

NOVELLA SERIES 1

WARHAMMER
40,000



STEEL DAEMON

IAN ST. MARTIN

NOVELLA SERIES 1

WARHAMMER
40,000



STEEL DAEMON

IAN ST. MARTIN

BACKLIST

More Warhammer 40,000 stories from Black Library

CADIA STANDS

A novel by Justin D Hill

SHADOWSWORD

A novel by Guy Haley

BANEBLADE

A novel by Guy Haley

ASTRA MILITARUM

An anthology by various authors

YARRICK

An omnibus edition of the novels *Imperial Creed*, *The Pyres of Armageddon*, the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and several short stories by David Annandale

GLORY IMPERIALIS

An omnibus edition of the novels *Imperial Glory* by Richard Williams, *Commissar* by Andy Hoare and *Iron Guard* by Mark Clapham

HONOUR IMPERIALIS

An omnibus edition of the novels *Cadian Blood* by Aaron Dembski-Bowden, *Redemption Corps* by Rob Sanders and *Dead Men Walking* by Steve Lyons

STRAKEN

An 'Iron Hand' Straken novel by Toby Frost

THE MACHARIAN CRUSADE

An omnibus edition of the novels *Angels of Fire*, *Fist of Demetrius* and *Fall of Macharius* by William King

• GAUNT'S GHOSTS •

By Dan Abnett

THE FOUNDING

**An omnibus edition containing books 1–3:
*First and Only, Ghostmaker and Necropolis***

THE SAINT

**An omnibus edition containing books 4–7:
*Honour Guard, The Guns of Tanith, Straight Silver and Sabbat Martyr***

THE LOST

**An omnibus edition containing books 8–11:
*Traitor General, His Last Command, The Armour of Contempt and Only
in Death***

Book 12: BLOOD PACT

Book 13: SALVATION'S REACH

Book 14: THE WARMASTER

The Beast Arises

1: I AM SLAUGHTER

2: PREDATOR, PREY

3: THE EMPEROR EXPECTS

4: THE LAST WALL

5: THRONEWORLD

6: ECHOES OF THE LONG WAR

7: THE HUNT FOR VULKAN

8: THE BEAST MUST DIE

9: WATCHERS IN DEATH

10: THE LAST SON OF DORN

11: SHADOW OF ULLANOR

12: THE BEHEADING

Space Marine Battles

WAR OF THE FANG

A Space Marine Battles book, containing the novella *The Hunt for Magnus* and the novel *Battle of the Fang*

THE WORLD ENGINE
An Astral Knights novel

DAMNOS
An Ultramarines collection

DAMOCLES
Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Ultramarines novellas *Blood Oath, Broken Sword, Black Leviathan* and *Hunter's Snare*

OVERFIEND
Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Salamanders novellas *Stormseer, Shadow Captain* and *Forge Master*

ARMAGEDDON
Contains the Black Templars novel *Helsreach* and novella *Blood and Fire*

Legends of the Dark Millennium

ASTRA MILITARUM
An Astra Militarum collection

ULTRAMARINES
An Ultramarines collection

FARSIGHT
A Tau Empire novella

SONS OF CORAX
A Raven Guard collection

SPACE WOLVES
A Space Wolves collection

Visit blacklibrary.com for the full range of novels, novellas, audio dramas and Quick Reads, along with many other exclusive products

BLACK LIBRARY

To see the full Black Library range visit
blacklibrary.com



Multiple
formats
available



MP3 AUDIOBOOKS | BOOKS | EBOOKS

CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
Part 1
Part 2
Part 3
About the Author
An Extract from 'The Bloodied Rose'
A Black Library Publication
eBook license



STEEL DAEMON

IAN ST. MARTIN



BLACK LIBRARY



It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.

Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

PART 1

The Wrathful Song hung inert in the twisted void that existed both within and beyond reality. The malignant and unpredictable tides of the Eye had consumed the vessel for the briefest of moments, an instant swallowed by a roiling wave of colours that were not colours. Within that moment its light, seen by all the covens of sorcerers and psychic choirs in thrall to the warband, was extinguished. The Wrathful Song emerged a changed thing: a pitted and dark shape like a corroded blade wreathed in clotted blood.

Those inquisitive minds that reached out to it recoiled at what they found. The most powerful suffered agonising afflictions, while those who could not claim their strength sloughed away into steaming pools of viscera, burst into incandescent flame, or became hosts for malignant entities that stalked the Sea of Souls. All the while, every one of them screamed, across a hundred languages of man, beast and daemon, the same word.

Hunger.

And so the Relentless sent Hakaron to learn what had become of the Wrathful Song. The master of the Crimson Slaughter understood better than most how a moment of corruption could bring about an eternity of damnation.

Hakaron and his cohort waited in silence within the boarding ram. They had been summoned from the depths of the warband's labyrinthine fortress, the Lost Hope, where they had been whetting their blades in a purge of its lightless lower decks. Mutants, debauched tribes of savages and inhuman monstrosities were rife within the hulk, and the Crimson Slaughter routinely descended to butcher its foul denizens when not reaving through the Eye. With fresh blood upon their armour, their minds drew the closest they ever could towards serenity outside of battle.

Still, Hakaron's mind was not wholly his own. The whispers, dulled by the bloodshed as they were, still caressed his thoughts, like silk catching on pitted steel. The renegade Space Marine saw the tics and twitches rippling through his warriors, limbs jerking beneath mismatched armour scavenged from their endless wars. Fingers spasmed irregularly, tightly clutching stolen weapons. Hakaron began to wish that the Wrathful Song had fallen to the malign entities of the Eye, that they would find the crew and warriors possessed rather than simply butchered. Daemon or flesh, death was the harbinger of tranquillity, fleeting as it was.

Hakaron's grip tightened around his chainaxe. Whatever awaited them, he would not return to the Lost Hope without the prize the Wrathful Song had carried within its holds. Precious few of them remained, and few prices were too high to be paid to keep them.

Contact with the Wrathful Song's hull came with a wrenching clang, rocking the silent renegades in restraint harnesses that had long ceased to be entirely mechanical. It was when the melta torches began liquefying the plate between them and the ship's interior that Hakaron first heard his cohort. Low growls slipped through clenched teeth and the blackened plugs of iron that replaced them, issuing from decrepit vox-grilles as an inhuman bass chorus. Snarling helms tilted and twitched. They pierced the gloom with glowering eye lenses of crimson, sapphire and jade, some flickering unevenly or dark altogether from disrepair. Virulence exuded from every movement as they thrashed free of the harnesses and crowded before the egress hatchway. Even in the short time since emerging from the depths of the Lost Hope, their affliction had returned enough to sway their minds.

The air the traitors swarmed into from the boarding pod was stale and freezing. Steam curled from their back-mounted power packs. Reality was as thin as the air. Twisted corridors spiralled out before them, the iron of their forging given way to fleshy carapace and blackened horn.

Flickering wraiths trailed behind the warriors, clinging to them like cloaks of damnation. The souls of Umidia and beyond, torn from life by the wrath of the Crimson Slaughter, forever hung over their murderers, visible within the semi-real realm of the Wrathful Song. The blood-maddened traitor Space Marines paid them no heed, yet twitched and spasmed in response to their incessant whispers and condemnations.

Hakaron pressed deeper into the corrupted vessel, focused on reclaiming some of a dwindling number of anchors back to a time before they had cast aside old

names and older allegiances.

Hours stretched by, trekking through the darkness, before Hakaron's cohort found life within the Wrathful Song. Huddled wretches deep within the ship's darkness recoiled from the renegades, before debasing their pathetic forms in submission. They dragged themselves forward, emaciated and blind, clutching at the traitors' boots with gurgled prayers leaking from malformed lips. They were weakness made manifest, far beyond even the twisted slaves that had thronged the vessel's decks hours before. These were the culmination of centuries of degradation, puppets to the unknowable whims of the warp.

Hakaron had neither the time nor the inclination for them. Muffled cries were cut short as the wretches were crushed beneath ceramite boots. The traitor Space Marines did not even break their stride.

The vile things had been clustered about a massive gateway, its pitted iron blackened with ash and daubed with blasphemous runes painted in human grease and dried blood. It had all the marks of a pagan shrine, one that had been tended for centuries.

How much time had passed within that tidal swell of psychic energy? thought Hakaron. How long had things been disintegrating here, and what could still remain?

The Crimson Slaughter set to the gateway with melta cutters and chainblades. Within a short time, Hakaron's cohort had managed to pry the gate open wide enough to admit them one by one into the darkness beyond. Hakaron ground past the ancient metal, geneforged eyes piercing the gloom.

The chamber he entered was cavernous. The blackness that consumed it was not merely an absence of light, but also the existence of something ancient and bladed. Though he had no capacity for sorcery, Hakaron could sense a titanic presence of unfathomable cruelty dwelling in the dark.

Cruelty, and hunger.

Broken slabs of armour plating littered the rusted deck, scoured of the scarlet enamel that had once conveyed its allegiance to the warband. The cohort moved swiftly, adopting the piles of rent iron and ceramite as cover while they advanced. The barrels of bolters made haphazard circles in the air as they panned across the emptiness surrounding them.

The loss was galling to Hakaron. An entire host of battle tanks and Rhino assault carriers gone, their ruination scattered around him like carrion left stripped of its meat by howling scavengers. He had led these war machines into a hundred battles across the hellspace of the Eye and beyond. Hakaron was

wondering what manner of beast could bring such destruction to these vaunted machines, when the author of their demise made itself known at last.

A cacophony of screaming engines ricocheted from the walls with deafening force. A gargantuan form slashed from the oppressive shadow, smashing renegades to ragged lumps of meat and crushing them beneath its bulk. A caustic pall filled the frigid air like dragon's breath, reeking of promethium and charred blood.

Within seconds, half of Hakaron's warriors were dead. He hurled himself aside as the beast skidded past, the spikes of iron and horn protruding from its scarlet flesh-metal tearing deep gouges in his armour. A building electric whine set Hakaron's teeth on edge, as beams of heliotrope purple wreathed in silver lightning blasted the remainder of Hakaron's cohort to mounds of burning ash.

The flashes at last illuminated the beast as Hakaron rolled to one knee. He had prepared himself for this, but still fought back hesitation as his dread became reality.

'Rhoghon's Blade!' bellowed Hakaron, driving the butt of his chainaxe into the deck with a resounding clang.

The beast stilled, shivering with the pulse of its massive engines as the fresh blood caking its hull glistened in the sorcerous twilight.

'Heed me!' Hakaron rose, plodding towards the monster.

With a squeal of iron tracks, the beast turned to face the renegade Space Marine. Slowly it began to resolve from the blackness. Angled plates of dense ceramite that had reknit itself as carapace and raw muscle adorned its hull. The warband's icon of a grinning horned skull had manifested life, its jaw clacking as it moaned a silent dirge. The Land Raider Rhoghon's Blade had made war since before the fall of the Crimson Sabres. Now, like the Crimson Slaughter, it had become something else, a warp-spawned apotheosis that burned with the blood and breath of daemons.

