truly how angelic Dante was.

My revelation began on Hecatomb...

RUST-RED SAND SKIRLED across a barren plain, obscuring the hulking silhouettes of gunships. One of those vessels belonged to us, though it was lost in our wake and the storm winds eddying down from the northern mountains.

Our footprints were gone too, swept away as if we had never walked on the high plateau to where our faltering auspex told us to find the Blood Angels.

A burst of flame soared up from a volcano amongst the high mountain peaks, presaged by a bellicose rumble. It was but child's laughter to a Salamander, but Vulcanis appreciated the symmetry as he watched it erupt.

'A taste of home,' he murmured across the vox.

'You whelp. Drygnirr spit has more ferocity,' replied Zad'ir, argumentative as always.

Beneath my draconic faceplate, I smiled at their banter. It was right and good for Firedrakes to have some volatile spirit. It had to be instilled. I trusted this task to Praetor, my sergeant of the Firedrakes, but his mood had grown dark of late. He fought an inner war, in a crucible that would either forge him stronger or break him. Praetor would have mocked this drab world's fury too.

Hecatomb was a much lesser version of Nocturne. By comparison, its skin-searing heat was a gentle caress, its mountains like diminutive crags to the Salamanders who had seen soaring peaks that rose and obscured the sun.

'Your breath does, Zad'ir,' remarked Xakkus, siding with his brother.

'Sked-eating—' Zad'ir began.

Ikanius interrupted. 'Ahead,' he said, the slate-screen of his auspex crackling with interference. 'Two hundred metres and closing.'

Despite the static, I could see the range counter clicking down to zero.

'Are you certain, Vanguard?' Zad'ir asked, using his derogatory nickname for Ikanius. It reflected his eagerness to always lead the line. His tenure as a Firedrake in my retinue was shorter than the others. Soon enough he would learn he had nothing to prove. 'I recall a desert basin some eight hundred metres back that looked nothing like our destination.'

'The storm was fouling my instrumentation.'

'Sure it's not your nose for direction that is foul?'

Ikanius turned and glared at Zad'ir, but when others joined in with his laughter any unmeant insult was forgotten.

'Are we discussing your breath again, brother?' Ikanius replied, though he looked serious.

More laughter. I was glad to hear it. There had been precious little to laugh about

since the invasion. But Nocturne had survived Nihilan and his Dragon Warrior renegades. Our Chapter and its tribes also lived, but I still carried many burdens.

'Do not pity this world's anger,' I said to my warriors. 'Bask in it. Defy it. And should it still dissatisfy you... only then turn to Zad'ir for a true test of your courage.'

The laughter grew raucous. It was a rare thing for us, though Firedrakes were known for their choleric temperament. In that way, we had much in common with the Wolves. But it was not Grimnar and his Fenrisian dogs of war I had come here to see. As the winds abated, the sand thinned to reveal ruby-red gunships and a half-sunken citadel behind them.

It was an old bastion of the Blood Angels made of smooth, pale granite, though the red sand had stained it and eroded some of the statuary clinging to its curved walls. A banner hung from a lancet arch above us, fluttering mournfully in the breeze.

A wide archway granted admittance to the bastion. It might once have been large enough to allow mighty war engines through its missing gates but it had sunk so low and awkwardly that only a warrior in power armour could pass through the archway now.

Three such warriors stood before it to greet us.

I knew Israfel. The Herald nodded to us as we approached. I saw also Cassiel, the seneschal never far from his master's side.

Between them stood a figure as noble and imperious as I remembered him. His war-plate had been crafted to resemble unadorned muscle, albeit wrought from gilded adamantium and ceramite. Largest amongst its many gemstones was a ruby blood droplet emblazoned upon his chest, two angelic wings spreading out from it across his armoured pectorals. A gold mask hid his face from us, again made to look like the face of an unarmoured man, and he wore an exquisite looking axe at his hip. As a Salamander, I could appreciate a finely forged blade and this one had few equals.

It had been years since we last met to honour the pledge. Here, on Hecatomb at

the sunken citadel, the ritual between our Chapters would finally take place again.

As we reached the angels I knelt and so did my warriors.

'Rise, Tu'Shan, all of you,' said Dante, his voice melodic yet strong, 'and know you are amongst friends.'

As I arose, Dante gripped my wrist in the manner of warriors and we embraced as brothers.

'Well met, Tu'Shan.' He sounded pleased to see us. 'Tell me all that has happened since we last spoke.'

'A tale not as warm as this welcome, I am afraid.'

'I see.'

I noted Dante's warriors bowed respectfully but did not shake hands with my drakes. The Angels were often reserved in this way. Poised, always. I considered Dante's efforts towards me exceptional.

The Lord of the Host went on in the same vein, clapping my shoulder guard.

'Then let us speak inside, out of the storm. I have warm kharash all the way from Baal.'

Worn by entropy, the blood droplet above the immense arch of the sunken citadel was a reminder of whose territory this was. As we passed under it, I was reminded of something else - the vaunted history of the Angels and their taste for blood.

THE KHARASH TASTED hot and acerbic on my tongue. On Nocturne, I was used to something stronger but the Baalite wine was not without flavour and potency.

Dante watched me keenly, sipping at his chalice as I drained my own silver goblet dry in short order.

'Not one to savour wine, are you, Tu'Shan?'

'I reserve my indulgence for the forge, Dante.'

He laughed at that, as if amused at some private joke.

Dante's chambers were dark and spartan. Statues and banners, half hidden by the shadows, comprised what little decor there was within. Dante had removed his helm soon after entering the room and sat cloaked in darkness on a simple iron throne. I took the one opposite, facing the Lord of Hosts and the faded mosaic behind him. It depicted a pair of angels, one of the light and one of the dark, benevolent protector and wrathful avenger on both turns of the figurative coin. Duality of the self came through heavily in its symbolism. Artistic, beautiful, the mosaic suggested an internal struggle, one not fought with blades but willpower. I wondered what it meant and considered that I was reading too much into it.

Sipping at his kharash, which had a more coppery scent than the wine I was drinking, the Lord of the Blood Angels looked pensive as he read my reaction to the mosaic.

I had already related the tale of the war that almost brought Nocturne to its knees, of the return of the Dragon Warriors, of the defection and subsequent corruption of two of my brothers. I needed the drink to quell my remembered anger or my nerves; I could not be sure which.

Here before me was Dante, one of the oldest and wisest Chapter Masters in the entire Adeptus Astartes. Our deeds, my own and my Chapter's, on Armageddon had earned his respect. A bond had forged between us.

At the end of the "Dragonstrife" as some were calling it, I had need of his counsel more than ever.

'Mastery of a Chapter is a heavy burden,' Dante said, taking another sip of his kharash. 'Emperor knows we have all felt it.' He seemed wearisome, as if gripped by sudden listlessness. Dante had outlived many, seen much and fought in hundreds of battles. Did his martial pride hide some latent sense of apathy? His next words prevented my asking this question.

'Your world endures, your Chapter also. I fail to see reason for doubt.'

'It isn't doubt,' I said. 'If I am unworthy, another will replace me. None have stepped forwards. I seek counsel to avoid the mistakes I have made before and to ward against future complacency.'

'And you think you were complacent?'

'I should have seen it. The canker worming within.' I felt the urge to lower my gaze but resisted, not wanting to seem weak. I am not weak; my blood runs strong with promethean fire and my will is the same iron it has ever been, but I know I have erred and must make restitution for that failing.

I hoped Dante would have some insight.

'Had you known, had you seen, it would have been little different.' Dante was almost nonchalant but I knew he was trying to ease the blow to my ego. I both hated and admired him for that.

'What if there is something insidious at the heart of my Chapter, Dante? Can it be purged?'

'With fire...'. His voice level, he remained studiously neutral. 'This existence of ours has a way of corrupting even the most stalwart hearts, Tu'Shan, and not just to Ruin. Lest we forget, we are still human, albeit transcended. You and your kin are perhaps the most human of us all. Even angels can misstep, brother. Our measure should not be how we came to do so but rather in how we rectify it.'

Now I bowed my head, but out of respect not shame.

'As ever, I am humbled by your wisdom.'

'Do not be so. I only tell you what you already know. In you and your Salamanders I see the same nobility you perceive in me, Tu'Shan. I admire your humanity. It is both your greatest strength and greatest weakness. You are a contradiction, as am I.'

'I see only unimpeachable honour, brother.'

Finishing off the last of his kharash, he leaned forwards and I saw the purity and

divinity of his face without the veil of shadow to obscure it. A being of true light.

'Then look closer...'

A strain of dark red mildly affected the sclera but otherwise Dante's eyes were alive with undeniable power and deep wisdom.

I remarked as much, at which he laughed sadly.

'A mask, I assure you, Tu'Shan.'

At that moment, I did not understand what Dante meant.

Israfil entered the chamber and bowed, preventing any further enquiry. The time of the ritual was upon us.

A GALLERY LED from Dante's spartan chambers to an audience hall both magnificent and venerated by age.

In the middle of the vaulted hall there lay a slab of black Baalite rock.

Smooth as obsidian, unyielding as dacite, it possessed a nonagonal shape to signify the old Legion designation of the Blood Angels.

Xakkus stood upon the slab. In place of his armour, the Salamander wore Nocturnean ceremonial garb. His arms and legs were bare to display his branding scars, but his chest was clad in a metal breastplate. His shoulders and back were swathed by a long pelt of drake hide. A second pelt of leather covered the loins.

Head bowed, and down on one knee like a supplicant before his watching lords and brothers, Xakkus awaited introduction.

I knew he would not dishonour me with what followed.

Standing at the edge of the slab, Israfil the Herald spoke in a clear, clarion voice that carried to the entire hall.

'Here then we stand again, our two Chapters aligned in fealty and honour.'

Although they were but four amongst a host of many, I saw the pride in the eyes of my honour guard at the Herald's words. I know, for I felt it too. For a moment at least, brotherhood banished the spectre of doubt and the burdens of being Chapter Master.

'So it was on the first day, so it shall be again and until the Time of Ending. Our pact of brotherhood is sealed by the exchange of battle honours. Blood meets fire and each finds strength in the other.' Israfel bowed again. 'Ave Imperator.'

And as I echoed his final words and heard it echoed again in Dante and our warriors, I turned my attention to Xakkus.

His head slowly rose, and his fiery gaze met mine. Twin hammers emerged from where they had been tethered behind his back. He ignited the heads with a deft movement. Fire cast flickering shadows across the Baalite rock and reflected in the eyes of Xakkus. I saw purpose and intensity. With a powerful shout, he sprang from his crouch and the saga of Khugar'ath began.

Khugar'ath had been a mighty, vengeful beast that had taken several of my Fire-born to bring to heel and then slay. Artisans of the Sanctuaries had wrought the monster's flesh into a banner that I now gifted to Dante. Xakkus would present it through an ancient ritual.

The morgash was both a ceremonial war cry and an aggressive posture dance that relied on percussive hammer strikes against a metal breastplate and stamping foot movements. It was bellicose, a physical narration of how a war trophy had been won.

The Blood Angels looked on, but their faces were unreadable.

As hammer blows chimed stridently throughout the chamber, Dante turned to ask, 'The war cry... a vestige of old Nocturne?'

I nodded. Xakkus thrust one hammer out in front of him, the other held to his mouth before he arched his neck to spit out a gout of flame.

I noticed some of the Angels flinch ever so slightly at this incendiary display and hid my proud smile.

'Xakkus speaks the old language,' I said to Dante. 'The sigil dialect of ancient Nocturne. Millennia ago, it was spoken by the first tribal kings and taught to them by the earth shaman. Few now live who can speak it so fluently.'

The spit of flame died and Xakkus rang the hammers against his scorched breastplate. With the resonance of metal striking metal yet to fade, he put each fuller down, bowing to his lords as he did so, and took up the mantle of Khugar'ath. He thrust it high like a spear, bellowing one last time to emulate the dying cry of the beast.

And then it was done.

Silence reigned for a short while until Israfel returned.

He took the proffered banner of Khugar'ath from Xakkus, who bowed and left the Baalite stone, before ushering in the Blood Angel pact offering.

The ranks of Blood Angels lining the edge of the chamber parted to admit Abathor.

As a Librarian, Abathor had a touch of the arcane and aetheric about him that remained undiminished by his simple red robes. He wore the clothes of a tribune, not a psyker, and clutched a long roll of crumpled vellum in one strong, pale hand.

In the other was a casket, long enough for a gladius.

'Lo then did the Angels come to Hecatomb and the sunken citadel of Raegus Malifact.'

A sonorous tremor inflected Abathor's voice, a sampling of his witchery, as he regaled all with the tale of this dark champion's demise.

His recitation was long and verbose, a far cry from the uncouth exhibition of our death world tribesman.

Abathor described how the Blood Angels first came to Hecatomb and how the dominion of Raegus Malifact had been near absolute. His destruction was meted out by Dante himself, first breaking the champion's sword and then cutting him

down in turn.

His blood was spilled in this very chamber, the daemon inhabiting his flesh banished back into the Eye.

'His bones were cast to ash, his essence forever sundered,' said Abathor, his gaze upraised to engage his audience despite the length of unfurled parchment he was holding.

'Here then,' he brandished the casket, 'is the broken blade of Raegus Malifact, rendered into dormant metal as a totem of Lord Dante's triumph over—'

The halt was so sudden I failed to see what was wrong at first. 'Abathor...?' Dante began.

Scattered, confused muttering came from the onlookers.

Abathor was staring at his feet, at the crack in the Baalite slab that had miraculously just formed.

I saw it too, as did Dante and now several others, but my attention was on the casket.

It too had cracked and a strange un-light, like natural darkness only more pervasive, came spilling through the fissures in the stone. Scratching, like nails against stone, resonated around the chamber. I heard voices in it, though they spoke in a tongue foreign to an earthly realm.

Above, my eyes were drawn to the shadows that had shrunk away from the un-light and were coalescing into forms that had arched backs and long, curved horns.

Several Blood Angels had already reached for their blades. Some had them half drawn when one of their battle-brothers in the throng collapsed in profound and unexpected apoplexy.

Out on the slab, Abathor dropped the parchment and the casket, holding out his hand in a warning as Dante tried to approach him.

'Stay away, my lord,' he said, the effort of speaking a strain. 'Something is wrong—'

His head lurched back, body convulsing as a fount of blood spewed from his throat and into the air. Abathor fell to his knees. His eyes were aflame, his body too soon after.

'Abathor!' cried Israfel.

I felt Zad'ir's hand upon my shoulder. He had been joined by Ikanius and Vulcanis who closed in protectively around me.

Xakkus was on the other side of the slab watching Abathor die, as were we all.

Vapour issued in smoking tendrils from the blood the Librarian had vomited up. As it coalesced, one tendril congealing with another, forms began to manifest.

Blades slipping from scabbards filled the audience hall with a discordant echo.

I heard the racking of bolter slides.

Dante had donned his death mask. Instead, I wore a savage snarl. As I saw the enemy now before us, I cried out.

'Daemons!'

The word was still ringing in my ears and my hammer was already in my hands as I attacked them.

The creatures in the blood-smoke were denizens of the warp. Wiry, with crimson skin the hardness of adamantium, they were a warrior breed and one my kind had fought for centuries.

Dante was beside me, his axe a sliver of leaping gold in his gauntleted fist.

We fell upon the daemons with abandon.

As I crushed the skull of one of the horned creatures with my hammer, I saw the smouldering carcass of Abathor in my peripheral vision.

'What is this devilry?' asked Zad'ir, smiting one of the creatures with his glaive.

I scowled. 'We have seen this before. Something has broken through into our reality and used poor Abathor as the bridge.'

'His defences were breached without him knowing,' said Dante, cleaving a daemon in half. 'Something in the casket and the broken blade...'

My eyes were drawn to where it lay bare and revealed on the slab.

I smashed another daemon's ribcage, its body dissolving even before I had ruptured its spine.

Sporadic bolter fire cut into the rising sound of the melee but at such close quarters it was short lived. The growl of chain-blades and the harsh ozone-snap activation of power weapons prevailed.

'How many?' I called to Dante, even though he was fighting at my side.

He scythed a red-skinned devil from groin to sternum, and it collapsed into ether like all the others we had banished. A second was decapitated by Dante's backswing.

'Enough,' he replied, hewing a third daemon through the breastbone then wrenching the axe-blade free as the creature rapidly atrophied.

No two banishments were the same. Some devolved into ichorous sludge, others turned into smoke or self-immolated. Their "deaths" were myriad, though the nature of the daemoniac foot soldiers remained uniform as they appeared in the chamber like sparks thrown from a furnace.

