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**GALL OF
CHAOS**

QUICK READ

The cover art features a central figure, a Chaos Lord, with a fierce, screaming expression. He is adorned in dark, spiked armor and a crown. He holds a large, glowing orange and yellow flame in his right hand. The background is a chaotic, fiery landscape with other figures and structures, suggesting a scene of battle or destruction. The overall color palette is dominated by oranges, yellows, and dark browns, creating a sense of intense heat and conflict.

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COLLECTION**

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**GALL OF
CHAOS**

A SONG FOR THE LOST

by **ROBBIE MACNIVEN**

A Song for the Lost

Robbie MacNiven

666.M41

It was the forty-third Catechism of Blessed Absolution that broke Ulix. The boy had made it through the Rites of Imperial Truth, the Intonations of Saint Ozbadier and the First and Second Orders of Sanctity, but by then the words of the Catechism had slipped from the youth's mind. He stuttered and faltered, panic only further obscuring his memory of the dusty High Gothic syllables. A few seconds of hesitation were all that Bishop Eziah needed.

'If you can't even speak the God-Emperor's praises, how can you possibly sing them?' he thundered, a fleck of the old man's spittle hitting the choir novitiate's cheek. The boy cringed, and the bishop's expression grew even darker.

'If there's one thing He hates more than a lack of faith, boy, it's a lack of courage. Hold out your hand.'

Instinct kept Ulix frozen. Eziah snatched his arm and pinned it to the cold slab of the lectern between them, his face a rictus of manic zealotry.

'We must believe in no one but the God-Emperor, He on Earth, Father of Mankind.' Like a cruel joke, the words came back to Ulix as the Bishop raised his switch reed, but the hunched old man wasn't listening. The switch came down on Ulix's bared forearm with a hideous crack, and the boy's yell echoed back from the vaulted ceiling of the scriptorium.

'Your rotten influence has spread to Matthias,' Eziah spat before landing a second blow. 'He's gone mute. I won't allow your canker to spread to the rest of my novitiates. Pain will earn you salvation.'

Ulix didn't reply. He screwed his eyes tightly shut, all of his attention focussed on trying not to cry. His defiance only drove the bishop to greater fury. By the time he was done, Ulix's pale arm was a latticework of raw welts.

'I'm cutting your vittles for the rest of the week,' Eziah hissed, panting with exertion. 'You will return at three bells tomorrow, and you will try again, and if

you can't offer up veneration befitting this holy basilica, I will break either you or this reed. Whichever snaps first. Now get out.'

Ulix fled. His vision was a blur of angry tears, and the lofty corridors of the Basilica of Himaesus the Justicar echoed with his muffled sobs. His dorm was dark by the time he reached it, the rest of the boys already tucked into their sleeping alcoves. Only his own lumen stick still burned, its flickering light barely strong enough to pick out the craggy, bare stone walls and flagstones of the novitiates' quarters.

He slid into his alcove, fighting back sobs. Across the aisle, the boy who slept opposite him, Matthias, had his back turned and his own lumen stick doused, but Ulix could tell from his stiff posture that he wasn't asleep. He could sense the boy's thoughts, could almost hear him begging Ulix to snuff out his stick. Matthias hated her and her visits. But Ulix didn't care. She would come for him, he knew it. She would help him.

The night drew on. Ulix gripped his forearm, willing the pain to stop. Matthias, though he hadn't turned, was visibly starting to shake. Ulix closed his eyes and started to mouth a prayer, the one she'd taught him to use in the depths of the night.

'Mistress of Pain, Master of Pleasure, hear your child's cry—'

And that's when he heard it. The soft tap of sandals on stone, passing through the cloisters outside. They stopped at the arched entrance to the dorm, and a shadow fell on Ulix's alcove. He looked up.

'Good evening, little brother,' said Sister D'Fey.

'I knew you'd come,' Ulix began to say, but D'Fey hushed him with an indulgent smile. She was twenty-one years Terran standard, dark-eyed, tall and sharp-boned, her pale features accentuated by the long black habit she wore. From what little he knew of girls, Ulix considered her beautiful. Certainly more beautiful than the wizened old matron, Sister Rebocca, or the rotund, scarred crone who served the novitiates their meals twice a day.

It was D'Fey's duty to visit all the basilica's sleeping quarters during night cycle and ensure every lumen stick was doused before first bell. Ulix had learned that leaving his lit would guarantee a visit.

‘Have you been saying your prayers, little brother?’ D’Fey asked, her voice low and gentle. Ulix nodded earnestly, but his eyes strayed down to his arm. The sister’s expression became one of concern as she noticed his raw flesh. She sat down on the edge of Ulix’s alcove.

‘Did the bishop do this to you?’

‘I forgot the forty-third Catechism of Blessed Absolution,’ Ulix said. ‘We must believe in no one but the God-Emperor, He on—’

‘Yes, yes,’ said D’Fey, cutting him off. She smiled again. ‘Sometimes things happen which cause us pain, little brother. It is important that we don’t allow the pain to get the better of us, even if it seems constant, like these wounds. Learn to channel it towards better things.’

Her slender fingertips brushed against the skin of Ulix’s arm, and the stinging was replaced with wonderful numbness. He smiled with relief.

‘Your prayers,’ D’Fey said again. ‘The ones I taught you to shield your mind from this sort of thing.’

‘If I recite them will you sing for me?’ Ulix asked hopefully.

‘Of course, little brother,’ she replied. Ulix whispered all six to her, without hesitation. D’Fey gave a little clap of delight when he finished.

‘Rest your head in my lap,’ she said. ‘Let the dreams take you.’

Ulix lay down and closed his eyes, and D’Fey began to sing. The words were soft and warm, and though their meaning slipped from his mind as sleep began to take him, the sensations of safety and comfort never left him. In barely a minute he was asleep, his troubles forgotten. D’Fey continued to sing gently, smiling to herself, black eyes gleaming by the lonely light of the last lumen stick.

Across the aisle, Novitiate Matthias lay awake and wide-eyed, shaking with terror.

It was Fire Season on Sarnax, and the Angels of Ecstasy were in high spirits. They sang as they climbed the winding dirt pathway up the slopes of mount Tukkuva, vox grilles and cacophonous blasters amped to their maximum. The surrounding jungle – fronds and vines stained rusty gold and butcher’s red by the seasonal dustfall from the southern deserts – shuddered at the warband’s passing. Occasionally, one of the fallen Angels, lost in the incomprehensibly complex rhythms of his praise, would unleash his sonic weapon into the trees, shredding leaves and pulverising wood in a disharmonious shriek that echoed back along the path.

One Angel didn’t sing. Ulix the Enthralled, one-time Chapter Master of the Sons of Ulthunas, now Chaos lord of the Angels of Ecstasy and Champion of Slaanesh, never sang. It would be at best a distraction, at worst a betrayal. Certainly an act far more hideous than anything he had inflicted upon the corpse-worshipping Imperium in the centuries since he had joined the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes and his Chapter had turned away from the ruinous path of the False Emperor.

He could hear her. Always, even over the constant mind-fraying audio-praise of his warband. Her words were soft and indistinct, yet always comforting. A gentle thread running through the cold, jagged edges of the Chaos lord’s mind. It was the only thing he recalled of his life before the Space Marines had come for him, and the shielding prayers she – and not the Ecclesiarchy – had taught him had kept her voice safe through the mind scrubbing and hypno-inductions, the blood and the agony. Sister D’Fey’s song had echoed in his skull through all the combat drops and ship actions, the sieges and the frontal assaults, the bloody retreats and the last stands. It had been there, louder than ever, on Ganymethian, when he had finally cast off the falsehood of the so-called Imperium and slaughtered ten billion souls for the only one who could ever understand his pain, the Prince of Pleasure. On that day, the Sons of Ulthunas had become Slaanesh’s Angels.

The Angels had descended upon the Basilica of Himaesus the Justicar, and although Bishop Eziah and all who had known him were long dead, that did not stop Ulix and his brothers from nailing the minions of the Ecclesiarchy to their lecterns and burning their false relics. Ulix had found Eziah’s gilded tomb and defiled it, and all the while D’Fey had sung for him in his head.

But, as was always the case, he couldn’t quite recall her exact words.

He needed to hear them again. How long had it been? How many years? Or was it hours? It didn't matter. Either way, it had been too long.

The Chaos lord paused at the side of the narrow jungle track to watch his servants pass. They were too lost in their prancing, discordant passage to notice his gaze. All but one – Equis the Anointed. The possessed Chaos Space Marine's power armour was warped and distended to accommodate the lanky, slender-limbed changes inflicted on him by the glorious matrimony of daemon and genetically enhanced human. Though his fanged face was hidden behind the pale pink ceramite of his faceplate, Ulix could sense the challenge burning in the daemon-man's violet eyes.

Ulix returned his gaze, allowing his would-be challenger to observe his many blessings. Ulix's artificer power armour, once the proud blue plate of the Sons of Ulthunas, was now unrecognisable. It was now the shade of pallid flesh and bruised meat, and was etched with swirling, blasphemously conjoining runes, its studded edges hung with hundreds of multihued silk ribbons and fetishes. From the Chaos Space Marine's backpack sprouted a towering set of ornate sonic amplifiers, each brass pipe ending in a wailing black vox maw that eternally moaned the Dark Prince's blessings. Despite such ravages, it was the Space Marine's facial features that were the most horrific. In place of a mouth, Ulix now bore a vox horn, his jaw permanently distended around the polished grille. The nightmare surgery had left the rest of his skin pulled taut, giving his pale face and unblinking jet-black eyes the appearance of a screaming skull.

Equis could only hold his gaze for a few seconds. Ulix watched him continue to climb the muddy, winding jungle path, the Chaos lord's hand dropping to the flesh-bound hilt of his daemon sword, Bar'neth. Even without the truths whispered by the lascivious warp entity bound in his blade, Ulix could sense his brother's dissatisfaction with Ulix's everlasting quest to hear the song sung again. Equis wanted to challenge him for leadership of the warband. The threat did not concern Ulix. All that mattered was the song.

Just as the Chaos lord stepped back onto the track, Zsyth the Grandiloquent's head exploded. The gluttonous Noise Marine, pink armour ruptured around his obese flesh, toppled with the leaden force of a downed tree. Only Ulix noticed his brother's demise. The other Angels were too caught up in their cavorting to pay attention to the swollen, headless corpse sprawled across the track. For a second, Ulix assumed Zslyth had finally overloaded the lobe implants that had

been vibrating his cranium with subsonic noise for the better part of two centuries. Then Plinaeus Rawhide's fleshless face burst as well, and it finally dawned upon the Angels of Ecstasy that they were under attack.

The hunters were here, and right on time.

'The trees,' Ulix roared, his amplified bellow cutting through the cacophony raised by his underlings. They needed no further encouragement. Sonic blasters were turned in every direction, chords thrumming with power, sliding scales shrilling at the frenzied finger work of the warp-damned Adeptus Astartes. Within seconds, the surrounding jungle was disintegrating into a pulverised, bloody red mulch, successive shockwaves of raw sound kicking up dirt, splintering bark and shredding leaves.

'Blastmasters, clear the way,' Ulix ordered, black eyes scanning the treetops for a sign of their assailants. 'Advance.'

The warband's heavy weapons specialists, the triplets known only as the Tricord, unleashed their blastmasters in unison, the synchronised wall of bass demolishing the jungle ahead in a blizzard of mulch, and splitting the winding pathway wide open.

Ulix knew they had to keep moving. He doubted any of the Eldar rangers who had sprung the ambush had been caught by his minions' wild firing, but that didn't matter. The light slanting through the red-hued leaves ahead told him the clearing was close, and with it, the alien's webway portal. They would be forced to go hand-to-hand to defend it, and that was when Ulix would win his prize.

Hadril paused while his long rifle's crystal cell recharged, eye fixed to the scope. On the pathway below, the warp-tainted mon-keigh were still advancing, shrieking and screeching their unnatural delight as they decimated the surrounding jungle with blind salvos of sonic firepower. Hadril had already put down two from his perch in the thick upper branches of a rustbark. His brother, Arrith, invisible among the red leaves above and to Hadril's left, had claimed three more.

The daemon worshippers could not be allowed to defile the portal. Reinforcements were already on the way, but until then, Hadril and his kin had been tasked with culling as many as possible. The Eldar ranger refocussed his aim on a particularly tainted mon-keigh at the heart of the warband, watching as

the thing screeched incomprehensible orders from the plethora of audio units that distorted its body. He let his mind slip once more into the rhythm of the hunter, trusting his rifle and his centuries of experience to align the shot. He took half a breath, and fired.

And missed. As though sensing Hadril's aim at the last second, the Slaaneshi champion shifted his stance and, rather than vaporise his skull, the bolt of blue energy smacked into his left pauldron. The impact caused him to stagger but nothing more. Hadril felt the Chaos Space Marine's eyes fix on his position, and his blood ran cold.

'There,' Ulix snapped, pointing at the tree the shot had come from. In a heartbeat, a dozen sonic weapons shattered bark and shredded leaves. A figure, trailing a rust-coloured camo cape, plummeted to the jungle floor.

The alien sharpshooter would have added him to its tally had it not been for Bar'neth's warning. By way of gratitude, Ulix drew the sword and strode along the track to the Eldar's body, the bound daemon shrieking for its soul. To the Chaos lord's surprise, the alien shifted beneath him, seemingly only stunned by its fall.

Bar'neth was begging for the Eldar's sweet blood, vibrating in Ulix's grip. With the ease of a cruel child snatching a pup, the Chaos lord pinned the ranger against the tree with one hand, his stretched, white features inches from the alien's face.

'Sing for me, Eldar,' he said, the words rasping from the vox horn sutured into his distended jaw. The ranger struggled vainly in the fallen Space Marine's grip, trying to turn his face away from the black-eyed glare of the Slaaneshi champion.

'I said sing!' Ulix screamed. The sonic amplifiers bristling from his back channelled the shriek, causing the Eldar's eyes to burst and his brain to rupture. Ulix let the spasming, bloody alien slide to the ground, disgusted. He wanted one alive. She preferred them alive.

The webway portal lay ahead, the jungle before the clearing wrecked by the warband's sonic barrage. Ulix pushed through the shattered tree trunks towards the spear of rock that lanced above the jungle canopy, and that he knew contained the portal. Its smooth, bone-white surface was almost completely

covered in blotches of rust-coloured moss. The human savages who inhabited Sarnax believed it was an ancient portal to the realm of the gods, and in a way they were right. Ulix's vox-maws began to keen as he took a step into the clearing, the Angels fanning out either side of him.

That was when the portal's final guardians struck. With a crack of displaced air and a flash of light, two dozen slender, crouching figures materialised at the base of the rock. Ulix took in the female warriors' body-hugging white plate, long, curving blades and tall, red-crested helmets. If his deformed face could have allowed it, the Chaos lord would have smiled. Aspect Warriors, servants of the Eldar's Bloody-Handed God. Howling Banshees.

The Eldar warrior women attacked without hesitation, energy crackling along the blades of their wicked swords. The Angels of Ecstasy howled with glee as they met them, wild riffs of sonic firepower tearing into the portal's oncoming defenders. A few went down, brains burst, internal organs liquidised, but the rest leapt through the wall of noise, their charged weapons parting the humid jungle air.

Ulix met the downward stroke of the first one with Bar'neth. The Slaaneshi daemon was screaming for the Eldar's soul, furious at Ulix's earlier denial. The two blades rebounded with a shock, the masked Eldar sliding the stroke into a stomach-stab with reflexes no human could have matched.

Ulix, however, had not been human for a very long time. He turned the lunge aside and, with a speed belying his size, back-cut to open the Banshee's guts. The white psycho-sensitive bioplastics were no protection against Bar'neth's razor kiss, and the daemon's lustful shrieking turned to a sigh of contentment as it finally tasted blood. The Eldar crumpled, its soul drained, spirit stone dull.

Around Ulix, the Angels were struggling to match the finesse of their master. The Eldar were a blur of movement, swords slicing and stabbing, the crackling energy sheathing the blades parting the battle-plate of the Noise Marines with ease. Kavixs was on his knees, screaming with pleasure as he tried to hold his spilled intestines in. Sarth the Smiling had lost an arm and was attempting to work his sonic blaster's scales with one hand, laughing as he did so. One of the Tricord pulped a Banshee in mid leap with a bass thud of his blastmaster, but a second had slid in behind and parted his skull with a downward stroke before he could retune the weapon. Equis ripped his serrated, crab-like claws through the

throat of another, bleeding purple ichor from a wound across his thigh.

Sensing victory, Eldar rangers darted into the melee from the surrounding trees, sniper rifles discarded in favour of long knives and shuriken pistols. One came at Ulix, his face a mask of grim determination beneath the red cowls of his camo cape. The Chaos lord let his armour take the first thrust of the Eldar's knife, the runes coiling along his chestplate's warped surface glowing with sickly energy as they deflected the blow.

A few more minutes and the aliens would have won. The last of Ulix's minions would have been cut down, their vox amps smashed, their cacophonous praises finally silenced. But the Banshees were too eager to cement their victory. They wanted to cleanse the vile stain that Ulix's encroachment represented. So they unleashed their sonic scream, and turned the tide in favour of their enemies.

The amplifiers built into the helmets of the Aspect Warriors channelled their shrieks and war cries. When they unleashed them in unison, most enemies would have been left disoriented and clutching bloody ears. But for the Angels of Ecstasy, it was a revelation. Inured to sonic bombardment, they found that the Banshee's unique method of attack was a sensation none of them had ever experienced before. Their reflexes doubled as they shuddered with delight, lent vigour by the passion of new sensation. Suddenly, it was the aliens who were being pushed back, their speed no longer an adequate defence against the Noise Marines.

The Eldar ranger sensed the tide of battle turn and hesitated. The Slaaneshi lord swiped the ranger's knife aside with a contemptuous flick and stepped inside his guard, laughter rasping from his voxes. He had found his victim.

Arrith, Hadril's brother, was dead. Somehow Hadril had managed to keep his grip on a branch as the firepower of the Chaos warband had torn apart the rustwood perch, but Arrith hadn't been so lucky. He'd fallen into the undergrowth and Hadril, ears ringing and bloody from the sonic storm, had watched him crumple before the amplified scream of the Chaos lord, pinned to the trunk below him.

When the pathfinder had ordered them to go hand-to-hand and assist their sisters, Hadril had gone straight for Arrith's killer. The rashness of that decision now hit harder than the hilt of the Chaos Space Marine's sword into Hadril's gut.

The ranger went down on one knee, the breath driven from his lungs. Overhead, he heard the tortured scream of a mon-keigh shuttle as it banked towards the clearing, its shadow falling across the swirling melee. Hadril looked up into the bottomless orbs of the Chaos lord's eyes.

If the creature's face had allowed it, Hadril supposed it would have been smiling.

The Praise Eternal had once demolished capital ships and levelled cities in the name of the Imperium of Man. For three thousand years, it had served the Emperor and brought righteous, unbending fury to its enemies, from one end of the galaxy to the other. Now it was a beacon of damnation adrift in a sea of sin.

The venerable machine spirit that inhabited the ship's adamantium walls and armoured bulkheads had turned to the Prince of Pleasure with almost indecent haste, as though bored of the monotonies of loyalty. For such eagerness, Slaanesh had gifted it with a voice of its own, a howl of relieved pleasure that echoed eternally through the minds not only of its twisted crew, but through the Immaterium itself. Beyond reality's veil, the creatures of the Dark Prince thronged to its siren song, covering its hull in an undulating sea of distorted, heaving flesh.

The muffled screaming of their damned souls had long ago slipped to the back of Ulix's mind. The Praise Eternal's cavernous, musk-stinking holds and bristling, brass-mawed weapon batteries were no longer of any consequence compared to the chamber at the ship's corrupt heart. That was where he led the survivors of the raid on the webway portal, through a maze of marble corridors and garishly furnished suites. Traversing the Praise Eternal was never without risk – lesser daemons would penetrate the ship's screaming corridors and attack the crew, while the structure of the vessel itself was beset by hallucinogenic fogs and lilting cadences that led the unwary deep into her sickly-sweet bowels, never to be seen again. But Ulix, better than anyone else, knew where his path was leading him. He was so close now.

At the heart of the phalanx of Noise Marines was Equis, gripping the Eldar prisoner. The alien had been blindfolded with a strip of black silk, his other senses already on the verge of being overloaded just by the Praise Eternal's madness.

'We could have taken the webway portal,' Equis hissed at Ulix's back. 'We had

broken them. We could have carried the fight deeper into their realms.'

He knew the Chaos lord wasn't listening. His obsession with the song of his daemon mistress and her vile collection of tokens had completely consumed him. They came to a halt outside the rune-etched blast doors that marked the entrance to the daemon's lair.

'The prisoner,' Ulix demanded. Equis hesitated. The urge to snap the Eldar's scrawny neck and deny Ulix his greatest desire was overwhelming. For a moment, the daemoniac Noise Marine indulged the sensation, revelling in the power at the tips of his claws. Even with the ship's presence in the warp, Ulix's mistress wouldn't be able to materialise unless the Eldar was taken over her threshold. Equis could break the Chaos lord's will with a single action.

Then Ulix's hand strayed to the hilt of his daemon blade, and the thought of Bar'neth snatching his soul into oblivion finally made Equis release the alien.

Without another word, Ulix took the ranger by his cloak and punched in the blast door's entry code.

'We'll be waiting for you when she sends you out again,' Equis said as the Chaos lord disappeared into the cloying darkness within.

For a second, even Ulix's senses, already stretched by centuries of abuse, failed him. The shadows were impenetrable. The velvet drapes he brushed through made him flinch. The sickly sweet stench of stale perfume set his flesh tingling. Briefly, his hypersensitive hearing thought it caught the whisper of a voice, singing softly. It was gone as soon as he tried to focus on it. The blindfolded alien, still silent, was shuddering in his grip.

Ulix pushed through the final set of curtains and found himself blinking in the flickering light of lit lumen sticks. He was standing in a narrow stone room, its flagstone floor swept bare, alcoves carved into the walls on either side. In an instant, he felt over three centuries of pain and anguish drain away.

Sister D'Fey was waiting for him. She'd been sitting on the edge of one of the alcoves – his alcove – but stood as he entered.

'I've been waiting for you, little brother,' she said, embracing him. 'Welcome home.'

‘I brought you a gift,’ Ulix said, shuddering slightly as her touch spread salving numbness through his ravaged body.

‘And for that you have my thanks,’ D’Fey said. ‘The other sisters will take him. Come, little brother.’ Ulix was vaguely aware of two more sisters, both garbed in black like D’Fey, taking hold of the shaking Eldar. The alien’s existence melted from his thoughts as D’Fey took him by the hand and led him down the dorm to his sleeping alcove. She sat, motioning him to do likewise.

‘Would you like me to sing for you again, Ulix?’ she asked sweetly. Ulix found himself unable to speak. He nodded, tears blurring his vision. Smiling again, D’Fey gently took his head in her hands, and began to sing him her song for the lost.

The daemonettes cut Hadril’s tongue out first. One swallowed the bloody muscle while the other reached round and slipped the black silk from the Eldar’s eyes. They didn’t want his screams interrupting their mistress’ recital.

And Hadril would have screamed. At first glance, the chamber he was in appeared to have been carved from a solid block of multi-hued gems. Towering pillars of glittering pink and red supported a vaulted ceiling of sparkling blue and purple, the illumination from a dozen burning braziers dancing hypnotically from the jagged surfaces.

But Hadril knew immediately that he wasn’t just looking upon some garish display of opulence. The chamber hadn’t been built with pretty bits of rock. It had been constructed from spirit stones. Tens of thousands of precious Eldar soul shards had been beaten and shattered, split, smashed and melded together to form a blasphemous temple to the damnation of Hadril’s entire race.

The daemonettes grinned at the ranger’s voiceless anguish, needle teeth gleaming in the light of the broken stones. One tugged Hadril’s tattered cloak back to expose his own amber spirit stone, set into the abdomen of his breastplate. The daemonette’s tongue, purple, veined and hideously long, darted out to caress the precious surface. Hadril shuddered uncontrollably, knowing the warp creature was tasting his soul.

As its sister played, the second daemonette grasped Hadril’s jaw with slender talons and gently raised his head to look directly at the chamber’s centre. In it lay a dais of more crushed stones, arrayed to form the vile rune of the Prince of

Pleasure. Upon the raised platform, the damned mon-keigh warrior slumbered. Despite the depraved beast's size, it had curled into a foetal position, its tortured, deformed head cradled against the breast of the thing now embracing it. Hadril shook again as he took it in – a vast, serpent-like creature, pale as old corpse meat, its thick, fleshy body coiled around the mon-keigh's ornately armoured form. Its head was bowed beside the warrior's ear, and Hadril could see a forked tongue darting from between thin lips. Whatever it hissed was swallowed up in the chamber's soul-ravaging horror. As though sensing the Eldar's gaze, it tilted its head slightly, one black, nictitating eye looking at him with a gleam of sickly humour.

A sudden burst of pleasure in his right side drew a moan from Hadril's bloody lips. He realised that one of the daemonettes had slipped a thin blade between the joints in his armour. He watched a trickle of blood run down his leg, even as the unnaturally gratifying sensation made him gasp for breath.

The other daemonette had finished savouring Hadril's essence. It pressed one claw against his spirit stone's smooth surface, tapping at it gently but firmly. And that was when the pain started.

