

THE SIEGE OF FELL GUARD



MARK CLAPHAM

An Imperial Guard short story



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+++ Reconstructed extract of confidential Inquisitorial
communication begins+++

**For immediate attention of Lord Inquisitor Montiyf of the
most sacred ordo Malleus, from the devoted quill of your
loyal servant, Inquisitorial Clerk Menshon Lytle.**

My Lord,

Pertaining to the events that took place on Kelthorn in this
year 452999.M41 I have reviewed the materials extracted
from the ruins of Fellguard, along with the official accounts
provided by survivors of the Cadian 39th with particular
attention to the testimony of [WORDS OBSCURED]

[WORDS OBSCURED] to be aware that no civilian witnesses
[WORDS OBSCURED]

Those materials pertaining to the actions and beliefs of the
heretics themselves were stored for review in the Scorched
Archives and subjected to the required blessings, exorcisms,
rites and quarantine procedures to ensure their malice
remained contained.

Annex 3 of this report makes recommendations for the
destruction of certain of this material, which I consider to
[WORDS OBSCURED] in particular those entitled 'the
Bacterial Psalms'.

Annex 4 recommends that I myself be assigned six months compulsory meditation and [WORD OBSCURED] scouring to cleanse my soul before approaching a similar assignment.

[PAGES OF TEXT MISSING] in no doubt that the end of the campaign on Kelthorn was a victory to be embraced, there is equally little doubt that the tragic fall of Kelthorn to the enemy within that necessitated such a campaign was a dispiriting example of loyal subjects falling to corruption, and that matters were considerably worsened by the events surrounding the taking of Bastion Beta-3 in which

+++ Extract ends +++

‘Into the breach!’ Castellan Blakov’s voice echoed everywhere, through every vox-bead in every trooper’s helmet, through the vox-casters on the vehicles behind the footsoldiers, echoing back from the wall ahead and across the open, muddy fields behind them. ‘Into the breach, you useless—’

Blakov’s voice, continuing to unleash a stream of foul invective to encourage the men to keep moving, was drowned out by a shell exploding near Regimental Priest Vurtch, knocking him sideways and reducing Trooper Saunt to a shower of bloody chunks. The deafened Vurtch held his hands over his head, breathing in muddy filth as blackened dirt and human remains fell down on him, still hot from the explosion.

Saunt would, if he was in any position to comment, have accepted his fate. He was a Cadian, as were they all, and they lived to die in battle. He might, however, have wished that the shell that killed him came from the enemy, rather than a badly targeted shot from the small row of ill-maintained heavy weapons half a kilometre behind the frontline.

Vurtch was scrabbling to his feet before his ears stopped ringing, and looked around him to see what everyone else was doing, to try and divine orders he couldn’t hear.

That was easy enough: they were charging, running towards the wall of tarnished, yellow-white ahead of them – the perimeter wall of Fellguard.

Fellguard was a sacred city, sacred mainly for the many lives sacrificed in conflicts with now long-forgotten enemies for reasons lost to ancient

history. The frontlines of galactic conflict had now moved so far away that the planet Kelthorn was no longer of strategic value, but that did not negate its symbolic value.

Seeing Fellguard's skyline of spires, towers and monolithic habs in the distance, Vurtch felt the city's pull, the urge to retake it from the enemy. But before any Cadian could fight the traitors in the streets and alleys of Fellguard, the city's defences needed to be breached.

First, there were the wastes across which Vurtch now ran, and then there was the outer wall, which loomed ominous and pallid ahead. Beyond that, there was a no-man's-land spotted with heavily armed bastions before the Cadians could reach the city's less-fortified inner wall.

The few heavy guns and tanks that accompanied the Cadian 39th had done their work, reducing the nearest of the enemy's watchtowers and heavy gun emplacements to smoking ruins and demolishing the crude blockade the enemy had piled up across one of the gateways in the outer wall.

Running towards that gateway, nearly falling as his feet slipped on the mud, bayoneted lasrifle raised, letting out a war cry his ringing ears couldn't actually hear, Vurtch still why Blakov and his lieutenants had been careful to destroy the blockade with minimal damage to the perimeter wall, why they hadn't made the Cadian 39th's job a lot easier by at least marshalling their limited artillery to smash the wall to dust before a single Cadian infantryman laid a foot on the battlefield.

It was not just 'a wall'. That creamy white surface was not some local stone, nor was the pattern that became visible as Vurtch ran towards it a decorative engraving.

The wall was made of human bones, the bones of millions who had sacrificed themselves for the Emperor in long-ago battles, blessed and anointed and built into defensive walls on the shrineworld of Arabella's Hope, then shipped back to Kelthorn and blessed thrice more as they were assembled to form a sacred defensive ring around Fellguard.

The wall was almost a shrine itself, a first line of defence embodied with the spirits of fallen martyrs. The main part of the wall was a three-storey structure that encircled the city, with a parapet from which defenders could fire down on any approaching enemies. That there was no-one firing from up there now suggested that the enemy were too intimidated by the sacred

wall to climb on top of it. Behind that wall was a trench, and then an inner barricade – also made from blessed bones – slightly shorter than a man before the no-man’s-land that stretched between the outer and inner walls.

As he charged towards it, Vurtch, who as a Regimental Priest lived both in the brutal world of Cadian warfare and the sanctified realm of the Ecclesiarchy, could almost feel the sacred power of the wall, an aura that would surely intimidate any traitor daring to approach Fellguard.

It was tragic irony that the traitors had instead come from within.

‘The followers of the Corpse Emperor are charging the wall of dead fools,’ said Grent, listening to a squawking vox in one corner of what had once been the great council chamber of the city of Fellguard.

Recent events had left the statuary around the chamber demolished, the tapestries burnt and the murals scarred and defaced. Blood stains were splashed across the walls, the floors, and the great table around which the council had once sat, which were now broken in two, crumpled in the middle. The stench of decay filled the air.

The chamber’s two current inhabitants were not discomfited by the squalor around them.

‘Do not speak to me of corpses,’ hissed Mazalai, who had his hand placed over the face of a day-dead follower, trying to channel sorcerous energies through his scratched palm and into the dead man. In his other hand he held his staff, with which he attempted to draw power into himself.

Grent continued to blab, the words slightly slurred by the rictus that had frozen half of his face, twisting one side of his mouth permanently downwards. Such symptoms were a sign of favour, as was the malady of the brain that kept Grent babbling, but it didn’t make Mazalai want to listen to those babblings. Grent was a loyal servant, with great local knowledge, who acted as a useful conduit between Mazalai and the more mundane members of the faithful, but he often failed to filter the information he provided.

Mazalai closed his eyes, and breathed deeply the decay around him, isolating each part of the stench, the first hints of decay, the reek of dried blood, the festering smell of the sores that had made the dead man such a

promising subject. Mazalai pushed his consciousness outwards, through his palm, feeling the forbidden magics flow, making contact with the bacteria that crawled over the corpse, with the traces of disease lingering within the flesh and organs.

All Nurgle's gifts and Mazalai, sorcerer and follower of the Plague God, felt their presence, the traces of his deity's work. Yet that was not enough. He was trying to summon forth the greatest and final of Nurgle's blessings, the disease of unliving, the infection that raises the dead and spread itself through bites and scratches.