Brutal hand-to-hand combat boiled at the heart of the room until every man and daemon was fully engaged.

Through the carnage, I saw Xakkus fighting with his blacksmith's fuller.

'Stay close to the Chapter Master,' I heard Zad'ir remind the others. They needed no urging, but had to fight hard to keep up with me, and I with Dante.

His blade threshed limbs and necks, carved torsos and split skulls. My muscles burned from the effort of breaching hardened daemon-hide but Dante was tireless.

Fury overtook him, cascading in a red rain from the creatures he slew.

'Sanguinius!' He shouted his father's name, and it was as if something old and primal awoke from within him...

The Lord of Hosts became wrath and as he butchered, I heard a roar emerge out of the tumult of battle. Like a brazier lit in a darkened room, eyes fell upon a Blood Angel rampaging through the morass of bodies.

Feral rage twisted his features, the burring chainsword in his hand no I longer able to distinguish friend from foe...

'Brother Aczinor!' shouted Dante at the frenzied warrior.

Instead of wrath, the Lord of Hosts cried out in grief and anguish. He made for Aczinor.

I did not understand what was happening, only the primacy of the threat in our midst.

Daemons were still amongst us.

I was about to order my warriors to follow Dante when Vulcanis growled a warning.

'Firedrakes, look! The corpse...'

Abathor, believed to have been destroyed, was crawling and dragging his smouldering remains towards the broken blade of Raegus Malifact.

I had no doubt now that the dark symbolism of this place had lain in wait to exact vengeance against those who had put its master asunder. Some vestige of the champion remained, perhaps bound in the broken fragments of his old blade, and it was using the husk of Abathor to reach it. That could not happen. Dante and his warriors clashed against the growing tide of madness afflicting some of

the Blood Angels, but I knew our mission was to stop whatever was rising from Abathor's ashes.

It now clambered to its feet, blackened robes sagging beneath its arms like diaphanous wings.

'Destroy it, brothers,' I cried. 'Don't let it take the broken blade!'

The melee split, the Blood Angels led by Dante fighting their own deranged kin and a small knot of Salamanders trying to prevent something terrible.

Xakkus had been trying to reach us the moment the skirmish had broken out. He had heard my order and got to Abathor before any of us. Except it was not Abathor, not anymore. A revenant regarded Xakkus through fire-seared orbs, its skin a blackened parchment.

Despite its ostensible frailty, it ignored the hammer strikes of Xakkus and sent him sprawling with a single desultory blow. His cry of agony sounded above the furious battle taking place in the chamber.

'Xakkus!' Vulcanis was about to rush in when Zad'ir held him back.

'Wait,' he said. 'Divided, it will kill us. Together, brother.'

Vulcanis nodded, but I saw his concern for Xakkus.

'As one, then,' I said, unable to keep the snarl from my voice.

We charged, bellowing Vulkan's name, beseeching the primarch for his courage and strength to overcome evil.

Muttered imprecations spewed from the scorched remains of Abathor as it turned to face us.

It was a wretched, horrible end for such a vaunted warrior and I grieved for Dante's Chapter to have such a dark episode now forever engraved in their historic annals.

Ever the vanguard that was his namesake, Ikanius leapt in first. He had a sword

in each hand: a harpe in the left that he used to lead, and a kaskara in his right. The attack came as a blur of adamantium. Chunks of burned flesh and even bone slivers fell from the Abathor-revenant as Ikanius cut it apart. It raised a clawed hand against him, but Ikanius severed it at the wrist.

I lifted my hammer against the thing but it battered me back with a heavy blow that cracked the ceramite of my armour. Zad'ir clattered into the back of me and we both staggered.

Vulcanis had fallen back, crouched down to drag his brother away from the killing field.

Ikanius cleaved into its shoulder and neck in an attempt to decapitate it. Intent on the killing stroke, he missed its return blow, which dug deep into his gut, tearing through armour and mesh like it was parting the scales of a fish.

The kaskara fell from his blood-slicked grasp.

Zad'ir dragged Ikanius off the revenant, and the embedded claw withdrew with a sickening tearing of flesh. Blood gushed freely down Ikanius's torso and abdomen. With no strength left in his legs, he collapsed. Zad'ir and Vulcanis returned to my side to avenge their fallen brother.

'Take it apart,' I roared, hammer high as I waded in. 'Every wretched piece!'

I went in low, snapping one of the revenant's legs from under it. It flailed, hissing vitriol, and I caught a glance of the daemon-kind struggling to manifest through Abathor's borrowed flesh. Realising it was outmatched, it turned and hobbled towards the knife.

I buried my hammer into its back, actinic fire wreathing its form in crackling azure heat and corposant. A second swing took out its standing leg and it crumpled.

Still it crawled on its belly.

'Don't let it touch the blade,' I cried. 'Kill it now!'

Zad'ir impaled it to the ground with his glaive, lodging the weapon two-handed

as Vulcanis staved in the revenant's skull with his maul.

'Nothing remains,' I growled to my brothers and together we reduced poor Abathor's corpse into tenderised meat and ash.

I gasped for breath by the time it was over, and saw Vulcanis and Zad'ir do the same.

Elsewhere, the daemons were all but vanquished.

Summoning my strength, I crushed what remained of the broken blade and saw its power shattered. A flash of dark light filled the chamber and somewhere amidst the fell, echoing voices I heard a discordant scream.

'It's over,' I said, to myself more than to my brothers. Dante had said there was something in the blade.

Sheathing his weapons, Vulcanis went to Xakkus.

Zad'ir came to my side, watching as the Blood Angels finished their work. He wrenched his glaive free, returning it to the clasp on his back.

'I think the offering was a little misguided,' he uttered.

'Something had been harboured in the blade. When it came into contact with Abathor, he became the conduit for the blood of Raegus Malifact and the thing half-bonded to the weapon in his hand.'

'It possessed him.' I heard the voice of Dante from across the chamber.

He and his Angels had their backs to us. In destroying the daemons sprung from Malifact's blood, a passage in the chaos had formed between Blood Angels and Salamanders.

I noticed something else, too: bodies of red-armoured warriors. Most wore their battle-helms but some bared their crazed features openly. Such madness I saw in their eyes.

And still, Dante and the others had not turned.

'Aczinor...?' I asked, enquiring about the Blood Angel I had seen driven to frenzy.

'Dead,' uttered Dante, his back still to me, and a feral snarl in his tone. Though his power armour masked it, he was breathing hard, as were his brothers.

I stepped forwards, believing the danger over and letting my drakes tend to their wounded. Closer to the Angels, I saw some of the bodies at their feet had been mauled, their throats torn out. I saw Cassiel crouched down drinking the blood from the dead.

I discerned other things, half hidden by shadow... violent spasms, exsanguination, a crimson-smear across a mouth, a savage countenance, the imbibing of blood...

'What is this, Dante?' I asked, uncertain. I had to resist the urge to draw my hammer again, telling myself there had to be some explanation.

'Stay back...!' the Lord of Hosts warned. His death mask glinted on the ground. Arterial spatter marred its polished golden surface.

I risked another step. By now, Vulcanis and Zad'ir had noticed what was happening and were on their feet.

'Come no closer!' Again, Dante snarled. It was louder this time; loud enough for me to detect the unearthly tremor in his voice.

'What is upon you, brother?' I reached out, my brother's shoulder almost close enough for me to touch. 'Please, let me he—'

Dante turned - no, whirled - around, faster than a cracked whip. He struck the side of my unprotected face with the back of his hand, so hard it lifted me off my feet.

I scrambled, tumbling, but managed to land in a half-crouch.

There was blood in the air. I could taste it, that familiar coppery tang upon my tongue. I shook my head, groggy from the blow, and looked up into the face of my attacker.

Dante growled. Blood dripped down his bare chin, splattering against his discarded death mask.

I tried to reach him, to get through the feral thing that Dante had become.

'Brother! Come to your senses!'

As he snarled, I saw red-rimmed teeth. Fangs protruded over pale, crimson-flecked lips. At least three bodies lay at his feet, their throats torn out.

He meant to turn on me next. I could see it in his eyes, those pitiless orbs awash with fury.

The blood had enslaved him. It had taken every one of them and ripped away all sense. Monsters, not angels, were standing before us. In the dim light of the audience hall, I saw his honour guard resolve like crimson spectres. Ruby-like eyes, taut with hunger, measured us.

'Dante...' I tried one final time, before knowing reason had fled this place.

I backed away, three slow steps. Not to flee - I needed more room to fight. I let the hammer's haft slide through my gauntleted fingers, before I firmly seized the grip.

Vulcanis and Zad'ir followed my lead, edging back and unsheathing their weapons.

'No guns,' I warned. To raise arms against our honoured allies was bad enough without shooting at them. I tried not to consider the ramifications if we actually killed one of them, or they us.

Vulcanis grunted, dragging Xakkus behind us, before hefting his shield and maul. He left the mace head deactivated, but I could see his desire to power it.

Zad'ir was Themian, descended from a tribe of barbarians and huntsmen; he needed no reason to seek a belligerent course. Unsheathing his glaive, he thrust it forwards like a goad.

'Master Tu'Shan...' I heard Ikanius behind me. His voice was weak. He had lost

a lot of blood. 'We cannot prevail...'

'I know,' I said. My eyes were unyielding like my demeanour as they met those of Dante and his prowling warriors.

The Angels had fallen. They had bled their own to cease the mindless rampages of the afflicted and now they wanted us to bleed too.

'If we must die, we'll die on our feet,' I declared to my brothers. 'Unto the anvil!'

They echoed my cry as one before the Angels fell upon us.

A red surge swept out from the shadows, fangs glistening in the half light. They almost immediately overwhelmed us, dragging at our limbs, pushing us down to try and bare our throats to their hunger. Our only advantages were the fact they all couldn't tear into us at once and that their blood-fever made them reckless. I hoped also that some vestige of sanity yet remained and, through the fog of blood, some part of the Angels still perceived allies and were trying to hold back.

Vulcanis and Zad'ir fought as two sides of a triangle with me at the apex and Ikanius and Xakkus between us. They battered the thirsting Blood Angels back, but did little more than repel them for a few seconds.

Dante came for me.

Mercifully, the Axe Mortalis lay discarded, forgotten in his blood-red fury. I held him at bay with the haft of my thunder hammer pressed against his armoured chest but his strength and ferocity was still enough to bear me down.

Like vermin, his warriors began to swarm over us but Dante held them off with snarls and the baring of his fangs. I was his kill, they said.

Letting go of the hammer, I managed to get my left hand around Dante's chin without him biting it off at the wrist.

Blood-red filled his eyes, obliterating retina and pupil until all that remained was a crimson sclera. The remains of those he had drank dripped upon my face, like hot splashes of metal.

'See!' I urged, seizing his noble chin in my grasp.

Dante struggled, and I felt the awesome strength in his limbs.

'Look into my eyes and know me,' I cried.

Still, Dante fought to claim his kill.

I had to stop him and somehow appeal to the man inside the monster.

'You are not a beast,' I told him. 'You are Dante!'

I held him fast and thought I felt his struggles ease a little.

'Know me,' I said again, more calmly, hoping my demeanour would transfer by showing Dante my humanity.

'Tu'Shan,' I said, my expression filled with silent urging, 'your friend... your brother.'

Dante blinked, and the feral look in his eyes softened, though did not retreat entirely.

He gagged and I let him go.

'Stop!' he shouted, weary, sated. 'Brothers, stop this!'

Dante's senses returned, the lucidity of the moment reasserting itself as the enslavement to his baser instincts diminished.

Slowly at first, but confounded enough so as to pose no further immediate threat to my warriors, the Blood Angels emerged from their red thirst.

'It is within us,' he said, 'a curse, I—'

Rising, a glance to my drakes for them to stand down, I waved Dante's words away.

'You'll never have to explain yourself to me, brother.'

Dante looked surprised at first. About to smile, his mood turned grim at the sight of Abathor's remains.

'I missed it,' he uttered to himself, to me, his kin, it didn't matter. 'The blood... it's always in the blood.'

Averting his eyes from the dead and returning them to me, he said, 'You honour me, you honour us. I could not want for a stauncher ally than you, Tu'Shan.'

I bowed to acknowledge his words but Dante wasn't finished.

'I asked you to look into my eyes, brother,' he said. 'Do so again now, and tell me what you see.'

I saw red, an ocean of crimson, a darkness encroaching at the edge of every thought and violent deed. A thirst. A madness. I was reminded of the mosaic, the struggle between light and dark described by the artist.

'An exemplar,' I told him, 'a noble warrior worthy of my respect.' I clapped my hand upon his shoulder as he had done to me. 'I see a friend, Dante.'

His smile turned rueful, his eyes faded back to what they were before, albeit tempered with regret.

'Burdens,' he told me. 'That is what you see. I have mine. You have yours. Our desire is the same. To keep our brothers on an even path, to guard against sedition and to ward our souls from damnation.'

'Burdens,' I echoed, knowing we would have to raze the sunken citadel to ash, 'but neither of us need bear them alone.'

'Our charge is to be alone, Tu'Shan.'

I shook my head, finally understanding.

'A brotherhood is never alone, Dante.'

A DARK ANGELS STORY

ALL MUST END

Gav Thorpe



THEY HID THEIR fears well. They were Space Marines, trained and engineered to fear nothing, yet Harahel could sense the discomfort of his companions. Psychic powers, matters of the warp, from astropaths to Navigators to the Imperial Tarot, were forces beyond understanding for them, and there was no amount of Chapter orthodoxy or mental conditioning that could completely eradicate that dread of the unknown and the unnatural.

Their fears were laid bare to his othersense, as plain to the Dark Angels Librarian as their physical features. To his psychic awareness everything was visible, infused by immaterial energy from the warp. Some scholars in the ancient past had believed the warp was a separate realm, existing alongside, but divided from, the material universe. They had not been psykers. They did not see the power of the warp, the empyrean of dreams and emotions, leaking back into reality through even the dumbest mind. It was little more than a smudge of power, but its presence was enough for Harahel to see into the souls of the others gathering in the brightly lit chamber.

Even as the glow of the candles highlighted the faces of the assembled Dark Angels officers, so the minuscule trickle of soul power gave curves and edges to their thoughts. The patterns were ever-changing, as moods varied and concern rose and fell, but Harahel could see the shapes within and discern their meaning.

Sammael, Grand Master of the Ravenwing, was the calmest of them. Or perhaps calm was not the right word. He was the most prepared, for he had seen Harahel perform these divinations at least a dozen times previously. Excitement touched

on the underlying nervousness; they were close to capturing one of the Fallen, and as Master of the Hunt Sammael could feel success edging into view. His thoughts were the brightest, too, glittering and golden. Perhaps too bright with optimism to survive much longer in his current role, but foolhardiness was frequently the deadly stalker of the Masters of the Second Company.

Harahel carefully stepped to the centre of the room, taking care not to disturb the hexagrammic wardings he had drawn onto the decking. The principal alignments were denoted by candles at the points of a twelve-pointed star enclosed within a circle, in turn encompassing a hexagonal device with runes he had marked in molten lead. He sat directly under the candelabrum - made of meteoric iron from the remnants of destroyed Caliban - in a large, plain chair.

As he lowered himself he considered Grand Master Belial, commander of the First Company, leader of the Deathwing. Belial's thoughts were sharp and precise, controlled to the point of obsession, like masonry carefully chipped and smoothed by a lifetime of experience, rather than something organic and grown like the others. The Deathwing commander's thoughts barely changed as he stood with arms folded, surveying the others in the room with a wary stare.

Harahel was not surprised to see that the most closed thoughts of all belonged to Asmodai, the Master of Repentance. His mind was a steel shell of utter conviction. Only the tiniest glimmer of his soul shone through the defences, brutally and efficiently stifled by centuries of practice and a natural closed-mindedness that Harahel found remarkable. Had the Emperor encountered Asmodai ten thousand years ago when he was perfecting the gene-seed of the Dark Angels, it was possible that all Space Marines might have ended up with such single-minded zealotry.

That free thought was still possible for the Adeptus Astartes was evident from the roiling display of Sapphon's emotions. They pulsed green and blue and red, almost at random, the sign of an active, creative mind at work. Sapphon's soul was well protected, like the others, but his thoughts were quite readable. Currently the Master of Sanctity was thinking it strange that such a ceremony should be conducted in the light, when so many of the Dark Angels' inner mysteries took place in darkened chambers.