The last thing Hadril saw was the mon-keigh, over the daemonette's shoulder. The Chaos lord was still wrapped in the white coils of the serpent-demon, and though the Noise Marine's eyes were now closed, its lock-jawed features were twisted into what could only be described as pure contentment.

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Matthias could sense it in the dorm. It couldn't come here uninvited, he was sure. But Ulix kept calling it back. He'd begged him, and when the boy hadn't listened, he'd been too afraid to tell anyone. He was sure it would come for him too if he spoke a word.

He didn't turn. He'd made that mistake before. Hunger emanated from it as surely as the sibilant hissing that put Ulix to sleep every night, and kept Matthias tense and shivering until the chiming of the first bell. He'd seen it once. He knew what it was doing right now.

Coiled around Ulix's body, hissing in his ear, singing a song Matthias prayed he'd never hear.

About the Author

Robbie MacNiven is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. His hobbies include reenacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000. 'A Song for the Lost' is his second story for Black Library. The Deathwatch short story 'Redblade' was his first.

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40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

BLACK IRON

by **GRAEME LYON**

Black Iron

Graeme Lyon

‘What brings you before me, son of Olympia?’

Abaddon the Despoiler loomed over Kallus. The Iron Warriors warsmith knelt on the cold stone floor, his eyes downturned. He was unarmoured, clad only in a robe of black. No warrior of another Legion was allowed to bring armour or weapons into the Warmaster’s presence, he had been told, though he suspected that this treatment was simply to show him his place.

He was used to that. Anyone who had served Perturabo these past millennia was familiar with contempt. That was why Kallus was here before the lord of the Black Legion.

‘My lord, I–’

‘Look at me when you address me, warsmith,’ Abaddon boomed. ‘And stand. There is no need to kneel before me. We are brothers, are we not?’

Kallus hesitated. The question was double-edged. He opted to face the potential danger head-on.

‘My lord, we may be brothers in spirit, but in deed you are greater by far than I. You are Warmaster, the one who will bring ruin to the Imperium of Lies. I am but a humble custodian of the Lord of Iron’s domain.’

His breathing quickened as he continued to stare at the ground, expecting at any moment to be impaled upon the ancient blades of the Talon of Horus. He did not expect Abaddon to laugh.

‘Very good, Kallus. Like an Iron Warrior, you thrust a blade straight to the heart of the matter. Practical. I like it. Please rise.’

Kallus looked up. Abaddon met his eyes for several long moments. He nodded, as if confirming something, and strode over to the other side of the chamber. He gazed out of the immense windows set into one wall. The Iron Warrior rose and hesitated.

‘Come, warsmith. Look, and tell me what you see.’

Kallus stepped over to the window and looked out upon a world of metal.

‘I see... a forge world, Lord Abaddon,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ replied the Warmaster. ‘A forge world in the heart of the Eye of Terror. A forge world of the Dark Mechanicum. A forge world where, by the very nature of the space it inhabits, all that is built is a blend of metal and daemon.’ Abaddon turned away and paced the chamber. ‘Nothing can be built here that is not corrupted by the touch of Chaos, Kallus. You know this, I think. You have spent a long time on Medrengard, yes?’

Kallus nodded. ‘Yes, my lord.’

‘And your primarch, in his wisdom, has you acting as a watchdog over a lone fortress within his domain. A castellan.’ Abaddon turned and his piercing gaze penetrated Kallus, seeing right into and through him. ‘It is a fitting role for you. But you believe you are capable of much more, do you not? And that is why you are here.’

‘Yes, Lord Abaddon,’ the warsmith replied, holding the Warmaster’s gaze, though he longed to look away.

Abaddon smiled. ‘Yes, I agree, Kallus. You can – will – achieve more. Much more.’ He turned away again. ‘Do you wish to serve me, son of Olympia? Do you wish to join my Black Legion?’

‘I do, Lord Abaddon. And my warriors with me. Nearly a thousand Iron Warriors stand by my side. They are tested and true, and ready to swear oaths to the Black Legion and serve you in all things.’

‘Does Perturabo know you are here?’

‘No, my lord. The primarch... does not concern himself overmuch with the world beyond his tower these days.’

‘No,’ said Abaddon. ‘I have visited his chambers. Perturabo prefers to play the craftsman rather than the warrior. He always did. It is a shame. His abilities could be of use. But no matter. I shall make use of yours instead. And I have just

the task for you to prove your loyalty to me, Kallus.'

'Name it, Warmaster, and it shall be done.'

'Do you know why I chose to meet you here, Kallus, on this world?'

'No, lord.'

'Because this,' Abaddon gestured at the window, indicating the world beyond, 'is a problem. All the worlds creating new materiel for our armies are like this, overrun by the daemonic. It is, as I said, the nature of the realm we inhabit. And it has its place. But we need machines that are just machines as well. We need guns and swords, armour and Rhinos. We need the resources of forge worlds outside the Eye.'

'Aye, my lord,' said Kallus hesitantly.

'There is one such world, Kallus, out on the fringes of the galaxy, out of the control of the fraying Imperium. It is known to your Legion, I think. In fact, you have a garrison there.'

'You refer to Taris, my lord?'

Abaddon nodded. 'Indeed, Taris. Tell me of it, warsmith.'

'I know but a little. I have never been there. It is an ancient world, pre-dating the Imperium. It was discovered by the soldier Macharius in his crusade, and lost again in what the Imperium calls the Macharian Heresy.'

Abaddon gestured for him to continue.

'In that time, companies from the Fourth Legion took the world. Since then, it has produced weapons for the Iron Warriors.'

'And it remains uncorrupted?'

'Yes, my lord. The tech-priests there have no ties to either Mars or the Dark Mechanicum. They are... untainted.'

'I want that world,' said Abaddon. 'I want it producing weapons and vehicles for

the Black Legion. Give me this, Kallus, and you will have earned your place in my army.'

Kallus' warband, the Dark Castellans, left Medrengard without ceremony or fanfare, and without any intention of ever returning. Kallus and his second-in-command, Brane, stood at a viewing port on their battle-barge, the Fallen Empire, and watched the world that had been their home and prison for millennia receding. Neither spoke until it was no longer visible.

'How are we leaving the Eye, warsmith?' asked Brane at length. 'The Cadian Gate is too well protected.'

'There are other ways,' Kallus replied. 'Dangerous ways, but our new allies believe they can guide us through safely.' He looked sideways at the trio of figures who stood at the other end of the long, narrow chamber. They were hunched and robed, and metal glinted where the light hit what lurked beneath their hoods.

'Why did the Warmaster send priests of the Dark Mechanicum if he wishes Taris to remain untainted?' Brane asked.

'They are merely with us to help us take the world. There is a plan.'

Brane said nothing.

'Set a course for these coordinates,' Kallus continued, handing his subordinate a data-slate. 'And let me know when we reach them.'

The Fallen Empire passed out of the Eye of Terror without incident, slipping past a guardian created by the Dark Mechanicum to keep the route controlled. The daemon-infused machine was alive, great mechanical tendrils coiled around a stable entry to the warp. The Despoiler's tech-priests transmitted arcane codes to the monstrous construct. Each caused a single tendril to uncoil, painfully slowly.

'What happens if an incorrect code is sent?' Kallus had asked the Dark Mechanicum priests.

'It attacks,' replied one of the tech-priests in a grating, mechanical tone. 'It can devour a battle-barge in less than four standard minutes, and no known weapon can damage it.'

Kallus shivered and decided not to ask any more.

Once out of the great storms of the Eye and into the currents of the immaterium, they plotted a course for Taris. It took several weeks to arrive, giving Kallus and the tech-priests plenty of time to refine the plan and ensure that Kallus had the resources he required. It would work, he was sure. It had to.

Taris glimmered below them like a sapphire set in black metal. Unusually for a forge world, it had large oceans, with the temple-forges of the Mechanicum clustered on chains of islands around the equator.

‘Why this world?’ Brane asked. ‘And why not cover it in metal like other forge worlds?’

‘Something to do with the oceans,’ Kallus told him. ‘A property of the water that enhances power flow and allows greater operational efficiency. And the entire system is run by a central cogitator, into which is plugged one of the tech-priests. It all runs through his brain.’

‘That sounds like a fate worse than death,’ Brane said.

‘No worse than sitting out the Long War on Medregard, brother.’

‘I suppose not. It feels good to be in action again. It has been too long. Too long by far.’

‘It has. But don’t be in too much of a hurry to start shooting, Brane. Not until we know who we’re shooting at. Have we had any response to our hails?’

‘Nothing yet, warsmith.’

‘Then I suppose we do this the old-fashioned way.’

A Thunderhawk gunship carried Kallus to the surface of Taris. He had donned his armour, an ancient suit of Mark III plate, and was accompanied by a single squad from his company. He kept a vox-link open with Brane on board the Fallen Empire.

‘What response has there been to our entering the atmosphere?’

‘Nothing yet, warsmith. Perhaps they’re waiting to see where you land.’

‘Likely.’

They touched down a mile from the prime temple-forge complex, on the shore of one of Taris’ vast oceans. As the Thunderhawk’s hatch opened, Kallus could hear the sounds of engines in the distance. He and his guard disembarked and waited, enjoying the salty tang of the air. At length, three Rhinos in the colours of the Iron Warriors came into view and slewed to a halt nearby. Their rear hatches clanged open and thirty Space Marines emerged, bolters pointed at Kallus and his warriors. Nonchalantly, he raised his hands.

‘We surrender,’ he drawled. He lowered them again and put one hand on his holster. ‘I am Warsmith Kallus. Tell Terrox that I demand to see him immediately.’

‘What are you doing here, Kallus?’

The Iron Warrior strode into the sparse interrogation chamber and barked the question.

‘Terrox. Clearly your temperament hasn’t improved in the last... how long has it been, eight hundred years or so?’

‘Answer the question, Kallus,’ Terrox demanded, banging his gauntleted fist off the table, leaving a dent. ‘I have no time for your insouciance.’

‘I’m here to relieve you, brother. The primarch has decided that you’ve served your time here and invites you back to Medregard.’

‘Why you, Kallus? Why have you been sent to this world? What have you done to upset Perturabo?’

Kallus laughed. ‘Nothing, brother. In truth, I volunteered. We all know that on garrison duty, time sometimes seems to flow backwards. I grew tired of a world where that is sometimes literally true.’

Terrox was silent. He paced the small chamber, and Kallus could hear the subtle clicking that indicated a vox-link was active within his brother’s helmet. What was he doing? Kallus activated his own vox.

‘Brane, are you picking up any Fourth Legion vox-traffic down here?’

There was a pause before his underling responded.

‘Yes, warsmith, but with unusual encryption. It will take some time to find out what’s being said.’

‘No matter. I think I’ll find out before you manage that,’ he said and cut the link. Terrox turned back to him.

‘There has been no communication from Medrengard, brother. No indication that you were coming. And I do not like surprises. I don’t trust them. And I don’t trust you.’

‘I am hurt, Terrox! Why in the galaxy would you not trust me? Is it because I interrogated you that one time? You know that was merely a misunderstanding.’

Kallus knew that his casual demeanour would anger Terrox. In fact, he was counting on it.

‘You accused me of plotting against you and tortured me for a confession that I could not give, warsmith. You cut off my arm.’ Terrox flexed his bionic arm, pistons moving noisily. ‘You didn’t trust me. Why should I trust you?’

‘A surprisingly fair point, Terrox. Very well, what would you have me do?’

‘You will wait. I have sent word to Medrengard, and your vessel has been ordered out of orbit. You will be held prisoner until your orders are confirmed. And if they are not... then I might have to take my revenge on you, Kallus.’

On board the Fallen Empire, Brane prepared the company for war. There had been no contact with Warsmith Kallus since the order had come from Taris to leave orbit three days before. He had done so, albeit grudgingly, but now it was time to go in hard and fast. Besides, it had been far too long since he’d been in battle.

‘I will personally lead a teleport assault on the primary complex,’ he briefed. ‘One hundred Terminators will join me. The rest of the company will deploy by drop pod and gunship once we’ve knocked out whatever defences they have. Iron within!’

‘Iron without!’ chorused nearly a thousand voices.

The ancient teleportarium chamber flared with energy and Brane felt reality lurch. The effect was much like a starship entering the warp, but multiplied by a thousand. For a fleeting moment, he had the impression of a billion billion predators, all focused on him, sensing a soul on which they could feed, and then it was gone, and he was back on solid ground.

He spun, surveying his surroundings and orienting himself. He was in a large, multi-tiered chamber filled with robed tech-priests, all of them busy-looking, attending to arcane tasks. Some of them looked around, and he heard a confused babble begin to break out, then an alarm went off.

‘So much for surprise,’ he muttered. ‘Squad leaders, sound off.’ Each of the squad commanders acknowledged, and he was pleased to see that all had arrived safely. ‘Secure the complex,’ he ordered. ‘Eliminate any resistance.’

Resistance had arrived. A score of skitarii warriors entered the chamber, weapons trained on Brane and his bodyguard.

‘Stand down,’ ordered one in a modulated mechanical tone, ‘or be destroyed.’

‘Ah, I hoped you would say that,’ said Brane. ‘Dark Castellans, open fire.’

He trained his combi-bolter on the lead skitarius and squeezed the trigger. The explosive bolts detonated in its torso, blowing its organic components apart. The cyborg’s bionic legs remained standing for a long moment, then crashed to the ground. Around him, Brane’s warriors opened fire too, and the rest of the skitarii joined their leader in death.

‘Move out,’ he ordered. He looked around for the nearest tech-priest and found one cowering behind a sparking console. He grabbed the red-robed woman in his power fist and raised her to face him. ‘Where is my warsmith being held?’ he asked.

‘I... I do not know,’ she said, and Brane detected the ammonia tang of waste fluids. She was still human enough to feel fear, then.

‘Where are prisoners held?’ he asked.

‘I... I...’ she stammered, and Brane sighed. He closed his fist, pulping her.

‘I’ll find out myself,’ he said, and marched over to a still-functioning console. He tried to access the systems, but couldn’t decipher the language the display used. He fired a bolter round into it in frustration.

‘I am going to find the warsmith,’ he voxed. ‘Inform me when the complex is secured.’

Kallus stopped one of the two chronometers that had been running in his helmet display when he heard the first bolter fire. ‘Nearly three days, Brane,’ he said to himself. ‘You showed some restraint.’ He stood up and peered out of the slit in the cell door. The skitarii guards were moving away from the cell, towards the sound of fighting.

He tried his vox again, but the Legion channels were all blocked. Brane must have anticipated that and used an alternative. He wouldn’t have attacked without being able to stay in contact with his troops. As he cycled through channels, he heard bolter fire outside the cell.

‘Warsmith?’ a voice called. Brane.

‘In here,’ Kallus shouted. ‘I’ll step away from the door.’

He did, and it exploded inwards. When the smoke and dust cleared, he stepped out. Brane stood in the narrow corridor, with five more Terminator-armoured Dark Castellans behind him.

‘Nice to see you, Brane,’ he said. ‘What’s the situation?’

‘A hundred Terminators in the complex, warsmith, securing it and deactivating defences for the main assault. The only resistance so far is skitarii. They’re not much of a threat.’

‘Ah... don’t kill too many of them, Brane. We’re going to need them.’

‘My lord?’

‘Never mind. No sign of Terrox’s Iron Warriors?’

‘No, my lord, though I found data in the cogitators that suggests he’s been recruiting. There may be as many as ten thousand loyal to him here. We... we can’t take on that many. Plus countless skitarii.’

‘Leave that to me, Brane. Just get the rest of the company down. Within the next...’ he checked the chronometer that was still running in his display, ‘... ninety minutes would be good.’

‘Aye, warsmith.’

It took less than sixty.

The Dark Castellans landed on the shoreline. Drop pods thudded into sand and shallow ocean, disgorging squads of power-armoured Space Marines who emerged with bolters raised, ready for resistance. Their erstwhile brothers provided it. Many of Terrox’s warriors had been part of the Dark Castellans once, before Terrox had broken away and formed his own warband, and Kallus’ warriors were still angry about that betrayal. Others were refugees from other companies, or new Chaos Space Marines created in the centuries since Terrox had left Medrengard.

At Kallus’ command, Brane gathered his Terminators and headed towards the battle, leaving the warsmith in the complex. His own forces were outnumbered ten times, not even counting the tech-priests’ cyborg legions. But that wouldn’t stop them. He had gathered together his Terminators and crashed into Terrox’s force from the flank just as the main force engaged them from the front. In the ensuing confusion, the Terminators slaughtered hundreds and drove deep into the enemy formation. And now they were surrounded.

It was glorious.

He punched the head off an enemy Iron Warrior and threw the remains at two others, knocking them from their feet. He followed up with a burst of bolter fire and charged at them. He crushed one beneath the weight of his Cataphractii-pattern armour and kicked the other so hard that plates of his armour were driven into his body, crushing organs.

He turned and motioned his squad forward, and they advanced towards the heart of the enemy formation. Somewhere in there, Terrox would be leading his troops, and Brane wanted to deliver him to Kallus. Ferrum fired his heavy

flamer, dousing the foe with liquid promethium and setting them alight. They fought on, but the flames weakened the seals on their armour, and pinpoint bolter shots penetrated the softer joins and killed them. He activated his vox.

‘Warsmith, we’re doing well here, but we can’t last forever. How close is the plan to completion?’

‘Hold them just a little longer, Brane,’ came Kallus’ voice. ‘We’re nearly there.’

‘Acknowledged,’ sighed Brane, looking around for a new target.

Kallus stalked through the complex, contemptuously battering skitarii out of the way when they stood in his path. Finally, he reached his target, a heavily shielded chamber at the heart of the forge-temple. The door was sealed, but a handful of krak grenades saw to that, and he ventured inside. The chamber had a single occupant, a tech-priest wired into a throne. The throne turned as he entered, and the tech-priest looked at him with rheumy eyes and a dazed expression.

‘What... who are you?’ the priest asked.

Kallus ignored him and approached a console on the perimeter of the chamber.

‘Guards... guards!’ shouted the tech-priest, his voice weak.

‘They’re dead,’ said Kallus. ‘I’m here to take over your world.’

‘That... is impossible,’ the tech-priest croaked. ‘I control this world, and its skitarii legions. I have summoned them. All of them. They will be here soon, and you will die.’

‘No. They won’t,’ said Kallus, glancing once more at the chronometer running in his helmet display. It reached zero. ‘I’ve spent the last three days uploading a piece of scrapcode into your noosphere, exalted tech-priest. I just need to activate it, and control of everything on this lovely little world will pass to me... including your hundreds of thousands of cyborg soldiers.’

‘How...?’ the priest barked. ‘How is such a thing possible?’

‘The person I serve has been planning this for a long time,’ Kallus said. ‘His pet

tech-priests prepared the code, but they needed someone who could survive within this complex for long enough to upload it. And that meant an Iron Warrior who Terrox would keep alive, for a time at least. I was just what was needed.'

Kallus toggled a switch on the console before him, and a world of data streamed onto his helmet display. He vaguely acknowledged a strangled scream behind him as the tech-priest was cut off from control of the forge world and suffered a fatal aneurysm.

Kallus focused on the command protocols for Taris' skitarii legions and smiled. He was in control now.

Brane was surrounded and alone. He had run out of ammunition for his combi-bolter and been cut off from the rest of his squad some time ago, and had fallen into a rhythm of brutal melee combat. His armour was damaged in a score of places from bolter shells, power swords and other lucky strikes, and his helmet had been so badly damaged by a glancing blow from a power fist that he'd had to discard it. No single warrior had survived to hit him twice. He spotted an Iron Warrior with a crest on his helmet and was pushing towards him when a new sound invaded the susurrus of battle: the high-pitched whine of skitarii weaponry.

He turned. If the world's defence legions had joined the battle on the side of Terrox, the Dark Castellans would be exterminated. A squad of crimson-cloaked cyborg warriors came into view through the fog of war, firing ornate rifles at the nearest Iron Warriors. Brane raised his bolter to defend himself as the nearest turned to face him. It regarded him for a moment then turned away, targeting a knot of Terrox's troops.

Brane smiled savagely. 'Dark Castellans,' he roared over all vox channels, 'our allies have arrived. Into these turncoats. Leave none alive!'

He opened a private channel to Kallus. 'It worked, warsmith. The skitarii have joined the battle.'

'Yes, I've taken command of the cyborgs. And the world, actually. Win the battle, Brane. And bring me Terrox.'

'Aye, warsmith,' said Brane. 'Iron within.'

‘Iron without, Brane. Iron everywhere.’

The battle was won. Thousands of Iron Warriors had been exterminated in mere hours by the tireless skitarii. Many had tried to surrender, but Kallus had ordered them killed. Some had betrayed him once. Others had only known loyalty to his rival, and he could never trust them. Terrox had been captured alive and brought before Kallus, on his knees and stripped of his armour.

‘You traitor,’ Terrox spat. ‘Perturabo would never have ordered this massacre. Why are you here? Whom do you serve?’

Kallus stepped towards Terrox and punched him in the chest. His old rival fell back, grunting in pain.

‘My loyalty is no longer to the primarch, it is true,’ Kallus said. ‘He deserves it not, idling in his tower when he could be leading us into battle. And forcing us to do the same, keeping us as guards when we should be warriors. The Despoiler will use my Dark Castellans better.’

‘The Despoiler? You have thrown in your lot with the failed Warmaster’s son? You are an idiot, Kallus. And it will—’

Terrox never finished his sentence. Kallus pulled him from the floor and snapped his neck in a single smooth motion. He threw the body down and turned to watch the control chamber’s other inhabitants.

The three Dark Mechanicum priests had travelled down from the Fallen Empire and were tinkering with the machinery in the control chamber. They had cleared the corpse of the tech-priest out of the chair, which now sat empty. One of them would fill it, Kallus assumed. That was not his concern. He had taken Taris, and would soon be returning to the Eye to take his place in the Black Legion.

He had sent a message to Abaddon, but was surprised when one of the Dark Mechanicum priests came to him bearing a portable hololithic projection unit.

‘The Warmaster wishes to speak to you, warsmith,’ it said in a monotone, and activated the device. A three-dimensional image of Abaddon sprang to life, and the Warmaster’s rich baritone filled the chamber.

‘Warsmith, you have done well. I am... pleased.’

‘I live to serve you, my lord.’

‘All went to plan?’ the Warmaster enquired.

‘Aye. As you expected, Terrox held me in the complex, allowing me to upload the code. From there it was easy.’

‘And you are in control of the planet’s systems and forces.’

‘I am, my lord, though I am ready to turn that control over to the tech-priests whenever they are ready.’

‘That will not be necessary, warsmith.’

Kallus thought he had misheard. ‘My lord? I don’t understand.’

‘I said that will not be necessary. You shall remain in control of Taris, Kallus.’

‘But my lord... I have completed the mission. I am to join your Legion.’

‘And so you shall, Kallus. You and your warriors may call yourselves sons of the Black Legion. And as warriors under my command, your orders are to garrison Taris. Defend it against any and all threats that present themselves, and use its resources to manufacture materiel for my armies.’

‘I... Lord Abaddon...’ Kallus looked around in horror. The three tech-priests hovered at the edge of the chamber, watching him.

‘I told you, Kallus, that castellan was a fitting role for you. And so it is. You will do well as commander of Taris, I am quite sure. Of course, you will have to be wired in to the command chamber, or so my priests tell me. Apparently it is the optimal way to control the forge-temples.’

‘No! This is—’

‘Priests, do your duty,’ Abaddon ordered.

The hololith faded and Kallus turned, raising his bolter, but it was too late. A manipulator arm emerged from beneath one of the priests’ robes and knocked it from his grasp. Mechadendrites unfolded from the other two and wrapped

around Kallus. He tried to break them, but they were as solid as adamantium. His helmet was pulled from his head and he felt something in his neck. Cold paralysis flooded his body, and he was left unable to move, or to speak. He could only watch as his armour was stripped from his body. Over centuries in the Eye of Terror, the suit, once polished Mark III plate, had twisted and deformed, and parts had fused with his body. Where it didn't come loose smoothly, the priests tore it from Kallus' body, leaving ragged, gaping wounds that ached even through the numbing agent that flooded his system. The tech-priests lifted snaking cables that emerged from panels in the command throne and laboriously inserted them in to sockets on Kallus' black carapace, chanting arcane syllables. Slowly, the warsmith was plugged into the command throne.

'Activate,' one of the tech-priests barked, and an entire world's data flooded into his brain and overwhelmed him.

As he slid into unconsciousness, Kallus of the Black Legion, Castellan of Taris, screamed a silent scream.

About the Author

Graeme Lyon is the author of the Space Marine Battles novella *Armour of Faith* and the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'The Carnac Campaign: Sky Hunter', 'From the Flames' and 'Kor'sarro Khan: Huntmaster', along with the Warhammer tales 'Bride of Khaine' and 'The Hunter'. He hails from East Kilbride in Scotland, but now lives and works in Nottingham.

BLOOD AND IRON

Robbie MacNiven

No one, man or daemon, could remember a time before darkness ruled over Dementius. It was not the darkness of the night, for there were no stars, no moons, no constellations to be seen above the hell-forges. It was the blotch of a canker, the blackness of rotting, diseased lungs, the eternal pall of unrestrained and ever-grinding industry. The only light that existed there was even worse – the flare and fury of a million blazing, mile-high stacks, the white heat of city-sized furnaces, the shimmering glow rising from oceans of bubbling, molten metal, and the sickly yellow illumination that leaked from the unnatural runes that covered every inch of the lost forge world's metallic surface. Damnation took many forms, and on Dementius, it was iron and steel, fire and smoke, and burning, melting flesh.

