

WARHAMMER
40,000



REDEMPTION THROUGH SACRIFICE

JUSTIN WOOLLEY

The cover art depicts a scene from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. In the foreground, a Space Marine is shown in profile, looking forward with a determined expression. He has a skull tattoo on his forehead with the alphanumeric code 'SVP-278V3'. He is holding a large, futuristic assault rifle. In the background, another Space Marine is visible, also in profile, holding a smaller weapon. The setting appears to be a trench or a battlefield, with a dark, rocky ground and a hazy, purple-tinged sky. The overall tone is gritty and somber.

WARHAMMER
40,000



**REDEMPTION THROUGH
SACRIFICE**

JUSTIN WOOLLEY

CONTENTS

Cover

Redemption Through Sacrifice – Justin Woolley

About the Author

An Extract from ‘Shield of the Emperor’

A Black Library Publication

REDEMPTION THROUGH SACRIFICE

by Justin Woolley

REDEMPTION THROUGH SACRIFICE. These enormous words had long ago been carved into the grey metal of the drop-ship wall. Positioned above the main ramp and covering the full width of the cavernous hold, they were impossible to miss. Eventually, when the ramp opened like a gaping maw and vomited them out onto whatever battlefield awaited, every man of the Second Rapture Penal Legion, the Meat Dogs, would pass beneath.

Looking up, Marcus van Veenan idly wondered how many of the thousands of souls he shared this space with could even read. The men of the Meat Dogs were not, on the whole, the sharpest bayonets in the armoury. Perhaps some of them had been high-ranking officials or wealthy merchants, but when you were forced into the grey jumpsuit of a penal legionnaire with an explosive collar locked around your neck, your past no longer mattered. Illiterate hive world ganger or planetary governor, they were all together now, one seething mass of humanity, ten thousand men in the hold of a Devourer drop-ship – a space designed for half that.

Van Veenan heard shouting behind him, but before he could turn, someone slammed into his back. Unable to stop, he crashed into the body in front of him. The head attached to that body turned – a face like a cratered moon snarled at him, revealing a mouth full of yellowing teeth.

‘Frag off,’ he said, shoving van Veenan back.

Van Veenan turned to see an equally vicious prisoner. This one, his face pointed like a scowling rat, immediately threw a punch. Reflexively van Veenan dropped into a crouch, the fist flying over his head. It connected with Crater-face behind him. Van Veenan deftly rolled away, standing and

moving off through the crowd as Rat-man and Crater-face pummelled each other with their meaty fists. Commissars shouted for them to break it up and eventually provosts clad in riot-armour shoved their way into the mass of convicts and beat them into submission with heavy truncheons.

A crackling vox-amplified voice boomed out over the human cattle. *'Legionnaires of the Second Rapture Penal Legion, this is Colonel Jairus. Rejoice, for your absolution in the eyes of the God-Emperor is at hand. We have arrived at Vandicius, a world in the grip of heresy, a world worthy of your lives. Remember, it is through your death as ultimate service to Him that the God-Emperor forgives. Redemption through sacrifice. Prepare for drop-ship separation.'*

Officers and commissars made their way to fold-down seats around the outside of the hold, strapping themselves securely in place. The only harnesses the penal legionnaires would have would be each other and, if everything went to the warp, the hope that another grey jumpsuit would break your fall.

After a minute the drop-ship jolted as the primary clamps securing it to the transport barge released.

'Planetary descent in five seconds.'

Van Veenan had been dropped into bad situations before. He'd faced tides of xenos with poor leadership and pointless orders, but at least then he'd known what was coming.

'Three. Two. One. Release.'

Van Veenan felt the nausea-inducing acceleration as the drop-ship fell into the atmosphere of Vandicius, plummeting in a barely controlled plunge towards whatever waited for them on the surface below.

'Move! Form up! By the Emperor, move!' Lieutenant Kirsk, van Veenan's platoon leader, was yelling, his face turning crimson as the convicts under his command passed beneath the encouraging words of the legion's motto.

Kirsk ushered the prisoners into a loose formation, each man shuffling along behind the one in front. This was nothing like the tight drilling van Veenan had been used to in the Imperial Guard. They didn't even march in step. Savages.

It was dusk and the sky was turning lavender. Other drop-ships glowed yellow-orange as they burned through the atmosphere above. Despite the late hour the air here, in what must have been a tropical region of the

planet, was warm and heavy with humidity.

Van Veenan's drop-ship had landed at a requisitioned space port in the upper levels of the city, sandwiched between the arched windows of Ecclesiarchy buildings on one side and the square windows of hab-blocks on the other. The men of the Meat Dogs were spurred on by the shouts of officers and commissars in a long procession that snaked down a ramp descending from the space port to the streets of the lower city.

Some way from the bottom the legion stopped, the men moving forward one excruciatingly slow step at a time. It took van Veenan what seemed like hours to make it down the last five hundred yards. None of the officers seemed concerned and none of the commissars shot anybody so van Veenan assumed they had anticipated the delay. This, at least, seemed typical of his time in the Imperial Guard. It was the time-honoured military tradition of *hurry up and wait*.

Rounding the final bend van Veenan saw the holdup. Lining the street ahead were hundreds of green supply crates bearing the familiar symbol of the Imperial aquila. Moving among the crates were soldiers, both men and women, dressed in faded brown uniforms – not Guard but what must have been the Vandicius local auxiliary force. Going through the motions as quickly as they could, the soldiers handed weapons to the passing penal legionnaires. When van Veenan reached the front the man beside him was handed an M35 short-pattern lasgun – a weapon as common to Imperial soldiers as socks and boots. Another trooper approached, this one no more than a boy – his uniform bore insignia identifying him as Vandicius auxiliary guard. He passed van Veenan a single lasgun power pack.

Van Veenan took the power pack and looked at the young soldier. 'What am I supposed to do with this? Throw it at the enemy?'

'He's your partner,' the boy said nervously, indicating the legionnaire beside van Veenan, who was currently holding the lasgun by the barrel. 'We don't have enough lasguns for all of you.'

'Right,' van Veenan said, 'but I actually know how to use that, whereas it looks like he thinks it's for clubbing food.'

'Prisoner!' Lieutenant Kirsk roared from where he watched the convicts with barely disguised disgust. 'Move on!'

Van Veenan almost argued but when he saw Commissar Lex pull his bolt pistol from its holster he reconsidered.

'So, I guess we're partners then,' van Veenan said to the lasgun-wielding

brute. ‘What’s your name?’

Van Veean’s partner-in-arms, who stood at least a foot taller than him, grunted.

‘Grunt then, is it?’ van Veean said. ‘Well, I’ve got a proposition for you, Grunt. I’m pretty good with a lasgun. I was thinking we could swap. You take the ammo and I’ll keep us alive.’

‘Frag off,’ Grunt said.

‘Right,’ van Veean replied. ‘That’s a common sentiment around here, isn’t it?’

Night was kept at bay in the city by lumen towers spaced evenly along the main thoroughfares and by the little light that leaked out from the towering buildings, but for a city this size the streets were eerily quiet. No vehicles. No people. Nothing.

Under orders from their officers, platoons of penal legionnaires began to move off in different directions. A large force, including van Veean’s platoon, marched up a wide avenue beneath overpasses and railcar tracks until they reached a section of the road bordered on either side by the immense stone walls of manufactoria. It was here, in this bottleneck, that a roadblock had been erected.

A Chimera transport that looked to be older than the Emperor Himself was parked perpendicular to the road. In front of it several hundred of the brown-uniformed Vandician auxiliary guard barricaded the street behind a low wall of sandbags and razor wire, flanked at either end by two heavy bolter emplacements. The remaining fifty yards of the broad avenue was covered with a dozen or more spiked vehicle traps hastily constructed from rusting steel beams.

The soldiers of the auxiliary guard looked haggard, their pale faces drawn long, but when they saw the legionnaires approaching their faces brightened – the cannon fodder had arrived.

As the legionnaires came to a disorganised halt a woman approached the officers. Her blonde hair was cut short and she wore a black leather storm coat over her tall and thin frame. A chain around her neck displayed an Inquisitorial rosette.

‘I am Inquisitor Mariette Nikova of the Emperor’s Holy Inquisition,’ she said to Kirsk and the other platoon leaders beside him. ‘Have your men take up positions to hold this road. I’ll address them momentarily.’

Kirsk turned and barked orders to his platoon, who moved to stand behind

the line of sandbags and relieve the auxiliary guard. Van Veenan found himself in the third rank, the lasgun-wielding Grunt beside him. One of the auxiliary soldiers, his arm wrapped in a field bandage, looked at van Veenan as he passed. ‘Emperor protect you when those maniacs come back.’