The Land Raider's forward assault ramp slammed down, edged with concentric rings of lamprey teeth as it exposed what had once been the tank's crew bay. Deep within the possessed machine, a twitching form hung cocooned within a matrix of cables and fleshy mechanisms sheeted with black oil. With lidless eyes it stared at Hakaron, the bulky armour of its former station betraying its identity as Lorvyk. He had served alongside Hakaron through the armoured wars of the Crimson Slaughter, tending to the battle machines of the warband with fanatical zealotry.

'Hunger!' the corrupted warpsmith wheezed, reaching with trembling

biomechanical tentacles towards the butchered remains of Hakaron's troops.

Hakaron reached up to the collar seals binding his helm in place. A thin translucent skin tore away from the parting ceramite as he twisted the snarling death mask from his head. He was one of a rapidly diminishing number among the Crimson Slaughter who could still remove their armour. Most had become fully merged and entombed within the twisted war-plate, the immaterium's malignant whims forbidding them from ever being anything but killing machines.

Hakaron placed a gauntleted hand, slick with blood and oil, upon the hull of the Land Raider that had forever ceased to be Rhogon's Blade. He had marched to war since the beginning, before Umidia. He had watched himself and his brethren fray and succumb moment by moment, choice by choice, to bring them to this. He accepted his fate, and embraced his damnation without regret.

Hakaron watched, his features unmoving and stare unwavering, as the living tank devoured the ragged corpses of his brothers...

Hakaron's mind fled from the memory. It returned to the blackened deck upon which he stood before a monolithic gateway. A pair of hulking praetorians flanked the portal, the snarls issuing from their Terminator war-plate more alike those of a deep jungle predator than the buzz of servo fibre bundles. They were armoured in flawed gold-edged ceramite plates so dark that light did not escape their surfaces. The eightfold star of Chaos adorned their barrel chests, with an unblinking eye at the centre. The so-called Bringers of Despair, a loathsomely pretentious moniker if ever Hakaron had known one. The personal bodyguard of the Warmaster, as if such a being required sentinels.

The warrior to Hakaron's left was silent and unmoving, the twin barrels of his Reaper autocannon angled at the deck in a practised grip. His comrade stared at Hakaron, the blades of his lightning claws scraping against one another in a tortured chorus of abused metal. The shadow cast behind the Black Legion warrior sketched a silhouette of curling horns and spreading bat-like wings, revealing the truth belied by what the naked eye saw of his form. With a screech of ripping metal, the warrior's helm tore at the jawline, grinning at Hakaron with jagged fangs of ceramite stringed with mercury saliva.

Coming here was a mistake, and Hakaron had voiced this opinion to his lord. Had he borne command of the Crimson Slaughter, Hakaron considered that he might have acted differently, to set the warband upon a different course, though further idle speculation was pointless. Kranon had chosen, and, for good or ill, none rejected a summons from the Despoiler without consequence.

Hakaron stood in silence before the gateway, ignoring the taunting sneer of the Black Legion Terminator. He had never set foot upon this vessel, the Warmaster's infamous behemoth known within the Eye as the *Krukal'Righ*, and to its prey as the *Planet Killer*. The power to annihilate entire worlds thrummed beneath Hakaron's boots. The chieftain of Horus' remaining sons certainly made no concession for subtlety.

A sliver of greater shadow swelled through the gateway, slowly blooming as the massive doors parted with the thunder of immense cogwork. Hakaron's hold tightened on the chainaxe he carried low against his hips, the worn steel and leather of its haft creaking in his grip. He could not see into the audience chamber beyond the gateway, though whether that was incidental or by some sorcerous design, Hakaron could not say. All that could be seen as the slabs of black iron peeled back was the figure of his master as he emerged from parlay with the lord of the Black Legion.

Kranon the Relentless strode from the unnatural dark like a war deity dredged from ancient myth. A cloak of silver fur and hide hung from ornate armour of deep arterial red, flensed from a beast that could never exist within the bounds of reality. Sapphire eyes twitched and blinked across the warlord's plate, ensconced in riveted brass. The Blade of the Relentless hung across Kranon's back, the hilt of the massive longsword angling behind the twin horns that thrust from the crown of his leering mask.

The portal began to shut as soon as the warlord stepped through, opening only wide enough to grant him passage. Hakaron turned, keeping a step behind and to the left of Kranon as the warlord marched unabated from the closing gateway. The master of the Crimson Slaughter was unreadable behind his helm, and his stride gave no inkling of his mood.

'We return to the *Lost Hope*, my lord?' asked Hakaron.

A thin breath hissed from Kranon's vox-grille. 'I have pledged us to them. They stand poised to begin their new crusade, and we shall lend our blades to the slaughter when they do.'

'My war machines are ready, lord,' said Hakaron. 'We shall drown their hulls with the blood of Cadians.'

'No.'

To Hakaron's credit, he did not falter in his stride as the Relentless pressed on down the corridor.

'Will we not move with the Black Legion as it assails the Cadian Gate?'

Kranon's horned helm tilted fractionally, regarding Hakaron. 'Ours shall be a

different path.'

The next words to pass from the Relentless stirred the voices within Hakaron's mind to a frenzy of bladed wailing.

'Tell me, do you remember Regallus?'

Heit Lytviak came to in freefall, as the world shattered around him.

The skies above the central hive city of Regallus were streaked with flame and shrapnel, an atmosphere tortured by the thousand knifing wounds of an invading army making planetfall. Ribbons of flak and las-beams leapt up from the hive's battlements, spearing the pitted hulls of bulk landers swollen with thousands of debased cultists. Flaming bodies spilled from their ruptured forms as they were struck, raining dead upon the Imperial bastions below.

Through the madness of the skies, the squadrons of the Linoldian 706th Tactical Air Superiority Wing had struck forward, launching sorties of Lightning fighters and Marauder bombers to rain the Emperor's vengeance down upon the landing sites and marshalling grounds of the massing Chaos invaders.

Scarce moments ago, Heit had been aboard the *Ascended Light*, manning the auspex and vox stations of the Marauder bomber as it neared the swelling host of infantry and tanks that was its target. With a shriek of warning klaxons and a blinding flash he found himself twisting through the expanding wreckage of the *Ascended Light*, hurtling down towards the burning hive with the howling wind to muffle his screams.

Huge draconic fliers were weaving through the destruction, an impossible and unholy melding of bestial monstrosity and nightmarish machine. They passed in and out of sight, stalking the swirling banks of smoke like the leviathan predators of ancient Terra's primordial oceans. The abominable daemon engines were tearing the Linoldians to pieces, splitting hulls with razor-edged claws and liquefying whole aircraft with gouts of spectral green flame gushing forth from between their snapping jaws.

Heit had no way of knowing if it was these monstrosities that had destroyed his bomber, or any of the other myriad hazards filling the skies of Regallus with death. He could scarcely marshal thought for that at the moment, as he tumbled and thrashed at terminal velocity towards the ground.

'Throne, Throne of the Emperor – please.' Heit hissed the entreaties from between terror-clenched teeth. He fought with the controls of the emergency grav-harness upon his back. Having only recently graduated from the training cadres, he had been assigned to the *Ascended Light* for his first duty. Thus far,

Heit's experience had varied greatly from the instruction revolutions and simulators of his training schola. Particularly regarding the function of a grav-harness. His simulated evacuations during training were rote, orchestrated manoeuvres, overseen by instruction cadres more intent on moving the cadets through to the next evaluation than ensuring the doctrines they imparted could be applied practically.

The bulky device whirred and buzzed in varying pitches, and Heit could feel the internal components within its housing catch and grind against each other. Despite his frantic hammering on the control pad stitched into the shoulder strap, the device had failed to do anything to arrest his fall. The goggles of Heit's rebreather mask had been cracked and punctured when he had been thrown from the bomber, and he blinked away stinging tears as he passed through the lowest of the smoke layers.

The central hive rushed up beneath Heit like a vast insect nest of dark iron. Even over the lower urban sprawl at the city's periphery as he was, the hive's spires and towers grew like blackened teeth.

A thunderclap of concussive force burst near Heit, sending him spinning end over end. The surface of Regallus flashed before his eyes, replaced by the anguished skies and then flicking back, rapidly alternating again and again. The tearing wind stole his screams of panic and frustration as the ground rushed nearer. Heit twisted, kicking frantically as he clawed at his grav-harness controls with white-knuckled hands. He was low enough to pass below the highest of the spires, and within seconds he would be nothing more than a burst sack of unidentifiable viscera on the war-torn streets.

'Throne!' Heit cursed, relenting in his panic to clashing his fist against the control pad over and over. The cityscape grew closer, the crenellated blade of a cathedral tower so near he felt he could touch the sculpted angels adorning it. The altimeter in his crazed visor display shrieked in warning as the runes blurred towards zero.

With a final frantic punch, Heit felt a deep clunk within the machinery on his back. A sharp whine built, and Heit's broken rebreather filled with the smell of ozone as an anti-gravity suspensor field sparked to life. The stricken crewman felt his spin slow into a small measure of stability, and his body jinked from side to side as the small thrusters set above his shoulders coughed and sputtered to life.

Heit's descent slowed, but did not stop. He veered away from the looming cathedral, narrowly avoiding becoming a smear against its cracked and broken

stonework, and angled himself towards a courtyard ringed by squat hab blocks opened to his right.

The border of the hive below him was in flames, the front lines of the battle between the invaders and the Cadian mechanised infantry Heit's squadron had taken to the skies to support. Spheres of dirty fire blossomed as artillery was unleashed on both sides, reducing the outskirts of the city to a hellish landscape of craters and the skeletal husks of collapsed buildings. Smears of grey and black began to take shape, resolving into a massed charge of debased cultists hurling themselves upon the Imperial guns.

A building heat pricked Heit's back through his uniform, and pulsing runes flashed insistently on his visor as the whine of the grav-chute grew choppy and irregular. One of the thrusters failed, sending him pinwheeling down. Heit screwed his eyes shut as his vision blurred, and a white-hot web of sudden pain slammed across his body as something dark, massive and unyielding arrested his fall.

The distant crump of artillery fire jarred streams of loose rockcrete dust down upon Heit's prone form. A shell landed closer in a thunderous impact, dislodging a fist-sized chunk that struck the airman and roused him.

Shakily, Heit brought his arms up to push himself to his knees. His right shoulder exploded in deep, sharp pain, driving the air from his lungs. He rolled onto his back, blinking away the reddened edges of his vision to look up into the ragged hole of the hab-block roof he had fallen through. The grey ruin of the city's streets opened up to his left, putting him at ground level.

Heit tested his right arm gingerly. The limb was stiff and heavy, with his shoulder raised unnaturally at the joint. He noted there was no blood around the dislocation, so it had not broken the skin. Beyond that injury and a myriad of cuts and bruises, he was alive and able to move.

Resting his head back for a moment, Heit pulled his rebreather mask off, and drew in a deep breath. The air was thick with ash and smoke. He thudded his left fist against the harness of his grav-chute, unlocking the restraints. Slowly, he slid his right arm out, and sat up.

