



# BLACK LIBRARY WEEKENDER

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## VOLUME ONE

Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2012  
Nottingham, England



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Welcome to the first of two short story anthologies exclusive to the inaugural Black Library Weekender.

This book is a celebration of Black Library and the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. Within these pages, you will find several tales from the grim darkness of the far future and an action-packed saga from the Warhammer World, along with a Horus Heresy short story from the 31<sup>st</sup> millennium and a new tales from Warhammer's Time of Legends.

If you're new to the work of Black Library, this selection of action-packed short stories will serve as an example of what we do, and hopefully leave you wanting more. If you're already a reader, you will find links here to several of our bestselling series, and some tantalising hints about what you can expect in the future.

We hope you enjoy the stories within.

*The Black Library Editorial Team*

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# CONTENTS

## [Lost Sons](#)

James Swallow

## [Know Thyself](#)

Andy Smillie

## [Gods of Flesh and Blood](#)

Graham McNeill

## [Crucible](#)

John French

## [Berthold's Beard](#)

Josh Reynolds

## [The Smallest Detail](#)

Sandy Mitchell

THE HORUS HERESY

# LOST SONS

A Horus Heresy short story

*James Swallow*

I commit these words to vox-thief.

Know that it is day one hundred and eleven of the fifth year of our vigil, and the third year since the reckoning of the betrayal. My temper grows no longer, my blade's edge ever wicked as I sharpen it and wait.

And I wait.

I am Arkad, Warden of the Blood Angels and for now, as I have been since the order was spoken by my Lord Sanguinius, I am custodian of Baal and all her environs.

We are twenty in number, my brothers and I. A handful of sons from our Legion's great sum, here upon the rusty sands of our homeworld. We march the halls of the fortress-monastery and we drill endlessly. We spar against one another and the combat-slaves. We meditate and supervise the army of human serfs who keep the hearth of the Legion burning, the glories of the Blood Angels polished and perfect and always ready.

But we wait.

Five years is not the blink of an eye in cosmic time, it is barely within the notice of a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. We live on scales that common men do not comprehend. Campaigns that span decades are the meat and drink of our lives.

Five years? I have slumbered longer in stasis-sleep. It means nothing!

It means...

Time is a strange, malleable thing. I have known an age to pass between the draw and exhale of my breath, but these years have moved as if every day grows longer than the last. I rise before the dawn of Baal's red sun each morning and it seems an eternity elapses before it drops back below the horizon.

Inaction chafes at me, and the others. We do nothing. We occupy ourselves with trivia and training and accomplish no advance! All this occurs while out in the galaxy a war unlike any other burns stars to ash. A civil war, a nightmare of Legion against Legion. A conflict that... *and I whisper it...* may have taken the greatest toll upon us.

I hope that this day will be the last. That today the order I swore to obey will be lifted from my shoulders.

Imperial Memoranda # GHJRHVE/334/DXGJ/7316/Theta

+++DATUM BEGINS+++

*Let it be known that by the order of Horus Lupercal, Warmaster, First Among Equals (other titles omitted) has commanded that The Angel Sanguinius, Primarch of the IX Legiones Astartes, Lord of Baal (other titles omitted) is to gather the Great Companies of the Three Hundred, the entirety of the Blood Angels Legion [refer to: addendum] and carry the battle standard of the Emperor of Mankind to the worlds of the Signus Cluster. Lord Sanguinius will bring the Imperium's displeasure and its illumination to the errant and the lost under the yoke of the alien race known as the nephilim [refer to: Melchior pacification, extermination pogroms of the White Scars], until the extermination of the xenos.*

*This will be done, in Terra's Name.*

+ADDENDUM+

*To maintain operational parity in the Baal system and the Legion structure, a token force will remain in situ. Minimum recommendation requires six capital ships and attendant supplement vessels, servile crew thereof, and no less than twenty Space Marines.*

+++DATUM ENDS+++

I climb to the black basalt landing pad in the eastern donjon, and Brother Hezen

is there waiting for me. He looks out over the roof of the Grand Annex, the towers and domes of the fortress-monastery.

Hezen doesn't turn, even though I know he hears my approach. There is little sound up here beyond the low keen of the razorwinds. It seems unnatural for our citadel to be so quiet. As I walked here along the arcades, I heard only my own footfalls. Hezen is the first Blood Angel I have seen today, the bright crimson of his wargear polished to a lustre that glimmers in the noonday light.

He still does not turn to me.

My armour, ebon black as the Warden's office decrees, is as fine and undamaged as his. Cleaned and polished each night, even though the need may not be present. At my hip hangs the bone-white winged skull device of my *crozius arcanum*, the signifier of my rank and status. I have to think for a moment to recall the last time I activated the weapon's destructive power-aura; for now it remains inert and forever ready, as do we.

"Hezen." I call his name and at last my old friend graces me with a look. He has his helm tucked under one arm and the wiry silver threads of his hair are caught in the breeze. A line of service studs forms an accent over his right eye, giving him a permanently quizzical expression.

"Brother Arkad." He bows slightly. "Word comes from the orbitals." He taps his vox-bead. "A small craft has left the target and broken atmosphere in the last few minutes. Landing permission was granted."

"What about the starship?" The vessel, a *Dauntless*-class light cruiser, had first been met by picket patrols beyond the orbit of Ammonai, the most distant outpost of the system.

"Under the guns of a dozen battlecraft," says Hezen. "If it so much as lights a plasma torch without permission, they'll open fire."

I consider that appropriate. Communication has been terse; the shipmaster spoke only to inform us that he was delivering a messenger bearing the authority of the Regent of Terra. The pennants and codes are all present and correct, so I am left with little choice but to agree.

But these are times when trust is no longer in abundance, and I have made certain that every tower within line of sight contains a warrior armed with a

Stalker-pattern boltgun. We have all heard the stories of the treachery at Isstvan, Calth and elsewhere, when battle-brothers who supposedly came in good faith were shown to be disloyal, murdering those who welcomed them out of hand. *It will not happen here.* I have made that a vow.

I hear the distant noise of thrusters and I remove my own headgear with a snap of connectors. The skull-faced helm locks to my thigh plate and I turn my eyes to the clouded sky. Some say I have the aspect of an unfinished man; I am hairless, the after-effect of poisons that almost killed me on Vaddox Prime. I wear my disfigurement proudly, it must be said. If a man will not return my gaze at first meeting, I think I will never truly trust him.

Now a drop-ship, incoming. I see it to the west, moving fast. Grey like slate, and even my genhanced sight cannot pick out any identifying insignia. My hand drops to the hilt of my crozius.

Hezen sees it too. He rests his grip on the bolt pistol holstered on his belt. We are both ready to kill or be killed today. And I think it is true to say we both secretly wish for an excuse for battle.

It is a Storm Eagle. It makes one pass over the pad and lands in a skirl of thruster exhaust. The drop-ramp opens before the dust has settled, and a figure is silhouetted in the hatchway.

A Space Marine; he can be nothing else, the bulk of power armour filling the interior of the transport ship. But what colours does this so-called messenger wear? I do not know at first sight.

I remember another messenger, five years ago. The moment is clear and crisp in my thoughts, my eidetic memory bringing it to life as if it is happening now.

*I was on the Heartcease, the battleship. The vessel is an old friend. I was aboard it when the Emperor came to Baal for the first time, and I was young, so very young. We became whole when Sanguinius rejoined us.*

*But in this memory, the Great Angel was not with us.*

*The bulk of the Legion's fleet had been deployed across the galaxy, much of it to the Kayvas Belt for the past year, but now that mission was over and the Blood Angels prepared for a new endeavour. We were to go to Signus Prime on*

*the orders of the Warmaster, and punish the xenos who sought to impose their will upon it. In an unprecedented move, the astropathic signals told of the intent to take the whole Legion to those blighted stars.*

*I admit I was taken with the ideal. All of us, the grand army of the crimson, the Angels of Death turned to one singular purpose. Oh, I wanted so much to be a part of that campaign. Such glory would be found in it.*

*But it was not to be.*

*The orders came from the Primarch. He would not allow another to give them, for he knew full well how we would feel when we took up the duty. I heard the echo of his voice in the repetition of the astropath Ser Jesper, the Master of Speakers, as he relayed the command.*

*Stand down.*

*I actually flinched.*

*Jesper spoke twenty names, and I distinctly remember the flashes of regret on the faces of the men who were not chosen. Regret for us. As they left for the assemblage, they bade us farewell with rueful smiles. They felt sorry for us, but they were glad they were not us.*

*A great and singular mission was now ours in their stead; we were to stand sentinel over the Baal system and the home of our Legion, protect and nurture it while the remainder of our kinsmen fought the alien. We were to be guards, then. Caretakers entrusted with the security of our homeworld, but not warriors free to take to battle.*

*It was a bittersweet thing. On the one hand, a high honour that we twenty were trusted with the beating heart of the Blood Angels; on the other, a great tragedy that we would not taste victory in the assemblage of our Legion at Signus.*

*I accepted it, with the humility and stoic mien that was expected of a Warden. But not all followed my example.*

The messenger wears no Legion sigil, no rank insignia. His armour is featureless, except for a small icon etched high upon one shoulder. But none of that shocks me more than the fact that he openly wears a librarian's psychic hood, in direct contravention of the Decree of Nikaea! The Legionones Astartes are

foresworn from the use of psionic powers, and yet this one shows the tools of the psyker without fear of censure.

Before he can set foot on Baal, I am at the base of the ramp, denying him egress. Hezen is behind me, his pistol drawn.

The psyker eyes me with something that might be grim amusement. I see him better now, a shorn scalp and a stubbled face, eyes that are watchful, a nose broken by countless blows. He knows the question I am going to ask before I speak it, not through use of his powers, but because he has heard it a hundred times before. "I am Brother Tylos Rubio, agent of Malcador the Sigillite. I carry his authority and that of the Emperor."

The rest is unspoken; the Sigillite's word is permission enough for anything, so it would seem.

After a moment, I step back and allow him to disembark. "I would know your rank and Legion, brother."

Rubio's expression is neutral. "I have neither, as you would reckon it. I exist here as a tool for the will of the Regent."

"And what does Lord Malcador want with us?" Hezen asks. "I hear a civil war is going on out there." My battle-brother makes no attempt to mask his bitterness.

"Aye," Rubio nods. "And now that war has come to Baal."

"We see no traitor ships." My hand is on the crozius. I am willing the opportunity to draw it. "Horus Lupercal, may death blight him, has not yet seen fit to test our defences."

"But you know of the tumult in the immaterium?" Rubio presses me with the question. "The great swathe of warp-tempest that men are calling the *ruinstorm*?"

"I know."

How can one not? Several of Ser Jesper's astropaths have perished in the wake of the massive metapsychic effect. We have heard the reports, sporadic and conflicting, of a huge maelstrom of nigh-impenetrable space storms cutting across the galaxy. Some say it is an engineered thing, made by the turncoat Warmaster and his traitor allies, others that the Emperor caused it as a firebreak

to blockade Terra. Whatever the cause, while it churns and boils through the void, the skies are cut in two.

*I know the ruinstorm.* It hangs like a bloody curtain between Baal and the far stars where our kindred have gone. It is the barrier we would need to penetrate to peer toward the Signus Cluster. It is what denies us word of our Legion and our primarch.

“Then you know that the map of the galaxy has changed.” Rubio reaches into a pack hanging from his belt. “Perhaps forever. That change has forced Lord Malcador to make hard choices for the good of the Imperium. For the future of mankind.”

He is holding a matt-black tube in his hand, the case for a message scroll of photic parchment. The black scroll is a document of such rare import that it is more legend than eventuality. I see it and at first I do not understand.

Twice before in living memory such messages were delivered to the homeworld of a Legiones Astartes. I reach out and take it, because I know I must. I am Arkad, Warden of the Blood Angels, guardian of Baal, and only I can do so.

The tube breaks open with a twist and the parchment unfurls in my hands. The ceramite digits of my gauntlets hide the tremor in my fingers.

“I am sorry, brother.” I hear Rubio talking, but the words are distant. My every iota of being is trapped by the writing on the scroll. Silver, on black.

“The Blood Angels are no more.” I speak, although the voice is disconnected from me. The words it utters are not what scream through my thoughts, the denials and the howling defiance. “Our Legion... has been declared null.”

Hezen rounds on the grey-armoured warrior, his gun rising as high as his fury. “What lies are these?” he shouts, taking aim at Rubio. “You cannot say such a thing, you have no right to issue that diktat! This is madness!”

“It is the Regent’s command,” replies the psyker, and not without compassion. “I regret to say that if you disobey, you will be considered *excommunicatus traitoris*.”

I hold the scroll numbly in my hands, and I remember speaking those same words.

*Only months had passed since the fleet was dispatched to Signus. But so much had changed.*

*The stinging buzz of the teleporarium effect briefly overwhelmed my senses, and abruptly I was no longer in the transit chamber of the citadel, but there in the middle of the tacticarium aboard the Heartcease.*

*I drew my crozius but did not ignite its power field. I hoped that the sight of the weapon might be enough.*

*Nagal and the others turned to face me as I stalked across the compartment. Crewmen scattered out of my way. Nagal and five brethren, each of them clad in full battle regalia, bolters loaded and ready.*

*Ready to go to war.*

*“You should not have come, Warden!” Nagal fumed. He had his boltgun in his grip, but he did not quite point it at me.*

*“Stand down.” I gave the command, and it was only after the words left my mouth that I heard Sanguinius’s echo in them.*

*Nagal gave a bitter laugh. “Not this time. We are going, and you will not stop us.” He gestured around. The command crew of the Heartcease were at combat stations, prepared to take the ship out and into the warp. The fools; the storm would kill them if they attempted to cross it. I told him this, but Nagal was not swayed. “We’ll take that risk. It is better to perish in the attempt than remain here and allow our will to corrode.”*

*“Brother, heed me. Stop now. It is the primarch’s will. If you disobey, you will be considered excommunicatus traitoris.”*

*That gave them all a moment of honest pause, but Nagal rode over it. “I seek no violence, Arkad. Just turn your back and let us leave. It is for the best.”*

*“I will not.” A part of me wanted to go with him. “I share your anguish, your frustration. We all do!” I scanned the faces of the other warriors, and the crewmen. Yes, we all felt it. “But we have our orders. We must remain here and protect Baal until we are relieved.”*

*“Protect it from what?” The question exploded from Nagal in a snarl. “We cannot delay!”*

*He stabbed a finger at the viewport and the stars beyond, taking in the*

*blackness, and I knew what he meant. Out there, hidden in the marrow of warp space, a hellish fault was growing like a cancer. The spacers were calling it the ruinstorm. It thickened with each passing day, and with its arrival we had lost contact with the Legion fleet and the Angel. A dark pall fell over all of us. I feared the worst.*

*I said the name. "Horus. We must stand ready to oppose him—"*

*Nagal wouldn't let me finish. He spat on the deck. "Lies and idiocy! I refuse to accept these stories denigrating our lord's beloved brother! Horus would never turn his face from Terra! This is all a plan to divide us, engineered by some unseen enemy! That is why we must go to the Angel's side, to learn the truth." He stopped, losing his momentum, the terrible possibility of it weighing him down. I knew that feeling, oh yes. "And if... if by some horror it is true... then all the more reason to find Sanguinius."*

*"If Horus is a traitor," said one of the other warriors, "we'll find him and kill him."*

*My battle-brother rounded on me, his eyes alight with dread. "What purpose is there to hide here if our father is lost, if he is..." Nagal could not bring himself to say the words.*

*If Sanguinius has been killed?*

*I took my crozius and returned it to its scabbard. I approached Nagal and met his gaze. "Do you think the Angel is dead?" I asked it of all of them, and none could reply. "Answer me, kinsmen. If you truly believe that Sanguinius is lost to us, then I will let you take this ship and go."*

*The silence that followed seemed to endure forever.*

*"No," said Nagal, at long last. "I do not believe he is dead. We would know." He tapped his chest plate, over his primary heart. "Here."*

Nagal glares at me, and he hates me. He hates me for making him stand down, and he hates me for the news I have brought before the twenty of us. I am the focus of all his rage and frustration. I cannot blame him.

The black scroll is in his hand, and he crushes it in his grip before angrily dashing it to the floor of the Grand Annex. The massive domed chamber, built to

house conclaves of Blood Angels a hundred times the size of our gathering, resonates with the sound of our voices. “This is unacceptable!”

The others are in agreement. They have listened to me repeat Brother Rubio’s words and they rebel against them. The psyker stands outside the great hall, waiting for our word, but I have no doubt his preternatural gifts let him hear everything that transpires within.

“What proof does the Sigillite have?” asks another legionary. Like all of us, he does not want to accept the possibility that we two-score are now all that remains of the Sons of Sanguinius. “The word of fools and humans?”

And yet, I have seen the datum Rubio brought with him. Observations from Imperial warships, reinforcement vessels sent from Terra at the outbreak of the rebellion. A handful of wrecks have clawed their way back through the madness of the ruinstorm, a handful out of hundreds.

The crews of these ships turned their sensors towards the Signus Cluster as they crossed the light years towards it, their scry-scopes probing for any contact from the Blood Angels flotilla, their astropaths calling out for the like aboard the flagship *Red Tear* and its sister vessels.

I have seen, and now I show the others, what those crews saw. Blackness and the absence of light. A new void at the galactic coordinates where the stars and worlds of Signus once shone.

*The Signus Cluster no longer exists.* A monumental dark mass has taken its place, swallowing up whoever did not fear to tread on those blighted worlds. Some say that those within have been taken to hell, if such a thing exists. I would weep for my Great Angel if only I could.

The tragedy of it thunders in my mind, almost too big to comprehend. The Legion, erased from existence. All my brothers, my comrades in arms, my angelic father, *gone* .

*Do I truly believe Sanguinius is lost to us?* It shames me to say it, but in this moment, I do. I believe that *all* is lost.

Hezen is nodding. “The Regent cannot simply expect us to go quietly into oblivion! He must know that we would not accept dissolution without argument!”

*Dissolution* . Such a weak word for so great an act, so final a judgement. The systematic decommissioning of a Space Marine Legion; the repossession and redistribution of every last item of materiel, from bolt-shell to battleship. It is the closure of the book of hours on a legacy that has endured since the days of Old Night, the promise of the final end of the Blood Angels.

Not in glorious battle, fighting an intractable enemy until the very last of us perish—but a death by pen and ink, the work of administrators, politicians and strategists. It sickens and enrages me in equal measure. This is not the way of the Imperium I am oath-sworn to fight for!

“We are not dead!” shouts Nagal, and a handful of others take up the cry. “Even... even if this is true,” he says, glaring at the black scroll, “there are still twenty living sons of Sanguinius! Twenty souls are enough to rebuild this Legion.”

“*One* would be enough,” growls Hezen. “No matter if it takes a thousand years, we can restore our strength.”

“If you had millennia, that would be so.” I turn, and I see Rubio standing behind me. How he entered and approached without my knowledge is disturbing. “But these are difficult times, Blood Angel. The hardest times our Imperium has ever faced.”

“You have no right to be here!” says Nagal. “The Annex is for the scions of our Legion and no other.”

Rubio ignores him, looking to me instead. I feel the psyker reading me, knowing the dread in my hearts. He nods grimly. “The war with Horus threatens to rip the galaxy in two. Priorities change. As a surgeon must sacrifice a limb to save a life, so the Sigillite makes the difficult decisions. I regret that your Legion has fallen on the scales of such a choice.”

“Speak plainly.” I find my voice again. “If you are to be our executioner, Rubio, then grant us that!”

He bows slightly, and takes in the scope of the fortress-monastery with the motion of his hand. “The war machine that powers a Legion, the gene-engines and the weapons stocks, the whole of it... The strategic value of such hardware is incalculable, and it cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of the traitors. It

must be protected, nurtured, so that reinforcements can be brought to the battle in due course.”