‘Penal legionnaires.’ The woman who’d identified herself as Inquisitor Nikova stood on a stack of empty weapons crates, her long coat flapping rhythmically in the warm breeze. ‘Welcome to Madarn, the capital of Vandicius, a world in the grips of a heresy that could spread across the Imperium. We are here to purge it, to burn its taint away in the name of the God-Emperor. You, as penal legionnaires, have been given the privilege of finding absolution in His eyes and it is here that you will do so. You are to contain the heretics in this sector of the city. None of the wretched creatures are to make it past you. Not one. You will lay down the ultimate sacrifice to the Emperor to see this done. Do you understand?’

The penal legionnaires responded in the affirmative but van Veenan wondered if they understood the power this woman represented. He had dealt with the Inquisition once before and had vowed to never be within a frag’s throw of them again. They were the embodiment of the callousness of the Imperium of Man, the same callousness that saw him wearing a grey jumpsuit solely for doing his duty.

‘You heard the inquisitor,’ came the roar of Commissar Lex from behind them. ‘Ready yourselves to hold the enemy at bay. If they kill your partner, pick up their weapon or their ammunition and continue the fight. You will die by the hand of the enemy, or you will die by mine.’

The sound of lasguns being loaded and primed filled the air around him and, as van Veenan had done ever since the ritual had been drilled into him as a young Guardsman, he bowed his head and prayed. ‘O Holy Emperor, bestow on me the strength to destroy Your enemies. Bathe me in Your divine light that it might shield me from the dark.’

Grunt looked at him. ‘You think that’ll help?’

Van Veenan shrugged. ‘I don’t know but I’ve been in more battles than most. I’ve prayed before each one and I’m not dead yet. Why risk it?’

Grunt turned away but van Veenan heard him muttering something to the Emperor.

The first sign of the enemy was the screaming. It echoed through the eerily quiet streets, bouncing off the faces of the densely packed towers

around them. These were not guttural war cries designed to inspire and intimidate. These were the shrieks of carrion birds, throat-tearing screams that seemed some combination of agony and ecstasy. The uneasy legionnaires fidgeted and exchanged nervous glances.

Then, from the gloom of the streets ahead, men and women burst into the illumination of the avenue at a full sprint. They wore what appeared to be garments of dark crimson but as they drew closer van Veenan saw that all of them were soaked in blood. Some of them wore the brown of the Vandician auxiliary force, others civilian clothing, but all shone wet with thick, dripping blood. All of their exposed skin, their faces, even their hair, had been similarly bathed, and as they ran the red streaked down their mad, frenzied faces. They screamed until they were hoarse, their eyes wide and white. They were insane and they were coming.

‘Shit on the Golden Throne,’ Grunt whispered from beside van Veenan.

‘Steady!’ Commissar Lex called. ‘Hold your fire!’

The charging heretics wielded everything from broken bottles to bolt pistols. They ran with such a thirst for combat that they barely slowed when they reached the vehicle traps. They clambered over them, around them, through them. Some barely deviated in their insanity, impaling themselves on jagged steel. Smashed bottles and other projectiles pelted down on the legionnaires but it was the first crack of a lasgun that ignited the battle.

The shot came from a heretic near the front. A woman shuddering with painful euphoria fired her lasgun from the hip. The beam struck a legionnaire, incinerating his chest cavity. Even before his lifeless body hit the ground the prisoners had opened fire in return.

‘I said hold!’ Commissar Lex roared, but it was futile. The legionnaires in the front rank fired wildly at the approaching heretics. The two heavy bolters, still manned by unlucky auxiliary soldiers, erupted in staccato bursts, raining a shower of expended shells, every fifth bolt a tracer round that lit up a phosphorous white trail over the street.

Van Veenan watched the flashes from the legionnaires’ lasguns, the instantaneous beam between barrel and target showing just how inaccurate they were. Some shots struck cultists, but most just left black scorches on the road and surrounding buildings.

In front of him van Veenan saw one legionnaire’s head snap back as a round tore into his face, his skull exploding in gore. Hundreds of blood-

soaked lunatics continued to pour from the streets at the end of the avenue. He could see that the haphazard fire of the penal legionnaires was barely slowing them.

‘Front rank, get down!’ van Veenan shouted. ‘Kneel!’

They didn’t respond. Van Veenan pushed forward until he was right behind the front rank. He yelled into the ear of a lasgun-wielding legionnaire while pushing down on his shoulder. ‘Kneel!’ When the legionnaire complied van Veenan grabbed Grunt and positioned him to fire over the head of the kneeling prisoner.

Van Veenan moved up and down the line, flinching as a spray of blood from a nearby injury splattered across his cheek. He positioned more of the legionnaires in the same way, pushing those with lasguns forward and those with ammunition back, the front rank kneeling and the second and third ranks firing over their heads. Soon the formation naturally caught on. As legionnaires fell, others stepped in to take their place. In moments van Veenan had more than doubled the amount of fire flashing towards the rampaging enemy.

Las-beams scorched into the charging cultists, gouging huge cauterised wounds through their torsos and turning their skulls into smoking wrecks. Still the heretics came, attacking with a fervour van Veenan had only ever seen in greenskins. Even as those in front were killed the cultists continued in a shrieking charge, stepping on their fallen comrades in their haste. They came at the legionnaires as if some terrible master drove them on.

When the prisoner in front of van Veenan caught a lasgun shot in the shoulder and dropped to the ground, he saw someone perched on the raised portico of a tower at the end of the avenue. The figure was swathed in black, and in contrast to the madness of the blood-soaked mass below he simply stood, surveying the fray.

‘Target sighted.’

Van Veenan turned and saw Inquisitor Nikova. She was making her way through the grey ranks, staring at the figure at the end of the avenue. She spoke into her head-mounted vox-unit. ‘Located in containment sector gamma. I’m going to move in for confirmation.’ She paused. ‘Because,’ she continued, ‘thorn on rose requires confirmation and I will not let him slip our net again.’

When van Veenan looked back the shadowy figure had dropped from the

portico and vanished into the gloom of the alleyways.

Inquisitor Nikova turned, her eyes searching for a moment before falling on Kirsk. ‘Lieutenant, you and your platoon are to come with me. We push forward and follow that man.’

Kirsk’s eyes widened. ‘Inquisitor, that’s suicide. We can’t go out there.’

‘Suicide?’ the inquisitor said. ‘That’s why you’re here, lieutenant.’

‘I...’ Lieutenant Kirsk looked at the inquisitor, steeling himself. ‘That’s why *they’re* here, inquisitor,’ he said, indicating the grey-clad prisoners. ‘I’m not a convict, I’m an officer posted to look after this scum.’

Nikova stared hard. ‘Are you refusing an order from the Holy Inquisition?’

Kirsk swallowed. ‘No, inquisitor. Never. I will happily order the prisoners to go out there, I just don’t believe I should be sent with them.’

In a motion so swift Kirsk never had a chance to react, Inquisitor Nikova pulled a bolt pistol from the holster around her right thigh, raised it level with his forehead and pulled the trigger. Kirsk’s head popped like a lanced pustule.

Nikova casually wiped away a splatter of gore that had landed on her coat. She turned to van Veenan. ‘You, prisoner – I saw you arranging these men. You have leadership experience?’

‘Yes, inquisitor, I’m...’ Van Veenan paused. ‘I *was* an Imperial Guard sergeant. The Talissian 51st.’

‘Talissia. That world produces disciplined Guardsmen.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Which platoon are you with?’

‘Eighth, ma’am.’

‘All right, Eighth Platoon,’ Nikova called, ‘this is your new commanding officer. Consider it a battlefield promotion.’ She looked at van Veenan. ‘We push forward. It is imperative I find that man. Your platoon will get me down this avenue.’

Most Imperial Guard platoons were between fifty and a hundred Guardsmen strong, with penal legion platoons traditionally numbering much higher at around twice that. But even with that many men Lieutenant Kirsk had been right; pushing out there was suicide. Still, van Veenan thought as he looked at the body of Lieutenant Kirsk on the road, his face cratered into a gaping hole, the inquisitor wasn’t exactly asking.

‘Eighth Platoon,’ van Veenan yelled, ‘firing phalanx formation

transitioning to five deep hollow square. Forward.'

Most of the faces around van Veenan looked blank. He looked back through the ranks and made eye contact with Commissar Lex who, after a moment, slowly nodded.

'You heard him,' the commissar roared. 'Move forward!' He raised his bolt pistol and fired a warning shot into the air. The legionnaires from Eighth Platoon began to climb over the sandbags and negotiate their way through razor wire. The remaining platoons spread to fill the gaps.

