



THE HORUS HERESY®

CENSURE

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Vhetok Raan sights the target through his scope, carefully angling the crosshairs over its back. There's a strong side wind blowing that reeks of radiation decay, and he adjusts the aim to compensate when his spotter whispers, reading from a brass gauge.

'Eighteen millimetres left, elevate three millimetres.'

Raan makes the adjustments without acknowledgement. He does not nod, nor even blink. It would spoil the shot and he knows he will only get one. Miss, and they will have to run. He doubts they would escape. He and Scarbek would be dead – or worse, left for dead for the Unburdened to feast upon.

The target is one of *them*. A genetically-enhanced killing machine, bent on revenge. Ever since the world burned under the light of its own sun, they have been out for blood. A humming power pack attached to the target's armour creates a heat haze in the air above it. It feels close even through Raan's rad-suit. He can practically *taste* it.

A smirr of rad-dust occludes his vision for a few seconds, his finger moist in his glove just caressing the trigger of his sniper rifle. The rebreather fastened to his face and neck starts to pinch.

Raan holds his breath. The target is crouched, barely moving, as though he might be patiently digging for something in the dirt. The sniper's eye line is a tunnel, myopic and focused, and narrows just a fraction as the moment arrives...

Cobalt-blue flashes in the pre-dawn light, and the crouching figure shifts a little.

'Now,' Scarbek hisses through the vox.

Raan squeezes the trigger.

Like lightning on the sun, a heavy calibre shell scores the rad-hot air as a low cough escapes from the rifle. It seems to pass in slow motion. He fancies he can see the bullet turning, air particles dislocating at its passage through them, a faint and long-lived spark as it strikes metal and penetrates...

But there is no blood.

There should be blood, even through all that armour, a sign that his shot was a mortal one.

He's turning, mouth opening in a half-shout, world slowing further as if in partial suspended animation.

No blood, he tries to shout. *No—*

A cold ball of pain flares in Raan's back. Then Scarbek's throat is bulging open like a burst water main and gushing red all over his rad-suit, soaking the robes beneath.

Cobalt-blue flashes again. Only this time it is behind them, around them, stabbing into them.

In his eye line, which is no longer confined by the rifle scope, but myopic all the same and ever shrinking to black, Raan sees the target still crouched down, as lifeless as it has been ever since they first sighted him.

Now there is blood. Lots of blood, but it is all theirs.

Darkness rolls in, incongruous during the rad-scarred day, and Vhetok Raan realises – too late – that they have been tricked.

Aeonid Thiel takes an ankle of each corpse in either hand and starts to drag. He has slung the guns across his body already, widening the straps so they will fit his broader and more heavily armoured frame. He doesn't enjoy this grunt work, but it is the practical thing to do. Hide the bodies, bury them in the sun-bleached desert.

Finding a good spot, he starts to dig. Gauntleted hands make for surprisingly good shovels. Bury the dead deep enough and even the Unburdened can't sniff them out. Thiel suspects the radiation is fouling their senses, just as it is fouling his. Auspex, scanner, even his closed helm's retinal display are all unreliable in Calth's scorched atmosphere.

Graves dug and then covered back up, a chrono warning flashes up on his left lens. It is brief and marred by visual static, but about the only thing actually working that provides him with useful information. Radiation levels are spiking. A fresh solar event blazes on the horizon. Burn-up is due in eight minutes, eighteen seconds and counting.

'My gratitude for your assistance, Brother Akanis,' he says to the distant, blue-armoured corpse, 'but I must be on my way.'

No need to bury him – the Unburdened hollowed Akanis out days ago. Only armour and bone remains. There was a time when Thiel would have been

reprimanded for such disrespect, using a dead battle-brother as a lure, but Thiel is no stranger to censure. He still wears the red proudly across his battle-helm, though it no longer means what it once did. Had he not defied his superiors, then Marius Gage and even Lord Guilliman might be dead. As it is they live, but they have left Calth behind.

Thiel thought that he had too, but now he is back. Another act of insubordination on his part.

It isn't that Aeonid Thiel lacks respect, he simply acknowledged more quickly than his brothers that the rules of engagement had changed. Old tactics laid down in his primarch's *Codex*, as it is being called, were not always practical. Thiel wears the practical upon his armour, a ceramite and battle-scarred treatise of all the ploys and stratagems he has utilised in this most unconventional underworld war.

One more stretch of hardline cable to check for this tour. He marks it upon his armour with a short stylus, including coordinates, depth, and time. Thiel runs, staying low, away from the dead Akanis.

Reaching the dig site, he pulls a seismic stave from his equipment belt, plants it deep and activates the subterranean mapping pulse. Takes a few seconds to kick in. Checking the countdown in his left retinal lens, he realises he has but a few to spare.

'Come on, come on...'

Radiation levels are rising faster, a red and fatal dawn is already burning the horizon in a shimmering line of fire. Thiel feels the temperature increase, even as he shuts down the warning chime in his battle-helm to silence his armour's plaintive urging.

'Not yet.'

If he finds the break in the hardline cable, he will have to come back. No way he can dig now – the ambush took up too much time. That particular stratagem is written on his left shoulder guard. It is not the first time he has employed it, nor will it be the last.

Seismic stave comes back negative.

'Damn.'

Thiel tweaks the depth gain and boosts the signal pulse, knowing that radiation and several metric tonnes of earth, stone and steel will be clouding any weak returns.

Another few seconds lapse, and the chrono goes from amber to red. Time is running out.

Stave beeps again.

‘Negative... damn it!’

An actual wave of fire is boiling across the surface of Calth, once a shining frontier of the Ultramar Empire, now rendered into endless desert. Numinus City is a husk, inhabited by corpses and predatory shadows. Gone are the Dera Caren Lowlands, their forests turned to ash. Above, Veridia blazes, not so beautiful now. She is a harbinger, a pearl transformed into a fiery coal of hellish retribution.

Aeonid Thiel was marked for censure, but now Veridia seeks to mark him anew. She has marked him for death, her paint a solar flare that will burn away the red and blue, and leave his armour black.

Leaving the stave and much of his equipment behind, Thiel runs.

Narrowed, bloodshot eyes watch the Ultramarine’s flight. Even with flare dampeners dialled to maximum, the warrior is still a haloed silhouette through the scopes, with the hell-sun burning bright behind him. Though, not so bright that the eyes don’t see him crouch and activate a panel obscured in the dirt. A few seconds later a crack opens in the desert, prompting a cataract of sand to roll over and into an expanding black chasm.

Ignorant of being watched, the Ultramarine hurries into the darkness of the hidden shelter, smoke rising in grey wisps from his battleplate.

Kurtha Sedd cuts the visual feed, retracting the periscopic viewer back into the cavern where he and his cohorts are waiting. His power armour growls as he turns, and he regards the seven cult warriors before him. Even in the low light of phosphor-lamps, the sigils carved into their bare arms shimmer and coil.

Not Unburdened, not yet. But soon. It has been pledged. Promised.

‘Well?’ asks one of the cult, speaking roughly through his battered vox-grille.