While Harahel's mind-sight regarded his companions, his regular senses took in

other features of the room: the scent of the candles mixed with a hint of oil and a touch of rust; the heat of the other Space Marines and the flickering flames that lit them; the creak and murmur of the starship's bulkheads and decks; the undercurrent of the plasma engines throbbing through the vessel from aft to prow.

He allowed it all to become one, merging physical and psychic as he closed his eyes. As his eyelids descended, the two worlds - the real universe and the warp echoes - became as one in his thoughts, so that even though he no longer looked upon the chamber with his physical sight he was well aware of what transpired around him.

Harahel placed his hands in his lap and allowed the psychic power to flow. He could sense the apprehension of the others increase as they noticed flickering light from beneath his eyelids. The Librarian rested his head against the back of his chair and exhaled smoothly, pushing away the last of the trepidation he had felt when he had proposed the ceremony. Any warp delving was risky, and in this place, so close to the Eye of Terror, the risks were greater than usual. But Harahel was strong and had trained for three hundred years. He was ready.

The Librarian was about to release his mind into the warp, but disturbances close at hand held him back. The thoughts of the others, so disparate, so at odds, made this initial navigation harder. Harahel needed to smooth their troubled emotions before he could perform the transition.

Sapphon was considering the nature of psykers and daemons, wondering if the reason they were so terrible was because they interacted directly with unconscious senses of the soul. He was not far from the truth, as Harahel saw such things, but now was not the time for such speculations. Thinking about the warp and its inhabitants stirred the stuff of the empyrean in a cyclic effect, so that it gained power even from idle speculation.

'Do not fear for my soul, Brother Sapphon,' Harahel said quietly. 'Every hour you spend reciting the hymnals and catechisms of the Chapter, I spend hardening my spirit against temptation and possession.'

At the mention of such things Asmodai, standing to Sapphon's right, shifted his weight, perturbed. The steel of his mind became a dagger, flames of

righteousness flaring along its length, directed towards the Librarian. A single thought blazed so strong the psyker could not avoid it: If Harahel shows the slightest sign of possession, I shall kill him.

A smile crept onto Harahel's lips.

'Please, Brother Asmodai, draw your pistol if it would make you feel more comfortable. I assure you, the wards are intact. The only person at risk is me.'

Regardless of the assurance offered by the Librarian, Asmodai drew his bolt pistol and aimed it at Harahel's head.

'Do not be too quick to use your weapon, brother, for there may be strange occurrences that are simply part of my delving into the warp.'

'You seek to send your soul to a world upon the edge of the Eye of Terror,' said Asmodai, his aim unwavering. 'I will take any precaution I feel necessary.'

'As you see fit, brother. Now I must beg silence, and to assist me it would be beneficial if you all focused on a particular thing, to stop the turbulence caused by your disparate thoughts as I enter the immaterium.'

'The Canticles of Nazeus?' suggested Sapphon. He received a nod in reply.

The Master of Sanctity began the invocation and the others joined in after a few seconds. Their combined voices rose and fell as they chanted, the sound shaped by the chamber, fading into the distance as Harahel prepared again to let go of his conscious thoughts. The Librarian was silent and still, withdrawing from his body, entering a trance so that his soul, or a portion of it, might lift his thoughts from their physical vessel to the turbulent eddies of the immaterium.

The chanting, the focus on the hymnal to the exclusion of other thoughts, stilled the ripples and echoes that had been disturbing Harahel's concentration.

'Sanctus Imperator protectorum,' the Librarian whispered. 'Be free.'

There was a feeling of detachment as his spirit lifted away from his mortal form. Always he was connected to the warp and the physical, a conduit for the unreal to enter the real, but with practised precision Harahel slipped away from himself

like a ship departing its mooring.

Heat, light, sound, all worldly sensation dropped away from his awareness. Instead, the weft and weave of the empyrean, the warp-sound and psychic thrum that he usually relegated to background noise became central to his universe. The real faded and the unreal solidified, still connected but transposed within his mind.

All around the Librarian was the tumult of the warp, but here, in the immediate space around him, was a calm pool, soothed by the devotional intoned by his brethren. They knew nothing of the effect it had, but the benefit remained.

Harahel tugged himself free of his body, loosing part of his consciousness onto the waves of the empyrean, allowing the pressure of the warp to carry him a short distance from the mortal host of his mind. He turned, not literally but in focus, to see his body sitting in the chair, surrounded by the wards and his battle-brothers. A trail like a golden cable snaked back to his body, tethering soul to flesh. It too was a construct of many years' training, allowing him to find his way back to his mortal shell.

Pulling back, Harahel watched the starship dropping away, deck by deck, until he saw it from outside, floating like a bubble on a stream, encased within the shimmer of its Geller field. A pulsing, irregular and powerful, drew his attention away from the warship and he focused on the source.

Distance was physically meaningless in the warp, but his brain could not cope with a dimensionless state, no matter his training. It was impossible to shape thoughts without a sense of up and down, near and far, in and out.

The pulsing came from somewhere close by, in galactic terms at least. A storm swirled on the edge of Harahel's perception, both sucking in all things like a vortex whilst simultaneously spewing forth tides and currents of warp power.

The Eye of Terror.

The greatest warp storm in the galaxy, so huge it covered dozens of light years of real space, an overlap between realms where material and immaterial were interchangeable. In the real universe it was perceived as a pulsing purple or red

orb in the heavens, but from the warp the Eye of Terror looked less like an abyssal gulf and more like a deep window onto stars and planets, nebulae and comets that all glittered with energy.

The Eye of Terror fluctuated constantly, and in its heaving Harahel could see that which existed between worlds, neither warp nor real, giving glimpses of the realms of the Chaos Gods. Such sights would drive lesser men insane, unable to interpret the swirling energies and tempestuous eddies. The training of the Librarian allowed Harahel to impose order onto the disorder, in a limited fashion, contorting his senses to imagine towering iron fortresses, tides of crystal waves, gleaming mirrorscapes and rotting forests.

He was dimly aware of his body reacting back on the starship. Out of instinct he narrated his journey, passing on what he experienced to the others. It required no more effort of thought than to keep his hearts beating and his lungs filling, a genuine stream of consciousness.

'Boundaries falling, walls breaking, the tumble of worlds and civilisations,' muttered Harahel, his lips barely moving. His eyes continued to move, as though in recognition or mockery of the warp-visions conjured by his othersense.

The power of the Eye of Terror was all-consuming. The Librarian felt it drawing him, pulling him into the maelstrom at its heart with irresistible force. Harahel was nothing but a mote on a raging ocean and his golden tether spooled out behind him like a lifeline connected to a warrior ejected into the vacuum of space.

Faster and faster he was pulled towards the inevitable crushing forces that raged through the Eye of Terror, and though Harahel diverted every thought and effort to fighting the inward tide there was nothing to stop his descent to the bottom of the opening pit of darkness.

He tried to make the tether go tight, to turn it into a golden rod that would hold him in place, but the force from the Eye of Terror was too strong. He felt the attention of intelligences vaster than any living creature, save perhaps the Emperor Himself. They momentarily regarded him in the same way one might notice a fleck of dust settling nearby. Harahel feared for a moment that one of those malign consciousnesses might reach out and examine the speck in more

detail, or perhaps flick it away without a thought, but the sensation passed and he remained alone and adrift on the flooding power of the warp storm.

Ulthor was located upon the very edge of this insane landscape, and to learn more Harahel knew he would have to venture into the unpredictable fronds of energy that licked about the outskirts of the Eye of Terror. His mental tether, the golden thread of his life, held firm, but he had no way to navigate. He had been turned inside-out, upside-down and back-to-front, and was so caught in the raging torrents that characterised the Eye of Terror that he was no longer sure how he could forge his way back to the others.

And then he glimpsed a solitary silver star.

He knew exactly what it was, and let his soul reach out towards it, latching on to its light as a drowning man seizes upon the lifebelt thrown to him. As he let the silver gleam fall upon him, Harahel was invigorated, filled by strength and warmth and a sense of belonging. The glow from the star melted through the raw Chaos, turning aside storm and wave, calming the warp around the Librarian even as it calmed his racing thoughts.

The beacon held true against all the buffeting of the Eye of Terror, strong and unwavering even here near the heart of the pulsing flow of energy. More than a beacon, it was a rock upon which to settle for a moment, a bridge to cross, a fortress against the madness and uncertainty.

The Astronomican.

The Guiding Light.

The Soul of the Emperor.

Harahel murmured his relief.

'The barrier sweeps aside, revealing the light beyond, the silvery path.'

Empowered by the grace of the Emperor's light, Harahel turned his attention to locating the world of Ulthor, hidden within the fronds of warp energy leaking from the Eye of Terror. He drew upon his psychic strength to manifest a form within the warp, as a daemon might create a false vessel in real space. Fuelled by

the light of the Astronomican, Harahel appeared as a knight of silver and white fire, blazing with the cold purity of his cause. In his hands he held a blade of dark green edged with pale flames, the crosspiece fashioned with splayed wings to match the Chapter symbol emblazoned on the chest plate of his immaterial armour. A cloak of deep blue hung from his shoulders, the colour of the Librarian.

Back on the Dark Angels ship, the Librarian's body straightened on the chair, his power armour whining with movement, limbs trembling slightly as his muscles became rigid for a moment. He relaxed again, frown softening, mouth opening with a gasp.

Fully formed, Harahel's immaterial avatar delved into the rifts of the warp, racing for the fringes of the Eye of Terror. The silver light of the Astronomican was left glittering in his wake.

Time flowed in curves and circles, passing and not passing in relation to real space, so it might have been a fraction of a moment or a thousand years before Harahel caught sight of that which he sought. On the very edges of the Eye of Terror stood a huge edifice, part crumbling cliff face, part immense stone tower, cracked and overgrown. A palpable miasma of decay surrounded the decrepit structure, a dark cloud that stained the warp and real universe in equal measure.

As the cloud parted for an instant, split by some random eddy of the warp, Harahel saw that the crumbling, monolithic keep was itself dwarfed by a far greater expanse. It was nothing more than an outhouse to a truly dread-inspiring mansion with a thousand broken-glass windows and countless sagging, cracked roofs. The tower of Ulthor lay in the shadow of the titanic manse, enveloped whole by the darkness and corruption spilling from great rifts and blasted holes in the structure of the mightier building. Harahel flinched, taken aback by the monstrous apparition, but the vision passed, swallowed by the warp currents a moment later, leaving Ulthor standing like a bony, upthrust finger surrounded by yellowing mists.

Still the silver star of the Astronomican shone overhead.

'On the border it stands, neither here nor there, real and yet unreal. Claimed but still free, the world of decay, a blossom in the dead garden. Upon the brink of

hope and despair it stands. Death and rebirth, the spiral of decline, until nothingness...'

His words brought reaction from the mortal realm, vague and distant.

'He is losing his mind,' he heard Asmodai say. 'Or something is taking it!'

'Hold your fire and your tongue,' said Sammael. The Chaplain laid a hand on his companion's bolt pistol. Asmodai's annoyance at the Grand Master flared like a plume of fire in the warp, but it was met with ice formed from the determined thoughts of Sammael. 'Do not think your reputation and rank greater than mine, Asmodai. Lower your weapon, Brother-Chaplain.'

'I cross the border, unseen by the many eyes, and the garden wilts around me,' whispered Harahel, unheeded by the others.

With reluctance, his ire dimming, Asmodai dropped the bolt pistol to his side. He glared at Sammael and returned his gaze to Harahel.

Harahel could feel the filth of Ulthor trying to leech his power from him. It was simple enough to siphon the rank warp energy into the hexagrammic wards, protecting his soul from corruption. On the starship, the air began to fill with shadows outside the hemisphere created by the warding signs.

Harahel moved his warp-self closer to Ulthor. He found that he could not approach the tower directly, but was forced to alight in a vast overgrown garden that clustered about the broken rocks at the bottom of the immense cliff.

As he explored, the Librarian allowed what he encountered to filter through his thoughts, shaping the shadows and light into representations of his warpsight. He could project visual images, but these were a flat caricature of what he felt coursing through his warp-self.

The garden was grown upon a foundation of misery and hopelessness. The twisted, stunted trees delved deep into the soil of despair, drawing up sustenance from broken dreams and shattered hope. As Harahel's feet sank into the mire he could feel the leeching effect trying to suck away his resolution, but he was able to resist the melancholy draining, the ground hardening beneath his tread as white fire burned the tainted mulch.

The air was thick with buzzing flies and the boles of the trees were rampant with many-legged creatures of all descriptions. They jumped about the sagging branches and leaves and regarded the intruder with glittering, multi-faceted eyes. Fungal growths vomited spores as Harahel passed, while microbes consumed everything with slow decay.

A fog of sadness laid droplets upon the foliage like the tears of the lost and abandoned. The sultry rustle of the leaves was filled with murmuring laments, of loves past and opportunities squandered. From the mulch underfoot jutted stones that would trip the unwary, jagged rocks upon which ambition was broken and pride bruised. Low-hanging vines moved like serpents, ready to catch the unwary in the grip of self-pity. Arachnids with pale and bloated bodies spun webs of selfdoubt between the tree limbs, the souls of the damned writhing within, wrapped more and more with loathing and despair as they struggled against the vile threads.

But not all was dismal. There were bright fronds and blossoms of rainbow hue hiding in the gloom. Caterpillars with striking tiger stripes and neon hairs gambolled amongst ruddy petals and nestled in leopard-spot cocoons, from which burst forth bulbous moths with death's head wings.

Here and there a chink in the canopy allowed a precious ray of light to fall upon the forest floor. In the fitful gleam of this nourishment, fragile flowers of hope pushed their way clear of the rotting carpet of insect corpses and leaves.

Yet the garish colours and joyous patterns could not hide the true nature of this place. By such phantasmal attractions were the unwary lured into despair.

The moment of freshness and clarity following recovery from a long sickness.

The joy of seeing a loved one after prolonged absence.

The swell of pride and fulfilment at the birth of a child.

These were snares of the emotions, moments of weakness to be exploited, for only those truly accepting of the eternal pain of existence and the inevitable corruption within were proofed against the heartbreak of disappointment and setback.

Not in endless drudgery, the thankless toil of everyday existence, was the Lord of Decay present, for in monotony was a base sort of comfort. It was the high notes, the tantalising promise of better, the scattered moments of elation, that were the cruellest weapons, for they set the mundane and pointless into stark contrast and plunged the soul into true despair. For every speck of light and colour, the forest and shadows seemed all the darker and more forbidding.

A masquerade of glittering jewels hid the dark truth that all things faltered and failed, a facade of happiness and fulfilment erected by the ego of all sentient creatures to persuade them there was a meaning within the interminable pointless cycle.

Slowly, across aeons of time, the decay grew stronger. Entropy picked apart all that existed, turning civilisations to dust and suns to clouds of cooling gas. Nothing could escape the grip of the immortal destroyer: time. Life became death and, in turn, death became life. Everything was sustained by this simple cycle of existence.

The Librarian let his companions see what he could see, showing them drooping leaves turned by autumn to russet and gold, mist streaming between the trunks tinged with green and black, a diseased smog. In the distance an immense edifice soared above the woods, indistinct, giant and grotesque.

Something was approaching. He heard buzzing from a distance, which swiftly became an incessant droning converging from all directions. The shadows seemed to merge and deepen, thickening, if that were possible, becoming tangible like a pool of oil. The noise drowned out the fluttering of dried leaves and the drip of foggy tears.

From everywhere, fat-bodied flies spilled from beneath the gloom of the decaying forest. The swarm engulfed Harahel in moments, pressing closer and closer until a layer of furry blackness covered him, constantly moving. They found gaps in his armour to settle on his skin, not biting, but squashing their bloated bodies into his flesh, oppressive through virtue of their numbers. They sought the visor of his helm, thickening on his face, pressing through to cover his eyes and blot out the light of the Astronomican.

He tried to sweep them away with his gauntleted hand, but they were too thick, too numerous. Like a drowning man thrashing at the waves, his blows moved slowly, the thickness of the swarm itself so dense that it was suffocating. Where he crushed them, vomit-yellow smears stained his armour, bubbling and blistering like acid. The droning was intolerable, making his head throb, burning his eardrums with its monotony.

Harahel flailed, gritting his teeth, but parting his lips simply allowed more of the flies to push in, skittering along his gums, trying to squeeze their soft bodies between his incisors. His nostrils were blocked by squirming insects forcing their way up into his sinuses, seeking the warm passages down into his lungs. The Librarian attempted to dislodge the swarm with the leaves hanging lank from drooping branches, crashing through the trees, almost tripping on the rocks of folly that appeared beneath his tread. Blood-like sap splattered his battleplate, sticky fluid seeping into the joints and hardening to a paralysing resin.