Alone among the carnage, Eighth Platoon advanced. Those with lasguns continued to fire as they moved but they barely made it five yards before the first of the heretics collided into them and the firefight devolved into the madness of melee.

The cultists swung their lasguns and pistols like blunt weapons, spraying beams and bullets in all directions, cutting down their own allies as often as the legionnaires. Others swung knives and shattered bottles. Those that were unarmed bit and clawed with faces and hands caked with blood.

'Second and third ranks, fire over!' van Veenan yelled. 'Close up the sides. Face outwards and fight!'

As the legionnaires found themselves in hand-to-hand combat, van Veenan had expected them to collapse. But to his surprise, many were suddenly in their element. Van Veenan saw the rat-faced man who'd tried to punch him on the drop-ship pushing his way forward for his chance to attack.

'Keep moving!' Inquisitor Nikova shouted.

They were making progress. There was a significant trail of grey corpses behind them but they were over halfway up the avenue now. Grunt still moved alongside van Veenan but they were on the flank and he was still firing his lasgun over the heads of those in front.

'Grunt,' van Veenan said, 'face outwards, pay attention to the perimeter.'

He'd barely finished speaking when a crazed heretic, much smaller than Grunt but with a huge serrated knife, launched herself off one of the vehicle traps. The cultist, a woman whose hair was matted in a nest of bloodied curls and whose eyes were alight with crazed joy, sunk her blade deep into Grunt's side. Grunt dropped to his knees as the woman pulled the blade free, tearing his flesh.

'I warned you!' van Veenan said as he collected Grunt's dropped lasgun. He fired into the cultist at point-blank range, the las-beam eviscerating her

lower torso.

‘Stay tight,’ van Veenan called to those legionnaires left. ‘Fight while moving.’

As expected, this had been a slaughter. Eighth Platoon was down to around thirty men now. Nikova was still alive inside the shrinking escort of legionnaires though, and they were less than ten yards from the end of the avenue. They’d taken heavy losses but these prisoners had done their duty and perhaps, Emperor willing, they might find redemption after all.

Knowing they were close to their goal, the legionnaires moved faster. Unfortunately, as they quickened their pace those still locked in combat were left behind.

‘Stay together!’ van Veenan called, but it was no use; their formation was failing.

Cultists forced their way in and within seconds the protective square of troops collapsed. Van Veenan fired in quick succession at three heretics that moved to attack him, blowing smoking holes in their chests. He turned to see Inquisitor Nikova pull a second bolt pistol from her left thigh holster. She held one in either hand, firing as she spun slowly on the spot, acquiring targets and eliminating them with deadly precision. As the fight became increasingly chaotic many of the legionnaires began to run, but Nikova showed not an ounce of fear. The sound of her bolt pistols was like a litany to the God-Emperor.

Van Veenan watched Nikova in awe as the cultists swarmed towards her. In a single sweeping movement she dropped one of her bolt pistols and let her long, black coat slip off. Beneath she wore an armoured bodyglove with a sheath strapped to her back. She reached over her shoulder and pulled free a short-bladed power sword that burst into light. Nikova slashed and lunged with perfect form to dismember and behead heretic after heretic. But eventually one slipped through. The screaming man landed on Nikova’s back and threw her forward, her head smashing on the road as she fell.

Van Veenan, the spell cast by the inquisitor’s martial prowess broken, lifted his lasgun and shot the cultist just as he prepared to drive a knife into Nikova’s back. Van Veenan flicked the lasgun to fully automatic and opened up, sweeping beams of las-fire across the heretics around Nikova, cutting them down while she regained her feet. He could feel the weapon getting warm in his hands. A lasgun on automatic fire would eventually

overheat, but more importantly, full-auto quickly drained the power pack.

When the spray of las-beams ceased, van Veenan pulled the empty power pack from the lasgun, but before he could reach for his spare he was lunged at by a blade-wielding cultist. In a desperate spur-of-the-moment decision, he threw the empty power pack at the cultist. It struck him between the eyes but didn't cause the slightest injury.

'I knew that wouldn't work,' van Veenan muttered.

The tossed power pack had given him a second's respite though. He dropped the lasgun and reached down to collect Nikova's discarded bolt pistol. He brought it up and shot the cultist through the forehead, surprised by the immense recoil of the weapon. He moved then, grabbing at Nikova's arm. 'Come on.'

Nikova looked at the weapon in his hand. It was inlaid with gold in swirling patterns of leaves around a fleur-de-lys. 'That's my bolt pistol,' she said.

'Really?' van Veenan said as he shot an approaching cultist twice through the chest. 'That's your current concern?'

'You may borrow it,' Nikova answered as if they weren't currently surrounded by wild enemies soaked head to toe in human blood.

They moved, slicing and firing their way through the cultists, heading for the end of the avenue.

Together they ran into the alleyway down which the mysterious figure had retreated. Van Veenan shot the cultists coming from ahead of them while Nikova's bolt pistol roared in answer as she despatched those that tried to follow.

'Keep moving,' Nikova said as they turned down another alley between the colossal towers of the city. Van Veenan glanced back to see her stop. Above her a suspended walkway linked two hab-blocks. Nikova grabbed the sole grenade clipped to her belt and launched it upwards before immediately taking off at a sprint. The grenade hit the underside of the walkway and exploded, causing debris to rain down.

With the collapsing walkway creating an obstacle behind them, van Veenan and Nikova sprinted away, winding their way through streets and lanes to lose their pursuers. Eventually van Veenan felt Nikova grab his arm and pull him sideways. She yanked him through a small door which she banged shut behind them, sealing them in a dark corridor. They held perfectly still, listening to the foul screams of distant cultists over the

sound of their own rapid breathing.

For the next ten minutes, they sat against the cool, damp walls on opposite sides of the stone corridor. It seemed like hours in van Veenan's heightened state. He had no doubt that the cultists were still hunting them but it seemed as though they'd lost them – at least for now.

Eventually Nikova pressed her finger to her ear, activating her vox-communicator. 'Gorton, this is Nikova, do you copy? Inquisitor Gorton?' Nikova removed the vox-unit from her head, looking it over before tossing it aside. 'Dead,' she said. 'It must have been damaged in the fighting.'

They sat in silence a moment longer before Nikova spoke again. 'Thank you for your assistance.'

'You should thank the other prisoners too,' van Veenan said. 'The men who were massacred out there.'

'They have their thanks. Their souls have received absolution for their crimes. You should feel sorrow that you too did not meet your death.'

'Far be it from me to question the Inquisition,' van Veenan said, 'but that was a disaster. What in the Emperor's name did we achieve other than getting a lot of prisoners killed and us ending up trapped in a pit of blood-soaked fragging nutcases?'

Even in the gloom van Veenan could see Nikova's eyes burning brightly as she examined him. 'Do not forget your place, prisoner. Hold your tongue or I will have it.'

A silence, tenser than before, fell over them. Eventually van Veenan heard Nikova sigh. 'The lives of those men were not thrown away on a whim. That man you saw, he is the reason all of you are here. You have been on this planet for barely hours. I have hunted him across Imperial space for three decades. Finally, I have him located and surrounded. He will not escape me.'

'Tens of thousands killed for this one man. Who is he?'

'He is someone for whom tens of thousands is a small price.'

Van Veenan listened to the sounds of battle still floating through the city outside. 'I'm not a traitor,' he said.

Nikova looked at him. 'What then? A deserter?'

'My family have been Talissian Guardsmen for sixteen generations. I would never desert. All I did was my duty.'

'Then what was your crime?'

'I did only what I had to do to save my men.'

‘You disobeyed orders?’

‘No, Inquisitor Nikova, I ignored idiots to save my squad and win a battle.’

Nikova rose to her feet and looked down at him. ‘Sometimes the Emperor sees fit to change our path, prisoner. I was once a Sister of the Adepta Sororitas but He saw fit to guide me to the Holy Inquisition. Perhaps the Emperor has brought you to this moment. We have waited long enough here. I must go deeper into the sector and find the target. You have proven yourself capable enough, you will come with me.’ She looked at the bolt pistol on the floor beside van Veenan, the bolt pistol she had permitted him to borrow amidst the turmoil on the avenue. ‘You may continue the privilege of wielding my bolt pistol. I trust it will prove satisfactory in covering my back.’ She tossed him a spare magazine.

A Sister of Battle, van Veenan thought – that explained her ability in combat. It also explained her fervour. He stood, collected the bolt pistol from the floor, reloaded it with the new magazine and, without any option to the contrary, followed her outside.

The two of them moved carefully through the streets, Nikova taking the lead now and van Veenan following. They kept low, stopping at each corner for Nikova to peer ahead as van Veenan’s eyes swept the wide angles over the streets and buildings behind them.