If granted this boon, Mazalai would have an army of the dead to match in number the Cultists already fighting off the loyalist filth who marched on Fellguard.

Mazalai grunted, willing the corpse to twitch into unlife, searching with his soul for that animating presence.

Nothing. Only dead flesh.

He slammed his fist into the stone floor next to the corpse's head, and a window near to Grent exploded. Mazalai looked down at his hand to see psychic energy flowing over the scabbed skin, energy that had emerged without him willing it.

Once Mazalai had meditated for days to break objects with telekinesis – now it happened as an emotional response. His power was growing, but also straining against his control.

He forced himself to concentrate, to rein in his rage, and gradually the white-hot energy faded.

Why had he not been granted the next level of mastery? Was he not powerful enough? Had he not served his god loyally, offering up a sacred city of the hated Imperium, drawing the elites then the whole population into collective worship? Was it not enough?

Who could tell? Mazalai thought himself a master sorcerer, but he was not fit to know the appetites and wisdom of a god, nor the daemons that acted as intermediaries and emissaries. None had emerged on this plane, but he could feel their presence in the void, and sometimes heard their whispered commands in his dreams. It was their entreaties that had led him to become a sorcerer in the first place, and placed him amongst the highest ranks in Fellguard's new regime.

He had been there from the beginning, one of the early few to believe themselves held back by the Imperium's restrictions on knowledge. That cult had, from those small beginnings, expanded until it took over Fellguard in its entirety, the military leaders and city elite coopted to the cause. And while it was those elites and officers that continued to give orders, sorcerers like Mazalai, those who had first pledged their loyalty to the ruinous powers, had great influence, and provided spiritual guidance.

Unfortunately, with power came responsibilities. Mazalai wished he could concentrate on his meditations, but the demands of war came first. The likes of Grent were always claiming Mazalai's time, either to report the latest movements of the mewling Cadian filth sent to reclaim the Fellguard, or to request orders on some matter or other.

Grent. Yes. Hadn't Grent been saying something?

'What was that about the wall?' asked Mazalai, head twitching towards Grent like a predatory bird sighting a fat rodent.

The enemies Vurtch encountered as the 39th breached the outer defences of the Fellguard did not challenge or undermine his faith, they were an affront to it.

Vurtch had passed under the arch of one of the outer wall's gates as part of a surge of Cadians, and all around him, his brothers and sisters of the 39th were clashing with cultists, all of whom were marked with signs of decay and infection. These afflictions didn't slow down the enemy at all, and the cultists were able to get in close, running between the outer wall and the lower barricade, engaging with Cadian invaders hand-to-hand.

The presence of these heretics was an insult to the Emperor, and to the martyrs whose bones surrounded them. Perhaps it was just the frenzy of battle, but Vurtch imagined he could feel the presence of those martyrs demanding retribution.

Vurtch wanted nothing more than to appease those restless souls, and as a Cultist charged him, Vurtch muttered a prayer and defended himself, knocking aside the Cultist's sword and jabbing at him with his bayonet, the blow's ferocity fuelled by self-belief. Vurtch struck, knowing he was right in his cause, that the Emperor and all those martyrs stood behind him as he struck out against the heretic.

If their will was with him, divine assistance did not guide his aim, as the bayonet missed the Cultist's heart and jammed in his shoulder instead, a debilitating but not fatal blow. The Cultist, scabbed and fly-ridden, was wearing filthy overalls, and as the bayonet gouged through the coarse material and into the flesh beneath foul-smelling yellow liquid seeped up, staining the cloth and causing Vurtch to gag with its rank stench.

As Vurtch flinched back, the Cultist roared, mouth open to reveal blackened teeth, and kicked upwards with a booted foot, landing a blow right in the centre of Vurtch's body armour and knocked the regimental priest backwards. As Vurtch stumbled, winded by the kick, his finger squeezed the trigger on his lasrifle, but the bayonet was almost free of the wound it had caused and the shot only clipped the Cultist's upper arm, scorching away skin so heavy with sores Vurtch doubted the Cultist could feel pain from its loss.

The Cultist pulled a short knife from his belt and eyed Vurtch hungrily, vision seemingly sharp in spite of the milky cataracts on his eyes. Beneath the caked filth and dried blood on the man's face, Vurtch could see a crude tattoo of a fly inked on one cheek, the mark of a plague worshipper.

Vurtch stepped back again as the Cultist swiped at him with the knife, and the blow missed. The footsoldiers of the enemy here rarely fought with guns or grenades, instead trying to get close, to cut and slash, to tear through protective clothing and open up wounds with filthy blades. Infection was sacred work to their heretical minds, and they sought not just to maim or kill the Cadians but to pollute them with disease, to corrupt them even if for a brief moment before death.

For that, they needed to get in close.

Vurtch had no such desire to engage the enemy up close and shot the man square in the chest with his lasrifle from a few paces away, waiting until the heretic dropped before walking over and jamming the bayonet into his skull. Vurtch grimaced at the unnatural scum that seeped out as he twisted the bayonet, the softness of the skull's disease-weakened bone as the blade churned through it.

Weak in faith, weak in body, thought Vurtch. That was why, for all their horror and fanaticism, these heretics were doomed to lose.

Around him, a cheer went up.

The wall was theirs.

Mazalai stared out of compound eyes. Looking out of those eyes, the human scale was lost, the giants that walked nearby incomprehensibly immense and misshapen from his perspective.

The sorcerer imposed his will on the creature he was using as his spy, forcing his consciousness to shape the images he was receiving. All the disease carriers, the fleas and the rats and flies, were part of the vector and accessible to him.

As Mazalai looked through the eyes of the fly, what he saw went from the rough impressions of mass and movement that the fly perceived, and solidified into the complex patterns only a sentient mind could draw from those raw images.

The enemy had taken the outer wall, and massacred its defenders. Mazalai could see uniformed Cadians pouring fuel onto piles of corpses and setting light to them, the black smoke drifting upwards. There was a bustle, but no sign of the Cadians crossing the barricades that stood within the wall, beyond which lay further defences before the inner wall of the city was reached.

No, the Cadians were occupying themselves with other activities. As the fly drifted over muddy ground to land on the outer wall, Mazalai saw uniformed men chanting and waving incense burners, while others splashed the wall with liquid from ceremonial brass cylinders which they held by short wood handles, droplets scattering from dozens of tiny holes in the brass.

With a flick of the wrist, one man cast a shower of water at the part of the wall where the fly clung, and a droplet hit the insect.

Mazalai burned, screaming with rage as fire consumed his body. He felt that fire driving his consciousness out of the dying fly, and his mind snapped back into his own body and—

‘My lord,’ Grent was shouting, gripping Mazalai’s shoulders. ‘My lord, what do you see?’

Mazalai shrugged off Grent’s concern, suppressing the sense of fierce, blazing light that had seared through him. The Cadians and their priests were far away now, while Mazalai and Grent were back in the old council chamber.

‘They have retaken the wall,’ said Mazalai. ‘They have taken it back in every way possible.’