It was as though they were buzzing inside his head now. He could feel thousands of grotesque bodies pushing into his organs, crawling along nerves and arteries, clogging his lungs and heart.

This was how all things ended. Even the mighty Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes. Even the Astronomican. Even the Emperor.

It was all so pointless to struggle. What if he were to prevail today? There would be another battle tomorrow. Each day brought fresh threats against mankind. The Space Marines were pitifully and ridiculously few.

Fewer than one Space Marine per world in the Imperium. The forces of the Imperial Guard numbered in the countless billions, but their souls and hearts were weak and in time even that bulwark would crumble like a wall battered by the constant wind and rain. Courage would falter, and what then?

Why did it matter? To die today was no better and certainly no worse than dying tomorrow. That was the nature of the inevitable, the unavoidable. Orks could be slain, eldar craftworlds destroyed, tyranid fleets scattered, but there was no way to defeat time or death. It was folly and pride to believe that anything made a difference.

Harahel's courage suffocated even as imaginary lungs were starved of breath. He felt the darkness consuming him. No, not consuming, welcoming. He had but one chance to rid himself of the curse of life. It was simple, to accept that the Lord of Decay was his master. In doing so he would become one with decay, its ally, not its victim. No matter how superhuman his mind and body, only acceptance of the ascendancy of the Master of the Dead Manse could save Harahel.

A distant voice, a connection to the real world, brought him back from the void of oblivion. He reached out with his thoughts, drawn back to his body by the contact.

'Ulthor, brother,' said Sammael, stepping closer to the Librarian. The black of his robes seemed to suck in what little light remained, leaving his face a pale mask floating in gloom. 'Cast your mind to the world of Ulthor. It is close, brother.'

Sammael's faith was like a cleansing touch, his brotherhood a source of infinite strength. Harahel did not fight for himself, for his eternal soul or his mortal body. He fought for his brethren in the Chapter. He fought for mankind. He fought for the Emperor.

In a moment, refreshed by the contact with his physical form, the Librarian found that the fly swarm had gone. Not dissipated, but burned away by silver flames crackling across his body, their daemon-essence absorbed, their power neutralised by a psychic surge, leaving nothing but wispy husks flying away on a strengthening breeze of his renewed will.

Though he had fended off the flies, Harahel knew his trials were far from over as he pressed on towards his goal. Storm clouds swirled and thickened overhead, the sky turning from grotesque yellow to black, as though bruised by the battering of some huge fist.

The rotten canopy of the dead forest swayed as the gales came, bringing with them a tumult of broken branches and tattered leaves that crashed against Harahel's armour as he advanced into the tempest. Step by step he forged forwards, jaw clamped tight with determination.

Back aboard the Dark Angels starship, Harahel's body flinched and tensed again.

His breathing came more quickly and his fingers moved from his lap to grip the arms of the chair.

With Sammael's words driving him, he fixed on the shadowy tower atop the distant cliff, taking one slow step after another, leaning hard into the gale. The storm did not wholly obscure the light of the silver star. Harahel could see the paler gleam like a path in front of him, occasionally being blotted out as darkness swirled, sometimes turning into forked lightning that split open the storm and lit the road ahead.

Coming to the foot of the cliff, Harahel paused and looked up. From this perspective the edifice seemed almost endless, the city-tower out of sight, the heights of the cliff lost in the gloom of distance.

He reached up and took hold of a jutting rock. Pulling himself up, he found a foothold and raised himself off the ground. Harahel fixed his stare at the vaguest line that delineated cliff-top from sky and climbed. His thoughts shaped the cliff face so that wherever he sought a handhold for fingers to grip or a niche for toes to set upon, there was always something there.

His was not the only will that guided the formation of the dark rock. Roots split the stones, jabbing like spears into his body and legs, scratching across his armour. Others writhed like tentacles, trying to grasp wrists and ankles, seeking to wrench him from his precipitous advance. The more he ascended, the more violently the cliff struggled against him, lashing whips of roots trying to dislodge him, to send him plummeting back to the hungry forest below.

Wasting no energy, not even to snarl or groan, Harahel pushed upwards, his thoughts enclosed behind a barrier of steel as his immaterial form was shielded by the silver of his armour. The labour was nothing, a test of will more than muscle, and no sooner had he come to this realisation he found himself grasping a fistful of rock to haul himself onto the cliff-top.

It had seemed to him before that the tower of Ulthor had been almost upon the edge of the great drop, but he found that it had been a lie, a trick of hope rather than objective perspective. The tower had disappeared and in its place he saw an immense ebon-petalled flower.

'The black rose, a thousand flies crawling on the petals. The stem bends but does not break, swayed by foetid winds carrying pollen of despair to the bright flowers of hope. A choking presence, cloying.'

He could see the tiny pollen grains pouring into the sky like the fumes from a fire. If he focused he could see that each miniscule dot was in fact three globes attached to each other, and each of the globes was a grinning skull. The smog rose higher and higher, whirling about in a vortex of wind until it reached the storm clouds, where it drifted down across the whole of the foetid garden and the dead woods beyond.

Like black snow the pollen fell, and though he brought up a corner of his blue robe to cover his nose and mouth he could feel the tiny particles passing through the weave, settling about his tongue and throat.

He thought they might bring pain, but instead he felt numbness stretching from where they alighted on membrane and muscle. His jaw felt slack and his airways opened, allowing more and more of the black pollen beads into his body.

Individually, the tiny intruding specks were inconsequential, but as they grew in number Harahel felt them melting into his body, trying to become part of him. Like the flies before, the pollen set itself in his flesh, looking to become a seed, to send out roots into his thoughts.

He staggered, mesmerised by the apparition of the gigantic black rose. There was purity in its blackness, hidden colours and depths that he had never imagined existed. The pollen was not a poison, it was an elixir of truth, granting him the ability to see the universe as it really was. Through eyes stained grey he saw the atoms at the heart of suns perishing to produce heat and light. He saw the dust of dead novae collecting over the ages to form new worlds, new stars. In bacterial sludge he saw energy transferring from one state to another, never disappearing, simply finding new forms, infused with immortality.

The sludge expanded and grew, became higher life, sentient and selfknowing, and the innocence faded. The blossom began to wilt with the pain of knowledge. To see, to hear and feel was to deceive oneself. The mind existed only as a barrier to the reality that all was transient and nothing was permanent.

He wanted to help the flower, to sustain its beauty, but already he was guilty of the sin of knowing. Harahel's resistance was a poison in the bosom of the earth, seeping into the roots of purity. It was his adherence to falsehood that was causing the bloom to sag, the petals falling away one by one, each loss accompanied by a wrenching pain in Harahel's heart.

The Librarian gasped loudly and flung a hand to his face, covering his eyes, though they were still shut. The darkness around him was absolute, the vista of light-woven scenes playing about his head and turning like a kaleidoscope, coming in and out of focus.

For the first time since besting the cliff Harahel noticed the soft ground underfoot, welcoming and golden. He wanted to lie down, to be subsumed into the layer of fertile earth so that his essence could give life to new creatures. In accepting his role he would purge the toxins he had brought forth with his presence. His conversion to the truth would be nourishment, enriching the bloom of death that he desired so strongly. Sacrifice would water the roots, his blood and soul fertiliser to make the stem stand strong again, to push forth new flowers so that the great process of reproduction could spread the pollen of truth across the galaxy.

Though Harahel's conscious thoughts wanted him to surrender, his instincts - his inner mind protected by centuries of ritual and practice - pushed him on towards his goal. Where the mind was weak, the soul remained strong. Though he could no longer see the silver star, he could still sense its presence, lighting his way to his objective. He followed it blindly, trusting to the Emperor to deliver him to his purpose.

He stumbled on, fighting the sensations, trying to stay awake. He was so tired. His legs were leaden, and he had long since given up trying to shield his face with his cloak. Every breath drew in a thousand more pollen globes. Harahel was almost at the last of his resistance, numbed and exhausted.

The Librarian turned as he fell, looking back the way he had come. Before his eyes closed forever he caught a glimpse of the silver star.

Forcing his eyes to remain open he allowed the light of the Emperor to stream into him. Its presence drove out the black pollen, purging arteries and veins,

heart and lungs, guts, hands and feet.

As the pollution within him cleared, so too did the sky. The storm receded, revealing a beautiful azure heaven untroubled by cloud or wind. A silver sun touched him with warmth. The armour that was his second skin absorbed the strength of its rays, abating the numbness to fill him with fresh vigour.

The tower was close now and Harahel knew that it had been there all along, concealed by the glamour of the black rose. He could almost reach out and touch the moss-covered, pitted stone walls. Tendrils of plant life covered the crumbling brickwork, obscuring doorways and windows, twisting around the skeletons of those that had attempted to climb them before. The wind returned, now chill and laden with the scent of death. As the vines stirred, skulls chattered to the Librarian, their rictus warnings wordless but strangely comprehensible.

Only the foolish followed in the footsteps of those that had perished. Only the prideful dared to think themselves strong enough to overcome the obstacles that still lay ahead. Arrogance would be Harahel's downfall. Better to return in failure than never return at all.

The snickering of the death's heads fuelled the Librarian's doubts. His companions would never know - could never comprehend - the risks he had taken already. It would serve no purpose to die here, ensnared by the evil of this broken keep. How could he protect humanity from beyond the grave?

Despite these misgivings weighing down every step, Harahel resolved to push on. It was the destiny of every Space Marine to ultimately offer up his life for mankind, and it was not for Harahel to decide that one day was better than another. This was the task at hand and he would apply himself to it with all his strength and will until he succeeded, or died.

All that remained was to traverse the mire that surrounded Ulthor like a moat. Bubbling tar pits and sucking marsh lay between him and his goal. Fronds of rushes stood out from the boggy ground, rattling in a dry wind. The noise of escaping gases and the movement of something sinuous and large beneath the surface caused Harahel to pause at the swamp's edge.

There looked to be pathways through the mire, but the Librarian was not so

easily fooled. He was beginning to get the measure of this place. The false hope was the foundation of everything that passed in this immaterial reflection of Ulthor. All that seemed achievable was simply a ruse created to drag the interloper further into the web of despair, drawn so far from their normal path that they could not find their way out again. The seemingly secure route would doubtless peter out, leaving him stranded, succumbing to isolation and despair.

Then he remembered where he was. He did not have to toil across the morass, he could simply extend his will and make it something else. Just as its light had resurrected his flagging strength, so now the heat of the silver star, guided by his power, baked the corrupted earth dry, turning marsh to packed dirt, tar to hardened puddles of blackness. The plants withered under the harsh light of Harahel's power, drying and cracking beneath his psychic glare.

The energy of the writhing grasses and towering rushes seeped into the ground to escape the glare of the Librarian's assault. Here the warp power swelled roots and tubers, which in turn leached more nourishment from the dirt, continuing to grow to enormous proportion. Harahel could sense them bulging like seed pods, the latent power within pulsing and churning. As he scanned them with his mind he felt that he was being regarded by malign beings in return.

The roots started to move, burrowing towards Harahel, metamorphosing from vegetable matter to something else, something not quite animal but sentient and aware. White-bodied, feeling their way towards the Librarian by latching on to the scent of his soul, the loathsome sluglike beasts closed in.

'A field of maggots, laid beneath the bosom of the world, full of vitality, waiting to burst forth. They hear me. The blind worms see me.'

Beads of sweat were running down the psyker's physical brow and the light leaking from beneath his eyelids took on a rusty hue.

'The warp is claiming him,' he heard Asmodai snarl as the Chaplain shoved Sapphon aside to stand at the very edge of the psychic circle. 'Something is burrowing into his mind.'

'Do not break the field,' warned Sapphon, taking a step closer. 'We must trust to his assurances, brother.'

On the edge of awareness, Harahel noticed Asmodai dart a look at Sapphon that conveyed his contempt for the assurances of psykers more clearly than any words. The psyker flinched, feeling the lash of contempt striking his soul. Sammael moved up beside the Chaplain, eyes flashing with anger, but he did not lay a hand on Asmodai.

Breaking into a run, Harahel forged his way past the dead and dying blooms of the marsh-plants, heading towards the base of the Ulthor tower. His armoured boots left imprints in the dust that filled with grey ooze from below. The slime puddles took on a bulbous shape, turning grey from green, budding grasping hands and beady eyes. Clawed fingers and antlers sprouted from fist-sized daemonic minions. Snarling and giggling, they tumbled after Harahel, forming a carpet of vicious, grinning faces and red eyes.

The Librarian focused his powers ahead, trying to see into the tower that represented the world of Ulthor. Much was barred to his sight, encrusted with vile mould and lichen that blotted his thoughts, but he was able to pierce the foundations of the city, which stretched deep into the rotten earth.

He sensed mortal souls for the first time since leaving his companions, tainted by the touch of the Lord of Decay. In the roots sprawling from the city he saw icons and livery known to him, and warriors clad in ancient, decay-ridden suits of war-plate: the Death Guard. He sought more information, hoping to glimpse their dire primarch, the dread Mortarion, but there was no sign of the daemon-cursed leader of the Traitor Legion. Instead, Harahel witnessed row upon row of ghastly sarcophagi housing bloated, pale warriors, while an endless line of young slaves were herded into dark cellars, trailing implants that twitched and sputtered with their own life.

The mites of decay were on his heels, scrabbling and grasping, threatening to trip him. Harahel knew he had to stay upright. If he fell he would be engulfed by the daemonic creatures, cut off from the silvery light that yet remained his guiding star.

Broken nails scratched at his armour and tugged at his cloak. Chitters and sniggers followed him, just a step behind. Harahel sensed the overwhelming nature of the foe behind him, but he could not stop himself from turning to see the extent of the threat.

The carpet of daemon-things stretched far and wide, in places forming hummocks as scores of the plague-mites scrambled over each other to get at him. He needed just a little more time to probe the secrets of Ulthor.

Drawing a silver blade, he carved a flaming furrow into the mass of daemons, bursting their bodies with concentrated waves of loathing and disgust. He formed his hatred for the creatures into bolts of fire that leapt from his eyes, and as he did so he stretched the rest of his thoughts into the tower, trying to hunt down its secrets.

'The pods, all in a row, dangling from the tree of death like the hangman's fruit.' Harahel's body was feverish now, skin ashen, limbs twitching like a palsy victim.

On the surface, gun towers and fortifications of rusted metal jutted from the ground like broken teeth. The fortress spread like a cancer, infused with the will of the Death Guard, raised by mortal servants and daemoniac conjuration given form as shuffling mobs of mindless vassals. He pulsed a warning back to his companions in the only way he could.

'Little skins of metal, peeling back, revealing the maggot within the womb. The thorns drip with blood, coiling about the city, snaring all that will enter.'

A ring of white fire exploded outwards from his knightly form, incinerating the decay-daemons by the thousands, leaving him in a charred circle, unmolested for a few moments. The curtain protecting the innards of the city parted. Harahel did not hesitate, but plunged in, throwing his soul into the breach to see what lay concealed behind the tower walls.

Something stirred in the heart of the city, swollen and monstrous, yet in its centre Harahel saw something else - a window back into the reality of the material universe. He thought he recognised the stars somehow, a vision of a system imprinted on his memory but one he had never visited in his long years of service. The shattered ruin of a world slowly orbited the star, a billion chunks of rock and vacuum-scoured ice. Now and then he glimpsed something impossible: the evidence of human artifice. The face of a statue, the broken remnants of a wall, a piece of power armour or bolter.

Harahel could not shake the feeling of familiarity as he spied the remnants of a

window spinning through the ruin, the glass stained with green in the shape of a white wing.

This was the warp and he knew that what he saw was not real - not a physical place but an idea. These were symbols, not literal objects, but Harahel could not decipher their meaning. He tried to take in as much as possible, staring into the open abyss in the hope of seeing something that would decode the message.

This train of thought took him to another level of understanding. A message, perhaps? An astrotelepathic projection? If it was an astropath's missive, it carried none of the usual markers and templates. But then, what was one to expect this close to the Eye of Terror? The message could be from ten thousand years in the past, or even the future, it was impossible to say.

Rather than trying to riddle the source, Harahel concentrated on absorbing all of the elements, so that he might deconstruct its meaning at leisure once he was back in his body.

It seemed to him that somehow the massive inhabitant of Ulthor was communicating with something else, outside the Eye of Terror. But that didn't strike the Librarian as quite right. The hole opening up between the real and unreal was a conduit, formed of a mass, a singular entity.

The thing in Ulthor and whatever it was communicating with, or had communicated with, or would communicate with, were one and the same in some fashion.