Lorgar left these men to die on Calth, loyal servants of the Word who chose the wrong demagogue to follow.

Sedd rasps, the smile in his voice easy to detect, ‘By Erebus’s blood, we have him.’

Cracking ceramite cooling in the subterranean air interrupts the silence of the underground world that now exists beneath the surface of Calth. That was close. The readings on Thiel’s armour went below the red-line, and his radiation levels are perilously close to acceptable maximums.

After the gate, he kept running. Down into the bowels of the earth, where a

new and entirely more ugly world awaits him. This is Calth now, cavernous arcologies, no better than tombs.

At the bottom of the tunnel, Thiel slows to a walk and then stops. He slumps down onto one knee to catch his breath. Already battered from the fight aboard the *Macragge's Honour* almost two years ago, he balks at the additional damage inflicted upon his war-plate by the solar flare, imagining the many minute fissures reducing its combat efficacy.

‘Every time you leave the compound,’ a stern voice echoes from the darkness, interrupting Thiel’s thoughts, ‘you risk our secrecy and safety.’

Wearily, Thiel reaches for the seals affixing his battle-helm to his gorget, disengages them and lifts it away to breathe fresh air.

He is youthful, but has a face with hard edges made that way by war. Sweat lathers his forehead and temples, sheening his short blond hair. His eyes are blue, like bright sapphires and they find the speaker in the darkness at once.

‘And each second we remain isolated and alone, we risk annihilation. Are you keeping such a close eye on my movements now, Captain Vultius?’

An Ultramarine steps from the shadows into the light of a single hanging phosphor lamp. He is gilded, a laureled helmet in the crook of his right arm, a gladius sheathed upon his left hip. Three platinum service studs shine, embedded in a forehead like a granite cliff. Vultius has closely cropped dark hair, and wears full battleplate. His wargear is pristine but betrays the battles he has fought, despite his artificer’s best labours. A short, crimson cape extends from his power generator, ending just below the joint at the back of his knees.

The eyes of Captain Vultius are emerald green, cold and unforgiving as the sea.

‘Do I need to, sergeant?’

‘Practical – the longer we go without further reinforcement, the greater the chance we will be overwhelmed. The communications hardline is our only means of signalling the fleet. With it severed, the command hub is cut adrift. I cannot help but wonder what broke it, sir.’

‘That’s not your concern.’

‘It’s my *only* concern, sir. As I believe it should be yours.’

‘Were you this obstreperous before Lord Guilliman?’ Vultius snorts derisively. His question, Thiel realises, is rhetorical. ‘I can see now why you still bear the old mark. It was always a badge of honour for you, wasn’t it? To be defiant, insubordinate.’

‘I am neither, sir. This is an unconventional war, requiring unconventional

tactics to wage it.'

'Surely you mean win it?'

'May I speak freely, sir?' Thiel sighs.

Vultius cocks his head to the side, incredulous. 'Are you not already, sergeant?'

Thiel answers the previous question.

'No, sir. I do not mean "win it". There is no winning Calth. It has no strategic significance beyond propaganda. Calth is already lost.'

Now Vultius scowls, his patience having reached its end. 'Perhaps you should have stayed on Macragge.'

'Perhaps, sir. Thought I could be more use here.'

'You were wrong, sergeant.' Vultius is already turning his back, moving from the glow of the phosphor lamp and disappearing into the shadows again.

Thiel nods. 'Seems I was.'

'Get yourself rad-scrubbed, and I'll come to debrief you in an hour.'

'I'll try not to be late, sir.'

Vultius pauses, perhaps about to fashion a fresh reprimand, but decides against it.

'See that you're not.' He waits a few more seconds, half swallowed by the dark, 'I thought Lord Guilliman sent you here as a punishment for defying his will, but I see now that I was wrong.'

'How so, sir?'

'Because it feels very much like *I* am the one being punished.' Vultius walks on, his footsteps echoing away as he leaves Thiel to the darkness.

Sitting on a bench in a post-purification cell, Thiel watches two servitors through dirty armourglass as they scrub his war-plate. Radiation cleansing is painful, long, but necessary. Ever since the enemy attacked Calth's sun, any trip to the surface brings with it the hazard of radiation poisoning. Even the Legiones Astartes are not immune, but can withstand greater and more prolonged exposure than their ordinary human counterparts.

Thiel's last trip would have killed a normal man several times over. As it is, he will live and overcome the effects of Calth's radiation.

Dressed only in partial undermesh and a white training vest, he still dwarfs the lone trooper standing beside him. The trooper's uniform jacket identifies him as Rowd, in the colours of the old Numinus regiment. Of course, there is no Numinus regiment anymore, nor any battalion for that matter. The survivors of

Calth's old Army divisions were subsumed together into a guerrilla force, supported by the legionaries of the XIII where possible.

'How much longer, trooper?' Thiel asks.

Rowd turns, shocked at first. Thiel gestures to the servitors through the dirty glass.

'My armour, how long?'

He knows the answer, but the silence underground bothers him, and allows his mind to wander.

The trooper checks his chrono. He's wearing a partial rad-suit, gaiters and boots but with his jacket unzipped to reveal his old Army designation. A rebreather and concomitant face-mask hang around his neck on a loose strap. A hood gathers over his shoulder blades.

'In a moment, sergeant. The servitors are just finishing up now.'

Thiel nods as though this were news.

'Tell me, trooper – are you supposed to be my keeper?'

Rowd is aghast for a moment. 'I... uhh... No, sergeant. Captain Vultius asked that I ensure you remain here until he can return.'

Thiel gets to his feet, a simple act that sees him loom over the trooper.

'You *are* my keeper then.'

'Sergeant, I'm just—'

Laughing out loud, Thiel waves his hand in apology.

'You may relax, trooper. I am only joking with you. Just a little humour to help pass our time together.'

Trooper Rowd relaxes. He tries a smile, but his fearful eyes give away his game. Before he can reply, a klaxon sounds, accompanied by a flashing strobe lamp above the door to the scrub chamber. Seconds later, a hiss of pneumatic pressure presages the door opening, and a servitor appears with Thiel's rad-scubbed war-plate. He's pleased to see that his improvised markings are still engrained upon it.

Rowd sees them too.

'What are they?' His eyes narrow, scrutinising – trying and failing to discern their meaning.

'The Legion would call them practicals. I use them as a record of every tactic, every stratagem and ploy I have utilised on Calth since my posting.'

'Doesn't your suit have internal systems for that?'

Thiel smiles, taking a vambrace proffered by the servitor.

'Already full. I've been busy. Here, help me put this back on.'

Rowd obliges, just as the dull echoes of violence sound in the tunnel ahead.

It takes three minutes for Thiel and Trooper Rowd to armour him. Another three minutes sees them halfway up the tunnel, en route to the command hub where Thiel hopes that Captain Vultius is still in charge.

Three hard bangs sound in the phosphor gloom, louder than before. Thiel slows to a light jog, armour clanking dully.

Rowd catches him, out of breath. 'What was that?'

'Bolter fire.'