“The rebellion will not last that long,” says Hezen.

“Can you be sure?” Rubio replies. “The Sigillite foresees all possibilities. Even now, on distant Titan, he makes ready a new weapon, a new breed of warriors. *Malcador prepares* .” He indicates his armour. “I, and others like me, have been called to assist in his deeds.”

“You would gut our fortress for this?” Nagal’s tone is flat and cold. “When we are at our lowest ebb, the Regent would come to Baal like a carrion eater and strip it bare? Is that why you are here?” He advances on Rubio, fists clenching. “To pick us to the bones?”

“Yes,” replies the psyker. “Cargo leviathans are coming, crewed by recovery battalions from the loyal factions of the Mechanicum. They will remove what is needed.”

“Get out,” Nagal snarls.

“I have more to say—”

“*Get out!*” bellows the warrior. I watch Rubio pause, then bow again. When he is gone, Nagal’s ire returns to me. “You should have let us go, Arkad. Damn your blood, you should have let us go!”

I face him. “If I had, then there would be nothing left of us.”

“Look around,” Nagal demands. “Soon that will be so.”

His words remind me of the dream.

*We never speak of the dream, although we all shared some iteration of it.*

*Those in true slumber—if a Space Marine can ever truly sleep—saw it most strongly, but even those of us who were awake, standing our posts or at practice, experienced a measure of the...*

*I hesitate to call it a vision.*

*What did I see? A jumble of images, flickering through my thoughts like a half-recalled memory. A world of blood-red sands, but not Baal. Fire in the sky. A great creature, more beast than man, but blurred so that I could not define its characteristics.*

*An axe in the creature's hands. A mighty blow and hundreds of my kinsmen dead.*

*Among it all, Sanguinius, his wings spread wide. I saw him falling, even as I knew that the Angel never falls.*

*Then it was gone, but in the wake a terrible, brief fury awoke in me. It was a strange kind of anger, far removed and hard to grasp. I felt somehow... tainted by the passing of its touch.*

*In the times before the Emperor's illumination, this dream would have been called an omen.*

*But after that day, no warrior among the twenty spoke of it again, as if to give voice to what the dream suggested would make it a certainty.*

The summons brings me to the landing pad, where Rubio's Storm Eagle remains, poised like a patient raptor ready to throw itself into the sky.

I confess I have already made my decision, as I walked through the Silent Cloister and along the upper galleries. Nothing the psyker can say will change my mind.

"Speak," I insist, as he emerges from the interior of the lander.

"I have an offer for you and your brothers, Arkad. An opportunity." His tone seems genuine. I wonder for a moment, did Rubio once stand where I do now, a loss so great it cannot be measured weighing upon him? The warrior removes the power sword on his belt, scabbard and all, and shows it to me. "Before, you asked me my rank and Legion. I was once a warrior of the XIII, the Ultramarines." Rubio turns the weapon so I may see the shape of the revered Ultima upon the hilt. "I am lost to my Legion as certainly as if the sons of Macragge were dead and gone." There is no exaggeration to these words; I hear the pain in his voice and I believe him.

"And now you are Malcador's agent?"

He nods. "One of many. Some of us legionaries, from brotherhoods on both sides of the insurrection. Others mortal and... otherwise. I have a new purpose now."

He speaks of the Sigillite's works in the Sol system, the deeds done in the

Emperor's name, but not with true openness. All across the stars, he tells me, measures are being taken. Ships and men silently diverted to where they will be most needed in the battles to come. Military equipment, gene-tech and the building blocks of a Legion's infrastructure. All to Lord Malcador's design, all to combat not Horus Lupercal's treachery, but the dark forces the Warmaster has awakened.

I find it hard to follow, until he makes the offer. Then I see.

Rubio holds out his hand. "Join me, Arkad. You and your brothers. The black scroll may mark the ending of your Legion, but it need not be the end of your duty to Terra."

"You would have us give up our colours for those?" I study his ghost-grey wargear, and tap the winged blood-drop across the chest of my night-black armour. "I will die before I surrender that. If Sanguinius has been taken from us, we lost sons... then to shrug off our identity like some discarded cloak would be the greatest insult to his memory!"

"You don't understand."

"I understand." Rubio stands his ground as I advance towards him. "I speak for all my brothers. Your offer is refused."

To his credit, he does not waste breath trying to convince me otherwise. "Very well. I have one last demand of you, then." The psyker returns his sheathed blade to his belt and offers me a vox-module. "Your ships in orbit, the guardian flotilla... I have given them Malcador's orders to disperse and strike their colours—"

A smile comes to my lips, a swell of pride to my hearts. "But they do not obey?" In that moment, the humans, the crew-serfs and the mortal officers, they remind me that one need not be a legionary to be of the Legion.

"The shipmasters refuse to accept the Sigillite's commands unless you authorise them. Arkad, you must release the fleet from their oath to the Blood Angels."

"I will not." I hear footfalls. Ceramite boots upon the stone, the sound of armoured warriors rising to fill the ranks behind me. I turn to see their faces, but each one of my kinsmen has hidden his visage behind his helmet.

And their armour...

They no longer wear the blood-crimson of our legion. Dark layers of inkstone stain have blackened their wargear to a shade similar to mine. The only marks of incarnadine that remain are brazen red saltires that cross over their chests, their shoulders. The stark lines of scarlet are like bloody wounds.

It is Nagal who leads them. "If we are truly in the company of death," he intones, "then it is fitting that all who look upon us shall know it."

My pride grows ever stronger, and I see the questions in Rubio's gaze as I turn back to him. "Where is Horus Lupercal, brother? Under what blighted rock does the turncoat hide?"

Rubio reads our collective intent immediately. "You seek to face the Warmaster. The twenty of you against the might of his armies, his traitor legions? You will die."

"By the Sigillite's word, we are already dead," snarls Hezen. "We will find Horus and kill him. Or die in the attempt."

"What other end can we aspire to?" I ask, and I see Rubio's manner hardening. "Anyone who has given their fealty to the Great Angel may follow us, if that is their wish."

The psyker draws his Ultramarine gladius, slowly and deliberately. The sword's blade glows, and in concert with it, the crystals of his psychic hood come alive. "I cannot allow that. Master your own fates if you will, for you are of the Legiones Astartes and that is your right. But those ships belong to the Imperium, and Terra." The tip of the blade points at my head. He still holds out the vox-module. "Tell them to stand down, Brother Arkad."

"No." The *crozius arcanum* is suddenly in my hand. The aura crackles into being, glowing blue-white.

In this moment, I am fully ready to commit the most unthinkable of acts. I am ready to kill another Space Marine for what I believe to be right, and I know that the battle-brothers standing behind me will not stay my hand. They will see it good and raise no reproach. I am ready to end the life of Tylos Rubio if that is what it will take.

In a way, the feeling is... *liberating*. Is this what Horus's traitors so desired?

And once it is done, will it be easier to kill again, and again? For that is the threshold we now stand upon, and the path beyond will be marked with the blood of warriors we might once have called brother, might once have fought alongside.

And then a cry comes from human lips before our weapons can meet. “Wait! *Wait!* Hold your blows, in the Angel’s name!”

Nagal, Hezen and the others part like a dark curtain, to allow a man’s approach. A spindly thing he is, clad in velvet robes. He stumbles as if he is dizzy. Ser Jesper, the Master of Speakers, tries his best to run to us. Behind him trail cords of rope-wound wires and ritual bonds. He has come at a mad pace from the fortress-monastery’s astropathic seclusium, and done so with such urgency that he is in great disarray. It concerns me to see Jesper in this state, for whatever news he brings must be of the greatest import. The poor telepath is not properly decompressed from his psi-sendings. Weak, watery blood runs from the corners of his eyes.

The astropath collapses, but Hezen is there to catch him. He brings him to us, bearing the weakened, fallen man like a child.

“Heed me,” croaks Jesper. He is barely awake, but something in the waif-like form keeps him conscious long enough to speak. His tone becomes the sing-song of mimic repetition as he gives the meme-codes that prove his message to be authentic. He is relaying a communication from the stars. “Raldoron speaks across the wild and screaming distances,” he whispers.

“The First Captain?” Nagal stiffens at the mention of the name. Our brother Raldoron was called to be at the Angel’s side at Signus. Suddenly, Jesper’s near-panic is understood.

“He speaks...” The astropath is dying. He has killed himself to rip this message from the tumult of the ruinstorm, sacrificed his life because he knew it would save us. I am humbled by his act. “*Sanguinius lives. The legion endures.*”

It is the last communiqué Ser Jesper grants us; I hear the final beat of his heart.

Rubio cannot deny what he has heard, even as his vox-bead crackles with confirmation from his own astropaths aboard the cruiser. His sword sinks towards the ground.

I raise my crozius, Baal's red sunlight casting it like spilled blood. "Go back, Rubio. Take your ship and your orders, and go to Malcador with empty hands and empty holds." My hearts sing as I say the words.

"He counted you lost too soon," says the psyker.

"We were never lost." I shake my head. "We are Blood Angels."

And that is answer enough.



# KNOW THYSELF

A Flesh Tearers short story

*Andy Smillie*

The *Victus* stretched out below Balthiel like an armoured continent. The Flesh Tearers' flagship was a colossal vessel. Teeming with weaponry, it was possessed of a near-impenetrable hull, wrapped in miles-thick slabs of ceramite armour. By the *Victus*' guns had the populace of a thousand worlds died, its lance batteries boiling away their atmospheres as its seismic torpedoes shattered their tectonic plates.

The Librarian stood in the observation tower, his attention fixed on the lone ship edging its way towards the portside docking bay. Its approach heralded more menace than the largest enemy battle group, promising a threat that no salvo could halt. The dagger-shaped craft was smaller even than a single barrel of one of the *Victus*' close protection batteries, its void-black hull free of markings and insignia, a ghost ship—invisible save for the glowing, stylised 'I' that emblazoned its prow.

Harahel stood immobile in the launch bay, relishing the unusual quiet. The dozens of servitors and gangs of engineering serfs that worked the deck were absent. Plasma saws and arc welders lay discarded on workbenches. Two Thunderhawk gunships stood untended, awaiting refit and repair. Overhead, a squadron of Stormravens nestled in transport cradles, fuel hoses hanging like limp vines from engines in need of proper ministrations. The silence was oppressive, punctuated by the whisper of the chamber's air filters and the gentle

hum of Harahel's armour. To his left, Appollus's power fist crackled as he tested its charge.

"Seth should never have allowed this." Appollus seethed with displeasure, his mood as black as his armour.

Behind the angular grille of his battle helm, Harahel grinned. As Company Champion it was his duty, if not his honour, to meet the arrivals. Appollus, on the other hand, was there as punishment. The Chaplain had pressed his point too hard, and it was unwise to tell the Chapter Master he was wrong. Seth would have Appollus remember his place. "What would you have him do?" asked Harahel, his gaze fixed on the docking tunnel. His eyes followed a black craft as it drifted through the entry doors. "Defy the Inquisition?"

Appollus didn't answer. As he watched the toothed slabs of the entry hatch slide closed behind the Inquisitorial shuttle, his jaw was set as stone.

The arrowed craft touched down in total silence. The technology powering its engines was derived from a xenos discovery, its capabilities far in advance of the thrusters that powered the Thunderhawk gunship in whose shadow the shuttle rested. A ramp emerged from the near side of the ship, widening from a sliver of metal to a slender plank that extended to the deck.

Appollus growled, "That vessel is no warship. They've sent a politician to judge warriors."

With a faint hiss of pressure, a section of the hull slid away, revealing a doorway. A lone figure alighted onto the ramp, its heavy footsteps resonating around the chamber. A gilded heavy bolter replaced its right arm and shoulder, its barrel inscribed with intricate High Gothic. Its eyes were elongated brass optics that protruded from a diamond-encrusted face. A blue targeting matrix passed over Harahel's armour as the gun-servitor scanned the deck. "Perhaps not," he said, touching the pommel of his eviscerator.

"Clear," the servitor intoned, its soft cadence at odds with its mechanical exterior.

The air around the gun-servitor shimmered, and Harahel's helmet cycled vision modes as its codifiers struggled to maintain focus. A fulgurant web of energy crackled in the air. The distortion cleared a moment later, and the rest of

the craft's occupants resolved into view at the base of the ramp.

Harahel bit down a snarl, his body willing him to attack.

+Calm yourself+

Balthiel's voice pushed into Harahel's mind. He ground his teeth, irritated by the Librarian's intrusion.

+It's a distortion field. He is not a psyker. Proceed+

Harahel massaged his temple as Balthiel's voice faded.

"The Librarian?" Appollus asked.

"Yes. I'll be seeing our brother in the duelling cages."

A persistent icon flashed on Appollus's tactical display.

"Pity," he said, and blinked the rune for *stone* to Manakel, ordering the Dreadnought to stand down.

Seth had been clear with the Inquisition—no psyker would be permitted to set foot upon his vessel. Manakel stood within the nearest of the docked Thunderhawks, ready to enforce the Chapter Master's edict. *Another time old friend.* Appollus removed his helmet, cupped it under his arm and spat on the deck. The acid saliva bubbled on the metal with a hiss.

"Let's get this over with."

Harahel echoed the Chaplain, mag-locking his helm to his waist, and approached the Inquisitorial warband.

Seven figures stood in loose formation on the deck, an inquisitor at their head. He wore golden power armour that shone as though fixed under a bank of luminators. The symbol of his office bisected his breastplate, its onyx finish mirroring the man's dark eyes. Four warriors in artificer plate-mail flanked him. Each carried an oversized blade and storm shield. A slender woman in a crimson body-glove, her fingers adorned with jewels, stood behind them. Her narrow eyes flitted between the Flesh Tearers and the final member of the party, a hunched savant whose crooked fingers dug through the folds of his robes for a data scroll.

"I am Inquisitor Corvin Herrold of the Ordo Hereticus." The inquisitor stepped forward to meet them, folding his arms over his breast in the sign of the Aquila.

"Harahel, First Company Champion." Harahel clasped his fist to his

breastplate in salute.

Corvin nodded and looked at Appollus next. The Chaplain said nothing, disdain etched on his face. His cold eyes studied the inquisitor. Corvin's jaw tensed. Appollus heard the quickening thrum of the shield-warriors' heartbeats, as their bodies prepared for combat. Appollus's honed instincts could easily detect the subtle shift in posture that belied their intent. The Chaplain remained silent.

Harahel broke the stalemate. "Our Lord awaits you."

"Of course." Corvin's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Shall we?" The inquisitor motioned his henchmen forwards.

"Just you," Harahel barred the way with his massive bulk. "Your warriors stay here."

"Respectfully..." Corvin gestured to the savant, whose brass eye whirred as he looked up from a data-slate. "I must bring my chronicler to record every detail of this engagement."

Appollus stiffened at the inquisitor's choice of words. If the inquisitor was there to *engage* the Flesh Tearers, then he had brought woefully inadequate forces.

"No." Harahel didn't move. "My lord will not forget a single detail of your meeting. Our scriptographers can transcribe it before you leave."

Corvin only came up to Harahel's breastplate. He had never been so close to a Space Marine before. He suddenly felt very small. "Very well," he said, nodding to his bodyguard to stand down and falling into lockstep with the giant Flesh Tearer.

Appollus lingered behind as Harahel left with Corvin. He eyed the savant scrawling on a data-slate. The neuro-quill trembled. The savant let out an involuntary whimper and tried to creep further into his robes. The Chaplain glowered. He would credit the serf who cleaned his armour with more backbone than that hunched wretch. Turning on his heel, he followed the inquisitor from the deck.

The Reclusiam was as much museum as place of worship. Venerable relics from

the Chapter's past decorated the curved walls, their sanctity maintained by stasis fields which were themselves artefacts from a forgotten age. The mosaic floor was crafted from the armour of fallen captains, the story of their demise ever present in the irregular tiling. Reclaimed honour-blades stood up like vicious candles in a moat of volcanic sand that bordered the pulpit. Seth knelt in the Reclusiam's centre, naked save for an ashen tunic that draped his broad frame.

To Balthiel, his Chapter Master looked to be chiselled from the same immutable stone as the statues that stared down in judgement. Even fully clad in his battle garb, the Librarian knew he stood at no advantage over the hulking Flesh Tearer.

"My lord," said Balthiel, dropping to one knee.

Seth remained still, his gaze fixed above. The duel visages of Sanguinius and the Emperor stared down at him, their likeness engraved on the greyed armour-glass of the ceiling that worked to diffuse the light from the single luminator.

"He has arrived."

"Yes, lord. Harahel waits with him in your war-room."

Seth didn't reply. The Chapter Master of the Flesh Tearers was unusually contemplative. Even without his gifts, Balthiel could have discerned his lord's feelings of contempt towards their guest. Seth was a direct, brutal warrior that few could match. But the Inquisition was an insidious agency. It could not be stopped by blade or by anger. Its operatives could not be met head on. Defeating them required patience and cunning—two concepts as alien to Seth as the charges that the inquisitor was no doubt there to level against him and his Chapter.

"The blood guide you," Balthiel rose and walked from the chamber, leaving Seth alone with his fathers.

Seth met the eyes of the Emperor. "Give me counsel." He paused, losing himself in the threads that cut across his progenitor's armour. Imperfections in the plaster served as a reminder that no defence was impervious.

"Bind my rage." He turned to Sanguinius.

"Give me the strength to endure this affront."

Unlike the Emperor, Sanguinius was sculpted unarmed.

A second truth—the sons of The Angel needed no weapons to smite their enemies. Seth bowed, touching his forehead to the floor. “Paschar.”

Outside the Reclusiam, a serf eased himself to his feet. His knees and hips ached from days of inaction, making him feel old beyond his twenty-six Terran years. “Yes, liege?” Paschar rasped, his throat hoarse from lack of water.

“Bring me my armour.”

There were no chairs in the chamber, forcing Corvin to stand while he awaited Seth. Unlike the ostentatious command thrones and strategiums found on Imperial Navy battleships, the Flesh Tearer war-room was barren, empty save for a circular table that sat at its centre. Corvin removed a gauntlet and ran his hand over the table’s surface, flinching at the touch of cold steel. A sterile chill permeated everything on the *Victus*, an atmosphere exacerbated by the lack of heating and the grilled walkways. His nose was numb from the cold, his breath fogged in the cold air.

The Flesh Tearers were seemingly unconcerned with those who didn’t share their enhanced constitution. The grinding of cogs stirred Corvin from his reverie as a pair of heavy brass doors swung inwards, their hinges worn from centuries of use. The doors had seemed immense, unnecessarily so, until Seth stood between them. His armoured bulk was massive, easily filling the double-doorway. As he strode into the room, a crimson cloak trailed behind him. An iron halo framed by bronzed wings sat atop his backpack, adding to his deific stature. His armour, though more intricately worked than Harahel’s, was as perfunctory as the war-room. Brutal rivets locked together robust plates whose toothed edges could tear a man to shreds.

Corvin regarded Seth’s face. The Chapter Master’s angular jaw looked capable of taking a hit from a power fist, and was in stark contrast to his own patrician features.

“Lord Seth,” the inquisitor said, bowing. “I thank you for granting me an audience.”

The inquisitor wielded the power to scour the life from an entire sector. He could marshal battle groups and bombard civilisations out of existence. Yet

before the Chapter Master he was but a child, easily dispatched by a casual flick of the wrist. Corvin was afraid, Seth could smell it. He looked past the inquisitor to Appollus and Harahel.

“Leave us.”

The two Flesh Tearers startled Corvin as they departed. He'd almost forgotten that they were there. Their faces sealed within their helms, they'd been stood in the corner, as lifeless as the many statues they'd passed on the way from the hangar. Corvin fought down the urge to run out after them as the doors ground shut, leaving him alone with Seth.

“Speak your piece, inquisitor, I have wars to attend to.”