Hidden deep amongst the asteroids was something else, a part of the beast that lurked in Ulthor. Just as the shining knight was Harahel's presence in the warp, the daemon-thing of Ulthor had a guise in the real world. A perfect matt-grey sphere amidst a cluster of asteroids glinted against the starry void.

He saw prison bars falling away and felt a surge of release. Something longed to escape the warp. Something that had already imparted a piece of its essence into the material world but had been thwarted in the past. Was the time coming when it would escape completely? The thought filled Harahel with foreboding, a sinister sensation far deeper than simple horror. The scene foreshadowed an event of great importance, and he had been fortunate to have glimpsed this

warning. His psychic sense was like a shrill alarm, telling him that great disaster was about to befall his brethren.

He knew this place but he could not bring himself to believe the truth of it. The time had come to leave, so that he could take what he had seen to the others. He had not been able to project the vision-within-a-vision, so he would have to tell them first-hand of the connection between Ulthor and the broken world.

The window closed as the city-beast sensed Harahele's presence. Like a blast door closing, the vision disappeared, unreality slamming down into the Librarian's psychic view. Lashing out with rage, Ulthor's unnatural ruler summoned forth the daemons of despair and decay and within moments Harahele was surrounded by a horde of grotesque apparitions.

They fell upon him without a sound, and though he lashed out with his flaming blade, he was soon overwhelmed as more and more of the daemons piled onto him. For every cyclopean creature he cut down, two took its place. For every handful of bulbous mites he destroyed, a welter of fresh daemons surged into the breach. The ground itself, once obedient to his will, now rebelled. The mire started to bubble up around his feet again, becoming softer and softer with every passing heartbeat.

Finding himself up to his thighs in the marsh, Harahele's movements were woefully hampered. He twisted to look at the Ulthor tower but couldn't see it properly, as though it was somehow deliberately avoiding his gaze.

He looked up, hoping for a glimpse of the silver star, but nothing but black clouds filled the heavens. With a choked cry Harahele realised that he was cut off.

Outnumbered and engulfed, he was borne down to the ground, which opened up beneath him like a grave.

He felt maggots latching onto him, gnawing at his psychic body, burrowing and prying at his armour, peeling away his defences even as the other daemons battered and tore with their fists and claws and prised at the joints of his armour with rusted blades and broken horns.

Their touch withered him. Armour became rust and flaked away. Skin slewed

from flesh, and flesh rotted to the bone. Bone became dust as the convulsing earth of the grave consumed him. Only the core of his soul remained, guarded by the precious silver light of the Emperor, an impenetrable shield of faith and determination forged over decades of inculcation into the defensive rites.

A worm slid into the remnants of a decaying eye, slipping along the optic nerve into the meat of his brain. Others followed, passing along neural pathways, slithering and sliding between synapses, seeking a route into his mind, taking control of the flesh.

They heard what he heard, saw what he saw. He had sought to spy on them, and now they looked to turn his own body against him, to wield it as a weapon against the Dark Angels.

'The city, Harahel, what of the city?' asked Sammael, eyes flicking between Asmodai and the Librarian. 'Think of the city.'

Ulthor was just a memory now. It collapsed into nothing in his thoughts, flowing over him like a sandstorm, blowing away the last vestiges of his psychic construct. Yet it was also still there, impermeable, eternal, made not of brick and mortar but hopelessness and woe.

'The majesty of decay, towering and fallen, standing solid upon the shifting sands.'

He reached out to the hidden silver star, a prayer in his thoughts, seeking the strength of the Emperor to free him from the grip of the foes leeching his will, tunnelling into his thoughts. Across the warp divide he could see back aboard the starship and felt something else looking through his eyes as more worms dug into his flesh.

He had to get back, but for the moment he was no longer in control.

Suddenly the Librarian stood up, knocking the chair to the ground. He noticed Sapphon feeling a moment of dread as Harahel opened his eyelids, revealing milky-white corpse eyes. A rope of saliva drooled from the corner of his mouth.

Harahel saw Asmodai raise his pistol and silently thanked the Emperor for the Chaplain's unflinching dedication to duty. He wanted to tell Asmodai to shoot,

but his lips were no longer his own, his tongue a limp slug rotting behind his teeth. He wanted to beg the Chaplain to fire, to end the life of his mortal form, to cut the golden thread that linked soul to physical body, a golden thread that was now the route of intrusion used by the daemons.

The worms were now burning at the silvery light of his last defences, etching a path like acid on metal, while their companions slinked down through sinew and vein, energising muscle and organ with warp energy. They were preparing the body for full possession, infusing it with their own power so that they could reshape it at a whim.

'No!' shouted Sammael, tackling Asmodai to the floor.

Harahel's body was becoming a portal. Their control was not yet absolute. If he wanted to resist physically he had to extend his will from beyond the moat of pure energy that kept the daemons at bay. Better to die body and soul than surrender the physical and spend an eternity trapped inside his own thoughts, impotent and ashamed.

He allowed a sliver of his mind to extend back into the real universe, burning along the golden thread of his existence.

'They are here!' snarled Harahel.

Sapphon drew his pistol while Asmodai wrestled himself free from the grip of Sammael. The Master of Sanctity aimed at the Librarian's left eye, knowing the shot would punch through into the psyker's brain and slay him in an instant, cutting off the conduit for whatever was trying to use his soul as a bridge into the mortal world.

He was about to pull the trigger when Harahel collapsed with a shriek.

Harahel looked at Sapphon, trying to plead with his eyes, urging him to shoot as he had urged Asmodai to shoot.

There was nothing left. The daemons possessed his form to the innermost fibre and smallest atom. It was just a shell for their power, a puppet whose strings had been taken from the Librarian. He tried to wrest control again, opening up more of his thoughts to the psychic assault of the daemons in return for just a few

seconds of corporeal influence.

Their response was instantaneous and agonising. Shards of vital pain coursed through Harahel, and he fainted, relinquishing even consciousness for a moment.

The Librarian lay still, face down. The light flowed back from his body to the candles and the strange shadows faded back to normal. The lead symbols of the floor had turned to indistinct blobs, sizzling, spitting and steaming as though on a hot plate.

Sanity and sensation returned, but it was with despair that Harahel saw what had happened. Only the most slender thread of energy connected him to his body, overwhelmed by formless slime and writhing maggots. He was a silent, inconsequential witness to his own actions.

Harahel pushed himself slowly to all fours and looked at his companions. Trickle of blood marked him from ears, nostrils and eyes, quickly drying and clotting on pallid skin. Saphon looked into the Librarian's eyes, dark brown with disappearing flecks of gold, and saw the warrior he knew looking back. Asmodai was not yet convinced, his pistol once again aimed at Harahel.

Harahel screamed, but the scream was voiceless. He could see the tiny flickers of warplight that were the souls of his brethren and he wanted to touch them. An instant of connection, a moment of intuition, to urge them to kill the thing that was waking before them.

He had no strength left. All that remained - his body, his thoughts, even his memories - now belonged to the daemonkin. The Librarian had no power to throw his warning into the mind of another, no energy to spark revulsion or suspicion with a glance.

'What are the three Abjurations of Assiah?' demanded the Chaplain.

The daemons plucked the knowledge from Harahel's brain. His tutelage by the Chaplains, session after session in the Reclusiam alone and with the other initiates, flashed through his existence. He could not stop the words rising unbidden to his thoughts, and from there the daemons carried them to his lifeless lips.

'Despise the mutant, abhor the heretic, loathe the alien,' Harahel replied, voice hoarse.

Despair. It was total, enveloping Harahel with its darkness. The Lord of Decay had known this would happen from the moment Harahel had parted the veil of the warp and looked upon the entropic garden. It was folly, arrogance, to believe that anyone could escape the clutches of the immortal destroyer.

Not even a Librarian of the Adeptus Astartes, one of the most highly trained psykers birthed by humanity, could resist the slow turning of the aeons. Naive pride had sent him into the empyrean realm, hoping to undo the plans of the Lord of Decay's mortal followers. This had provided a gateway for the daemons, and through misguided intent Harahel had doomed his companions and the others aboard their starship. Lies would bring them into the warp and there they would be consumed.

If Harahel had possessed a body he would have convulsed with weeping, torn apart by the grief of what he had done. Total, all-devouring despair tore ribbons from his mind, casting out sanity like streamers of thought that dissipated on the waves of the empyrean.

'And name the six principal Lords of the Keys,' Asmodai insisted, the muzzle of his pistol following Harahel's head as the Librarian righted the chair and, with much wincing and grunting, forced himself upright.

Again the daemons delved into his brain, bringing back the scent of freshly lacquered wood, the droning of Chaplaincy epistles, the growl of his masters prowling along the benches ready to exact retribution for one misspoken word, one heartbeat of hesitation in intonation.

Harahel lunged at a memory, frantically latching on to it, trying with all his strength to stop it surfacing but the daemons pried it from his grasp and traitorous lips spoke the words.

'Nessiad, Direstes, Thereoux, Mannael, Dubeus and...'

With one last agonising effort Harahel reached out, blossoming like a flower, revealing everything to his core as he grasped the silver star, letting it burn

through him. He could not destroy the daemons, but he could hold them at bay.

For what seemed like an eternity he drove them back, feeling their teeth and barbs tear at his soul. Every effort to purge himself inflicted more pain and misery upon body and spirit. In the real world less than a heartbeat passed, but for Harahel it was an immortal age of mind-shredding agony as he made himself a conduit for the power of the Emperor, turning his psychic-self into a pyre, the flames igniting the energy of the daemons.

They scrambled to fight him, to blot out the silver fire with their darkness, to expunge flame with grotesque slime. In the moment of conflict Harahel stopped fighting. Rather than striving to regain control, Harahel withdrew from himself, for an instant forcing the daemoniac presence to reveal itself.

For a brief moment the silver fire consumed Harahel, cowering the daemons. He wrested control of his body.

The Librarian hesitated, a twitch in his eye. 'And...'

Asmodai fired.

The bolt took off the side of Harahel's skull, ripping through the intricate wiring of the psychic hood, spattering gore across the rune circle.

Harahel watched his body dying, the slow ebb of life from heart and lungs. He was satisfied. The daemons fled the falling corpse and the empty shell of his mortal self crashed to the deck.

For a moment more his soul lingered in the warp, surrounded by the vengeful, ravenous daemons. The Librarian felt no fear. Sanctuary was close at hand, for his mind was a fortress once more, if only for an instant. Not for him the mindless eternity awash with the tides of the warp, a mote in the whorl of greater beings.

The silver fire of the Astronomican consumed the last of him, turning the last vestiges of his soul to a flicker of fire that was absorbed by the greater light.

And then Harahel was no more.

AN AHRIMAN STORY

HOUNDS OF WRATH

John French



*'Do not ask which creature screams in the night.
Do not question who waits for you in the shadow.
It is my cry that wakes you in the night,
And my body that crouches in the shadow.'*

- Karazantor the Vile, the Traitor of Xian

KNOW THIS, THE daemon is a lie.

The daemon claims supreme dominion. It claims that in time all will be its slaves, that reality will lie broken, and that it shall rule the realm of mortals for eternity. It says that it is destiny. It says, in the paradox time of the warp, that this has already happened. These claims, like every part of its nature, are false.

The daemon's existence is a dream. Its power is the stolen strength of mortal minds. Its shape is an image painted onto existence so that we may look on it and know that our sins have returned for us. Though it has power, it is a power which eats itself. The high daemons, which some call gods, squabble of souls and dominion, betraying each other and themselves. They are not predators. They are carrion.

Yet, for all its falsity, the daemon has the ability to twist the mind of the living, to make flesh a mockery, to defy death, and bring ruin on the works of mortals. When the warp waxes, and the neverborn walk through the veil, they have the

strength to break armies and cast down heroes. They are always there, watching from the edge of thought and the corner of sight.

The daemon is a lie, but it is a lie that can unmake reality.

I say this because I have made my life in the calling and controlling of these creatures. I am Ctesias, and I above all know the price for believing in the power of the gods and their children.

Arrogance is the mark of the sorcerer, and those of the Thousand Sons more than any. We make the mistake of thinking that because we are not slaves that we cannot be prey. This is a tale of how I made that mistake, and the price that I paid.

THE FALL OF IGNORANCE spun in the fires of its death. Its hull had split from prow to beneath the bridge. Its stern hung from broken bones of girder. Standing upon the bridge, I watched as a splinter of iron and stone the size of a hab-stack tumbled slowly through the void.

+Geller field failure.+

I looked up. Astraeos knelt on the deck.

I shook my head and looked away without replying. The bridge was a cave of twisted metal open to the vacuum. Spheres of machine oil and blood drifted past me. Corpses, or rather parts of corpses, spun in lazy arcs. Portions of servitors hung from tangles of tubes and cables, still tethered to their systems. My eyes found pieces of power armour amongst the debris: a silver gauntlet set with a spiral of blue stones, a peg of severed bone projecting from within.

I sniffed. Inside my helm I could taste burnt meat and bitter ash.

+No,+ I sent. +It was not the Geller field.+

I reached out with my staff and sent a severed hand spinning with a gentle tap. Its fingers twitched at the psy-active contact.

+You seem very sure,+ sent Sanakht. He was standing on a crumpled wall

section above me, feet mag-clamped to the metal. The swordsman looked bored, his hands resting on the pommels of his paired blades. He was ready, but this was a place of the dead and there was nothing to threaten him.

+Seeming does not come into it,+ I replied. +I am sure.+

+The neverborn were here.+ Astraeos stood, his fingers dark with half frozen blood from the deck.

+A crushingly obvious fact,+ I sent, and I could not keep the weariness from my words. I closed my eyes for an instant. They stung with tiredness.

We had translated from the warp only four hours before, and the passage preceding it had not been kind. We had passed outwards from the central volume of the Eye of Terror. Storms had battered our fleet and minds.

I took a long slow breath inside my helm and felt my hand twitch with the instinct to pinch my forehead with my fingers. Bright motes of red light were dancing on the edge of my sight.

+There were neverborn here,+ I sent, +but that does not mean that the Geller field failed.+

+Then what did happen?+ sent Sanakht, his thought voice not hiding his impatience with both Astraeos and myself. I bit back a retort, and instead gave the most accurate reply I could.

+Something else,+ I sent.

+What?+ Astraeos asked, his eyes fixed on me, contempt bleeding off his aura in grey coils.

+I am...+ I began, then paused. The Fall of Ignorance had arrived an hour after the rest of the fleet, cast back into reality, still burning, the echoes of its death trailing after it in tatters of red warp skin. That in itself was a puzzle, a worrying puzzle. How had the daemons got within the ship if the Geller field had not failed?

+I am not certain,+ I finished.

Sanakht gave a cough of laughter across the vox. I was about to reply when another voice filled our minds.

+He is right. +

We all turned as one as Ahriman entered. He did not walk, but floated, guiding himself with threads of telekinetic force. Wreckage spun past him, sometimes so close that I was certain it would hit him, but it did not, and he did not change his speed or direction. A film of ice sparked on the high horns of his helm, and in the weave of his silk robes. A squad of Rubricae followed him, their feet locked to the deck as they marched in dull unity. He stopped in front of us, and we bowed our heads. The ache in my skull was still bright.

+Ctesias is right,+ sent Ahriman. +The shields did not fail. When the crew died they were fleeing from something that came from within. Their doom was with them when they passed into the aether.+

+The damage... + began Astraeos.

+One of the command crew overloaded the plasma couplings. Courage, or madness, it cannot be known.+ Ahriman paused, pivoting in the space above the burnt and twisted deck. +I can hear the screams still - they cling to the hull. But it is a storm without order, only the colour and texture of terror. And amongst it...+

His sending trailed away, and that hesitation sent ice across my skin.

+Master?+ sent Sanakht into the empty moment.

Ahriman shook his head, and turned his gaze on me.

+Discover what happened here, Ctesias. We make passage to Samatis in two cycles. You have until then.+

A protest began in my thoughts, but it died before forming fully. I could feel the skin of my face prickle inside my helm as Ahriman's gaze held steady on me. I knew without testing the feeling that this was not a command I could refuse. Of his Circle, I was the one who knew most of the ways of daemons. I was most suited to getting him an answer. Our kind does not like mysteries; they damage

our pretensions of infallibility.

+As you will it,+ I replied, bowing my head.

Ahriman nodded and gestured to Sanakht.

+Sanakht will watch over you, and keep you alive should there be need.+

I could tell from the swordsman's posture and silence that he had already received the command from Ahriman by thought, and liked it less than I did. I nodded at him, once. He turned away.