Vurtch walked and chanted with his fellow priests as they reconsecrated the outer wall, casting blessed water and filling the air with the aroma of sacred smoke. The incense fumes went some way to blocking out the terrible, sickly stench of burning corpses from the pyres, and the even worse smell that had clung to the traitors when they lived.

All around the wall, other priests were doing the same. Blakov had attacked on all fronts, seizing the entire perimeter, and only when the Wall of Martyrs had been truly reclaimed – the blessings driving out any lingering hint of heresy – would he order the next advance. For now, having taken all four gates, the whole of the 39th were encircling Fellguard as the outer wall was blessed.

For all that Blakov was of a fearsome and terrifying leader, he was without doubt a pious man, and he knew that the enemy would be beaten not just by military might, but by the Emperor's benevolence. By reconsecrating the wall, they formed a ring of light, one which would tighten to strangle the usurpers of Fellguard and restore this world's honour.

Vurtch could feel that cleansing as it happened. It could have been his imagination, or simply a reflection of the clear white skies above, but it seemed to Vurtch that the wall was beginning to glow a little, the souls of the martyrs restored to their rightful place.

As he chanted and walked, Vurtch felt a glow within himself, the sure and certain knowledge that these traitors, however terrifying their aspect or their heretical beliefs, would be defeated and destroyed. The light of the Emperor would prevail.

These Cadians would not prevail. Mazalai knew this for a fact.

While their stranglehold around Fellguard was complete, the Cadians were just men, mere humans, regardless of the strength of their beliefs. A man with a gun cannot fight the relentlessness of a disease, the omnipresence of blessed bacteria. Great Nurgle was present in every exhalation and excretion of his troops, spreading through the air and water, every beast and microbe his carrier.

And yet... the Plague God had not granted Mazalai his greatest gift, and that must surely mean that their faith and resolve were being tested. The

gods did not bless followers who simply waited for their deities to aid them; they cherished those who fought for their honour, who spread their word through decisive action.

If the Cadians were a test, then Mazalai and his fellow Cultists needed to pass it without hesitation. Though they were doomed, these violet-eyed infidels could not be dismissed, they needed to be eliminated with fervour.

‘Who guards the west gate?’ Mazalai asked Grent, as they walked down the steps of the old city council building.

‘Krauer commands all defences from Bastion Beta-3,’ said Grent, confusion stretching across the mobile part of his face. ‘I did not think you wished to be concerned with the minutiae of military matters, my lord?’

‘I do not,’ said Mazalai. ‘Yet, the western gate is where the enemy will likely strike first. It is well defended, but we should take such an opportunity to show these invaders the truth that has been revealed to us, and make sure the message is well understood. You understand that this is our sacred duty?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Grent.

Mazalai would have punished the note of doubt he heard in Grent’s voice, if he did not feel the tiniest shred of similar feeling inside himself, a doubt that itched like the burning sensation he had experienced coming into indirect contact with the Cadian priest’s blessed water.

Through possession of that fly, Mazalai had felt something, a very different presence to those he worshipped, the impression of a burning light out amongst the stars, flaring out from Old Terra.

As much as he scorned the Corpse Emperor as a myth held by fools, Mazalai could not quite rid himself of the memory of that burning, intense light, and with it the shaking of his own spiritual certainties.

Bastion Beta-3 stood on a hill, a dark squat structure jutting out into the pallid sky like a tombstone. Two storeys high, with weapon slits on the ground and battlements on the top, the Bastion overlooked a no-man’s-land of mud, traps and trenches that stretched between Fellguard’s inner ring of city walls, specifically the stretch dominated by the west gate, and the outer wall captured by the Cadians.

There were other bastions and bunkers surrounding Fellguard, but the west gate was the most accessible route into the city, and Bastion Beta-3 overlooked the entire approach to the gate. Eliminate the Bastion, seize the gate, and the city would fall.

But while the Bastion still stood, occupied by the enemy, it would be able to rain death on anyone who dared to cross those first barricades.

All around the outer wall, squads of Cadians were preparing for the assault. They had many targets, and Vurtch knew that Blakov would leave no weakness in the traitors' defences unprobed. There would be strikes on waste outlets and watch towers and low-lying bunkers. The Cadian 39th would close in on the enemy from all sides, showing no mercy, testing all their defences for a weak point to break through.

But it was those who would attack in the shadow of Bastion Beta-3 that Blakov chose to lead personally, and to speak to before he ordered the assault.

Blakov stood straight-backed to address the squads before him, Lieutenant Rawl at one shoulder and the Commissar, Chavaria, at the other. Blakov was tall, even for a Cadian, and his black hair was cropped short on top and shaved to a thin layer of stubble at the sides, accentuating the severity of his jutting jaw. Violet eyes glared out beneath eyebrows almost permanently lowered into a scowl, and a tiny white line – infamously the only scar an enemy had ever given him – stood out against skin sun-weathered from a long desert campaign in the Perides Crusade.

As he spoke, Blakov gestured with his left hand, but kept the right forever at the pommel of his sword. The Castellán's skills at close combat were well known, and the reason he had only that single, tiny scar to show for all his years of victories.

Blakov was many things, but an orator was not one of them. His speech was a barked series of threats and demands, telling the troops nothing they did not know already aside from the fact that he, Castellán Blakov, would be amongst them as they went into battle. This was less a reassuring or inspiring thought as a warning against any attempt to retreat.

Vurtch did not listen to the Castellán's speech closely. As Blakov spoke, Vurtch walked along the line of men and women, saying a quiet blessing over the rebreather that each of them wore. As he did so, each man or woman nodded their thanks, eyes closed in brief supplication.

They had all seen the yellow mist that hung over the territory they were about to charge into and knew that it was not some simple chemical, a poisonous gas that the normal workings of a rebreather alone would protect them from. This miasma was some accursed weapon of the enemy, and it would require a higher form of protection if they were to survive it.

As Vurtch finished, Blakov made a final entreaty to those under his command. Not only would Blakov be watching them, along with his officers and Commissar Chavaria, none of whom would hesitate to deliver field justice, but they fought in the name of the Emperor, and it was in his eyes that they would be most harshly judged should they fail to do their duty.

At last, here was a sentiment that Vurtch could entirely agree with.

After Blakov's speech, the Cadians spread across the barricades, preparing to go over the top. There was no subtlety or planning to this assault – they were to pull themselves over the sacred barricades and charge forward until they engaged the enemy or died. The yellow fog ahead of them made the landscape hard to assess from the glimpses over the barricade Vurtch had risked.

As a regimental priest, Vurtch was not assigned to a specific squad, but went where he was needed or ordered to be. For the purposes of this assault he would be fighting alongside the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Squads, under the temporary command of Lieutenant Rawl.

Rawl was a veteran, nearly eighty years old, although juvenat treatments made her seem considerably younger. She was popular with the troops in the way Blakov wasn't, an officer drawn from the ranks who had the scars to prove it, including augmetic eyeballs that glowed beneath thick rimmed goggles, the strap of which kept some control over her wiry, grey hair.

Lieutenant Rawl wasn't a soft touch by any stretch of the imagination, but her hard practicality included a strong desire to keep as many of those under her command alive for as long as possible. Her presence gave Vurtch hope for them all as they prepared to jump the barricades.