“You...” Corvin struggled, his throat felt dry. “You Space Marines are hardly known for your civility, but I see you are as cold and efficient in matters of peace as you are reported to be on the battlefield.”

“No.”

Corvin frowned. “No?” He started pacing in an effort to increase the distance between them without looking weak.

Seth was not fooled. “No, inquisitor. You are mistaken.”

“I—”

Seth turned with the inquisitor's movement, filling the space between them without taking a step. “There is no peace amongst the stars. Here, or anywhere else.”

“How true,” Corvin nodded, thankful the cold was keeping the sweat from his brow. “Well then, to the matter at hand.” He managed to speak with a measure of composure. “As I'm sure you're aware, this is not the first time my Ordo has had cause to question the actions of your Chapter.”

Seth said nothing, his expression unreadable.

“The Eclipse Wars are well documented. All actions accounted for. Except,” Corvin paused. “Honour's End...” He spoke slowly, letting the words hang in the air.

Seth stayed silent, his eyes fixed on the inquisitor.

Nerves sucked the moisture from Corvin's mouth. He coughed, clearing his throat. “According to the official report, the Flesh Tearers were instrumental in

defeating the archenemy.”

“I have seen the report. Make your point.”

“Yes, I’m quite sure you have. And like you, I too know of the greater truth.”

“Do I?”

“The Flesh Tearers, warriors under your command, your brethren, killed hundreds of Imperial citizens. Hundreds. In cold blood. All innocents.”

Seth’s jaw tightened. “Is that so?”

“Yes, I believe it to be the case.”

“Then again, you are mistaken. The *citizens*,” Seth spat the word, full of a warrior’s contempt for the weak, “you speak of had succumbed to the taint. They had become pawns of the archenemy. They were righteous kills.”

“A claim, I believe, that can be neither confirmed nor denied, seeing as your forces left no one alive to testify to the facts.”

“Choose your next words wisely, inquisitor.” Seth’s voice was edged with menace.

Despite his instincts urging him otherwise, Corvin held his ground.

“It is not my words which trouble me Chapter Master, but those of Brother-sergeant Jorvik of the Space Wolves.”

A low growl rumbled from Seth’s throat at the mention of the Wolves. Corvin backed up a step.

“Your forces engaged the Space Wolves, did they not?”

“They attacked us. Assaulting our rear like cowards.”

“They fought to protect the populace of the hive.”

Seth clenched his fists. He could feel his pulse drumming in his veins, hear its roar as it called him to blood. He was going to kill the inquisitor, rip his head from his shoulders and crush it between his fingers.

“Please,” Corvin held up his hands, trying to placate the seething Chapter Master. “My purpose here is only to understand your actions, to hear your side. Not to pass judgement.”

“Is that so?” Seth’s voice was like the bark of a heavy bolter.

“Yes and—”

“Then understand this,” Seth closed the distance between them in a heartbeat,

lifting the inquisitor up by his gorget so that their faces were level.

Corvin let out a gasp, locking his hands around Seth's vambrace in a futile attempt to break the Flesh Tearer's hold.

"This Chapter has served the Imperium since before you crawled mewling from your mother's womb. It has stood at arms and bled almost unto extinction, while you treat us with suspicion and doubt, dishonouring the very warriors who have died to ensure you yet live." Seth tossed Corvin to the ground. "I am done with your questions, inquisitor."

"You dare..." Corvin began as he regained composure, and his feet. "You dare strike me?"

Seth ignored him and turned for the door.

The inquisitor lunged forwards, anger robbing him of prudence. "To turn your back on me is to turn your back on the Throne!"

Seth spun around, murder in his eyes. "Be careful, inquisitor. My patience has its limits."

Corvin opened his mouth to speak. Seth didn't let him.

"You have fifteen minutes to leave my ship. Through airlock or your own vessel, it matters not."

The access panel winked green. The savant retracted his data keys and took a step back as the doors hissed open. Skulking into the corridor, he pressed against the wall. A row of luminators stuttered overhead, following the line of the passageway as it snaked round to the left. He crept forwards, keeping to the shadows, the folds of his cowl camouflaging him in the darkness.

The three previous corridors had been deserted, but he could not afford a mistake. His mission was too important for laxity.

At the end of the corridor, he negotiated another lock and climbed down a service ladder to the deck below.

Stepping from the ladder to a metal grille floor, he rolled his shoulders back, easing out the tension and standing straighter than he'd done in months.

*Almost there.* The thought sent a surge of adrenaline through his system.  
*Victory is never further from your grasp than the instant before you claim it.*

He took a steadying breath, remembering the maxim his master had taught him. He pressed on.

His steps became more assured, his stride lengthening as his legs remembered their former power. Splaying his fingers, he flexed his hands, throwing off the malaise that had settled on them. The final door was before him.

He pulled off his robe to reveal a dark suit of segmented armour, and set about shedding the rest of his disguise. Unclamping the brass augmentation from his eye and screwing it into the haft of the blade that hung from his waist, he reached into a velvet pouch to produce the last piece of his true attire.

Running his finger across the debossed 'I', the real Corvin Herrold slid the Inquisitorial signet ring onto his index finger and pressed the door release. With a slow, deliberate grinding, the doors came apart.

Darkness greeted the inquisitor as he stepped into the corridor beyond. No luminators shone, the gloom was total, thick and impenetrable.

“Emperor walk with me.” Activating the portable luminator on his gauntlet, the inquisitor pressed into the passageway. The door growled shut behind him.

The corridor was unlike any of the others. The panels of the floor were warped and dented, rusted from disuse. The ventilation grilles had been welded shut. The air was rank and stale, ripe with blood and faeces. The walls were dotted with hatches, each leading to small cells. None were occupied, broken manacles the only clue that they ever had been.

“Where are you?” Corvin whispered to the darkness as he passed another set of cells, their doors slack on battered hinges.

Noise from further along the corridor pushed Corvin into a crouch. He held his breath, straining to hear. The noise was indistinct, faint. A less experienced operative might have mistaken it for ambient background noise, emitted from one of the warship's many systems. But Corvin had supervised the interrogation of hundreds of heretics, put thousands more to death. He was more familiar with the sounds of pain than he was with his own voice. He drew his inferno pistol, its primed muzzle glowing amber-hot, and took a cautious step forwards. The screaming grew in intensity as he approached another set of cells. This time the doors were sealed.

Corvin listened. Pained, angry cries emanated from within. But there was something else—a hoarse roar that sounded almost feral. A sound like nothing Corvin had heard from the throat of a man.

The inquisitor reduced the focus of the luminator beam, tightening it on the nearest of the cell doors. He moved up against the wall. The door was fusion-bolted shut; there was no way to prise open the lock. Pressing the nose of his pistol to the first of the two hinges, he fired, melting the bond in a flare of super-heated metal. He aimed down and shot out the second, swinging round to kick the door in an instant later.

A roar. The sharp rattle of chains. A black-armoured beast rushed at him. Corvin fired twice, recoiling against the wall of the corridor. He heard his attacker slump back, the chains clattering as the tension on them eased. The noise from the other cells intensified, as though the beasts sensed the carnage nearby, or perhaps, Corvin thought with a shiver, they smelled his fear.

Guiding the luminator into the cell, the inquisitor took his first proper look at the beast within. He grinned in satisfaction. It was as he suspected, a Space Marine. Though not as he had previously known them. The beast was a dark parody of the Imperium's superhuman champions. Corvin activated his pict-recorder.

Swollen veins threatened to push through the skin of its forehead and neck. The scleras of its eyes were gore-red, and its throat emitted a continuous growl as it writhed on the floor. It wore black armour emblazoned with blood-red saltires. Tattered, blood-soaked scrolls hung from its pauldrons and breastplate.

“Subject shows remarkable resilience.” Corvin zoomed in on the gaping holes he'd blasted in its chest, before raising his pistol and shooting it in the face. The Space Marine slumped backwards and lay still. “But not to head shots.”

“That was a mistake, inquisitor.”

Corvin spun around and fired. The opposite wall glowed faintly, scorched by the melta blast.

“To have come here under false pretences, to have killed one of my flock.” The voice in the darkness was closer this time.

“Show yourself, daemon!” Corvin tapped his luminator, expanding the beam

to encompass the corridor. Appollus's leering skull helm appeared from the darkness. In terror, Corvin pulled the trigger. The Chaplain was quicker, crushing the weapon between the fingers of his power fist, and shouldering Corvin to the ground. The inquisitor rolled, letting the momentum take the sting from the blow.

"You have uncovered a secret." Appollus advanced on him. "Our secret." The Chaplain let the haft of his crozius slide down his hand until the flanged head hung a few inches from the floor. "And like all secrets, its knowing comes with a price."

"It is you who shall pay the price." Corvin unsheathed his sword, energy arcing along its blade. "I have summoned my warriors. We will commandeer this vessel, and you and your kind shall answer for your perfidy."

"Is that so?" Appollus growled in contempt as the inquisitor retreated. He reached out to tap a pict-viewer on the wall.

++Recorder 10A9: Bay 17++

Harahel tore his eviscerator from a shield-warrior's chest, the weapon's teeth churning his torso to red mist. The giant Flesh Tearer reversed the grip, driving his blade through the back of a prone figure clad in golden armour. The rest of the Inquisitorial warband lay dead at his feet, now unrecognisable as anything more than a pile of orphaned limbs.

++10A9: Segment Ends++

Disbelief held Corvin's tongue.

Appollus grinned.

"You are alone, inquisitor."

"No, traitor, I am never alone. The Emperor stands by my side." Corvin's blade flashed towards Appollus's throat.

The Chaplain slipped the blow, smashing his crozius into Corvin's breastplate. The inquisitor flipped backwards, his armour cracking under the blow. "You have spent too long in the shadows. Judgement's light has found you wanting."

Corvin tried to push himself to his feet, his chest alive with pain. He could barely breathe...

Appollus yanked the inquisitor up by his hair. Holding him level with the

soulless eyes of his helm, he drove a finger of his power fist into his chest, cracking ribs. The inquisitor screamed. “Twice you shot my brother. Are you as resilient as he?” The Chaplain stabbed a second crackling digit into Corvin, eliciting another tortured cry.

“Emperor...” Corvin’s lips trembled.

Appollus pulled the inquisitor closer, the visage of his skull helm filling Corvin’s world. “He is not listening to you.”

Harsh light shone above Corvin. He blinked hard in an effort to shake the torpor from his eyes, forcing them to focus. He tried to reach for his face but his arm was pinned. Shock snapped him to alertness. He was strapped into some sort of chair, his arms and legs bound by thick clamps. He struggled against the restraints, crying out as pain stabbed through his chest. His ribs were broken.

“The restraints are for your own protection.”

The Chaplain. Corvin remembered the skull helm. “You go too far, release me or—” The inquisitor’s jaw cracked as something struck it. His vision swam, clearing to show the face of another Flesh Tearer looming over him.

“Do you know who I am, inquisitor?”

“Y-yes.” Corvin stuttered, the granite face of Gabriel Seth unmistakable.

“You came here seeking truth, inquisitor.” Seth gestured to Corvin’s right. “Let us show you our truth.”

Beside Corvin, strapped to another chair, was a black-armoured Flesh Tearer, his armour daubed in red saltires.

At Seth’s gesture, Balthiel removed his gauntlets. He stepped between the two chairs. Placing a hand on the forehead of the Death Company marine, he turned to Corvin.

“No! No! Wait, no!”

Balthiel ignored the inquisitor’s pleading and completed the psychic union.

“A cowardly mind is a weak mind. This will not take long.” The Librarian reached out with his gifts. The Death Company marine’s mind was incandescent. His anger burned, a pyre that called to Balthiel. He dove into the flames, until they surrounded him, shuddering at the power in the warrior’s blood. The rage

was absolute. The flames licked at his armour, trying to find a way to his flesh. The wards inscribed on Balthiel's battle-plate held, glowing as they turned aside the fire's advance. He pushed down to the kindling that had given the fire life. Scooping up a pile of embers in his palm, he sought the inquisitor's mind. It hid beneath layers of disguises and barriers. Corvin was well prepared, but Balthiel would not be deterred. He tore through the inquisitor's mental defences with a savagery that would have killed an untrained mind, burrowing down past Corvin's fears to his very essence. There, among the winds of the inquisitor's soul, Balthiel let the embers fall from his hand.

Corvin screamed. His cry became a guttural roar as the rage overtook him. Blood rushed to his muscles, which began to convulse as adrenaline saturated his system. He would tear free from his restraints, kill Seth, wear his skin like a cloak, crush his bones to powder.

"Die!" Corvin growled, thrashing in the chair. Blood ran from his mouth as he bit off his tongue, one of his legs broke with a sickening snap as he tried to free himself.

"Enough."

Seth ordered Balthiel to end Corvin's torment, and close the psychic conduit he had created. After it was done, the inquisitor continued to spasm, his teeth rattling as he went limp in the chair. The effort of communion had taken a huge toll on Balthiel, who dropped to one knee breathing hard.

Seth rested a hand on the Librarian's pauldron "Return to your cell, brother. Rest."

"Yes, lord." Balthiel nodded and left the room.

"Watch him," Seth voxed Appollus on a closed channel. The Chaplain dipped his head in acknowledgment and went after the Librarian.

Tears streamed from Corvin's eyes as he sobbed between laboured breaths. His body trembled. Seth knelt down next to him, his voice little more than a whisper. "And you would dare call us traitors. We who channel this anger, this curse, each and every moment in which our hearts pump our father's blood through our veins. We who endure this torment and yet stand ready to fight for humanity. You. You who cannot handle our pain for a heartbeat dare question our loyalty."

Seth stood, snapping the restraints from their housings. “Leave and pray to the Emperor that you never cross my path again.”

Inquisitor Corvin Herrold lay among the corpses of his warband, thankful the shuttle’s pilot had been spared. The inquisitor couldn’t stand, let alone steer the craft. His nervous system was shot and his muscles were shivering from withdrawal as the remains of the rage left him. Sweating with effort, he propped himself up. The symbol of the Inquisition stared accusingly at him as he adjusted the ring on his finger.

*Who am I?*

Tears soaked his cheeks as he searched for an answer. Grief pushed him to remove the ring from his finger and toss it away. He looked to the ceiling; the galaxy stared down at him through the translucent hull as they edged away from the *Victus*. No stars shone. Yet the darkness of the void was as a beacon of light compared to what he’d felt living inside the Flesh Tearers’ souls.

“Emperor save us.”

**WARHAMMER**

**GODS OF FLESH  
AND BLOOD**

**A Tale from the Age of Sigmar**

*Graham McNeill*

Snow clung to the winding path, making the rock slick and treacherous, but the dwarf rangers marched with sure strides that could easily outpace the six riders following them. Seven of the mountain folk, each clad in dulled mail and tight-wrapped cloaks of dappled grey and brown, led the way along the steep-sided gully as it snaked deeper into the towering cliffs of the Grey Mountains.

The rangers were heavily bearded, and what little of their skin was visible was nut-brown and gnarled like weathered bark. They carried heavy wooden crossbows over their shoulders, and a slender-hafted axe was strapped to each warrior's thigh.

Sigmar rode at the head of the horsemen, weary and saddle sore, but grateful to have met these pathfinders. His horse tossed its mane, and Sigmar patted its sweat-lathered flanks. Taalhorsa was near the end of his endurance, for he not only bore Sigmar's weight, but that of the Norsii warlock, Bransùil.

The raven-cloaked warlock had said little on the ride from Glacier Lake, for his every word was treated with suspicion and hostility. As a man of the northern tribes that Sigmar had driven from the Empire, he was not to be trusted, and his unearthly powers only made it easier to despise him.

"Was it wise to keep to the mountains?" asked Bransùil, his tone laced with implied criticism.

"No one understands stone like dwarfs, but Alaric says that these rangers know these peaks and their secret paths better than anyone," replied Sigmar.

“But where do those paths lead, friend Sigmar? Many paths are secret, and some are secret to protect the unwary from walking into danger.”

Sigmar said nothing, but Bransùil’s words lodged like a splinter.

He put the misshapen warlock’s warning from his thoughts and looked over his shoulder at the few warriors who rode with him back to Reikdorf. Cuthwin and Wenyld swayed wearily in their saddles, with arms dangling limply in their laps. Leodan grimaced with every stumbled step his exhausted horse took, and the rags covering the deep slash in his chest were stained red with blood.

Teon rode alongside Gorseth, his wounded friend lashed to a cross of lance hafts tied to the saddle of his horse. The lad had taken a fearful blow from the axe of a living dead champion of the Dark Gods, and the wound was beyond their skill to treat.

Marching just ahead of Sigmar, Alaric of Karaz-a-Karak led a solemn group of armoured dwarfs in strict order. Though there was little obvious to distinguish his dwarfs from the rangers, Sigmar sensed a hierarchy at work that he did not understand. Though Alaric was clearly much older than these rangers, a fact that—as far as Sigmar’s understanding of dwarf culture went—should have accorded him great respect, the runesmith had deferred to the leader of the rangers, and consented to be guided.

Seven nights had passed since their defeat of Krell, and the journey home was, if anything, proving to be even harder than the hunt. Food was running low and though there was a plentiful supply of fresh snow to drink, only Cuthwin had a bow and even he was struggling to catch enough wild creatures to feed them all. Bransùil had used his powers to bring down a mountain stag, but no one was prepared to eat the flesh of a beast slain in such a fashion.

“Ulric’s bones, how much farther is it?” asked Wenyld for what felt like the hundredth time since the sun had passed its zenith. “I thought these dwarfs knew a short cut.”

“These dwarfs know the mountain paths better than you know your own manhood,” said Alaric with a gruff bark of annoyance. “So curb your whingeing. The entrance to a dwarf hold is a secret thing, not meant for manling eyes. The road to Karak Izor is no exception.”

“This is a road?” said Wenyld. “I’ve seen better tracks through the swamps of Marburg.”

“Hold your tongue, Wenyld,” ordered Sigmar.

“Perhaps the manling would be happier making his own way home?” asked the lead ranger, without looking back. Though he had not raised his voice above a whisper, every one of the riders could hear his voice perfectly. This was the first time he had deigned to speak in the language of men since they had met him four days ago.

“Do not shame me, boy,” hissed Alaric, and Sigmar saw the runesmith’s anger in the clicking flexing of his metallic hand. “These are Stromhelm’s rangers, and I’ll not have it said that manlings I have vouched for have the manners of greenskins.”

Wenyld’s back stiffened and Sigmar saw he understood the seriousness of Alaric’s words.

“Apologies, Master Alaric,” said Wenyld. “I am weary and did not think before speaking.”

“Aye, well you manlings seldom do,” said Alaric. “It’s what brings you such woe.”

The riders and dwarfs passed another hour in silence, and the path through the mountain gradually widened until the hard-packed earth beneath the horses’ iron-shod hooves became rune-stamped flagstones. Sigmar saw a pair of towering statues ahead, dwarf warriors in full battledress, with axes held out to the side forming an archway beneath which they would soon ride.

The rangers passed under the archway, and Sigmar reined in his horse, allowing Leodan, Cuthwin and Wenyld to ride ahead. Teon drew alongside him, and Sigmar’s heart sank to his boots anew at the sight of the grievous wound in Gorseth’s shoulder. The lad’s skin was ashen, glistening with sweat despite the icy air this high in the mountains. His saddle was sticky with blood.

“I fear he won’t live to see Reikdorf, sire,” said Teon, wiping away the tears streaking his young cheeks.

“He’s a strong one, lad,” said Sigmar. “He’s made it this far, he can make it a little longer.”

Teon looked at the rearing statues, as though seeing them for the first time.

“And they can heal him here?” asked Teon, suddenly looking very young to Sigmar’s eyes.

Sigmar did not want to lie to Teon, but nor did he wish to crush what little hope he had left, and said, “The mountain folk are masters of many things, and I do not believe they will be any less skilled in the healing arts.”