Ferrix, foremost warpsmith of the Iron Warriors, surveyed it all from the spiked observation tower of one of Dementius' numberless battle pits. The arena stretched before him, the packed dirt long ago obscured by a layer of shattered war engines, the side tiers now patrolled by the warriors of his personal retinue. Around the stadium, the manufactorums and slaughtermills pressed close, bloody processor spires, burning promethium chutes and belching, black-stained stacks all melding into a nightmarish cityscape that stretched in every direction for as far as the warpsmith could see.

It was all decidedly unimpressive. Dementius was nothing to Ferrix, nothing next to the true glories of his home planet. Medrengard revealed this place for the pathetic shadow it really was. Ferrix had stood beneath the black sun of the Iron Warriors' fortress world and marvelled at crenelated keeps and spires that pierced the upper atmosphere. He had seen prisoners languishing in the heat of dungeons that pierced the planet's core, and manned bastions that encircled entire continents. He had stood atop the walls of the great citadel of his blessed primarch, Perturabo, and observed the warships of the collected warbands tethered to its upper towers, filling the white sky with iron. Dementius was a backwater, a fume-choked hellhole with nothing to commend it bar the volume

of its production lines. That, and the pact for the war engine that had brought Ferrix to its polluted surface.

The blind servants of the Corpse Emperor had once described it as a god-machine. Ferrix had seen gods, had battled them and bound them during innumerable summoning rituals, had felt their wrath. He knew the thing looming over the far end of the arena was not a god. Gods, even the mightiest, manifested as flesh and bone, not adamantium plate and tempered steel. This was no god, not yet anyway.

Even so, the warpsmith had to admit that it was a construct worthy of his skills. At a hundred and eighty two feet from its splayed base-plates to the tallest spire battery that topped its back, the machine dwarfed even the nearest smoke stacks, towering over Dementius' industries like a brooding father stood among his children's play blocks. The machine had borne many names and titles down the centuries, but its latest, the one the hereteks of Dementius were even now christening it with, was Bloodbane. Ferrix's data feeds listed it as a warmonger-class Titan formerly of the Legio Gladius, now captured and enslaved by the Dark Mechanicum. As far as he was concerned, it was going to be his greatest work yet.

'The supplicants are ready, brother warpsmith,' Sallik said. The Iron Warrior's voice was strained, and Ferrix didn't need to turn his gaze from Bloodbane's mighty form to sense his subordinate's lust for butchery. Sallik was one of the few Iron Warriors who had sworn himself to Khorne, and although he had refused to repaint his power armour with the colours favoured by his god, in over six centuries of slaughter he had never cleaned the ceramite. His battleplate was now caked in a thick layer of dark, dried blood. For his dedication, the Blood God had blessed Sallik with a mutation that morphed his right forearm into an organic parody of a chainaxe, the bones bent backwards, the flesh twisted and remoulded into a broad head, the fingers shattered and sharpened into teeth. Unlike the other brethren of the Legion, Sallik had refused to replace his deformity with the blessed purity of bionic augmentation. The Khornate warrior was, as far as Ferrix was concerned, a disgusting and deranged barbarian. But where the warpsmith's mission to Dementius was concerned, the barbarian had his uses.

'We wait,' Ferrix said. 'The machine needs to be anointed further before you start your butchering.'

‘Khorne demands skulls,’ Sallik said, the bass voice issuing from his vocaliser rising in volume.

‘Khorne always demands skulls,’ Ferrix said dispassionately. ‘He’ll get them soon enough.’

‘The Blood God will not be dismissed,’ Sallik barked.

Ferrix rounded on him. Even with his Chaos-warped bulk, Sallik still found himself having to look up at his legion-brother. The warpsmith’s gunmetal ceramite was accentuated by extra layers of riveted battleplate. Down his back bristled a thick cape of cables, data cords, uplink plugs and servo spines. Six mechatendrils – segmented, serpent-like appendages that sprouted from his fume-belching backpack – writhed and hissed at the Khorne champion, their metal maws snapping and drills buzzing. The warpsmith’s green bionic lenses, set into his leering metal skull helm, whirred. The Khornate Iron Warrior took a pace backwards.

‘We wait for word from the hereteks,’ Ferrix said, smashing the bottom of his barbed power glaive into the tower’s gantry for emphasis. ‘You will not seek to amend my plans again, Sallik, and if you do, I will cut your limbs off and lobotomise your miserable, worthless shell. Is that understood?’

Sallik said nothing. Ferrix turned away from him, mechatendrils still snapping agitatedly. Khorne’s savages understood nothing but brute strength but, if necessary, the warpsmith could demonstrate that in abundance. He keyed his vox uplink, patching into the personal channel utilised by Warp-magos Ghool.

‘Report your progress, venerable magos,’ he ordered. There was a moment’s laboured breathing before the phlegm-choked voice of the corrupt tech-priest came back over the net.

‘How did you gain access to this channel?’

‘Your encryption data is ancient and utterly obsolete, Ghool. It took me point seven seconds to break it. Now, I asked you a question.’

‘We are still on schedule, warpsmith. The eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eighth supplicant has just been executed. My prognosticators are sensing the machine-spirit beginning to turn.’

‘Then I shall begin the ritual,’ Ferrix said. ‘Keep me informed of your progress.’

‘May the Dark Gods bless—’ Ferrix cut the link before the simpering magos could finish his meaningless catechism. He could feel expectation radiating from Sallik, but made a point of not looking at the Khorne warrior, instead continuing to observe Bloodbane.

It was a truly mighty engine. Each leg was the size of an Imperial bastion, the baroque outer walls now swarming with hundreds of chained slave gangs who hacked away the loyalist iconography of the once-proud Titan and befouled its surfaces with vile runes and fresh blood. The torso was draped in a vast banner sewn from human hides and daubed with the great skull crest of the Blood God. Each arm was a weapon, wondrous in its sheer size – the left a plasma annihilator, the right a hellstorm cannon, both bound in heavy chains. Upon its back, it bore what had once been a mighty Imperial battle-basilica, bristling with flying buttresses, spires and secondary weapons batteries. The rituals had begun within the basilica’s echoing halls, which were now carpeted with dismembered corpses and hung with the marks of Chaos. Heldrakes and lesser flying daemons were already roosting in its towers, and terrible shapes slunk, just out of sight, beyond the shattered stained-glass windows.

The machine’s head, set low between its shoulders, was a great, grinning metal skull not dissimilar to the sigil of the Iron Warriors Legion embossed on Ferrix’s right pauldron. The lenses of the machine were dark and dead, for now. If Ferrix was successful, they would soon blaze with infernal light.

‘Warpsmith.’ Sallik was speaking through clenched teeth. Ferrix finally turned, gesturing down at the pit below them.

‘Go.’

Sallik didn’t hesitate, scrambling down the tower’s ladder to the pit with curses and oaths on his lips. The arena space was full, though not with its usual combatants. Normally, the warp-fuelled slaughter machines created by the planet’s deranged heretekks did battle against one another in arenas such as this, each one competing for the dark honour of joining the ranks of standardised engines like the defilers, forgefiends and soul grinders. Now however, the broken wreckage was carpeted with hundreds of souls, human and daemon alike, united by one thing – they all bore on them the favour of the Dark Prince,

Slaanesh. They'd been corralled in the arena beneath the levelled bolters of Ferrix's Iron Warriors, each one bound to a metal stake. It had taken months to assemble them all together, ripped from Dementius' assembly lines or seized from its slave pens. As Sallik thrust between them on the way to the dais at the pit's centre, they began to let up a wailing cacophony.

Ferrix ignored the eerie sound, satisfied by the knowledge that the beast he was seeking to summon loved nothing more than slaughtering his god's most hated enemies. He would not be able to resist this many Slaaneshi skulls offered up to him.

Two of Ferrix's Iron Warriors took hold of the ritual's first victim, a bare-headed noise marine of the Angels of Ecstasy, and hauled him up onto the dais. The fallen Angel seemed lost in a daze, his mind addled by centuries of sensory overload. Ferrix shuddered with disgust. The debased servants of the Prince of Pleasure were as unworthy as a blood butcher like Sallik. Unrestrained worship of the Dark Gods brought only lunacy and mutation. Ferrix's ambitions were considerably more grandiose.

Howling with glee, Sallik swung his arm, and his flesh-axe thudded down through the noise marine's bared neck. Purplish ichor splattered across the sigils carved into the dais. The horde of prisoners wailed louder, chains rattling as they strained and struggled. Ferrix's warriors fetched another victim, a writhing manufactorum dreg with eyes mounted on stalks and a nest of tentacles sprouting from his belly.

The executions went on. Ferrix set a remote counter on his visor's uplink display and turned his attention to Kwemmich. The little mechanical daemon-cherub had returned with the item he'd sent it to his shuttle to collect – a great, yellowing skull, elongated and jaw-jutting like some monstrous primordial hound. The mark of Khorne, carved into the centre of its forehead, still seemed to burn with latent bloodlust. Kwemmich, iron pinions rattling, clutched the relic to its chest with both diminutive claws.

Ferrix held out his hand, and the iron cherub paused for a moment as it steadied itself midair before dropping the skull into the warpsmith's hand.

'Thank you, Kwemmich,' Ferrix said, and the tiny construct's rotor hummed with contentment. Kwemmich had been Ferrix's first daemon engine, forged and

bound ten millennia earlier, when the Long War had been young and the former Techmarine had first started on the path of the warpsmith. It remained, to this day, his favoured construct.

One of Ferrix's me chatendrils snaked round and opened its maw, spilling a stream of blood across the skull's top. The vital essence of a hundred ritually slain psykers had taken Ferrix the better part of a century to collect. Not only would it delight Khorne's servant, the blood should sustain the entity for long enough within the skull for it to be installed in Bloodbane's former princeps node.

That was assuming Ferrix could bind the beast to its former skull in the first place.

Kwemmich came to rest on one pauldron, wings scissoring away as Ferrix smeared the blood across the cranium's bone. The Khornate rune at its centre pulsed a little stronger.

'Soon, Kwemmich,' Ferrix hissed to his familiar, looking into the baleful relic's empty eye sockets. 'I can feel him drawing nearer. He will be my greatest work yet.'

Before the diminutive daemon engine could react, Sallik's howl seized the warpsmith's attention. He turned back to the arena just in time to see the blood which now drenched the central dais beginning to rise, as though drawn into the air by some great vortex. The gory matter started to swirl and coalesce, taking on a roughly coherent shape. The counter on Ferrix's visor read a little over eighty-eight.

'Keep going, Sallik,' he ordered, though he needn't have bothered. The jubilant berserker had already beheaded another victim and was personally dragging a bound and gagged daemonette to the chopping block. As the creature's pale head joined the pile littering the edge of the platform, the swirling viscera pulsed and surged, leaving the dais and storming like a sentient flood into the remaining prisoners. The outermost wailed in depraved pleasure as the savage flow whipped the flesh from their bones and drained their flayed bodies dry.

'He's here,' Ferrix whispered. Kwemmich made a grating, mewling sound and edged behind the protection of the Iron Warrior's backpack vents. The warpsmith flexed his grip on his power glaive and activated the vox.

‘Brethren, stand by.’

The last of the Slaaneshi captives collapsed, little more than bloodless, drained husks. As the final one slumped there was a crack like thunder and a roar that set the whole arena shaking. The swirling blood came together with a crash, resolving itself around the shape of what looked like a vast, crimson hound. Freshly formed, meat-red muscles rippled with savage intent beneath gore-matted black fur, while a bestial head, full of fangs and edged by frills of raised green flesh, glared around with daemoniac intelligence. A spiked brass collar binding the beast’s thick neck throbbed with witch-hate.

The Red Hound, Slaughterclaw, Khorne’s Huntsmaster, the Relentless One, this particular daemon of the Blood God bore many names, but Ferrix knew it as Gorgoth, and it had pounced right into the warpsmith’s trap.

‘Open fire,’ Ferrix ordered. The bark of bolters immediately reverberated around the stadium. Gorgoth twisted and howled in fury as hard rounds chewed at its unnaturally resilient hide, turning at bay as it tried to pick which of its attackers to charge first. Sallik made the decision for it. Utterly overwhelmed by the manifestation of one of his deity’s most favoured servants, he’d fallen to his knees before the huge hound. Gorgoth snapped forward and, with a single bite, cut the Iron Warriors berserker in half.

Ferrix descended into the pit, activating his glaive with Kwemmich swooping and darting behind him. He could feel his own bloodlust – tracked by the scrolling visor-data monitoring his heartbeat and adrenaline levels – rising due to his proximity to Khorne’s avatar. He couldn’t let it get the better of him.

Swallowing Sallik’s bloody remains, Gorgoth began to scabble up the arena’s side to get at the nearest Iron Warriors firing down into it, ignoring the bolter rounds chewing away ineffectually at its red flesh. Ferrix started to sprint across the arena towards it, raising the old skull in one fist.

‘Gorgoth!’ he bellowed. The daemon turned at the wall’s base, snarling at the mortal who dared address it by name. Ferrix came to a halt, letting Kwemmich catch up and snatch the skull back up into the air.

‘Do you recognise yourself, daemon?’ he demanded. ‘Do you remember the last material form you took before you were banished by a warrior mightier than you?’

Gorgoth howled and leapt, trying to swipe at Kwemmich, but the diminutive machine imp darted back out of reach. The daemon turned on Ferrix, bloody claws snatching at him. The warpsmith took a step back and parried with the adamantium haft of his power glaive, warp-spawned talons grating against the crackling metal. Ferrix stamped a foot down to gain purchase among the wreckage littering the pit's floor, servos and bionic limbs whining as they battled against the vast strength of the furious daemon.

The other Iron Warriors had ceased fire for fear of hitting their warpsmith. Gorgoth was the first to break the death-grip, rearing back on its powerful hind legs to snap at Ferrix's visor. One fang scored a groove against the silver skull, and the Iron Warrior went back another pace, a swipe of his glaive keeping Gorgoth at bay.

'Submit,' Ferrix ordered, mechatendrils writhing and snapping as they sought to hold the daemon back. 'Submit now, or I swear you will suffer a fate worse than mere banishment.'

Gorgoth lunged again, darting inside Ferrix's guard with a speed unimaginable in something so large. The Iron Warrior cursed as he felt the beast's jaws clamp around his left leg, one of the few parts of him still comprised of flesh and bone. With a twist that spoke of uncounted millennia of successful hunts, the monstrous daemon brought the warpsmith down and was on top of him in a heartbeat. Warning runes flashed red across Ferrix's visor.

The warpsmith snarled and twisted in the beast's grip, and the two mechatendrils not pinned beneath him darted forward. One rammed itself into Gorgoth's slavering maw, its metallic pincers spread wide to keep the fangs parted, while the other, its sinuous coils tipped with a charged fusion cutter, hovered before the daemon's open mouth. In the same instant, one of Gorgoth's talons closed around Ferrix's neck seal, threatening to snap it with the slightest exertion.

'I will name you, Gorgoth,' Ferrix spat. 'If you don't submit to my binding, I will speak your true name, and you will belong to me forever.'

Both Iron Warrior and beast, locked together in a violent embrace, went completely still.

The beast blinked. For all its seemingly unthinking savagery, the daemon was far from a mere bloodthirsty animal. That was why it was dangerous. That was why

Ferrix needed it.

You lie, the creature said, a voice like the crashing of razor-sharp steel on brass shields projecting directly into Ferrix's mind.

'Perhaps, daemon,' the warpsmith said. 'But I have bound more terrible creatures than you down the ages. If you force me to name you, I will seal you far from any battle or place of bloodshed. I will torment you for the rest of eternity. Submit freely, and you can quench your bloodlust here and now.'

'I am no mere machine-spirit,' Gorgoth roared, grip tightening fractionally around Ferrix's neck. 'I will not be shackled to one of your constructs!'

'Bloodbane is more than a machine,' Ferrix managed between gritted teeth. 'With it you can slaughter entire worlds. Nothing will stop you. It's that, or suffer a naming.'

For what seemed like an age, Ferrix held the hate-filled gaze of the warp beast. Then, almost imperceptibly, the creature's grip on him lessened. Slowly, Ferrix eased his mechatendrils back.

'I believe we can reach an agreement that satisfies both of us,' the warpsmith said. 'For the Blood God, and for Perturabo.'

'Warpsmith Ferrix!'

The voice of Warp-magos Ghool, choked with the rot of Nurgle, caused the Iron Warrior to look up from the data-slate he'd been scanning. The master heretek was approaching, his bloated, rusting form borne aloft on a scrap-littered computational palanquin carried on the backs of two-dozen blinded slave dregs. The Dark Mechanicum overlord waved one palsied hand at Bloodbane, towering over them both.

'Is it not a sight worthy of the Dark Gods themselves?'

Ferrix let one of his mechatendrils take the data-slate, following Ghool's gesture. Even now, Kwemmich was delivering the bloody skull binding Gorgoth to the Titan's inner sanctum, while a hundred thousand supplicants wailed praises from the basilica spires and bastion limbs of the war machine. The ceremony was nearing completion.

‘By what means did you bring the Red Hound to heel?’ Ghool continued, surveying Ferrix from beneath the rotting folds of his green cowl. ‘I heard you lost at least one of your battle-brothers in the process?’

‘The Warpsmith Coven does not share the secrets of the gods with others, magos,’ Ferrix said. ‘I’m sure the Mechanicum appreciates that as much as we do.’

He sensed the heretek tense with anger, doubtless infuriated that the mastery of melding monster and machine was so blithely denied to him. Before he could concoct another barbed question, the chanting of the supplicants struck a howling crescendo. Ferrix looked up in time to see bloody crimson light flare into being behind the Titan’s lenses. His bionic eyes picked out Kwemmich, the daemon’s skull properly implanted, skittering down the Titan’s cliff-like front towards him.

‘It’s waking up,’ he said.

For the first time since its capture by the forces of Chaos, the Warmonger Titan moved. It was a ponderous, almost imperceptible shift, its arms raising slightly to pull taut the vast chains that bound it. A low growl echoed from huge vox grills set into its lower jaw.

‘Everything specified by your warsmith in our pact has been assembled at landing zone Epsilon,’ Ghool said, staring up at the towering engine. ‘Munitions, slaves and more.’

‘And more indeed,’ Ferrix said, turning his back on the magos and keying his vox. ‘Brethren, it is time. Activate the melta charges.’

There was a distant crump, followed by a second and a third. Searing flashes of white light lit up the Titan’s defiled lower limbs. Chains began to fall from the daemon engine, the links molten and broken. Ghool shifted his bulk into a more upright position, sickly spume pouring from his open mouth as he stared askance at the detonations breaking his new war engine free.

‘Wh– What are you doing?’ he burred, turning to Ferrix. The Iron Warrior said nothing, watching as more preset melta bombs wrecked the Titan’s restraints. The daemon engine yanked its weapon-arms, the remaining chains shattering and the heavy links crushing those caught beneath. It let out an ear-splitting

bellow of triumph.

‘Treachery!’ Ghool wailed. ‘You fool! What have you done?’

Ferrix finally turned back to face the heretek, signalling with his glaive to his retinue. Without a word, the Iron Warriors opened fire, mowing down the twisted skitarii scrambling to protect their master and blasting apart the screaming slaves trying to keep his palanquin aloft.

Ferrix leapt as Ghool’s platform began to sway, mechatendrils splayed, cords and cables snapping out behind him. He landed before the corpulent warp-magos with a crash, power thrilling along the barbed blade of his glaive.

‘I didn’t bind him,’ he said, staring down into the terrified eyes of the heretek. ‘Not in the fullest sense. Gorgoth possesses the Titan, and he is free to do as he wills. You are a fool to believe you can control a creature like him.’

‘Our pact,’ Ghool stammered. ‘We’re giving you—’

‘Not enough,’ Ferrix finished. ‘While Gorgoth wrecks your pitiful domain, my brethren will strip it bare. You and your kind never contribute enough to the Long War, Ghool. That ends today.’

Before the warp-magos could speak again, the Iron Warrior swung his glaive, opening the heretek’s blighted belly. A flood of bile and thick knots of writhing maggots burst out, splattering Ferrix’s silver greaves. Hissing with disgust, the warpsmith cut the pitiful creature’s head from his shoulders and dropped off the edge of the bolt-riddled palanquin.

Behind him, the daemon Titan was fully awake. Its furious roar split Dementius’ polluted air, and the thousands of pallid, suppurating slaves still cramming its basilica battlements shrieked with agony as dark flames burst forth from every surface of the corrupt engine, consuming flesh and soul alike. Burning figures plummeted like falling comets down its sheer sides. Ferrix raised his hand so that Kwemmich could alight on his fist, the little daemon’s metal head turning a hundred and eight degrees so it could observe its handiwork.

Then Gorgoth Bloodbane took its first step.

With leaden grace, one bastion-limb rose, trailing rubble and crushed corpses.

Ferrix watched the huge metal appendage swing ponderously overhead, the Titan's shadow passing across him as falling debris pattered from his armour. Despite the danger, and despite the illogicalness of the emotion, Ferrix couldn't deny a rush of excitement. It was a sight even the Long War did not often provide him with.

Then the foot had passed over him and came crashing down behind, the impact flinging Ghool and the mangled corpses of his minions high into the air. Even with his auto-stabilisers activated, Ferrix barely kept his footing.

'Warpsmith,' one of his subordinates voxed. 'The fleet is breaking from the warp on the system's edge. They will be in orbit within the hour.'

'Upload the drop sites I scanned earlier to the warsmith,' Ferrix ordered. 'The faster we strip this place clean, the better.'

Gorgoth fired its plasma annihilator, the weapon's recoil kicking up rubble all around them. With a blast of light as bright as the birth of a new star, a distant manufactorum district disappeared. A second shot followed, liquefying a huge tech-temple in a white blaze. The Titan's hellstorm cannon began to spin as the creature bellowed with blood-crazed delight, shaking the scarred earth beneath Ferrix's feet.

The warsmith turned his back on the glorious sight, looking up at the black skies for the first signs of Dreadclaw assault pods. Time passed differently on places like Dementius, but by his best calculations, it would take the Dark Mechanicum between eight and ten standard years to completely wreck Gorgoth and banish him from the Titan's blazing structure. There was even a slender chance the daemon would achieve its wish and kill every living thing on the planet. Either way, Ferrix and his Iron Warrior brethren would be long gone, the holds of their fleet filled with the twisted forge world's most valuable artefacts.

A long time ago, when it was still possible, the warsmith might even have smiled. It really was his greatest work yet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robbie MacNiven is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. His hobbies include reenacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000. He has written the Deathwatch short story 'Redblade', and the Warhammer 40,000 stories 'A Song for the Lost' and 'Blood and Iron' for Black Library.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

DIVINE WILL

by **ANDY SMILLIE**

Divine Will

Andy Smillie

Death is not instantaneous.

I pull the trigger. The target falls, dead.

For most, that is the truth of it. That is enough.

It is in man's nature to turn from death. It is his primal belief that to look too closely, to linger too long on another's final moment, would tempt oblivion to claim more than one life. For all he has conquered, man cannot stare down death and triumph for long.

I tighten my grip on my rifle.

To a Vindicare, a man reborn a weapon, the fleeting space between life and death is a vast gulf of action and reaction. It is a moment stretched to breaking.

I press my eye to the scope.

A golden-armoured figure fills the display. A series of translucent digits resolve as the range-finder adjusts. The man is half a mile away.

I adjust the magnification, drawing out to see the surround.

The man stands atop a marble podium, dwarfed by the grandeur of the structure behind him. The vast, many-columned building is the seat of power here on Drex. An honour guard of Tempestus Scions flank the man to the left and right. Each wears a scarlet dress uniform, their weapons holstered, their hands tucked in ceremony behind their backs.

I adjust again, widening the field of view.

A crowd of thousands vies for my attention. They have crammed themselves into the palace square beyond all reasonable capacity. Held in place by a ring of iron-framed barricades, their mass stops a few meters short of the podium.

I feel my breath drift between my lips as I pan over the shifting crowd.

Rough-hewn, wooden signs and ragged banners with slanderous oaths reinforce the bitter faces of the men and women wielding them. These people have come to listen to the man in armour, but they have not come to follow him. Not yet.

I tighten focus.

The man's jaw is certain. By appearance, he is in his mid-thirties. Like the sense of self-determination the people of Drex feel, this is a lie. Rejuve-therapy and vital stimms have prolonged his life. The man is three hundred Terran standard.

It is a long time to have lived. A long time in which to rack up sins and amass enemies. And this man has not been idle.

I exhale and make a final, minute adjustment to the scope, narrowing on the Inquisitorial pendant affixed to the man's breastplate.

'They will try to kill you,' I had said. 'It would be safer to deploy in force. Sweep north from the capital and burn out what remains of the daemon's followers.'

'Too much has been wasted already. An army will not bring peace to Drex, Tarim. The only salvation for the planet lies in a single bullet.'

'It will take me two days to locate the cult leader.'