Heit looked down at the mound of dirt and debris that had broken his fall. Peering closer, he brushed away the dirt from a shape, quickly resolving into the broken and twisted form of a human hand missing several fingers. Heit scrambled away from the mound, seeing more pieces of bodies reaching out stiffly from it, their grey flesh pale and long dead. He pitched over, back arching

as he heaved bile onto the ground. He slumped against the ruined wall of the hab block, only half successfully wiping the sick from his face with a gloved hand.

The sound of distant shouting jarred Heit from his shock. He cut a length of the grav-chute harness and tied his right arm against his chest, pulling his laspistol from the holster on his hip with the left. He had no idea where in the line he was, whether he was within Imperial-controlled territory or that which had been overrun by Chaos. Peering around the wall into the streets, Heit rose unsteadily to his feet, and ventured out.

Heit had not been on Regallus when the invasion had begun. The Linoldian forces had arrived weeks into the campaign, delayed by perilous warp storms that had claimed three of their ten vessels. By the time Heit and his comrades had broken back into the embrace of reality, they found a world in flames.

Scrambling to deploy their forces, the Linoldian commanders had rushed into the fray. Their soldiers, Heit among them, heard only snatches of what had transpired on the surface. Rumours abounded of cultist hordes millions-strong, in howling thrall to sorcerous masters; walls of screaming shades rising thousands of metres to swallow continents; red-armoured warriors twice the size of a man, reducing entire armies to ruin.

Renegade Space Marines.

The idea had seemed unfathomable to Heit. To him, Space Marines existed frozen into panes of stained glass on chapel windows, paragons of virtue as the chosen sons of the God-Emperor. How could the Emperor's own angels turn against him?

Wing Captain Delandrier, commander of the *Ascended Light*, had warned him to keep such thoughts to himself, and as the commissars of the reclamation forces meted out executions and unit decimations to restore order, Heit thanked him for his caution.

Heit tried not to think of the faces of his crew as he picked through the blazing ruins of the city. In all likelihood he was the only one of them left alive, but it was neither the time nor the place to dwell on such thoughts. He had to keep moving, find the Imperial lines. After that he could see to their memory.

A crunch of loose rockcrete behind Heit turned his head, before something slammed him down hard into the road. He cried out in pain as his dislocated shoulder ground outside its socket, but was quickly silenced as a dirty hand clamped tightly over his mouth.

Heit looked up, seeing a woman with wild eyes poised to drive a combat blade

into his throat. She wore a torn plastic Astra Militarum-issue rain mantle over body armour, her face streaked with grime and camouflage paint. She hesitated, her bright eyes flicking over Heit's uniform before locking back onto his own.

'Unit and designation or you get a new hole in your throat,' she hissed, moving her hand from Heit's lips and bringing the blade beneath his jaw.

'Heit Lytviak, airman, Linoldian Seven-Oh-Sixth Tactical Air Superiority Wing,' Heit stammered, trying as best as he could to adopt a placating posture with his arms pinned beneath the woman's knees.

The woman considered Heit for a moment, before snatching up his laspistol and standing. She stared down at Heit, scratching furiously at the dirty stubble of her hair.

'Pilot? What are you doing on the ground, pilot?' Her accent was thick, unused to forming the words. Heit doubted Gothic was her first language, nor the one she spoke most often. 'Why are you not in the air, dropping fire on the dogs butchering our lines?'

An explosion detonated nearby, close enough to whip at the woman's rain mantle. Her eyes flicked up to the streets, then back down at Heit.

'Get up.' She flipped the laspistol to hold it by the barrel, offering it to Heit. 'Get up! Throne, they are near. We must move, now.' She pulled the lasgun she carried from its shoulder strap, slotting her blade onto its bayonet lug.

Heit took his pistol, squirming to a sitting position.

'What?' she demanded, glaring down at Heit. Her eyes flicked to his arm. 'Oh, for Throne's sake!'

She grabbed Heit's right wrist and planted a boot in his chest. Gritting her teeth, she kicked Heit down onto his back, wrenching his shoulder back into place with a wet snap. The air fled Heit's lungs, and he rolled onto his side, fighting to cling to consciousness.

'I said get up,' the woman hissed. 'Or I leave you for them, and trust me, you will wish I hadn't.'

Heit pushed himself to his knees, hearing shouting coming from down the street.

'You hear me?' Her bright eyes flashed. 'Get up or I'll—'

A whizzing crack silenced the woman, followed by a pop like a wet tree branch snapping. A burst of hot fluid fizzed over Heit's face. The woman teetered for a moment, smoke curling from a finger-sized hole in her cheek, before toppling down into the street.

Heit looked up, seeing a loose pack of three dozen men in ramshackle carapace

armour moving from the end of the street. Needle-thin lines of las-fire slashed over his head, and he sprang up, sprinting doubled-over into a side alley. Slamming his back against the near wall, Heit leaned out to peer down the street.

The mob of cultists had stopped over the body of the slain Imperial soldier, producing arm-length machetes and short blades as they began to chant. The words they uttered were wrong, guttural, sending vertigo rippling through Heit's head and making his eyes water. He heard them argue amongst one another, and turned back against the wall as they began bringing their blades to bear on the corpse.

The rising sound of boots crunching rubble announced their approach, their unholy chant growing louder. The ground beneath the airman began to shudder. Panic clawed up his spine with icy sourness, and he fought to keep his breathing quiet. The cultists drew closer. Heit could hear skulls and totems clink from wires and chains as they drummed against their looted armour. Terror overwhelmed him as the ground beneath felt as though it were trying to throw him off. His mind shrank, cornered, trapped.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Heit pressed the barrel of his laspistol to his temple. As they rounded the corner, his finger tightened on the trigger.

God-Emperor, forgive me.

The crumbling wall of a hab block across the street from Heit collapsed, exploding as a massive dark shape crashed through it. Crushed rockcrete dust bloomed out, filling the air with a blinding grey pall. Heit heard the thunder of enormous engines, and the brittle crunch of stone beneath iron tracks.

The cultists shouted through the dust, firing blindly with lasrifles. The chattering boom of a heavy bolter answered them, its report deafening in the narrow streets. Heit slapped his hands to his ears, rolling on his side as chips of rockcrete and stone flew in all directions. A severed arm skidded a metre away from him, still clutching a machete as its stump emptied of blood.

Heit edged out, looking into the dust. A sightless firefight was raging between the cultists and their foe. More dark hulks burst into the street, levelling hab blocks as they brought heavy ordnance to bear at extremely close quarters.

The cultists swarmed around one of the hulks, singing as they dragged heavy cylindrical objects behind them. Withering streams of heavy bolter fire blew bodies apart, but a handful managed to reach their target. A shrill cry of blasphemous ecstasy was followed by a thunderous detonation that blasted out in a concussive roar, sending smoke and fire soaring into the sky. Shrapnel the size of human bodies rained down, scything through the rapidly diminishing force of

Chaos invaders.

The shouts grew fewer. The shrieking of each cultist was abruptly silenced by a burst of mass-reactive carnage as the massive dark hulks combined their fire. Stinging beams of lascannon fire lit the dust cloud in headache-bright light for flickering instants, doing nothing to improve the visibility.

As suddenly as the fighting had begun, it was over.

Heit waited for a moment as silence solidified, abraded only by the throaty growl of idling promethium-fuelled engines. Pushing himself up into a sitting position, he kicked the severed arm away. The machete clattered as it struck the pavement.

A cone of golden torchlight pierced the dust, filling the entrance to the alley.

'*Come out, slowly!*' a tinny voice barked from a loudspeaker.

Heit swallowed, raised his arms, and stood. He stepped out from the alley, finding himself staring directly into the barrel of the largest gun he had ever seen.

Hakaron felt the Land Raider shudder with pleasure as it ground the still-screaming bodies of the fleeing soldiers to pulp beneath its tracks. The segmented treads of the tank had become porous during its apotheosis on the *Wrathful Song*, and it drank deep of its prey's blood as the remaining survivors were routed. Hakaron watched impassively as networks of pulsing veins within the crew cabin swelled with stolen lifeblood, the daemon-possessed war machine gorging on murder to slake a thirst that could never be sated.

The Crimson Slaughter had swept across the ash plains separating the continent-spanning hives of Regallus, darkening its skies with attack craft and heavy bulk landers. Massed charges of cultists had absorbed the majority of the Imperial artillery bombardment, giving Hakaron and his brothers a relatively uncontested advance as they deployed from drop pods and landed heavy armour onto the surface. The mechanised units under Hakaron's command blotted out the weak sun of the Imperial world with the ash kicked up in their wake, an armoured phalanx of tanks, Rhino troop transports, and ponderously stomping Defiler daemon engines. Leading from the tip of the spear, Hakaron rode into battle upon a machine he could no longer call *Rhohon's Blade*. That venerable war machine had been lost within the immaterium's cruel tides. Now, only *The Hunger* remained.

The Imperial lines, bolstered by networks of hardened trenches and fortified bunkers, and reinforced with armour and artillery batteries, suffered their first

casualties before the renegade Space Marines had even come within range. As in every other war waged by the Crimson Slaughter, their first weapon was always the most destructive. Hakaron knew it so well he did not have to witness it to know what was happening.

A surging tidal wave of rolling mist, hundreds of metres high, had appeared on the horizon, bearing directly for the entrenched defenders. Soldiers began to bleed without cause from eyes and ears. Sanctioned psykers lost all control, exploding in ruinous starbursts of psychic energy or becoming thrashing conduits for frenzied warp lightning. The latter were rapidly executed by officers and commissars, but not before bringing dozens of scorched and twisted men and women into oblivion with them.

When the mist closed to within fifty metres, the Imperial defenders began to see shapes writhe in and out of sight within its rolling pall. Howling faces and skeletal hands reached out, clawing and sinking back into nothing before appearing again. A keening shriek filled the air, echoing in the ears of the Imperial soldiers as well as their minds. Long-dead family and lovers beckoned to them with impossible, honeyed words. Secrets and lies bored into their psyches, drowning their synapses in madness.

The effect was devastating. Whole sections of the front lines broke for the rear, fleeing the storm of spectral horrors. The Commissariat resorted to establishing a second firing line immediately behind the front, whose sole duty was to kill any soldier who turned to flee. By the time the Crimson Slaughter arrived, hundreds of Imperials lay dead, killed by their own guns.

While renegade Space Marines trudged through a twitching carpet of dead cultists as they began their assault on the walls, Hakaron led his armoured units in a sweeping advance upon the right flank of the enemy fortifications. The greatest concentration of artillery batteries was gathered there, with the majority of the Imperial armour deployed to defend them. As he had countless times before, the traitor made ready to leap into the maelstrom of tank warfare.

Hakaron opened the cupola hatch over his head, which hinged like a jaw to let him through. With one hand clamped idly to the storm bolter mounted to the cupola, the Crimson Slaughter Space Marine looked out upon the warzone the planet had become. Regallus had changed with the passage of time, its urban sprawl even larger than when the Crimson Sabres had fought here to dislodge eldar pirates raiding its hive spires. Indeed, it had changed, though Hakaron acquiesced that, to the terrified mortals cowering behind the city walls, he had changed far more.