They made their way up to the higher levels of the city, following streets and pathways that angled up towards the wealthier sectors, the citizens there elevated in both class and altitude from the unskilled and unwashed masses of the lower city.

As they moved onto a pedestrian overpass Nikova dropped to a crouch to take cover below the waist-high fencing along either side. She signalled for van Veenan to advance slowly and silently indicated for him to look down.

Below them, a short distance away, was another barricade. It was constructed from the same waist-high sandbags and curls of razor wire as the one on the avenue, but this one was burned and shredded with the scars of battle. There were piles of supply crates bearing the Imperial aquila, some unopened. There were bodies too, brown-uniformed auxiliary troops hacked into pieces and the bodies of cultists, their clothes stiff with dried blood, torsos blown apart by lasgun fire. The air around the corpses was thick with large purple insects that seemed to be depositing eggs into their

open wounds.

Moving around the barricade, rummaging through crates and picking at the corpses like scavenging vultures, were half a dozen of the blood-soaked cultists.

‘This is where the auxiliary soldiers attempted to hold last night,’ Nikova whispered. ‘They fought valiantly. Blessed be they in the Emperor’s light.’

After a cursory moment of silence, Nikova moved ahead onto an elevated street that curved around yet another immense tower, keeping low.

After they’d crossed the overpass and were out of earshot of the cultists, van Veenan spoke. ‘All right, so who is this person we’re looking for?’

Nikova turned to look at van Veenan intently, evaluating him. ‘The target’s name is Cal Corditus. He is a psyker and worshipper of dark powers. That is all you need to know.’

‘And how do we find him?’

‘Servo-skulls fitted with pict-transmitters have been scouring the city for several days monitoring the movements of cultists during their attacks. They come from all over this sector but pattern analysis centres there, on that mausoleum.’ She pointed ahead. On a yet higher level of the city was a stout building, the wide facade lined with the statues of men and women of importance from Vandicius’ past – servants of the Imperium that were laid to rest inside.

‘And when we reach it?’

‘We observe. All we need is a positive identification of the target and confirmation of his intentions.’

‘His intentions?’

Nikova was about to answer when there was a shattering sound above them. Stained glass dropped with a tinkle to the elevated street. Then bodies followed, dropping from the tower beside them and landing with sickening impacts, enough to shatter femurs and burst internal organs. One figure landed on Nikova, knocking her to the ground. Another just missed van Veenan, but even as the cultist lay broken on the stones it fired a laspistol. Van Veenan felt the searing burn on his upper left arm and the blast spun him off his feet.

The screams of cultists intensified. More of them were coming. Van Veenan looked up to see half a dozen bloodied heretics clubbing at Nikova with truncheons. They were wearing carapace armour, crimson running off it in streaks, local peacekeepers that had turned to the worship of Chaos.

+Bring her alive.+

The voice slammed into van Veenan's mind like a psychic thunderclap. Grimacing, he saw, behind the peacekeepers who had gathered around Nikova, the tall figure from the first battle. He wore a long black jacket tattered into strips around the hem. Beneath the jacket he was bare-chested, his skin a mass of scar tissue cut into unnatural symbols. This must be Cal Corditus.

The traitorous peacekeepers grabbed Nikova, whose head hung limply, and hauled her up. Van Veenan scrambled to his feet, raised the bolt pistol and fired. His first shot went wide, striking the tower with a puff of dust. He fired again, this shot finding a target in the back of one of the peacekeepers. The traitor's carapace armour cracked and punched inwards, and he was thrown forward onto his face, unmoving.

As van Veenan readied for another shot the psyker's attention fell on him. Corditus flicked his hand, little more than swatting away an inconsequential insect, and van Veenan was thrown into the air, landing with a lung-jolting slam twenty yards away.

Reeling, he pulled himself together and stood. He raised the bolt pistol again and began running back towards the peacekeepers who, following Corditus' lead, were dragging Nikova away.

Two of the peacekeepers turned to face him, and he howled as he started firing. Struggling against the pain in his arm and with his mind still reeling from the psychic intrusion, van Veenan could barely control the bucking recoil of the bolt pistol and his shots went astray. He struck one peacekeeper in the arm and the other in the stomach. Both of them lurched but did not drop.

Van Veenan roared again. As he reached the pair, he swung his weapon to club one peacekeeper across his blood-drenched cheek. He felt the crack of bone under his strike and he turned quickly to fire at the second, but wasn't fast enough. The second heretic smashed their balled-up fist hard into van Veenan's cheekbone.

While van Veenan staggered, the first peacekeeper cracked him on the wrist with his truncheon, causing Nikova's bolt pistol to drop to the rockcrete. The other hit van Veenan again, this time in the lower leg, and he dropped.

As they moved in to finish him off, van Veenan looked up to see Nikova being hauled away. She was looking back at him. He knew he'd failed her.

A truncheon smashed down onto his chest and, as another blow came down to cave in his skull, he followed instinct. He rolled to the side, dodging the blow, and reached out with searching fingers. He managed to claw the bolt pistol into his hand. He turned onto his back and fired two shots wildly up at the peacekeepers. Then, with desperation overriding sanity and with only a vague sense of the height, he rolled off the edge of the elevated street.

Mariette Nikova did not fear death. She had been ready to die for the Emperor since she was a child, walking the hallowed halls of the Convent Sanctorum. She would have but one regret – that she had finally cornered Cal Corditus and could not complete her task.

The cultists threw her forward and she landed heavily on the floor of the mausoleum chapel. She pushed herself up and spat out the stringy metallic blood that had filled her mouth. She wondered what fate had befallen the prisoner. She had seen him drop into the lower city. He was dead or he had abandoned her. Either should have been unsurprising for a penal legionnaire, and yet she could not help but feel a pang of regret. She held hope for that one. He still had her bolt pistol too.

Corditus stood near the altar of the chapel, looking down at Nikova. His shredded overcoat was gone, leaving his chest bare, the forbidden and heretical symbols cut into his skin glowing with the foul light of the warp.

The chapel around them had been desecrated, violated in profane and blasphemous ways. The stained-glass windows that might once have depicted images of the Emperor were shattered, and the statues of great Imperial saints that lined the walls had been beheaded, their visages smashed on the ground. The walls, floor and ceiling were covered with heretical symbols of the Ruinous Powers. All of this culminated in a pool of human blood in the centre of the space that bubbled and churned as if boiling. Surrounding it stood a ring of Corditus' cultists, their hooded heads bowed.

'Inquisitor Nikova.' Corditus' voice was husky. 'It's been so long since our paths have crossed. Not for your lack of trying, of course. I cannot fault your diligence.'

Nikova continued to rise, struggling to her feet. Her teeth were smashed. Her tongue was split. She found it difficult to speak but she would still deliver the words she had been saving for thirty years. 'You betrayed me,

Corditus – you betrayed all of us. You are the most heinous of traitors to the Holy Inquisition, one who has fallen to the forces we are sworn to fight. I declare thee Extremis Diabolus.’

Corditus’ laugh reverberated around the chapel. ‘Your words, your labels, they are nothing. I have seen the true powers of this universe and uncovered the lies spouted to us by the false Emperor and His toy Imperium.’

‘You have consorted with Ruinous Powers and fallen to Chaos. Do you refute the charges laid against you?’

‘I do not refute your charges, Mariette. I embrace them. I want you to understand. Your beloved Emperor is no god. He is a husk, a rotten carcass. Once you know the truth then you can embrace it as I have.’

‘Then the charges stand. As an inquisitor of the Ordo Hereticus I claim thy life.’

‘Do you know the power it takes to bring forth the denizens of the warp, inquisitor?’ Corditus said, ignoring Nikova’s words. ‘The sheer force of will required to tear open the immaterium?’

‘You plan to summon daemons?’

Corditus laughed. ‘It is not what I *plan* to do,’ he said. ‘It is what I *am* doing.’

The ring of cultists around the blood pool began chanting, long, low words in some unknown tongue. Louder and louder they recited the rhythmic patterns of words until they were almost shouting. A body emerged from the pool. It padded across the floor on four legs, blood dripping away, a twisted vision of a canine. It was skinless, the pink muscle and sinew expanding and contracting in full view as it walked. It stopped beside Corditus, its forelegs splayed wide, its head low as it pulled back its lips and snarled. Nikova began whispering prayers to the Emperor.

Corditus ignored her. ‘Ordinarily a psyker is needed to provide the servants of the true gods with a pathway to our reality. But even ordinary mortal minds, if gathered in enough number, can eventually break through. You have seen my followers. The Ruinous Powers have seen fit to allow me to bind mortal minds to my will and I shall use this power to bring forth their hosts. Imagine, once I have freed myself from your petty entrapment here and gathered world after world to my side, all those minds, all those men and women spilling blood to bathe in, chanting, intoning, focusing their minds. They shall tear open the fabric of reality

and the children of Chaos shall flood the Imperium.’