'No,' Inquisitor Gerhart shook his head, and tossed a shell casing into my lap. 'The people of Drex must believe as they once did. They must be made to understand, to know in their hearts that there is only one true Emperor and that He is the God of Mankind.' Gerhart paced the short length of my meditation cell. 'I will stand before them, and the Emperor Himself will reach down from the heavens and ward me from harm. Of His divinity there will be no doubt.' He stopped moving, clenching his fists. 'Or I will turn their planet to ash.'

I looked up then and met Gerhart's eyes. Despite the vigour of his oration, they were still, full of the cold calm of a man whose soul has been burnt away by the fire of his own deeds. 'There are perhaps only seven in my temple capable of such a shot,' I said. 'Even I have made a shot like it only once.'

'Do you believe in the Emperor's divine will?' asked Gerhart.

‘Yes,’ I nodded. ‘But I do not believe that it will render you bulletproof.’

‘Good,’ said Gerhart, stepping from my cell. ‘Then do not miss.’

I lift my eye from the scope and look down towards my south-west at the Oration Tower. The domed structure is the only other vantage point overlooking the inquisitor. Red warning sigils filter over my display as my visor picks up a heat signature behind one of the angular windows decorating the tower’s peak.

The High Speaker, his aide and the five scions who were there to keep up the pretence of protection were undoubtedly now dead. A fair price to ensure the target’s location.

I take off my visor and place it on the roof next to me, careful to angle it towards the tower. Teasing out the thread-thin data-cable from behind the visor’s optical cogitator, I jack it into the scope’s auxiliary port, linking their displays.

I settle back into a firing position.

Gerhart is in full flow now, his arms thrusting in emphasis. I resist the urge to read his lips. The coming minutes will require all my concentration.

I exhale slow, fixing on the Inquisitorial pendant. It is a beacon, drawing my crosshair to Gerhart’s central mass.

He raises his arms, drawing them up from his sides as though crucifying himself before the crowd. He will never present as an easier target.

My visor feeds the scope a single rune.

I fire.

For a long a moment, I watch.

A bullet spins through the air towards Gerhart’s chest. It was not fired from my rifle. Another chases the first. This time, my round. I watch the displacement in the air following the path of the two bullets as they bear down on the inquisitor.

My round hits first...

I exhale.

...striking the other before it can kill the inquisitor.

The bullets collide in a brief crack of noise. The Tempestus Scions break ranks, moving to surround Gerhart. He waves them away, looking to the heavens as he makes the sign of the aquila.

I am on my feet, pistol in my hand. I open up on full-auto at the tower. The range is too severe for my rounds to punch through the thick walls and kill. I keep firing. It is enough to cause panic. Stone shrapnel and the twisted remains of shells rip through the interior space of the tower, forcing the would-be assassin to displace. I empty a magazine, watching the single heat signature recede.

It is seventeen hours before I complete my mission.

Fear, like all disease, has to be allowed time to fester, to spread. The heretic from the Oration Tower told all who would listen of what the Emperor did to his bullet. Overnight, the populace of Drex had fallen silent. The angry protests seemed a distant memory as the manufactorums returned to capacity and the tithes of munitions began flowing once more. Drex had been humbled. It was fearful. Obedient.

I had followed word of a broken man whose eyes were the dark ink of death, and whose skin pulsed with a sickly vigour. The would-be assassin had no refuge; he was shunned by the now-loyal populace, and outcast by the rest of his heretical brotherhood. They had taken their own lives in the hope the Emperor would forgive their transgressions and protect their souls from the jaws of the daemons that awaited them in the beyond.

A rare smile stretches the corners of my mouth. The Emperor would offer no such redemption. Even as I walk the sheet-metal streets of the manufactorum district, their souls will be writhing in eternal agony.

A ramshackle wooden hut, strung together by leftover rigging, the Wyrms' Talon is typical of the many sump-holes bordering the munitions port. Short stools stand grouped around freestanding cask barrels. The makeshift tables echo the haggard faces of the eleven patrons whose eyes do their best to avoid me. I feel the rotten timbers of the floor strain as I step in out of the rain. A gaunt man in the crimson robes of the priesthood hurries past me. I make a mental note of the

barcode stamped into the flesh of his neck. The squat man behind the bar disappears into a back room. The wood shavings carpeting the place mulch to my boots as I move to a table in the corner and sit down.

I take my pistol from beneath my jacket and place it on the table. Ten of the room's occupants make for the door, their exits neither discreet nor graceful. None of them will see the dawn. There was a time when I might have pitied them. Their transgressions weren't wilful but to sin in ignorance is still to sin, and innocence proves nothing. Their laxity had allowed the Archenemy to sit among them unchallenged. The Emperor demanded more of his children. He demanded vigilance.

The man sitting opposite me doesn't even look up from his drink.

'Your name,' I say.

'I knew someone would come for me,' he says.

'Your name.'

'My name?' He looks up to hiss at me through wasted stumps of teeth.

'What is your name?'

'Rot and die.' He moves to stand.

I move quicker, catching his arm to keep him in place before driving my fingers into his throat. Gagging, he fights to steady himself on the stool.

'Tell me your name and I will grant you the Emperor's mercy. Do not—' I pause to pull a blade from the folds of my overcoat, and place it on the table next to my gun, 'and we will spend a long time together.'

'What does it matter? The Emperor himself tore my bullet from the sky. Between him and the darker gods I've failed, my soul will not escape judgement.'

I smile at him, a cold gesture laced with mocking pity. 'The Emperor has many hounds. He has little need to bark himself.'

‘You...’ His mouth widens and goes slack.

I roll up the left sleeve of my jacket. His eyes shift to my exposed forearm. Dark lines of neat text hide most of my flesh. Each of the tattoos is the name of a life I’ve taken. Yet they are more than just a tapestry of my life as a murderer. They are wards, armour against death’s gaze. A foolish notion, perhaps, that lines of ink could trick the fates, but camouflaged in the names of the dead I have, to today at least, avoided oblivion’s pull.

‘Name,’ I say, my voice hard as I indicate an area where the white of my skin still shows.

‘My name...’ He tightens his jaw, trying in vain to stem his tears. ‘St’phen. My name is St’phen Tylr.’

Before all of St’phen’s blood has had a chance to escape his corpse, I am already back out in the rain. Those who allowed this to happen are still out there, and none can live who deny the Emperor’s divine will.

About the Author

Andy Smillie is best known for his visceral *Flesh Tearers* novellas, *Sons of Wrath* and *Flesh of Cretacia*, and the novel *Trial by Blood*. He has also written a host of short stories starring this brutal Chapter of Space Marines and a number of audio dramas including *The Kauyon*, *Blood in the Machine*, *Deathwolf* and *From the Blood*.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

GIFT OF THE GODS

by **BEN COUNTER**

Gift of the Gods

Ben Counter

‘Banishment,’ spat Lord Antonidas Hajos of the Dire Claws. In the darkness of the shuttlecraft, his face was lit from beneath by the glowing power coils of his armour. ‘Why did they not just kill me? Put my head upon a pike at the fortress gates? Why was it banishment?’

‘It is written,’ replied Chirurgeon Koridis. ‘The Chapter pronounced exile as the punishment for attempting to usurp their Chapter Master.’

‘A law from an age of cowards!’ snarled Hajos. ‘Those were the times when the Dire Claws still skulked beneath the Imperial yoke! Even though we have cast off the Corpse-God for the lords of the warp, the cowardice remains. They feared to make a martyr of me, chirurgeon! The discontented would kneel before my severed head and carry it onto the battlements of our fortress in triumph! I was banished because they fear what I would become in death.’

The shuttle touched down. It had been fuelled only enough to reach the world nearest to the Dire Claws capital ship on which Hajos had been tried. Now it had reached that world, and its engines shut down for the last time.

‘They shall curse their folly,’ said Hajos, ‘that they let me live.’

The shuttle’s rear ramp boomed open to reveal a sweltering mass of jungle, a dark green ocean of choking foliage. The ship had come to rest on a hill of clear ground, and Hajos could see for miles across the rolling canopy, broken occasionally by mountains and plateaus. The sky overhead was deep blue and hung with heavy clouds, and it was speckled with columns of shrieking avian creatures set to flight by the shuttle’s arrival.

‘We were fortunate,’ said Koridis as he emerged from the shuttle beside Hajos.

‘Fortunate? We were betrayed!’ Hajos’ battered, leathery face creased with anger. ‘We have been reduced to vagabonds, and you call us fortunate?’

‘We could have been exiled to a dead world,’ replied Koridis, his own expression unchanging. Of all the Dire Claws, Koridis seemed the most immune to Hajos’

rages. ‘Or one otherwise inimical to survival. This is a world full of life.’

Hajos seemed about to speak, but something mollified him and his face turned from angry to stern. ‘Full of life,’ he said. ‘Brethren! Scout around! I will not tarry here!’

Less than half of Squad Morituris had accompanied Hajos on his exile. They had joined him in storming the throne room of the Dire Claws’ fortress-monastery, and those who now jumped down from the shuttle were all that had survived the ensuing firefight. Sergeant Morituris had been among the dead, and now Brother Forelm was their de facto leader.

‘Perimeter!’ ordered Forelm, gesturing with his power axe. ‘Give me eyes all around! Seek a foothold, we are too exposed up here! Get to it, vermin!’

‘Where there is life,’ said Hajos as the Dire Claws spread out, ‘there are the foundations of an empire. From less than this have mighty civilisations been wrought.’

‘Our priority should be our immediate survival,’ said Koridis. The surgeon had joined Hajos in exile for reasons of his own – he had not been among the would-be Chapter Master’s conspirators. He had claimed that his purpose was to retrieve the gene-seed of any fallen exiles and return it one day to the Dire Claws, but few had believed him.

‘I shall let the brethren deal with that,’ replied Hajos. ‘I must think for the long term. Survival is not enough, not for a Dire Claw! We do not survive, Koridis. We rule!’

‘I see signs of habitation,’ came a vox from one of Forelm’s brethren. ‘Smoke from small fires, and cleared land to our south-west.’

‘Then this,’ said Hajos with a rare smile, ‘is where it begins.’

The people of this world called it Jaeglor, the Endless Green, the Devourer of the Unwary. They lived in a collection of huts and low earth lodges, and they kept fires lit to ward off the jungle’s predators. They watched, terrified, from the treeline as Lord Hajos and the Dire Claws entered their village.

‘You!’ demanded Hajos, pointing at one of the tribesmen who seemed a little less

cowed than the others. ‘Come forth!’ he beckoned the man forward with a finger of his power claw.

The man walked unsteadily into the open. His well-tanned skin was covered in decorative scars and painted handprints, and he wore little more than a loincloth of animal hide. He was hung with bones and tiny animal skulls dangling from hooks and tendons worked into his skin. It was impossible to guess his age, but he looked about as old as someone on this world could get.

He spoke a few halting words that Hajos did not understand. ‘Can you translate?’ Lord Hajos asked of Koridis.

‘It is an old Low Gothic dialect,’ said Koridis. ‘I have tomes in such a language. These people must be psuedo-natives left over from the latter days of the Scattering, reverted to sub-feudal levels.’

‘What does he say?’

‘He asks who we are.’

‘Then tell him.’

Koridis translated, and the tribespeople swapped nervous glances as they drank in the news that these enormous armoured warriors had come from the sky and brought their superior gods with them. It was impossible to gauge how much of it they believed, or even understood. People such as these had been separated from the bulk of humanity for so long that many thought they were autochthonous, born from the earth of whatever world they had settled thousands of years ago.

‘He asks that we show mercy,’ said Koridis, translating the words of the tribe’s elder. ‘His people are pious and humble. They will make offerings to their god if it will placate us.’

‘Pious?’ said Hajos. ‘To whom? Who is their god? Ask them!’

Koridis translated Hajos’ demand and in reply, the elder pointed to the far end of the village, where a dozen huts clustered around a rise in the earth. Atop that rise was a statue of black stone. ‘They call it Serpentias,’ said Koridis. ‘It sounds like a typical ancestor-god, some ancient leader deified and worshipped.’

Hajos crossed the village to the statue, followed by the fearful eyes of the tribespeople. Up close, Serpentias did not strike Lord Hajos as impressive. The statue was of a huge and muscular man, caught in a pose of open-mouthed anguish, yelling at the sky. There was no denying that the crude sculpting had a certain flair to it, as if Serpentias' aggression and ambition had been captured in the grainy black stone, but it was a strange idol to have captured the devotion of a people.

Hajos crouched by the base of the statue, scattering the offerings of trinkets and animal skulls the tribe had left there. He gripped the statue around the knees and, as the servos of his armour hissed and smoked with the effort, the mass of stone shifted. With a roar, Lord Hajos uprooted the statue from the earth where it had stood for centuries. The tribespeople shrieked with alarm as he adjusted his grip to hold Serpentias like a stricken enemy over his head.

'There are no gods but those of the warp!' bellowed Hajos, knowing Koridis would translate his words. 'All others shall be cast down! The lords of the warp are your gods now, not this sham god of stone! To the lords of Plague, of Secrets, of Excess and of the Shedding of Blood, you will pledge your souls! Or you will be broken!'

Hajos cast down the statue. It shattered into thousands of chunks of stone. A terrible wailing rose from the tribespeople, until the elder turned to them and shouted out a few words of their language. The wailing quieted and the elder turned back to Koridis and conversed for a moment.

'They do not wish war,' said Koridis as Hajos walked back from the site of Serpentias' fall. 'These people make gods of the strong. If you prove strong enough, they will not defy us.'

'So we must prove our strength?' said Hajos. 'I do not foresee that as being a problem.'

The first trial of Serpentias had been to delve into the smoking volcanic labyrinth beneath the Scalding Vale and read there the secrets left behind by the ancients. Those ancients had founded the various tribes and scattered them across the jungles to carve out their own kingdoms, make war with one another, and rise and fall as fate would have it. From among them rose heroes like Serpentias, and to such heroes, the legends maintained, those ancients left secrets

to be uncovered.

This was the knowledge Koridis had gleaned from interrogating the elder of Serpentias' tribe. Hajos had immediately set off to the Scalding Vale to find what the ancients had left behind for himself.

They were not proving amenable to the worship of the Dark Gods, these people of Jaeglor. It was no surprise. The demands of the warp powers could be onerous to the weak or the squeamish. The Dire Claws had to break down the faith and morality of the Jaeglori before they could become devotees of Chaos. The first step was to prove Lord Antonidas Hajos superior to the fallen Serpentias.

The volcanic caverns were lit by channels of superheated rock in the walls, like pulsing veins fat with blood. Hajos felt his body's augmentations fighting to keep him alive in the heat and almost complete lack of oxygen.

'The readings indicate a junction ahead of you, my lord,' came the vox from Brother Forelm. Forelm was near the entrance to the caverns, reading the layout of the tunnels and chambers with the squad's auspex. 'Heavy toxic readings and heat spikes.'

'Then this Serpentias must have learned to hold his breath,' said Hajos. 'A strange qualification for godhood. Any life sign readings?'

'Nothing,' replied Forelm. 'But the heat and magnetism could mask them.'

Hajos' question was answered more conclusively by the mass of rippling wet muscle that surged at him from a side passage. It was a fat, worm-like creature with a round mouth ringed with teeth of flinty stone. The worm poured into the main tunnel, filling it like a flood of liquid flesh. Its jaws were as wide as Hajos was tall. Hajos reacted with a Space Marine's superhuman speed, rounding on the creature as it loomed down to swallow him. He thrust his arms out and pinned its circular maw open, fighting against the tremendous force of the worm as it sought to close its jaws and bite Hajos in half at the waist.

'Foul thing!' growled Hajos. 'What dares a worm to threaten the Lord of Jaeglor?' With a grunt, Hajos drove his arms outwards and felt the muscle tearing. Teeth broke loose from their roots and plinked to the floor. The worm let out a foul exhalation of sulphur and ash, and Hajos forced himself out of its mouth.

Hajos activated the power field around his claw. The blades had already punched deep into the muscles around the worm's jaws and they smouldered as the blood and flesh caught between them ignited. Hajos rammed the claws into the worm's body just behind its head, shredding the flesh and leaving the head hanging by a precarious string of skin. A stream of gore and gritty half-digested rock flowed it.

'What more has this world for me?' yelled Hajos into the darkness. 'You think me a morsel to be swallowed down? You will be corrected!'

A trio of rock worms erupted from the many side tunnels. Each was a cousin to the first, faster and smaller, though still huge enough to swallow a man whole. Hajos was ready for them this time. He blasted the head of the first into a mass of ragged, glistening flesh with a burst from his bolt pistol, then turned to the next and met its strike with his power claw, stabbing the blades deep down its throat and slicing through to its minuscule brain. He ripped the claw free as the third squirmed its way down the tunnel ahead of him. Hajos met it with a boot, stamping down on its upper jaw, driving it down into the scalding rock. He slashed his claw along the length of its body, slicing it lengthways and laying the foul length of its organs open to the scorching air.

The thing stopped thrashing. Hajos extricated himself from the mass of torn muscle and skin. The tunnel was shin-deep in gore, boiling in the volcanic heat.

'There is no threat here worth speaking of,' voxed Hajos as he continued down towards the nadir of the tunnel complex. 'This Serpentias was a weakling or a liar.'

In a long, low chamber created by some strata of rock eroded away an aeon ago, Hajos saw what lay beneath the Scalding Vale. A mass of machinery had become entombed here, in places encased in rock that had flowed into the chamber as lava and cooled. The steel was scarred and wounded, not just by thousands of years underground but by the familiar marks of atmospheric entry and micrometeorite strikes. Hajos made out the front section of a spaceship, aerodynamically configured for planetside flight, with its cockpit shattered and laid open. Heat had blistered the plastics of the cockpit so the instrument panels and pilot's seat looked more like something biological, a mass of glossy black organs that had bubbled up from an infected wound.

Hajos saw the corroded remains of a skeleton in the cockpit, almost swallowed by the melted plastic. The bones were eaten away but in places were shored up with silvery implants, like a weave of fine metallic wire, underpinning the structure of the bone.

Most of the paint had blistered off the hull in the heat, but Hajos could still see the bright orange and blue livery and markings in a language that bore no relation to High or Low Gothic. The shape of the spacecraft echoed the heavy prows of Imperial warships, but with a sleeker, faster appearance and none of the ornamentation common to ships of the Imperium.

The craft was a relic of the Dark Age of Technology or perhaps even the Age of Terra, epochs that pre-dated the conquest of Earth, the rise of the Corpse-Emperor and the Imperium of Man. It followed the same principles of the Standard Template Constructs that still guided the Imperium's technology, but in a purer, more refined form. If Serpentias had truly delved down here, he had learned the ancients travelled in ships of steel and possessed technological magic that had now been lost. The exact significance of the spacecraft would have been lost to him but he could not have returned from this place without his understanding of the ancients being fundamentally altered.

‘So this is what you found,’ said Hajos. He picked up the skull from the ruins of the cockpit. Over the millennia it had become a pitted, rock-like chunk. ‘It is as we suspected. This world is just one more relic of the Scattering, fallen to ignorance and savagery. Nothing special at all.’ Hajos allowed himself a smile, his grin echoing the rictus of the skull in his hand. ‘Yet.’

The first shrine was one dedicated to the sky. That was where, in the primitive comprehension of these people, the warp could be found. A circle of obelisks, cut from black volcanic glass, was being raised in a newly cleared section of jungle, around a pit where sacrifices would be burned and fortunes would be read from the smoke. The tribal elder preached the words Koridis had dictated to him, vague promises of power and strength from the sky, as the tribesmen sweated in the evening sun to haul the obelisks upright.

‘Yet Serpentias did not tell them what he had found,’ said Koridis, examining the petrified skull Lord Hajos had brought back from the Scalding Vale. ‘This Serpentias, if he indeed realised the origins of his people, kept it from them. There is no trace of technologically advanced ancients in their native belief.’

‘He knew it made him weak,’ said Hajos. He watched the erecting of the ritual circle alongside Koridis, from the fortified tribal lodge that had become the base camp of the Dire Claws. ‘He feared the knowledge that there was once a people more powerful than he. The tribes would have worshipped these idiot settlers instead. Is that not seen on many such worlds?’

‘It is so, my lord,’ said Koridis. ‘Or it could be he did not think he would be believed. Many are also the tales of prophets on savage worlds who claimed their peoples were descended from sky-travellers, and who were burned for their heresy.’

‘Not that it matters,’ said Hajos. ‘I went to the depths of the Scalding Vale and returned with a relic of a time beyond their remembering. Thus I am Serpentias’ equal. I barely broke a sweat doing it, either. I think my second heart did not even bother to beat.’

‘It will not be enough to usurp this tribe’s god,’ said Koridis. ‘I have spent much time communing with their wise men. There are other tribes, too, and they have their own gods. Some such deities cross tribal boundaries – they may not be the patrons of every tribe, but every tribe honours and sacrifices to them. This tribe is beneath our thumb and I shall convert them in quick time, but one gaggle of savages does not make a civilisation to rule. There are other gods on Jaeglor, and they must fall.’

‘I see,’ said Lord Hajos. He cast the skull into the dirt, and drew his bolt pistol. ‘Where are they?’

The Dire Claws moved carefully through the jungle. Even in the dense foliage of the Green Abyss, the burned orange of their armour was obvious as they stalked through the deepening shadows.

‘Watch your backs,’ snarled Forelm over the vox. ‘This scaly hrud-sniffer is smarter than you think. And Vurkal, spread out! One burst vine will wipe out all three of you morons!’

It was inevitable that the people of Jaeglor would ascribe a mystical significance to hunting, an activity at once deadly, infinitely complex and necessary for survival. Jaeglor’s hunters, however, knew their limitations, whether they were tracking down game for meat, predators for trophies or each other. The Dire Claws had no such limitations. They were after a creature that no hunter of

Jaeglor had ever sought to bring down.

Hajos was just behind the line of Dire Claws. Forelm's brethren were the beaters and he was the huntsman. They were the gun and he was the bullet. It would have done no good to simply charge into the swampy mass of the Green Abyss, an area considered impassable by the tribesmen, and hope that the quarry would present itself. This had to be done with cunning. As Forelm had said, the prey was more intelligent than it seemed.

The earth beneath Hajos' feet became more waterlogged. There were regions of the Abyss that were more river than forest, and an armoured Dire Claw was so heavy that if he was not careful he might disappear into the swampy ground entirely. It would not be a glorious way to go.

'Life signs,' came the vox from Brother Vurkal.

'Of course there are bloody lifesigns,' retorted Forelm. 'We're in a rainforest.'

'Anomalous cluster two hundred metres ahead of us,' continued Vurkal.

'Split and encircle,' voxed Lord Hajos.

His quarry was here. He could smell it, among the stench of decay that suffused the Green Abyss. One god, sensing the presence of another.

Up ahead the squad split into two, speeding up as they hurried to flank the suspect auspex signal. Hajos backed against the massive, gnarled bole of a tree, his bolt pistol in his hand.

'Contact!' came a vox up ahead. A split second later, a Dire Claw sailed through the air, punching through the mass of foliage to crack against a tree trunk and thump to the sodden ground. Bolter fire crackled and a terrible roar shook the jungle, shuddering the forest canopy.

The jungle was full of noise. Roosts of birds took flight and simian tree-dwellers whooped and screamed in alarm. Bolter explosions ripped through the trees.

Hajos stayed still. Let the brethren do the hard work driving out the prey, he told himself.

Something huge and fast crashed through the trees. Trunks splintered and fell. From the Green Abyss erupted an enormous saurian, easily three times the height of a Space Marine even with its massive head held low. Two violent red eyes glimmered above its huge undershot jaw, and its powerful forelimbs tore furrows from the ground as it loped towards Hajos. Its dark, scaly body was crowned with a ridge of spines running from its cranium down its back to the tip of its spiked tail.

The Dire Claws had driven the quarry towards their lord. Now the hunt really began.

‘The kill is mine,’ voxed Hajos calmly, and ducked out from behind the tree trunk.

The saurian saw him right away. It was impossible to hide from such a predator. The natural instinct was to run, but that would result in nothing more than being chased by the faster creature and crushed into the ground by the huge claws on its rear limbs. Hajos did not feel fear as men did. He was a Space Marine – a renegade, yes, and one pledged to the gods of the warp instead of the Emperor, but he had still been created to know no fear, and he showed none as the creature bore down on him.

The enormous maw opened. A gale roared over Hajos that stank of rotting meat. At the last moment, Hajos dropped to one knee and rolled out of the way of the saurian’s jaws, stabbing up with his power claw. The blades found scale and flesh, and he was showered in gore as the claw’s power field sheared through the saurian’s torso. The creature’s forelimb smacked him in the chest and he was thrown aside, but he had trusted in his armour to hold, and it did not let him down.

The saurian bellowed in pain and anger and sent up a tremendous spray of dirt and swamp water as it skidded to a halt. It rounded on its prey again, but Hajos was on his feet already and running right at the creature.

The wounded saurian raised a claw and batted Hajos down to the ground, pitching him face-first into the swamp water, then stamped down with its massive clawed rear leg, narrowly missing Hajos as he rolled out of the way.

The strike from the beast’s forelimb had hit harder than Hajos had anticipated, and it caught up with him now. Pain burst along his chest where the claw had

impacted. His armour had held, but his ribcage felt fractured.

Hajos had expected the saurian to be dangerous, but not so quick and skilled an opponent. This was a creature that had maintained its position at the top of the food chain for thousands of years. If Hajos gave it another half-second, it would kill him.