+Two cycles, Ctesias, + sent Ahriman, as he floated towards a ragged hole in the bridge wall. The firefly lights of circling gunships moved against the night beyond. I saw one craft change course and begin to close on our position. +Two cycles and then you will have an answer to what happened here.+

I WORKED THROUGH a sunless cycle of day and night. Sanakht watched over me, his half-broken soul filling the edge of my senses with itches of impatience. I moved through the dead ship brushing its every wall and rivet with my mind.

Emotions are the currents of the warp. Strong emotions send ripples through it, and leave a mark on the place they occurred. Most marks are shallow, and fade quickly. The strongest emotions leave more permanent impressions. The Fall of Ignorance was a tattered wound, a confusing blur of impressions, so thick that it took hours to tease out shadows of what had happened on board.

Ahriman was right, of course; the ship had died within the warp, and its Geller field had not failed. The daemons that had destroyed it had come from within, and its explosive death had come at the hands of its own, panicked crew. But amongst the wash of terror and the dark splashes of death, there was something else.

The Fall of Ignorance had been the ship of a warband ruled by a priesthood of psykers, who worshipped a selection of poorly chosen daemons and aspects of the Changer of Ways. Like many of the warbands that had been drawn to serve Amon and had then transferred their loyalty to Ahriman, they were not Thousand Sons, but opportunist and mercenaries drawn to power and the

possibility of more of it.

Rather like myself, in fact.

Even their most potent sorcerers were weaklings and children compared to Ahriman and the rest of the Circle, but their powers were still considerable. And in all the churned mess of death, fear, rage and desperation I could find no trace of their arts. The wounds left by conjured lightning and the imprint of infernal fire were absent. They had died without raising the most potent weapon in their defence.

That worried me.

I kept moving, trying not to linger on possibilities.

A pattern emerged as I walked and floated through the wreckage. At first it was faint, but the deeper Sanakht and I went the clearer it became. The destruction and terror on the ship radiated from a single central point, like the blast imprint of a bomb detonation. At the centre of the pattern was a corridor. A bare strip of walls, floor and ceiling in an area of the ship which had been inhabited by higher orders of human crew: skilled serfs, favoured attendants, and thralls. It looked like nothing, just an empty corridor, with sticky splatters of blood adhered to the walls. It was the start though, the central point, and if I was to give Ahriman answers then it was the place I needed to truly begin my work. There I would call back the past to witness for us.

I breathed out the last word of my conjuration, and it formed a glowing cloud in the airless void. The cloud solidified, squirming over itself like a snake. I watched it. Static fizzed across my helmet display. My inner eye saw it grow, the coils of light thickening until it was a fat knot in the dark. I could see other shapes within it now, hands and faces stretched into ropes of grainy light.

+Do you take pride in what you have become?+ Sanakht asked as he watched me.

'Pride?' I replied in my mundane voice. 'A strange question to ask.'

+A fair one, given what you are.+ His sending nudged my thoughts. The conjured image before me flickered. Angry black cracks formed across its edges.

'Please stop that. I realise that your capacities are even more limited than they were, but this is both delicate and difficult, and prone to unpleasant results if it goes wrong.'

I spoke a string of silent sounds, and the shadows in the corridor flickered and thinned.

'Given what I am...' I repeated his words carefully, aware that I should just ignore him, but let my annoyance override prudence. 'I take it you know what I am then?'

'You are an agent of your own desires - a creature without honour, who has sold himself over and over again. A failure.'

'Failure?'

'You have bartered away all that you had for petty power. Nothing exists in your universe that you would not sell to take another breath. You are the greatest of failures. You are a shell where a warrior once stood.'

'Strong words, brother.' I let the last word slide from my lips like a slug. 'You are of course a warrior of ideals, without weakness or failing. I can see that in those you gave your loyalty. Tell me, did Magnus lack something greater and more worthy? Was that why you decided to defy him? Were Ahriman's high motives so fleeting in your soul that, when Amon came and offered a future of oblivion, you took to it without pause? And when he fell to Ahriman, did the new dream take the place of the old before or after Amon's corpse hit the floor?'

His swords were a blur in his hands before I realised he had drawn them. I pulled a fragment of my will away from the construct, and slammed it into him. It was not much, but it was enough to rock him backwards for an instant. The sphere of energy bulged and flickered. Frost flicked up the walls, and I felt sores open on my skin as I fought to keep my mind aligned.

'Careful,' I said, softly. 'Remember, this is not something either of us wants to be close to if my concentration slips.' He looked at me, the edges of his swords sparking in the pale light. He shook his head, and sheathed the blades. To be honest I do not think he intended to kill me. If he had, then this tale might have

been very different in the telling.

'Am I proud? That was the question, wasn't it?' I asked. The psych-construct before me rippled. 'Proud of my skill? Proud that, against the odds, I still survive while living in the underworld of a universe that is populated only with enemies?'

I turned my head towards him, and the knot of pale light unravelled. Tendrils of ghost energy whipped through the dark and struck the walls, floor and ceiling. Growths of shape and shadow spread outwards, churning with blurred shape and movement. Whispers and broken voices began to babble in my ears. Sanakht flinched as the backwash from the manifestation hit his mind.

I smiled.

'Proud? Yes, I suppose I am.'

He turned to reply, but then the past filled the corridor before us, and stole what he was going to say from his tongue.

A human made of shredded light rose from the dark. The ghosts of robes and limbs blurred at his edges. The vision was not real, of course. It was an imprint left by what had happened here, pulled from the warp and cast into being like an image projected onto a wall. I could see a face, but it was not the face that he had worn in life. Pit-black eyes bulged above a billowing slit of a mouth. It was the face of his soul. The face of a human psyker, not powerful, but one of those kept by some of Ahriman's followers as thralls. And he was running for his life.

I watched as he turned and looked behind him, the image exploding in splinters of light as his mind shattered with fear. I heard the ghost of his scream, faint and distant, as though it was coming from far away. I looked behind us, at where he had looked.

In that moment, just as the image of a dead man looked behind him, I saw a shadow blot out the darkness.

And I heard a howl.

+What was that?+ sent Sanakht. The ghost images were draining away into the

airless dark. I was shivering, my fingers rattling inside my gauntlets. Cold danced on my spine. +Ctesias, did you hear that?+ In my head the sound of the howl rose again and again. +Ctesias?+

I was breathing hard, the blood a rising drum beat in my skull. Sanakht's swords were drawn and he was turning his head as though trying to catch a sound.

+I hear wolves,+ he sent.

+No.+

I reached for the bolt pistol at my waist. I carry it because I have always carried it, but I seldom use it. My mind is the only weapon I need. Ice was still coiling my spine. It had all become very clear just what had happened to the Fall of Ignorance and, as ever, the truth once known is never comforting.

+Not wolves, brother,+ I sent. +That was the call of a hound.+

And, as I sent the word, two eyes opened in the dark-like holes cut into a furnace, and the hound howled as it bounded into reality.

EVERYTHING IN THE universe is balance, or so Magnus once said. For every sorrow there is a joy. For every light a darkness. And for everything that clings to life there is a predator. It is the oldest of balances and the oldest source of fears. The growl from the dark beyond the firelight, the ring of teeth rising silent from dark water, the wings of the raptor circling against the sky. We of the Thousand Sons imagine ourselves transcendent amongst mortals, our powers akin to those of gods. So they are; our arrogance is not unfounded, but we are not separate from the herd of mortality. There are creatures that hunt us, ever hungering for our souls. Of these, the hounds of the Lord of Skulls are perhaps to be most feared.

The hound formed as it leapt. Its head was a cave of flame, its teeth the tips of broken swords. Blood-caked fur and molten scales skinned its red muscle. Its presence filled the passage with the reek of hacked meat and hot iron.

Sanakht reacted before I could form a thought. His swords lit as he cut, bright streaks of lightning and fire. I saw the blows hit, saw the power and beauty as his

force sword stabbed into the hound's muzzle, and the perfect timing as the power sword's edge opened its flank. I saw the hound land, molten-brass blood spreading in spheres in the dark as it crumpled. Except it did not happen.

The tip of the force sword rammed forwards, and the fire in the cutting edge guttered like a blown candle. The power flowing through the blade vanished. The hound dipped its head in midair and met the dead metal tip with its forehead. The blow sheered into empty air. I could smell burning sugar and meat. A collar of barbed brass circled its neck, glowing with forge heat and hatred. I saw it and wanted to scream. The warp was draining into it, fleeing my mind and leaving me naked before the hungering void. The hound was a hole in my mind's eye, a stretched shape of shadow.

Iron claws shrieked on plasteel as the hound pounced. Sanakht spun to turn the momentum of his blows back, but his feet were mag-locked to the floor, his movement slowed. The hound arched its head back. Sanakht flinched back as its jaws snapped shut where his neck had been. He released the mag-clamps in his feet and spun into the space above.

I fired my bolt pistol. The hound leapt up the wall, claws gouging into metal plates as it shed the pretensions of gravity. My bolt shells exploded in its wake. Sanakht's feet hit the ceiling, and clamped to the plating. The hound bounded off the wall, muscle flowing like pistons. Sanakht twisted and slammed the dead metal of his force sword into its muzzle. The blow twitched the head aside, and the jaws snapped shut a hair's span from Sanakht's face. If it had been anyone else, I would have thought it a second lucky escape, but while Sanakht was many things, I would never deny that with a sword he was closer to divinity than mortal.

He rammed his power sword up under the hound's jaw. The lightning-sheathed blade exploded through bone and muscle. The hound's body scabbled at the air, claws skittering off the ceiling plates. Sanakht ripped the sword down, back through the head and out of its muzzle. The collar around the hound's neck flashed blue with heat and shattered globules of flesh and liquid brass exploded outwards. Sanakht flinched back, disconnected his feet from the ceiling plates and pushed off.

I heard another howl and had time to turn as a second hound slid from the

shadows. I fired. The round hit its shoulder, and ripped a crater in its bulk. Splinters of crimson scale exploded into the vacuum and hissed to ectoplasm. I squeezed the trigger again, just as the hound hit me.

The lack of gravity saved me. If I had fallen, the last thing I would have felt in life... was...

The hound's paws and chest slammed into me, its mouth yawned wide to bite down on my head. I pitched backwards, and my boots unclamped from the floor. The hound's jaws closed. A single tooth caught my forearm and slit the armour open like skin. I tumbled down the corridor. Beads of blood scattered after me. Bright, white pain exploded in my skull. Blackness was seeping into me as blood poured out. The warp fled into the distance. Ceiling, walls and floor hammered me as I tumbled over and over, still clutching my staff and pistol.

I could hear the hound bounding after me, its claws ripping metal as it sprung down the corridor. Its hunger filled my mind and I knew that it would never stop, that it would drag my soul back to the blood-soaked dark beneath the Throne of Skulls. It was inevitable. It had been ordained. I raised my pistol, targeting spinning runes as my world turned over and over.

A sword blade hacked down into the back of the creature's neck. The power field activated just before the edge met flesh. Scales, flesh and bone sprayed out, as the blade cut down and down.

My back hit the wall. I punched my hand into the metal and jerked to a stop. Sanakht was tumbling beside the daemon, pushing his blade deeper into the hound's lower neck. I raised my pistol and fired. Three bolts ripped the creature's head free and blew it into splinters and froth.

I let out a breath as my thoughts and the warp reconnected. That, more than still being alive, was a sublime relief.

Sanakht struck the wall next to me and gripped onto it.

+Are you injured?+ he asked.

+Your concern is refreshingly unexpected,+ I managed. Blood was still pumping from the slit in my arm. +I am functioning. +

+Can you move?+

By way of reply, I kicked off the wall and shot down the corridor. We had to reach our gunship. We had to get back to the Sycorax. My mind reached out, trying to find Ahriman, trying to speak to him, but the only answer was the fading cries of the dead. Sanakht followed, kicking off walls and gantries in the spinning silence.

+This was not a random attack.+ I sent as we hurtled through the dark. +They were waiting for us. This was their message. The hounds have been loosed to hunt us, to hunt him.+

It was one of the moments of my life where my capacity for something approaching loyalty surprised me. I should have known better. I should not have been so naive.

+Which power unleashed them?+

It was a good question, and I should have seen that it was the only question which really mattered. Hindsight makes us all seem fools.

+Pick one,+ I spat back.

On the edge of my mind I could hear more howls rising from the distant night.

AHRIMAN WAS WAITING as we jumped the gunship. I had managed to connect to his mind only minutes before we docked, blurting out a warning as my body fought to staunch the blood flowing from my wound. Sanakht had his swords drawn and lit as we hit the floor. Blood scattered from me as I rose from where I landed. My eyes took in the rings of Rubricae covering the hangar deck. Astraeos and the rest of the Circle stood beside Ahriman, helmed and armoured.

Surprise spilled through me. It was so calm. So still. No blood. No howl of hounds. Bright stablights reflecting on azure armour. I felt myself sway.

It was wrong.

Or was it I that was wrong?

+Ctesias,+ sent Ahriman, stepping forwards.

The Hounds were coming. I had heard their cries. They had tasted my blood, and I knew that they were coming with total certainty.

+Ctesias?+

I heard the thought, but it was distant. I blinked and tried to form a sending, tried to open my mouth. But nothing happened.

The world was cracking. Smears of red marked the light touching my eyes. I felt one of my legs slide out from beneath me and the deck met me as I fell to my knees.

Red. Everything was calm, but all I could see was red: the red of thick blood rippling in a pool, the red of a sun hidden by the smoke of a burning world and the red of a sword pulled from the forge. The world was drowning in crimson and I was drowning with it.

And then a portion of my stupidity fell from my mind. I should have known. Of Ahriman's entire Circle I should have known, and seen, and not been so blind. I am, it seems, not immune to my own form of hubris.

I tried to rise, but I could not.

I felt hands touch me, and try to pull me up.

I forced my mouth open.

'They...!' I began, and felt thoughts try to reach my own, but my mind was a blur of sharp edges and heat. 'They are coming,' I rasped. My breaths were coming fast. The air in my lungs was smoke and cinders.

'We are ready for them,' said Astraeos.

'They need a scent,' I said, and with each word I heard the patter of my blood on the deck. I think they understood then, because I felt them draw back, and heard

the sound of weapons crackling to life.

The hound had not failed in its purpose. It had maimed me, and tasted my blood so that it could have my scent.

So that they could follow me from beyond the veil.

The howl rose within my mind. First one, then a second, then more than I could count. I could feel fire in my blood. The whirl of crimson was all around me, a wall of blood fog and black smoke, and I knew that my long and pitiful life was at an end.

But I knew that I was not going to meet my end on my knees.

I stood and forced my eyes open.

For a second everything was as it had been. Ahriman, Astraeos, Sanakht - the ranks of Rubricae - all facing me with weapons drawn. Then, with a last howl in my skull, the hounds fell upon us.

They bounded from the edge of sight. Crimson bodies flickered into being. Lightning formed around Astraeos, lashed out towards the forming shapes, and vanished before it fell. Light stuttered and ripped into shreds of black and glowing red. I saw a hound, the first to take full flesh, leap into the air as the Rubricae fired as one. The bolts exploded in midair, the blue and pink fire within flashing out and collapsing in an eye blink. The hound landed amongst the Rubricae, its jaws locking around the chest of one and tossing it into the ranks behind. Dust fell from the pierced armour. I could hear high, dry screaming in the warp.

Sanakht was running to Ahriman's side, his swords a blur. More hounds bounded into sight. I heard the stutter of bolt-rounds, and the splash of explosions. The Rubricae began to jerk to stillness as the presence of the hounds severed them from the power animating their armour. Voices called across the vox. I saw Astraeos battering down a creature with the pommel of his lifeless force sword. Ahriman was calling to us as he wove amongst the devastation, firing with each step.

'Ctesias!' he called, and my head turned. A hound cleared the immobile line of

Rubricae, and loped towards me, muscles bunching to pounce. I pulled the pistol from my thigh. My fingers were wet with my own blood. Blazing orange eyes fixed upon me - they were already too close, and my hand was still rising.

A figure in blue armour cannoned into the hound from the side, pitching into it with raw physical power. The hound landed, its claws raking the deck for purchase. Then Astraeos straightened and fired, his bolt pistol breathing rounds into the creature as he walked towards it. The hound came apart in spills of red smoke and jellied flesh.

He turned. Hissing blood coated his armour and robe.

'Thank you,' I managed.

He turned away, already firing. Blurred shapes, cries and the roar of weapons rolled like a storm through the air. I looked for a target, but my limbs were moving as though I was wading through water. Blood fell from my arm. It fizzed with fire as it fell through the air.