The anguish in Teon’s face transformed into boyish excitement, and he placed a light hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“You hear that, Gor?” he said. “We’re at an actual dwarf hold in the mountains, can you believe it?”

Sigmar led them through the archway onto a wide road that followed an arrow-straight course towards a mighty portal of seasoned timbers and age-blackened iron set into the flank of the mountain. Great images of helmed warrior gods were carved into the wood, and squat drum towers with ramparts that glittered with axe blades flanked the enormous gateway. The sun was setting behind the great peak, bathing the rocks in a ruddy copper hue.

The rangers were already halfway towards the gate, with Alaric’s dwarfs eagerly following behind. Sigmar’s riders awaited his arrival, and he saw their relief that they had finally reached a place of safety after so long in hostile terrain.

“So this is a dwarf hold?” said Leodan. “Doesn’t look very inviting.”

“Hold your tongue,” said Sigmar, though he also sensed the unwelcome air that hung over the mountains. This was a place where outsiders were normally met with hails of crossbow bolts and dwarf blades. Alaric had vouched for them, and the honour in which the runesmith was held was the only reason they had been allowed this far.

How long that goodwill lasted would be entirely dependent on their actions here.

“We are guests here,” said Sigmar, with all the authority that had made him Emperor. “Master Alaric has given his oath that we are men of honour, so none of you are to act out of turn or you’ll have me to answer to.”

His warriors nodded, but Sigmar wasn’t done.

“Understand this,” he said. “We are not in the lands of men now, and if any of us gives the mountain folk offence, none of us will live to see our homes again. Do you understand? I want your oaths.”

Each man nodded solemnly, even the warlock riding with Sigmar.

Satisfied, Sigmar rode for the gates of Karak Izor.

“And here was I thinking fighting Krell would be the dangerous part of this hunt,” said Leodan.

The interior of the dwarf hold was no less impressive than the colossal gates that afforded entry to the subterranean fortress. A vast entrance hall, fortified more stoutly than the soaring crag of Middenheim, was filled with warriors, five hundred at least, all clad in shimmering hauberks of scaled iron and overlapping plates that shone too brightly to be anything other than gromril, the legendary metal of the dwarfs.

A vaulted roof of shimmering gemstones and gold arched above the riders, and each coffered panel glittered like starlight. Vast columns of carved stone, at least fifteen paces in diameter, soared to the roof, marching off into the distance in serried ranks. The scale of the entrance took Sigmar’s breath away. Great fire bowls hanging on enormous chains suspended from the roof bathed the great entrance in a flickering, warm light, and Sigmar took comfort in the smell of hard rock and deep earth.

A stout dwarf in a red cloak and ornately fashioned mail that glittered like snowfall in the dawn was borne upon a shield carried on the shoulders of four masked warriors. His braided hair and be-ringed beard were red like molten copper, his features no less so, and he carried a foaming tankard of beer that reeked of mature hops. A heavy hammer was carried alongside him by a warrior to his right, while another to his left hefted a heavy barrel of ale on one shoulder.

Sigmar dismounted and nodded to his warriors to do the same. Teon, Cuthwin and Wenyld released Gorseth from the lance hafts tied to his saddle and laid him out on the mosaic floor, a great circle of copper in which were rendered swathes of runic text. Gorseth groaned in delirious pain, but that at least was a sign he still lived.

The dwarf on the shield belched loudly and Sigmar stepped to meet him as the regimented lines of dwarf warriors folded around him like the jaws of a closing spring trap. Their movement was so precise, so coordinated, that it eerily reminded Sigmar of the perfect unison of the dead legions of the necromancer. Not the shambling, rotting grave-fiends, but the armoured warriors of undeath, the black riders and the dreadful liche-lords of the dead.

The red-bearded dwarf looked Sigmar up and down, then took another mouthful of beer. It foamed on his lips and soaked his beard. He did not look impressed with what he was seeing.

“So who is this you bring to my hold, Master Alaric?” said the dwarf. “A manling? No wonder they call you mad.”

Alaric stepped forward and bowed to the elevated dwarf.

“Thane Egril Barazul,” said Alaric. “It is my honour to present to you Sigmar Heldenhammer, Emperor of the lands of men. He is oath-sworn to King Kurgan of Karaz-a-Karak, and though he is but a manling, he understands the value of such things. His treasure halls are rich in gold, his grain stores are well stocked and his people are courageous.”

“An emperor, eh?” said Thane Barazul. “A big title.”

“Well earned,” said Alaric.

“So you say.”

“I do.”

Barazul wiped beer from his beard and his already gimlet eyes narrowed further as he studied Sigmar. As the thane’s eyes bored into him, Sigmar held his head high, determined not to be bowed before this dwarf.

“I think I’ve heard of you,” said Barazul. “Are you the manling who joined King Kurgan at the pass north of Karak Angazhar?”

“I am,” said Sigmar. “The warriors of King Kurgan fought alongside my army and we defeated a host of greenskins that would have overrun the world.”

Barazul grunted and Alaric nudged Sigmar in the ribs.

“Show him the hammer,” whispered Alaric.

Sigmar reached for Ghal-maraz and five hundred dwarfs each reached for their weapons. Hundreds of axes were suddenly bared and the fires reflected ruddy

light from every blade.

“Careful now,” warned Barazul. “It’s a foolish individual who dares to draw a weapon before the Thane of Karak Izor. Nice and slow, manling. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

With deliberate slowness, Sigmar unhooked the ancient rune hammer and held it out before him. Where the keen edges of the dwarf axes shimmered in the glow of the fire bowls, Ghal-maraz held fast to the flames until it seemed it was ablaze with captured starlight. Sigmar felt the warmth of the runic magic bound to its metal, and a powerful sensation of homecoming swelled in his breast. Every eye in the entrance hall was locked to the warhammer.

Barazul nodded towards Alaric. “One of your creations, I’m guessing.”

“It is,” replied Alaric.

“And King Kurgan just gave it away?”

“He did, and he did so gladly,” said Alaric. “Sigmar saved King Kurgan from greenskin slavers while only a youngling. The gift of Ghal-maraz sealed their oath of brotherhood and stands as a symbol of the unity and warrior brotherhood that exist between our people.”

Barazul nodded, understanding full well the import of Alaric’s words. To dishonour an oath of the High King, even one made to a manling, would be to bring shame upon his hold, and Thane Barazul wasn’t about to make such a poor error of judgement.

But Sigmar saw that didn’t mean he had to like it.

“Very well, I give you leave to enter the halls of Karak Izor,” said Barazul. “Now tell me why you have come to my hold, Emperor Sigmar.”

Gorseth lay on a pallet bed that was about a foot too small for him, stripped to the waist, while dwarf maids in long dresses cleaned his bloodied chest with mountain spring water. The boy’s colour was terrible, and that he still clung to life was a miracle. Teon sat by his bed on a stool, while Leodan, Wenyld and Cuthwin tore into fresh-roasted shanks of meat and bread laid out on copper platters. Bransùil loitered at the wounded boy’s bedside, as though relishing the chance to watch a mortal soul pass into the next world. Alaric and his dwarfs

were quartered in an adjoining series of chambers, and had, thus far, kept themselves to themselves.

After telling Barazul of their climb into the Vaults, the battle to destroy Krell and Gorseth's subsequent wounding at the hands of the dread champion, Sigmar saw a lessening of the casual hostility in the thane's manner. Krell's damned name was well known to the mountain folk, with countless grudges against him. For a manling to have settled those grudges was no small matter, and Thane Barazul knew it.

Barazul had nodded to a pale figure standing unnoticed in the shadows behind him, a dwarf of such advanced years that it seemed he was entirely composed of streaked grey hair and wrinkles. The venerable dwarf was introduced as Gromthi Okri, though Sigmar couldn't be sure if that was a name or a title. Alaric had given the dwarf a deep bow of respect, a deeper one than the thane had received, so the dwarf was clearly not some doddering old fool assigned to them as a veiled insult. His skin was pale to the point of translucence, and Sigmar wondered how many centuries the old dwarf had behind him.

Gromthi Okri had led Sigmar's men through high-roofed chambers adorned with gold and copper towards a network of linked apartments decorated with precious metals and brightly coloured glass. He had spoken of each hall's ornamentation and history in slow, courteous tones, like a kindly grandfather taking a leisurely stroll with a gaggle of children in his wake. He told of the hold's deep mines, its honourable history in war and the thane's great wealth with paternal pride. His tale-telling made it sound as though he had been part of the household since its first tower had been raised.

With the hold's guests accommodated, food and beer had been brought, and Okri began his examination. He studied Gorseth's dreadful injury through a number of whirring and clicking eyeglasses attached to a headpiece of red-gold metal that hissed with venting steam and clacked with ratcheting clockwork mechanisms.

The ancient dwarf worked in silence for some time, before bending to sniff Gorseth's wound. He leaned closer and sniffed again.

"Most curious," he said at last.

“What is?” asked Sigmar.

“The smell.”

“What smell?”

“Exactly!” said Okri, dipping a glass rod filled with coloured liquid into the wound. Gorseth groaned and a cold breath sighed from his lips.

“I do not understand,” said Sigmar. “I smell nothing.”

“But you should,” said Okri with a serene expression on his face. “This wound has festered for seven days beneath unclean bandages. It should be rotten and black, and the boy burning with fever. But his skin is cold. Icy even.”

“What does that mean?” asked Teon.

“It means that I cannot save him,” said Okri. “No one can.”

“No!” cried Teon. “Surely the wound being clean is a good thing?”

Okri smiled indulgently. “In most cases I would agree with you. The boy would be dead already, but for the dark magic clinging to his spirit.”

“Krell’s axe,” said Bransùil, leaning in to look at the wound. His rustling cloak of black feathers put Sigmar in mind of a carrion bird circling its prey. “Its blade was forged in the Northern Wastes on the edge of the world, where the winds surge with the breath of the gods themselves.”

“You are a man who knows of such things?” said Okri.

“I have some art, aye,” agreed Bransùil.

“Art you call it?” said Okri with a rueful shake of his head. “Long have I held that men should not dabble with things they do not understand.”

“I understand power, old one,” said Bransùil.

“If you truly understood the power you wield, you would foreswear it utterly,” said Okri.

“Enough,” said Sigmar as he saw Bransùil’s crooked grin. “If Krell’s axe is so dangerous, why is Gorseth still alive?”

The lenses on Okri’s headpiece clicked and spun around on tiny toothed wheels, rising up like the visor of a battle-helm.

“Because Death has claimed him.”

“He’s dead?” exclaimed Teon.

“Not yet, but when his body fails, as it most assuredly will, his spirit will be

claimed by the dead things. He will wander the Grey Vaults as a shade for all eternity.”

“The Grey Vaults...” hissed Sigmar.

“You have heard of them?”

Sigmar nodded. “I’ve been there,” he said. “I was lost there as a youth.”

“And yet you live. Curious. How did you return to the world of the living?”

“My father brought me back.”

“Then he must be a very great warrior,” said Okri.

“He was.”

“Ah, yes. I forget how swiftly your kind pass through life. It must be very exciting,” said Okri, removing a twisting pipe with a bowl carved in the shape of a dragon’s head. As he filled the bowl with a reeking tobacco, he nodded towards Gorseth. The boy’s chest rose and fell with shallow breaths, and Sigmar knew his life hung by the slenderest of threads.

Okri lit his pipe and said, “If you have walked the wastelands of the Grey Vaults, Sigmar Heldenhammer, then you understand the doom awaiting this youngling.”

The ancient dwarf turned and placed a hand on Teon’s shoulder.

“I grieve for your loss, manling, but when your friend’s spirit passes, you must burn the body and scatter the ashes to the four winds. It is the only way to keep him from returning as a revenant.”

“What? No!” protested Teon.

Leodan, Cuthwin and Wenyld joined Sigmar as he knelt beside the dying boy.

“You saved my live, Gorseth, son of Gothen,” said Sigmar. “I shall see that you are honoured and remembered.”

Bransùil knelt beside Sigmar, his twisted frame making the movement awkward and jerky.

“It does not have to be like this, my lord,” said the warlock. “You can save him.”

“No,” said Okri, firmly. “He cannot.”

“He can, and you know he can,” snapped Bransùil. “You could do it too, but you choose not to. I can help bring this boy back, you know I can.”

Okri sighed and addressed Sigmar. “This boy will die. Nothing now can prevent that.”

“He’s wrong,” said Bransùil, gripping Sigmar’s wrist with a strength that belied his wizened frame. “I can send your spirit to the Grey Vaults. As your father did for you as a youth, you can do for this boy. You can bring his spirit back to his body.”

“That would be a fool’s errand,” warned Okri. “You would lose two souls instead of one.”

“You could do that?” asked Sigmar, ignoring Okri’s words.

Bransùil nodded. “Aye, Lord Sigmar, I could.”

“My lord, no!” cried Cuthwin.

“And you can bring me back?” said Sigmar.

“I believe so.”

“You believe so?”

Bransùil shrugged and grinned, exposing his gleaming white teeth. “Such things are ever fraught with uncertainties, but you have a strong soul and will not be hard to locate. It is the best I can offer you.”

“Sire, this is madness,” said Leodan. “You can’t trust this man, he’s Norsii!”

“Leodan’s right, my lord,” added Wenyld. “I’m all for trying to save the lad, he was a brave one, but he’s as good as gone.”

Sigmar stood and hauled Bransùil to his feet alongside him.

“You say you can send me to the Grey Vaults,” said Sigmar. “Then do it.”

Sigmar lay on the floor next to Gorseth’s bed, Ghal-maraz clutched tight to his chest as Bransùil knelt at his head and placed thin, willowy fingers on each of his eyes. Leodan stood behind the warlock, his hunting knife bared. Cuthwin and Wenyld had blades drawn, while Teon held tight to Gorseth’s hand.

“Are you ready?” asked Bransùil.

“No, but do what you must before I lose my nerve,” said Sigmar, the fear of what he might find in the Grey Vaults making his heart hammer against his chest. He had been little more than a boy when he had last walked its ashen wastelands, but the horror of those memories was still as dreadful.

“Come back to us, my lord,” said Wenyld.

“I plan to,” said Sigmar.

Leodan tapped his blade against Bransùil’s shoulder and said, “Know that if this wretch has treachery in mind, I’ll open his neck before he can blink. If you die, he will serve you on the road to Ulric’s halls.”

“Your faith in me is heart-warming,” snapped Bransùil. “Now let me work.”

Sigmar controlled his breathing with effort, feeling a chill settle in his bones. The Norsii warlock began a low, guttural chant of words that were not words, more like the racking coughs of a man dying of lung-blight. With each utterance, icy cold seeped into Sigmar’s flesh, and he let out a frost-limned breath as he felt his body go numb.

The sharp outlines of the richly appointed chambers faded as a cold mist arose and the hazy contours of a far distant landscape swam into view. Sigmar’s spirit rebelled at the sight of such a bleak, empty domain, fighting to remain within his body rather than be transported to so awful a place.

“Do not fight it,” said Bransùil’s voice, a lifeline to the world of warmth and hot blood. Sigmar wanted to cling to his voice, to let it guide him home, but he had come here with purpose and he could not shirk that duty. A boy with a warrior’s heart was trapped in the space between life and death, and only Sigmar could save him.

He stopped fighting the pull of his body and let his spirit flow from him into the Grey Vaults. Cold swept through him and he gasped as the connection between flesh and spirit was broken.

Sigmar cried out and opened his eyes in the nightmarish netherworld of the damned.

Everything was just as he remembered it: the lifeless hinterlands of desolate ash, the bleak grey sky that had never known the sun, and clawed trees of black cinders that scraped the air as the frozen winds of the shade-haunted plains howled through their gnarled branches. Black mountains rose in the distance, and Sigmar knew that no matter how fast or long he walked, they would come no closer. Time was meaningless in this place. Day and night were non-existent,

and every moment was as hopeless as the next. Here and there, lonely figures wandered the wastelands, anguished souls condemned to walk in limbo for all eternity, for crimes real or imagined.

Sigmar was naked, but with a thought he was clad in his dwarf-forged battle armour and helm. He carried Ghal-maraz, and the frost-white glow of its runic powers was a beacon of light in this eternal twilight. In a place where nothing ever changed, his appearance was sure to attract all manner of monstrous attention. Already he could see black wraith-wolves slinking from the shadows of the black trees, and moaning spectres were gathering on the ash plains as they sensed his powerful presence.

“Gorseth!” yelled Sigmar. “Gorseth, son of Gothen! Come to me! Your Emperor commands you to stand at his side!”

His voice did not echo, nor did it carry over the dead landscape, but his call was answered by a plaintive cry of desolation from the black forest before him. A hundred eyes of cold light glittered between the tangled trunks, and Sigmar knew Gorseth’s spirit was being held within that lightless copse.

“I am Emperor Sigmar Heldenhammer!” he bellowed, but the howling winds swallowed his words, mocking his ego and delusions of immortality. Anger touched Sigmar, and he set off towards the forest with Ghal-maraz looping around in killing sweeps. Puffs of ash blew up around him, and he felt the hunger of the shades that stalked him.

Sigmar entered the forest and the bleak light of the dead sky was snuffed out as the black canopy of trees closed in overhead. Everything was gloom, and the only light came from Sigmar’s hammer. Midnight-black trees loomed from the darkness, whipping branches clawing at his body as he pushed deeper and deeper into the forest. Moaning shades swirled around him and Sigmar swept his warhammer out as immaterial claws slashed for his warmth.

Ghostly revenants vanished at the touch of Ghal-maraz, and as each one was destroyed it loosed a shriek of plaintive horror. Sigmar forged a path onwards, swinging his hammer at the creatures of darkness as he charged through the haunted forest. Wraith-wolves howled and snapped at his heels, but Sigmar was too fleet for them. He ran with the speed of Ulric’s wolves, fighting and running

as he aimed his course for the bleak heart of the forest. Claws tore at his armour and spectral fangs ripped plates from his body.

Scores died to the touch of Ghal-maraz, but he could not see or fight them all. Icy fangs bit his arms and soul-sapping talons raked his chest. None of these wounds bled, but each sapped his spirit, making it ever more difficult to keep moving and fighting.

“Gorseth, come to my side, your Emperor commands it!” he shouted. “Damn it, boy, fight! Fight with me!”

His imperious demand was met with a battle shout that could only have come from the throat of an Unberogen warrior. A light flared in the darkness, and Sigmar saw Gorseth surrounded by a host of shadow-black spectres who held him fast in their claws of ice. The boy’s spirit was being drained by these horrors of the dead, but he was fighting them.

“To me!” yelled Sigmar. “Your sword, boy, think of your sword!”

A gleaming sword of silver appeared in the boy’s hand and he plunged the blade into the shades holding him. They screeched in terror as they vanished, and Gorseth fought his way clear of the others as a shimmering dagger appeared in his other hand.

“Where is this?” cried Gorseth as he staggered over to Sigmar.

“It is a place of hopelessness and death,” said Sigmar as a host of darting shades and wraith-wolves attacked. “Now fight!”

The noose of dead things closed on the two of them, howling wolves circling as the spectral soul-stealers swirled around them. Sigmar and Gorseth fought back to back, silver sword and rune hammer slashing, bludgeoning and killing with every stroke. It was a bloodless battle, for each wraith-creature struck simply vanished and their own wounds were of the soul. Hundreds of the monsters surrounded them, and Sigmar knew they could not hope to survive this fight.

It had been foolish to come here, but honour would not allow him to abandon a warrior who had given his own life to save his. The last time he had come to the Grey Vaults, he had his father and an army of Unberogen at his back. How arrogant to assume he could save Gorseth on his own!

The boy cried out as a pair of wraith-wolves bore him to the ground, their gleaming fangs tearing for his throat. Sigmar threw himself at the wolves, but a taloned hand plunged into his chest and Ghal-maraz fell from his grasp as his last reserve of strength was harvested. Gorseth held out his hand, but Sigmar couldn't reach it. He fell to his knees as their spectral attackers closed in, knowing that he was now condemned to walk the Grey Vaults as one of them.