That hope evaporated within seconds of the charge beginning. As the Cadians ran across open ground, mud churning between their feet, distant guns opened fire. Looking ahead to Bastion Beta-3, so many heavy

weapons opened fire from that structure that it seemed ablaze with light as barrels flared.

The bombardment hit the Cadian line and turned human flesh and ground alike to a boiling mush, tearing human bodies to pieces and churning new landscapes from the malleable ground with the ferocity of the explosions. As Vurtch ran the very land around him changed shape, all in a blur of flying debris that scorched and splattered his protective layers. Swarms of marauding insects descended on the killing field, somehow avoiding the explosions and descending on those Cadians who survived, searching for an entry into their protective clothing.

Vurtch saw one Cadian whose visor cracked, allowing the insects into his rebreather. He flailed close to Vurtch as fat black flies crawled over his face and poured into his mouth and nose, before a shell landed and blew him to pieces.

Some combination of gore and mud splattered the visor of Vurtch's rebreather and, trying not to enrage any officers or commissars at his back by slowing down, Vurtch tried to wipe away the mess so that he could see again, gloved fingers fumbling and slipping on the smooth surface.

When he finally cleared his field of vision, he found that he had stumbled into lower ground, heading down a gully into a trench which wove ahead, splitting into other similarly deep channels ahead. Vurtch was not alone – he seemed to have a handful of men and women from Eighth, Ninth and Tenth squad still close by, though Lieutenant Rawl was nowhere in sight – and as they kept moving forward the walls of mud became taller than they were, and the Cadians marched in single file as those walls closed in.

The sound of the guns seemed dampened by the mud packed around them, but not entirely. A shell landed somewhere nearby, and a brief cloud of debris obscured the crack of white sky overhead, a severed arm dropping down, ricocheting off the walls to land limply on the watery ground between two of Eighth Squad.

'Grief,' said Trooper Irvan, kicking the arm out of the way. Hardly a suitable tribute to a fallen comrade, but any Cadian would understand the midst of battle is no time for tributes, but a time to clear the body parts out of the way and mourn later.

If you were still alive.

The arm bounced off the wall and landed in slightly deeper water ahead of Sergeant Golbok, who led the party. It floated for a second before a mass of wet, grey fur emerged momentarily from above the waterline, sinking a mouth full of sharp, white teeth into the flesh of the limb before disappearing back beneath the water with its prey.

Golbok let out a stream of invective, the general filthy gist of which was to question what had just taken the arm and why Golbok in particular should be forced to live in a universe of such over-sized vermin.

Vurtch didn't appreciate the colour of the language, but empathised with the sentiment. He himself expressed his feelings through a muttered prayer and an aquila gesture in the air, a call for the Emperor's protection.

'Do we go back, Sarge?' asked Irvan. Now they were below ground, with no officers in sight, the pressure to move ever on had lessened. But they couldn't stay still all day.

'And face Blakov's temper and death from above?' asked Golbok.

'Rats it is,' said Irvan, to mumbled assent from everyone, including Vurtch.

Then they moved on, and as they did Vurtch couldn't help noticing they were walking into deeper and deeper waters.

Krauer looked out of one of Bastion Beta-3's firing slits, taking the opportunity as one of the autobolters was reloaded.

No living thing moved in his field of vision, and it was beautiful.

The expanse between the hill on which his Bastion stood and the perimeter wall of the Fellguard was a scorched and blasted landscape, cratered and strewn with bodies and body parts. Fires burned and a toxic cloud of yellow mist and thick black smoke hung over the cursed ground.

The Bastion's weapons and those of the soldiers manning its battlements were slaughtering the Cadians before they could get anywhere near the Bastion, churning the ground and the Cadians trying to cross it into a smoking, hot mulch.

When the day was done, those fields would be left with the remains of the dead unburied, the decay and pestilence spreading an offering to Nurgle.

Krauer smiled and clenched a fist in satisfaction as he backed away from the firing slit to let the autobolter resume its thunderous assault.

Or at least, he tried to. In truth, both gestures were beyond him now. He had been blessed with an extensive mutation, a great scabbing that covered most of his body, making fine movement difficult but acting as something akin to armour.

Krauer creaked back to his command chair. The ground floor of the Bastion was a small chamber with rockcrete walls and floor, with the command position at the centre and weapon placements facing out of the firing slits. A rough staircase led to the battlements above, from which snipers and fixed guns could fire down on approaching enemies.

Krauer took his seat, the modified Kelthornian uniform he wore scuffing away flakes of diseased, dried out matter from his scab-covered skin. He sat in his chair, wheezing but satisfied, drinking in the clamour of weapons fire echoing around the Bastion's interior.

He was truly blessed. They all were.

Rats. Rats everywhere.

'Rats' was an understatement – these vermin were bloated and mutated, rank with disease and covered in over-sized fleas that bit bloody marks into the many patches of exposed flesh where skin irritations had caused the hair to fall out.

They were also, if not fully amphibious, then certainly capable of holding their breath for longer than any mammal Vurtch had ever seen. Creatures of Chaos, warped by the forces at work within Fellguard, turned from simple vermin to something far more threatening.

And they were everywhere, lurking beneath the water, jumping out with a screech that no normal creature could make.

'I didn't train so that I could kill a hundred rats before fighting an enemy that's taller than my knee,' grumbled Trooper Irvan, impaling another of the beasts on his bayonet. The rat splashed around beneath the fetid water of the trench, legs and tail thrashing wildly as Irvan pinned it until it lay still.

'To purge such abominations is sacred work,' said Vurtch, stabbing another rat with his bayonet. The blade went right into the skull, killing

the foul thing instantly. There was no point trying to shoot at them – they moved fast, and mainly underwater. The only way was to wait until they were close then stab them, as he had done with this yellow-toothed horror.

That would teach it to try and snack on a Cadian's leg.

'No creature of the enemy, however small, should yet live,' he added as he removed the blade. He delivered the sermon gently, for he knew Irvan was only lightening the threat with typical Cadian bravado.

'No danger of anyone thinking these rats too small, preacher,' said Irvan, who swore as another of the rats burst out from the filthy water, going for his knees. The trooper jabbed it with his bayonet, taking out an eye, and the thing went running, squealing.

'Should we give chase after this enemy of the Imperium?' said another muffled voice. Vurtch couldn't tell who, the rebreathers hiding identities and disguising exact voices.

'Let it go for now,' said Vurtch, letting the insolence pass. 'We'll drain this place and burn them all out once Fellguard is ours.'

There was a minor cheer at that. Good, their spirits were up. It was slow progress, but they were making their way through the trenches in the direction of the Bastion. While their course was weaving with the curve of the trench, a glance at Vurtch's compass indicated they were moving the right way.

Ahead, Golbok swore again. Vurtch glanced forward to see what was up, but the Sergeant was standing completely still in the trench.

'What is it...' said Irvan, but Golbok waved him back with one hand.

Then he pointed that gloved hand downwards, beneath the filthy water, to his feet.

'Mine,' he said. 'I can feel it.'

Vurtch believed him. Vurtch had done the same training Golbok had, running through a field of concealed, disarmed mines, the training sergeant shouting *BOOM* if a rookie made a misstep. He knew what Golbok felt – the solid metal beneath the boot, the slight give as the mine pressed down.