The one possibility that I had overlooked came to me then, and I cursed myself that I had not seen it sooner.

I focused my mind and turned it within, reaching down into the base beat of life within my veins. I felt the blood pouring through me, and the dual beat of my hearts became the roar and clash of battle. Like all daemons the hounds were of the warp, even if their brass collars and the blessing of their lord made them immune to our powers. The warp is their existence, and at that moment their existence in reality hung by the thread of blood they had followed. My blood.

They felt it as my mind began to reform. They howled and turned towards me. I was fighting to stand. I saw Sanakht cut the legs from one as it turned from him and bounded towards me. Formulae were unfolding in my mind, multiplying as my will gave them life.

The hounds were steaming towards me, closing with flickering bounds. Frost covered the deck beneath their feet, and their blood spun into the air as smoke. Gunfire and blades cut into the pack, and some fell or blew apart. They did not stop or turn aside. They knew what I intended, and they would bring me down

before I could complete my plan.

The formulae of banishment are old, their secrets known for millennia and forgotten many times. Their preparation should be done with care, their use controlled with every precaution. But I did not have time, and I did not have the strength for caution. I unleashed my thoughts and let them pour across the blood bond.

The hounds screamed but their howls died in their throats. Their bodies began to burn. Flakes of ash peeled from them. Their scales cracked. The fire in their eyes blazed. They were choking in reality, and mine was the hand on their throat.

Ahriman, Astraeos and the others began to fire. Bolt-rounds struck crumbling flesh, and blew it into grey clouds. For a second I thought I had succeeded, that I would survive.

A hound leapt over the powdering form of its pack mates and landed before me. Molten brass bled from its flanks and the edges of its shape were a haze of cinders and ashes. The last segment of the formulae completed in my mind, and I felt the warp buckle as it reached in to reality to yank the hound back into its own realm.

The hound's mouth opened. Its teeth were black slits in the world. I could hear shouts and the stuttering boom of gunfire. The hound's body broke apart as surged towards me. The sound of its howl swallowed my mind.

Its jaws closed on my neck.

Silence rushed up to meet me as the clamour and colour of life vanished, and then I died for the first time.

AN ULTRAMARINES STORY

DO EAGLES STILL CIRCLE THE MOUNTAIN?

Graham McNeill



'TO DESTROY THE works of the Mechanicus is an affront to the Omnissiah,' said Adept Komeda, hurrying after Uriel. 'Adept Komeda does not approve.'

'Your approval is irrelevant,' said Uriel.

'Adept Komeda is certain that Fabricata Ubrique will not allow this.'

'The Fabricata is not in charge here,' said Uriel. 'I am.'

He turned from the irritating adept, pushed through the buckled shutters of the compound's operational command structure and emerged into its walled courtyard.

Weak sunlight glittered from rusted metal palisades and iron-framed drilling towers. The stench of alien dung and foul electrical vapours filled his senses. Less than an hour ago, this had been the site of a bloody kill-strike against an occupying force of greenskins.

Ancient Peleus stood atop the gate arch like heroic statuary, as if daring the orks to return, the banner of the Fourth Company snapping in the wind above him. Petronius Nero stood beside him, combat shield slung over his back and honour blade shimmering in the low sun.

Uriel touched the eagle at his breastplate, pride and humility alloyed in perfect balance at the sight of the jade-bordered image of a mailed fist gripping the Ultima.

Two Rhinos grumbled by the molten remains of the compound's gate, the cobalt-blue of their flanks all but obscured by clinging mud. Brutus Cyprian and Livius Hadrianus sat on the running boards, checking their weapons and arguing over the best way to aim a melta-gun.

These warriors were the Swords of Calth, his honour guard and chosen men. They had fought at his side since the Bloodborn invasion of Ultramar, heroes all, and each with an exemplary legacy of courage and honour.

Uriel nodded to his warriors, making his way past three execution poles lying in the mud where a defence auxilia Chimera had toppled them. A team of corpsmen in tan and ochre uniforms attended upon two pallid youngsters who until only recently had been chained to those petrochemical-soaked poles.

Alexia and Casimir Nassaur. Highborn twins and joint heirs to the governorship of Sycorax. Both were clad in garb wholly unsuited to the muddy conditions prevalent on this world: kidskin britches, thin-soled boots of soft leather and brightly coloured fabrics that shone like dragonfly wings.

Along with Fabricata Ubrique, they had been taken prisoner by the orks and were only alive thanks to Uriel and the warriors of the Ultramarines Fourth Company.

The Fabricata herself stood beside a shattered drilling auger, surrounded by a gaggle of fussing tech-priests and grim-masked skitarii. Her servo-harness delved into the machine's guts in search of salvageable parts.

Uriel ignored them and climbed up to the dung-smear ramparts. Ultramarines warriors manned the walls, bolters aimed out over the endless expanse of mudflats and mist-shrouded fens.

To the south-east, the rust-brown summit of Mount Shokereth was veiled by slate-grey rain clouds. On Macragge, the mountains were soaring, geological wonders, white as marble. Here, they were miserable agglomerations of loose shale, rain-slick basalt and treacherous mud.

Abandoned mine-workings and nameless Imperial facilities circled Mount Shokereth's haunches, and from a rocky promontory near its summit, a lone vox-

mast relayed positional information. When the mists closed in on Sycorax, pilots were as good as blind, and such beacons were the only way to navigate.

Uriel circled around to the northern corner of the compound's defensive walls, where a glyph-inscribed tower lay cantilevered out over the mud.

Perched atop the tower, Torias Telion kept watch on the horizon. The Scout sergeant looked down and gave a curt nod. His features were like weathered oak, and careworn fissures carved deep lines over his stern expression.

'Best tell Pasanus to hurry,' he said.

'They're on the move?' asked Uriel, gesturing to the tar-black pillars of smoke on the ash-smeared horizon.

Telion nodded. 'At least three mud-steamers. Turning our way and picking up speed.'

'How long do we have?'

'No more than fifteen minutes,' said Telion. 'Any word from Captain Fabian and the Third?'

'Nothing certain,' said Uriel. 'Between the ork scrap-tech and the atmospheric, long-range vox is lousy with distortion. All I know is that they are in the thick of it with the orks on Medea Ridge. We will link with them once Fabian starts rolling up their flank.'

Telion dropped from the canted rig, landing silently despite the metal decking plates.

'Then we need to be moving now,' he said. 'I'll take the Scouts ahead in the Speeder, see if we can't find a better route to Port Setebos.'

Uriel nodded and followed Telion back to the courtyard, issuing evacuation orders as he went. Even before they'd reached the churned earth of the courtyard, the Rhino exhausts were venting fumes as they built up power.

Telion boarded the Land Speeder Storm and it lifted from the mud with a wet

whine before vanishing over the walls. The warriors of Pasanius's Firebrand squad boarded one Rhino, the Swords of Calth the other. Fabricata Ubrique and her coterie of tech-priests and skitarii clambered aboard a heavily modified Salamander Scout vehicle, while the Nassaur twins were bundled into an up-armoured Chimera with their family's heraldic lion and tower crest on its glacis. Ablative mesh and integral ion-shield generators studded its flanks like blisters.

'Pasanius?' said Uriel over the vox.

'Coming up now,' came the brusque answer.

A cog-stamped access hatch to the compound's maintenance sub-levels in the centre of the courtyard lifted from the mud and was pushed aside.

A broad-shouldered Ultramarines sergeant emerged, his shoulder guards scraping the sides of the hatchway as he climbed the last rungs of an inset ladder. His blue armour was a mix of Tactical Dreadnought plates affixed to a power-armoured chassis, every square centimetre caked in mud and oil or dripping with subterranean effluvia.

'Guilliman save us, you stink,' said Uriel.

'You try planting demo-charges below the water table and see how sweet you smell by the end of it,' countered Pasanius.

'Telion says we need to get out of here now,' said Uriel.

Pasanius wiped mud from the Ultima on his shoulder guard and nodded. 'In five minutes this place is going to be a smoking hole in the ground, so yes, I'd suggest we get a move on.'

ORKS HAD LONG been a problem for the inhabitants of Sycorax.

A greenskin invasion nine centuries earlier had been defeated, but improperly eradicated, and the surviving orks had festered in the inaccessible mudflats. Occasional spasms of violent migrations forced a succession of governors to mount periodic expeditions into the wilds to quell such threats.

For the most part, this was enough, but the current rampage was the worst for five hundred years, destroying every force sent against it and spreading over the planet's surface like a virus. Mechanicus facilities were looted and burned to the ground, cities plundered and their populations taken as slaves or meat. The local defence auxilia was swept aside by the green tide, and so Governor Nassaur had sent a desperate petition for aid to the Lord of Macragge.

In the wake of the Bloodborn invasion, few such petitions could be heard, but Sycorax lay within Ultramar and Lord Calgar had despatched warriors from the Third and Fourth companies.

While the Fourth mounted hit-and-run raids against targets of opportunity throughout the continental landmass, Captain Fabian - eager for glory after the attack on Lysis Macar - had put the Third in the thick of the fighting.

The greenskins were pushing hard for Port Setebos, the seat of Governor Nassaur and heart of the vast manufacturing empire of the Adeptus Mechanicus, but there was no mass evacuation or flights across the ocean to safety.

Dozens of defence auxilia regiments and skitarii cohorts had been pulled back here to hold the city's main defensive line on the natural bastion of Medea Ridge. Captain Fabian and his Third would launch an unstoppable hammerblow on the enemy flank to roll up the greenskins and trap them with their backs to the ocean.

And this time, the eradication would be done correctly.

URIEL WATCHED AS the last of the compound sank into the mud. Most such structures were temporary anyway, built on a honeycombed network of subterranean drilling foundations, but the orks had buttressed this one with shuttered caissons long enough that it would likely have survived to be plundered by their disgusting kin.

'Captain Ventris is correct in this matter,' Fabricata Ubrique had said, when Adept Komeda had once again protested at the compound's destruction. 'The corruption is too pervasive to be removed entirely. Its destruction is preferable to it being looted by xenos.'

Even Adept Komeda had understood that.

The last spar of a drilling auger sank beneath the boiling mud, and, beyond it, Uriel saw the smoking, clanking behemoths pursuing them.

The locals called them mud-steamers, which sounded almost pleasant until you saw one. Each was a hulking slab of bladed iron that bludgeoned its way through the surface layers of mud like an ocean-going ironclad of a bygone age. Smoke-belching engines and vast iron paddles on either side churned the mud and threw spuming geysers up in their wake.

Monstrous weapons that defied any easy understanding or identification crowded the decks, together with ramshackle aircraft that every adept of the Mechanicus swore should be unflyable. The greenskin ability to swiftly assemble weapon technology that ought to be beyond them had proved to be far in advance of what would normally be expected.

'They are quite magnificent, are they not?' asked Fabricata Ubrique, riding atop her converted Salamander, whose integral power fields kept the mud from touching her black and red robes. Ubrique's throat had been partially crushed by her ork captors, and her voice was scratchy and distorted. 'Ah, what I would not give to study one such leviathan up close.'

'I saw one up close not long after we made planetfall,' said Uriel. 'Trust me, it is not an experience you would relish.'

'Entirely understandable,' agreed Ubrique with a bark of mechanical laughter. 'But just think what we might learn.'

'I was under the impression that xenotech was outlawed by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Forbidden.'

Ubrique nodded and said, 'Indeed it is. Such a belief in the inherent ungodliness of alien technology is what separates us from the lesser races of the galaxy. Taint the golden light of the Omnissiah with the insidious corruption of alien mechanisms, and we risk dulling that light forever.'

'Then why study it?'

'Do you not study the methods of war practised by your enemies so that you might better fight them?'

'We do,' agreed Uriel.

'Then we understand one another, Captain Ventris,' said Ubrique as the air-pounding noise of enormous guns opening fire erupted from the closing mud-steamers. Their decks were obscured by yellowed clouds, and seconds later multiple smoke trails arced upwards on wobbling parabolas.

'Are we in range?' asked Uriel.

'As with all things greenskin, who can tell?' said Ubrique, retreating within the armoured interior of her Salamander as it pulled away in a spray of mud.

Uriel returned his attention to the incoming munitions, trying to extrapolate where they would hit. As Ubrique had warned, their flight paths were unpredictable. Some had already fallen to the mud, others were boosting themselves into higher arcs.

As erratic as the incoming shells were, there were a lot of them, and what the orks lacked in quality, they made up for in quantity.

Uriel dropped into the Rhino and pulled the hatch shut behind him. He locked it and moved back into the crew compartment where the Swords of Calth sat ramrod straight against its interior surfaces.

'Was that incoming artillery, captain?' asked Peleus from the driver's compartment. The ancient's voice was strained from the effort of guiding the Rhino through the mud while trying to keep them from becoming bogged down.

Uriel nodded. 'Deck guns on the mud-steamers.'

'On target?' asked Brutus Cyprian.

'You'll know soon enough if it hits us,' said Livius Hadrianus.

'The range is too great,' said Petronius Nero. 'There's no way the orks could hit us from here.'

Cyprian hammered a fist on Nero's shoulder guard.

'Emperor save us from such foolish words,' he said. 'You've all but guaranteed we'll be hit, Peto.'

Uriel knew Nero would be scowling beneath his helm. Only Cyprian would dare call their champion bladesman by his old Agiselus nickname.

'We stay on course and Nero should be correct,' said Uriel as the first tremors of impact shook the Rhino. 'It's likely they'll turn back when we get close to Fabian and the Third.'

Yet more impacts hammered down, closer this time, and Uriel grabbed onto a stanchion as the Rhino shook with the violence of a nearby detonation as stones and buried rubble struck its armour.

'You were saying?' said Cyprian.

'You're worried?' asked Hadrianus.

'No,' answered Cyprian, and Uriel believed him. It took more than scores of incoming high-explosive shells to unnerve Brutus Cyprian.

'Captain Ventris,' said Peleus. 'Vox contact with Port Setebos.'

Uriel frowned. He hadn't heard anything on the Chapter vox-net. 'Who is it from?'

'Unknown. Defence auxilia signifiers. Command rank.'

Uriel made his way forwards and removed his helm, placing it in the stowage rack beside Peleus's shoulder. The vox-horn was only required when speaking to non-Chapter personnel, and a grim sense of premonition filled him as he held it to his ear.

'This is Captain Ventris. Speak.'

When it came, the voice was scratchy, fading in and out every few seconds, but the import of the words was all too clear. He carefully replaced the horn in its

recess.

'What news, captain?' asked Hadrianus.

'Port Setebos is about to fall,' said Uriel, still reeling from what he had just heard.

'What?' said Nero. 'How...?'

Uriel shook his head. 'I do not know. Medea Ridge has been broken open and the orks are pouring through.'

'And what of the Third's flanking attack?' asked Cyprian.

'It... failed,' said Uriel, the word anathema to him. 'Fabian is in full retreat.'

Before the Swords of Calth could react to the unthinkable notion that an Ultramarines attack could fail, even more impacts slammed into the Rhino.

The vehicle's topside armour buckled inwards where half a dozen impacts punched convex deformations. Hadrianus slammed a fist into one, flattening it.

'Konor's Teeth!' he swore. 'That wasn't artillery fire.'

'No,' agreed Uriel, remembering the red-skinned aircraft on the decks of the mud-steamers. 'It was a strafing run.'

URIEL THREW OPEN the top hatch of the Rhino in time to see one of the six defence auxilia Chimera explode as a stream of laser-bright shells cut it in two. Bodies on fire tumbled from the wreckage as it ploughed a wash of muddy water ahead of it.

It wasn't the only one to die.

Another auxilia Chimera was ablaze sixty metres behind them, trapped in the mud by a thrown track and an easy target even for greenskins. A skitarii transport was missing half its side where its engine block had blown it wide open. Its crew were either dead or firing into the sky.

Four aircraft spun crazily overhead, as though piloted by drunken maniacs. Crude centreline prop-engines dragged them through the air, the iron patchwork of their fuselages painted a painfully vivid red. They were emblazoned with fangs and angular bovine skull emblems, and Uriel had seen wrecked Imperial craft that looked to be in better shape.

They wobbled and dipped and rolled erratically, but every now and then they would level out and come at the convoy of vehicles once again. Wing-mounted guns barked with deafening thunder, throwing up great ochre spurts where the explosive rounds ripped into the ground.

The mud-steamers were close enough to make out individual greenskins on their gun decks. Howling, grunting, mad things, they took obscene pleasure in the act of killing and were almost energised by it. More shells arced overhead, falling in a booming, explosive deluge that filled the air with brackish mud and rain.