All the colour drains from Rowd's face, illuminated starkly by the fizzing lamp overhead. 'That's a Legion weapon.'

'Yes.'

Rowd checks the power gauge on his las-carbine, and clicks off the safety with his thumb.

Thiel has drawn a bolt pistol from a side holster. In his other hand, he has his gladius.

The gunfire is joined by shouting. Some of the voices he recognises. One belongs to Captain Vultius as he bellows orders. Others are more guttural, harsh. He knows the language, even if he cannot actually speak it.

Colchisian.

Word Bearers.

Thiel's grip tightens around the handle of his pistol, and the hilt of his gladius. He wants to reach for the electromagnetic longsword sheathed down the side of the generator upon his back, but he doesn't yet know what he's facing. No practical to gauge his response, no theoretical worth formulating during these strange days of fratricide.

'Get behind me,' Thiel warns, prowling the last few hundred metres of the tunnel. There are blast doors at the end of it; a key-coded panel prevents entry, but somehow an enemy force has found and infiltrated their base of operations.

The sounds of battle are getting louder, even through the thick plasteel of the doors. Thiel pauses at the threshold, tapping in the precise numeric sequence to disengage them. He wishes there was another way, but this is the only clear route into the command hub. The opening blast doors will announce his presence – he must be ready for whatever lies beyond. Memories of fighting aboard the *Macragge's Honour* return to him in cold flashes. Thiel tries to suppress them, hoping to face only mortal foes this time.

'Every door a new horror...' he mutters.

Rowd looks up. ‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

Loud even over the din of weapons fire, shouts and curses, the blast doors grind open.

‘Stay with me, Rowd!’

Head low, Thiel darts for the side wall, absorbing snatches of tactical data in his first brief glance at the room.

Much of the command hub is destroyed, its cogitators and strategium consoles wrecked. Flickering overhead lumen strips suggest that the power generator is on backup too. A pair of blast doors on the opposite side are blown-in and lying broken on the fire-black ground, the obvious point of ingress. Three Ultramarines are behind stone support columns towards the centre of the room, chips of ornate filigree and baroque lapidary exploding around them as they take cover.

One of them is Captain Vultius. Blood is leaking into his eye from a savage head wound that must also be spoiling his aim. He is hunkered down, reduced to making snap shots, the hollow echo of his pistol a sign that the magazine is close to empty.

Fifteen targets spread out across the other side of the large chamber, advancing in pairs. Thiel counts seven wearing power armour, but stripped down to leave their arms bare. The other eight are human cultists – flak armour, robes, carrying solid-shot weapons and stolen lasguns. Poorly equipped but well motivated, they move with a precision uncommon in the zealot brotherhoods.

A three-shot burst from Thiel’s bolt pistol clips a Word Bearer in the gut, and he spins with the sudden flesh wound, stunned. Rowd gets off a shot too, taking a cultist through the neck, dropping him instantly.

‘Good aim,’ shouts Thiel.

‘I was going for the torso.’

The pair of them are pressed against the chamber wall, using the natural alcoves to shelter in. Blistering return fire is keeping them pinned.

Static crackles over Thiel’s vox-feed and the grainy voice of Captain Vultius resolves a moment later.

‘They bombed the door, Thiel. Numetor and Hargellus are dead. Practical – we are ambushed and outgunned.’

‘I count seven legionaries and seven cultists.’

‘Negative. There are at least double that number of human auxiliaries.’

Thiel grits his teeth. ‘I’m sorry sir, this is my fault. They must have followed

me.'

Theoretical: they are losing, and in a few short minutes the command hub will be overrun.

Thiel is still formulating a plan when the voice of the enemy leader is broadcast into the room, above the tumult of the firefight.

'This is Kurtha Sedd, Apostle of the Third Hand, Seventeenth Legion. You are outgunned and outmanoeuvred. Surrender, and your lives – and the lives of those in service to you – will be spared.'

The command hub is part of the wider arcology network, the centre from which the Ultramarines have coordinated the local shelters these past years. There are no refugees here, but there are still civilians. Fourteen men and women, only a third of whom are soldiers, the rest logisticians, engineers and cooks, cower with their failed protectors. Some clutch las-pistols in shaking fingers. Others lie dead, hit by stray shots or ended by their own hand. Like Thiel, Vultius is responsible for them.

They are the blood of Calth. Or all that's left of it.

Static fills Thiel's vox-feed as Vultius gives his final order.

'Get out, Thiel. You're the only one who can.'

'You're giving up?'

'They want prisoners – that gives you time, sergeant.'

'Time for what, sir?'

'To mount a rescue.' He laughs, enjoying a moment of black humour that Thiel doesn't share. *'It's like you said, sergeant – this is an unconventional war, requiring unconventional tactics. These are mine. Now go.'*

Thiel's mouth becomes a stern line as he realises what he has to do.

'Fall back.'

Rowd looks at him questioningly. 'Sergeant?'

'To the blast doors. Now. We're leaving.'

Thiel shields Rowd as he leads the retreat out of the command hub and back into the tunnel. He winces as a slew of snap fire follows them through the gap.

'Move!'

Risking a stray bullet, he reengages the locking sequence and puts a bolt round into the panel before he leaves. The blast doors are still closing when an explosion sounds behind them, putting Rowd on the deck and staggering Thiel so that he has to brace himself against the wall.

Looking back, he sees several figures advancing eagerly through the smoke. Twisted metal lays strewn either side of the ragged doors. He hauls Rowd to his

feet. 'Get up, soldier. Hold here.'

The Army trooper is dazed but follows orders, recovering his composure quickly, and firing from a kneeling position. Three screams reward their efforts, one kill definitely Rowd's. The rest of the cultists are more cautious after that.

Thiel holds up a clenched fist, signalling for Rowd to stop. 'Go to overwatch.' He then listens as the resonance of las and bolter fire fades.

The silhouettes gathering in the dissipating smoke are falling back, though a voice lower than the rest still seems to be issuing orders.

'They're retreating.' Rowd cannot help but sound relieved.

Thiel continues to listen. More muttering, the sharp clink of metal against metal. His eyes widen as he recognises the sound of a grenade pin being pulled.

'Down!'

His warning is swallowed by a painful blare of white noise, intensified by the close confines of the tunnel. Rowd cries out as pellucid light fills the space, as bright as Calth's angry sun.

'They've got... stun grenades...' Thiel's speech is slurred. He feels groggy, ears ringing, head like the inside of a pounding drum. The detonations have overloaded his auto-senses, feeding back directly into his cerebral cortex.

He hears a high-pitched pop, followed by the aggressive *whoosh* of expelled pressure and released gas. Fresh smoke is filling the tunnel, spilling out from a new clutch of grenades. Grunting, Thiel drags himself upright. His battle-helm's retinal lenses have overloaded so he takes it off, mag-locking it to his belt and leaving it to auto-calibrate.

Everything gets louder, the stench of cordite igniters more potent. Vision still blurred, he stays low in case the cultists come out shooting.

They don't. Hurried footsteps resolve through the still-fading echoes of combat instead.