If Golbok removed his foot, the mine would explode.

There had been other traps already. Golbok himself had gingerly disarmed a tripwire connected to explosive charges in either side of the trench that would have buried them all beneath the mud. An unfortunate

rat had activated a spiked snare that impaled the creature, foul blood leaking out of the rat as it thrashed in the filthy water.

Of course there were mines as well, as there doubtless were on the open fields above. The enemy would have set many traps.

That didn't make the prospect of disarming one any easier.

The Cadians had tried to avoid them, staying close to the walls of the trench, being careful with their footing. But conditions were poor, the rats were a constant distraction. That someone would step in the wrong place was almost inevitable.

'Get past,' said Golbok. 'Quickly, and tread carefully for Throne's sake.'

'Yeldi,' shouted Irvan. 'Get up here, we need to disarm—'

'No,' said Golbok, with enough ferocity that he had to calm himself with a deep breath. His eyes darted back and forth across the water. 'I can feel them beneath the water, the moment they bite I'll move, then...'

He trailed off. They got the point. But Irvan seemed about to come back with some retort.

'Disarm a mine in this filth, before a rat knocks me?' said Golbok, cutting him off. 'No chance. Only hope is you get out of range before it happens.'

'Yes, Sarge,' said Irvan reluctantly, and he led the way.

Vurtch said a blessing as he passed Golbok quickly. The Sergeant wasn't listening, though. Beneath the lenses of his rebreather Vurtch could see wide eyes filled with tears, and Golbok's entire body was shaking.

'It's... chewing on me,' wailed Golbok in a low howl, and Vurtch started running as best he could, the mud and water dragging his feet, slowing him down.

He was almost out of range when Golbok collapsed – or shuddered too much, or pulled his leg away in agony – and the mine exploded behind Vurtch, throwing him off his feet and face down into the filth of the trench.

Krauer's victorious mood was tempered when someone detonated an explosion within Bastion Beta-3, then followed it up by setting Krauer's troops ablaze.

It started with a grenade. Krauer did not hear it enter the Bastion, as the clattering of a small sphere bouncing along the floor was inaudible

beneath the roar of the heavy guns, but he noticed the explosion that ripped through one of the gun crews.

The grenade went off close to Krauer's command seat. A normal man would have been killed or severely injured by being caught in the blast radius. The explosion licked the hard surface of Krauer's scabbed, near-chitinous skin, scorching away part of his uniform and setting his chair ablaze, but he felt no pain, blinking slowly at the debris as remains of the soldiers manning one of the guns scattered across the Bastion floor.

The explosion distracted the other gunners, and so they were looking the wrong way when flame began to pour through the firing slits of the Bastion. Lacking Krauer's unnatural protection, the flow of white-hot promethium led to an agonising death.

Krauer was out of his seat, but there was little he could do. Apart from a couple of injured soldiers far enough away from the edge of the Bastion to survive, he was the only one alive on the ground level, surrounded by a ring of fire that near-encircled his command chair.

There were still snipers on the roof, and still time to kill whoever had managed to evade the fire from the Bastion and get close enough to attack.

The fire ceased, and Krauer was about to shout for reinforcements from the roof when the doors of the Bastion were blasted open.

Krauer had seen even loyal servants of Chaos, creatures of utter depravity, hesitate at his bizarre and foul appearance, but the Cadian officer who charged through the doors didn't blink at the encrusted creature before him. The Cadian ran in with pistol in one hand and sword in the other, shooting Krauer's two surviving troops then running at Krauer with sword raised.

A wise, snap decision, thought Krauer. A laspistol would do nothing to him.

A sword would not save the Cadian either, of course. The officer swung the blade at Krauer's neck, but he blocked the blow with one arm. Chunks of scabby plating flew off Krauer's forearm as the blade made contact, but the sword still bounced off without doing any serious damage. Krauer lunged forward with his other arm, punching the man in the chest.

The officer staggered back, but didn't hesitate to push forward again with his sword.

A rain of glancing sword blows hit Krauer, the Cadian officer dancing back and forth in a fencing stance, weaving around Krauer, hitting and jabbing with his sword, ducking back after each strike.

Krauer's condition protected him against much harm but slowed his movements, and he felt nothing but rage and frustration as the Cadian attacked him, weaving out of the way as Krauer tried to grab or strike him. Determined to crush this impertinent officer, Krauer was also aware that other Cadians had followed the man into the Bastion and were engaging in a running battle with Krauer's soldiers on the stairs of Bastion Beta-3.

Then Krauer felt pain and let out an involuntary yelp, more from the shock of it than the actual sensation itself. The Cadian had stabbed at a weak spot on Krauer's chest, where the ever-shifting mass of scabs had left an exposed area of putrid, green-tinged skin. A lucky blow.

Krauer looked up to see the Cadian standing bolt upright, looking at the blood on his sword, mouth twisted in a cruel half-smile.

Before Krauer could react, the Cadian struck again, on the same spot, this time plunging deep and twisting, the officer spinning around into an unnatural angle so as to thrust the sword deep into Krauer's body, piercing his heart.

His enemy in reach, Krauer tried to grasp him, to crush the man's skull with his heavily crusted hands, but as he tried to do so he found his limbs not responding, a cold darkness numbing his senses, as oblivion overwhelmed him.

Irvan and the others had dragged Vurtch out of the mud where he had fallen, pulling him to his feet. Together they had marched the rest of the way cautiously, until the water around their feet gave way to drier ground, ground which tilted upwards, and they found themselves approaching the bottom of the hill where Bastion Beta-3 stood.

The guns of the Bastion were silent.

They could hear gunfire from *inside* the Bastion, and as Vurtch, Irvan and the others ran up the hill to join the combat they found themselves accompanied by men and women who had taken the higher ground, Cadians blasted and scorched those who had nonetheless fought their way over to reach the Bastion. Vurtch saw Rawl and the commissar amongst

the survivors, the latter doling out the usual admonishments and threats to those he considered too slow or too cautious.

As they crested the hill, coming level with the Bastion itself, a great cheer went up along with shouts of Blakov's name. The Bastion had been taken.

As the others ran to join the celebrations, Vurtch found himself slowing as he climbed, looking behind him. The smoke was clearing now, and the killing fields were a mass of churned mud and human remains, the scorched bodies – and body parts – of countless Cadians strewn across that blood-soaked field, over which silence now descended.

Vurtch couldn't bring himself to look for long at such carnage. He said a short prayer and walked the rest of the way to the Bastion.

The besieged citizens of Fellguard fell to their knees as Mazalai passed them in the streets, Grent sloping behind him as surely and uneasily as the hem of his tattered robes dragged across the uneven cobbles.

It had been a holy city, drawing pilgrims from across the system to see the sites of martyrdom in the Emperor's name.

It still was a holy place, though now it was devoted to different gods. The spires that twisted up towards the sky had banners with blasphemous symbols scrawled upon them, and the statues of the Emperor that looked down from the looming buildings had been defaced, often literally. The streets were narrow, the sky blocked by the ominous curved spires of the city's warped cathedrals, and it was in these shadows that the penitents approached Mazalai.