The saurian charged. Hajos jumped to his feet, ignoring the ripples of pain across his torso. The creature knocked the boles of ancient swamp trees aside as it rushed towards Hajos. Hajos leapt right at the beast as it charged, sailing over its huge snapping jaws.

Hajos grabbed one of the spines along the saurian's back, and plunged the blades of his power claw into its spine. He held on as the creature bucked, ripping the power claw out and plunging it back in again and again. The saurian roared but there was no anger in the sound, only pain and anguish, as if the beast could feel sorrow. It slumped onto its front. Hajos clambered up its back to its neck, and rammed the power claw into the point where it met the back of the skull.

The saurian growled, once, emptying the last of the foetid air from its lungs. Then Hajos, grunting with exhaustion and pain, drove the claw deeper into the saurian's brainstem. The beast, the Predator God of the Green Abyss, lay still at last.

The Dire Claws oversaw the celebration of Lord Hajos' victory. The head of the enormous saurian was burned in the sacrificial pit, and as its skull blackened in the fire, the tribespeople danced around it and howled their prayers to the Dark Gods.

'The tribes to the north worshipped this thing as their patron god,' said Koridis. It was he who had schooled the tribal elders in the prayers they were now crying out – prayers exhorting the powers of the warp to grant them power beyond mortality. 'Its death will cause them to make war.'

'Excellent,' said Hajos. 'These whelps need toughening up if they are to serve us. When I take to the field, even the headhunters these people fear will kneel in worship of the God of Jaeglor!'

'Indeed,' said Koridis. 'Being seen to best this saurian was a necessary step in converting this world. We must be wary, however, of the consequences.'

The flames leapt higher. Already some of the tribespeople were sporting new mutations, extra limbs or cosmetic deformities brought by the fleeting touch of the warp.

‘I am ready for them, chirurgeon,’ said Hajos.

‘I am glad to hear it, my lord.’

Hajos was too busy watching the celebrations of his godhood to notice the long, slender needle extending from Koridis’ medicae gauntlet. He had no chance to react as Koridis inserted it into the base of his skull and pumped a flood of chemicals into his bloodstream.

In less than a second, the cocktail of drugs, enough to paralyse even a Space Marine, suffused Lord Hajos’ brain and shut off its higher functions. And in that moment, Jaeglor – the world of which Hajos had made himself the god – turned dark.

The eyes of the gods were on the Mouth of the Fire Serpent. The stars deformed overhead, the new constellations and discoloured nebulae a reflection of the insanity of the warp. The zealots, those who had heard the words of the gods in answer to their prayers, howled up their delight to the night sky. The rest of the tribe laboured under Forelm’s direction as they carried the litter to the volcano’s crater. When they reached the steep slope of the crater they dragged the litter on fireproof smouldervine ropes, chanting in time with their laboured footsteps.

It was possible, thought Koridis, that Lord Hajos was still conscious. He showed no signs of stirring as his litter was dragged to the top of the crater’s ridge, but that did not mean he could not hear and feel what was happening around him. The anaesthetic Koridis had used on his lord was potent, but a Space Marine’s constitution was enough to overcome it eventually. Not that it would do Hajos any good now.

‘Bring the holy flame for the Lord of Change!’ cried Brother Forelm up on the crater ridge. He held up a hand and pulled off the gauntlet of his power armour, running his palm along the jagged edge of his shoulder guard. A bright wet slash glimmered on his palm. ‘Open your veins for the Blood God!’

‘Send him in,’ voxed Koridis.

Forelm gestured to the tribesmen carrying the litter. Hajos still did not move. He was bound there securely – even if he woke up, he would be unlikely to free himself in time. The screaming of the zealots reached a crescendo as the litter was pushed over the edge of the crater and tumbled end over end into the lava.

Koridis had read of the belief systems typical of savage peoples. It was very common for a powerful ancestor to be ascribed mighty deeds and subsequently deified. Almost as common was the way such a myth-cycle ended.

With sacrifice.

If Hajos was indeed conscious, he would feel the heat enveloping him, every nerve ending screaming at once as he was cooked in his armour. If a Space Marine could ever feel fear, Hajos would feel it then. His body would be going numb from the outside in as his nervous system was burned out. His organs would cook and pop. And with a Space Marine's titanic capacity to undergo injury and pain, he would suffer every elongated second.

The lava closed over the litter. Hajos' mighty body disappeared beneath the surface.

Serpentias, like so many deified heroes before him, had to undergo a final transformation before he could become a god. He had to sacrifice himself so his might and wisdom would be unlocked from his physical form and imbue his tribe with greatness. It was the gift all such savage gods gave their people – their self-annihilation, to move beyond the grossness of the flesh and on to godhood.

Koridis' suspicions about Serpentias had been confirmed when he examined the statue of the god that Hajos had shattered. Encased in the volcanic rock were chunks of bone. It had not been a statue at all.

'Say the word,' voxed Forelm.

'A few moments more,' replied Koridis. It paid to be sure.

In the sky, a spiral galaxy opened like an eye with a pupil of dying stars. Whatever gods of the warp had turned their attention to Jaeglor, they were watching intently. Koridis counted off the seconds and concluded that Lord Hajos had died some moments ago, boiled and suffocated beneath the lava.

‘Bring him in.’

Forelm gave the signal and the sturdiest tribesmen hauled on the smouldervine ropes to drag Lord Hajos back out of the molten rock. His body was encased in lava that began to cool immediately as he was dragged back up the crater slope.

‘Their new god,’ said Koridis. ‘The champion of the warp. The conduit of the Dark Gods’ will.’

‘If it works,’ replied Forelm.

‘It is how Serpentias became a god,’ said Koridis. ‘A new deity will draw the attention of tribes across this world. The peoples towards the equator are much more warlike, and when they bow to this new idol, we can sweep across Jaeglor and claim the planet.’ He did not add that he would be the high priest of this new empire of the warp, but that went without saying.

The lava encasing Lord Hajos was cooling and blackening in the night air. Soon he would be returned to the village and set up in the clearing where Serpentias had once stood. Word would spread of the hero who had descended from the stars, outdone the deeds of the one-time god and sacrificed himself to the fires.

The tribesmen surrounded the cooling statue. They knelt and wailed, and the elders cut new scars into their bodies in imitation of the new constellations above them.

When Koridis had joined Lord Hajos on his exile, he had not known exactly what form the opportunity would take. The legend of Serpentias had given him the perfect way to found his church, and to remove the biggest obstacle to its expansion – Lord Hajos, whose ambition masked his lack of imagination.

When they looked back, thought Koridis, they would say this was how it started. This was where it began.

And it would never end.

About the Author

Ben Counter is one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors, with two Horus Heresy novels to his name – *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*. He is the author of the *Soul Drinkers* series and *The Grey Knights Omnibus*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The World Engine* and *Malodrax*, and has turned his attention to the Space Wolves with the novella *Arjac Rockfist: Anvil of Fenris* and a number of short stories. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

GLORY FROM CHAOS

by **CHRIS DOWS**

Glory From Chaos

Chris Dows

Smoke spiralled lazily from the smashed frigate into the emerald-green sky of Valaena, carried away on the same high breeze that bore several wheeling eagles, curious at the violent disturbance to their tranquil world. They carefully avoided each other and the still-burning pyres of debris strewn out in a rough arc around the ship, flames made greedy by the oxygen-rich atmosphere. A handful of armoured figures picked their way through the ruins, salvaging what was useful and abandoning that which was beyond repair. To most eyes, the image was one of violation, of nature torn asunder by the works of man, but the lone figure watching from the gently hovering golden disc was no longer human, and cared as little for the damage to the planet as for the loss of his ship.

If the feeling could be given a description, Karnel the Ruinous, Thousand Sons lord and sorcerer of Tzeentch, felt a tired satisfaction at the vista before him. True, he had lost more of his followers than anticipated, but the final trap in his carefully executed plan was now set. Those who considered themselves the greatest hunters in the galaxy would soon become his prey, and within a few short hours the Tzeentchian lord would command a warband unlike any other. And not a moment too soon, as the tremendous energy he had expended was finally taking its toll.

With a turn of Karnel's head, the living platform on which he balanced pitched and rotated, the underside of one of its upwardly curved barbs brushing carelessly against the carpet of grass beneath. The sorcerer's blue and gold cloak whipped crazily as he willed the disc of Tzeentch to accelerate, leaning forward on his bedlam staff as he glided over the brow of the hill and into the wide rolling valley below. Within seconds of his descent, Karnel was enveloped in a black-purple darkness, Valaena's clean, sweet atmosphere exchanged for the stench of putrid decay. A thunderous roar filled the air, punctuated with low moans and high wails, a symphony of despair and misery to match the swirling maelstrom that had engulfed the valley's floor. Bringing his disc to a halt, Karnel dismounted and strode towards the six towering figures stretched out on jagged X-shaped crucifixes on the edge of the swirling portal behind them. Despite being stripped of their armour and sporting the marks of months-long abuse, the White Scars were still an imposing presence.

Karnel stood before the nearest Chogorian and waited for the warrior's good eye to fix upon him. While the White Scars' suffering had helped create a temporary gateway to the warp, it was Karnel's powers that hid it on Valaena. As their lives slipped away, the portal got that bit smaller, but Karnel had calculated the torture perfectly. It was true, of course, that the longer the conduit remained open, the greater were the chances of a daemon tearing into this realm and taking everything for itself, but he had done his very best to hide it from both sides. The effort had been enormous, but it was a risk the sorcerer was prepared to take.

The Chogorian began to speak, every word heavy with spite and venom.

'Karnel... My brothers will not abandon me... they will hunt you down... and send you back to that abomination from which you came.'

The Tzeentchian lord looked up at the battered warrior, the tips of the curved golden horns on his helmet not reaching the chin of the massive Space Marine. He had to shout his reply, such was the eruption of noise generated by the warrior's naked hatred within the seething conduit behind him.

'That is what I am relying on.'

The body of the khan stretched out before the three-score White Scars should have been resting in the chapel of the Strike Cruiser Talons of the Hawk, but the sanctum had been badly damaged in the battle with Karnel's ship, along with most of the drive systems and all of the heavy weapons. As the crippled vessel limped its way through space, the decision had been made to hold the last rites on the drop pod flight deck, as it was the only place left where the surviving brothers could assemble in number and pay their respects. No one really minded; being surrounded by assault bikes was entirely fitting.

'And so the soul of the khan shall roam forever on the Chogorian plains, to hunt with our ancestors and join with the spirits of our home world.'

Stormseer Khaguran Amal finished his solemn incantation and regarded the survivors of his brotherhood. It had been a long and brutal hunt for the Chaos lord, and their numbers were significantly diminished from when they had started all those months ago. However, they had inflicted mortal damage on Karnel's ship and, somewhere on the approaching planet below, the Tzeentchian sorcerer was theirs to claim. This would normally be something to savour, but the loss of their astropath to a massive psyker attack during the space battle left

Amal deeply troubled. The Stormseer had also been overwhelmed by darkness during the fight. While he had survived, the astropath was now lost to confusion and despair, and Amal could not shake the suspicion that they had been drawn into the battle deliberately rather than them finally tracking down Karnel's ship, as it had appeared to the khan and most of the veterans. There was also something about that planet, Valaena, he could not make sense of. The auspex showed nothing unusual; in fact, it appeared to be perfect for the White Scars' style of fast, mobile fighting, but the closer they approached, the greater became his unease. He had to speak his mind.

'We face a choice brothers. Do we wait for repairs to Talons of the Hawk and have its full support during our attack, or press on without?'

The brothers looked to each other uncomfortably. The question had to be asked, and now had to be answered. After the low murmurs finally died down, Samlak stepped forwards, stroking his long, black moustache in thoughtful preparation before he spoke. Samlak would never be hurried, and when he spoke, all listened.

'Our brothers are on that planet. We must free them of their suffering.'

Nods of assent were exchanged, eyebrows furrowed and jaws set grim.

'Quite right Samlak. The very purpose of this hunt is to release from their purgatory those we have seen with our own eyes to be corrupted by Chaos, and to free those being held by Karnel and his renegades. But we do not know if any of them survived our attack on their ship. It may be we strike from a position of weakness for nothing.'

The front row of the assembled White Scars, veterans all, bristled at his words. The Stormseer ran a hand over his scarred and weathered face. Something was colouring his thoughts, and now his words. He must be careful.

'Nothing? Nothing?'

Louk-Sen sported a fresh gash across his face from the recent battle, the tear only just congealed enough to stop the bleeding.

'What about avenging our fallen khan? Or the thirty brothers we have lost? Karnel is the prey. We are the hunters. We have him. He must be finished.'

The scent of the quarry had quickened Louk-Sen's blood. They all shared the sensation.

'We must be sure, Amal. Not one of us can tolerate the idea of turning to Chaos. It is true that those who do are no longer our brothers. But what of our own six?'

Amal sighed and folded his arms at Louk-Sen's words. They had been taken by Karnel early in the hunt, a surprise move neither he nor the khan had anticipated. The Stormseer looked up to the row of armoured figures, his gaze resting on the newest brother in their ranks, just elevated from novitiate and still to be given his own assault bike mount. He stood attentively at the back, eyes burning bright and keen, his ritual scars still pink from the cutting.

'What say you, Jetek Suberei? We are under-strength, unsupported and without the sight of our astropath. The enemy's power is unknown. We may be heading into a trap... or worse.'

Hands tightened around ceremonial lances and daggers in anger, with some of the brotherhood glowering at Amal's bold words. Passions were running dangerously high, but it was Jetek, completely unfazed at being asked so direct a question, that broke the tension.

'We attack. Now.'

Karnel watched the drop pods land on the far side of his wrecked vessel and smiled. Signalling his deliberately revealed forces to retreat up the slope towards the valley, he felt the fury of the daemon barely contained within the bedlam staff ready to be unleashed. He would use the power of its scream to harvest the White Scars' souls.

There was only one thing complicating Karnel's plan. A single young Chogorian, prized above the others by the Changer of Ways, was not to be his. He knew not why, and knew not to ask. It was a small price to pay for such little interference in his schemes.

Amal accelerated hard, the attack bike's thick front tyre ploughing through Valaena's soft ground. Past the rattling figure of Jetek Suberei hunched behind his sidecar-mounted bolter, two dozen assault bikes emerged from the far side of Karnel's wrecked ship. The same number maintained position to his right. They were barely half the force they had once been, and the dread kept on growing

within Amal's chest. The auspex might well show a clear path to the enemy forces over the high ridge a handful of miles distant, but his warp-sight was clouded to the point of uselessness. This planet was hiding something, and he felt certain it was soon to be revealed.

Jetek, too, felt uneasy. At first, he had felt an immediate connection to the beautiful planet; he was no Stormseer, but his affinity with the natural world had always been stronger than that of his other brothers. His greatest concern was the eagles circling above. There was something about them that...

Sky. Land.

Jetek shook his head, but the view did not change. An aerial view looking down, the acuity of the image better even than his augmented eyesight. He saw the line of White Scars bikes closing up around the front of the smouldering crashed ship. He saw himself, sitting in the sidecar next to Amal at the centre of the pack. He saw the enemy forces clustered on the brow of the hill, with Chaos riders waiting patiently in a line.

And just before his view down the barrels of the bolter returned, he thought he saw the valley floor shimmer darkly.

'By the Emperor's Throne!'

Jetek's amazement was clear in his breathless comment. He'd broken radio silence, and a clamour of curses flooded his ears. A sharp knock came on his right pauldron and Amal signalled him to change channel so only the two could communicate.

'What is it Suberei? Speak. And speak the truth.'

The column would be climbing the hill within seconds, and Jetek did not know whether to share his experience. But the Stormseer had clearly picked up on the shock from the young warrior – that and his shared realisation that all was not right on Valaena.

'A revelation, Stormseer. Through the eyes of an eagle.'

Amal eased off the throttle slightly, and the flanking rows of assault bikes surged forwards, several riders choosing their quarry from the assembled Chaos riders

at the top of the hill and headed directly for them.

‘A powerful vision, young Suberei. I fear—’

Whoops and calls of the hunt overrode his words as the pack leaders closed in on their prey. As one, the dark forces turned their mounts and roared out of view into the valley below, followed quickly by the closing White Scars silhouetted on the horizon. Suddenly, the ground exploded in a brilliant rupture to Amal’s right, showering earth over both him and Jetek. Turning to look behind, the Stormseer saw a line of dark shapes pouring from the wreckage of Karnel’s ship as dozens of his renegade followers mounted a rearguard attack. Their over-eagerness had left them exposed, and Amal cursed bitterly for not insisting they check the remains of the vessel as they had passed it.

Karnel weighed his bedlam staff in his hands and readied it for his first attack. From his position halfway down the slope, he waited for his riders to hurtle past, then willed the disc of Tzeentch further away from the ground. Within seconds the slope was filled with White Scars bikes churning flurries of soil with their enormous wheels, bolters and tulwars raised high and horse-hair standards whipping proudly in the breeze. Spotting the Chaos lord, many changed their direction, realising their weapons might prove useless, while the more foolhardy aimed straight for him, unleashing a murderous hail of fire as they rode. Karnel deflected the bolts with ease, snorting at the futility of it as he rose higher into the air.

As the first wave of riders passed beneath him, the sorcerer unleashed a wave of dark power across the bottom of the valley with a sweep of his staff. Before the astonished eyes of the White Scars, the tranquil vale into which they were chasing their quarry disappeared, replaced by a seething pool of darkness. The sky above changed from green to black and, to their horror, the forward riders saw six of their brothers, transfixed on enormous metal crosses, directly in their path. Three attack bikes smashed into the slumped and broken forms of the tortured Chogorians. The impact spun their mounts, themselves and their crushed brothers into the Chaos rupture. Black ribbons of living malice lashed outwards and upwards, the entire portal seemingly digesting the offering with greedy abandon. Karnel noticed the conduit shrink dramatically. With half of its nourishment now gone, the gateway had reduced to nearly half its original size. It remained enough for the Chaos lord’s needs, but even so he realised time had suddenly become an enemy rather than a friend.

Karnel directed his Chaos riders to engage the White Scars around the edge of the portal, their orders to disable or unbalance their mounts rather than fire at the bikers directly. Confusion reigned, with some of the White Scars careening into the swirling current or dragged in by thick tentacles of Chaos-formed miasma. However, it did not take long for the remaining Chogorian riders to realise the true horror of their situation, and they retreated back up the steep slopes of the valley away from the vile morass. This, too, had been anticipated by Karnel and, with a terrifying scream from his staff rending the foul air, the Chaos lord swept down like a vengeful spirit on the closest fleeing White Scars biker.

Louk-Sen had nearly made it to the top of the hill when a searing pain tore through his right shoulder. Looking down, he was infuriated to see a glistening spike projecting from beneath his pauldron. He grabbed onto it with his throttle hand, but the metal – or whatever it was – suddenly changed, its surface writhing and shifting, making it impossible to grip. As he felt himself rising into the air, the burning turned to a tearing sensation, and the weight of his armoured body forced him to slide backwards. Twisting and kicking, he managed to move forwards a few inches and thought he might be able to free himself from impalement, but the end of the spike reformed itself into four backward-facing barbs. Roaring in frustration, he unsheathed his tulwar and hacked at the hooks, but to no avail. Directly below, the broiling portal loomed, and he felt himself pitching forwards, sliding towards the barbs, which transformed into a slender spike on his approach. As black tendrils wrapped themselves around his thrashing body, the last thing Louk-Sen saw was the blade on the underside of the disc as it was reabsorbed into its upward-sweeping shape, and Karnel hurtling away in pursuit of his next target.

Amal and Jetek heard the cry in their helmets, but were too busy avoiding the suppressing fire from the pursuing Chaos bikers and Predator tanks to consider its significance. Karnel's forces seemed determined to prevent a retreat, and when the vox chatter changed from the triumphant cries of the hunt to urgently shouted orders and furious oaths, it became clear the battle was turning against them. Jetek unleashed a carefully aimed burst of fire at an approaching Chaos bike, shattering its front left-hand fork and causing the wheel to flip up and under the frame. The machine slammed into the ground, pitching the flailing rider head first into the soil as the bike cartwheeled over him then rolled to a halt. Jetek concentrated bolter fire at the helmet. The rider did not get up again.

And then his vision changed once again to the rolling plains of Valaena, except

this time he could see the swirling maelstrom of darkness at the bottom of the valley and his brothers being herded into its dreadful grasp. He could see his position, trapped between the forces behind them and the forces beyond. He could see a gold disc travelling at tremendous speed, a cloaked and helmeted figure atop it sweeping a long, dark staff towards himself and Amal.

Colour erupted inside Jetek's head. As he spun over the lip of the hill and down to the valley below, he saw dazzling flashes from Amal's force staff as the Stormseer tried to fend off the onslaught from the Chaos lord who had swooped in on them from above. Landing heavily on his back, Jetek could see the eagle overhead through whose eyes he'd witnessed the attack, its wings beating strongly to avoid the darting ebony wisps snaking up from the void at the bottom of the valley. Jetek's view was suddenly blocked by a large object hurtling towards him, and the young Chogorian staggered to his feet as his mangled attack bike thumped into the ground beside him. The scene down the slope of the valley was one of turmoil; some of his brothers had managed a counter-attack on the Chaos riders to the right, but the engagements were precariously close to the edge of the swirling black vortex. Several White Scars assault bikes idled without riders, including the one previously ridden by their slain khan. Where the riders were, Jetek was unsure, but it was likely they had fallen victim to another one of Karnel's aerial assaults or been driven into the clutches of the portal and dragged to their doom. Jumping over to the sidecar, Jetek wrenched a bolter from its mounting and started firing at the nearest enemy.

It was then he saw the three wretched forms of his crucified brothers.

Bellowing in fury, he strode ahead, cleaving a path with bolter fire at the renegades who had turned to confront him. Something very large hit him in the back and threw him to the ground, the weapon spinning from his grasp.

Karnel floated yards from Jetek's position, resting heavily on his glowing staff. The upswept blades of his disc of Tzeentch were thick with blood, some of which dripped in a thin line of crimson from the razor-sharp tips to the ground below. The Chaos lord seemed oblivious to the raging battle behind him, instead beckoning Jetek to stand before him. There was no sign of the Stormseer. Karnel had caught them completely by surprise, and such was the sorcerer's terrible power, it was likely Amal was either dead or dying. Whether it looked like bravado or a sign of his utter contempt for this force of evil, Jetek didn't care; he still unsheathed his tulwar and felt comforted by its familiarity. The gold curved

horns of Karnel's helmet accentuated his glance at the action and there was amusement in his voice.

'So, Jetek Suberei. You still refuse to recognise the futility of fighting against the Changer of Ways?'

The young warrior heard a clamour from behind the hill. Explosions shook the ground and debris rained down around him. Most of it seemed to belong to Karnel's renegade forces, which gave him great heart despite his desperate situation.

'I see no futility in hunting you to extinction, or slaying those who have turned their backs on the Imperium.'

The staff released a scream so piercing it made the blade in Jetek's hand sing in sympathy. The Chogorian's head spun, and the Chaos lord sounded as if he was speaking from the bottom of a well.

'The gifts of Tzeentch are far greater than those bestowed by your desiccated Corpse-God. The way of Chaos is the only true path to glory. You yourself know this; I see the doubt in your soul as clearly as the fear writ across your face.'

Jetek's hand tightened on his weapon. The words were sliding through his mind, worming their way into his thoughts and dreams.

'You desire that glory, don't you Jetek? To become the greatest hunter the White Scars have ever seen. If you must serve that dead idol, you need not forsake your loyalties to wield such power – the power that has been foreseen by the Changer of Ways himself. Think of the hunt you could lead within the Eye of Terror.'

The disc hovered closer to Jetek. He was rooted to the spot, mesmerised by the power of the sorcerer who leant forwards towards him.

'Think of the glory.'

And then he was looking down on himself and his brothers fighting against the rearguard forces of Karnel, battling to the last so they would not be driven into the seething black chasm. He saw himself, so close to the edge of damnation. He saw the three remaining crucified brothers, their heads lolled onto their chests, clinging to life. The arrogance of the White Scars, their absolute belief in their

superiority over others, had led them to this point. Jetek closed his eyes and felt the sensation of wind beneath wings, of freedom and clarity of purpose.

Despite how much he desired what was offered, his own hubris would not triumph.

‘Your god is an abomination, a lord of lies! I shall not succumb. I would rather die.’

Karnel stood upright and held his staff between his hands. He had done what was bid of him by his master, had made the offer for the White Scar to turn of his own free will.

It was time for him to finish his great gathering of souls.

‘It is of no consequence what you shall or shall not do. You will face the warp, be reborn in its beauty and then serve the Great Changer regardless.’

Jetek roared his defiance and raised his weapon. Karnel looked down and the nearest blade reshaped itself into a lance, ready to skewer the Chogorian and drag him into the slowly eroding portal behind.

A blast of crackling energy lit the gloom of the valley floor, blasting Karnel onto the black-encrusted ground. The daemonic disc immediately spun and moved towards its master, tilting to protect the sorcerer from the barrage of naked warp energy lancing from Amal’s skull-topped force staff.

‘Suberei... the khan’s bike... hurry. We have very little time.’