'Stay where you are, little man,' the loudspeaker barked again. 'One false move and there won't be enough left of you to make a stain.'

Heit could not have moved if he had wanted to. His mind was blank, utterly transfixed on the barrel of a cannon that could level buildings with a single shot. As the smoke and rockcrete dust thinned, more than just the immense gun barrel came into view. Heit saw the form of his deliverer, and perhaps his executioner.

The battle tank was an imposing box of dense armour, lacquered in a dappled grey camouflage pattern scorched and pitted by recent combat. The barrel of its main gun, aimed directly at Heit, extended forward, nearly doubling the length of the war machine from its place on the main turret. Set below the main gun and slightly off centre, a lascannon crackled with charge, emitting a thrumming whine that sent gooseflesh rippling over Heit's skin. A pair of heavy bolters swivelled at its flanks, framing the thick forward-sweeping rhomboids of the tank's tread assemblies. The right side heavy bolter panned back and forth, vigilant for targets, while the left remained inert, cocked awkwardly with its sponson armour fractured.

Despite the damaged and weathered state of the tank, it still filled Heit with terrified awe. Such vehicles had formed the iron fist of the Astra Militarum for millennia, laying waste to the enemies of mankind across a million worlds. It was a symbol of the Imperium's military might, blessed with the honoured namesake of one of the God-Emperor's own sons.

Leman Russ.

Four more of the massive tanks filled the street behind the one drawing down on Heit. One was little more than a charred mound of twisted metal, still burning from the cultists' suicide attack.

Heit took a calculated risk at that moment, slowly lowering his hands. The lascannon of the Leman Russ twitched in its housing, aligning centre of mass on the airman. Heit slowly, carefully, crossed his arms over his chest, hooking his thumbs to form the Imperial aquila. He sank to one knee.

For moments that felt like hours, nothing happened. Heit watched dust fragments of stone dance on the sloping armour of the idling tank. He heard a deep clunk, and a figure emerged from the turret.

'Okay, choir boy,' said the figure. 'Let's go ahead and get those hands back up.' Her voice was firm, laden with authority, and did not have the breathless edge of the one who had spoken through the loudspeaker. Wearing wrinkled grey coveralls and utility webbing, she climbed out from the turret cupola and plodded down to stand at the edge of the tank.

The tanker pulled off her helmet to reveal a close-cropped scalp of dark hair. Deep scars covered one side of her face, forging tributaries of glossy pink down the pale skin. She set her helmet in the crook of one arm, the other hand holding a bolt pistol aimed at Heit's heart.

Heit raised his hands again, slowly getting to his feet.

'No, no,' the woman warned. 'I liked the kneeling, that was a good idea, so stay down.' Her eyes blazed a bright violet as she rested her finger on the trigger of the bolt pistol.

Those eyes, thought Heit. Cadian eyes.

'Another good idea is to blast him and be done with it, Crown,' barked the woman using the loudspeaker. 'This area's crawling with sappers just aching to get close.'

The Cadian tank commander spared a tired glance to the turret of the Lemn Russ, then back to Heit.

'Are you a sapper?' she asked him.

'No,' Heit answered, eyes still locked on the tank's battle cannon.

'Then what are you?' Her head tilted to one side. 'Hey!'

Heit started, jarred from staring at the huge gun, and met the Cadian's gaze.

'I'm Linoldian Seven-Oh-Sixth,' Heit began, the shock beginning to thin from his voice. 'My Marauder got hit above the city, dumped me out and I landed here.'

The Cadian flashed a smirk, for an instant twisting the scar tissue on her face into pinkish lightning. 'Choir boy, fallen from heaven like an angel.'

She turned back to the tank. 'We're clear. Lochna, get me a fuel check and even out what's left with the others, if you please. Zevsin, point my gun somewhere else. Jesh and Brydl, the sponson.'

The turret of the Lemn Russ ground as it traversed away from Heit. A hatch beneath it swung open, and a stocky man hauled himself up and out of the tank, circling around behind it towards the fuel cells. Two more crewmembers emerged from the turret, working in silence to begin hauling small bundles out of the tank.

One was slender, her coveralls pooling around her limbs, and could not have been beyond her teenage years. Even still, she was nearly a head taller than Heit, her frame packed with wiry muscle that spoke of generations of exacting breeding programmes. The other was stripped to the waist, showing a roadmap of scarred and burned flesh as he worked, with shining bionics that replaced his arms all the way to the shoulder. All were Cadians, fair-skinned and violet-eyed,

taller and heartier than nearly any other human in the Imperium. A race born beneath the Eye of Terror, bred to serve as the first line of defence against the evil and corruption that spilled from its cursed storms.

The younger Cadian cursed, adjusting her grip on something Heit could not make out as he rose to his feet. The other tanker wheezed a quiet reprimand as he gathered it up in his iron arms, carrying it reverently to the rear of the tank. Their hands were stained scarlet. Heit realised then what they were removing. It was a body, and they were pulling it out a piece at a time.

‘Lieutenant Knispel, Cadian Forty-Fourth Armoured,’ said the Cadian tanker, drawing Heit’s attention back to her. ‘Though I’m platoon leader around here, so everyone in these cans calls me Crown.’

‘Heit,’ the airman said quietly in reply.

‘We need to run a quick patch on the sponson, but you can hitch a ride back to central with us. You run that bolter for me in the meantime and I’ll get you where you need to go.’

Heit gave a short nod, clearing his throat. ‘I don’t know what would have happened if you had not come by,’ he said as the Cadian began to turn away. The pistol at his belt felt like it weighed as much as one of the tanks. ‘Thank you.’

Crown looked back over her shoulder at Heit. ‘Didn’t come for you. We’ve been hitting enemy infantry movements all over this area, didn’t see you until after the smoke cleared.’

Heit looked away for a moment, watching as the Cadians pulled their fallen comrade from the tank. That soldier had fought and died in valiant service to the Imperium, while Heit had cowered in an alley, his own gun to his head rather than firing at the enemy. The shame burned at the pit of his stomach.

‘All the same, thank you. You are all heroes.’

Crown stopped at the word. The Cadian turned fully to stare darkly at Heit.

‘No, we’re not.’ She jerked her thumb towards her comrades moving out of the turret. ‘The only hero is the one being pulled out of that tank.’

After the body had been gathered together, the Cadians laid it in a rain mantle, tying the ends of the poncho together into a bundle. One by one the tankers sat beside the bundle for a moment, before moving off to see to their duties refuelling the tank, making hasty repairs and establishing a secure vox-link to command.

Heit stood off to the side, and watched as Crown sat down beside the body. The tank commander reached into her webbing and produced a small battered tin.

She unscrewed the top and poured a measure of fine dust over the plastic mantle.

‘What is she doing?’ Heit asked Jesh. The young gunner was holding a slab of armour plating over a section of torn armour on the left sponson while Brydl worked to quickly weld it in place. The man’s bionics hissed as he worked, almost drowning out the muttered entreaties he made to the tank’s machine spirit as he applied the welds in a fountain of sparks.

Jesh flicked her eyes up towards the rear of the tank, flinching as a stream of sparks rained over her. ‘That’s Cadian soil. Few honours greater for a soldier of the Gate than to die with the homeworld beneath their feet.’

Heit looked back to the tank commander as she stood, casting his eyes away as she turned in his direction.

‘Lochna!’ called Crown. The driver’s head emerged from the forward hatch beneath the turret. ‘Our choir boy wants to help, so let him.’

‘Aye, Crown.’ Lochna gestured to Heit, then disappeared beneath the hatch.

Heit climbed onto the Lemn Russ, his boots slipping on the mud and compacted ash caking the tank. Lochna appeared again from the turret.

‘Wanna help? Here you go.’ Lochna passed an empty shell casing to Heit. ‘Toss this out for me, though mind yourself.’

The spent casing was the length of Heit’s arm, and surprisingly heavy for having already been fired. The brass shell had a strong smell of ammonia, and Heit felt something slosh inside it as he turned to throw it. A cold measure of pale liquid slopped over the rim of the shell onto Heit’s hands, and he gagged as he hurled the shell away into the street.

‘I said mind yourself,’ Lochna chided, fighting to contain the sniggering his comrades saw no reason to avoid. ‘Not sure what you are used to up there, but down here we can’t exactly park in an artillery barrage and dig a latrine.’

Heit shook his hands, frantically wiping them on his flight suit as he fought down the bile surging in his throat. He sucked in a deep breath, and heard muffled shouting within the turret. Crown was having a stilted conversation, but Heit could only hear her side, meaning she was likely on the tank’s vox.

Crown flipped up the turret cupola and whistled. ‘Right, gather up.’

The crew of the Lemn Russ congregated around the turret.

‘Repairs?’ asked Crown.

‘Done, Crown,’ replied Jesh, while Brydl muttered behind her. ‘Not anything we’d want an engineeer to see, but the welds will hold until we get it back to central.’

‘Well, they’re gonna have to hold a bit longer than that,’ said Crown. ‘Just in

from command, the first walls are gone.'

The Cadians were silent as the import of that statement sank in. Heit's eyes widened in shock. The first walls of the hive were extensive fortifications a hundred metres high, networked with gun emplacements, underground tunnels and even void shields to repel orbital bombardment. The direst projections vouched that they would hold for weeks. Instead, they had fallen just two days after the enemy made landfall.

'We will not be returning to central,' said Crown. 'Command is massing everything they can find at the minefields, and that's where we are heading too, so mount up.' She looked at Heit.

'Looks like you'll be riding with us for a bit, choir boy.'

'Hold,' uttered Hakaron, concentrating on the scarlet targeting reticules that flicked across his retinal display. He felt *The Hunger* decelerate, though it did not fully halt. He spared a quick glance back towards the warpsmith behind him, who hung inert within the tumour of biomechanical cables with oily blood streaming from his eyes. His brother's control over the daemon engine was slipping little by little, but Hakaron could not concern himself with it now.

The targeting reticules in the renegade's visor were linked to the twin lascannons mounted on either side of the Land Raider. Hakaron's gauntleted hands danced over the controls, operating the cannons independently to blast apart a ring of Chimera transport tanks deploying infantry squads around him. Multilaser fire from the Chimeras' short turrets flickered against *The Hunger's* armour, as ineffectual as rain. Searing blasts of energy from the lascannons sent the Imperial vehicles skidding back, erupting in flames as their fuel reserves ignited. Frantic mortals screamed as the fires consumed them, their flesh sloughing away like wax.

Hakaron fired short bursts from the Land Raider's hull-mounted heavy bolters, reducing more slaves of the Corpse-God to puffs of red mist and chunks of oozing flesh. He reached down, throwing a lever at his feet. The fanged maw of the tank's forward assault ramp thudded to the ground.

'Go, brothers,' said Hakaron, destroying another Chimera with a lascannon blast. 'Leave none alive.'