Thiel pulls the dazed Rowd to his feet.

'Something's wrong.'

The cultists are backing off. Beneath the sound of their movements, Thiel swears he can hear chuckling. He blinks, willing the harsh sensory afterimages to fade. With the effects of the stun grenade and the smoke, his targeting ability is severely compromised.

Something is coming. Blurred silhouettes, he can't tell exactly how many from this distance, are barrelling towards them. He fires off a shot, but misses. Grainy, crimson ovals emerge through the dense smoke. They are the lenses of pioneer infra-goggles, burning in the murk with heat-targeting certainty.

Closing his eyes, Thiel listens.

Three attackers, running full pelt.

He brings up his pistol two-handed, his eyes closed. He pinpoints a figure – one shot, followed by a grunt of pain.

‘Two to go,’ he breathes, focusing.

The next shot only wings the target. He hears the shell ricochet, the target yelping as it stumbles. Another shot takes it centre-mass, bringing it down hard.

‘One more...’

The cultist shrieks, so loud, so close that Thiel realises he has run out of time. He opens his eyes, and sees that the madman has just triggered the incendiary device strapped to his torso.

The blast rips Thiel from his feet and throws him into the tunnel’s ceiling. The thunder of falling rock is almost deafening. As darkness takes him, he imagines himself tumbling down into the maw of a creature that lives beyond reality, through the veil.

A scratching sensation against his breastplate wakes him.

Thiel opens his eyes to darkness, the reek of earth and wet stone. Something intensely heavy is pressing down on his back. He tries to move, but he is pinned; breathing is hard enough.

‘Trooper...’ The word is nothing more than a croak, made flat and dull by the ton of rock on top of him.

It is Rowd scraping Thiel’s war-plate, arms flattened against his chest by the Ultramarine’s armour, fingers locked around a tiny knife, desperately scoring the metal in hope of a response.

‘Thank the Emperor,’ Rowd breathes.

Thiel is crouched over him, the Ultramarine’s pinned body the only thing between the trooper and being crushed to death. At least Rowd has had the sense to fit his mask and rebreather before the cave-in.

‘Can you lift it?’ he asks.

It feels like a tank is squatting on Thiel’s back. Experimentally, he pushes. Grunting, he raises the slab of rock that is slowly flattening them both by just a few millimetres before letting it down slowly again.

‘Can’t get it any higher.’

‘Even Space Marines have their limits then?’ It is intended as a joke, but Rowd doesn’t sell the humour well. ‘I don’t want to die here, sir.’

‘Nor I. That’s why you’re going to reach down to my belt and unclip one of

my grenades. Can you do that, trooper?’

Rowd nods, letting go of the knife.

Thiel’s arms are braced either side of him, bearing the load. His legs are similarly trapped. His body is arched just enough that the trooper has a small amount of space to manoeuvre. Thiel feels the grenade disengage, hears it scrape against his breastplate as Rowd brings it up to his face.

‘Now what?’

‘Adjust the timer to thirty seconds, then reach up and push it into the gap between me and the rock on top of us. Push it deep. You’re not wearing power armour, and a blast this close will almost certainly kill you if you’re unshielded.’

Rowd sounds uncertain at this plan. ‘And what will it do to you?’

By contrast, Thiel is resigned. ‘Hurt like hell. Now do it.’

Rowd obeys. He sets the thirty second timer, engages it and plugs the grenade as deep as he can so that Thiel’s body will be between him and the blast.

‘Done.’

‘Good. You have less than twenty seconds. Make yourself as small as you can, and do me a favour – cover my ears.’

With Rowd’s trembling hands pressed against the sides of his head, Thiel feels the grenade counting down, each minute tremor of the timer rippling through his armour. With three seconds left, he closes his eyes.

Heat, pressure, the sound of splintered rock, the stench of burnt metal and the taste of blood in his mouth – it all hits him at once in a whirlwind of agonising sensation. Thiel has weathered the blast, though his limbs are numb and his war-plate’s integrity has been severely compromised.

Above, the air is brighter and he is able to turn, albeit with an intense amount of pain. Rubble and dirt tumbles from his back.

‘You alive?’ he rasps to the trooper. There’s blood on his teeth. He can taste it.

Rowd’s reply comes with a strange lack of conviction. ‘Yes.’

‘Then help me up, trooper. I can hear the cultists scouring the rubble. They’re coming for us.’

Alone and without an apothecary, it is difficult for Thiel to ascertain the full extent of his injuries. It feels like internal bleeding, some bone fractures around the rib-shell, and possibly the left shoulder. With his helmet now back on, the retinal display reveals blast damage to both the plate and seals of his armour, as well as his power plant couplings.

Thiel limps to his feet, shucking off the split sections of fallen rock shattered by the grenade. He stares through a cloud of displaced earth and dust, finding

enemies.

‘Four contacts, thirty-three metres.’ He pulls out his pistol, three rounds still in the clip according to the ammo gauge.

A single burst echoes loudly, harsh muzzle flash lighting up the half-dark. Three cultists are reduced to blasted chunks of meat. A fourth dies more elegantly to a well-placed las-bolt from Rowd.

Thiel nods. ‘You’re actually a pretty decent shot with that.’

Rowd is still wiping the grit and sweat from his face, having pulled off the mask to make the kill.

‘I fight for Ultramar, sergeant, even down here in the dirt. Retribution is also a strong motivator. Helps focus.’

‘Justly said. What did you do before joining the Army?’

Rowd hesitates. ‘I... I was a convict, sir. Penal conscript.’

Thiel whistles. There’s a smile in his voice. ‘What are the odds?’

Up ahead, solid shot cracks noisily from the shadows. A bullet ricochets from the wall, spitting debris. Another prangs off Thiel’s shoulder guard, leaving a shallow groove in the ceramite. Beyond them, a heavier weapon is being wheeled into position, hunkered down behind the rubble. Crewmen are getting it braced, fixing its magazine and targeter.

Thiel has no wish to test the resilience of his power armour any further. ‘We need to move.’

Not waiting to be asked, Rowd supports the Ultramarine’s weaker left side and together they stumble down the tunnel, turning the bend just before the autocannon opens up.

Rowd crouches down. Thiel rams a fresh clip into his bolt pistol.

With his hands over his ears, Rowd has to yell to be heard. ‘Now what?’

‘We can’t go back that way.’

Gunfire is shredding the end of the tunnel, chewing up rock and earth like a drill.

‘Enemy legionaries won’t be far behind them, either.’ Thiel checks the chrono count on his retinal display. He has it running all the time, just like the operational mark that has been running ever since the Calth engagement began. ‘Solar flare should have subsided by now. There’s an egress not far from this point.’

‘Head to the surface? But it’s—’

‘A deadly radiation-scorched wasteland.’ It’s easy to tell from his manner that Thiel’s mind is made up. ‘Theoretical – we have to find a different approach of

attack, surprise Kurtha Sedd and his men. Practical – we stay here, we’re dead and so are the others. Captain Vultius won’t fight back if he can’t guarantee he’ll protect the civilians by doing so. Sedd wants prisoners.’