The life force was draining from Amal as he shouted, the intensity of his bombardment diminishing as Karnel sheltered behind the disc. Jetek did as he was bid, sheathing his tulwar and vaulting onto the rumbling attack bike with its torn and ragged command pennants snapping in the lashing energy. Gunning the throttle, he rode towards Amal, who was sagging to his knees on the scorched ground. He could see Karnel was readying his staff for a counter-attack, and had Jetek not been so fast and skilful on his newly acquired mount, the maelstrom unleashed by the sorcerer from his bedlam staff might have torn the Stormseer apart. Instead, Jetek grabbed Amal and swung him with all his might onto the pillion behind, accelerating the instant he was astride and leaving empty space as a target for the Chaos lord.

‘Head for the crucifixes. We must either rescue or kill our brothers. Their suffering is feeding this portal.’

Jetek needed no second bidding. All around the valley, White Scars tried to manoeuvre away from the conduit but the rearguard forces had pushed nearly the entire brotherhood into the arena, driving them down the slopes with intensive fire and suicidal runs. Behind him, Amal had turned around so the two were back-to-back, giving him a better opportunity to level his staff at the pursuing Chaos lord. A summoned blast hit the underside of Karnel’s disc, but as the sorcerer accelerated and descended, the front blades of the disc extended into deadly spears ready to puncture the two riders. The Stormseer shouted a warning to Jetek, who forced the bike into as sharp a left turn as he dared at that speed. The Chaos lord overshot, Amal ducking beneath the lethal projections on the disc’s underside and channelling warp energy directly at the living metal. The strange daemon writhed and shrunk back into itself, but Karnel was already turning to present an undamaged blade to his target.

Directly ahead, Jetek could see the three figures hanging lifelessly on their crosses. Amal panted his command, his voice cracking with exhaustion and pain.

‘Aim for the middle, then broadside all three. You will have to—’

The Stormseer’s words turned into a wet gurgle. To Jetek’s right, a gleaming spear tip grazed the side of his helmet, smearing blood across the white surface. The young Chogorian’s ears were filled with the roar from Amal as he rose into the air, but he had not given up the fight. Dark and light energy arced between the two psykers at point-blank range, and Jetek knew he could do nothing for the Stormseer. Aiming straight for the figures now only yards away, he threw the bike into a slide, released his grip and let the tremendous momentum of the machine do the work. It ploughed into the two figures on the left, taking them into the rift over which the sorcerer now hovered.

Karnel knew he had won the fight. Despite his own power being severely depleted, he could feel the life ebbing away from the White Scars psyker skewered directly in front of him. The Stormseer could barely hold his force staff now, and it was time for the Chaos lord to finish him and take the good number of bikers still fighting so ferociously for their very souls. Willing the disc towards the edge of the portal, Karnel readied himself to push Amal into the tendrils of its dark grasp with his boot.

But the portal was not there anymore. The outer edge receded dramatically, leaving only a pool a couple of yards wide swirling and bubbling in the middle of the valley.

Looking over to the crucifixes, Karnel saw only one remained, and that single Chogorian was being released from his bonds by one of his brothers. Realising he had run out of time, Karnel howled with rage – and felt a searing pain shock through his body.

That single moment of distraction was all that Amal had needed to pull his body along the disc's lance and ram his force staff into the Chaos lord's thigh. The last of his energy poured into Karnel, and the sorcerer could feel his connection with the disc, even the Warp itself, breaking. Amal ducked under Karnel's wildly swung bedlam staff and grabbed onto the disc with his dying strength, willing the inhuman creation back to its own dimension. Taking the command as that of its master, the disc pitched downwards into the conduit back to the Empyrean, taking a raging Karnel and lifeless Amal with it.

Jetek Suberei opened his eyes. He could not remember being thrown so high into the air by the shockwave from the collapsed portal, and was confused at how he could see most of his fellow warriors finishing off what was left of Karnel's warband. At the bottom of the valley, others tended the surviving tortured White Scar and burned the bodies of the Chaos riders, finally releasing them from torment. Removing his helmet, Jetek screwed his eyes closed and could hear the beating of wings from above.

The warrior opened his eyes to see a huge brown eagle watching him coolly from the seat of an attack bike. Rising to his feet, Jetek stood quite still as the bird continued to regard the Chogorian closely. This, Jetek realised, was the creature whose vision he had shared. The feeling of dread had abated, and while the Chaos energies had disappeared, the connection with this noble creature still remained. Jetek had no idea why, but respected the gift this planet had bestowed upon him.

Raising his arm, Jetek offered a perch to the powerful beast, who cocked her head to one side and considered the invitation for a few seconds before fluttering over to land heavily on his vambrace. The two stared at each other for long seconds, then Jetek replaced his helmet and mounted the bike seemingly chosen for him by the eagle. He waited for her to hop onto his shoulder, then gunned the

engine and headed towards the final clean-up of Karnel's abandoned forces.

About the Author

Chris Dows is a writer and educational advisor with over twenty years' experience in comic books, prose and non-fiction. His works for Black Library include the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'In the Shadow of the Emperor', 'The Mouth of Chaos', 'Monolith' and 'Glory from Chaos'. He lives in Grimsby with his wife and two children.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**
JACKALWOLF

by C Z DUNN

Jackalwolf

C Z Dunn

Lukas the Trickster, Lukas the Jackalwolf, Lukas the Strifeson, Lukas the Laughing One, Bane of Hrothgar, Blight of Dvorjac and Saviour of Elixir, was well into his cups when the Blood Claw burst into the Great Hall. Around him, his fellow Space Wolves were noisily engaged in arm wrestling bouts, drinking games and orating boastful tales of past glories.

‘Brothers,’ the young Space Wolf said, voice raised to capture the attention of his drunken brethren. ‘Fenris is assailed! An Archenemy fleet lies on the edge of the system and its commander broadcasts his threats across an open channel.’

The Space Wolves, despite their inebriation, stirred at the Blood Claw’s announcement, some getting to their feet in alarm. Lukas broke off from his attempt to drink Jurri Ironclaw under the table and staggered towards the messenger, gesturing lazily for his battle-brothers to stand down. The stasis bomb grafted in place of one of the older Space Marine’s hearts pulsed rhythmically, a promise yet to be kept. Lukas stared at the boy intently, swaying slightly under the effects of three days of imbibing nothing but mjod.

‘You look familiar,’ Lukas slurred. ‘Did I know your mother?’ He jabbed the boy in the chest with a finger as he spoke.

‘I don’t know, brother,’ the young Blood Claw replied. ‘We have this conversation every time you revel.’ Unlike Lukas, who had come through the procedures and rituals of becoming a Space Marine with a relatively solid hold on the events of his past life, the junior Blood Claw had lost most of the memories of his youth on Fenris.

‘I think you have my eyes. It must have been your great, maybe great-great, grandmother I was... acquainted with.’ Lukas laughed, long and hard. ‘Now then, what’s this business about an Archenemy fleet?’

‘Their lord is hailing us, threatening to bombard the Fang from orbit.’

Lukas closed his eyes momentarily, allowing his oolitic kidney to flush his system of the toxins that were impairing his vision, judgement and various other

faculties. With all but one of the Great Companies a-hunting in the Imperium, and Wolf Lord Bloodhowl leading the rest of his company in a purge of Fenris' great beasts while the rays of the Wolf's Eye were at their brightest, Lukas – despite spending his entire time as a Space Wolf among the lowly ranks of the Blood Claws – was effectively in charge of the Fang and its defences. It was not through choice that Lukas remained behind; the latest in a string of transgressions that had arrested his progress through the Chapter's ranks had also angered Sven Bloodhowl so much that he had told Lukas to remain out of his sight for thirty nights lest the Wolf Lord slay him in a fit of anger.

When Lukas opened his eyes, his pupils were no longer dilated, his speech no longer impeded. 'Put him over the Great Hall's vox casters.'

The Blood Claw padded over to the comms lectern at the end of the vast chamber and manipulated the controls. A voice, ancient and terrible, echoed from the thick stone walls.

'...bathed in the fires of Calth, reborn among the flames to carry the Primordial Truth among the stars, to wreak bloody vengeance on all those who venerate the Corpse Emperor, to spread darkness where there is light, to—'

Some of Lukas' pack now abandoned their drunken activities and listened. Lukas spoke, cutting off the voice mid-sentence.

'Who in the Nine Hells are you and what are you blathering on about?'

The speaker's incomprehension at being spoken to with such irreverence was palpable in the silence that followed.

'I am Lord Moe franc of the Word Bearers Legion, chosen of Lorgar Aurelian, destroyer of a hundred worlds, enslaver of a billion souls, and the Doom of Fenris!'

'Never heard of you,' Lukas said, looking around the Great Hall to see if there was any flicker of recognition among his pack. In return, he received only shakes of the head.

The Word Bearer spoke again, his voice tinged with impatient rage. 'At Kavlok Prime I personally slew a score of your grey-haired veterans! On Setok's World I claimed the souls of three-score of your Chapter's champions! Only scant

months ago, your lord Hrothgar fell to my blade, his blood tainting the soil of Qi'Ki'Ci even as its core erupted and was torn asunder. Each time I was denied the triumph that was my due. Now the False Emperor's mongrels will pay for their temerity!

Lukas spoke quietly so that his words would not be picked up by the vox. 'Hrothgar is dead? He never liked me, nor I him, but somebody remember to tell Grimnar the next time we see him.'

'For millennia, the curs of Fenris have interfered with my destiny, but today is the day I shall offer up your hearts and bones to the Ruinous Powers! My fleet stands ready to reduce your fortress to rubble. Now beg, Space Wolf. Beg for mercy before I order your destruction. Beg like the craven dogs I know you and your kin to be!'

'It seems like the act of a coward to destroy us from the safety of high orbit. Then again, I would expect no less from a sanctimonious whoreson of the XVII Legion.' Lukas paused. 'Based on your track record against my Chapter, though, I would fully understand if you chose to avoid making planetfall.'

The Chaos Space Marine's voice boomed from the vox casters, reverberating from the walls of the Great Hall. 'I will crush you! I have nigh on four hundred Word Bearers at my command and at least two hundred thousand faithful ready to obey my every word.'

'That doesn't sound like a fair fight. We can wait while you go and recruit more if you like.'

The Word Bearer cut the vox link as voices of zealous indignation welled up in the background. When he reopened the channel seconds later, his voice was resolute. 'Who among you leads, dog? Speak!'

'That would be me,' Lukas said.

'Truly Russ' whelps have fallen far! So be it. I invoke the warrior's right of ritual combat – a trial of champions, on open ground. We shall see which of us is the coward when I pluck your fangs from your skull and hammer them into your eyes. Name the place of your death, mongrel.'

Without any urgency, Lukas approached the lectern and operated the controls.

‘Challenge accepted. A trial of champions, with honour guard.’ He pressed a discreet rune on his vambrace, plucked the portable data-spike that had been concealed beneath from its cradle, and inserted it into one of the lectern’s input jacks. The lectern’s vid-screen flickered, before columns of High Gothic characters mixed with Fenrisian runes began rapidly scrolling down the display. ‘You will see that I have just opened up a window in our system and orbital defences. You will also see that the approach vectors I am sending you now...’ Lukas twisted the data-spike in the jack, ‘...lead to an area of open ground suited to such a combat. It is land sacred to our Chapter, where such conflicts have ever been resolved. We will be ready for you there within the hour. Prepare to die honourably, traitor. The manner of your death will do naught to absolve your crimes against the Allfather, but I suppose we all have to start somewhere.’

‘Enjoy the hour, Space Wolf, it will be your last,’ the Word Bearer said before Lukas cut the link.

The Blood Claw messenger and the other green-blooded initiates swiftly assembled before the senior Space Wolf, awaiting his orders. Lukas ignored them and headed in the opposite direction, towards a table that was littered with mugs, jugs, bottles and tankards. He picked up a full keg of mjod and put the tap to his lips, emptying the container without pausing for breath. Still not satisfied with his level of drunkenness, he repeated the process with another vessel, then another. His blood-toxins finally back at a suitable level, Lukas wrung out his now-soaking beard, lay down on one of the benches and closed his eyes. His pack looked on, bewildered.

‘We must prepare for battle, brother,’ said the messenger.

‘I’ll raise Lord Bloodhowl over the vox,’ said Jorgenn Straightclaw.

‘Aye, and you must share with us your plan for defeating this superior force,’ added Morten Sternhammer, his white hair and beard making him look much older than his thirty winters.

‘There will be no battle,’ Lukas replied without opening his eyes.

‘I don’t understand, brother,’ said Ole Brightfang. ‘The Word Bearers are about to land on Fenris, and you refuse to face them?’

‘I don’t refuse to face them,’ Lukas said. His tone was irritated and he opened

one eye to look upon his pack. 'I ensured that there will be no enemy to face.'

A murmur of confusion spread among his charges.

'The Corsair-grade data corrupter I sent has provided their ship's machine spirit with a false topography of Fenris, along with coordinates for the very middle of the Sea of Lost Souls. As well you know, the ice there is thin at the best of times, but during the summer, it could barely hold the weight of a snow hare, let alone a fully armoured Space Marine.'

He closed his eyes again and rolled onto his side.

'Feel free to wake me up if, by some miracle of Russ, any of them make it to shore,' Lukas said before the Great Hall was filled with the sound of his snoring.

About the Author

Domiciled in the East Midlands, C Z Dunn is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel Pandorax, the novellas Crimson Dawn and Dark Vengeance and the audio dramas Trials of Azrael, Ascension of Balthasar, Terror Nihil, Bloodspire and Malediction, as well as several short stories.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

**MIDNIGHT
ROTATION**

by DAN ABNETT

Midnight Rotation

Dan Abnett

Yeah, I know what I done.

We was on the midnight rotation at the depot last night, and–

Oh. You want the particulars? All formal and correct? A statement? Yeah, suppose you do have to do things by the book. Circumstances like these.

I'll lay it out, then. I am Cawkus, trooper, second class, and it were my honour to enlist for the service of the Throne at the founding of the Fiftieth Urdesh Regular, Astra Militarum, eighteen year gone. May we bless the Throne, above us all, and the light of Terra, for which mankind fights. I am a true man, sir.

I was put upon my watch by my commanding officer, Major Zailman. I believe he is an upstanding man, sir, a fine soldier, for he has many pieces of shiny metal on his chest, and he polishes them every day. I was sent, with my platoon, to the depot in the last hours of the evening. Yes, that is Depot 686, the long building down by Division Arch, in the Munitorum Precinct. Well, it has been quiet there, though there was shelling last fortnight. The roof is caved in, in parts, and there are holes in the courtyard that have become ponds due to the rain. There is vermin, also.

But, in general, quiet. The eternal bastards, by which, sir, I mean the Archenemy, have slackened their assault on this part of the city of late. Because, I believe, of the action of our armour in the fields. The treads have driven them back into the highlands, and they concentrate now on the docks and the Western Gates. The siege stands. That is my understanding of affairs, though I am not privy to strategic overview being, as I am, a trooper second class. The flow of this war is explained to me by my superiors, men like Major Zailman, when they consider it appropriate, and the rest I have learned through gossip.

The depot– yes, Depot 686 – is for food storage. Consumables. The stuff is packed in there in crates. There's stuff in cans and jars, and dried rations, and also food that is packed and sealed in stasis cartons, so as to preserve it. Food is scarce. From the hollow of your cheek, sir, I see you know that as well as I. The siege has been a long one. What food reaches the city gets stored at the depot,

and then distributed by the watchful and diligent officers of the Munitorum, so there is a fair and equal share. Many souls, particularly them citizens what live in the rubble zones, they do fair crave for sustenance, as you might understand, and being desperate, they sometimes try to pillage and raid, for which reason a guard is set day and night.

Midnight rotation was our watch. We come down and assembled in the courtyard, between the rain-ponds. A servant of the Munitorum, all in his robes and whatnot, he come out and explained the wherewithals to our sergeant, who then explained them all to us. I don't know why he could not explain them directly to us, but this, apparently, is not the way the Munitorum do things.

Our sergeant, Pawlak, is a good man. Paws, we call him. Well, because he is a robust sort, with strength in him, and I've seen him take his solid fists to the enemy more than once, when things got close. He keeps to himself a fair bit, but he is a decent sort. He is a sight better than our previous sergeant, Gamberlin, who was lost in the highlands last year, when he had the misfortune to greet one of the eternal bastards' bayonets with his face.

So Paws— yes, by that I mean Sergeant Pawlak — so, Sergeant Pawlak he done listen to the Munitorum officer, and then he done turn right around and explain it all again to us, all waiting there in the yard with nothing but the skitter of the vermin for company. He explained where the access points were, the limits of the fence and the wall, and the location of a few sneak-holes where looters were known to try their luck. They patch them up, as best they can, when they find them, but the looters dig more, you see? Especially in them parts where the shells have fallen and brought in the roof and whatnot. Close one rat-hole up, and another one gets dug out.

Well, because they're hungry.

Paws— yes, Sergeant Pawlak — he sets us to our duties. Sentries on the fence, the walls, the holes and the gates, and patrols to circuit the depot. We'd switch from standing watch to patrol every two hours, so every man could stretch his legs and stay fresh. We was sharp enough. Standing still, sentry at a gate, can get soporific, but you don't doze off when Paws is watching you, for fears he might discover you slacking and lay his paws upon your head.

I were with him, though, in the second two-hour stretch. A moving patrol. Me

and Paws, and Trooper Eron and Trooper Fevurse. We walked up and down the stacks – rows and rows of crates and pallets – checking that all was the way it should be. We had been at it an hour, walking up and down, looking under tarps and making sure the drain covers were secure, and Paws says, ‘I don’t like the smell of that.’

And I says, ‘Smell of what, sarge?’ Because frankly the depot has a smell to it that is quite noticeable at all times. Damp and decay and vermin droppings, and wastewater what comes up through the drains, and spoiled food, of which, I am sad to say, there is a lot. It is a heady mix, and you breathe through your mouth for some time on first arrival.

So I says ‘What smell, sarge?’ And he says, ‘That smell,’ and he means a sort of chemical stink, and once he points it out, I notice it. It smells like cleaning fluids, which is strange, because believe you me, sir, there isn’t nothing what has been cleaned in this city for many a month now, excepting perhaps the Warmaster’s chamber pot, which I wouldn’t know anything about, being a trooper second class.

‘It’s coming from over there,’ says Fevurse, and we go and look. And there’s water, and Paws says, ‘I don’t like the look of that water there.’ It’s laying on the ground, on the floor of the depot, seeping out from under a great big stack of crates, eight high, all set on metal shelving. So we figure it’s another sneak-hole – a new one, dug up by some poor soul underneath the crates – and groundwater is running out of it, chemical stuff, polluted and whatnot. So Paws says to move the crates so we can find the hole and plug it. He fishes out an incendiary grenade to roll down the chute when we find it. ‘As a deterrent,’ he says.

We start moving them crates. They’re big and they’re heavy. The Munitorum officer told us not to touch or move anything, because it weren’t our business to do so. Moving crates was Munitorum business and guarding crates was Militarum business, and never the twain should meet. But Paws says we move the crates or we won’t find the hole, so we have to move them. We move them and stack them in the walkway so we can put them back again after. The crates, they are big, as I said, and sealed with Munitorum shipping tags, and they have transit marks writ on them. They are stasis cartons, and they hadn’t been in long. The handling mark says they had been brung in two days previous, from the landing grounds.

We'd cleared a few away, and it was sweaty work, and by the third row we'd leant our rifles against the racks and taken off our jackets and all. 'Where's this hole then?' says Eron, and Paws says, 'I think the water's coming out of the crates. Look at this.' And some of the crates, they are wet all right, as if there was water inside and it was dribbling out around the seals. Paws wipes his hand in it and sniffs and says, 'Chemicals,' like the smell we noticed before. 'That isn't right,' he says to us. 'Something's not right. We should open one of the crates.'

So Eron says, 'Hang on, Paws, we can't do that. Munitorum property. We shouldn't even be moving them without permission. Tampering with Munitorum seals, that's a crime. It's looting, and that's a hanging offence.' Paws says to us he agrees, it would be a hanging offence right enough, but there's a security issue too. A Militarum issue. This isn't right and we should check it, hanging offence or no hanging offence, because who do we serve? The God-Emperor of Mankind what watches over us all, that's who, and not some jumped-up fart from the Munitorum, thank you.

Well, Eron complains again, and Paws tells him, 'Eron, you run along and fetch the Munitorum fellow, and bring him here, so he can see for himself what we're about.' Eron sees the sense in this, and he runs off to locate the gentleman. And Paws looks at us, and says, 'Get me a crowbar, Cawkus, we're having these boxes open.'

So I get him a crowbar.

And we push a crate out into the open, one what was particularly leaking water, and Paws says, 'Yeah, I'm really not having this,' and gets to work with the crowbar, and he breaks the seals and gets the lid off.

A stasis carton's meant to be all cold inside, and there's always a hum of the system keeping it stable. Tech stuff, I don't know. But this box, it's swimming in water, chemical water, and there's no hum or nothing. No what-you-call-it. Stasis field.

So I figure it's broken, and the field's failed, and the contents are spoiled and that's why the water's coming out. And Paws rolls his sleeve up and sticks his arm in, and pulls.

And there's a man inside. He's all curled up, in a plastic bag. And he's dead.

And we flop him out on the ground, our eyes right wide, and stare at him. And he's still dead. And Fervurse gets out his combat knife, and he slits the plastic bag, and all this stinky, filthy stuff pours out, like water from the bottom of a trench. Stagnant water. And the dead man flops out with it, and he's still dead.

We look at this dead man, and we know. He isn't one of ours. He's in combats, old combats, but his face is all marked with these scar-patterns, and there are badges on his tunic. Signs. Symbols. Insignia of the eternal bastards.

So I curse out loud, and Paws says, 'Enough of that mouth, Cawkus,' and he fishes around and finds a lasgun and some webbing that were also in the sack with the dead man.

'This isn't food,' says Fervurse, 'unless the Munitorum is so desperate they're hoping to feed us the enemy dead for our suppers.' And I says, 'They wouldn't do that, would they?' And Paws says, 'It depends how desperate the shortage is, what with the siege and all,' but none of us believes they would actually do that, so there has to be another explanation.

About then, Eron comes back with the Munitorum officer and the Munitorum officer is all, 'What the hell do you men think you're about? You shouldn't open that,' and gets quite beside himself until Paws shows him the dead man, and then he gets even more beside himself, but this time it's with fear.

And he starts shouting, and Paws starts shouting back, and we all start shouting, and there's a right barney, which is probably why we didn't notice what was happening right away.

Some of them other boxes were opening. All by themselves.

There was men in the other boxes too. Eternal bastards, all bagged up with their guns and everything. But they weren't dead, sir, because the stasis fields on their crates hadn't failed. They was alive. And they had been waiting until all was clear to come out.

I suppose, sir, it were a scheme, devilish, devised by the Archenemy to sneak pioneer forces into the city and break the long siege. Sneak them in, pretending that they're food, so they could come out and undermine us from within. I don't know how long they'd been in them crates, or how far they'd come, but them stasis fields had kept them alive, suspended, and because we had disturbed them,

they was waking up.

They were coming out of boxes all around us, using rusty blades to slash open the plastic sacks containing them, grabbing their guns, shouting obscene things.

Well, Eron, Throne rest him, he dies right away. They shoot him, plain as that, and he shudders and twists and falls on the ground with holes in him. And we back up, in a mad scramble, and grab our rifles, and Paws is yelling orders. And that's when the firefight started.

The Munitorum gentleman, I don't know what he was about. He was running around, yelling and screaming.

I fancy he was in on it. I fancy he knew what was in them crates. The eternal bastards, they must've had a man on the inside to get the shipment into the depot, past all the checks. That is just my notion, sir. I have no proof, and we can't ask him now, because the eternal bastards, they shot him too. He looked surprised, I know that. He looked disappointed when they turned their guns on him, like it was unfair. But they shot him anyway.

So we was firing at them and they was firing back, and there was a lot more of them than there were of us. Paws tells Fevurse to go and get the men, but Fevurse got clipped in the leg and fell down, and could do no more than sit there and shoot back. So Paws, he tells me to go instead, and that he would cover me.

He's a good shot is Paws. I saw him, dug in between the shelving, knock four of the bastards down with clean shots. Then he yells, 'Run, Cawkus, you idle mug. Run and get the others.'

So I start to run, dodging the fire coming my way, and poor Fevurse is shooting, and Paws pulls out the incendiary grenade that he had kept for later use, and lobs it in amongst them, and there's a bang and half a dozen of them start lumbering around screaming, all alight from head to foot.

Yes sir, I do believe that is when the depot caught fire.

I rallied the men and we came back, and by then Fevurse was dead and the depot was all ablaze, half of it anyway. Paws was still going. He'd littered the place with kills. We laid in beside him, and set up a fusillade, and did the bastards some harm.

But it were the fire that stopped them, sir. There were too many of them. Hundreds, maybe more, all coming out of boxes. My platoon couldn't have held them long. And it would have taken too long for reinforcements to arrive from the garrisons. By the time they'd got there, we'd have been overrun, and the eternal bastards would have been out, into the streets, into the city and, well...

Yes, sir, I understand that food supply is a vital resource and we cannot afford to lose a principal depot. And I also understand that arson in a Munitorum facility is a serious offence. Even in time of war, under extremis. I understand that. But it was the fire that stopped them. But for the fire, the city would be gone.