With ponderous, thundering gait, the hunched forms of five Crimson Slaughter warriors stomped from the Land Raider in hulking Terminator war-plate. A brackish downpour of acid rain from the city-spanning clouds of smoke and ash pattered against the ancient ceramite, burning with thin wisps of caustic vapour.

Effectively tanks in their own right, the Terminators charged into the Imperial formations, cleaving soldiers apart and upending tanks with lightning claws and thunder hammers. Death spewed from the screaming barrels of an assault cannon and storm bolters clutched in monstrous transhuman fists. Litanies of deranged hate blasted from the vox-grilles of their tusked helms as the elite of the warband succumbed to their marrow-deep longing for atrocity.

Hakaron had been tactical in deploying the Terminators, resisting their taunts and demands to be unleashed until they were deep within the highest Imperial resistance. He knew he would never be able to recall them. The voices drove them to greater and greater acts of butchery in search of a moment's peace they would never find. The Terminators would lose themselves completely, roving the city killing any who came near. Some might find death, though even then Hakaron doubted they would find silence awaiting their souls.

Hakaron glanced at the Land Raider's tainted auspex. The device's screen had mutated into a sheet of twitching red flesh, shuddering with rising pinpricks like gooseflesh to symbolise detected foes. A cluster of raised points rippled at the edge of the skin, glittering with a sheen of oily sweat.

'Bring us around,' barked Hakaron, glimpsing his brothers for the last time as the assault ramp folded back into place. He could feel *The Hunger* straining, angling its tracks towards another Imperial bastion. 'You know where to go.'

'Hunger,' came the warpsmith's rasped reply.

Heit stooped as he lowered himself into the Leman Russ. The interior of the tank was a roughly rectangular box, its cramped cabin smelling strongly of gunsmoke, engine oil and stale sweat. The driver, Lochna, settled into the forward control station in the bow, his hands dancing over control panels to bring the tank to life. The driver positively reeked of lho smoke, and Heit spied a string of blocky numbers tattooed at the nape of his neck, just visible above the collar of his coveralls.

A penal tattoo?

The gunner's station was set directly beneath the main gun on the turret ring, with the commander seated behind and above it. Brydl crouched behind the gunner to the left in the loader's station, iron fingers tapping against massive shells as he counted the Leman Russ' ammunition. Jesh carefully squeezed herself into the sponson on the right side of the turret. There was even less space than aboard a Marauder, and Heit marvelled at how the Cadians were able to fight within such tight confines.

Heit felt a pair of dark violet eyes follow him from the gunner seat as he lowered himself into the tank. 'You're likely the first one inside this tank who isn't Cadian, besides the ones who built her.'

Heit turned, regarding a gaunt mousy woman seated behind the tank's battle cannon. Glossy synth-skin covered much of her face, and Heit could see plugs of dark iron in place of her teeth. Her limbs had been replaced with claws of similarly dark metal, all save her right arm.

'Mortar round,' said the woman, assuming what Heit was thinking. 'I was perched with my spotter up in a cathedral tower on the Kulaxis shrine world, stacking up a good tally with my long-las. Seems the heretics sacking the place took offence to this, and finally brought the tower down around my ears.'

The gunner flexed her bionics with a buzz of purring servos. 'Not much good as a sniper any more, new bits are too noisy. But I've still got my eyes and the right trigger finger.' She waved her flesh hand. 'So I convinced them to give me a bigger gun.'

The gunner extended her flesh hand to Heit. 'I'm Zevsin. Sorry for before.' She gave a short nod. 'Arguing to kill you and all.'

'Forget about it,' Heit replied. 'Sorry about your comrade.'

'His number came up,' said Zevsin. 'He was Cadian. There's no mystery why none of us ever seem to die of old age.'

'We took a hit to the flank, glancing, but it split open a seam,' said Jesh quietly. 'Just wide enough for a bolter round to sneak through.'

'Bolt-round's not a bad way, if it finds you in the head or torso,' said Lochna, rapping a fist against his chest. 'Anywhere centre of mass you'll be in chunks before you know what happened. Even a limb shot will get you after a minute or two, but you'll know what happened then.'

Zevsin nodded behind Heit. 'There's home.'

Heit took a deep breath, wiping the sweat from his brow. Turning around, he folded himself into the left sponson gunner seat, a rough piece of thin rolled metal fixed at a ninety-degree angle. The chair was set into a channel in the deck of the tank, allowing the gunner to swivel left and right as the heavy bolter traversed. Heit could see the jagged gap to the right of the seat where the armour had broken, where the shot had come through to kill the gunner.

Heit peered into the periscope sight. The thin slit of armourglass was cloudy, blackened at the edges and provided little in the way of visibility. He wrapped his hand around the pistol grip of the heavy bolter, its metal stock pressing into the meat of his shoulder. The weapon was stiff, and Heit needed both arms to

swing it across its field of fire. Releasing the gun, he looked down. His hands came away sticky with blood.

Crown settled into the commander's seat above and behind Zevsin, punching keys into the vox station as she tapped the comm-bead at her throat.

'All tanks, *Imperial Son*. Call in.'

A chorus of scratchy replies came in as the other Leman Russ tanks of the column reported their readiness.

'Right, spin them up.' Crown rapped the hatch over her head with her knuckles. 'Let's shake the tread.'

The Leman Russ shuddered as its engines rumbled to full-throated life. With a short jolt, the tank began to move, grinding down the cracked rockcrete of the hive streets.

'Listen up, soldiers,' said Crown, scanning through the tank's auspex readouts. 'We are linking up with what's left of our armour to hold the minefields. Threat's massing against them and if they break through them they'll have punched their ticket to the hive centre. Choir boy, keep your eyes open. You see anything moving on our flank you spray them, you got me?'

Heit swallowed, taking hold of the heavy bolter again.

'Got me?' Crown repeated.

'Got you,' Heit answered quietly, squinting through the periscope into the ruin of the city beyond.

Imperial Son arrived at a scene of orchestrated pandemonium as it led the column of tanks to the outermost edge of the Imperial lines. Soldiers from a dozen armies and a dozen worlds sprinted to and fro, stacking sandbags and hauling cans of fuel and ammunition. Heavy weapons teams ministered to heavy bolters, autocannons and siege mortars. Gunners gingerly adjusted the focusing lenses of lascannons. Infantry stood in disordered rings around fires, snatching up power packs for their lasguns recharging in the heat of the flames before hurrying to their hastily entrenched positions.

Looking out from atop the turret cupola of *Imperial Son*, Crown raised her magnoculars to her eyes, panning across the rear. She could make out the squat forms of Basilisk artillery tanks in the distance, the barrels of their cannons raised like inquisitive fingers pointing to the sky. She looked down at Lochna, his head and shoulders clear of his hatch as he drove the Leman Russ from a standing position.

'Roll us down over there.' Crown gestured to a dishevelled gathering of

weathered Chimeras, Hellhounds and Leman Russes. At the centre of the armour, dominating the other vehicles like a mother with children clinging to her skirts, was a Baneblade super-heavy tank.

Crown's mouth went dry at the sight. 'Throne,' she cursed. 'Look at the size of it.'

The Cadian struggled to comprehend the sheer enormity of the Baneblade. One of its track assemblies was as wide as *Imperial Son's* entire chassis, and four Leman Russ transports put together barely matched its menacing bulk. Its main battle cannon was longer than Crown's tank on its own, even with *Imperial Son's* extended Vanquisher cannon. It took a bare minimum of ten highly trained personnel to operate the super-heavy tank, along with a veritable army of maintenance engineers, logisticians, armourers and myriad other support crew to keep it at peak capacity. Eleven separate weapons were mounted on its immense frame, poised to obliterate the foes of the Imperium in a hurricane of bolter rounds, las-beams and high-explosive shells.

Crown gazed at the Baneblade's main battle cannon. The name of the tank, etched in shining platinum High Gothic script, shone unblemished amidst a field of weathered and scored-black tanks.

Furor Imperator.

Crown swung her legs out of the cupola, striding down from the roof of *Imperial Son* and dropping to the ground as it rumbled across the assembly area. She set off towards a circle of officers gathering in the shadow of *Furor Imperator.*

'Fuel, ammo, rations, lho,' said Crown to Lochna. 'In *that* order, driver.'

Crown smirked as she heard Lochna's groan over the vox, and cut the link. The crew of *Imperial Son* disembarked from the tank, setting about their duties.

Heit followed the loader Brydl, squeezing out through a small access hatch behind the left sponson. The air was thick and hot, coating Heit's tongue with the acrid tang of smoke and promethium. Everywhere he looked, uneven columns of ragged citizens passed, heads low and eyes sunken as they dragged themselves along. Mothers clutched babies, and men carried all that remained of their lives upon their backs. Astra Militarum soldiers stood at intervals, directing the diaspora to the network of subterranean tunnels that led deeper into the hive. Any who were of fighting age were pulled aside, barely given a moment for their families before a rifle was shoved into their hands and they were led away to join the ranks of the Glorious Defenders, the conscript battalions.

A muted shout turned Heit's head with a shock. He saw a woman crouched against a landslide of broken rockcrete spilling from a collapsed tenement. She fought off the attempts of an older man to pull her away as she clawed at the ruins, the rough dark fabric of her robes and shawl torn and caked with dust. Chunks of masonry rolled to either side of her before she stopped.

The woman sagged to her knees, her head falling against the mound. The man placed his hands on her shoulders. She threw her head back. She let loose a wail, so sharp and true in its despair that for a moment it cut through the noise of war engines and shouting crowds. For a moment, it eclipsed them all.

The man pulled her back and turned her away from the mound, and slowly they merged with the other refugees. The woman's face was impassive, as if she had released her very soul in her cry. Her hands were red. She had torn them to the bone to reach her son, whose twisted form lay broken and still in the rubble.

Heit was jarred from the sight by an elbow to his ribs.

'Come,' muttered Brydl, nodding towards a row of supply tents on the other side of the tanks.

Heit turned, sparing a look over his shoulder at the boy who lay dead in the rubble. The mound had shifted, burying him again. He was gone.

PART 2

The commanders of the other Leman Russ transports from Crown's platoon followed behind her, leaving their crews to refuel and requisition repairs for their tanks. Cadians all, they stood head and – in one hulking tanker's case – shoulders above the other Imperials fortifying the line.

One of the tankers passed a battered tin mug of caffeine to Crown. She nodded her thanks, bringing the mug to her nose.

'Throne, Jayne,' Crown winced. 'Did you brew this on the radiator?'

'*In* the radiator,' Jayne replied with a crooked grin.

Crown shrugged, and sipped the dark steaming liquid.

The officers were circled around a cluster of broad ammunition crates converted into a makeshift strategium. Junior officers and servitors tended to portable vox-casters, relaying communications across the sector. Maps of the city were strewn over the crates, annotated with arrows and circles of red grease-pencil to denote enemy movements and positions.

At the centre of the gathering was a major. His uniform was pressed and spotless, compared to the battered flak armour of the infantry and the frayed and grease-stained livery of the tankers.