Peleus wasn't stopping the Rhino. To stop would mean never moving again as the mud pulled them down. Uriel gripped the handles of the storm bolter and swung the cupola around as the screaming howl of thudding turbines bellied out over the mudflats.

'Top cover!' shouted Uriel, and a moment later, he saw Pasanus take control of the storm bolter mounted on the Firebrand's Rhino.

'Where in Guilliman's name is Telion?' shouted Pasanus. 'We could really use a speeder about now!'

Uriel had no time to answer. Chopping, percussive thunder to his right. He swung the cupola round. A greenskin fighter rolled in on an attack run, and he gave thanks the pilot wasn't aware enough to attack along the line of the column.

Shells sawed into the ground. He mashed the triggers and a stream of mass-reactives punched upwards. Recoil battered his palms as he tried to walk his fire into the path of the warplane.

'Hold still, damn you,' cursed Uriel as the ork pilot swung his aircraft from side to side. He slewed the cupola round as the warplane roared overhead, the propwash battering Uriel with its force.

The aircraft began climbing, slowing. Uriel drew a bead on it before it passed out of his weapon's arc of fire.

'Now,' he said and sent four shells into the rear quarters of the warplane. The explosion blew off its tail section and it immediately corkscrewed around in a looping spiral before slamming straight down.

It exploded in a wet bloom of fire and mud.

Streams of laser fire from Ubrique's Salamander struck another aircraft, too weak to hurt it but serving as a warning that this convoy had teeth. An additional aircraft fell from the sky as Pasanius found his mark, a bolter shell managing to get past the enormous prop and blow the pilot's head off.

Uriel swung around as a further set of explosions sent a wash of heat over him. The up-armoured Chimera containing the Nassaur twins had taken a hit to the engine block. The vehicle came to a swift halt as the cloying mud sucked hard at the tracks.

'Peleus, turn around,' he shouted. 'Circle back to the Nassaur Chimera.'

'That will make us a target,' warned Peleus.

'I'm not leaving them behind,' said Uriel. 'For all we know one of them might be the Imperial commander now.'

Peleus threw the Rhino into a tight skid, throwing up a wall of mud as he wrenched the controls. Uriel heard the side doors open and two Space Marines stepped out onto the running board.

Brutus Cyprian and Livius Hadrianus.

'Just drive in close and we'll get them,' Cyprian shouted through to Peleus.

The two aircraft, sensing the value of the smoking Chimera arced around in a wobbling circle. A pair of shark-nosed missiles detached from beneath one warplane's wings and slashed towards the wallowing vehicle. One buried itself in the mud after only fifty metres, but the other...

'Invictus's Oath, it's actually on target,' said Uriel. He pulled the triggers and fired a stream of bolter shells into what he hoped would be its flight path. Another pattern of fire joined it and the missile detonated as it flew into the interlocking zone of mass-reactives. The shredded wreckage ploughed into the ground and blew a mushroom cloud of mud into the air.

'That's how you bring down a missile,' called Pasanus from his own Rhino. 'Did you forget everything Chronus taught you about working in pairs?'

The Firebrand's vehicle followed a parallel course to Uriel's, and behind it came Fabricata Ubrique's Salamander. Riding in the turret, much to Uriel's surprise, was Adept Komeda, who was linked by a flexing brass cable to a boxy missile tube mounted on the side of the turret.

The adept's optics flashed from cherry red to emerald green, and a fiery contrail raced upwards. The war-spirit in the seeker head of the hunter-killer saw its victim and twisted through the air to slay it.

The missile flew straight into the warplane's intakes and it vanished in an expanding fireball of spinning debris. Its remains fell into the mud as the final aircraft dropped vertiginously to strafe the Nassaur Chimera.

'Faster, Peleus!' shouted Uriel.

Escorted by their lifewards, the Nassaur twins struggled through mud that reached mid-thigh, ruining their fine clothes. Until now, they had affected an entitled disregard for their safety, but the fear on their faces was immediately very real.

Cyprian and Hadrianus leaned out, their arms extended.

'Get a move on!' bellowed Cyprian in a tone that Uriel was willing to bet they'd never heard directed their way before. Their lifewards hauled them out of the mud and held them as high as they could. Peleus brought the Rhino in as close and as slow as he dared.

Cyprian leaned out, his hand closing on Alexia Nassaur's wrist. Hadrianus grabbed hold of Casimir.

'Go!' shouted Cyprian, and mud fountained from the rear of the Rhino as Peleus rammed out the throttle. Alexia screamed in pain as she was wrenched from her lifeward's grip and Cyprian all but threw her inside the Rhino. Hadrianus was scarcely less brutal and Casimir cried out as he too was bundled unceremoniously inside.

The Rhino lurched through the muddy tracks left by the Nassaur vehicle, leaving the lifewards and the Chimera's crew wallowing in its wake. It sat ill with Uriel to leave such brave men and women behind, but to try and save them would doom them all. They knew that too and urged the Ultramarines to greater speed as they turned to fire pistols at the incoming ork warplane.

A blizzard of shells tore from the howling craft's wings, and a hurricane engulfed the ground behind the Rhino, fogging the air with a mist of shredded meat, iron and mud. Peleus slewed the vehicle around as Cyprian and Hadrianus fired at the warplane as it too circled. Bolt-rounds spanked from its scavenged, ironwork hide. Thin lines of smoke trailed the juddering craft.

'It's coming in again!' shouted Livius Hadrianus as the warplane dropped lower, rolling and pitching as though coming in to crash land. Perhaps it was, thought Uriel. Perhaps that was its last ditch attack.

He brought the storm bolters around and lined the iron sights with the erratic flightpath of the ork assault craft. It roared towards them in a looping, veering course, miraculously evading the streams of las and bolt-rounds punching the air around it.

Enormous shells tore a weaving path towards the Rhino. Metre-deep trenches were gouged in the mud. Uriel couldn't tell if they would hit. His own shells ripped a blazing path through the air, maddeningly refusing to marry up with the warplane's lunatic trajectory.

Time slowed as the warplane dropped lower. It rolled, the wings vertical as the canopy slid past Uriel. The hammerblow force of its propwash threatened to rip him from the cupola.

He heard the clang of metal behind him.

The topside hatch opened.

Uriel's eyes locked with those of the greenskin pilot. Encased in furred leathers, smeared-glass goggles and a spiked pot-helmet, the bestial creature's eyes were coal-red and pitiless. Its porcine jaws opened wide with savage glee, monstrously tusked and spattering the canopy with caustic saliva.

The warplane thundered past Uriel. Standing behind him on the upper deck of the Rhino was Petronius Nero. He leapt, combat shield held in one hand, his honour blade sweeping out in a blindingly swift arc.

It clove through the cracked glass canopy and sheared the ork pilot's head cleanly down the middle. Stinking greenskin blood exploded over the inside of the cockpit.

And then the tail struck Nero, slamming him fifty metres out over the mud. Uriel watched him twist in the air, bringing his legs around to land in a skidding slide.

The ork warplane remained airborne for a hundred metres or more before its nose dipped and the leading edge of its wing ploughed mud. It cartwheeled and came apart, exploding into a million fragments of flaming debris.

PELEUS ANGLED THE Rhino to intercept Petronius Nero, who climbed aboard as if leaping from a moving vehicle to attack a warplane was the most basic move taught by the swordmasters of Macragge.

Brutus Cyprian slapped the champion on the back, congratulating him on the kill, while Livius Hadrianus just shook his head at the recklessness of the young.

'Good work,' said Uriel, dropping into the Rhino as Nero closed the top hatch and took his seat. The champion nodded, but said nothing, cleaning the blood and oil from his slender blade.

Even through the steelwork hull, Uriel felt the booming thunder of fresh artillery fire from the mud-steamers.

The vox chirruped in Uriel's ear.

'I must congratulate your warrior on a most entertaining kill, Captain Ventris,' said Fabricata Ubrique.

'Once we're safe,' answered Uriel.

'Ah, yes, to that,' said Ubrique. 'There is no delicate way to say this, but since Captain Fabian's defeat, it seems we are caught between the hammer and anvil. We cannot continue south to Port Setebos, and the mud-steamers behind us render north an unattractive prospect.'

'Then it's east or west,' said Uriel, calling up the local topography onto a command slate inset on the wall of the Rhino. Impacts shook it as high explosive rounds slammed down nearby.

'I would suggest east,' said Ubrique. 'West is open mudflats for thousands of kilometres, east takes us to Mount Shokereth. Rocky ground where the mud-steamers cannot follow.'

'They can still bombard us.'

'Not if we take refuge within the mountain,' said Ubrique. 'The reinforced tunnels beneath Variava Station plunge deep into the rock and ought to be proof against any greenskin munitions.'

'Ought to be?'

'So I would surmise from the strength of the detonations surrounding us and the known density of the mountain,' said Ubrique, her voice rich with an amusement that Uriel certainly didn't share.

He scanned the map, quickly scrolling in all the cardinal directions and quickly coming to the conclusion that Ubrique was correct. It was the mountain or death.

Coordinates appeared on the slate, fresh from the Fabricata's Salamander.

He spun the vox dial to a broad-frequency channel.

'All vehicles, full speed to the east,' said Uriel, passing on the coordinates. 'We make for Mount Shokereth.'

THE INTERIOR OF Variava Station reeked of abandonment, though Ubrique insisted it was a fully-functioning outpost. Its corridors were sepulchral, bare stone and steel, modular and virtually identical to every other Mechanicus facility Uriel had seen.

A handful of servitors tended to the quietly humming machines of its central command chamber, and the air was freighted with a bitter, electrical tang. Adept Komeda was plugged into the vox-station, and his augmitters burbled with background chatter, ghost voices and hissing static.

Defence auxilia personnel fussed around the highborn twins, though it was Pasanius that had set the bones in Alexia Nassaur's wrist. In the absence of Apothecary Selenus, Pasanius had taken on that role with a gentleness surprising in such a big warrior.

'Is our world lost?' Alexia Nassaur asked.

'The situation is bleak,' said Uriel. 'But this world can still be saved.'

She nodded, her features slick with pain-sweat, her trust in the invincibility of Space Marines total. Uriel hoped he and his warriors could live up to that trust.

Dust drifted from the ceiling as the mud-steamers continued their bombardment. Almost every mine and Imperial facility ringing the lower slopes of the mountain had been pounded flat by the greenskin artillery, but Variava Station yet endured.

'As promised, the roots of this place reach deep into the mountain,' said Ubrique, glancing upwards.

'More than I would have thought a maintenance station would require,' said Uriel.

Ubrique shrugged, a curiously human gesture. 'When you need to build everything on shifting mud, you build strongly.'

'Then let's hope it's strong enough to last until the lord admiral's Thunderhawks

arrive.'

Adept Komeda had finally broken through the vox-distortion to make contact with Lord Admiral Lazlo Tiberius in orbit aboard the *Vae Victus*, the Fourth Company's attendant strike cruiser. A pair of Fourth Company Thunderhawks were even now dropping through the atmosphere to extract them.

Ubrique's eyes flickered with internal calculations. 'I make that fifteen minutes from now.'

'Tight,' said Livius Hadrianus, halting in his pacing of the circular room and glancing at external pict-slates. 'We'll likely still need to fight our way out.'

The mud-steamers were unable to approach the mountain, but the hordes of greenskin warbands disembarking from the three leviathans had no such problem.

Adept Komeda lifted a hand, and Uriel heard the crackle of an incoming vox. Space Marine prefix codes.

'Captain Ventris,' said the voice of the Thunderhawk's pilot via Komeda's augmitters. 'Be advised that we will approach from the east and circle in for evacuation from platform Rho-Epsilon-Seven. Estimated arrival time, thirteen minutes.'

'Understood,' said Uriel. 'On our way.'

The transmission snapped off, but Adept Komeda jerked as though current were passing through him. His augmitters barked and spat a hiss of angry static, like a swarm of killer stingwings.

The sense of something immense and ancient filled the chamber, a fragment of something inhuman in scale and perception, yet hideously curious about the tiny lifeforms before it.

'Komeda?' asked Ubrique. 'Disengage the vox. Now.'

'Do Eagles still circle the mountain?' asked Komeda in a voice not his own. Uriel felt a chill as a sensation he'd not felt for a long time crept over him.

The space between his shoulder blades burned cold, as though an old wound were suddenly aflame. He remembered another mountain, another world. A dark place far from the light, where something older than time had almost ended him.

'Do Eagles still circle the mountain?' repeated Komeda, his head turning towards Uriel like the turret of a tank on rusted bearings.

Uriel didn't understand the question, but knew his answer was crucial.

'Yes,' he said. 'Eagles still circle the mountain.'

'Then begone,' said Komeda, sagging against the vox-station as though drained utterly of strength. Ubrique rushed to his side, wrenching the link-cables from his inload ports.

'What in Guilliman's name was that?' asked Pasanius.

Petronius Nero had his sword drawn and aimed at Komeda. Even the skitarii looked unsettled by the malign voice and its mysterious question.

'Something to deal with later,' said Uriel. 'Everyone up, that Thunderhawk isn't going to wait for us.'

SPIRALLING ROCKETS AND heavy-calibre gunfire chased the Thunderhawk as it surged from Rho-Epsilon-Seven. Its blazing jetwash scorched braying greenskins to ash as the Swords of Calth fired from the open assault ramp.

The second Thunderhawk hovered overhead, its prow-bolters flensing the approach to the platform with mass-reactives.

Uriel hammered his fist on the closing mechanism as the gunship gained height. Explosions slammed against its underside and rattling impacts of gunfire beat its flanks like hard rain.

'Everyone accounted for?' he asked as the ramp finally shut.

'All of us who got to the mountain are aboard,' said Pasanius. 'Still no sign of Telion, though.'

'I wouldn't worry about him,' said Uriel. 'If anyone is going to survive out there alone, it's him.'

'I'm not worried,' said Pasanius. 'I want to know where the hell he was when we needed him.'

Uriel wanted to know that too, but said nothing as he made his way forwards through the crew compartment. The Swords of Calth and Firebrand squad did not sit idle, but reloaded and resupplied. Preparing for the next engagement.

Alexia Nassaur all but clung to Brutus Cyprian, and her twin brother looked on with relief plastered over his features.

The sound of solid round impacts began to lessen as the gunship gained height, and Uriel let out a breath. The gunship's estimated arrival time had been conservative, and they'd reached the platform a good minute ahead of the orks.

More than enough time to get everyone aboard.

Uriel made his way to where the Fabricata sat with Komeda, conversing in crackling streams of binary that sounded urgent even to his ears. 'Back in Variava Station,' said Uriel. 'What was that?'

Ubrique looked up, her half-masked porcelain face unreadable in the dim red light of the gunship's interior.

'I do not know,' she said, and Uriel didn't know whether to believe her. 'A data ghost, a rogue exload. Who knows? I am searching all Mechanicus databases for matching phraseology.'

'And?'

'Nothing yet,' said Ubrique. 'But my link to the Sycorax Analyticae is imperfect and local conditions are far from ideal.'

'I want to know what that was,' said Uriel. 'So find out fast. Is that understood?'

'It is indeed, Captain Ventris,' answered Ubrique. 'Trust me, I desire to know what it was as much as you.'

Uriel didn't doubt that, but suspected the Fabricata knew more than she was telling. Now wasn't the time to take her to task on any omissions. That could come once they reached the comparative safety of the Vae Victus.

He continued on towards the flight deck and took a seat across from the pilot, a junior warrior of the Forge named Taysen. The gunship's navigator and gunner nodded in respect.

'Pull up the local topography,' ordered Uriel.

The navigator nodded and the slate before Uriel swam into focus, displaying Mount Shokereth and its immediate environs. The mountain was a mass of dense contours, tightly gathered on the east and south and more spaced to the north and west.

The mineworkings and surrounding facilities were picked out in a mix of Imperial aquilas and toothed Icon Mechanicus. Those on the lower slopes shone a deep red, indicating they had been destroyed, and Uriel watched several more turn from blue to red as the bombarding mud-steamers pounded them out of existence.

Until then, only the eagle icon of Variava Station remained.

'Do Eagles still circle the mountain?' he whispered.

Not for much longer...

To be continued in The Swords of Calth

About the Authors

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Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a New York Times bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. For the Warhammer 40,000 universe, Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnus*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* for the War of Vengeance series. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

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

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Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes Vengeful Spirit and his New York Times bestsellers A Thousand Sons and the novella The Reflection Crack'd, which featured in The Primarchs anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel Storm of Iron being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy The Legend of Sigmar, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award, and the anthology Elves. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.