Did Paws make it out? Sergeant Pawlak? Well, I'm glad of that. I'm sure he can explain the matter better than I can. I'm sure he can make a good account of our midnight rotation and the emergency. You've already spoken to him? Good, then. Good.

No, sir. Nothing else to add, sir. Yeah, I know what I done. I saved your fragging arses is what I done.

What's that? The commissar will see me now? Yeah. Yeah, I bet he will.

About the Author

Dan Abnett is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both New York Times bestsellers. He has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. He scripted Macragge's Honour, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS
SIEGEMASTER**

by **CHRIS WRAIGHT**

Siegemaster

Chris Wraight

I see the marks of his work from orbit, long before Tacitus reaches drop-range. I have time to study them, shifting blurred images across the lenses, and what I see inflames the anger that has been intermittently dormant for the long month I have spent in the void getting from Scraw's Reach to Harrowar.

It makes me angry for the waste of resource. I find I care about this even more than I did before the Legion broke itself apart and every usable rivet became as precious to us as diamonds.

The last time we had spoken, he and I, we had lamented this. We had remembered how it had been in the Stor-Bezashk, when we had commanded access to our unmatched leviathans, those machines of glorious, terrible power. We had both been in that brotherhood. We had both been there when our instruments of reduction had vomited their innards out against those damned, Dorn-crafted gates.

But now we scratch around for blunted blades and pretend the rust was always there. So it stirs my anger that he has diminished himself further. As I see what he has done on Harrowar, my eyes are dark with fury.

My crew evade my gaze. They clank and shuffle in the darkness of the bridge-wells, preparing the lander.

I look down at the world my brother travelled to, eighty Terran years before this day, and whisper the curse that he will find most hurtful.

'You have wasted yourself.'

'Warsmith Bakulos,' the slave-drone vocalises.

I do not look at it, that creature of iron and pulled sinew, but its intervention tells me descent is prepared. I rise from my throne, armour hissing, and draw my helm to me. The patina of old wars is on it, thick like oxidation.

My retinue falls in behind me as I walk – three battle-brothers of my warband,

clad in dark, chevroned iron, the icon of the Corpse Grinders on their blunted shoulder-guards. I have not seen their true faces in a hundred years, nor they mine, for our mortal skins are now bound up with our armour, the union of body and ceramite our Father himself had flirted with, on occasion, back when he still possessed the inclination for invention.

My quarry has hidden his location well, but not the effects of his presence. As the lander burns down through Harrowar's choked atmosphere, I see the webs of scarring stretch out, gradually sharpening into networks, and networks inside networks. The earth is beaten down by the tread of a billion boots, made slick and black, then burned again, until it all glints like coal.

We come down fifty kilometres southwest of the main battlefield on what my tactical feed tells me is Kurr's nineteenth offensive complex on the primary continental mass. Constructions loom up around us, half-lost in the dirty film of Harrowar's poisoned air. I see refineries meshed in pipe-clusters, glowing sickly with chem-discharge from ranks of terraced chimneys. I see munitions works, armour manufactories, cavernous hab-blocs. He has built all these things himself, for the mark of ancient Olympia is on them – no Imperial would have used such obsessive layers of redundancy.

In the distance, I hear the low crump of artillery pieces. They are firing in sequence, metronomically, and I recognise the report of the guns – Kroeger siege-pattern maulers, tracked on nine-metre gauge rails, macro-calibre, capable of levelling any wall in existence, given the time.

He has had the time. He has had it in shovel-blades.

His men come to acknowledge me, clenching their fists in wary salutes. Two hundred line the drop-site, most hanging back, clad in dark grey tabards over heavy blast-armour. They are in poor condition, these men.

The principal kneels and waits for me to grunt in acknowledgement. When he rises, I see he bears the Corpse Grinder's eyeless skull on his chest, fused in molten lines like spilled solder. His own eyes are gone, replaced by twin range-finder lenses for the guns, and he squints up awkwardly.

'Warsmith,' he says.

'Where is he?' I ask.

‘At the front, Warsmith.’

‘Which front?’

He looks confused.

‘Give me a location,’ I press.

‘Will you observe the war?’ he asks.

I see then that he is simple. His mind has gone. Kurr has done it, perhaps. All the men stare at me. I will learn nothing from them.

One of my retinue aims his bolter at the principal, but I gesture for him to lower it.

‘Show me,’ I say. The man grins. Grins and nods.

It takes us almost an hour just to reach the edge of the trench system. We go in a convoy of armoured crawlers caked with black dust, their segmented tracks five metres high. As I crouch in the crew bay, I remember trundling across other dark sands on the world where it all started for us.

He had been next to me then, my deputy in the unit, keen for an action that was not garrison-duty or wall-breaking. He had smiled before putting his helm on, looking hungry, like a famished infant.

‘We will like this new war better,’ he had said.

I had not been so sure. ‘They too have been our brothers.’

Then his helm had gone on, hissing as the seals closed tight. Only blank iron had faced me then, a pitted mask of silver-grey.

‘They were never our brothers.’

Now I sit back, cramped in the mortal-scale spaces of the present, breathing in the fumes, smelling the sweat-fear of those that ride with me. Perhaps, out there, he still wears that same helm, battered by the millennia. He did so the last time I saw him on Scraw’s Reach, with the multihued sky of the Eye reflecting in the

lenses.

As we travel, my armour tells me much of what passes outside the crawler's hull. There is little movement of men. We overtake another convoy, grinding hard north, and I taste its promethium stink. Everything beyond the armourglass slits is dark, thrown into dirty shadows by the shrouded sun, cold as dormant forge-ash.

When we arrive, the principal hastens to make things ready. The crawler's rear door squeals open on rust-strangled hinges, and I make my way into the open.

'Ur-67,' he tells me, gesturing north against a hot, flaked wind.

I see trench lines spider away from me, hundreds of them, extending out across a wide plain of rock and rust. Bodies crawl within them. War engines, belching goutts of smoke, wallow slowly among the formations. Streaks of black stain the sky, leading like twine back down to the angled maws of artillery ranks.

They fire then, briefly swallowed up in avalanches of boiling smog, and the ground shudders. In the distance, far even for my eyes to make out, I see the Enemy behind his walls. I take in the defensive scheme in an instant – high bastions, marked with Gothic crenulations, studded with faint red points of light. I see spires beyond those walls, rearing into the haze, belching their own smoke. They still bear their Imperial aquilas, despite the ruins they now squat inside. That one place, Ur-67, might yet have a million defenders.

'How long have you been fighting?' I ask my guide.

He is barely listening. He looks out, rapt. He watches the arcs of the shells, but his smudged lenses give little away.

'Ur-67,' he says again.

I turn away from him. My retinue are stomping down the slope toward the first trench complex, kicking through a grey layer of boot-churned mud, scanning for any signs they can use.

The Enemy cannot hurt us, not at this distance, but they are still there. I begin to find something compelling about the vista – bled clean of colour, framed by a low and lowering sky. Ruins march across that no-man's-land, naked, stone-

stripped down to their corroded skeletons of burned adamantium. He has made a tomb-world here, and yet its inhabitants do not die.

My lieutenant, Shohvaz, returns to me and bows. He is bearing a data-slate, mud-streaked but functional.

‘One of his?’ I ask.

He nods and activates the power cell. I see cartography on the lens – construction schematics, some logistical data-screeds. So he was building recently, heading up to the northeast, past Ur-67’s outer margins and into the glacial zone. I know there are other spires there, perhaps also still defended.

‘He has gone after them all,’ I say.

Shohvaz says nothing. He is disgusted by this and would happily see Harrowar destroyed from orbit. Such things are difficult now – costly to muster, draining the resources of a sundered Legion with its countless feuding factions – but they can be done. I do not try to persuade him of my own course, for despite his revulsion, he will not disobey me. Some dregs of the Stor-Bezashk remain, and we were ever the disciplined ones.

I turn to the principal. ‘We will take your transport,’ I tell him.

He is not listening. He is looking out at the city he has failed to reduce. He is watching the guns prepare to fire again. Their report is a like a heartbeat on this world: endless, thudding out time.

His mouth hangs open. His skin is grey-white, pocked with sores. He will die of those, and still that city will stand.

‘North,’ I tell Shohvaz, turning away, and I find that I share his disgust.

But I also remember Gugann. That was good fighting. For once, we were given an enemy that we could slaughter and run down, and the killing was neither ranged nor static. We landed en masse, bringing the Grand Battalions in waves from low orbit. The Lord of Iron had spent the warp-stages planning, bringing us together from our sundered garrisons, and we hit the xenos hard, then harder, then again and again, never allowing them respite.

‘Choke them,’ our Father had said, and we knew what he wanted. We struck, then did not let them catch a breath. When we had our fingers around their throat, we tightened. It was a fine thing, to watch them gasp and retch. We of the siege brotherhood landed our earth-borers, and we broke the roofs of their tunnels, pushing into the wet earth and generating cascades of blood-rich slurry around us.

I did not know the name Kurr then. We were in different fighting units of a large Legion, and only Isstvan would bring us together as full battle-brothers, but it was Gugann that gave me my first sight of him. I had delivered my heavy pounders into the heart of the caves, pushing on even as the earth cracked and gaped around us. We had to drive the slave crews hard to keep up with the main tactical squads, and they hauled on long iron chains until their muscles split from the bone.

We had taken position high inside one of the central chambers where the xenos had gathered to fight. I was following orders, establishing fire-points behind our infantry advance, angling the shell-paths to bring ruin among them before they could pull their own blades into contact. I had not finished that before I saw more Legion units break out from the left flank, demolishing the earth walls and showering the routes ahead in powdered soil. They had done something to their crews – maddened them, given them stims, something forbidden – and they dragged the mortar trains as if they were stampeding animals. They pulled ahead of us, opened fire first, and filled the arterial spaces with raging fire.

I should have been furious, but was instead intrigued. I strode ahead of my crews, magnifying the battlescape with my helm lenses, singling out the warrior responsible. He was at the forefront of his gun trains, swinging a chainsword, roaring through the grille of a sloping helm.

He was impatient for the kill. That was not something we were known for, neither then nor since – we were the methodical ones, the stoic breakers of lesser wills. We had stood quiet like cattle while our Father had ordered the Decimation, bound by our orders, bound by our stolid souls.

I voxed him, ordering him to pull back lest my own greater guns pulverise his troops where they marched.

He laughed back over the link. ‘If you can catch us, we will deserve it.’

If you can catch us.

I never did. I never got close. I do not think I have been close since.

The climate falls away fast as the land rises, clutching us with fronds of ice and making the crawler stutter. There are just the four of us, myself and my retinue, and we can bear the cold, but the machine struggles.

The sky darkens further, plunging into midnight blue. Ice creeps across the bare rock, worming its diamond fingers into the crevices. We go ever further north, winding along the sheer edges of mountain passes. I see clouds forming below us, heavy with grey snow, and realise we are over a thousand metres up. The armourglass freezes over and turns opaque, and a sheen of white creeps across the outline of our armour-shells.

It takes two standard days to clear the mountains, creeping like some enormous metal insect through rubble-choked passes. On the far side, our progress is slower still, descending moraines of silt and frozen rubble that choke the crawler's tracks and block the air filters. I could have summoned a flyer, but he would have detected it. In any case, this is the way we have always preferred it – against the earth, the tick-tock grind of progress, creeping closer to the quarry with every engine-cycle.

When we are low enough to reactivate the crawler's augur units, we scan ahead. The mountains are giving way to wind-blasted tundra. Atmospheric auroras sway above us, curtains of bright-green ionisation against an iron-black horizon.

Soon there are trenches again. I do not know how he excavated them here – the ground is like adamantium, the air frigid and lethal – and yet they stretch across the tundra in massive patterns, chewed into the earth, lit by oil-plumes. I see troops, first dozens, then hundreds, huddling in greatcoats around braziers, shivering even as they reach for the gun breeches and call up the shell-gurneys.

The crawler shivers to a halt, its engine-spirit screaming, and we leave it. I am used to awe from humans, to being seen as an ironclad god to be feared and loathed, but these armies here are beaten into numbness. They stare at us and hang back, but they do not run – they are too sick and cowed by old authority. These ones, too, bear Kurr's marks, the marks of the Corpse Grinders, and they are also laying siege to a city that should have fallen a long time ago. I look up and see it on the edge of the north-western horizon – spires like charred rib

bones thrusting up from the ice, ringed on all sides, defiantly alive.

I find the army's commander, cloistered in a sprawling rockcrete bunker at the heart of his trench city, bent low over a pile of mouldering maps. The bunker chamber is cramped, even more so with transhuman occupants. The walls are stained with frozen mould, and the lumens gutter behind their cages. The commander, a thin man in worn fatigues and cloak, stands up when he sees me enter, and a flicker of fear kindles in his blue eyes.

So he has at least enough life in him to fear me.

'I seek Kurr,' I tell him.

Something ghosts across his tired face then – anger, maybe? – but he masters himself. 'The Supreme Commander is at the front,' he says.

'There is more than one.'

He half-smiles, wearily. 'And they are ever growing.'

I move towards the table of maps and see the full extent of the endless earthworks that Kurr has constructed, and for an instant, I do not believe it possible. He was of the Stor-Bezashk, and so knows his art, but still.

'How long have you been fighting here?' I ask.

'Three years at Ur-43. Two more here.'

I run a gauntlet down the edge of the map, and the rotten paper flakes off with my fingertip. 'You are close to breaking it?'

'It will fall soon. We are promised more guns.'

'You have plenty of guns.'

'And men. They die quickly here. I have twenty thousand promised, but delays... in the mountains...'

He trails off. It looks like he cannot remember why they are not here. I lose patience and lash out, grabbing him by the throat. His eyes flare wide, but he

does not struggle, and hangs like a gutted fish in my grip.

‘You have had eighty years,’ I hiss at him. ‘How many spires have fallen?’

He cannot answer, for he does not know. I realise then that he must have been born here, spawned in a slave-pen somewhere among the rest of Kurr’s indentured millions. This world is the entire universe for him. I imagine he does not even know why he is fighting.

‘Where is Kurr?’ That is all I truly need.

He can just about gasp out an answer. ‘North. The polar stations.’

Perhaps I should have expected it. The summit of this world, circled by the isolation of its howling wastes.

I let him fall, and he crashes to his knees, dragging air into himself hungrily.

I turn to Shohvaz, and beckon towards the door.

‘North again,’ I say.

We were once more than these petty bands. We once formed one of the greatest armies assembled in the species’ history. At the muster before the first departure from Olympia, our battalions filled the parade grounds of the Magister Palatial in Lochos, rank upon rank, standing immobile in the grey dawn. Ever afterwards we were dispersed by the Crusade, but on those occasions when we came together, we were among the mightiest, the most steadfast, the hardest to break.

In the end, no Legion broke us. They did not need to, for we broke ourselves. True enough, we survived the confusion of the Siege’s dissolution, keeping together, keeping our discipline. We remained strong enough to face Dorn again on Sebastus IV, and that was a great victory, whatever the liars of Terra have written since. We endured as, one by one, the loyalists’ own primarchs faded from history and ours did not.

I do not know what caused the madness on Medrengard. None who lived through it know. There are whispers that Perturabo instigated it, though I do not believe that myself. If I am wrong, and his design was to bring about a second Decimation, then it was a failure, for everything was shattered: all our strength,

all our unity – gone amid a hundred years of sustained insanity.

I came to the bloodshed late, arriving at Medrengard with my Grand Company. I had hoped to be wrong, or hoped to end it, but that was foolishness, for greater forces were at play with us. We were fired upon before we had even gained the planet, and other fleets closed on us like predators. Tacitus was a lesser ship for me then, but it proved our salvation when the reactors on Krastus blew, and we were able to take sanctuary amid the spinning metal. Then we could fire back, and the macrocannons opened up, and we were killing our own again, only this time it wasn't just our own species but our own gene-brothers.

I pushed clear of the void-carnage, running before a pack of hunters until the black sun loomed on the forward augurs and its pale world swam before it. The comm-lines swelled with incoming messages, alliances were formed, bargains struck. We learned the names of new warbands, culled from old Crusade-era monikers, and they were already fragmented and re-forming, seething like molten metal on an anvil.

In the earliest days, we had been called the 'corpse grinders' by those who despised our way of war, and so that became our name again, taken in anger and incomprehension. We raised our own tower on Medrengard and ringed it with the artillery once used to level the Carrion Emperor's walls. Then we entered the power games of the daemon world, watched over by our deranged Father, who remained either unable or unwilling to intervene and caught up in resentments that we would never fathom.

That was when I met Kurr again for the first time since the long flight from Terra. I had taken my warriors out onto cracked glass plains, hunting the daemons that we bound to our machines. Not for the first or last time, we were drawn into the battles of other warbands, and the skies sang with the laughing screams of the neverborn. Lightning the colour of entrails lashed across the tilting earth, and we were surrounded by a force more than three times our strength. I expected to die then. I ordered our formation, swearing to damn the souls of as many faithless as I could before the end, and the taste of defeat in such a cause was bitter on my lips.

But I was cheated of that. In the endless shifting tumult of those pointless wars, we were not alone. Warriors of the old Legion burst out of the fog, breaking the enemy cordon. Then it was a true fight, as hard as any we had prosecuted. I lost

my old comrades, but I gained new ones, for Kurr had known it was us. He fought like a demigod, crashing through ranks of warriors with his chainsword whirling around him.

We came together in the heart of the fighting, and by then, I knew that we would win, and that I would see more black-sun dawns on Medrengard.

‘Warsmith,’ he acknowledged, lowering the bloody tip of his blade.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘We are the siegemasters. There will be other worlds to conquer.’

Then we were fighting again, cutting the heart out of our own Legion, purging the weak or the unlucky.

He was right. In time, there would be other worlds for us to reduce, crushing the hope out of them as the Imperium weakened, but I was never easy with him after that. The life-debt weighed on my shoulders, so when the time came, I sent him on his own missions, keeping him at distance, and that worked for us for a long time.

All until Harrowar, when he finally went dark.

For the first time on this cursed world, I detect warriors of my own kind. They detect me too and come to meet us long before we arrive at the location our sensors tell me he must be at. The snow is falling fast now, gusting jerkily as if pulled by daemonic fingers. Since leaving the heavy transport behind, thirty kilometres south of here, we have waded through it, thigh-deep in places. Even now it cakes our pauldrons, melts against the heat of our power packs, drips in slushy trails in our footfalls.

They emerge from the permanent night of this latitude, twelve of them, all bearing bolters. Like the mortals they command, the sign of the warband is on their chests, scraped in molten metal in place of the old aquila. They do not salute. Shohvaz and the two others of my retinue draw their own weapons, but I make no move.

I am their Warsmith. I am Kurr’s Warsmith.

‘Warsmith,’ says one of them, his voice clipped by the extreme cold. His helm visor is rimed with frost, his greaves streaked with bloody ice. I recognise him then: Skarrak, one born of the gene-ranks on Medrengard before the schism. He has served with Kurr for a long time, just as all the others here have.

‘You know why I am here,’ I say.

Skarrak nods. ‘He knew you would come, eventually.’

I try to gauge the balance of their loyalty. They have been with him for decades, fighting a war that should have been over a half-century ago.

‘Tell me of him,’ I say.

Skarrak almost replies. Then he changes his mind, gives a signal, and the bolter muzzles drop. ‘He waits within,’ he says, falling back to reveal the edifice beyond.

It takes me a while to perceive it, lost in the murk and the driving snow-flurries. Then I see my mistake – I have taken its black face for the night sky, but it fills that sky, up and up into the storm, a wall of sheer ebony. My vision adjusts, and I see the buttresses, the octagonal towers, the gates and the guns. It resembles nothing so much as the primarch’s tower on our own home world, crusted here with a shield of ice, splitting the winds like a thrown dagger.

I cross a single bridge, a narrow span across a gulf that goes down into eternal dark. Shohvaz and the others remain at the inner gate on my command, and I pass under the heavy lintel alone. Within, all is echoes and emptiness, and the cold is crippling even through my battle-plate. I press on, my boots clanking on stone. I pass through galleries, vaults, silent halls. Eventually I reach the centre, below the level of the ice, a single chamber buried deep, impervious to the world outside.

He is standing there, face hidden by the old helm, the chainsword still in his hands. A hololith of Harrowar spins slowly in the gloom beside him. Other things lurk in the shadows – maps etched on bronze plate, schematics, skin-bound books piled high and slowly freezing into ice-mush.

‘Well met, Bakulos,’ he says.

His voice has changed. It is not just the age – that affects us all – but the resonance. It has gone, dried out like stretched leather.

‘You knew I would have to come, sooner or later,’ I say. I do not reach for my weapon yet, though I judge I will have to kill him. We have never fought before, so it will be interesting to see which one of us is the stronger.

‘No, I thought you might forget me,’ Kurr says, drily. ‘But we never forget, do we? So yes, yes, you had to come, chasing me down.’

I look at the hololith. It shows all of the siege lines, ringing the entire hemisphere, enclosing hive-clusters and city-states. To maintain it, he has created an empire of his own, sucking in men and materiel and hurling it against walls that do not fall.

‘Look at it,’ Kurr said. ‘I am only doing what we have always done.’

‘You were ordered to destroy this world,’ I say.

‘True.’ He shuffles closer, and I smell the acrid mix of armour oils and physical sweat. He has daubed his plate with something – blood, maybe – and it glistens in the cold. ‘Another void-rock, spoiled and sucked clean. Then we move on, and they come back after us, and they rebuild, and we are all sapped a little more.’

He extends a hand towards the hololith and traces the lines of the trench systems. ‘So I remain true to what we were. We guard, we watch. That is what our Father forgot, and it turned his mind. We should never have wished for what the others had – there was a reason we were not trusted.’

I find I cannot take my eyes off the hololith. Kurr has lost none of his artistry, and his tactical placements are impeccable. Beautiful, even.

‘You could end this in a month, brother,’ I say.

‘And that would finish everything. Bakulos, look at this and tell me it is not perfection. My commanders come to me and say ‘When will we launch the attack, lord?’, and I try to show them that it is not yet done, and more building is needed. I think they see it, sometimes, but some have had to be... corrected. I try to teach them. I tell them ‘Not yet. Not until all is done.’ I think they are seeing

that now.'

I look at him. Green lith-light bathes his battered helm.

'I came to end this,' I say.

Kurr chortles, a sound that limps from his vox grille, drained of the old humour. 'Or you will end me. Is that what you think will happen here?' He draws closer to me, and I hear the rasp of his near-frozen respirator. 'Gaze on it, Bakulos: a siege that never ends, that is never lifted. We breed our armies, they breed theirs, all into endless suffering, locked tight in formations that span horizon to horizon. I made it. This is what we wanted, and the Eye rejoices – there is nothing finer.'

His hand rests on the grip of the chainsword, but mine is still empty.

'I came to give you a chance,' I say.

'No, you came to see what I had become. So now you have seen it, what comes next?'

I move instantly, crashing my fist into his throat. He must have known the blow was coming, but it sends him staggering and give me time to draw my bolter.

I sense his shock – he really believed I could be persuaded – and I fire, point-blank, at his helm. The reactive shell explodes as it impacts on the cranial shielding, dropping him. For a moment I think that has done it, but he powers back up, the blades on his sword whirring, his helm cracked open.

'I built perfection,' he snarls, lurching towards me.

I pull away, firing again, but he swerves clear and swings the blade at my neck. I seize his wrist and brace, holding the blurred teeth just above my gorget-seal. His breathing is ragged, wet with frenzy, and I sense his strength.

I drop the bolter and punch with my free fist, smashing the lump of it into his helm-lenses. Still, he leans into the chainsword, bearing me down, and I punch again, then again, harder and with an edge of desperation. Blood flies across my own vision, and my fist connects with flesh now.

Finally the chainsword falls away, skidding and snarling across the floor in a

welter of sparks. Kurr collapses, his face a pulpy mess. I catch a glimpse of old, old flesh amid the pumping blood, as grey as the ice of Harrowar.

Once I am sure that he is dead, a feeling of sudden emptiness wells up within me. Our fates have danced around one another for ten thousand years, intersecting across time like the junctions of his trench lines.

I look back at his work, picked out in the translucent green of the hololith projection, and see again how flawless it has been. He has created stasis, two forces locked together with no hope of release. It could be eternal here, the slow suffocation of all souls, just as we were charged with in the Crusade. We had resented it so much then, fuelling the change of allegiance, feeling that we were wronged.

I am only doing what we have always done.

I hear noises from outside the chamber. Skarrak enters, and Shohvaz. They look at me, and at Kurr's corpse, and I can sense Skarrak's raw hope.

'Then we attack now,' he says, relieved. 'We end this.'

All over Harrowar, I imagine them saying the same thing, once they know the truth. Those with the wit left to realise it will know that their nightmare can be over: the cities will be stormed, smashed into dust, and we will move on.

I cannot take my eyes from the hololith. I cannot take my eyes from Kurr's vision, and I see for the first time that it is incomplete.

Shohvaz takes a step towards the generator. He wants to shut it down.

'I can give the order,' he growls. 'We have the forces in place.'

I know we do. Kurr always had what he needed, but that was not the point.

There are gaps in the siege-lines. They could be extended, given time and effort, and that would make the vision complete.

I can sense their impatience. They want action now.

So I do not look at them as I speak, for I am already planning, something I have

not done in this way for a long time. I wonder if this is how it started for him.

‘Not yet,’ I say. It will be beautiful when it is finished, and I already know where the digging will start. ‘Not until all is done.’