Rowd looks far from sanguine. ‘Seems like both choices are death, one just slower than the other.’

Already on the move, Thiel seems not to hear him. ‘Suit up, and watch your rad-gauge.’

‘I doubt it’ll provide much comfort during another solar flare. Where will we go once we’re out there?’

Thiel turns his head, regarding the trooper with cold retinal lenses.

‘Somewhere underground, and quickly. If we don’t, we both burn.’

Kurtha Sedd stands impassively, his armoured form half swathed in dissipating smoke and shadows. The little of his war-plate that is revealed in the phosphor light is barbed, misshapen and wrought with lines of cuneiform script. Much of it has been written by his own hand, for he thinks of himself as something of a preacher. Some passages even spread from metal onto flesh but, unlike his armour, these markings are etched in his own blood and not that of his victims.

Hands clasped across his lower torso, he waits.

Three cultists emerge from the shadows, followed by one of his legionaries. He addresses only the Word Bearer.

‘Eshra. Where are they?’

‘Escaped, my lord.’ The legionary kneels when he reaches Kurtha Sedd, lowering his neck for a punitive ritual beheading.

‘Lift your gaze. I won’t kill you for this failure, but you must make atonement.’

Since Lorgar left his errant sons to die on Calth, a factionalist mentality has arisen, spurred on by a profound survival instinct and sense of righteous denial. Sedd believes that he has been left behind for some divine, albeit unknown, purpose.

Eshra has no war-helm. He lost his several weeks ago and now goes without it, his scars displayed to all as a declaration of his devotion.

‘Name it.’

He slams a fist against his war-plate, an outmoded gesture that Sedd does his best to ignore. The apostle’s eyes are like balefires behind the lenses of his skull helm. ‘Follow them.’

‘Into the rad-desert?’ Esra looks perplexed. ‘Without full armour...’

‘You will sicken and die, but you will last long enough to catch our prey. Think of it as motivation.’

‘But my lord, I—’

The blow is swift, severing Esra’s neck and parting head from shoulders before anyone has even glimpsed the blade drawn from Kurtha Sedd’s vambrace.

He hisses. ‘Kaeloq.’

Another warrior steps forward from behind the Dark Apostle. He has the good sense to still wear a battle-helm. A curved horn arcs from his left temple.

‘Yes, my lord.’ His voice is not one but two, overlaid and just slightly out of synch with one another.

‘Noble Kaeloq. Will you also refuse this honour?’

Kaeloq draws himself up. ‘Do you want their heads or their tongues?’

Behind his rictus mask, Kurtha Sedd smiles.

A hot wind is whipping across the scorched ruin of a city. The solar flare has left fires in its wake. Some are small, flickering at the edges of roadsides or within the shells of blasted buildings like tiny funerary candles. Others are vast conflagrations that burn across entire districts, leaving black soot behind them.

Thiel looks to the horizon, then back to Rowd. ‘Mercius District South. See, that statue belonged to the landmaster.’

Before the fires, before Veridia turned Calth into an arid wasteland, there were north, east and west districts too. Agri-farms on an industrial scale, all of them. Carefully cultivated vine forests, tree-lined avenues and great arboreal domes, all now just dust and ash. Over fifty-thousand workers, with only this skeletal monument to mourn them.

Thiel knows of Mercius, and he knows of the landmasters. Before he returned to the surface, his tactical briefings on all of Calth’s major cities and districts were very detailed. Now they are little more than historical documents, footnotes to describe a broken world.

Rowd coughs into his mask, fogging up the visor with his spittle-breath.

‘Are you injured, trooper?’

‘I’m fine, sir.’

Thiel’s gaze lingers on him for a moment before he turns his attention back to the ruin. ‘Eyes open then. There could be anything lurking in those shadows.’

Rowd frowns. ‘What kind of a man could endure out here?’

‘It’s not men we need to worry about.’

Since arriving at the outskirts of Mercius South, they have not met a single

soul. Corpses do not count – or rather the charred, blackened bone remains of what were formerly corpses that litter the ground in every direction.

Thiel advances slowly, ordering Rowd to remain twenty paces behind him. He watches every shadow, every fissure and crack, all of which deepen the further in they move.

Silently, he holds up a clenched fist.

Rowd halts at once. Looking ahead, he sees what has caught the Ultramarine's attention.

A tank, specifically a XIII Legion Rhino APC, is blocking the road.

'Hold here,' Thiel's voice crackles through the vox-link built into Rowd's rad-suit.

The Ultramarine advances alone, an unslung bolter cradled in both hands, held at waist height. No good for the tunnel fight, out here in the open its extra range could prove useful. His pistol is holstered, his gladius sheathed, a combat knife at his knee and the electromagnetic longsword strapped to his back.

Though his autosenses are fouled beyond usefulness by radiation, his internal chrono counts down towards the next predicted solar flare. Caution is a commodity he can ill afford, but recklessness might also prove costly.

Reaching the armoured transport, Thiel notices that the rear hatch is open. Bolter leading the way, he steps inside. There is some superficial fire damage but the interior is largely unscathed. A driver sits slumped at the controls, certainly dead. A hole is gored into his helmet, rimed with dark, encrusted blood.

Thiel has seen injuries like this before. 'Not a blade wound.'

A shout from outside alerts him. He comes running in response to Rowd's cry.

'Up there...'

The soldier is pointing, jabbing the muzzle of his lasgun like a finger.

Thiel follows it to a graven-looking statue, like an ecclesiastical gargoyle, perched and shrouded by its wings atop the remains of a tower.

Rowd sounds concerned, and has yet to lower his weapon. 'What *is* that thing?'

'A daemon, once. Now it's just a shell.'

As if to confirm it, a strong gust of wind erodes the statue into mere flakes of ash.

At last, Rowd lowers his lasgun, but keeps staring at the pair of clawed feet left behind on the shattered tower. 'What's happened to them?'

Thiel shrugs.

'The veil thickened again, I suppose. Daemons went with it. Tough for them to

anchor to the mortal plane. There are no true daemons left on Calth anymore.’

Rowd meets the Ultramarine’s gaze. ‘How can you know that?’

‘Have you seen any?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Just the Unburdened left now...’ Thiel exhales, a long reedy breath, and reaches out to the Rhino for support. Something dark is trickling between the joints in his war-plate.

Rowd sees it.

‘You’re still bleeding.’

‘I can barely stand. Help me to the tank.’

Together, they struggle inside. Thiel slumps against the interior wall, his breathing ragged.

‘What should I do?’ asks Rowd.

‘Stay in here,’ Thiel rasps. ‘If we are being hunted, we may be ignored inside this wreck, but they’ll kill us if we’re out in the open. I’ll recover, just need a moment...’

He grunts in pain, hissing through his mouth grille.

‘And you can hope my recovery doesn’t take too long. Solar flare’s not far off.’

Rowd scowls. ‘Anything *practical*?’

Thiel laughs at the attempted sarcasm.

‘Tell me about your life on Calth, soldier. Remind me what we fought for after our kinsmen betrayed us.’