A wraith-wolf reared over Sigmar, fangs bared to swallow his spirit, but before it could end him, a shimmering axe blade of the purest silver light clove through its black body. The axe swept out, faster than Sigmar would have believed possible, and its light was blinding. The shade creatures fell away from its dazzling radiance, and those that had been driven to frenzy by their insatiable hunger for the living were cut down like grain stalks. Sigmar saw a powerfully built dwarf clad in armour that shone as brightly as his axe, and a vivid red cloak with golden runes worked into its every warp and weft. A horned helm of ancient design sat upon a troubled brow, and his lustrous beard was a brilliant white, pure as the first snows of winter.

He slew with calm, economical strokes of his incredible axe, hewing the dead things with contemptuous ease. His white beard swung about him as his axe wove a killing dance among the shades, and the forest was bathed in its light. The shadows fled from the blinding fury of its power, and black trees crumbled like ashes in the wind until Sigmar saw the entire forest had been levelled by the power of the light pouring out of the weapon.

The dwarf walked a slow circuit around them, as though making sure that none of the dead things remained. He grunted and turned to face Sigmar. The dwarf's stern eyes glittered with the coldest blue light, and Sigmar felt the awesome power he represented.

The dwarf sheathed his axe over his shoulder and bent to retrieve Sigmar's fallen weapon.

"You dropped your warhammer," said the dwarf. "That was careless of you."

He turned Ghal-maraz over in his hands, nodding appreciatively at the craftsmanship of its forging. His gauntleted fingers traced the runes on the killing face. They shone brightly at his touch, as though greeting an old friend.

“Good to see that some standards are being maintained,” grunted the dwarf, holding the weapon out to Sigmar.

“Alaric will be happy to hear that.”

“That he will,” agreed the dwarf. “Always was a proud one.”

Sigmar gratefully took back his hammer, feeling the awesome strength bound to the warrior’s very bones as he was hauled to his feet.

“You saved our lives,” he said, as Gorseth appeared at his side. “We are eternally grateful.”

The dwarf shrugged off his thanks and said, “The wraiths might have fled for now, but they’ll be back. They won’t be able to help themselves. And you don’t have the strength to fight them again. Even with that fancy hammer.”

Sigmar squared his shoulders. “We’ll fight,” he said.

“No,” said the dwarf. “You won’t. You’re going back to the world of flesh and blood. You still have things to do, and there’s no use in you getting stuck here.”

“I owe you a life-debt,” said Sigmar.

“And you’ll repay it before your time’s done,” said the dwarf.

“I’m not leaving you here on your own.”

“You’re not,” said the dwarf sadly. “The boy is staying with me.”

Sigmar turned to face Gorseth, dismayed to see that his body was becoming as insubstantial as mist, as ghostly as the creatures they had fought moments before.

“No!” cried Sigmar. “Not now, not like this!”

Gorseth ignored him, as though he hadn’t even heard him, and Sigmar knew no words of his could reach him now.

“His body’s dead, but his spirit’s strong,” said the dwarf, as the shade-wraiths gathered at the edge of the light pouring from the dwarf’s white beard and glimmering axe. “I’ll make sure he gets where he needs to go. You have my word on that.”

Sigmar felt a tugging pull at his spirit as the dwarf spoke, the irresistible claim of flesh upon spirit. He knew he could not fight it, and he let the growing sound of Bransuïl’s voice guide him out of this place of darkness and torment. The barren plains of the Grey Vaults diminished like a forgotten nightmare, leaving

only a lingering touch of ice in his heart.

“Wait!” cried Sigmar as the shades closed in once again. “I don’t even know your name.”

“You will, Sigmar Heldenhammer,” said the white dwarf. “You will...”



# CRUCIBLE

A Grey Knights short story

*John French*

*“We die, though our war is eternal,  
We are doomed, but we walk into darkness,  
We are forgotten, yet the future is our gift to humanity.”*

– Oath of the Seventh Brotherhood,  
attributed to its first Grand Master.

***Crucible Rift – time determination not possible/  
non sequitur***

I cut the visual display from my helm. Blackness fills my mundane eyes. There is a second when I am aware of nothing but the breath easing from my lungs, and the cold ache of wounds numbed but not healed. I know the left-hand side of my body is torn and blackened. My mind can sense the dance of heat in the cooling gouges of my armour. The halberd in my hands is trembling, resonating to the rising pulse of the warp.

The darkness stares back at me. Then the forest begins to form in my sight. At first it is flat, like paint applied to a black wall. I see grey trees hunched and leafless, their twigs and branches stroking a rising fog. The branches begin to move, and the trunks sway like shadows thrown by a guttering lamp. A wet iron smell fills my mouth and nose. I turn my head slowly. The servos click in concert with the movement, and I feel an electric tingle of sympathy with my

damaged armour. The forest around me expands into the distance as I look at it. My ears hear silence, but my mind feels the gale that is rising with the fog.

None of this is real, at least not in the sense that anyone sane would consider real. I am not walking through a forest. There is no fog, and the wind I hear in my ears is a lie. If I am walking through anything it is along the corridors and passages of the *Crucible*, but that is a failing truth. The physical reality of the voidship is crumbling as the rift opens at its heart: its angles are broken, its existence spiralling around its doom like draining water. The warp reigns here now, and so I have closed my eyes to reality, and allowed my soul to see what my flesh cannot. The warp is a mirror; its form is the light and shadow we cast on it. So it is that I see the death of the *Crucible* as a winter forest.

I glimpse the rift point as a cave-like darkness beyond the trees. It is growing, ripping wider. Something waits within that darkness, building the strength to birth itself into this world. I begin to walk forwards.

The darkness shifts and the perspective of the forest changes. Distances expand and contract. Shadows solidify and objects break into splinters and haze. I see eyes amongst the trees, glittering, moonlight cold. Snow crunches beneath my foot; it was not there when I began my step. Snowflakes rise on the wind. A shape moves on the edge of sight, slithering and padding, night black against powder white.

I kindle an image of flame in my mind. I hold the image, allowing it to form a pattern in my thoughts. I begin to burn. Flames rise from the silver of my armour. A sphere of light now walks with me. The shadows recoil and beneath me the snow melts. Riveted metal gleams under the slush. The forest twists around me as I walk through it. Corridors of tree trunks and bent branches form and vanish. The ground rises and falls like ocean waves. I turn my mind's eye and meet the eyes amongst the trees; they are closer. Coal-black shapes slide against the silhouettes of tree trunks. The haft of my halberd begins to vibrate in my hands. Its blade is a frozen sheet of flame in my sight. Howls crack the cold air.

They are coming.

A daemon breaks from the trees. Its shape forms as it crosses into the circle of

light. It has the body of a hound. Shadow peels back from scale-clad skin. A mouth opens in its snout like a crack splitting wide in fire-blackened clay. Its hate and hunger snarls across my thoughts as its jaws hinge wide. I can smell grave rot and blood. It bounds forwards. I drop into a half-crouch, and ram my halberd forwards. The blade tip punches into the wolf's neck. The shaft of the halberd rams back into the ground, takes the weight of the hound for a second then jerks upwards. I stand and turn, flipping the daemon over my head. I send a splinter of anger through the halberd's core and the hound dissolves into ash and frost.

I begin to spin my halberd, weaving it between my hands as power flows through its core. They come to meet me out of the dark. They have the shapes that millennia of nightmare have given them: skinless bodies of blood-slick sinew, spheres of reaching hands, horned heads that grin with iron fangs. I rise and pivot, spraying bolt-shells in a wide arc. Explosions rip through the fog, parting it with blessed fire. Seen by my mind the detonations are pure white, like the burning of magnesium. My storm bolter clatters silent.

The daemons howl as one. The snow melts and then freezes harder. The ground twists and rolls as my mind burns into the warp. The trees retreat, their branches lacing through the fog to close off paths. Others reach upwards, growing like spreading thunderclouds.

A lance of rainbow fire strikes me, its tongues crawl across my armour. I shiver as the warp scratches against the sigil-laced silver. The daemons scream and the circle closes. I cut, muscles and will unwinding into a bright crescent around me. The blade parts flesh and bone. The wind catches the blood as it sprays out and lifts it into the fog in a spreading pink stain. My cut reaches its end. Light stirs in the cavernous darkness of the rift beyond the trees.

A waking roar echoes through the trees. I hear the call of carrion birds and the crack of bones in that cry. My enemy is almost here, it is almost awake in our world. I have to end this now. Every heartbeat spent here is strength lost to my enemy.

I call the fire. I speak its name and it answers. I feel the inferno roar in my ears and my skin feels colder than the void. I am glowing, my armour changing from

silver-grey to coal-orange. A flayed lupine skull roars as its jaws close on my wrist and its teeth touch my armour. Ice spreads across the daemon's muzzle, its jaw and teeth shattering like struck pottery. The fire unfolds from me like wings, like a cloak spilling in the wind, like the breath of a dying god.

### **Warp transit to *Crucible* Rift – 8883313.M41**

The ship that brought me to the *Crucible* was named the *Blade's Peace*. It could have carried a handful of my brotherhood, but I was the only one aboard. Her captain and the crimson-clad crew did not speak to me except to relay details of our progress through the warp. The *Blade's Peace* was as fast as a ship could be, but still I stood two nights' vigil before we arrived. Of those two nights the silence is what I remember now. Not just of a ship under power, but the silence that only those with our gifts and our brotherhood understand: the silence of a mind walking into darkness alone. I spent those silent hours in the candle-filled armoury.

The serfs disassembled my wargear down to the smallest rivet. I held each component, feeling the traces of its past, my past, in every touch. I saw the fires of Locara dancing against a black sky. I felt the death of the Revelator of Velt in the heartbeat before the daemon took his sight. I smelled the cold air of Hynal thick with the ozone of our teleportation. A thousand fragments caught like threads on the thorns of time. These moments are my life. They are the marks I made by the passage of my life. Eventually they will be forgotten.

I had no life before I became a son of Titan. A child was born, grew and lived, but he is not me. He is a ghost of a boy that died long ago. Not even I remember his name.

I had rebuilt my armour and weapons three times before the captain told me that we had arrived. Her voice was cold. She addressed me only as 'lord' while I was aboard her ship. Her name is Lydia, and I wonder if she realises that she is my ferryman to the underworld. Perhaps she does. She has served the Grey Knights for almost a century, and carried many to battles that will see them dead. Perhaps that is why she spoke with machine-like formality. Some say that it is

our kind that lack humanity. I don't believe this. Everything I have seen tells me that mankind holds infinitely greater inhumanity in its soul. Space Marines are not inhuman, we are focused.

I remade my armour for the last time, and the serfs clad my flesh with its second skin. There were dozens of figures around me, Chapter serfs in red and white robes with mirror eyes, tech-priests that clicked and muttered in static over every wire and fastening. The air was thick with incense smoke. I was surrounded but all I could hear was my mind echoing in the void. Finally my helmet closed over my head and a web of projected data filled my eyes. I became a hunched figure of silvered plate. The tapers of seven hundred and seventy-seven purity seals hung from me like dry leaves. They rustled as I moved to take my halberd from its iron coffer.

I did not go to the bridge. Instead I walked the kilometre-long passages to the launch bay. I asked the captain to channel the data from the ship's sensors to the left eye of my helmet display as I walked. I watched the *Crucible* draw closer. It looked like a crenulated slab of dulled metal. The space around it still bore bruises of its panicked attempt to return to safety. That desperate hope was false. The *Crucible* was doomed, its part now only to serve as the stage for my final battle. A rift was forming like a cyst in the ship's guts, gorging on reality, swelling in size.

I did not know why the rift had formed. Perhaps it had been a Navigator following a route through the warp that resonated like a ringing glass. Perhaps some amongst the crew had dreamed the same dream by chance, and that dream had grown. Perhaps it was a thousand factors spread across hundreds of years, aligning slowly like the cog teeth of a great clock. There were countless possibilities and none of them mattered.

I reached the launch chamber. The boarding torpedo waited for me, lying in its cradle like a dissected bullet. I felt the deck tremble under my feet as the *Blade's Peace* fired its thrusters, clipping its momentum until it was at a dead halt three thousand kilometres from the stricken ship. I climbed into the cramped cave of the boarding torpedo. My armour mag-locked to the torpedo's inner surfaces and the hatches closed around me. In the darkness I cut the feed from the *Blade's*

*Peace* and let my thoughts settle. At that moment I realised I had one regret: I would have liked to speak to my brothers.

***Crucible Rift – time determination not possible/  
non sequitur***

The only sound is the wind stirring snow through the trees. I stop and turn in a slow circle. The trees have moved, and I cannot see the rift point any more. Snow becomes a halo of vapour as it tries to touch my cooling armour. Quiet surrounds me like a tide waiting at the edge of the shore. The trees seem to press close, their black trunks creaking in the wind. I shift my grip on my halberd. The snow swirls thicker, settling in a silent blanket.

A sharp crack splits the quiet. I turn, looking for its source. Another crack, then another, each like a bone splintering. I see it then. A tree is splitting, and something is pulling itself from the trunk. Scabs of black bark cover its back. Its limbs and torso are soft and pale, like drowned skin. Yellow sap oozes from lesions and sores in its flesh, rolling down its body in a sticky sheen. It steps away from the tree, leaving an impression in the trunk. The ground shakes as it turns. Its head is set low on its shoulders, a flat wedge split by a wide mouth and slit nostrils. It straightens to twice my height. Its eyes are the dead white of cataracts.

It lunges at me, its hands and arms growing as it moves. I bring my halberd around as I step back, and cleave through its arms at the wrists. The daemon shrinks back, yellow blood showering from the stumps of its arms. It roars, and vomits a stream of thick sap over me. My armour begins to ring with warnings. Acid is eating into the joints and cracks between the silvered plates. Maggots and grubs begin to chew into the softening metal. The warding runes etched into each plate are burning with heat. For an instant my focus falters. The daemon strikes me then. Its hands have regrown, and a blade-like finger punches into my gut and spins me through the air. Damage warnings shriek in my ears. It strikes me again as I fall. I hit the ground in a tangle of limbs and buckled armour.

I start to rise, snow and blood falling from me. The daemon is walking towards

me, the slowness of victory in its stride. Weeping burns mark its flesh where it touched my armour. It grunts, and opens its toad mouth to show a black tongue rolling behind hooked teeth. I come to one knee. Pain reaches into my chest as I move. My halberd shakes as it takes my weight. I look weak, as if my strength is failing. It is not a complete lie.

The daemon bellows and charges, its mouth wide. I stand at the last instant. The point of my halberd meets the daemon's descending mouth. The force of the daemon's charge punches the blade through the top of its skull. Its bulk rams into me, and its arms rake the air. It is still alive. It shakes its head, forcing its bulk down my halberd. Its eyes are level with me, black blood oozes from its nostrils. The halberd twists in my grip. My hands are slick with pus and blood. I step back, twisting the halberd with all my strength. My armour screeches. The halberd turns in the daemon's skull. I push down and the blade saws out of the bottom of the daemon's head, splitting its jaw and cutting down through its torso. I pull the blade free and spin the tainted blood from its edge. The daemon collapses, and begins to burn.

I look up. I can see the waiting cave of the rift. It has grown wider, and suddenly I can feel the wind howling towards its black mouth. A shriek rolls through the forest. It is the sound of a monstrous birth, of triumph, of a nightmare waking. I run to meet it.

## **Titan – Augurium 0874313.M41**

Three sent me to the *Crucible*. They shared their deliberation with me so that I would know why: so that I would understand. I do understand.

The three gathered in spirit rather than body. They had no need of names or greetings. They knew each other to a degree that no bond of blood or kinship can match. They emerged out of the darkness between each other's thoughts. Each of them was a voice alloyed with notes of sensation and imagery. As they came together their thoughts became one. The Grand Master of the Seventh Brotherhood, his brother-captain and the prognosticar ceased to exist as separate beings. They became voices running through one consciousness. Such a

gathering is an eye-blink of thought in mundane reality. For the three this state is more real than the touch of hands or the sound of voices. It is called communion.

+The projection is certain?+

+Certainty cannot be taken for granted.+

+True.+

+The likelihood of it being a different entity?+

+Dependent.+

+What is the dependent factor?+

+How we respond.+

+Explain.+

+One of the highest choirs of daemons will manifest on the *Crucible*. We cannot prevent that; the cogs of fate have already turned. But which daemon will manifest is not certain.+

+There is something you are not sharing, prognosticar.+

Silence filled the thoughts of the communion. In physical reality the quietness lasts for less than a microsecond; in the telepathic representation it lasts for the equivalent of several unsettled minutes.

+The matter could be made certain.+

+How?+

+There is one amongst your brotherhood whose name is set in opposition to the entity.+

The communion became silent again.

+If he is sent alone then the daemon will come. It may not realise why, but it will come. It will not be able to help it.+

+ For this victory there is a price.+

+All victory has a price.

We send him alone.+

***Crucible Rift – time determination not possible/  
non sequitur***

I blur as I move through the forest that is a ship. My thoughts turn my movements to quicksilver. The rift's mouth yawns in front of me. I can feel more of the daemons oozing through the cracks at the edge of sight. I can taste their thirst and hunger panting at my heels. In front of me I see my doom come. It pulls itself from the rift like a great serpent coiling from a cave. Ectoplasmic birth fluid sheens its hunched body. Growing muscles twitch under its translucent skin. It twists on the ground, mewling with broken croaks. Quills spout from its flesh and begin to unfold into pale feathers. It raises its head and begins to stand. Around me I hear the lesser daemons begin to shriek as they melt back into the forest.

I take another stride forwards.

The daemon straightens. Its body is still forming, feathers elongating and colouring like an oily rainbow. Its spindle limbs lengthen, spouting delicate white claws. It towers above me. Its eyelids crack open. They are two holes into a fire.

I send my mind forwards in a whip of lightning. The fog flashes white around me. The lightning strikes the daemon and spreads across its flesh. It is not ready, its powers still aligning to existence in the physical world. For this instant I have

an advantage.

The daemon falters, stumbles perhaps. I feel its anger on the wind. I surge forwards. The daemon screeches and charges to meet me. Shadows billow behind it like smoke. Its presence is like looking into a star. My mind lashes out again. Forked lightning bounds across the snow, coils around the daemon and tightens. My mind bites into its essence, digs deep, breaths pain into its core. It screams and twists, scattering black blood to the snow. Then it falls in a tangle of feathers and thrashing limbs. My lightning cages its body where it lies. I move closer, the tip of my halberd pointing at its twitching body. It seems smaller now, shrunken in my mind's eye.

The wind rises around me. It is howling, pushing wildly. A cold blue light is rising through the trees like a sapphire sun. I can hear branches cracking and trunks creaking in the fog beyond my sight.

I look back down to the lightning-chained figure at my feet. Power builds within me, growing sharper with every instant. I raise my halberd, the words of banishment forming on my tongue. Perhaps the prognosticar was wrong; perhaps I will not end here, perhaps that is not a price that needs to be paid. The silver edge of my halberd slices down towards the daemon's neck.

It vanishes. My halberd slices into the ground in a shower of molten sparks. I feel the cage of lightning gutter out as the illusion it held dissolves. I realise how wrong I have been, how I have let myself be blinded. The daemon I came to banish is already here; it has been here all along, watching, waiting for me to realise how powerless I am.

I hear a laugh on the wind. I turn. The daemon steps from the shadows and mist. It looks like nothing, like an absence sliced into the world. Looking at it feels like falling. It looms taller and taller, like a shadow cast by a growing fire.

It is a moving shadow now, jagged features picked out by an inner furnace glow. A talon-tipped hand solidifies the instant before it thrusts at my gut. I pivot, and feel the talon's tip gouge a molten line across my torso plating. I turn my halberd to cut as I spin. It is a kill stroke, intended to slice from one side of the torso to the other. But this is not a battlefield, it is a war fought in living dreams. The daemon whips back, snake-fast, then lashes out again. I bring my

halberd around just in time. Blade and talon meet.