Nikova’s regret turned to bile in her stomach. Her worst fears had been confirmed. Corditus had succeeded in what she had sought to prevent these last thirty years, and if what he said was true, it would only get worse.

‘I had hoped to save you all those years ago, Corditus,’ she said. ‘When I saw the change in you, I should have saved you then. I should have shown you the Emperor’s mercy and killed you. Now hurry up and end this. I will die at your hand but I will have what you shall never feel again, for the Emperor protects me.’ She bowed her head, ready for the end.

‘Oh, Nikova,’ Corditus said, his voice almost pitying, ‘I’m not going to kill you. You are too valuable. You are an inquisitor, once of the Adepta Sororitas no less, and your mind is strong – trained, protected with mental engrams against the encroachment of a will like mine. What better test of my talents than to break you? Your mind will serve me better than ten thousand of those already in my grasp. I knew you could not resist coming after me yourself, overcommitting to my capture, and now puritanical Inquisitor Mariette Nikova will find herself an agent of the true gods. You are going to stand beside me as I break through your pitiful forces and spread across the Imperium.’

Nikova did not look up. She told herself it was to rob him of the pleasure. In truth, she was terrified: not of Cal Corditus, but of the fate he was promising – a fate in service to the great enemy. A fate worse than a thousand deaths.

Van Veenan opened his eyes. Surprisingly, he was alive. Unsurprisingly, he was wracked with pain. His cheek had swollen so much that he couldn’t open his right eye and his head thumped rhythmically in time with his pulse.

‘Ow,’ he moaned.

He was staring up at the dark sky. Fat drops of tropical rain had begun to fall through the humid night and were landing on his face. He sucked a breath in through clenched teeth and forced himself to sit. Whatever had broken his fall squelched beneath him. The smell would have been enough even if he hadn’t looked. He’d dropped onto a pile of garbage, a collection of trash left to fester and rot in a lower-city alley. Worse still was the open sewer pipe nearby from which brown fluid had seeped out to saturate the rubbish. Van Veenan slid off the pile. That oozing mess had likely saved

his life, but it was best not to think about the details.

Inquisitor Nikova was gone. Last van Veenan had seen she was being dragged away by those traitorous peacekeepers. This was not the first time van Veenan had seen once loyal servants of the Imperium turn to Chaos, but it always left him uneasy. The Imperium was cruel, uncaring, flawed, and yet despite having faced hordes of greenskins, cowardly aeldari and a planetwide infestation of horrific tyranids, van Veenan thought the Imperium never looked as vulnerable as when it turned against itself.

As he reached the end of the alleyway he could see the mausoleum Nikova had pointed out, the building she believed housed the enemy. He knew that in the opposite direction lay the penal legion and safer sectors of the city. Could he turn his back on the inquisitor after all this? She was just one more Imperial tyrant after all. How many had died in service to those just like her? Then again, maybe she was right and enough *was* at stake to justify it. Regardless of all that, he couldn't leave anyone to face whatever torments might be dished out by that dark psyker.

'Emperor's teeth,' he said trying to think of how he was supposed to rescue this fragging crazy woman.

First and foremost, he'd need more weapons, and luckily he had an idea where he might find some. He moved on through the damp streets, eventually pausing at a corner. Just up ahead was the destroyed barricade they'd spotted earlier.

Four cultists still hovered around the charred and torn remains of the barrier, picking through supplies. One injured penal legionnaire against four maniacal cultists weren't the best odds but at least he had the element of surprise.

Quietly, he released the bolt pistol magazine, slid it out and checked how many rounds were left – two in the mag and one in the chamber. He pushed the magazine back in place, letting it slowly click over the locking mechanism.

Leaning back against the wall van Veenan readied himself. He took a breath and then swung out. Nikova's bolt pistol barked three times. The first two shots were instant kills; one opened a heretic's skull like a piece of dropped fruit and the other tore through the neck of the next cultist in a visceral spray. The final shot struck the third cultist in the upper arm and tore it off in a shower of exploding gore.

The final cultist let out the now familiar scream as he charged. He

wielded a long serrated knife, holding it outstretched as he ran.

Van Veenan moved into a defensive stance and, as the cultist swung the knife in a wide arc, he blocked the blow forearm to forearm with his left arm, ignoring the howling objection of pain, and smashed the bolt pistol across the cultist's face with his right hand.

He followed his strike by kicking forward with his good leg and planting the sole of his heavy boot in the man's stomach. The cultist fell onto his back and van Veenan pounced on his prey. Landing astride the cultist's chest he repeatedly smashed the metal of the bolt pistol down on the man's face until his blood had well and truly mixed with that he'd covered himself in.

Sucking in heaving breaths van Veenan climbed off the corpse and rose shakily to his feet. He moved to the plastek supply boxes and used his good arm to shove the empty crates aside. Flicking the latches on one of the unopened crates and lifting the lid revealed several stub-pistols. He reached in and took one of these plus an extra magazine. Without ammunition Nikova's bolt pistol was useless but, thinking of the lashing he would no doubt receive if he lost it, he slid it securely into his belt. Opening the next crate revealed rows of krak grenades and several rolled-up bandoliers.

He had an idea.

Van Veenan looked at the dead cultists on the ground, their clothes stained red-brown. He considered for a moment and came to the unfortunate conclusion that this was the only idea he had.

So, in the humid rain, van Veenan stripped off his grey jumpsuit. He couldn't remove the explosive collar so he chose a cultist who wore a hooded cloak. He slipped the heretic's clothes on, trying to ignore the stench of blood and grime.

Once he'd prepared his weapons and hidden them beneath the robe he now wore, van Veenan retrieved the combat knife from the ground nearby. He knelt beside the now naked cultist, took a steadying breath and stabbed the blade into the side of the dead man's stomach. He worked the blade up to the navel. Dark blood, no longer pumped by a beating heart, oozed out onto the stones. Van Veenan cupped his hand beneath the burgundy rivulet and, holding down the urge to vomit, splashed it onto his face. He then rubbed it all over his exposed skin and freshened up the blood on his clothing.

He once again made for the higher levels of the city, this time heading directly for the mausoleum. He didn't hesitate as he passed cultists, hoping they would consider him one of their own. To his immense relief, it seemed as though they did. These cultists, as they stood around, did not seem as deranged and maniacal as they did in battle. Instead they weaved, swaying from side to side, entranced, as if moving to some music in their minds. As van Veenan climbed the mausoleum steps to the intricately carved double doors, none of the cultists attempted to intercept him. He slipped inside.

That was a bad idea. No, it was probably the worst idea he'd ever had in a lifetime of questionable decisions.

Inside the mausoleum was a long columned hall. At the far end was what must have been the chapel, and then in several symmetrical locations on either side of the hall there were stairs, lit by burning promethium torches, descending into the belly of the mausoleum. Van Veenan picked the first set of stairs and headed into the depths.

His search did not take long. On the first level of tombs he found the group of peacekeepers from the street. They stood in a circle like the bars of a human cage. At their centre Nikova was sitting with her knees tucked up close to her chest, her hands clasped over her ears, rocking back and forth amid some sort of psychic bombardment.

When he was twenty yards away, van Veenan felt a psychic bombardment of his own, the words of Corditus broadcasting to all minds in the area.

+He is here.+

The peacekeepers turned in unison.

Well, he'd wanted to cause a distraction, and this seemed like a good time. He reached into his cloak to grip the hidden stub-pistol and, as swiftly as he could, he lifted, sighted and pulled the trigger. The closest peacekeeper wore no helmet. His skull opened as the round entered through his right eye.

The rest immediately came for him. Van Veenan turned and dashed back onto the stairs. Once out of view he stopped and let his bloody cloak fall open. Beneath he wore two bandoliers crossed over his chest, each one holding five krak grenades. He grabbed a grenade, pulled the pin, and dropped it on the stairs before continuing up.

Just as the peacekeepers reached the stairs the krak grenade exploded. Van Veenan felt the shock wave as he emerged at the top of the stairs,

smoke and stone fragments spraying out after him.

Cultists began flooding through the mausoleum's doors. Van Veenan ran deeper into the building. Ahead of him the door to the chapel burst open. He glimpsed shapes moving inside but ignored them and took a sharp turn down the next set of stairs. In the brief time he'd had to survey the building from outside he'd guessed the mausoleum was like an iceberg, the top visible above the street while the sheer bulk of the interred dead were buried deep below. All these stairs should lead to the first level of tombs, with more stairs leading deeper from there.