The Kelthornians wanted to have a blessing from Mazalai, a boon, though virtually all had been touched by the powers already and hardly needed him to draw Nurgle's attention to them. Welts and sores were abundant, vermin and insects crawled across skin and chewed on clothing. Flies circled.

It was a beautiful sight, accompanied by a rich and potent stench of decay and disease.

Mazalai didn't stop, but made priestly gestures through the air to keep the spirits of the faithful up during these difficult times. They might hope, as Mazalai did, for a direct sign of support from the warp, but in the

absence of a god stepping in, the intervention of one of the sorcerer priest's would have to do.

As for Mazalai's fellow sorcerers and high priests, they had been engaged in meditations for days, attempting to bring forth powerful forces to defend the city. Mazalai had been assured that, when the time came, he would have a role to play in the summoning. He awaited their word.

For now, Mazalai was occupied enough by the enemies at the gates.

In this case, the west gate. Mazalai gave a leaderly nod to the troops setting up barriers and spikes behind the west gate, ready for when the forces of the Imperium broke the gate itself down, and swerved away from the gate towards a door in the wall. From there a narrow stone staircase led to the battlements, and guards who saluted as he passed on his way to a good viewing position.

A brass telescope stood on a stand. Mazalai put his eye to the eyepiece, and gently adjusted the knob to focus in on the Bastion.

The guns of Bastion Beta-3 were inert. That wasn't a promising sign. Mazalai focused in closer, moving the telescope very gently.

He caught a flash of muddy, green uniform at one edge of the Bastion. Pale faces at the firing slits. As he watched, the corpse of one of his own cultists was thrown over the battlements.

The Cadians had taken the Bastion.

Mazalai took a breath, so that the order he was about to scream at the soldiers nearby would be heard as far away as possible.

Inside the Bastion, spirits were high as the doors of the Bastion were resealed and Cadians took control of the fixed weapons or took to the rooftop battlements with their own guns. Everyone knew the counterattack would come soon, and if they hadn't known before then Blakov was now screaming at them to prepare targeting, to be ready, to be alert.

In spite of the sure and certain knowledge that someone would try to kill them again sooner rather than later, there was a nervous energy in the air, fear mixed with heady excitement. They had the Bastion now, they had the higher ground. A tide had turned.

The presence of blasphemy was still thick in the Bastion. Even though the corpses of the traitors had been dragged outside or pitched off the roof,

it was visible in the heresies scrawled on the walls, in the scars across the signs of the aquila. There was also a stench in the air that wouldn't shift, something beyond even the vile smell of burnt flesh – a sickly smell of disease and decay.

There was a limit to what anyone could do about the foulness, now that Blakov had locked down the Bastion, but Vurtch helped as best he could by performing simple blessings and prayers to hold back the taint of Chaos from weapon placements so that the Cadians who took charge of them felt their souls were safer when they fired them.

A silence gradually descended upon the Bastion as they waited for the inevitable. If they were vigilant against a surprise attack, then that vigilance was wasted, as when the enemy came it was with a shrieking cacophony of blasphemous battlecries that could be heard before the first heretic was seen.

‘Fire!’ shouted Blakov, the order echoing around the Bastion so no officers needed to pass it down the chain of command. ‘Fire at will and kill them all!’

Vurtch was on the battlements when that order came, and heard it as clear as if he were standing next to Blakov downstairs. The air was clearer up there, and Vurtch had already taken a firing position – from up on the roof, the cultists could be seen advancing from the city's inner walls, an unruly mob. They came in force, a horde of screaming cultists with guns and swords and barbed weapons of a kind entirely unfamiliar to Vurtch.

He held his position at a narrow firing slot looking down towards the city's inner wall, lasrifle aimed. Vurtch was not a sniper or even a sharp-shooter, and the enemy would need to get close for him to get a clear and accurate shot.

Vurtch's finger never got to squeeze the trigger. The Cultists never got within his firing range, as the weapons of the Bastion and the lasrifles of the Cadian sharp-shooters tore the heretics to pieces, wave after wave of them dropping before getting within scratching range of the Bastion. Bodies piled high but in no way dissuaded the further hordes of Chaos worshippers that followed in their wake, all of whom seemed eager to die for their blasphemous beliefs.

Even though he knew it was righteous to strike down the heretic, Vurtch was unsure whether to feel elated or nauseous by the scale of the slaughter he could see before him.

‘This... This is unacceptable,’ said Mazalai, one eye fixed to the brass telescope on the battlements. He and Grent had taken to the top of Fellguard’s inner wall, from where they could watch their forces charge from the west gate to attack the Bastion.

‘My lord?’ asked Grent, but Mazalai didn’t answer his subordinate.

Instead, Mazalai stepped away from the telescope. He had seen enough. Wave after wave of cultists, cut down by the weapons Krauer had been tasked with using against the enemy.

The course of the siege was turning unacceptable. While the enemy were yet to advance further, holding the Bastion gave them complete oversight of the West Gate, and heavy cover to allow a future advance on the city’s inner wall. Those corpse-worshipping bastards had turned the Kelthornians’ own weapons against them.

‘My word!’ said Grent, who was now looking through the eyepiece. In spite of his rejection of the Imperium’s ways, and his embrace of all that was filthy and diseased, Grent still retained a vocabulary as scrupulously clean as the treatment room of a rich man’s private medicae.

Normally Grent’s odd manner of speaking irritated Mazalai, but he had greater concerns. Any further waves of Cultists would be mowed down by those damned heavy bolters, and with the inner wall being hammered from other directions, it would only be so long before a full-scale assault on the heart of Fellguard.

It would come by night fall, if not before – the Cadian commander seemed to have a flair for the dramatic, judging by the fearlessness of the siege so far, so Mazalai doubted he or she would wait to cautiously attack under cover of darkness.

No, it would be sooner than that. Perhaps the Cadians would strike the moment the waves of Cultists attacking them ceased. Yes, even if there was a high chance that an assault would cause the first wave of Cadian attackers to be massacred before they took the inner wall, whoever this

Cadian commander would happily risk the lives of a few squads in an early attack, just to see what happened.

In which case there was no time to wait for a decision. Mazalai was running out of men and women to send out on to the killing fields, reinforcements would need to be called from elsewhere in the city, and that would take time...

‘My lord,’ said Grent, unwisely tugging on the sleeve of Mazalai’s cloak to gain his attention. ‘We have no time. We must take to the tunnels and get you and the other leaders to safety. Fellguard can fall, but we can—’

‘No!’ said Mazalai, knocking away the wart-covered hand. ‘There will be no retreat, no withdrawal. I will not see Fellguard fall, not see all we have built here be desecrated and set ablaze by mindless brutes. We will stand and fight.’

‘But my lord,’ said Grent, and Mazalai felt repulsed at the genuine concern for his welfare in the underling’s eyes, ‘your followers cannot defend you if you stay, we have few lines of defence left, and no time, no time...’

The man collapsed into babbling and muttering, feverish.

‘You are right,’ said Mazalai, and he knew what he must do. He placed a hand on Grent’s shoulder and the muttering ceased. ‘There is no time, and our options for defence are limited. Yet you may still be of service... follow me.’

Mazalai ran, and Grent followed, his mutations slowing him down. While mutations were a blessing, Mazalai had to acknowledge that they could also prove a disadvantage, and he cursed Grent’s slowness.