And the dream reality shatters.

My perception breaks into pieces, cleaving along planes of weakness. I have enough time to realise that this is what the daemon wanted all along, that I am entering the true battlefield, that I will die, and that I might fail.

My mind's eye blinks. I cannot see. The blackness around me is not an absence of light; it is the absence of anything to see.

“Why did you come here?” The voice is made of razors. Wounds open in my psyche, and I feel strength bleed from my mind into the warp. Isolated from my body this is a duel of minds.

“It is my purpose.” I say, and my will hardens over my mind like stone.

“To die?” The voice is grave, without a note of mockery or contempt. I am not surprised. Few monsters cackle.

“Yes.”

“A tragedy.”

“A duty.” I pause. I feel that if I do not speak then there will be nothing, not even my sense of self. “This is the sightless realm, the land of the mind without the spirit, is it not?”

It chuckles now. I can feel it circling my consciousness, its words and laughter tracing over the surface of my thoughts like cold fingers over skin.

“Is it? To you perhaps. To me it is the membrane of consciousness. It exists throughout the universe, a skin of connection between all sentience. From a certain point of view there is only one sentience. All you mortals are just the sparks falling back to the fire.” The voice pauses. Here in the blind silence I have no way of knowing how long passes before it speaks again. “You know who I am.”

“Yes,” I say. I feel the daemon's presence close to me. “You are folly, and hubris. You are abomination.” I send my will with my words, cutting out into the darkness. It rolls with a sound of thunder.

The daemon laughs, and suddenly the sound comes from all directions.

“Poetic. Crude, but poetic. You are not the first of your silver-clad kin that I

have met. Do you not think it strange that your enemies know you, but you kill those you protect if they learn that you exist?”

I remain silent. I have considered the truth the daemon states, we have all considered it; that and countless other heresies. The truth is one of the many gates through which we pass to become sons of Titan. Only those who can survive its cut truly survive to become grey, to die in battle for humanity. Those who cannot resist die sooner.

“The first Space Marines were made to fight for illumination, to bring truth and knowledge. Your kind is intended to bury it. That is the tragedy, is it not?”

I feel its power building around my mind. The pressure begins to grow. I feel my soul buckle.

“You are a remarkable soul, you and all your kind. You are the Imperium’s sacrifice, its sons offered up in hope of survival. You die for an empire that will never know that we lived. You do not push back the darkness, nor bring a new dawn. You fight a war that you can never win, only prolong.” The crushing force of its power presses from every direction. “I am glad we had this time at least. But you will die here.”

“I know.”

A wave of mental force radiates from me. My mind is cold with fury. The pressure releases and suddenly there is light rushing into my eyes.

My true eyes open to the physical world. I am standing within the guts of the *Crucible*. The forest is gone, the metaphor collapsing into a reality that stinks like a death pit. I am standing in a cave of crushed metal. Light seeps through a spreading web of cracks; it is the icy light of oblivion. The walls around me are flexing and compressing with the sound of tearing steel. I can see sheets of flesh stretched amongst the broken girders as they shift like the branches of trees. Red-black liquid sheens flat surfaces. Droplets of oil, blood and bile spin without gravity through the air.

The daemon clings onto the tangled wreckage. Loose skin and pale half-formed feathers cover its body. Its head is a flayed vulture skull on the end of a scaled neck. The metal wreckage is glowing blue hot where its claws grip. A

stench of rotting fish and crushed flowers fills my nose even though my armour is sealed. It looks at me and I hear it laugh in my skull. I lunge at it as it unfolds to strike.

Claws score across my temple and sink into my shoulder joint. I fall. The daemon is on me, worrying at me like a carrion bird on a corpse. Its flesh is burning from the touch of blessed silver but it roars and strikes me again. The glass of my eyepiece shatters inwards. I feel warmth on my face. I am blind in my left eye. The smoke of burning feathers is a choking reek in my throat. The cracks running through the ship yawn wide. The cold light of the warp is nova bright. Sympathetic wounds blister my skin inside my armour. I feel the daemon's power flow through its claws and into my flesh. My blood is boiling. Fresh wet pain explodes in the right of my chest. I have one heart now, like a mortal.

I still hold my halberd in my hand. I try to rise. The daemon rears and strikes down. I bring the haft of my halberd up to meet the blow. The daemon's claws close over the weapon. Warp energy gushes into the halberd's crystal core. The weapon shatters before my eye. The light burns my remaining retina out before I can blink. In the physical realm I am truly blind now.

The daemon is all around me. I am suffocating in folds of oblivion. This is the realm of war fought not with blades or words but with the raw heat at the core of our being.

I retreat, solidify, harden. I feel my soul become sharp. I am the wetted edge of a blade, the cutting caress of a razor. It was always going to end like this. It is the only way. It has always been the only way.

I say my name for the first time.

"I name myself. Istafel, son of Titan. Knight of the Seventh Brotherhood."

I hear the daemon scream. It recoils, spilling heavy panic in its wake like blood billowing from a wound. I taste copper, cinnamon and smoke. My name has cut it. As we are weapons so are our names. Each name is forged in opposition to one of the great daemons of Chaos. It sets us against them, binds us to them even as it repels them. In speaking my name I have thrust a sword into the daemon's essence. It is hissing at me now, babbling with a hundred

voices. It has begun to see what I intend and why I came here alone. It is afraid.

“I name myself and I name you.” The daemon’s name comes out of my lips in a bloody flow of syllables. I feel ice spreading through my soul, spreading in dead nothingness. I become a flicker of purpose sustained by pain.

The daemon strikes me. I feel its claws slice through my left arm and torso. It lifts me into the air. I force the words from my throat even as my lungs fill with blood.

“I name us and bind us together, blood and soul, and fate.”

I hear an instant of the daemon’s shriek then I embrace it to me. I feel fire blazing from my empty eyes. The flesh of my face burns to the bone. The daemon tries to pull away but it cannot. We are bound together now. We will burn as one.

Every molecule in my body blows apart. My thoughts scatter. I have no centre. Time and memory become a flat plateau. I know everything. I can see every thought I ever had, every memory contained in my cells, all those secrets hidden from my mind. Nothing is truly lost. I see my own birth. I know the name that I once had before I was remade. I see the possible deaths that would have been mine: bleeding out in the dank guts of a stone city, blood oozing between my fingers from the slit in my belly; the fire rising around me as the mob cries witch; the hunger slowly leaching my life away as winter deepens. These are not ghosts, or projections. They are real. I can choose. I can change anything that I see. I do not need to end here. I can take any path, any path that was or will be. I can die and walk into oblivion. I can rest.

Somewhere in the memory carried in my blood a knight walks into the darkness. He is bloody, his sword is broken, and he can barely stand. From within the darkness he hears a deep reptilian roar. He hesitates. He thinks of turning, of the feeling of cool water cleaning the blood from his skin, of blessed sleep, and the happiness of seeing those he loves again. He walks on, into the dark, raising a broken sword.

I choose my path.

My mind’s eye opens. The black branches of the forest thrash above me, and snow lies thick around me. The wind is a roar in my ears. I am dying. This is the

last beat of my life, the last blade-stroke of a battle of souls. Somewhere my body lies broken and withering in fire. But here in the last blink of a dream I stand. The daemon is there, its feathers shimmering in the ghost light of the warp. Its eyes meet mine. We are bound together. It will be banished for thousands of years, but I have to die here. That is the price, a sacrifice as old as life.

I raise my broken blade and walk to meet it.

### **Titan – Augurium 0884313.M41**

The three that doomed me gather in communion.

+It is done.+

+We will remember him.+

A pool of silence fills the communion. When the voices return they are one.

+He was our brother, and so we name him.+

All three minds echo the phrase. They begin the ritual thought pattern, rolling my memory between them until it is like a stone smoothed by the sea. They hold the thought until it is hard and clear, until it is ready to be remembered. A part of their thoughts that never sleeps adds my name to its murmured list. It is a list that has existed for ten thousand years. Portions of it are carved on stone, or etched into the metal of swords carried into the dark. But the whole list exists only in the minds of those who send us to die. There my name will live as they live. In time they will pass the burden of remembrance to others, and those successors will take up the recitation of the fallen. It is their honour and penance.

+Istafel.+

+Istafel.+

+Istafel.+

Somewhere, beyond time and hope, I hear them.

**WARHAMMER**

# **BERTHOLD'S BEARD**

**A Gotrek & Felix short story**

*Josh Reynolds*

No birds sang.

Felix Jaeger paused, one hand on the hilt of his sword, his eyes flicking from the ruined doorpost to the shattered wall to the gaping ceiling. The ancient house had more holes than Averland cheese and it stank of age and beasts. The foundations might be stone, but the rest of the manse was rotting. Walls slumped against one another and the roof sagged down with alarming inexorability. Rotten support timbers stabbed down into the floor like the fangs of some long-dead leviathan. A pelt of hairy mould covered everything, and as he stepped through the hole in the wall the floorboards beneath his feet creaked and dipped alarmingly and Felix imagined for a brief, sickening moment that he was stepping onto the back of some vast, breathing *thing*.

“Gotrek,” he hissed; then, louder, “Gotrek!”

There was no reply save the sound of the house shifting on its foundations, settling. Swollen wood squealed. Felix stopped and glanced over his shoulder. It had felt as if there had been something on their trail since they’d entered the wild hills north of Wolfenburg. The Middle Mountains were rife with beastmen and had been for centuries, as the degenerate descendants of the rampaging hordes of Gorthor the Beastlord bred in the dark glens and bowers.

“Aldrich,” Felix tried. Aldrich Berthold was the sole heir to the substantial mercantile empire of the Wolfenburg Bertholds, a family that had, of late, gone through an inordinately unusual number of suicides, accidental self-immolations

and at least one incident involving cuttlefish. Aldrich was also the nominal owner of the ruin Felix found himself in.

Star Hall, as it had once been known, had been abandoned centuries earlier, during the invasion of the aforementioned Beastlord. The Bertholds had left behind their former lives as country gentry for the urban comforts of Wolfenburg and had flourished ever since. At least if you listened to the gossips and wags. But though it had been abandoned, Star Hall remained and its secrets with it.

Felix cursed under his breath. "Gotrek," he cried out. "Where are you?" It had taken them several days to reach the hall; its location was a well-guarded secret among the Berthold clan, and for good reason, to hear Aldrich tell it. But evidently not that well-guarded, for Gotrek's keen senses had caught a whiff of a cooking fire before either Felix or Aldrich had seen the thin query mark of smoke rising above the ruin and into the deepening dusk as they crossed the bluff above.

Gotrek had insisted on circling around. Aldrich had vanished not long after. Felix found himself in the unenviable position of being utterly alone.

Wood creaked beneath a sudden weight.

Instincts first shaped by the finest fencing master in Altdorf and honed in hundreds of melees since brought his sword up to almost gently tap aside the falchion's grimy edge as it dropped towards his head. His perception of the world around him had slowed to a crawl in those first few moments of surprise, but now as the blades touched and rang, motion, thought and time once more lurched forwards at their proper speed. Felix did not stop with the parry. Instead, he loosened his red Sudenland travel cloak from about his throat and spun, stealing his opponent's momentum and tangling the snorting, gibbering beastman that had leapt at him in the cloak's folds.

The creature, more goat than man and more man than dog, staggered to its knees. The edges of the cloak flared, revealing its broad, hairy back. Felix rammed Karaghul between its shoulder blades and sawed upwards with professional brutality, cutting short a bleat of agony. He rode the creature to the ground, forcing his weight down on the hilt of the sword. Beastmen took altogether too much killing for Felix's liking. As he wrenched the sword free, he

heard Gotrek's joyful roar and noted that for some, however, it was just the right amount.

A sense of relief flooded through him as another beastman crashed through one of the rotten interior walls and landed in a heap of blood and wood splinters. Another staggered backwards through the hole, its boar-like maw opened in a squeal of desperation. A moment later, a short, impossibly broad shape followed with a bloodthirsty roar.

Gotrek Gurnisson buried his rune-scrawled axe into the swine-thing's prodigious belly and lifted it off its disturbingly childlike feet with the force of the blow. Bone cracked and flesh ruptured as the wailing thing folded over the blade and slid off in two squirming pieces. "Ha!" Gotrek snarled, his one good eye glinting with battle-lust as he spun. "Come on, scum, come to Gotrek!"

The beastmen obliged, tumbling towards the Slayer like a pack of slaving hounds through the hole in the wall. For a moment, the squat form of the dwarf was utterly obscured, save for his tall crimson crest of hair which bobbed above the hairy shapes engulfing him. Then a beastman, its bovine head hanging at an odd angle and its bottom jaw nearly sheared off, flew from the scrum to crash against a fallen support beam. There was a sympathetic groan from the manse, and Felix feared that the decrepit structure would collapse in on them. Then he was too busy fending off a bird-headed monstrosity to do anything other than fight. The creature was as quick as the crow it resembled, and it croaked vaguely intelligible curses as it chopped at him with the ill-cared-for woodsman's axe in its talons.

Its berserk assault forced Felix back against one of the fallen beams. It was all he could do to avoid or parry the flashing axe as it bit at his face and limbs. Then the bird-man gave a startled squawk and staggered around, a gaping wound in its back. Felix grimaced as blood and feathers splattered him and then Gotrek was kicking the dead thing aside. "Having trouble, manling?" the Slayer grunted dismissively. His broad frame was striped with so much blood that his tattoos were almost obscured and the massive, ham-sized paw that clutched his rune-axe was drenched to the shoulder joint.

"When do we not, Gotrek?" Felix shot back as he wiped strangely hairy

feathers out of his eyes. What sort of beast grew hair *and* feathers? The strands seemed to curl around his fingers as he brushed them hurriedly away. Gotrek grunted again, with what Felix thought might be humour. It was hard to tell with a being as taciturn as Gotrek.

There were a half a dozen of the beasts left, though they didn't appear confident that their numbers would provide any sort of advantage. Having seen Gotrek in action far more times than he cared to admit, Felix could understand the brutes' hesitation. Gotrek raised his axe threateningly and started forwards. Watching a dwarf run was akin to watching an avalanche slide sideways, and the Slayer's impossibly smooth yet lumbering charge was no exception. There was a sense of violent inevitability to it that always impressed Felix.

It seemed to have the opposite effect on the beastmen; with a chorus of howls, barks, grunts and cat-screams, they rushed to meet Gotrek. Felix bit back a curse and followed the Slayer. It wasn't as if Gotrek needed the help, but he was honour-bound to aid the Slayer as best he could. And if that meant keeping him from dying an ignoble death because he was too unobservant to guard his back, then so be it. Gotrek deserved a better death than these beasts could give him.

A beastman slashed wildly at him with a club topped by the fanged jawbone of a wolf. Felix skidded aside and caught sight of Gotrek driving his head into a cloven-footed nightmare's belly even as his axe took off another's leg at the knee joint. The club came at him again and he twisted aside, the yellowed teeth of the jawbone biting only empty air. The club's wielder was as hairy as the others, its goatish features nearly obscured by a mop of tangled, matted hair. It screamed and came at him again. Felix drove Karaghul into its chest. He grunted as the blade bit into bone and he was forced to plant a foot on the creature's chest to try and retrieve his sword.

Even as he did so, however, he heard the scrape of hooves. He turned, trying to jerk his sword free as something both feline and equine shrilled out a triumphant cry and leapt from its perch on one of the fallen support beams. A pistol cracked, and the creature dropped in mid-leap, crashing through the floor and into the darkness below. Felix gaped, and then looked around, spotting Aldrich Berthold crouching near the gap in the exterior wall. Aldrich pointed with his smoking

pistol. "Look out, Jaeger!"

Felix jerked Karaghul free just in time. The axe that had been aimed at his head slid off the blade in a shower of rust flakes and sparks. The simian-faced mutant grunted as Felix kicked its kneecap out of place and he split its skull as it fell. Felix turned as Gotrek brought the last beastman down.

The Slayer had his hands wrapped around its neck, his axe being embedded in the skull of another. As Felix approached, Gotrek efficiently crushed the thrashing creature's throat. The Slayer let it fall to the floor and wiped his hands on his trousers. "Filthy beasts," he grunted, spitting on the body.

"My thanks, Aldrich," Felix said as he cleaned his sword. "That was a timely intervention."

"I'm paying a lot for your services, Jaeger," Aldrich said. "I'd hate to see that money go to waste."

Gotrek's eye blazed at the mention of money. Even the merest whiff of it did odd things to dwarfs, and it was one of the few things that could stir Gotrek other than the promise of a glorious death. Aldrich had promised them Gotrek's weight in gold to escort him to Star Hall. The journey was normally to be undertaken alone, but the rash of accidents among his kin had made Aldrich wary, and as the last surviving Berthold he felt comfortable breaking with tradition. Felix couldn't fault him for that.

"Did you find the fire?" Felix said. "Was it the beasts?"

Gotrek grunted in assent. "Back there," he said, hiking his thumb over his shoulder. He looked down into the hole in the floor through which the beast that Aldrich had shot had plunged. "Smells foul down there," he added.

"Who knows how long those creatures have been squatting here," Felix said, sheathing his sword. He looked at Aldrich. "I'm surprised no one ever mentioned it to you."

"There's a lot I don't know," Aldrich said, holstering his pistol. "I didn't even know I was related to the family, despite the name, until last week." He looked around. "I certainly wasn't expecting to have to come here."

"Why are we here anyway?" Felix said. "You weren't very clear about that in Wolfenburg."

Aldrich frowned. "I'm looking for something," he said after a moment.

"What?"

"A beard," Aldrich said.

Felix blinked. "What?"

Aldrich made a face. "Well, more a lock from a beard."

"Maybe you'd best explain, manling," Gotrek rumbled, cleaning his axe on the mane of one of the dead beastmen.

"The Bertholds are—were—a large family," Aldrich said. "And their fortune is even larger. Star Hall was built with that fortune, by Bollin Berthold, the first Berthold." Aldrich looked around. The shadows cast by the setting sun were deepening and creeping across the floor. "He was entombed here, in the vaults below, before the Beastlord put Ostland to the torch. When the family left, they left him here. It's become a... tradition of sorts, for those coming into their inheritance to come to Star Hall and pluck a hair from the beard of the first Berthold in order to prove their blood to the family's legal representatives, the firm of Flywheel, Shyster and Flywheel." Aldrich made a face. "They've been seeing to the family's interests since the time of the Three Emperors."

"Odd sort of tradition," Felix said. He glanced around. There was a sound he couldn't place. A faint scurrying or slithering that he dismissed a moment later as the sound of branches in the evening breeze.

"No odder than anything else you manlings come up with," Gotrek said. "This place still smells of beasts."

"We should start a fire. It's getting dark," Aldrich said, looking uncomfortable.

"I would have thought you'd have wanted to claim your prize," Felix said.

Aldrich shook his head. "If there are beasts about, I'd rather wait until daylight, if it's all the same to you, Jaeger." He grinned. "What's one more night after all?"

"May as well use the beasts' fire pit," Gotrek said. He led them through the hole in the interior wall and into the room beyond. It had been a parlour once, Felix judged. Architectural styles didn't change much in the Empire, much less Ostland. It was in as bad a shape as the rest of the house and there were holes in the floor and the walls that put Felix in mind of rat-holes. There was a stone fire

pit in the centre of the room, and charred kindling still smoked within it. Felix sniffed.

“I was expecting it to smell like a sty,” he said.

“Maybe the beasts haven’t been here as long as we thought,” Aldrich said.

“Someone was,” Gotrek said, tapping his axe on the edge of the fire pit.

“Those beasts didn’t start this fire.”

Felix was about to reply, when he again heard the soft scurrying sound. Rats in the walls, perhaps? Or something else... Felix watched the hairy patches of mould clinging to the walls undulate in the breeze and he repressed a shudder.