Rowd shrugs, staring at the ground. ‘Not much to tell. I was a farmer, and worked in the Vollard Meadows, or harvesting grain for the silos.’ He pauses, fiddling absently with the seals of his suit. ‘I killed my overseer when he tried to assault my wife. Shot him through the heart. Dead instantly.’

Thiel’s head sinks back, touching the metal of the interior wall. He lets out another pained breath.

‘You were convicted of murder.’

Rowd nods. ‘I had no proof of the assault. I was a harvester, he was an overseer.’ His voice changes, becomes embittered at the memory, the loss. Thiel can empathise.

‘With me gone, my wife and infant daughter were alone. They perished before the war – a blessing, I suppose. I thought I’d die in my cage. Instead I was pressed into service as part of the military. Marked for censure, if you like.’

Rowd gestures to Thiel’s helmet. ‘Just like you were.’

Thiel's mirth is forced, because of pain rather than disagreement.

Afterwards, a charged silence descends. Rowd waits a minute to break it.

'We aren't getting out of this tank, are we sir.'

'Maybe we can get the tank moving. It might have self-repaired.'

Rowd looks around. 'They can do that?'

Thiel doesn't answer. He is under, mind and body making the necessary repairs for him to function again. Ultramarines are particularly good at this recovery. They do it efficiently, rapidly, better than other Legions. It is one of the reasons they are so hard to kill. Of late, they have also had a lot of practice.

The dull glint of armour, seen through the open ramp of the Rhino, makes Rowd start. He realises that he has been daydreaming instead of keeping watch. Without a chrono, there is no way of telling how long Thiel has been out. Certainly, the horizon line is brightening and the stench of heat and fire is growing in the air. Neither is a good sign. He slowly shuffles over to the hatch, trying for a better look.

A hunting party have seen them, or at least the possibility of their hiding place. They are advancing on the wreck, four cultists and a legionary with an ugly battle-helm mask; a single horn protrudes from the side of his head. Spiked iron chains rattle against his war-plate. His arms are bare brawn, slabs of cuneiform-inscribed meat, baked brown by the radiation. In one hand he grips a saw-edged ritual knife. The other holds a snub-nosed bolt gun, with a second blade attached to the stock.

Rowd estimates that they have scant minutes before the hunters descend into the shallow crater where the Rhino is languishing. Scurrying over, he is about to reach for Thiel's vambrace when the Ultramarine's hand snaps out and seizes his wrist.

Suppressing a yelp, Rowd gestures to the open ramp.

Still a little groggy, Thiel grunts. 'How many?' He reaches a vision slit, and shakes his head. 'They're close.'

Then he notices the fiery line of the horizon.

'But *that's* even closer.'

Rowd is back at the edge of the ramp, sighting down his carbine. 'I can kill two before they're close enough to see us.'

Thiel cocks his head slightly. 'You say you were a grain harvester?'

'Lot of time to waste, out in the fields. Used some of it picking off vittle-cans with my father's long-las. He was a sniper in the Army.'

‘Didn’t skip a generation then. I feel sorry for the cans. Two it is, soldier. I’ll take the others. Legionary dies last.’

Rowd nods. The plan is set.

The trooper waits another five seconds before taking his first shot. He blows out the eye of the closest cultist, feeding brain and skull through the back of the head with his las-bolt. The second one dies with a burn across the neck, good as a slit throat. Both crumple within seconds of one another.

Two bolt gun shots boom out from the opposite end of the Rhino, magnified by the close metal interior, heralding the explosive deaths of the other two cultists. Then Rowd sees what is coming up behind them, and realises that their time has just run out.

Thiel is about to draw a bead on the legionary when the first flare of light blinds him. Coursing over the desert, roaring across the ruins and the ash dunes comes a curtain of brilliant fire. It rolls in waves, one atop the other, undulating, coruscating. It is beautiful and terrifying – a living, breathing embodiment of destruction, and it is coming for them.

Thiel shouts through to Rowd. ‘Get us moving. Now!’

Rowd obeys, scrambling to the Rhino’s command console as the bolter fire begins again.

‘How does it...?’

He trails off, the controls foreign and overlarge for his human hands.

‘No different to a grain harvester,’ calls Thiel over the crash of arms. ‘Put it into drive, then ram the accelerator as hard as you can.’

It’s hot in the Rhino now, furnace-like with the approaching firestorm.

Rowd hears Thiel shouting, and the solid *thunk* of shells striking the hull. Another voice invades the chaos, deep and guttural. He doesn’t need to turn to know that it’s the Word Bearer.

Finding the drive lever, he hauls it back, punches the ignition panel. Incredibly, the wrecked tanked sputters... then dies. He tries again. Something heavy lands in the troop hold behind him. A shout from Thiel makes him glance in the rear-view reflector.

The Word Bearer is on board, and the two of them are fighting hand-to-hand.

‘Seal the compartment,’ snaps Thiel, his attention focused elsewhere.

Rowd tries, but the hatch is buckled and won’t slide across. Desperately, he hammers the ignition panel again, sweat stinking in his rad-suit, hot breath fogging his goggles, the heat threatening to overwhelm him.

It turns over, the Rhino coughs and its engine judders into life.

Something is happening behind him. The fight is changing. He hears grunting, snarling, catches a glimpse of something inhuman and bestial. It reminds Rowd of the statue, the daemon-husk. He realises that this creature *is* the Word Bearer.

‘Hellspawn!’ Thiel roars, drawing the electromagnetic longsword from his back. It hums with feral energy, as fierce as the monster unveiling itself before him.

The Word Bearer laughs, his two voices mocking.

‘Chosen, Gal Vorbak... Unburdened. So many names, none of them true. How petty your mortal flesh is.’

Armour splits, shifts and remoulds around pinioned wings. A crest of dew-wet bone spurs punches out from the legionary’s spine. Skin darkens, brown all the way to black. Pin-prick pupils visible through the monster’s vision-slit blaze with a malignant light.

And in that moment of transformation, his injuries weighing him down as surely as any anchor, Thiel knows that he is outmatched.

Snatched glimpses in the rear-view reflector reveal little of the fight between Thiel and the Unburdened. It is brutal, a blur of rapid blade thrusts and claw slashes underpinned by the snarling, growling dual-voice of the monster.

The Rhino is moving through the solar fire. Rubble beneath its rolling tracks makes it violently buck and shift. Dwarfed by the driver’s seat, Rowd is almost thrown when he smashes through a wall of heavier debris. He clings on, the temperature in the hold rising, the metal now almost scalding to the touch. All he has to do is hold on, keep moving.

Keep moving.

‘Just keep on moving...’ he mutters.

There’s a crack in the reflector, which splits the view of the battle behind him into two jagged pieces. In the background seen through the gaping rear hatch, Calth is burning. The horizon is gone, obliterated by fire. Thiel and the monster are dark silhouettes carved in the light. Hard to tell with the movement and the violent motion of the battle tank, but it looks to Rowd like the Ultramarine is losing.