Thankfully, the sorcerer’s tower was only a short distance from the west gate. It had once been a building of the Ecclesiarchy, but those marks had been stricken, the priests who once resided there impaled on the wings of the great aquila sculptures and left to decay, the symbols transfigured through the draping of rotten flesh.

Mazalai ran up the steps, and slammed the knocker three times.

‘Let me in,’ he bellowed. ‘The time for meditation is over.’

The double doors opened, and Mazalai walked in, Grent at his heels, to a ring of hooded figures. The air was thick with smoke, the floor stained with blood. Many sacrifices had already been made.

‘We are ready,’ said one of the sorcerers. ‘But it is not without risk...’

‘There is more risk in allowing Fellguard to fall,’ said Mazalai.

The sorcerer nodded his hooded head.

‘You shall be the vessel, Mazalai,’ said the other sorcerer. ‘We shall sacrifice ourselves so that you might strike down our enemies.’

‘I am honoured,’ said Mazalai. ‘May we proceed?’

‘Not yet,’ said the hooded sorcerer. ‘One more sacrifice must be made.’

‘An innocent?’ said Mazalai. He looked at the dried blood on the floor. ‘Shall we fetch one from the cellars?’

The hooded figure chuckled.

‘No, not an innocent,’ he said. ‘Quite the opposite. A true believer, devoted to our cause.’

All eyes, visible and hooded, turned to Grent.

There were tears in his yellow eyes, his twisted mouth twisted further still into a smile of joy.

‘My Lord, it is an hon—’

Grent hadn’t finished his sentence when Mazalai’s blade, a knife so thin it could be mistaken for a long needle, pierced his chin and dug deep into his skull, a hand gripping Grent’s shoulder to press down as the knife drove up. Weeping pus dripped down the blade, over the handle and onto Mazalai’s fingers on the hilt, and the sorcerer chanted a prayer of offering as his most loyal servant bucked and died in his grip.

As Grent died, he gagged three times and coughed out a small swarm of fat, black flies that buzzed around his head, then drifted off over the battlements.

A good omen, thought Mazalai, turning to his fellow sorcerers.

‘Let us begin,’ he said.

If Vurtch had not been called down to the Bastion’s ground level by Rawl to perform another blessing, he would have died on the battlements of the Bastion like the others. As it was, he was halfway down the steps when the attack struck, and only narrowly survived it.

Just before he heard, through the rattle of gunfire, the voice of one of the Cadians still above on the battlements, curiously, asking a three word question.

‘Who is that?’

The answer came as witchfire embraced the Bastion, and Vurtch looked back to see tendrils of psychic energy crawling over the rooftop, spilling over the battlements, swirling and glowing in a maelstrom of blinding mystical power.

The terror came not from that unnatural energy itself, but the effect it had on what it touched. Weapons rusted and collapsed, the very rockcrete of the Bastion began to blacken with fetid mould.

Worst of all was the effect that it had on the Cadians on the roof. They died screaming, skin turning green and black with disease, eyes yellowed and blind. As Vurtch stumbled backwards down the stairs, just out of reach of the witchfire's touch, a sergeant reached towards him, his hand a claw covered in boils, before collapsing and dying. Vurtch recoiled in horror and fell, rolling down the hard stone steps.

It was a short fall and he landed on his side, bruised but nothing broken. No-one noticed him fall, Blakov and the others were urgently talking about something outside the Bastion, phrases overlapping:

‘What was tha—’

‘Did you see his eyes, they’re—’

‘Like fire—’

‘The barrel, it’s rusting—’

Then silence, and a single word uttered underneath someone's breath, but loud enough to carry across the Bastion's interior before the next wave hit.

‘Psyker!’

Then witchfire tore over the Bastion again and Vurtch, standing, could see even from a distance through the firing slots to where a glowing figure was approaching the Bastion, clothes seemingly ablaze and terrifying energy pouring out of his hands.

He was surrounded by a miasma of rank vapours, swarms of black flies swirling around him, but at the heart of the storm Vurtch could see a man more dead than alive, a skeletal figure with diseased skin and patchy hair, dressed in tattered purple robes, yet animated by a malice that seemed more alive than the healthiest human being.

This one man, this *sorcerer*, was attacking the Bastion alone, and the powers he was unleashing tore at the very fabric of that heavily fortified building. A couple of unfortunates near the firing slots had fallen to their

knees, stricken by disease just as those on the roof had been, while the heavy weapons were dripping with rust and mould. Wet clumps of matter began to fall from the ceiling as corrosion set in.

Then Vurtch felt strong hands grabbing him by the shoulder and backpack, swinging him around and tossing him aside like a sack of supplies, and he rolled across the dirty, dusty floor of Bastion Beta-3.

Vurtch looked back to see Trooper Irvan, who had just thrown him to safety, being crushed by a support beam that fell from the ceiling.

The entire Bastion was coming down around them, the rot eating away at the building itself.

Was this what godhood felt like, or was that heresy in itself?

Certainly, Mazalai had never felt power like this before. He had given in to all his emotions, his rage and his fear, and used them to draw every scrap of psychic energy he could through himself, channelling it into the psychic blasts that were picking apart Bastion Beta-3, the fortification that had turned the tide of battle.

What Krauer had failed to do from within the Bastion, and all those waves of screaming Cultists had tried to do from outside it, Mazalai was achieving alone: he would tear every defensive wall away from this cluster of little Cadians, and he would fry those who hid within, and if they did not die that easily he would simply crush them as the Bastion fell down around them.

He could do anything now, with this kind of power. If not a god himself, he was at the very least one of their most potent instruments. Had he now proven himself worthy? Surely he must have, to be granted such power. These mortals were no obstacle at all, and neither was the Emperor who supposedly watched over them. If Mazalai had felt doubt, it was dispelled now. His faith had never been stronger. He believed in the glory of his gods, and his own glory as their instrument.

Mazalai was irked to find this elated line of thought interrupted by Cadians out on the battlefield, spreading out from the collapsing Bastion.

A mere inconvenience. They would be easy enough to kill, even if they removed themselves from the box Mazalai had tried to crush them within.

‘Out out out!’ Blakov had screamed, leading the charge out of the building. ‘Spread out around the Bastion, target that psyker from all directions. I want him taken down.’

As Vurtch ran around the outside of the Bastion, lasrifle raised, he knew that he was likely running towards his death, that many would fall to this sorcerer before the heretic died.

No matter. It was Vurtch’s duty and honour. He whispered a prayer as he ran, that his lasfire find its target.

Mazalai was aflame with witchfire, alive with the relentless, feverish heat of disease, as unstoppable as the plagues he carried. He barely noticed the Cadians opening fire on him. Their lasfire was absorbed by his own heat, the bolts melting and corroding as they hit the field of corrupting psychic energy that crackled all over his body.

He smirked as he looked at their efforts. Pathetic. They were mere flesh, while he was the conduit for immortal power. It was flowing through him, the power, and it was glorious. Mazalai felt connected to the warp in a way he never had before. He could feel the power working its way through him, a pressure in his skull, the expectancy of something about to be born.