'The cleaner the uniform,' mused another of the Leman Russ commanders from behind Crown, 'the less they do when the shells start falling.'

This was greeted by a low grumbling of agreement, though Crown remained silent as they reached the ersatz strategium.

'Lieutenant,' said the major as he looked up from the maps, 'these are the platoon leaders of the regiment?'

Crown looked over her shoulder at the five tank commanders behind her before turning back to the officer.

‘This is my platoon, sir.’

‘Platoon?’ The major frowned in confusion. ‘I was briefed that the whole of the forty-fourth regiment has been allocated to this sector.’

‘The Four-Four got put through the grinder,’ replied Crown, making the effort to keep an edge from her voice. ‘Whatever is left of it is here before you, sir.’

The major did not respond, smoothing down the front of his fatigues and repressing a sneer. He was young, and looked completely out of his element here. Crown wondered how many officers had needed to die in these first few days for him to have come into command.

‘Gather around,’ said the major, prompting the officers and tank commanders to crowd close to the maps.

‘Late last night, the invaders collapsed a section of the outer walls directly ahead of this position.’ He gestured to the map, where a portion of the hive city’s walls was darkened in red. ‘The defences on either side of us were neutralised in the fighting, though the walls are still in place.’

‘Funnelling them right into us,’ said an infantry captain, his carapace armour cracked and singed with las burns.

The major paused, thrown off his train of thought. Crown spied the unit designation on his lapel, and pinched the bridge of her nose. *Throne, a supply officer. He could have been commanding a laundry station for all we know.*

‘Our position here is provisional,’ the major continued after a moment. ‘Our most crucial defensive measure is the minefield between here and the outer walls.’ He indicated a thin strip of Xs inked into the map’s surface.

‘How do they mean to breach it?’ asked Crown. ‘Artillery? Cultists?’

‘Unknown,’ answered the major. ‘What little aerial recon we have left has identified tanks in the area, but not artillery. We believe that the majority of their batteries have been concentrated in the south, bombarding the spaceports.’

‘And our reinforcements,’ muttered the captain under his breath.

‘What about other reinforcements, sir?’ asked the commander of a Basilisk artillery tank. ‘Support from within the city?’

The major shook his head. ‘I have petitioned to central command but they have nothing to spare. Our forces are spread thin all across the hive – we cannot depend on anything but what we have right here.’

Scarlet light flickered over the map, drawing Crown’s eye to a signal flare arcing through the sky. Scouts had sighted enemy movement inbound. The lines leapt into action, sergeants bellowing orders as they marshalled their soldiers for the impending assault.

‘To battle stations!’ the major shouted, waving his arms to the hastily assembled earthworks. ‘Hold the line! The Emperor protects!’

‘Mount up,’ the commander of *Furor Imperator* breathed calmly. The assembled commanders set off to their positions.

‘Imperial Son.’

Crown halted, turning to see the Baneblade commander looking at her.

‘I’m deploying *Furor Imperator* on the left flank. Place your tanks on the right. If any of the bastards make it in we’ll catch them in a pincer.’

‘Whatever it is,’ said Crown, ‘we won’t be able to hold this ground if they cut through those mines with any kind of numbers.’

‘Well,’ the Baneblade’s commander sighed, scratching at a cut on his cheek. ‘I will have eleven barrels of hell waiting for them when they do.’

Heit wrung his hands, clutching them tightly to keep them from shaking. He started as Crown climbed down from the turret.

‘Easy there, angel.’ Crown grinned, giving Heit a soft kick. ‘Keep that bolter pointed out there.’

Heit’s face flushed purple. He took a deep breath, thick with lho smoke and engine fumes. He looked up, hearing a faint whistling pass high over the tank before Crown sealed the hatch over her head.

‘Artillery’s saying hello,’ said the commander.

Heit peered through his periscope. He could not make out anything in the distance. A haze of dirty smoke blurred the ground into an indistinct smudge, and the thin strip of slate grey between that and the swollen cloud cover offered nothing he could identify as friend or foe.

Soft tremors shook *Imperial Son* as the artillery barrage from behind the Leman Russ began to land. Pillars of dark earth geysered up in the distance, bridging the dark surface with the clouds for flickering moments like strings of drool between blackened teeth. Heit glimpsed the commanders of mortar teams shout orders to their gunners, who began to drop shells into firing tubes with percussive metallic clinks.

‘Mortars means they’re close,’ said Zevsin, her eye glued to the sight of the Vanquisher cannon. ‘Keep your eyes open.’

Heit looked up as he heard a high whistle, barely audible from within *Imperial Son*.

‘Rain,’ Lochna shouted, locking the hatch over his head. ‘Incoming!’

With a rolling crack, the ground around the Imperial lines exploded in a chain

of thunder. Man-sized tendrils of loose earth and flame shot up as shells dropped around the tanks. A mortar round detonated directly over the trench line in front of *Imperial Son*, sending a wall of razor-edged shrapnel lancing down into the soldiers below. Screams filled the air as the metal splinters tore through carapace armour and cut limbs from bodies.

A guardsman vaulted up from the smoke of the trench, his face a crimson mask as he sprinted for the rear. A commissar stood calmly, oblivious to the mortar fire, and took aim with his pistol. The brow of the guardsman's head burst open in a cloud of blood and brain matter, and he crashed unmoving to the ground.

'Those are their mortars,' said Jesh. 'They'll be coming now.'

Heit looked over his shoulder at Zevsin. The gunner pointed insistently to Heit's heavy bolter, then tapped two fingers against her own sight, not taking her eye from it as she scanned for the invaders. Heit pressed his face against the periscope, sweat streaming down to sting his eyes as he gazed into the occluded field in front of him. The cacophony of the bombardment slackened, thinning until the air was no longer filled with falling bombs.

'Steady,' warned Crown.

A dart of screaming light ripped past Heit's viewplate, clearing the tank by spare metres.

'Incoming!' barked Jesh. 'High-velocity gun!'

'Eyes, eyes!' said Crown. 'Get me a visual.'

'Armour!' Lochna exclaimed, squinting through his periscope. 'Forty-five degrees at eight hundred metres!'

Heit glimpsed a dark shape moving forward through the smoke. It matched the silhouette of a Hellhound tank, but with heavier armour plating and a mid-sized battle cannon bolted onto the turret in place of the promethium-spewing flamethrower of its namesake.

'I see him,' Crown answered. 'Load, AP! Zev, traverse right. Let's get in the fight.'

'Identified!' the gunner called back, twisting a control stick to rotate the turret to the right.

'AP, up!' hollered Brydl as he rammed the armour-piercing shell in place.

'God-Emperor,' Zevsin whispered, eye pressed to the gunsight. 'Guide the flight, watch the target, take the unworthy's life.'

'Gun,' ordered Crown. 'Fire!'

'Sending!' shouted Zevsin.

The Vanquisher cannon of *Imperial Son* roared with righteous thunder as the

tank bucked with the recoil. The gun's breech block bounced back, spitting the spent shell casing to the deck.

'Hit!' Crown exclaimed with a feral grin. Smoke billowed from the target as it ground to a halt.

'Load, high-ex. Gun, repeat, break that bastard open.'

'First we crack the shell,' Zevsin murmured as the high-explosive round clunked into the breech. 'Then we crack the nuts inside.'

'Up!' called Brydl.

'Fire!'

'Sending!'

Imperial Son rocked back as the gun fired again. Heit watched through his gunsight as the high-explosive round struck the compromised armour of the enemy tank. The vehicle's hull twisted open like a bursting flower as it exploded from the inside. Flames rolled up into the sky, wreathed in greasy smoke as the iron husk spat shrapnel in all directions.

'Tank destroyed,' Zevsin grinned as Crown rapped a fist against her back. Heit released a breath he did not realise he had been holding.

'More where he came from,' warned Crown, fingers tapping at her auspex display. 'Keep sharp.'

Hakaron watched impassively as his forces died at the end of Imperial guns. He had sent the light tanks in – looted Astra Militarum vehicles with mortal crews – to probe and flush out the positions of the defenders. As they shattered and burned within sight of the enemy's minefield, Hakaron now knew that his foe had tanks and mobile artillery, but not in significant numbers. His pulse flickered for a moment when he heard the telltale roar of a Baneblade's main cannon.

Burkath and his two brothers heard it too, and Hakaron looked down from the cupola as they strained against their leashes fixed to the outer hull of *The Hunger*. The dense chains creaked with their attempts to pull away.

'Soon, kindred,' said Hakaron. Knowing what was arrayed against him, he would not send his own kin in to clear the mines. Turning back to the mewling horde behind him, he voxed to his brothers tending them.

'Forward,' said the traitor Space Marine, the word having barely left his lips before he heard the roar of revving chainblades and the screams of mortal weaklings.

'Let them clear a path of blood for us.'

Heit heard the screams just as the first of them emerged from the smoke. A tide

of filthy humanity surged forth. He could see the torn and dirty remnants of Astra Militarum uniforms, from armies defending Regallus. Other figures were in civilian garb, marked with badges and sashes of the planet's organised militia units. They were flailing their arms in terror, not holding any weapons. Bulky shapes were lashed and chained to their bodies.

‘Explosive charges,’ Crown called out. ‘They’re herding them into the mines.’

Heit looked over his shoulder as the commander took hold of the control stick for *Imperial Son*'s hull-mounted lascannon. Crown pushed a quick breath between her teeth and triggered the firing rune.

A beam of dark purple with a blinding silver core slashed out from the tank. A swathe of the screaming mass disappeared. Several of the explosives they had been chained to detonated, killing dozens in the tightly packed crowd. The infantry in the trenches added to the fusillade, sending out a flickering wall of las and autogun fire. The other Leman Russ tanks also opened fire upon the charging mob, blasting men and women apart with streams of mass-reactive shells from their heavy bolters.

‘Sponson, you’re up!’ Crown barked. ‘Three hundred degrees, spray ’em before they take out those mines.’

Heit hauled the heavy bolter forward in the direction of the minefield. He levelled his gun upon the pitiful charge materialising from the smoke, and their uniforms made him hesitate.

‘Those,’ Heit stammered, looking up at Crown. ‘Those are our uniforms!’

‘I don’t give a damn if it’s a High Lord of Terra,’ growled Crown, leaning down to throw her boot in Heit’s back. ‘Hit them!’

‘But they’re friendlies!’ Heit spat, gritting his teeth at Crown’s kick.

‘They surrendered and are cowards,’ hissed Zevsin. ‘Or they allowed themselves to be captured, chained to bombs and thrown back at our lines. Either way they’re not friendlies.’

Heit looked back to the scope. He could see the hulking forms of Chaos Space Marines behind the prisoners. Blood arced from screaming chain weapons as they butchered the unfortunates trapped in the rear, throwing the rest forward in a desperate flight from them. His finger trembled over the heavy bolter’s trigger.

‘Fire that cursed weapon! Now!’ Crown kicked Heit again, hard. His face smashed into the periscope, cutting a gash over his right eye. He doubled over, hands clutching at his face.