“Of course the beasts set the fire,” Aldrich said. “Who else could have?”

Felix caught sight of something out of place in the debris of the room. He strode over and drew Karaghul, using the blade to lift the object in question.

“Perhaps whoever owned this?” he said, showing his companions the boot.

“It’s a boot,” Aldrich said.

“It’s got blood on it,” Felix said.

“Bah, the beasts probably killed some traveller,” Gotrek said. “Not everyone is as lucky with a blade as you, manling.”

Felix ignored the backhanded compliment. “But first forced him to light a fire?”

“I’ve heard stranger things, manling,” Gotrek said with a shrug. “It doesn’t matter. Whoever set the fire is gone and the beasts are dead. And if there are more, well, we’ll soon fix that.” He ran his thumb along the edge of his axe for emphasis.

As the fire curled to life, the sky, just visible through the gaps in the roof, turned dark. Felix watched the smoke rise through the gaps. Gotrek sat staring into the fire, his attentions turned inwards, as ever. Sometimes Felix wondered what it was the Slayer saw in his mind’s eye on such occasions. But only sometimes—for the most part, he was glad that such things were hidden from him.

Aldrich, on the other hand, only seemed to get more nervous as the night went on. From the way he had coolly potted that beastman earlier, Felix had assumed that the man wasn’t easily rattled. But then, Felix couldn’t fault him for being a

bit out of sorts. The fire cast weirdly dancing shadows on the walls and the sounds didn't help. Every creak and sigh set Felix's hackles to bristling. And there was something else... A steady sound, distant but unceasing, like the beat of a drum.

Finally, he said, "Gotrek, do you hear that?"

Aldrich started at the sound of his voice, nearly dropping the piece of jerky he was chewing on. Dried meat and cheese were all they had brought in the way of supplies. Felix had assumed that they could catch a rabbit or a bird, but the signs of wildlife had dwindled the closer they'd come to Star Hall, though he blamed that on the beasts. But it was strange how even the grass and trees seemed to shy away from this place.

"Hear what, manling?" Gotrek said, shaking himself from his reverie and turning.

"That," Felix said, gesturing. "That sound, whatever it is... Do you hear it?"

"It's water," Gotrek said dismissively. "Water beating on stone; these mountains are the worse for water, with weak roots and too much limestone." Gotrek knocked his knuckles on the stone of the fire pit. "Soft stones these. That is why you men could shape them as you did. No need for skill."

The echo of Gotrek's knuckles was loud in the silence. It bounced from pillar to post, growing louder and quieter in turn. Felix felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night. "Why did they call this place Star Hall anyway?" he said, more to fill the oppressive silence than from any real curiosity.

"The usual reasons, I'm told," Aldrich said absently. "A star fell here. Its landing created the clearing the house occupies."

Gotrek was suddenly on his feet, and there was a look on his face that Felix didn't like. He sniffed, suddenly alert to the stench he'd smelt all night. He'd put it down to the stink of the dead beasts, but he wondered if that were the case. There was a persistent dampness to the smell, *like wet hair*, he thought.

The sound was back as well, and louder. Not just the dull thudding but the scurrying. Felix's suddenly sweaty palm dropped to Karaghul's hilt. Aldrich hadn't moved, but it was clear that he heard it as well.

In the shadows, shapes moved. Gotrek gave a triumphant bark and leapt on

one, his big hands snapping out to grab a flapping limb. With a roar, he tossed the figure into the light. “Ha! Caught you,” he shouted. Felix leapt to his feet, his sword in hand. “Watch him, manling, I’ll take care of the others,” Gotrek said, grinning wildly.

“Gotrek—” Felix began, looking in horror at Gotrek’s captive. Gotrek snatched up his axe and bounded into the shadows, ignoring him. Felix looked back at the body that Gotrek had dumped at his feet. The man was dead, and had been for several days, by the look of the wounds that had done for him. But that was not what caused Felix’s gut to turn icy with fear.

Something long and black and glossy stretched from the body into the darkness and as Felix watched, the serpentine shape twitched, causing the body to jerk and sway upright. Then, with nary a sound, it was dragged back into the darkness. Gotrek roared out inarticulately, and Felix saw him striking out at bobbing, weaving shapes that moved less like living things than puppets on strings. But what was pulling those strings?

“Aldrich, did you see—” Felix turned and looked down the barrel of Aldrich’s pistol.

“I have seen far more than I liked, Jaeger,” Aldrich rasped, his eyes wide and his face twitching with strain. “Now be a good hired sword and get out there with your friend.”

“What is this?” Felix said.

“Just do your job, Jaeger. Do what I paid you and your stunted companion to help me do—”

A familiar shape flew through the air, broken beak clacking. The hairy bird thing that had nearly done for Felix earlier fell down towards them, claws flailing. Felix lashed out with his sword, knocking it to the side. It flopped bonelessly into the fire, the coiling black tendril that had been manipulating it like a hand puppet writhing as the flames licked at it for a moment before its thrashing doused them. A horrid smell, like burning hair, filled Felix’s nostrils as everything went dark.

Light dripped down from the thin sliver of moonlight visible above. Felix gagged on the smell and spun, holding his sword in both hands. There was a

sound like a nest of serpents rubbing across the floor. “Aldrich,” he said, then, “Gotrek?”

He could hear the grunts of the latter and the wet chop of Gotrek’s axe as it sank into dead flesh. They had faced the walking dead before, but this was something different. *Fouler* somehow... Something brushed his face. Felix let slip a cry of disgust and lashed out. “Aldrich, relight the fire, or Gotrek—somebody!” More somethings slithered around his legs and waist and arms, snagging him in warm coils that felt like hemp rope.

He was yanked off his feet and slammed to the floor. Karaghul slipped from his hands and as he clawed for it he found himself being dragged roughly and swiftly across the floor. He crashed through the piles of debris as he tried to dig his fingers into the floor. Splinters bit into his fingers and he cried out as he struck the wall. He felt the wall buckle and mould drifted down on him like snow.

A dark shape loomed over him suddenly and he heard the whistle of metal cutting the air. Suddenly he was free. A strong hand grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him into the air. “Are you alive, manling?” Gotrek said.

“For the moment,” Felix gasped. “What are these things?”

“Whatever they are, they’re making me angry,” Gotrek snarled. He dragged Felix away from the wall and back towards the fire pit. Contrary to Felix’s earlier observation, there was still a red glow to the embers in the pit. Gotrek threw a chunk of wood in and stirred it with his axe. There was a sudden burst of light and heat. Felix looked down and uttered a grunt of revulsion.

“Gah, get it off me!” He beat at his arms and chest, trying to dislodge the coils that still clung to him. Gotrek snatched one up and bounced it on his palm. Felix grimaced. “What is it?”

“Hair,” Aldrich said. Felix half rose to his feet and Gotrek tensed as Aldrich stepped around the fire pit, his pistol in one hand and Felix’s sword in the other. “Don’t twitch, master dwarf... I’d hate to bring your quest to such an ignominious end.”

Gotrek growled wordlessly and made to start forwards, but Felix grabbed his arm. The dwarf glared at him, but paused nonetheless. “What’s going on,

Aldrich?” Felix said. “Did you bring us here to feed us to... whatever that thing was?”

“If need be,” Aldrich said. “You weren’t my first choice, if that helps.”

Felix recalled the look on the other man’s face when he’d found the boot.

“Who were they? Not friends, I hope,” Felix said.

Aldrich’s face twisted into a sneer. “More like employees. They were effective at murder, but not so much at monster-fighting.”

“You killed your own kin,” Gotrek rumbled. As the Slayer spoke, it all fell into place in Felix’s head.

“You murdered the rest of your family for the inheritance!” he burst out. Beneath his feet, the floorboards clattered as if something immense were moving beneath them.

“Murder? It was a *service*,” Aldrich hissed. “If you knew what I know, you wouldn’t accuse me of murder... you’d thank me.” He stabbed Felix’s sword into the floor and held out his hand. “Give me the hair.”

Gotrek gave a gap-toothed grin. “Come and take it, kinSlayer.”

“Don’t force me to waste a bullet on you, Slayer, or your companion,” Aldrich said. He cocked his head, listening to the sounds of the ruin. “Can you hear it? They kept it here all this time. That’s why they left, the poxy bastards... not because of beasts, but to escape their own taint.” He smiled bitterly. “My taint too, I suppose. The money will ease the pain.” He began to back away. “You’ll want to keep that fire lit,” he said. “It hates the light. I’d hate it too, living in darkness for all those centuries.”

The eaves and beams shifted and sighed. Felix heard the water-rumble again, only louder this time. It was like a wave approaching from all directions.

“It recognises its own, that’s the only thing I can figure. That’s the only way they could have done it,” Aldrich continued, licking his lips. “The beastmen worshipped it and fed it, but when a Berthold came, it kept them safe. But not me... it knew. Somehow, *it knew* what I had done and it came for us. For me,” he hissed, his eyes rolling in their sockets. “But I escaped! Or maybe it let me go.” The panicked orbs swivelled, fixing on Gotrek. “I thought that was it, but then I saw you, master dwarf and I knew you might just be what I was looking for.”

“Star Hall,” Gotrek said, his one eye blinking slowly.

“What?” Aldrich said.

Gotrek held up the lock of evilly glistening hair and sniffed it. “Ha!” he growled. “I thought I smelled warpstone.” He grinned at Aldrich. “This house must be sitting on a nest of the stuff. I thought only the ratkin were mad enough to build their lairs in such sour places...”

Felix felt a chill course through him. His skin suddenly itched where the tendrils of hair had touched him and he was forced to fight off the urge to strip naked and check himself for signs of mutation. “What is it, Aldrich? Tell us that at least. What devil is lurking in the darkness?”

“Haven’t you guessed?” Aldrich said, stretching out his hand. “Are you deaf? Give me that hair!”

“First tell us what’s moving down there,” Felix said, his muscles tensing. If he could get to his sword, and Aldrich didn’t shoot him first, they might make it.

“Bollin,” Aldrich said hoarsely. “Bollin Berthold. He didn’t die, but he was entombed nonetheless.”

A groan erupted from the depths of the manor, sending shivers of nausea shooting up through Felix. Aldrich twitched. “The secret shame of the Berthold family, revealed only to those who profit from its wealth,” he muttered. “Something buried here changed him, and the family fled, only to return again and again. But after me, there’ll be no more. I’ll change my name. I’ll go west, to Marienburg, and leave this behind.” He looked around wildly. “I don’t want it, you hear?” he screamed. “I don’t want your damned name!”

Silence fell as the echoes of his cry faded.

And then, the sound of wood snapping as the floor began to buck and heave. Aldrich’s scream was drowned out by a thunderous roar as something vast and hairy burst upwards through the floor, its flabby lips slamming shut on the last Berthold. It was all writhing hair, save for a huge face, all the more horrible for the distinctly human cast to the features, which resembled Aldrich’s, albeit twisted into a brutish and inhuman leer. It was as if someone had stretched and pulled a human face across a jumble of barrels, and the lashing tendrils of its great beard and moustaches stretched out with quivering eagerness. Massive,

square teeth ground the pulpy thing that had been Aldrich into a red stain as it heaved itself around, its mad, empty eyes fastening on them.

“Stoke the fire, manling,” Gotrek said, raising his axe. “It’s time someone put paid to this pest-hole.” With an inarticulate roar, the Slayer charged towards the monstrous spawn of Chaos, his axe licking out to sever the tendrils that sought to snare him. Felix began throwing wood on the fire, fear lending him speed and strength.

Gotrek was like a man caught in a bramble thicket, hewing and chopping, unable to press forwards more than a few steps at a time. His roars mingled with those of the thing, and a deluge of raw sound hammered at Felix’s ears. His hands bled from splinters as he tossed more and more broken wood onto the fire. Light drove back the shadows, more fully illuminating the battle.

Gotrek’s flesh was bruised and battered by the pounding, yanking tendrils, but he staggered on. Blindly, he groped out, snagging a handful, and with a snarl he struck out with his axe, letting the haft slide through his palm. The blade of the axe bit deep into the bulbous, pasty flesh of the thing’s cheek, and a fountain of foul-smelling fluid spurted. The Berthold-thing wailed and rolled, nearly pulling Gotrek off his feet.

“Out of the way, manling,” Gotrek bellowed. Felix needed no further encouragement. Even as he dove aside, the Slayer set his tree-stump-like legs and every muscle in his arms and chest swelled. Then the Chaos-thing was sliding unwillingly across the broken floor and up off whatever passed for its feet as Gotrek gave a mighty heave and sent it rolling into the fire pit.

There was an ear-splitting wail and a rush of noisome odour and then the greasy crackle of the hungry flames drowned out everything else. The agonised thrashing of the beast sent chunks of burning wood spilling across the floor and walls and very quickly the mouldy structure became engulfed. Bollin Berthold, if that was who the beast had truly once been, burned even as the house he’d built did the same.

“Up, manling,” Gotrek said, hauling Felix to his feet. “Time to go.”

Felix scrambled to his feet, snatching up Karaghul as he went. Together, he and Gotrek fled the ruin, even as the light of the cleansing flame illuminated the

night. The creature's screams pursued them into the clean night air, fading only after a painful length of time.

Once they were outside, Gotrek watched Star Hall burn, a sour look on his face. "No doom and no gold," he grunted, his good eye reflecting the firelight.

"Well, the one can't be helped, true enough," Felix said. He reached down and plucked a thin curl of singed hair from Gotrek's axe. "But as to the other, who's to say?" He held up the hair so that Gotrek could see it. "When do you think the offices of Flywheel, Shyster and Flywheel open up?"

Gotrek laughed and they turned towards Wolfenburg, leaving Star Hall and its secrets to burn.



# THE SMALLEST DETAIL

A Ciaphas Cain short story

*John French*

Jurgen had never liked people very much, and their returned indifference was fine by him. That was the main reason he'd joined the Imperial Guard: they told you what to do and you got on and did it, without any of the social niceties of civilian life he found both tedious and baffling. Since becoming a commissar's personal aide, however, he'd been forced to interact with others in ways which went far beyond the simple exchange of orders and acknowledgement, although he remained obstinately wedded to the most straightforward approach in dealing with them.

"What do you want?" the sergeant in the blue and yellow uniform of the local militia asked, looking warily at him from behind the flakboard counter walling off most of the warehouse-sized room. "The Guard have their own stores."

Jurgen nodded, unable to argue with that, having already worked his way through the inventories of every Imperial Guard supply depot close to the commissar's quarters. He didn't suppose there would be much here worth his attention, but you never knew, and it was a point of personal pride to know where he could lay his hands on anything Commissar Cain might feel the lack of at a moment's notice.

"Dunno yet," he said, choosing just to answer the question, and ignore the statement of the obvious which had followed it. "What have you got? And I'm not here for the Guard." He readjusted the shoulder strap of his lasgun, so he could rummage in a pocket without the weapon slipping to the floor. After a

moment he extricated a grubby sheet of vellum, embellished with a seal, and leaned across the counter to bring it within the sergeant's field of vision. The man stepped back hastily, as people so often did when faced with clear evidence of Jurgen's borrowed authority from close at hand.

*“The bearer of this note, Gunner Feric Jurgen, is my personal aide, and is to be accorded all such assistance as he may require in the furtherance of his duties.”*

*Commissar Ciaphas Cain.”*

“You're with the Commissariat?” the sergeant asked, a nervous edge entering his voice, and Jurgen nodded. It was a bit more complicated than that, he was technically still on secondment from a Valhallan artillery regiment he never expected to see again, but he'd never bothered to find out precisely where he now fitted into the inconceivably complex structure of the Imperial military. No one else seemed to know either, and he found the ambiguity worked to his advantage more often than not.

“I work for Commissar Cain,” he said, keeping it simple, folding his well-worn credentials and returning them to the depths of his pockets as he spoke.

“So I see.” Sergeant Merser forced an ingratiating smile towards his face. Though he outranked this evil-smelling interloper, he'd long since learned that his status in the planetary militia didn't mean a thing to most Guardsmen; they regarded all locally raised units as little more than a civilian militia barely worth acknowledging, let alone according any sign of respect. Besides, this particular Guardsman appeared to be running an errand for a commissar, one of those mysterious and terrifying figures seldom encountered by lowly militia troopers, and a good thing too if even half the stories he'd heard about them were true. Not just any commissar either, but Cain, the Hero of Perlia, who even now was giving the rebel forces infesting the city the fight of their lives. However unwelcome his visitor may have been, it was probably best to appear cooperative, at least until it became clear what he wanted.

Jurgen leaned on the counter, and raised his gaze to the racks of neatly shelved foodstuffs in the cavernous space beyond. "Can't see a lot from out here," he said.

"No, of course not. Come on through." Reluctantly, the sergeant lifted a hinged flap in the boardsheet countertop, enabling him to tug open a sagging gate of the same material beneath it. Jurgen ambled through the gap, making a mental note of the man's name at the top of the duty roster tacked to the wall as he passed. Even the most trivial detail could turn out to be important, the commissar always said, and Jurgen had taken the precept to heart, squirreling away whatever nuggets of information he could find as assiduously as pieces of unattended food or kit. You never knew when something you stumbled across might come in handy.

"Got an inventory?" he asked, and Sergeant Merser nodded reluctantly.

"It's around here somewhere," he said, making a show of rummaging through the shelves under the counter. After a moment or two of Jurgen's patient scrutiny it became obvious there was no point in attempting to stall any further, and he hauled out a venerable-looking book, leather-bound and battered, trying to hide his annoyance. "I think you'll find everything's in order."

Jurgen said nothing as he took it, but his scepticism was palpable, hanging around him like the peculiar odour which had accompanied him into the stores. Merser found himself edging away from his unwelcome visitor, unsure of which he found the more unsettling.

"I'll get on, then," Jurgen said, dismissing the sergeant from his mind as thoroughly as if the militiaman had evaporated.

Merser watched, as the Guardsman worked his way methodically along the storage racks, periodically pausing while he leafed through the pages of the venerable tome. Now and again he glanced in Merser's direction, with an expression of patient inquiry.

"Some local thing?" he asked, as a sliver of dried meat disappeared through the hole in his beard, accompanied by the squelching sounds of mastication.

Merser nodded. "Sand eel. From the Parch. Only things that can live out in the open down there, so the locals raise them for food." Aware that he was beginning

to babble, he clamped his mouth firmly shut. The less he said, the less could find its way back to the commissar's ears.

"Had worse," Jurgen conceded, slipping a couple of packs of the leathery shreds into one of the pouches hanging from his torso armour. There had been none of that in the Guard stores, and Commissar Cain generally appreciated the chance to try new flavours. Come to that, they were both seasoned enough campaigners to find the idea of emergency rations which tasted of anything identifiable at all a pleasant novelty.

By the time Jurgen had finished working his way round the shelves, the pouch was considerably fuller than it had been, stuffed with other local viands which the offworld-supplied Guard stores had been without. There was little enough else to like about Helengon, a world which, in his opinion, was aptly named. He'd seen worse, of course, and at least the heretics they were fighting here were human enough instead of gleaming metal killers or scuttling tyranid horrors, but like most of the places he'd been since enlisting, the air was too warm and dry, and the ground too firm underfoot.

"Anything else I can help you with?" Sergeant Merser asked, and, reminded of his presence, Jurgen shook his head.

"Got what I came for," he said, passing the book back.

"I see." If the sergeant's voice trembled just a little, or his face seemed a trifle more ashen than it had been, Jurgen didn't notice: but then he seldom noticed things like that anyway.

One kind of subtle cue Jurgen was pretty much guaranteed to pick up on, though, was intimations of danger. By this point in his life he'd been on the receiving end of enough ambushes, berserker charges, and incoming fire to have taken it pretty much for granted that if something wasn't trying to kill him now it was only a matter of time before it did. Accordingly, it didn't take him long to realise he was being followed.