He is so engrossed by the struggle, so fearful of what it’s likely outcome will mean for him, that Rowd fails to see the steep drop opening up right in front of them.

Even with a day's recuperation and fully-charged suit of power armour, Thiel knows that he would still be on the back foot fighting against the Unburdened. It is swift, its blows hard and resonating. Every parry of its claws, every defensive block sends a shivering impact all the way to his shoulders. Grimacing, Thiel realises that his wound has reopened. First a warming sensation in his back, then cold – a chill that numbs his nerves and slows him fatally.

The tank jolts, throwing Thiel back just as he makes a rare counter. He staggers, the electromagnetic longsword slipping in his grip. Seeing weakness, the Unburdened attacks. Brain strategising with every passing microsecond, Thiel is unable to craft a response as the monster bears him to the deck, its claws pressed against his throat.

‘Such petty, fragile mortal flesh...’

The Unburdened is laughing. His spittle reeks of decaying meat and spoiled milk, but Thiel does not gag. Struggling to the end, he shows no weakness and resolves to meet his death with fury in his heart. He feels the bite of the claw against his carotid artery, pledging his life and soul to the Emperor and Guilliman, just as the ground beneath both combatants seems to give way. Belatedly, Thiel realises that they are falling.

Then there is blood. Oceans of blood, enough to drown in.

Alone, the Word Bearer trudges doggedly along the subterranean corridors beneath this dirty little world. In his hand he carries a head: his promise. The helmet still worn by the head is covered in markings, battle strategies scored into the very metal.

He follows the sounds of pain emanating from deeper within the tunnel complex, knowing they will bring him closer to the command hub. Above ground, the inferno will be raging, scorching the earth and turning it black.

The crash saved him. Dumped in an extinct sub-arborea – the vines withered, the hydroponic systems long fallen to neglect – he found a way back. The further down he went, the less he felt the heat. His armour is caked dark with blood.

Heaving open the last of the inner doors, barely visible in the gloom, he finds them.

One of the warriors turns, chuckling. ‘Kaeloq? We all thought you were dead.’

The two Word Bearers have an Ultramarine as their captive, a captain by his rank insignia. Vultius's face is bruised and bloody, one eye gummed shut with congealed crimson. They have evidently been torturing him. A rusty table strewn with knives and clamps sits within their reach. A magnesium-white lumen casts

the scene in a stark light. It flares intermittently, surging and dying every view seconds.

Kaeloq steps into the torture chamber. 'Not yet.'

The two Word Bearers, who had been intent on their cruel labours, turn sharply at the sound of his voice.

Kurtha Sedd regards the pict screen with quiet interest. With the phosphor lamps extinguished, the pict screen is the only source of light. It paints the Dark Apostle a sickly green. The image crackles, crazes with static and then stabilises for a few seconds before crazing again.

'Perfect,' Sedd purrs, smiling to himself.

They have been digging, planting seismic beacons with every new tunnel excavated. Its pattern is revealed on the screen: a star with eight points. A tribute to the unholy Octed.

At the sound of another legionary entering the chamber, Sedd half turns. He stops himself, confident in his mastery of this place. In his peripheral vision, he sees that Lathek is still 'playing' with another of the surviving Ultramarines.

'Don't bleed him dry, Lathek. Not yet.'

They need this warrior's blood, and the captain's. He resists the urge to send Lathek to check on Vorsch and Methkar. All of their captives must live, for now, and the humans cowering in the far reaches of the chamber, too. Their blood will be important.

'The veil will thin again,' he says. 'Is that not so, Kaeloq?'

The horned figure standing behind him takes a step forward. Kurtha Sedd sneers.

'You reek of blood. Did you bring me their heads or their tongues, my disciple?'

Something heavy is kicked over to Sedd, rolling around to face the apostle. He stares down into the smashed lenses of an Ultramarine's helmet. It is bloody, with a ragged stump of neck jutting out of the bottom.

'Very good, Kaeloq.' Sedd looks up again to the screen and the ritual tunnels they have hollowed out beneath the rock. Here, an old sewer line. There, a mag-lev track fallen to disuse. All Sedd had to do was join up the points. So much of it was already there, part of the cosmic pattern long before the war even came to Calth. This subterranean bunker of the Ultramarines provided the nexus. A pleasing twist of fate.

He gestures back to the map. 'Miraculous, isn't it?'

‘It is.’

Realising that this voice does not belong to Kaeloq, Kurtha Sedd starts to turn again. He recognises the blood-soaked Ultramarine wearing Kaeloq’s helmet.

‘By the Word!’

‘I have a word for you,’ Aeonid Thiel replies. ‘I’ll let my bolter speak it for me.’

Muzzle flare rips into the darkness, tearing open Lathek’s chest plate and exposing his insides to the air. He crumples with a muted gurgle of pain. The pinned Ultramarine Hadrius, who still has Lathek’s ritual knife embedded in his clavicle, stamps down on his captor’s neck as he lies supine on the floor.

Screams and cries of alarm echo in the chamber as the human captives scramble to get out of harm’s way. Sedd is faster than his warriors, and dives for cover, shouting at his remaining disciples to counterattack even as another of them is cut down. Word Bearers are not the tactical equals of Ultramarines – perhaps they are not even on an equal footing as warriors, but Thiel knows that to dismiss them all as mindless fanatics is an error.

Hadrius learns this fact to his cost, his throat and right arm exploding into bloody gore when a Word Bearer opens fire, as the Ultramarine attempts to rush Sedd.

Thiel roars in anger and guns down Hadrius’s killer. There is only one more Word Bearer left, besides Sedd; the rest of their enemies are human cultists.

Vultius lunges from the shadows, killing two with well aimed shots from his bolter. He’s injured, but the captain still manages to square the odds. Another cultist hauls up a chain-stubber, spitting dogma copied from his master’s heretic tongue.

A bright las-beam scythes through the dark, striking the gunner in the chest and leaving a burning crater as it passes out of his back.

Rowd has a good eye, and Thiel is thankful that he has the convict-turned-soldier watching his back.

Enfilading fire keeps the traitors down behind a command console, Vultius pinning them from one end of the room, and Thiel from the other.

Just below the fire exchange, Thiel discerns the sound of rhythmic chanting and recognises Sedd’s voice.

‘Captain!’ he calls out.

Vultius has heard it too, but he is weak and slumped behind a blasted column. Sedd’s remaining disciple is switching fire between them, snatching off rapid

bursts that are foiling Thiel's aim.

But Thiel is not alone.

'Rowd! Remember those vittle-cans, out in the fields?'

Rowd's reply is nearly swallowed by the harsh retort of the bolter. 'I've never forgotten them.'

Thiel smiles. 'Hit one for me now, would you.'

Stepping from his hiding place in the fallen rubble strewn halfway across the command hub, Rowd fires a single shot. The rifle is pressed into his shoulder to swallow the recoil, his eye squeezed in to the sight. The las-bolt travels through smoke and debris, burning across the shadows of the room to strike the Word Bearer just above the eye. It stings, but doesn't kill – makes him shift, turn and seek out his aggressor.