At the bottom of the stairs van Veenan saw that he'd been right. Inquisitor Nikova was only a short distance away. She was still on her knees, not actively rocking like a distressed child but still clearly dazed. There was only one peacekeeper with her now. The others lay sprawled near the first set of stairs, scattered by the krak blast.

Without stopping van Veenan lifted his stubber and fired at the solitary heretic. The shots struck him in the back, arm, shoulder and chest as he turned. The peacekeeper dropped to the ground, dead.

Van Veenan knew that every cultist for miles would be descending on the mausoleum now. He worked quickly, the adrenaline pushing him through his pain. He grabbed Nikova by the back of her collar and pulled her with him. She turned to look at him, groggy.

'Prisoner?' she slurred.

'Come on, inquisitor,' he said, 'a little help would be nice.'

Nikova, pulling at least some of her senses together, got to her feet and moved with him even as she grunted with the effort of fighting off whatever psychic attack she was withstanding. Van Veenan ducked into a tomb alcove, pulling Nikova in with him.

'They'll—' Nikova started, struggling to put words together, 'have us cornered.'

'Not if I can help it,' van Veenan said. He unclipped both bandoliers of krak grenades and let them drop to the ground. He took one grenade, leaned out from the alcove and sent it skittering along the floor towards the cultists pouring down the stairs and coming towards them.

Even as the blast echoed through the tombs van Veenan was already working on their escape. He pulled all five krak grenades off his second bandolier and stuck them to the end wall of the alcove.

'What are you doing?' Nikova asked.

‘Well, I’m either making us a cunning escape route or I’m about to bring the whole mausoleum down on top of us.’

Without hesitation van Veenan pulled the pin from each of the grenades. He and Nikova took cover behind the tomb. The five krak grenades erupted in a series of concussive blasts that seemed to shake the very planet. A cloud of explosive gases, dust and stone chips filled the alcove. The tomb shielded van Veenan and Nikova as flying debris struck cultists just rounding the corner.

The pair scrambled out from cover and ran for the hole in the wall. Putting complete faith in his estimated location, van Veenan, Nikova alongside him, hurdled over the jagged rubble of the wall and through a dense cloud of smoke. As they fell, he had the terrible thought that he had got the layout of the building wrong and they were about to plummet to their deaths. To his relief, their feet landed heavily on the street outside.

‘Come, we need to make it to Imperial lines,’ Nikova said.

They sprinted away from the mausoleum with las-beams and bullets smacking into the walls around them as they ran. Just as they reached an alleyway, Nikova let out an involuntary grunt of pain. Van Veenan turned to see her stumble. She managed the last few steps into cover before her legs gave out.

Van Veenan immediately saw that a round had hit the side of her torso just above her hip, an area not covered by her bodyglove’s armour plates. It had torn her open. He moved to help, but she waved him off.

‘No. I’m not going to make it.’ She reached out and grabbed the front of van Veenan’s blood-slick cloak. ‘Make it back to the barricade. Find Inquisitor Gorton... tell him these exact words. Code obsidian. Thorn on rose confirmed. Execute rain of Titan.’ She coughed and a spurt of blood sprayed from her lips. ‘Can you remember that?’

‘I don’t understand,’ van Veenan said.

‘Doesn’t matter.’ Nikova struggled on. ‘Can you remember it?’

He nodded.

‘Repeat it.’

‘Code obsidian. Thorn on rose confirmed. Execute rain of Titan.’

‘Good, go then,’ Nikova said. ‘Emperor protect you, pris—’ The inquisitor stopped herself. ‘Emperor protect you, Sergeant van Veenan.’

‘Emperor protect you,’ van Veenan said, and as he heard the approaching screams of cultists, he ran.

Van Veenan sprinted through the dark city, abandoning all but the barest thoughts of stealth. The cult was preparing another push, looking for a weakness in the Imperial lines where they could burst out to haemorrhage across this world.

When he reached the avenue he was pleased to see the penal legionnaires had held the barricade, though their numbers looked horrifically depleted.

As he ran onto the avenue, cracks of lasgun fire forced him to drop to the ground and crawl behind one of the vehicle traps for cover. Suddenly he was thankful the Meat Dogs were such fragging awful shots. He realised he probably should have changed out of the clothes of a cultist; after everything he'd been through, being shot by his own side would be infuriating.

'Hold your fire! I'm one of you!' he shouted. 'Marcus van Veenan, Eighth Platoon!' He was desperately aware that the cultists behind him would be close. 'Inquisitor Nikova sent me with a message for Inquisitor Gorton.' When there was no reply van Veenan simply shouted the nonsense words the dying inquisitor had given him. 'Code obsidian. Thorn on rose confirmed. Execute rain of Titan.'

After a moment a man called back. 'This is Inquisitor Gorton. Come forward.'

Hesitantly, van Veenan stood. This time no wild shooting pinned him back down but as he ran down the avenue lasgun and heavy bolter fire soon broke out from the barricade again. He stumbled, ready to hit the road before he realised they weren't firing at him. The screaming cultists had emerged behind him. Thousands charged at the barricade again.

When van Veenan reached the barricade he dived over into the ranks of grey-clad legionnaires. A man dressed in black came forward to meet him. He was bordered on either side by acolytes. One was a heavysset man wearing a cloak with a fur collar despite the tropical heat, and the other was a young woman who watched van Veenan with bionic eyes. Each had weapons trained on him.

'Hold those heretics at bay!' the man shouted to the penal legionnaires before turning to van Veenan. 'I am Inquisitor Harth Gorton. What proof do you have that you represent Inquisitor Nikova?'

Van Veenan slowly reached for the bolt pistol tucked into his belt. He plucked it free and tossed it on the ground at the feet of Inquisitor Gorton. The inquisitor looked at the weapon with its unique decorative inlay and,

somewhat reluctantly, beckoned for van Veenan to join him in cover behind the Chimera.

‘Inquisitor Nikova told you to give me this message?’

‘Yes, inquisitor. I was with her in the city, searching for your target, Corditus. She was captured and I rescued her.’

Inquisitor Gorton stared at him. ‘You rescued her from Corditus alone?’

‘Yes, inquisitor.’

‘Where is she, then?’

‘Dead, shot during our escape. Her dying command was to deliver that message.’

‘And did you see Corditus personally?’

‘Only from a distance.’

‘Anything else you think it pertinent to report?’ Gorton asked. Van Veenan could tell the inquisitor was hunting for something, but he wasn’t sure what.

‘Just the same heretics with a penchant for covering themselves in blood.’

‘Like you are,’ Gorton said, one eyebrow cocked.

‘A disguise,’ van Veenan said, ‘for infiltrating the enemy.’

‘Very well. You have the thanks of the Inquisition.’ Inquisitor Gorton paused. He turned to the large man beside him. ‘Mercure, escort this legionnaire back to the drop-ship on which he arrived.’

‘That’s it?’ van Veenan asked. ‘After all that I haven’t earned my freedom from the penal legion? Just a thanks and get back on the drop-ship, better luck at redemption through sacrifice next time?’

‘You will go with my acolyte, prisoner.’

Van Veenan felt the hand of the massive Inquisitorial acolyte land on his shoulder.

‘Emperor’s teeth,’ van Veenan said as he was turned away from the barricade and led back through the streets towards the space port and the continuing clutches of Imperial injustice.

Inquisitor Gorton watched Mercure lead the legionnaire away. He could not blame the man for his attitude. He was only a convict after all. He did not understand the events around him. He did not appreciate the gift he had been given. Gorton keyed his vox headset.

‘This is Gorton. Code obsidian. Thorn on rose confirmed. Execute rain of

Titan. I say again, execute rain of Titan.’

‘Acknowledged.’

Gorton waited, watching the penal legionnaires fight back this latest attack from the crazed blood cult. He prayed to the Emperor that they would not fail now. Thirty seconds later a flaming object lit up the grey clouds in an orange glow as it descended towards the city. With a roar that drowned out the screams of the cultists the plummeting object resolved into a single black drop pod. It fired its retro thrusters and slammed into the centre of the avenue, crushing one of the steel vehicle traps as if it had been made of twigs and driving a crater into the road at least three feet deep. The force of the impact threw dozens of cultists into the air.

Jets of white gas hissed from each of the five sides of the hexagonal craft as it opened. The actuated doors released slowly at first and then fell the rest of the way, landing with a crunch on the street. From inside the drop pod five figures emerged. Each stood around eight feet tall and was completely clad in a suit of shining grey power armour. As they stepped from the pod their footsteps seemed to reverberate through the whole city. Every one of the penal legionnaires had ceased firing and stared in awe at these angels who had dropped from the sky.

Space Marines.