Mazalai looked at his hands, gripping his staff, so incandescent with raw psychic power he could see through the papery, diseased skin to the bones beneath as the power flowed through him. His brother sorcerers had sacrificed themselves to invest him with their power, their bodies dissolving into swarms of black flies that flowed into him, burrowing into him. He *was* Fellguard’s Nurgle cult now, entrusted with defeating the Cadians and leading the city to further greatness in Nurgle’s name.

It felt glorious.

Did he now have the gifts he had sought for so long? He tried to redirect that power towards the bodies of slain cultists around him, to resurrect dead flesh in Nurgle’s name... but nothing came.

No matter. He was still more powerful than ever before.

He tried to reach out with witchfire to strike at the Cadians once again, but although their gunfire had no impact on him, he found he could not release his own psychic power against them, could not unleash that energy.

Instead the pressure, the power, was building within him, a very real, malevolent presence forming, pushing through from the warp.

Mazalai had thought himself a vessel for the desires and power of his cult, to be honoured this way, and he was right, but not in the way he had thought. He realised the power bestowed upon him wasn't his to wield, it was just a precursor for something far greater, something terrible. His fellow cultists had seen that he would push his psychic powers to their limits, that he would not hesitate to use power that was not his.

He had been in control but now he was losing it. His brothers in death had left him not to rule, but to be destroyed in the birth of something greater.

He looked at his hands again and they were still ablaze, but now the staff had gone, the wood rotting to dust, and the skin on his hands was beginning to peel. Mazalai could feel a searing weakness within his bones, beneath the skin, as if his very skeleton was about to liquefy under the intense pressure. It was not just in his hands, either, but spreading through his whole body, and the growing white light was so intense that Mazalai was blinded by the energies coursing through his own body. Pain wracked his body and he felt himself collapse to his knees. The last sound he could identify was a terrible scream, and he realised faintly that it was his own.

Even his own imminent death, the pain and the scream of his dissolution, seemed distant, as Mazalai felt himself crushed, his soul and consciousness ground into nothingness, by the immensity of what was coming.

He had thought himself an honoured servant, a valued worshipper of Nurgle. He had thought their struggles meant something. He had been wrong.

It had been his moment of glory, but now he knew despair.

He was not Mazalai. He needed no name, he was not significant enough to warrant one. He was not a person, an entity. His life was over and had never mattered. All that he was, all that ever mattered, was that he was the conduit, that he opened the way.

Something was coming, using Mazalai's tainted soul to push its way out of the warp.

Vurtch had fired upon the heretic sorcerer, as had all the Cadians spreading around to target the psyker, and seen those attacks do nothing. He felt despair then, a creeping sensation of the universe's horrors he had never felt before.

Through everything, through so many atrocities and battlefields, Vurtch's faith had kept him strong. Now, though, in the face of such heretical and deadly power, Vurtch did not know what to feel. Terror? Awe?

He felt nauseated with himself, and that fuelled his anger.

Suddenly he realised that although the heretic was still standing, he wasn't actually attacking the Cadians anymore. The energies that consumed him seemed to be turning inwards, his whole body glowing, fierce with raging energy. The swarms of foul insects were closed around him, crawling over his body, and the stench of his evil powers carried across the battlefield.

Vurtch wanted to turn away, the unnatural powers he was looking upon causing his eyes to ache and a sickness to build in his stomach, but he couldn't stop.

Then the heretic held both hands to his head and screamed, and although there was not a cloud in the clear white sky, darkness spread around them, the sky turning black. The sorcerer, the psyker, was shaking uncontrollably, and his skin blackened like an over-ripening fruit, the flies descending to consume him.

Then this enemy, this sorcerer, exploded. His entire body liquidised, a hot flow of vile green ichor that shot into the air and sprayed all around, splashing across the ground and sizzling where it landed.

Though the sky was still unnaturally black, and a low rumbling could be heard, their enemy dead.

Vurtch was not sure whether to be entirely relieved or to give up and go mad. He had seen enough, he had seen enou—

He was snapped out of it by an order issued by Blakov.

'We move on the walls now,' Blakov said. The Castellan had taken cover behind a rusted gun emplacement a short distance away from the Bastion, firing at the heretic through a creaky hatch, but now he emerged from cover to direct his surviving troops. 'One heretic is dead, there are still plenty more to—'

He was interrupted by a high scream, an inhuman wail that came from near and far, both outside Vurtch's head and inside, working at his consciousness.

He instinctively looked to where the sorcerer's unnatural blood had spilled. The blood was rippling, still steaming. Vurtch looked into the small amount of hot liquid, and saw something black, deep and endless, and within it whole universes – it was spreading, and something was moving.

Vurtch looked around to see others reacting in the same way, seeing the same things. Where the heretic's blood had landed, rents were opening in the fabric of things and dark presences were moving. The enemy was dead, but his passing had just opened the way, and Vurtch could see what was coming.

'Oh no, dear Emperor, no,' said Vurtch, falling to his knees. Just looking at that hole in the world, at the things stirring beneath, was breaking his mind, shaking everything he believed to be true.

He had no idea, the horrors out there. He thought he had, but he was wrong.

It never ended, he thought. There was no escape, no purification or blessing that could hold back such a relentless tide of evil and decay.

All light would be snuffed out, even – and he shuddered to think of it – the light of the Emperor himself. How could even an immortal hold out?

It never ended, it would never end, it *could* never end.

+++ Extract from confidential Inquisitorial communication
resumes +++

The events that followed, hysterically referred to as 'The Hour of Hell' by witnesses, would threaten to turn the rebellion on Kelthorn into a crisis of more significant consequence, and it is only due to the fortitude of Castellan Blakov and his men and women of the Cadian 39th that victory was assured.

While those valorous actions of the Cadian 39th resolved the situation on Kelthorn satisfactorily, the propagation of any

references to the Ruinous Powers and their agents are of course completely unacceptable.

Knowledge of heresy is intolerable and must be extinguished. Knowledge of the processes by which the knowledge of heresy is extinguished is also, of course, unacceptable. Only in ignorance is there safety and clarity.

To this end while the actions during the Siege of Fellguard should be commemorated for the purposes of propaganda, I recommend that the details of the campaign be redacted.

Considering the extensive process of excavation required to retrieve all blasphemous materials from the ruins of Fellguard, I do not consider it likely that surviving witnesses have been exposed to the ideas that motivated the Kelthornian rebellion.

To that end I do not recommend that the survivors of the 39th be liquidated as a standing threat, but instead be reassigned immediately to the most lethal front line available. Their resilience proves them to be of some worth as combat assets, but that it would be unwise to allow the 39th to fight in regions where survival chances stretch into the medium term.

However, my final recommendation is that the pious survivors of the 39th swear an oath in the sight of the Emperor that they will not speak of those events, colloquially known as 'The Hour of Hell', on pain of death, and those events are also to be redacted from all records outside our own. Of some things we should not speak.

Yours in loyal service,

Inquisitorial Clerk Menshon Lytle

+++Message ends +++

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK CLAPHAM was born and raised in Yorkshire, studied and worked in London for over a decade, and is now an itinerant writer and editor based in Exeter, Devon. His short stories have appeared in the *Fear the Alien* anthology and the monthly magazine *Hammer and Bolter*. *Iron Guard* was his first novel for Black Library.



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