‘Damn!’ Crown snarled. ‘Whiteshield!’

‘Aye!’ replied Jesh.

‘Get in the fight. Lochna, spin us around.’

‘Roger, Crown!’

Imperial Son lurched as it turned, bringing its right flank to bear at an angle.

‘Firing,’ cried Jesh, pressing tight to the heavy bolter as she fired in disciplined bursts. Prisoners came apart in a red mist of blood and spinning limbs. Their viscera sprayed those frenzied souls who rushed in their wake, compelled to animalistic panic to escape the butchering Chaos Space Marines behind them.

A deafening boom erupted when the first prisoner struck a mine. The artillery shell chained to her chest exploded a moment later, throwing bodies and shrapnel in all directions. Falling corpses and pieces of corpses struck other landmines, creating a rippling chain of devastating explosions. In moments an entire corridor had been blown open through the minefield.

The enemy pressed their advantage. Tanks and Chaos Space Marines began to pour into the opening, firing as they advanced. The twisted form of a Chaos Predator battle tank rumbled into the gap, fire streaming from its turret-mounted autocannon. Imperial troops were shredded by high-calibre shells as it fired along the trenchlines, while Chaos Space Marines and cultists surged around it to plunge into the melee.

With a blinding flash, the Predator vanished in a ball of flame. *Furor Imperator*, smoke curling from its main gun, rumbled forward, unleashing a fusillade from its manifold weapons batteries into the charging invaders. Shots snapped out from its lascannons, spearing tanks and troop carriers while its heavy bolters and autocannon reduced infantry to ragged mounds of twitching pulp.

With a thunderous drumbeat of massive stomping feet, a trio of brutish figures emerged at the head of the Chaos army. Trailing the snapped remnants of broken chains rattling behind them, the beasts let loose an ululating howl of mechanical anger. They smashed packs of screaming cultists aside, heedless of their allies as they hurled themselves into battle.

‘Helbrute!’ Zevsin barked. ‘Three contacts!’

The Helbrutes roared in mindless rage as they charged through a storm of las and bolter fire. Even the heavy mass-reactive shells glanced and bounced from their dense, semi-organic armour. They moved impossibly fast for creatures of their bulk, preventing the heavy guns of the Imperial tanks from tracking them.

‘All tanks,’ Crown hissed into the vox. ‘Open fire, all weapons!’

Imperial Son bucked sharply, and a warning klaxon blared within the cabin.

‘High-velocity round,’ hissed Crown. ‘Just a ricochet. Find it!’

‘Contact identified!’ called out Zevsin, spotting an enemy tank strafing from the

right, smoke still trailing from its barrel.

‘Hit it, fire at will!’

‘Sending!’

Heit felt a sting at his ribs. He looked down, seeing the tip of a short blade pressed against them, and looked behind him.

‘Fire the weapon,’ growled Brydl, pushing the knife a touch deeper with his bionic hand, ‘or you die here and now.’

Heit swallowed, and took hold of the heavy bolter. Pressing his face to the periscope, he sighted a mob of cultists advancing towards the Imperial trenches. He sucked in three rapid breaths, and pulled the trigger.

Recoil impacts punched against Heit’s shoulder as the heavy bolter fired. He gritted his teeth against the deep pain blooming across his chest. Grunting with exertion, he dragged the stream of fire across the target.

Cultists flew apart as the mass-reactive rounds tore into flesh. Those that did not pass through detonated within torsos and heads in blasts of gore. Ragged hunks of bleeding meat slapped against their comrades before they too were scythed down by the fusillade.

‘Short bursts!’ Jesh shouted over the din of weapons fire. Her face was obscured in a flash of steel as the main cannon’s breech block swung back. ‘Count the rounds – don’t waste ammo!’

The ranks of advancing Chaos suddenly parted, like a school of fish making space for the passage of a hulking oceanic predator. A massive shape broke through the smoke and flames. Its sloped hull was the colour of clotted blood, festooned with twisted spikes of horn and black iron. Gaping lamprey mouths twitched and sucked across its oily armour, and the bloodshot orbs of dozens of sapphire eyes stared unblinking at the carnage that surrounded it. Immense iron tracks ground corpses into ruin as the beast surged forward.

Energy beams slashed out from twin-linked lascannons mounted on its flanks. A Cadian Leman Russ exploded, its turret sent spinning into the air to come crashing down on a mortar team in a burst of secondary detonations. The throaty boom of the enemy tank’s heavy bolters rang out, cleaving through Imperial infantry and cultists alike.

‘Priority target!’ Zevsin cursed. ‘Throne, it’s a Land Raider.’

Crown adjusted her periscope to centre over the emerging monstrosity. She had seen a Land Raider in action before. During the intense campaign of Sepris Prime, the Cadian 44th had been seconded to a strikeforce of the Adeptus

Astartes Genesis Chapter. The Space Marines had used one of the gargantuan tanks at the spear-tip of a combined assault against a greenskin stronghold. The Land Raider had been responsible for more than sixty per cent of the xenos killed in the battle, peerless upon the field.

Facing such a foe was not something Crown had anticipated on Regallus.

The Chaos Land Raider fired again, reducing another Leman Russ to a shattered husk of molten iron. Imperial infantry began to break, fleeing from the crushing advance of the Crimson Slaughter. Commissars roared themselves hoarse, executing retreating soldiers until they themselves were cut apart by the invaders' fire.

'Imperial Son.' Crown heard Jayne's voice through the interference of the vox. *'We just lost the Dawn's Hammer. We need to displace so we can draw down on that beast from a distance.'*

'Negative,' Crown shot back. 'We pull back now and this whole line collapses. All tanks, concentrate fire on the Land Raider!'

The four remaining Leman Russes locked their battle cannons onto the enemy tank.

'Fire now!'

The three other Leman Russ transports were of the standard chassis, lacking *Imperial Son's* long-barrelled Vanquisher cannon and armed instead with a shorter battle cannon on their main turrets. Dust and smoke shook off their hulls as they fired, hurling one hundred twenty-millimetre high-explosive shells at the Chaos tank. One shell ricocheted from the sloped armour of its frontal glacis, striking off at an angle behind the target. The other two rounds struck directly but bounced off its dense shell, leaving nothing but circular patches of abraded, oozing skin.

'Load, get me an AP now!' ordered Crown.

Brydl hurriedly rammed a shell into *Imperial Son's* breech.

'AP up!'

'Holy Emperor,' whispered Zevsin as she gingerly shifted the position of *Imperial Son's* cannon. 'Reward my faith, and smite the target.'

'Hit it, Zev,' shouted Crown. 'Fire now!'

'Sending!'

Imperial Son kicked. Thick blooms of black smoke erupted across the Land Raider's hull as the armour-piercing shell struck. After a moment, the prow of the massive war machine breached the blackened pall. The track assembly of the Chaos tank was damaged, yet it still ground forward with a fountain of blood

and sparks. They had slowed the beast, but had not stopped it.

A las-beam struck a glancing blow on *Imperial Son's* turret. The cabin filled with the reek of ozone and smoke.

'*Furor Imperator,*' Crown voxed. 'We need your fire on the Land Raider. Do you acknowledge? *Furor Imperator?*... No,' Crown breathed, clutching at the periscope. 'Throne, no.'

Furor Imperator was on fire. The trio of Helbrutes had climbed atop the Baneblade's roof, hammering its hull to splinters with spiked fists and siege hammers while blasting down with plasma cannons and multi-meltas. Orange fountains of liquefied armour sprayed out as the monstrosities fired again and again. Screaming crew members were hauled thrashing from within the massive tank, flung away by the Helbrutes or dashed to a paste of blood and bone against the armour plating.

A blast from a multi-melta struck *Furor Imperator's* fuel cells, sending a deep crump tearing out from within the Baneblade as it began to burn from the inside. Whatever crew had not been killed by the Helbrutes scrambled clear of the dying tank, and were quickly surrounded and butchered by Chaos Space Marines and cultists. The fiends howled in savage glee, lifting the crudely severed head of the Baneblade's commander for all to see.

Crown cursed, slamming her fist against the turret as she snatched the vox horn. 'All tanks, *Imperial Son*. Full reverse, tactical displacement.'

'*Where?*' came a voice over the vox, so distorted by static Crown could not identify the speaker.

'Just not here!' she snapped. 'Follow me out, and keep your chests facing that monster. Nobody's taking a shot to the back here. Lochna, full reverse!'

'Aye, Crown!' the driver called back through gritted teeth, as solid and las-shots smashed off the tank's hull.

'Load.' Crown looked down at Brydl. 'Smoke. Gun, let's give them something to choke on.'

'Smoke up!' answered the loader.

'Fire!'

'Sending!' Zevsin fired, launching a shell a few metres short of the Land Raider. A ball of caustic white mist exploded out from the impact crater, spreading to shroud the Chaos vehicle from view.

Crown punched a series of commands into her vox console, cupping her headset as the channel opened.

'Eagle one seven, eagle one seven acknowledge.'

'Eagle one seven acknowledges,' came the distorted reply.

'Fire mission,' Crown barked over the crash of solid shot striking the hull. She punched a series of numbers into the console. *'Fire mission to these coordinates, send now!'*

Crown fired the lascannon at an advancing troop carrier. The vehicle slewed to the left as its flank melted to slag. Tiny figures leapt from the vehicle as its fuel cooked off, thrashing as they burned.

'Say again,' the artillery commander voxed. *'Cannot... you must... your position?'*

The link went dead. Crown cursed, throwing open the turret hatch. She stood in the cupola, peering to the rear, where the handful of Basilisk tanks were deployed for fire support. Their lines were overrun, and a death by artillery barrage was far preferable for the infantry on the ground than whatever rituals the invaders had planned for prisoners.

'Eagle one seven, acknowledge!'

Crown ducked as a huge crimson blur screamed low overhead. It was a massive gunship of brutal avian design. Crown had seen its like before, and had witnessed the devastation such craft were capable of, and that of the ones they carried roaring into battle.

Thunderhawk.

'Eagle one seven, you have inbound!'

The Thunderhawk slowed. Crown glimpsed thin contrails as it launched ordnance down upon the city. Explosions tore up beneath it, as the dark shapes of traitor Space Marines leapt from either side of it. Tiny pinpricks of light slowed their descent as they hurtled down for the kill.

The Basilisks were gone. Crown spared another moment to watch the flames, jarred into action as a burst of autorifle fire ricocheted from the cupola. She ducked back within *Imperial Son*, hauling the hatch shut over her head.

'All right, let's go, let's go, get us out,' said Crown, squeezing off precision blasts from the lascannon into the hordes of cultists massacring the Imperial fortifications. Zevsin fired another smoke round into the densest concentration of the enemy as Lochna sent *Imperial Son* roaring in reverse.

Disparate bands of invaders pursued the tanks a short distance. Comprised of cultists lacking heavy weapons or support from the Chaos Space Marines, they were either cut down by heavy bolter fire or elected to withdraw back to their comrades and indulge in the slaughter. After the enemy had lost sight of them completely, the three remaining Leman Russ tanks of the Cadian 44th Armoured

halted, turned and quickly vanished into the city streets.