Despite having called them in, Inquisitor Gorton swallowed the nervous lump in his throat. These were not brothers of just any Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. The immense silver power armour of these warriors was covered with not only purity seals, but also ancient scrolls and blessed parchment. These were Grey Knights, the hammer of the Emperor against the forces of daemonkind. Gorton’s gaze met the glowing blue eye-lenses of one of the Grey Knights who turned to look in his direction. With the Space Marine’s face completely obscured by his helmet it was impossible to know how to interpret that look, but it chilled Gorton nonetheless. It felt, if not quite inhuman, then at least uncaring.

In near perfect unison the power swords in the hands of the Grey Knights burst to brilliant-blue life and, moving with a speed that seemed impossible in such bulky armour, the Space Marines slashed their way through the cultists, dispatching all in their path with the casual ease that a farmer might display while scything crops. Leaving not a single cultist alive the Space Marines moved on, disappearing into the city as they moved off to find and eliminate the heretical traitor Cal Corditus and

whatever foul things he had brought through from the warp.

There was complete silence as rain fell on the men of the Second Rapture Penal Legion. Gorton let his lips billow out in relief. With Inquisitor Nikova gone he supposed the next responsibility fell to him.

‘Legionnaires,’ he said, ‘you have fought with valour and have held this line as long as we have asked. You have no doubt achieved your redemption in the eyes of the God-Emperor. Place your weapons down and form up over here.’

The grey-clad men, having left their lasguns behind as ordered, moved out from behind the barricade. There was a muted excitement among them. They were cannon fodder and yet they had survived. Their formation seemed just that little more professional.

Twenty-four Inquisitorial acolytes moved to stand beside Gorton. Each of them held a lasgun.

The eyes of the legionnaires widened but before they could flee Gorton spoke.

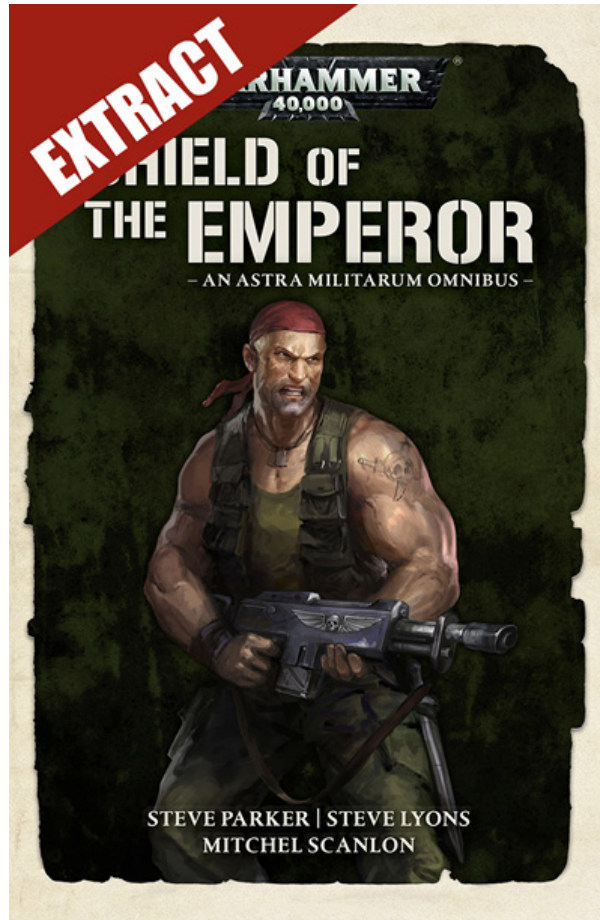
‘Fire.’

The lasguns cracked with fully automatic fire that raked through the legionnaires. After a moment Gorton raised his hand for the acolytes to cease. He waited for any signs of life but there were none. They had kept the cultists back but in turn had laid eyes on the Grey Knights and protocol was clear. All the legionnaires were dead. The only exception being that one legionnaire he’d sent away. The one who had assisted Nikova and delivered her confirmation message. What was his name? Van Veechen? No matter. Alone in the drop-ship’s hold that legionnaire would live, at least until his sacrifice was asked for again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin Woolley hails from the bottom of the world in Tasmania, Australia and is an author of science fiction and fantasy. In his other life Justin has been an engineer, a teacher, and at one stage even a magician. A long-time fan of Warhammer 40,000, he looks forward to contributing to the grim darkness of the 41st millennium.

An extract from *Shield of the Emperor*.



The sun was setting, its slow descent reddening the vast reaches of the westward sky and bathing the endless wheat fields below it in shades of gold and amber as they stirred gently in the evening breeze. In his seventeen years of life to date, Arvin Larn had seen perhaps a thousand such sunsets, there was something about the beauty of this one that gave him pause. Enraptured, his chores for the moment forgotten, for the first time since his childhood he simply stood and watched the setting of the sun. Stood there, with the world still and peaceful all about him, gazing toward the gathering fall of night as he felt a nameless emotion rising deep within his heart.

There will be other sunsets, he thought to himself. Other suns, though none of them will mean as much to me as this one does, here and now. Nothing could mean as much as this moment does, standing here among these wheat fields, watching the last sunset I will ever see at home.

Home. The mere thought of the word was enough to make him turn his head and look over his shoulder across the swaying rows of ripening grain toward the small collection of farm buildings on the other side of the field behind him. He saw the old barn with its sloping, wood-shingled roof. He saw the round tower of the grain silo; the ginny-hen coops he had helped build with his father; the small stock pen where they kept the draft horses and a herd of half-a-dozen alpacas.

Most of all, he saw the farmhouse where he had been born and raised. Two-storeyed, with a low wooden porch out front and the shutters on the windows left open to let in the last of the light. Given the unchanging routines of his family's existence, Larn did not need to see inside to know what was happening within. His mother would be in the kitchen cooking the evening meal, his sisters helping her set the table, his father in the

cellar workshop with his tools. Then, just as they did every night, once their chores were done the family would sit down at the table together and eat. Tomorrow night they would do the same again, the pattern of their lives repeating endlessly day after day, varying only with the changing of the seasons.

It was a pattern that had endured here for as long as anyone could remember. A pattern that would continue so long as there was anyone left to farm these lands. Though, come tomorrow night at least, there would be one small difference.

Come tomorrow, he would no longer be here to see it.

Sighing, Larn returned to his work, turning once more to the task of trying to repair the ancient rust-pitted irrigation pump in front of him. Before the sunset had distracted him he had removed the outer access panel to reveal the inner workings of the pump's motor. Now, in the fading light of twilight, he removed the motor's burnt-out starter and replaced it with a new one, mindful to say a prayer to the machine spirit inside it as he tightened and re-checked the connections.

Taking a spouted canister from beside the foot of the pump he dribbled a few drops of unguent from it into the workings. Then, satisfied everything was in order, he reached out for the large lever at the side and worked it slowly up and down a dozen times to prime the pump before pressing the ignition stud to start the motor. Abruptly, the pump shuddered into noisy life, the motor whining as it strained to pull water up from aquifers lying deep below the ground. For a moment, Larn congratulated himself on a job well done. Until, just as the first few muddy drops of water emerged from the mouth of the pump to stain the dry earth of the irrigation trench before it, the motor coughed and died.

Disappointed, Larn pressed the ignition stud again. This time though, the motor stayed sullenly silent. Leaning forward, he carefully inspected the parts of the mechanism once more – checking the connections for corrosion, making sure the moving parts were well-lubricated and free from grit, searching for broken wires or worn components – all the things the mechanic-acolyte in Ferrusville had warned them about the last time the pump was serviced. Frustratingly, Larn could find nothing wrong. As far as he could see, the pump should be working.

Finally, reluctantly forced to concede defeat, Larn lifted the discarded access panel and began to screw it into place once more. He had so badly

wanted to be able to fix the pump; with harvest time still three weeks away, it was important the farm's irrigation system should be in good working order. Granted, it had been a good season so far and the wheat was growing well but the life of a farmer was always enslaved to the weather. Without the irrigation system to fall back upon, a couple of dry weeks now could mean the difference between feast and famine for an entire year.

But in the end he knew that was only part of it. Standing there, looking down at the pump after he had screwed the panel back in place, Larn realised his reasons for wanting to see it repaired went far beyond such practical considerations. Like it or not, tomorrow he would be leaving the farm forever and saying farewell to the only land and life he had ever known, never to return. He understood now that he had felt the need to perform some last act of service to those he would be leaving behind. He had wanted to complete some final labour on their behalf. An act of penance almost, to give closure to his grief.

This morning, when his father had asked him to look at the pump and see if he could fix it, it had seemed the perfect opportunity to achieve that aim. Now though, the recalcitrant machine spirits inside the pump and his own lack of knowledge had conspired against him. No matter how hard he tried, the pump was broken beyond his powers to repair it and his last act of penance would go unfulfilled.