He glanced around, tugging gently on the sling of his lasgun, to bring it within easy reach of his hand without appearing to ready himself for combat. Sure enough, a faint scuffle echoed in the shadows behind him, as someone took a

half-step too many before realising their quarry had become stationary, and froze into immobility in their turn.

Jurgen felt his mouth twitch into an involuntary sneer. Typical militia sloppiness, he thought. Not a bad place for a bushwhacking though, he had to give them that. He'd cut down an alleyway between two of the big storage units, which, from the signage stencilled on the ends, he'd deduced contained small-arms and ammunition, neither of which made them worth a visit. Those he could obtain directly from the Guard if he wanted them. Besides, most of the las weapons around here were of local manufacture, adequate, but no match for the products of an Imperial forge world; he had no desire to find a power pack shorting out on him just when he needed it the most.

Which could be any time now. Seeing no point in letting his followers know he was on to them, and needing a plausible reason for his sudden stop, Jurgen unsealed his trousers, and relieved himself against the nearest wall in a leisurely fashion. While he did so, he let his gaze travel around his immediate surroundings, as though simply passing the time until nature had run its course.

There were two men trailing him, trying to make themselves invisible behind a stack of corroding metal drums. They'd almost succeeded, but not well enough to escape the notice of a combat veteran of Jurgen's calibre. A faint clank of metal against metal meant that at least one of them was probably armed.

In the other direction, a jumble of crates narrowed the gap between buildings; a soldier in blue and yellow was lounging casually against one, puffing on a lho stick, and apparently keeping an eye out for his immediate superior; a performance which would have been a little more convincing if his head had spent more time turned in the direction of the alley mouth than towards Jurgen.

Completing his task with a sigh of satisfaction, Jurgen rearranged his clothing and his dignity, and resumed his unhurried progress towards the smoking trooper. As he'd expected, the soft padding of stealthy footsteps followed him. Only one pair, though, by the sound of it. That meant the other man would be lining up a weapon of some kind. His opinion of the Helengon militia plummeted even further, if that were possible; the gunman would be as much of a danger to his confederates as to Jurgen. More of one, even: Jurgen had a

helmet and flak vest for protection, while the troopers stalking him were dressed simply in fatigues.

It never occurred to Jurgen to wonder why these men appeared to be after him; they just were. Reasons were irrelevant.

As he passed the smoker, the man attacked, lunging with the combat knife he hadn't quite managed to conceal behind his body while leaning against the crates. Either he knew what he was doing, aiming a single, precise blow at one of the vulnerable points in Jurgen's body armour, or he was an idiot, striking out blindly in the vague hope of finding an opening. Whichever it was, he was out of luck; Jurgen pulled the lasgun off his shoulder, ramming the barrel into the side of the man's arm, and deflecting his aim with a *snap* of shattering bone. The blade skittered off the tight carbifibre weave of his flak vest, and Jurgen pulled the trigger, putting a couple of rounds through the smoker's chest before he even had time to finish inhaling in preparation for an agonised scream. One down.

Jurgen turned, seeing the man behind him pick up the pace, hoping to close the distance between them before he could bring the lasgun round to bear. He was a slight fellow, whose uniform hung oddly on him, as though it was a little too large for its wearer; which might have struck Jurgen as odd, if he hadn't spent most of his life being issued with kit which didn't quite fit. Imperial Guard uniforms only came in two sizes, too large and too small, a problem most troopers solved by swapping what they'd been given with others in their unit; an option Jurgen had never felt inclined to pursue.

The running man was carrying a weapon in his hand, a crude stubber, which he brought up and fired as he came. Jurgen didn't flinch; the chances of hitting a man-sized target with a handgun while firing on the run were minimal, he knew, and his flak vest would probably hold even if the fellow got lucky.

Which he didn't. A burst of lasgun fire from a stationary shooter, on the other hand, was a lot more accurate, especially if the shooter in question had spent years bringing down moving targets in the middle of a firefight.

Stubber man folded and fell, his torso pitted with the ugly cauterised wounds characteristic of lasgun fire, his pistol skittering away as his flaccid hand smacked against the ground. He was probably dead before he hit the ground, but

Jurgen put an extra round through his head anyway. He'd seen enough people keep going on the battlefield by sheer willpower, long after they should have laid down and died, insulated by shock and a final adrenaline surge from the full effect of their mortal wounds.

As Jurgen ran forward, angling for a clear shot at the man behind the barrels, his boot kicked against the fallen gun, and he glanced down at it disdainfully. It was an old-fashioned slug thrower, crudely made, and clearly not standard issue, even to the militia of a backwater world like this one. No wonder its owner had missed him; it was beyond Jurgen why anybody would choose to use a weapon like that, instead of the lasgun he'd been issued with.

The man behind the barrels had no such compunction, it seemed, a hail of las-bolts chewing up the rockcrete footings of the storage blocks, gouging a line of splinters across the crates and the knifeman's corpse behind Jurgen as he returned fire on full auto. That would deplete the power pack uncomfortably fast, he knew, but there was no cover he could take, and throwing himself flat to minimise his target profile would simply allow the hidden gunman to pick off an immobile target at his leisure. Better to advance behind a blizzard of suppressive fire, hoping that would be enough to keep his quarry's head down, until he was able to get a clean shot at him.

The tactic worked better than Jurgen had dared to hope. The hail of las-bolts threw up sparks from the metal drums, punching dents and ripping holes in them with a clamour which would have struck terror into the heart of an ork. It certainly terrified the hidden gunman, who stopped firing to retreat behind the metal cylinders' meagre protection, huddling in their lee.

Not that it did him much good. Liquid began seeping from the punctured drums almost at once, the thick, acrid smell of promethium lacing the air around them. As Jurgen continued to advance, firing as he came, either a spark from an impact or the heat of a las-bolt itself ignited the escaping vapour.

With a muffled *whump*, the whole stack exploded, making Jurgen stagger with the sudden wave of heat. He backed up fast as a lake of burning fuel began sloshing in his direction, scrambling over the crates which were already beginning to blacken in the intense heat, just as the blazing tide began to lap

against them. From somewhere in the middle of the inferno, he thought he could hear a prolonged, agonised scream, which was mercifully cut short in a sudden secondary explosion.

Choking from the smoke, eyes streaming from the acrid fumes, Jurgen stumbled into the open, gasping for breath. A thick, dense coil of smoke followed him like a questing tentacle, but he ignored it, sweeping his immediate surroundings for any further signs of hostility. Attracted by the noise, a score or more of the local militia were running towards him, some carrying fire suppressors, others with weapons ready, no doubt under the impression that the rebels were attacking.

“You! Guardsman. Drop your weapon!” someone shouted, and Jurgen turned, prepared to fight his way out if he had to; but this time it wasn’t an option. Five troopers had their lasguns trained on him, and it was clear that these ones knew what they were doing. They were too widely dispersed to take down; if he tried, he’d only be able to get a couple of them before the others returned the favour. They were dressed differently from the others too, in body armour and full face helmets, unit insignia which meant nothing to him stencilled on their chestplates.

He knew what they were, anyway, he’d seen plenty like them in his time in the Guard. Provosts, or whatever they called themselves in the Helengon militia.

“Can’t do that,” he replied evenly. “It’s against regulations.” Imperial Guard troopers were responsible for their lasgun at all times, and although simply putting it down wouldn’t be a technical breach of standing orders, the next step would most likely be someone taking it out of his reach altogether. Even an ordinary Guardsman would find the threat of being disarmed well nigh intolerable, but for a commissar’s personal aide, it would be a mortal wound to his dignity. On the other hand, being shot five times at close range wouldn’t do a lot for it either. “But I’ll take out the power pack and stow it.”

“Good enough,” the squad leader agreed, after a moment’s hesitation. She raised her visor to look at him directly, then back to the column of smoke still billowing from between the warehouses. “Then you and I are going to have a little chat.”

“You’ve got no idea which unit they were from?” the provost sergeant, whose name had turned out to be Liana, asked, not for the first time.

Jurgen shook his head. “Never saw any patches,” he repeated, and shrugged. “Probably wouldn’t have recognised ’em if I had.”

“Probably not,” Liana agreed. “But they should have had something.” She gestured at the bustle of activity surrounding them. By now, over a hundred militia troopers had arrived to fight the fire, clear up its aftermath, and, in many cases, simply take advantage of the free entertainment. Every single one of them had insignia of some kind visible on their uniforms.

“These ones didn’t,” Jurgen insisted, mildly irked at having his word doubted. The commissar would have believed him at once. He glared balefully at the charred cadaver being carried past by a group of troopers who must have seriously annoyed a superior to be landed with that particular duty, and spat vehemently, to relieve his feelings. “Not that you could tell from that.”

“Special forces, maybe?” Liana speculated, at least willing to entertain the idea that he might not have been mistaken.

“They’d have had better equipment than a backstreet stubber,” Jurgen said, “and they’d have been better shots.”

“Good point,” the provost conceded, to Jurgen’s faint, and pleased, surprise. She turned to Sergeant Merser, who was hovering uneasily nearby, a data-slate in his hand. “Any luck tracing the lasgun one of them was armed with?”

Merser nodded, looking distinctly unhappy. “We managed to find a serial number. I would have thought the metal had melted, but the body...” he swallowed, turning another shade paler, “what was left of it, had fallen on top. Protected it a bit.”

“So who was it issued to?” Liana asked.

“That’s just it. It wasn’t.” Merser held the data-slate out, as though he expected it to snap at his fingers. “It’s listed as still in stores.”

“So it was pilfered,” Liana said, and Merser nodded unhappily.

“Looks that way,” he replied.

“Then we need to know who by,” Liana persisted.

“If we find out what’s missing, we should be able to deduce who’s

responsible,” Merser said. “I’ll start going through the inventories.”

“We could start with yours,” Liana suggested, fixing the heavysset sergeant with a calculating look.

Merser flushed indignantly. “My records are fine,” he snapped. “What’s in the files is on the shelves.” He looked at Jurgen for confirmation. “He’ll tell you.”

Jurgen nodded. “Everything matched,” he agreed. He jerked a thumb in the direction of the latest corpse to be recovered, being dragged along in a tarpaulin by sweating, swearing troopers, leaving a faint trail of ash and flakes of charred meat in their wake. “And I’d have a roll call if I were you. Whoever’s missing’s probably them.”

“Good idea,” Liana concurred. “Then we can start chasing down their contacts. Wouldn’t be the first time a quartermaster started diverting stuff to the black market.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” Jurgen shouldered his lasgun, and turned away. “I’m done here.”

“Maybe you should stay,” Merser said hastily.

Jurgen turned back, surprised. “What for?” he asked.

“Yes, what for?” Liana turned a questioning gaze on the portly sergeant. “It’s not as though Gunner Jurgen’s a suspect.”

“Of course not,” Merser said hastily. “But he must have assisted the commissar in his investigations. Maybe he can spot something we might overlook.”

“Maybe he can,” Liana agreed, after a moment’s consideration. She turned to Jurgen. “Do you think you might?”

“Dunno.” Jurgen shrugged. “Worth a try, I suppose, so long as it don’t take too long.” In truth, his involvement in investigations generally went no further than processing the paperwork and shooting the occasional traitor who resented his unmasking, but an appeal had been made to his sense of duty, and he felt honour-bound to respond. It was what Commissar Cain would wish, he had no doubt.

“Right then,” Liana said, looking from one man to another, and wondering if she’d just made the decision to consign her career to oblivion, “might as well get started, I suppose.”

“What do you mean there’s no one missing?” Liana asked, handing the data-slate she’d just been shown back to the provost who’d brought it in to her office; a small cubicle on the western side of the militia barracks, which would have seemed crowded with only one occupant. Currently it had three, Jurgen observing from a corner near the window, which Liana seemed to like jammed open as wide as it would go. He had no objection to this, as it gave him a good view of the militia compound, and the city beyond, from which the occasional crackle of small-arms fire could be heard. The rebels were making a concerted attempt to hold on to the southern quarter, with the Imperial Guard equally determined to dislodge them, and show the militia how it ought to be done by breaking the year-long stalemate in a matter of days.

“I mean everyone’s accounted for, ma’am,” the provost said, and withdrew, a little hastily it seemed to Jurgen.

“Someone’s playing games,” Jurgen said. “Answering twice to cover for them.” A common enough dodge in the Guard, when troopers had overstayed a pass, or been too hungover to report for duty.

“Unless the men who attacked you weren’t soldiers at all,” Liana said thoughtfully.

“They were in uniform,” Jurgen objected.

“I went to a party dressed as an ork once,” Liana retorted. “That didn’t make me a greenskin.”

Jurgen nodded, the way he’d seen the commissar do while considering an unexpected suggestion, and tried to see what she was driving at. “You mean they were pretending to be militia troopers,” he said at last, reasonably certain he got it.

“That’s right,” Liana said, looking at him a little oddly. “Using stolen uniforms to get onto the base.”

Which sounded reasonable to Jurgen. If they could steal guns, they could steal uniforms just as easily. “If it was me,” he added, “I’d have set charges in the armoury as soon as I’d finished helping myself.”

“First thing we checked, believe me,” Liana assured him. “Nothing there.”

“Hm.” Mindful that he was a guest in her office, Jurgen spat out of the

window, rather than letting the gob of saliva land where it would. “Even the rebels here aren’t up to much.”

If Liana realised that was a thinly-veiled criticism of the local forces, she was tactful enough to let it go. Instead, she looked thoughtful. “You’re right,” she said. “If rebels could sneak in and steal weapons, they’d definitely have sabotaged what was left so we couldn’t use them.”

Jurgen’s brow furrowed. “Who does that leave?” he asked.

“Gangers, I suppose,” Liana said. “Plenty of those around, carving up territories for themselves while the fighting keeps us too busy to rein them in.” She looked up, as Merser entered the office. “Any luck?”

“I can tell you the records are a mess,” Merser said. “Overstocks, items missing, half the inventories read like fiction ’zines.”

“No change there, then,” Jurgen said, shrugging. “Yours are the only ones I ever saw that tallied exactly.”

Merser flushed. “I like to pay attention to the details.”

“I noticed,” Jurgen said. He glanced at his chronograph, and stood. “I need to get back. Anything I can help with, contact the commissar’s office.”

“Of course.” Liana stood too, began to hold out a hand, then withdrew it hastily. “We’ll keep you informed.”

“Of course we will,” Merser added, standing aside to make room at the door. “Where’s your vehicle?”

“Came on foot,” Jurgen lied, and left them to it.

In fact he’d commandeered a motorcycle, which someone had been careless enough to leave unattended in the regimental motor pool, the better to navigate his way around the warren of streets surrounding the Imperial Guard deployment zones. He’d have preferred a Salamander, but he’d have had to divert around so much rubble if he’d chosen one that it would have all but doubled the distance he would have to travel.

After retrieving his mechanical steed, he coasted into the lee of a battle-damaged Chimera, which a party of engineers were energetically reconsecrating, and waited a few moments.

As he'd expected, the distinctive figure of Sergeant Merser emerged from the building almost at once, at the closest to a trot he could manage. The heavysset non-com swung himself into the cab of a parked truck, against which a soldier with no visible unit patch had been lounging, and gunned the engine, while his companion scrambled up beside him. No sooner were they both aboard than Merser slammed the lorry into gear, roaring out of the yard as though half the daemons of the warp were after him.

It was almost too easy. After a quick conversation over his vox-bead, Jurgen opened the bike's throttle, and set out in pursuit. He hung well back, keeping the luminator off, despite the rapidly gathering night, well able to judge the presence of any major obstacles in the carriageway by the intermittent flaring of his quarry's brake lights. The risk of being spotted was minimal, he knew. Merser's attention would be entirely on the road ahead, looking for a solitary pedestrian.

Before long, the lorry coasted to a halt at an intersection, where Merser paused, glancing up and down the converging carriageways. Nothing moved in either direction, except a Chimera patrolling the deserted streets. With nightfall came the curfew, and nothing would be moving now except military traffic. Nothing legal, anyway, but there was nothing to worry about. No one would look twice at a militia truck.

"Where is he?" his companion demanded, nursing a laspistol the armourer still hadn't noticed was missing. "You said he was on foot."

"He can't have got far," Merser said, still hovering indecisively. If he picked the wrong direction, the Guardsman would be safely back in the Imperial Guard compound, reporting to the commissar before they could double back and correct their mistake. Before he could make up his mind which road to take, a motorcycle roared up out of the darkness behind them, and parked, its engine revving, next to the cab.

Merser glanced down, and found himself staring along the length of a lasgun barrel, with a well-remembered face at the opposite end.

"I thought you'd leg it," Jurgen remarked, conversationally. "But I wanted to be sure. The commissar always likes to be sure, before he accuses anyone."

“Accuses them of what?” Merser blustered, playing for time.

“Trying to kill me, for starters,” Jurgen said, as though that had been a perfectly reasonable thing to attempt. “You sent those frakkers after me, didn’t you?”

By way of an answer, Merser floored the accelerator. Jurgen debated pursuit for a fraction of a second, then squeezed the trigger of his lasgun instead. There was no way the cumbersome truck would be able to outrun the motorcycle anyway, so he might as well bring things to an end now. The hail of las-bolts shredded the lorry’s tyres, and he watched it veer off course and collide with a half-collapsed storefront with detached interest.

As it came to rest, amid a small landslide of displaced brick, the passenger door popped open, and the ersatz soldier bailed out, firing wildly as he came. He was no better a shot than his deceased companions, and Jurgen dropped him easily, without even bothering to dismount. As he swung his leg over the saddle, and began to walk towards the crippled lorry, the Chimera ground to a halt a few metres away.

“Took your time,” he said, as the hatch clanged open.

“What can I say. Traffic,” Liana said, which didn’t make much sense to Jurgen. So far as he could see, the streets were still deserted. She flung the truck’s tailgate open, and a cascade of ration packs spilled out onto the cracked pavement. “Looks like you were right.”

“Course I was,” Jurgen said. “Inventories never match up to what’s actually in stores. The only reason Merser’s would is if he was covering something.”

Liana nodded. “The way things are now, food’s like currency on the streets. Better. Him and his ganger friends must have been making a fortune.” She paused to glare at the sergeant, who was being prised, none too gently, out of the battered cab by a couple of her provosts. “He must have realised you’d spotted something was wrong, and sent his accomplices to keep you quiet.”

“That’s how I see it,” Jurgen agreed. “I still don’t get why he wanted to keep me around, though.”

“So we could try again, you idiot!” Merser called, as he was half-dragged, half-carried towards the Chimera. “If you told the commissar, we’d be finished!”

“Told the commissar?” Jurgen repeated, in tones of honest astonishment. “Why would I bother him with a bit of pilfering? Everyone’s at it.”

Merser’s response was vocal, prolonged, and unflatteringly inaccurate about Jurgen’s genealogy.

Jurgen listened impassively for a moment, before quietening him down with a well-aimed punch to the face. “Ladies present,” he admonished, although he suspected Liana had already heard a good deal of profanity in her line of work. Besides, he resented people trying to kill him.

“We might need a statement,” Liana said, after a moment, during which the power of speech seemed to have deserted her for some reason.

Jurgen shrugged, his attention already on the crippled truck. “You know where to find me,” he said.

After all, he still had a bit of space left in his utility pouches, and the motorbike he’d borrowed had commodious panniers. And you never knew when a few extra ration bars might come in handy.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**James Swallow** is a New York Times bestselling author whose stories include the Horus Heresy novels *Nemesis*, *Fear to Tread* and *The Flight of the Eisenstein*, along with *Faith & Fire*, the Blood Angels books *Deus Encarmine*, *Deus Sanguinius*, *Red Fury* and *Black Tide*. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*, along with the audio dramas *Heart of Rage*, *Oath of Moment* and *Legion of One*.

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Hailing from Scotland, **Graham McNeill** worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full time writer. Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

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