About the Author

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

**THE STAFF OF
ASCLEPIUS**

by **GRAHAM McNEILL**

The Staff of Asclepius

Graham McNeill

Isstvan Cantaro runs, though he knows he cannot escape his pursuer. Dzyban has hundreds of cultists genetically enslaved to his will. They are mortals, but they are well armed and surgically altered not to fear the Adeptus Astartes.

Especially a wounded, unarmed one.

He can hear them rampaging through the ship, uttering foul names of things best left nameless. They are little better than beasts or lab experiments that should have been incinerated at inception.

Isstvan presses a palm to the wall of the corridor as a stabbing pain from his groin rips up through his belly and into his chest cavity. His primary heart judders arrhythmically. It is failing, but has not yet switched functionality to his secondary organ.

And yet he is not mortally wounded.

At least, under normal circumstances, he would not consider himself so.

He leans against a bulkhead of bare metal, the absence of any vibrations from the Soju's engine decks only reinforcing the hopelessness of his situation.

But Isstvan Cantaro is an Apothecary of the Ultramarines and has faced hopelessness before. He has defied it time and time again. He looks down at his bloodied gauntlet, pressed against the ivory breastplate and Ichar IV honour seal. Blood bubbles up through his fingers as he releases the pressure. The entry wound is perfectly round and utterly innocuous.

Decades of ingrained training kick in: battlefield triage, employed on his battle-brothers in the thick of the bloodiest fights – the brutal arithmetic of war that decides who lives and who dies.

Entry wound in left flank, penetrating a cracked junction between plastron and back-plate. Two centimetres in diameter.

Stubber round. Upward trajectory. Fired from ten metres.

Ricochet impact from ossified rib-plate causing it to fragment and tumble downwards through the pelvic cavity.

Femoral artery ruptured.

Without intervention, internal bleeding will almost certainly be fatal.

He could perform the life-saving operation himself, but he doubts his pursuers will allow him the time to administer the soporifics and clarity enhancers required for self-surgery.

Once, the thought of such an ignoble death would have horrified Isstvan, but more than just his life is at stake now. He bears the souls of his fallen brothers. The future of every Chapter depends on the work of its Apothecaries, as they harvest the genetic legacy of each of the Emperor's favoured sons.

Isstvan's squad brothers are dead, killed in the opening moments of the attack, when the traitors boarded the Soju. He alone lives, and he bears the gene-seed of seven of his brothers of Macragge. He failed to reach two others before the void claimed them, their legacy of heroism now gone forever.

The loss weighs heavily on him.

He twists a pressure seal on his narthecium gauntlet and a puff of cold air vents as a steel-jacketed vial emerges.

'Such a small thing,' he says. 'Upon which so much depends.'

He kneels and grimaces as pain stabs into his belly. Reaching down, he lifts aside a small panel of the bulkhead and hides the steel vial within. He closes the panel and quickly scratches a symbol upon it: a pair of serpents entwined around a winged staff.

'Let us see how far you have fallen, surgeon of demise...'

He pulls himself upright once more and presses on, leaving a gleaming trail of blood in his wake. His breathing is laboured and his vision greys at the edges. Oily sweat pours from his skin as the arcane biology within his body drives his

healing mechanisms into overdrive.

He knows they will not succeed. The tumbling mass of shattered bullet fragments has wreaked havoc within his flesh. He needs to let his sustenance membrane shut down his extraneous bodily systems, but he bears too great a burden to allow himself the luxury of life.

Isstvan plunges deeper into the labyrinth of the ship's lower decks. He long ago memorised the layout of the Soju, but it has been modified since he last travelled to Mars with his portion of the Chapter's genetic tithes.

He is no longer certain of the path.

A vent, hastily scratched with snakes and a winged staff, bears another gene-vial. A smashed lumen strip becomes the final resting place for yet another, also scratched with the same sigil. It pains him to know he will not be the one to accord his brothers their proper rebirth in the body of a newly elevated warrior of the Chapter.

Once, the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were thought of as immortal, heroes of legend who mocked death and bestrode the galaxy as demigods. The Great Betrayal put the lie to that belief, and their immortality became metaphor, a lineage of heroism passed down through the mystery of the gene-seed.

Those like him are the guardians of that immortality, the custodians of the Chapter's future. He has failed in his duty, and the weight of that failure is a greater pain than that inflicted on his fading physiology.

He finds hiding places for three more vials before his pursuers catch up to him.

His senses are already diminished. Normally he would have detected the traitors and killed them before they even knew he was close, but his wounds are all but overcoming him.

Isstvan turns a corner and walks into a hail of fire.

Six cultists, swathed in a riot of colours: electric blues, shocking pinks and nauseating purples. They wear hoods, but he can see the scarification and piercings, the tattoos and the toxic discolouration of their flesh.

‘Dzyban!’ they yell as they shoot low-tech stubbers and autopistols. A blizzard of shells caroms from the ceramite of Isstvan’s war-plate. The armour’s spirit, already angered by its previous failure, is proof against their fire, and sends a pulse of combat stimms through his body.

The fatigue and sensory fog enveloping him fades.

His senses sharpen and the pain lifts, but he knows it is temporary. When the effects of the balm fade, he will be worse than before. But maybe it will be enough.

Isstvan charges the men, but they do not flee.

Dzyban’s gene-modification has removed any lingering traces of dread, and they howl as he attacks. They do not fear him, but they are only mortals, and mortals are absurdly easy to slay. Their limbs are barely attached to their bodies, and the trauma of even a light blow will kill them.

Isstvan destroys two with a single punch, reducing their skulls to bowls of pulped brain. A third dies as Isstvan tears out his throat, while the fourth is killed by a backhanded elbow jab that shatters his ribs to fragments.

The other two throw themselves at him, clawing with hooked daggers. Were they not neurologically altered, their actions might be called courageous, but the creatures are little more than drones, attacking only because they have been wired that way.

Both die in under a second, the bone saw of Isstvan’s reductor hollowing them out in an explosion of ripped flesh and blood. Their disembowelled corpses drop like the leavings of a rabid predator.

The passageway is an abattoir, a testament to how mercilessly efficient Space Marines are designed to be in the killing arts.

‘Very good, son of Guilliman,’ says a voice behind him.

Isstvan spins, but the balms are already draining from his hyper-energised physiology. Dizziness swamps him, and he falls as the detonation of a mass-reactive shell blows out his left knee. He backs up against a cold bulkhead – the Soju’s life support is failing – as a towering figure in war-plate even more

shocking and vivid than the garb of the cultists strides towards him. The traitor's armour is a baroque nightmare of rococo fretwork and fractal images of recombinant gene-molecules. Despite his fading vision and failing anatomy, Isstvan can see him with such awful, pin-sharp clarity that it feels like needles are gouging his eyes.

He knows Dzyban's livery, has seen it in a thousand devotional hate-tracts.

Emperor's Children.

'Dzyban,' he says, the name a curse in a hundred different languages. They have never met face to face before, but Isstvan has heard tales of Dzyban's biological and genetic horrors across dozens of star systems.

His armour bears no resemblance to its former glory. Once, it was a glorious Phoenician purple, honoured above all others to bear the Emperor's eagle. Now its iconography has been defaced by the blasphemous symbols of the Ruinous Powers, its colours so abhorrent Isstvan can barely bring himself to look upon them.

He kneels before Isstvan.

'You know me?' he says.

Isstvan does not reply, saving his breath and working his jaw to activate his Betcher's gland. He will spit caustic saliva in his tormentor's eye with enough force to burn through to his brain.

Dzyban's hand shoots out and clamps Isstvan's neck.

He shakes his head like a scolding tutor in a scholam.

'No, nothing so vile,' he says, working his thumb over Isstvan's throat and forcing the acidic saliva down. 'You and I, we are not of crude mortal matter, are we?'

Dzyban's eyes sweep over the Apothecary's armour, reading the ident-tags.

'Isstvan?' he says. 'A name the warriors of the False Emperor regard with infamy.'

‘It reminds me of my duty,’ he snarls in reply.

‘But you know nothing of that world,’ says Dzyban. ‘I was there. I remember the world of the black sands like it was yesterday. It was glorious.’

‘You are a monster,’ growls Isstvan. ‘A base peddler in flesh and blood. I know what you seek, and you will never find it.’

Dzyban grins, exposing serrated shark teeth.

‘Not so,’ says Dzyban. ‘We are the same, you and I, devotees of the body who peel away its secrets to the truth beneath. I once bore the sacred narthecium and reductor, until the Clonelord, blessed be his name, opened my eyes.’

Dzyban’s words are no mere metaphor.

The traitor’s eyes are distended orbs in eye sockets chiselled wide by a madman’s hook, the skin of a stolen face pulled drum-taut by sinew wires drilled into the back of his skull.

The fleshsmith of the Emperor’s Children reaches behind him and produces a handful of steel-jacketed vials. They glint in the dim light of the companionway, each one acid-etched with the Ultima of Macragge.

‘Did you really think you could hide these from me?’

Isstvan sags at the sight of them.

‘I hoped so,’ he says. ‘Even if they never returned to my Chapter, I hoped to keep them from you.’

‘And yet you marked them so clearly,’ replies Dzyban. ‘I may have ascended to another level of mastery in flesh, but I do not forget the old symbols. I saw the caduceus you carved to mark them. The sigil of the healer since time immemorial. Did you hope that your brother Apothecaries might come seeking what you had hidden and see the breadcrumbs you left them?’

Isstvan nods.

‘I am insulted you thought I would not,’ says Dzyban.

‘You and your kind have fallen so far. I knew you would forget the truth.’

‘Truth?’ laughs Dzyban. ‘I could speak for years on the truths I know, truths to which your kind are wilfully blind. But you are dying, and we do not have years. In any case, your scattered fleet is already regrouping.’

The corrupted Apothecary takes one of the vials and unsnaps the seal. A red line runs down its polished side, catching the light of the corridor as Dzyban lifts it to his lips and ingests the culture suspension of preservative fluids and flesh matter within.

Isstvan tries to keep his expression neutral as Dzyban opens each of the vials and takes the gene-matter into his body.

‘It has been too long since I have had such fresh material to work with,’ he says. ‘I altered the receptors of my omophagea and neuroglottis to allow the preomnor to sift and filter genetic codes, to extract useful sequences and valuable zygotes from everything that passes my lips.’

Isstvan nods and coughs, leaving a wad of blood on Dzyban’s breastplate. His killer swipes a finger through the frothed expectoration and licks it clean.

He frowns at the taste.

‘What have you done?’ says Dzyban.

‘Killed you...’ says Isstvan, surging forward with the last of his strength to hammer his narthecium into Dzyban’s chest. The injector spike punches through the traitor’s layered power armour and ossified rib-plate to pierce his heart.

The Emperor’s Children warrior grunts, and his hand slams down. The spike snaps, leaving it jammed in his breastplate.

Droplets fall from the broken metal.

‘What...?’ says Dzyban.

‘The component parts of a tyrano-toxin,’ says Isstvan. ‘Harmless in themselves, but lethal – even to us – when combined and activated with the ultra-rapid catalysing agent I just introduced to your bloodstream.’

‘No...’ says Dzyban, retching as his hand goes to his throat. ‘The caduceus... I saw your trail...’

The traitor’s false face is incapable of expression, but Isstvan sees fear in his eyes as his body begins to cannibalise itself.

‘You followed the wrong symbol,’ says Isstvan. ‘The caduceus was never the symbol of healers. It was the Staff of Asclepius that was borne by an ancient healer god of Old Earth, not the caduceus – that was the symbol of commerce, traders, liars and thieves...’

Isstvan leans back against the bulkhead and smiles through the returning pain of his wounds. He feels a vibration run through the metal, the sound of re-engaging engines, of boarding torpedoes and Thunderhawks punching through bombardment-buckled hull plates.

‘The gene-seed... where?’ says Dzyban, pawing at the steel-jacketed gene-vials. The musculature visible beneath his dead skin mask is turning necrotic with hideous rapidity. The toxin is designed to kill tyrannic organisms, but it is doing a brutally thorough job on old Legion flesh.

Dzyban shakes his head. His throat is now too swollen to speak.

‘The blood-legacy of my brothers runs in my veins,’ says Isstvan. ‘I will die before my brothers find me, but all that we were and can be will live on. You will die and be forgotten, your flesh burned to ash, your memory spat upon.’

Dzyban topples onto his side. Vile, purple-flecked foam bubbles from his mouth. He grunts, trying to speak, but dissolving brain matter leaks from his ears and pools beneath the softening bone of his skull.

Isstvan hears bolter fire echoing through the ship.

Mortals dying.

His vision greys and he clenches his teeth as pain fastens its grip on him. His autonomic systems take over conscious control of his physiological functions. They shut down Isstvan’s cognitive processes, diverting all resources to his sus-an membrane.

He lets it take him into darkness, hoping it will be enough.

Death is coming for him, but he does not fear it. Not now.

‘The warrior who acts out of honour cannot fail,’ he says with his last waking breath. ‘His duty is honour itself. Even his death is a reward and can be no failure, for it has come through duty. Seek honour as you act, therefore... and you will know no fear.’

About the Author

Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes *Vengeful Spirit* and his New York Times bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

WARHAMMER
40,000

**GALL OF
CHAOS**

**WITHOUT
FEAR**

by **AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN**

WITHOUT FEAR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

Earth to earth. Ash to ash. Dust to dust.

Earth from Iax. Ash from Calth. Dust from Macragge.

He consecrates his gauntlets with the sacred soil of three worlds. The ritual complete, with the fusion of soil-types marking his gloves, he reaches for his weapons.

The first is older than the empire it defends, with a full ten thousand years of venerated service to its name. It has been reforged, rebuilt, repaired – yet never lost, never abandoned, never destroyed. His other weapons – the boltgun in his personal armoury, the chainsword mag-locked at his hip – these are newer, with legacies that last mere decades. The pistol is a more majestic piece, a wide-mouthed Umbra-pattern born in a brighter age and preserved through millennia of war. All bolt weapons bellow when fired; this one roars louder and harsher than its kindred, a sign of its machine-spirit's pride.

Along its length, the words Sempram Fiberi shine in burnished bronze against the black: Always Free, when translated literally into Terran High Gothic. Macragge's centralised dialect of Gothic is a far more aggressive vernacular, and the words have a subtly different and more defiant meaning: Never Conquered.

A chrome Imperialis marks the weapon's opposite side, the winged skull sigil of unbreakable loyalty hearkening back to a time when there could be no trust between brothers, when the galaxy burned in the fires of a traitor's ambition then fell beneath the great, inevitable shadow of encroaching darkness.

Old, battered trinkets hang from slender chains on the pistol's grip: two of them, alike in humility and dignity, both made by human hands rather than wrought in a Forgemaster's foundry. The first is a simple icon of the primarch, no longer than a finger, with decades of wear smoothing out Guilliman's carved features to nothingness. It is the kind of good fortune token offered by the members of high-blooded families – a caring mother or sister, perhaps – when a son is taken from his academy and chosen for the Trials.

The second, similarly worn and just as precious, is a black iron seal the size of a coin, depicting the flowering stem of a verbena plant wrapped around a plain, sheathed sword. It is a symbol with its roots among the First Families of Iax back during the Founding of Ultramar, known as the crest of the honoured Lukallius bloodline.

The warrior performs the necessary rites of blessing one last time, speaking praise to the spirits of his bolt pistol and chainblade before locking them against his armour plating once more.

He stares through a red-lensed retinal display, running through the third and final calibration to ensure there is no delay between the movements of his eyes and the location of his targeting reticule. All is in order. His squadmates' biosigns play along the edge of his vision in a minor spillage of runic data, a far cruder representation than the comprehensive vision allowed by an Apothecary's diagnosticator helm, but a useful insight nevertheless. Everyone's read-outs are stable, with no sign of adrenal spiking or chemical alteration from the reserves of battle narcotics in the false-veins of their armoured suits.

He is ready exactly as expected, in the moment before the Thunderhawk gunship shivers with the pressure and heat of an atmospheric breach.

The flickering alert lights of the shaking crew bay bathe his battleplate in cycling flashes. The rhythmic illumination flashes across the name engraved upon his shoulder guard: Aeneas Lukallius – acid-etched and gold-chased with an artisan's precision within the numeric symbols of his squad designation.

'Animarus estac honori,' Sergeant Visanius says. Courage and honour.

Each of the Ultramarines replies with the sign of the aquila, armoured gauntlets thudding against breastplates.

Visanius has no need to relay their orders. Each warrior knows what they will face, retaining eidetic recollections of their briefings even down to the calculated, projected odds of their own survival.

Sergeant Visanius takes his position at the squad's lead. 'Hexus-Octavus,' he says, speaking the brothers' designation, shown in white marble numerals on their battleplate and the steeldust rims of their pauldrons: Sixth Squad, Eighth Company. His voice is beginning to crackle with the vox distortion of

atmospheric entry. ‘Tusca paratim?’ he asks them. Stand you ready?

‘Sinah meturos,’ they speak in unison. Without fear.

The gunship rattles now, its heat-shielding aflame as it lances groundwards. Hydraulic locks in the front ramp clank and clatter as their void seals unbind. In less than a minute, they will disengage. Ten seconds after that, they will release. The gang-ramp will grind open with the Thunderhawk still six thousand metres high.

Without needing to be told, two of the warriors step forwards in the same moment, flanking the sergeant. Caius and Erastes both bear ritually sanctioned flamers in their cobalt gauntlets. The honour of the first assault – oppugnarei primaris – will go to them at Visanius’ side. This is the way of Hexus-Octavus, as it has been since Visanius took command twenty-nine years ago.

The flickering alarm light burns brighter, its flashes turning wilder. The gang-ramp opens in a juddering yawn, letting in the buffeting wind. The ship is below the clouds, and the reaved earth of a war-torn world awaits. The Thunderhawk streaks high over the grey bones of a burning city.

Other voices join the squad’s vox; voices from the surface, each one calm and focussed, delivering brief slivers of relevant data and then falling silent.

Visanius takes a step forward as if beckoned by the voices of his embattled brothers below.

‘Ignae ferroqurum,’ he says at last, giving voice to the battle-dictum of Squad Hexus-Octavus. With fire and iron.

Sergeant Visanius takes three running steps, and falls into the sky. Caius and Erastus follow scarce metres behind him.

Aeneas and Tyresius are fourth and fifth. Behind them are Jovian and Priscus, and Caelian – the youngest – last of all.

Aeneas falls. He drops with all the weight of his active battleplate towards the city, which rises up to meet him, spreading out wider and wider in time to the cycling feed of altitude numerals. Silently, he beseeches the primarch to witness his deeds this day. In the same breath he entrusts his soul to the Emperor’s care.

Here, now, there is a sense of some brief, strange serenity. The void is above and the war is below, but for now there is only the open sky.

Altitude signifiers become warnings. Scrolling numbers become flashing runes.

Through rising smoke and the skyward flashes of anti-air fire, their deployment is as perfect as any simulated drop assault, the legacy of drilling until training becomes instinct. Visanius is first, plunging into the heart of the foe, his thunder hammer sweeping down with tectonic force. Caius and Erastes land either side of him, turning in viciously smooth motions, their flamers spewing torrents of corrosive chemical fire in a whirling spiral. They ignite the closest enemies and send others shrieking and falling back. They scorch the very earth, making room for their brothers to land. The site was once a plaza for the exchange and barter of goods. Now it is a mustering field around the most profane monument. Hexus-Octavus will remake it into a killing ground.

Aeneas fires his jump pack's descent thrusters for the seventh and final time, a precise and controlled burst, then strikes the rocky, burning earth with his weapons already in his hands.

'Haek,' he says, the very moment his boot touches the ground. Here.

Three steps bring him to a halt at the edge of the incinerated circle, his armoured boots crushing the unfortunate corpses of those who stood against Caius and Erastes. Already, he's shooting. Within his helm, Aeneas' targeting array is a calculated yet messy web of overlaying information. The Umbra pistol roars with each kick, firing bolts in quick succession. He leads his targets, gunning them down with torso shots, blasting them apart from within.

Humans. Just humans. Just shouting, shrieking, bleeding men and women in armour of industrial corrugate and barbed wire. Profane scars cut into their skin run with fresh blood. Many of them wear rebreather masks suited to forge or mining work. Others – those once loyal – fight in ragged remnants of Astra Militarum uniforms. Spittle flies as they shriek and bay like beasts. Many of them have slit their tongues in two, or removed them entirely in ritual gestures the meaning of which Aeneas cannot fathom. He kills them regardless, feeling their bayonets and cudgels breaking against his battleplate as he lashes back with cursory swings of his chainsword. Between his strength and the blade's monomolecular-edged teeth, their unarmoured bodies are riven to pieces.

Just humans, true. But so many of them. Feverishly praying to a broken idol, a thing of sundered armour pieces chained to the hull of a long-dead, burned out Baneblade.

Aeneas' heart soars as he sees the chained relic, even as the shame of the sight burns him to his core. The crucified Dreadnought has endured the erosion of weather and the defilement of hateful hearts for three years, since the last war seen upon this world. Its armour plating, what few parts of it aren't cracked open and punctured or rusted with acidic rain, shows none of the red that once so proudly signalled its allegiance.

There, engraved upon its dismantled sarcophagus, is the tarnished emblem of the Genesis Chapter, cousins and kindred to the Ultramarines since the Legions were severed by the will and wisdom of the Avenging Son. The name of the warrior within, a rotten husk of disconnected and desecrated bones wrapped in barbed wire, shows across the coffin-plate.

Benedictus of the Coblii.

The familiarity of the name smites him. Truly, the two Chapters are cousins.

'Caveantes,' warns Tyresius, a thirty-year veteran, born of Macragge's own Uthii bloodline. Beware.

Aeneas is already aware of the threat. He's turning as his brother voxes the warning, raising his pistol and sending three bolts into a team of filthy, hunched dregs bringing up a heavy stubber from a nearby roadside gutter serving as a makeshift trench. All three gun-bearers burst from torso shots. Aeneas doesn't see them fall. He's engaged once more, turning aside a jury-rigged pike with a deflecting parry of his chainsword and killing the wielder of the scrapyard spear with a boot to the woman's head. She drops, her skull shattered and her back broken.

Others rise in her place, jabbing at the encircled warriors with polearms made from mining pikes and packed with crude fyceline detonation sticks. Chainswords cut and chop. Bolters bark. Where the Ultramarines aren't scrambling over a ground made uneven by fallen bodies, they soon splash toe-deep in impure blood. It spatters up Aeneas' armour, reddening him to the shins.

By now, any sane human would have fled. These wretched things, these

emaciated revenants decorated with scarred flesh, fall upon the Ultramarines with knives, rocks and even their own bodies, breaking their teeth on cobalt ceramite.

Aeneas hears his sergeant across the wider vox-web, reporting on his squad's deployment as ordered. Hexus-Octavus are the falling blade, driven down into the dragon's heart. Now they kill, and kill, and kill, breaking this horde in advance of their brothers in the Third and First Companies. The former are already engaged elsewhere in the city, putting down the unrest that grips this rebellious world. The latter wait in orbit, praying in the bellies of the behemoths that serve as the strike force's fleet.

Hexus-Octavus fights on. Genhanced strength or not, the sheer weight of flesh against them defies the squad's precise fury and butchery. Vital signs start to spike as battle narcotics squirt into bloodstreams with stinging spurts. Pain suppressors numb poisoned scratches and stabs that manage to pierce the softer joints in the Ultramarines' armour, and chem-purges cleanse the minor wounds before they can become infected.

Every battle has its ebb and flow, no different from a tide. A warrior senses it, feeling for that moment when the enemy's collective will wavers, when so many of its number have been slaughtered that even a faith-crazed horde must catch its metaphorical breath at the foes it faces.

Aeneas senses it in the same moment the command comes.

'Promavoi!' Visanius orders, raising his voice for the first time. Advance!

First blood to the Chapter. Now the second strike will fall.

Turbines whine to life, then start howling. Fire breathes from their jump packs. Hexus-Octavus leaps skyward. Stubber fire, rattlingly insignificant, zips and cuts past Aeneas as he kicks off from the ground.

In their wake, a teleport beacon winks at the horde's heart, singing its song to the ships in orbit.

The few renegades not crying their hatred at the skyborne Ultramarines turn to vent their rage on the machine in their midst, thrusting their weapons at the thrumming homing beacon – but they're too late to end its clarion call. The last

of Hexus-Octavus' victims are still dying when the first thundercracks of dislocated air herald the arrival of the hulking warriors of the First Company.

Aeneas crouches atop the ruined spire of an Administratum building, which has been decorated with the crucified bones of loyal citizens. Rain begins to fall, its hissing caress steaming on the still-live engine housings strapped to his back. His retinal display dims to compensate for the livid flashes of apportation flares below. The Chapter's veterans take to the field, manifesting in fusion-bright bursts of teleportation.

He smiles at the sight. 'Laurelas,' he voxes to the rest of his squad. Victory.

Sergeant Visanius nods with a curt purr of collar servos. New orders already scroll along his eye lenses.

'Tusca paratim?' he asks his brothers once more.

'Sinah meturos,' is the unified reply.

As it should be, among those who know no fear. As it always is.

About the Author

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He also wrote the popular *Night Lords* series, the *Space Marine Battles* book *Helsreach*, the *Abaddon* novel *The Talon of Horus*, the *Grey Knights* novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.