Larn collected his tools together and made ready to turn for home, only to pause again as he noticed a change in the sunset. Ahead, the sun had already half disappeared below the horizon, while the sky around it had turned a deeper and more angry red. What gave him pause was not the sun or the sky, but the fields below them. Where once they had been bathed in spectacular shades of gold and amber, now the colour of the fields had become more uniform, changing to a dark and unsettling shade of brownish red, like the colour of blood. At the same time the evening breeze had risen almost imperceptibly, catching the rows of wheat in the fields and causing them to flow and shift before Larn's eyes as though the fields themselves had become some vast and restless sea. *It could almost be a sea of blood*, he said to himself, the very thought of it causing him to shiver a little.

A sea of blood.

And, try as hard as he might, he could read no good omen in that sign.

By the time Larn had put his tools away, the sun had all but set. Leaving the barn behind, he walked towards the farmhouse, the yellow glow of lamplight barely visible ahead of him through the slats of the wooden shutters now closed over the farmhouse windows. Stepping onto the porch Larn lifted the latch to the front door and walked inside, carefully removing his boots at the threshold so as not to track mud from the fields into the hallway. Then, leaving the boots just inside the doorway, he walked down the hall towards the kitchen, unconsciously making the sign of the aquila with his fingers as he passed the open door of the sitting room with its devotional picture of the Emperor hung over the fireplace.

Reaching the kitchen he found it deserted, the smell of woodsmoke and the delicious aromas of all his favourite foods rising from the pans simmering on the stove. Roasted xorncob, boiled derna beans, alpaca stew and taysenberry pie; together, the dishes of the last meal he would ever eat at home. Abruptly it occurred to him, in whatever years of his life might yet come, those self-same aromas would forever now be linked with a feeling of desperate sadness.

Ahead, the kitchen table was already laid out with plates and cutlery ready for the meal. As he stepped past the table toward the sink, he remembered returning from the fields two nights earlier to find his parents sitting in the kitchen waiting for him, the black-edged parchment of the induction notice lying mutely on the table between them. From the first it had been obvious they had both been crying, their eyes red and raw from grief. He had not needed to ask them the reason for their tears. Their expressions, and the Imperial eagle embossed on the surface of the parchment, had said it all.

Now, as he moved past the table Larn spotted the same parchment lying folded in half on top of one of the kitchen cupboards. Diverted from his original intentions, he walked towards it. Then, picking up the parchment and unfolding it, he found himself once more reading the words written there below the official masthead.

Citizens of Jumael IV, the parchment read. Rejoice! In accordance with Imperial Law and the powers of his Office, your Governor has decreed two new regiments of the Imperial Guard are to be raised from among his people. Furthermore, he has ordered those conscripted to these new regiments are to be assembled with all due haste, so that they may begin their training without delay and take their place among the most Holy and

Righteous armies of the Blessed Emperor of All Mankind.

From there the parchment went on to list the names of those who had been conscripted, outlining the details of the mustering process and emphasising the penalties awaiting anyone who failed to report. Larn did not need to read the rest of it – in the last two days he had read the parchment so many times he knew the words by heart. Yet despite all that, as though unable to stop picking at the scab of a half-healed wound, he continued to read the words written on the parchment before him.

‘Arvin?’ He heard his mother’s voice behind him, breaking his chain of thought. ‘You startled me, standing there like that. I didn’t hear you come in.’

Turning, Larn saw his mother standing beside him, a jar of kuedin seeds in her hand and her eyes red with recently dried tears.

‘I just got here, Ma,’ he said, feeling vaguely embarrassed as he put the parchment back where he had found it. ‘I finished my chores, and thought I should wash my hands before dinner.’

For a moment his mother stood there quietly staring at him. Facing her in uncomfortable silence, Larn realised how hard it was for her to speak at all now she knew she would be losing him tomorrow. It lent their every word a deeper meaning, making even the most simple of conversations difficult while with every instant there was the threat that a single ill-chosen word might release the painful tide of grief welling up inside her.

‘You took your boots off?’ she said at last, retreating to the commonplace in search of safety.

‘Yes, Ma. I left them just inside the hallway.’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘You’d better clean them tonight, so as to be ready for tomorrow...’ At that word his mother paused, her voice on the edge of breaking, her teeth biting her lower lip and her eyelids closed as though warding off a distant sensation of pain. Then, half turning away so he could no longer see her eyes, she spoke again.

‘But anyway, you can do that later,’ she said. ‘For now, you’d better go down to the cellar. Your Pa’s already down there and he said he wanted to see you when you got back from the fields.’

Turning further away from him now, she moved over to the stove and lifted the lid off one of the pans to drop a handful of kuedin seeds into it. Ever the dutiful son, Larn turned away. Towards the cellar and his father.

The cellar steps creaked noisily as Larn made his way down them. Despite the noise, at first his father did not seem to notice his approach. Lost in concentration, he sat bent over his workbench at the far end of the cellar, a whetstone in his hand as he sharpened his wool-shears. For a moment, watching his father unawares as he worked, Larn felt almost like a ghost – as though he had passed from his family’s world already and they could no longer see or hear him. Then, finding the thought of it gave him a shiver, he spoke at last and broke the silence.

‘You wanted to see me, Pa?’

Starting at the sound of his voice, his father laid the shears and the whetstone down before turning to look towards his son and smile.

‘You startled me, Arv,’ he said. ‘Zell’s oath, but you can walk quiet when you’ve a mind to. So, did you manage to fix the pump?’

‘Sorry, Pa,’ Larn said. ‘I tried replacing the starter and every other thing I could think of, but none of it worked.’

‘You tried your best, son,’ his father said. ‘That’s all that matters. Besides, the machine spirits in that pump are so old and ornery the damned thing never worked right half the time anyway. I’ll have to see if I can get a mechanic to come out from Ferrusville to give it a good look-over next week. In the meantime, the rain’s been pretty good so we shouldn’t have a problem. But anyway, there was something else I wanted to see you about. Why don’t you grab yourself a stool so the two of us men can talk?’

Pulling an extra stool from beneath the workbench, his father gestured for him to sit down. Then, waiting until he saw his son had made himself comfortable, he began once more.

‘I don’t suppose I ever told you too much about your great-grandfather before, did I?’ he said.

‘I know he was an off-worlder, Pa,’ Larn said, earnestly. ‘And I know his name was Augustus, same as my middle name is.’

‘True enough,’ his father replied. ‘It was a tradition on your great-grandfather’s world to pass on a family name to the first-born son in every generation. Course, he was long dead by the time you were born. Mind you, he died even before I was born. But he was a good man, and so we did it to honour him all the same. A good man should always be honoured, they say, no matter how long he’s been dead.’

For a moment, his face grave and thoughtful, his father fell silent. Then,

as though he had made some decision, he raised his face up to look his son clearly in the eye and spoke again.

‘As I say, your great-grandfather was dead long before I could have known him, Arvie. But when I was seventeen and just about to come of age my father called me down into this cellar and told me the tale of him – just like I’m about to tell you now. You see, my father had decided that before I became a man it was important I knew where I came from. And I’m glad he did, ’cause what he told me then has stood me in good stead ever since. Just like I’m hoping that what I’m going to tell you now will stand you in good stead likewise. Course, with what’s happened in the last few days – and where you’re bound for – I’ve got extra reasons for telling it to you. Reasons that, Emperor love him, my own father never had to face. But that’s the way of things: each generation has its own sorrows, and has to make the best of them they can. That’s all as may be, though. Guess I should just stop dancing around it and come out and say what it is I have to say.’

Again, as though wrestling inwardly for the right words, his father paused. As he waited for him to begin, Larn found himself suddenly thinking how old his father looked. Gazing at him as though for the first time he became aware of the lines and creases across his father’s face, the slightly rounded slump of his shoulders, the spreading fingers of grey in his once black and lustrous hair. Signs of aging he would have sworn had not been there a week previously. It was almost as though his father had aged a decade in the last few days.

‘Your great-grandfather was in the Imperial Guard,’ his father said at last. ‘Just like you’re going to be.’ Then, seeing his son about to blurt out a string of questions, he held his hand up to gesture silence. ‘You can ask whatever you want later, Arvie. For now, it’s better if you just let me tell it to you like my father told me. Believe me, once you’ve heard it you’ll know why it is I said I thought you should hear it.’

Hanging on every word in the quiet stillness of the cellar, Larn heard his father tell his tale.

Click here to buy *Shield of the Emperor*.

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in 2019 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Nuala Kinrade.

Redemption Through Sacrifice © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2019. Redemption Through Sacrifice, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.
All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78999-693-7

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.