The momentary lapse in concentration is all Thiel needs to put a round through the side of his head. Before the body has even fallen, the Ultramarine is leaping clear and discarding the spent bolter.

Vultius leans out of cover, firing off a flurry of shots into Kurtha Sedd as the Dark Apostle rises. The explosive shells burst against a dark aura now surrounding him, some foul ritual of summoning lending him unnatural protection from harm.

Thiel sees the practical at once, forgetting the pistol at his hip. Aboard the *Macragge's Honour*, blades and axes smote the Neverborn more efficiently than any firearm: something to do with the creatures' ties to ancient times, and the old methods employed to banish them. But Thiel has no knife or blade. They were lost in the Rhino crash, his prized longsword – a weapon from the primarch's own armoury – amongst them.

When the Unburdened died, capricious fate delivering it to the edge of that electromagnetic blade, it exploded, showing Thiel with daemonic gore. As he awoke, the blood cooked to his armour, he fashioned a theoretical that would give him the element of surprise and a practical he could exploit to save his battle-brothers. Kaeloq's borrowed helm, repugnant as it was, completed the subterfuge. Now, as he runs at Kurtha Sedd, as the apostle's skin writhes and shifts with warp-spawned mutation, Thiel uses the helm again. Ripping it off his head, glad to be free of its stinking confines, he wields it like a weapon.

Sedd is delirious, revelling in his burgeoning power.

'The veil thins, and I ascend!'

'You die,' Thiel corrects him, and slams the horned helm into the apostle's skull-like face.

Sedd screams with two voices as the ritual falters and the change begins to reshape and devour. Armour, skin and flesh melts into a gelatinous soup, until even that starts to smoke and wither.

Recoiling from the hideous creature, Thiel draws his pistol and aims squarely at the fleshy mass that used to be Kurtha Sedd.

‘Vanquish it, Thiel!’ Vultius cries out.

The captain shoots at the same time, and the two Ultramarines empty their magazines into the spawn. Every explosive impact shrinks it, reducing it down until it is little more than a stain.

The echo of bolter fire fades. Calm returns, undercut by shallow weeping and the muttered thanks of the human captives for their deliverance.

Thiel sags a little where he stands, still holding out his smoking pistol as if the thing he and Captain Vultius have just eradicated might yet come back to the material plane. He flinches as he feels a hand upon his arm.

‘Easy, sergeant,’ says Vultius. ‘It’s over.’

Men and women are crawling from behind cover, blinking as the emergency lumens kick in. Thiel nudges a dead Word Bearer with his boot, the one Rowd clipped. ‘Need to make sure they’re all dead. Clear this place out.’

‘Give it a few minutes.’ Vultius claps him on the shoulder as Thiel sits down on a fallen column, exhausted. ‘I misjudged you, Aeonid. I’m sorry for that. You are a credit to the Legion.’

‘I didn’t do it alone.’

Thiel looks for Rowd. He sees him, slumped against the wall, legs out, head off to one side. There is a gash in his rad-suit, one that has been there ever since the tunnel collapse. He is not moving, but there is blood on the rebreather mask hanging loose at his neck. Rowd’s eyes are open, but they do not blink.

‘You brave and foolish bastard. You followed me onto the surface anyway.’

Vultius follows Thiel’s gaze. ‘A conscript? Penal legion?’

Thiel shakes his head. ‘A farmer, a husband and a father.’ He gestures to the stuttering green pict-feed and the Word Bearers’ mapped excavations. ‘We’ll find the break in the hardline along one of those tunnels.’

Vultius nods. ‘We’ll lead teams, effect a repair and call for reinforcement. You and I can’t run this hub alone.’

Grunting, Thiel gets to his feet.

‘You’ll have to do it without me, sir.’

‘What?’

Thiel’s eyes are weary, and not just from the fight. ‘As soon as the next wave

of reinforcements arrive, I am leaving for Macragge. I made a mistake coming back here, to this.'

'We must keep fighting, Sergeant Thiel.'

'Yes, we must. But not here. This is propaganda, and I'm not much for politics. I'll only do or say something that'll see red on my armour again.'

Vultius looks about to protest, when he nods and smiles.

'You're probably right.' He salutes, and Thiel returns it. 'For the Emperor. For Calth.'

Thiel spares a final glance for Rowd.

'Aye, for Calth.'

The gunship powers up from a bare landing field on the surface, several kilometres outside Numinus City. The legionary reinforcements have already been deployed, and now only a single warrior besides the pilot remains aboard.

'*Brace yourself, sergeant,*' a voice crackles through the vox-feed in the hold.

Thiel is fastened into a mag-harness. His bolter is stowed in the overhead weapons locker, along with his electromagnetic longsword. After the arcology was secured, he went back to retrieve it from the wreckage of the crashed Rhino; he could hardly return to Lord Guilliman without it. Thiel's armour is cleaned, though the practicals etched into the ceramite remain. He doesn't need them to recall his battle plans – they are for the purposes of legacy, to preserve his combat logic for future generations.

When he gets back to Macragge, Thiel thinks that he will present them to his primarch.

As they break for orbit, the pilot's voice crackles over the vox again.

'*Are you glad to be leaving, Sergeant Thiel?*'

'Glad to be getting back to the war. Has much changed in my absence?'

There's a pause as the pilot makes the necessary adjustments for void flight.

'*You haven't heard?*'

Thiel looks up, paying proper attention for the first time since the ascent.

'Heard what?'

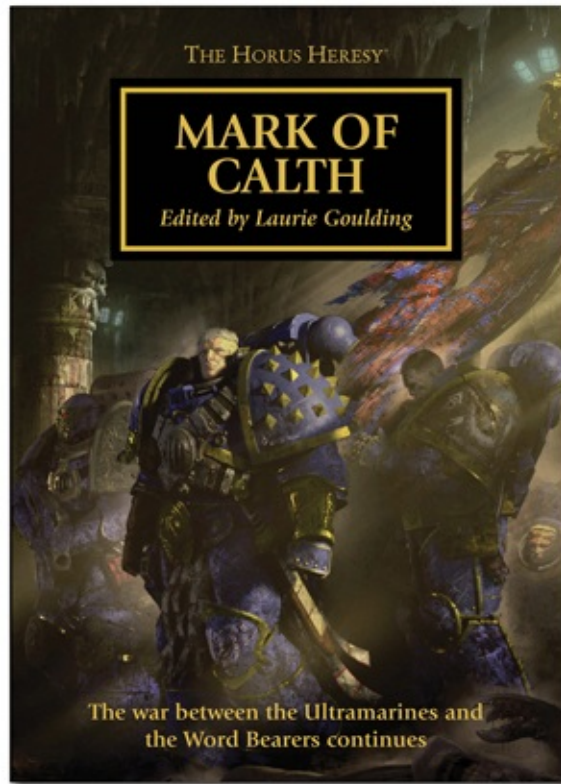
'*Our Lord Guilliman is building.*'

Thiel frowns. 'Building what exactly?'

'*Imperium Secundus.*'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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