The crew of *Imperial Son* climbed aboard the roof of the tank, looking down in silence as Crown threw Heit into the street. The two other Leman Russes that had survived the battle at the minefield, *Morningstar* and *Butcher's Block*, had aligned themselves a short distance away, holding a perimeter watch for enemies. Their commanders watched from their turrets as the leader of *Imperial Son* meted out her own justice.

Crown hurled Heit to the ground and threw a kick into his gut to keep him there. In a moment her bolt pistol was clear of its holster, its barrel levelled at the airman's head.

'Give me a reason not to,' hissed the tanker.

'They,' Heit wheezed, rolling to his knees. 'They were Imperial citizens.'

'And look what those Imperial citizens did,' snarled Crown. 'Did you think your cowardice was merciful? Did the men and women who died holding the line think that?'

Crown kicked Heit again, her boot cracking against his temple. 'Mercy did not haul you out of those streets. Mercy isn't out here! What's out here is them.' She pointed sharply at the horizon as it burned. 'And me. I pulled you out because you might have been of use to me. You're dead out there if you're lucky, and a whole lot worse if you're not.'

Crown seized Heit by the collar. 'You do what I say or I will cut you loose and leave you here to them. They're here! I can hear 'em, you can hear 'em, and they will skin you alive out here without us, you understand? You're dead without me!'

'There's no sense to this,' choked Heit. 'No honour, no right and wrong.'

'Not a single thing about this is right,' said Crown. 'This isn't about right and wrong. This is about war, and following orders. From here on, you do what I say, when I say it. When I tell you to spray them, you fire. You kill your mother, your father if I tell you to. You'll do that, or Throne help me, if you put my crew at risk again I will leave you here, and the things waiting out there will rip your flesh off and worse before the sky grows cold.'

'Those weren't soldiers,' Heit shouted back. 'They were militia. They didn't even have uniforms. They were practically civilians!'

Crown's eyes narrowed. 'What is a civilian? Let me tell you something – out here there's no such thing. There's only two types of people here, those on the walls killing the enemy, and the dead. Which one are you?'

Heit stared at the barrel of the bolt pistol.

‘Which one are you?’ roared Crown.

Heit swallowed, and met Crown’s glare. ‘I’m on the walls.’

‘Then convince me.’ She shoved the barrel against Heit’s temple before pulling it back. Crown leaned down, her face an inch from Heit’s. ‘Down here the dead are staring you in the face. Get used to having to look at them.’

The horizon rumbled with chains of detonations clawing their way closer to *Imperial Son*. Crown lingered for a moment, before letting the bolt pistol drop a fraction.

‘Here,’ she said, racking the pistol’s slide, catching the bolt shell that ejected from the weapons chamber and tossing it to Heit.

‘You put my crew at risk again, and by the Throne, I will bleed you, and leave you here.’ She did not wait for a reply, turning to climb back aboard her tank. Heit stared at the bolt shell, and the threat it represented. He looked up at the pairs of bright violet eyes staring down at him, and pushed himself to his feet.

The howl of the mortals as they died was like a soothing balm to Hakaron’s fractured psyche. Screams of agony washed over him as men and women were ripped apart and disembowelled. He heard their frantic entreaties to a carrion god who was either uncaring of their cries or powerless to come to their aid. For the briefest of moments, it assuaged the relentless press of the whispers.

For the briefest of moments, he came as close as he ever would to serenity.

Hakaron reached down, lifting up a man who lay dazed at his feet. The slightest tightening of his fist around the mortal’s windpipe flooded the creature with the adrenaline necessary to feel every modicum of what was soon to happen to him.

‘You must witness this,’ whispered Hakaron. His tone was almost conspiratorially intimate as he hauled the thrashing mortal closer, the snarling death mask encasing his skull making the words a wet, mechanical rasp.

The man choked, leaving lines of fresh blood on Hakaron’s gauntlets as he feebly clawed his hands into ruin in a misbegotten hope of escape. It was in vain, Hakaron knew. All of this had been.

The traitor Space Marine’s eyes flicked over the rank insignia of the man. As the officer of the highest rank in the enemy camp, his suffering belonged to him. The sight of his moniker sent a spasm of amusement along the corner of Hakaron’s mouth. A major. Truly, the damnation of mankind’s diseased kingdom was nigh.

With slow, almost tender care, Hakaron pushed the man onto a spike of

blackened horn protruding from *The Hunger*'s hull. He writhed in convulsions as he was impaled. Hakaron never took his eyes from him.

The horn's tip breached the Imperial officer's breastbone with gentle atrocity, anointed with his lifeblood. Blood, thick and dark like sticky wine, flecked and spilled from his mouth.

'Your lungs are filling,' mused Hakaron, tilting his head as he watched the mortal enter his death throes. 'No air to breathe, only blood. And even that will soon be taken.'

The traitor leaned closer, cupping the major's chin in his gauntlet to force his frantic eyes to look into his own.

'No, no,' he whispered, tightening his grip as the major's eyes began to wax. 'You must remain here for just a moment longer.'

Hakaron's head tilted again. 'Can you hear them?'

The man's eyes bulged in terror. His short, panicked breaths began to mist in front of him, pushed past blue lips riming with hoarfrost.

'Yes,' Hakaron breathed. 'You can hear them. The things waiting for you on the other side. So many are awaiting you. The barrier between is so thin now – do you hear them strain against it, as they howl for your soul?'

The mortal gagged, sending more blood foaming down his chin. Where his blood slathered onto the horn it trembled, shrinking into its hardened surface as the daemon within *The Hunger* began to drink.

'Know that there is no salvation waiting for you,' said Hakaron gently, as the last light drained from the mortal's eyes. 'There is only torment, ceaseless and infinite. Yet you may take comfort in the knowledge that soon, very soon, I will send every mortal soul on this world to join you upon the daemons' feasting grounds.'

In his last moments, the major's eyes grew milky with cataracts. The trail of blood streaming from his mouth paused, then began to flow back up his face.

Hakaron watched the man die. With the same gentle cruelty, the Crimson Slaughter warrior lowered the human's head, allowing it to hang over his chest. His icy flesh was already pale, drawn and wrinkled as *The Hunger* supped upon his blood. Soon there would be nothing left of the body but a desiccated husk adorning the Land Raider's hull. The wounds to its track assembly began to quiver and reknit, their healing fuelled by the scarlet libation of mortal life.

Hakaron closed his eyes. Like a candle's tiny flame guttering within a tempest, he experienced a moment's peace before the tendrils of haunted thought bloomed anew behind his eyes. He looked out again upon the remnants of the

battlefield. His warriors approached, bearing the limp form of another officer, an infantry captain in battered carapace armour.

‘Bring him here,’ said Hakaron. ‘My machine must feed.’

Imperial Son was silent as Crown departed to converse with the other two commanders. Heit lowered himself back into his sponson, trying to avoid the contemptuous stares from the Cadians around him. There was no pity in their violet eyes, no sympathy. Just a cold, disgusted lack of understanding, like he was an altogether different species to them. To those born of the Gate, raised from birth to stand sentinel between the Imperium of Man and the Eye, he was utterly alien.

‘The man who held that seat once broke an entire infantry charge single-handed,’ said Zevsin, her eyes low as she made adjustments to the gun sight of the Vanquisher cannon. ‘Ran through his ammo and fought on foot with nothing but a standard-issue lasrifle and an armful of grenades.’

‘We held the line together at Kasr Wynich,’ said Lochna, tendrils of lho smoke curling up between his words. ‘Even with everything burning around us, the bastard could always make me laugh.’

‘He taught me everything I know,’ said Jesh. ‘Would have been dead a dozen times over were it not for him.’

‘He was,’ muttered Brydl, ‘a devout man.’

Heit looked down at the bolt shell. He released a breath, turning to face the centre of the tank.

‘I am sorry.’

‘Sorry?’ scoffed Lochna. ‘Can’t eat an apology.’

‘Can’t wrap it around this hull to stop a shell,’ said Jesh.

‘Can’t load it into this gun to kill the enemy,’ continued Zevsin. ‘That makes it worthless out here.’

The turret hatch swung open with a deep clunk. Crown peered into *Imperial Son*, finding herself staring down the barrels of a trio of autopistols aimed steadily by Zevsin, Brydl and Jesh.

‘Very good,’ said Crown as she lowered herself into the command seat.

‘What’s the verdict, Crown?’ asked Zevsin, looking up over her shoulder.

‘Losing the minefield cut us off from our defence network,’ replied Crown. ‘With the gap in our lines overrun, the enemy kept pushing forward, and they are now between us and the central spires. As of now, we are on our own. No fuel, no resupply.’

The crew was silent, with only the low growl of *Imperial Son*'s idling engines rattling up into the cabin.

'Consensus with *Morningstar* and *Butcher's Block* was, per doctrine, we could either stay put and hope the vox clears enough to signal command, or skirt around the edge of the city until we reach our lines or make contact with a friendly unit. Neither of those sat well with us – too much enemy in the vicinity for the first, not enough fuel for the second.'

All eyes were on Crown as she leaned down from the turret. 'That Chaos beast that hit us, that Land Raider, has Cadian blood on it. It's moving forward to add more to its tally and I can't let that bide, not while we can fight. I am tired of holding, sitting around to give them the initiative and then defending. I want to attack. I want to hunt. That steel daemon is out there, and I intend to go into this city to find it and kill it.'

Crown looked to her crew. Heit saw the steely determination and nods from each of them. They knew where they stood. It seemed to Heit as if this were a course that they would have demanded they embark upon had Crown not already decided on it.

'Will they not be looking for us?'

The tankers turned to regard Heit. He saw Crown's eyes fall on the bolt shell he was holding.

'Not after the line broke,' Crown answered evenly. 'Whatever made it out scattered to the wind and command will be too busy organising the defence to worry about a few tanks.'

Heit opened his mouth to reply, but hesitated.

'How many did they send to look for you?' asked Zevsin, turning back to the gunsight.

Heit looked at each of the tankers, then turned back to his gun. His fingers closed over the bolt shell.

'Right.' Crown sat back in the command seat, cycling through auspex feeds. 'For Throne and home, let's go earn our keep.'

It had not taken long to find the steel daemon's path. The Archenemy had left a trail of annihilation in their wake. Entire sections of the city were flattened. Those few buildings still standing along the enemy's path were little more than burning walls propped up by rubble, their blackened forms reaching for the sky like broken teeth. The sky held no succour, itself a mirror of the churning morass of red flame and black smoke that was the surface. Dirty rain poured from the

tortured firmament, slashing down upon the desolation.

Blood covered every surface. It gathered in shell craters and the webs of cracks branching through the fractured rockcrete streets, filling the air with a heavy coppery reek. A reminder that millions of lives had dwelt within this city, now populated only by the dead and those soon to be.

Mounds of Imperial corpses were heaped behind makeshift barricades. Their twisted forms were entwined with the dead cultists they had killed and been killed by in hand-to-hand fighting, their bayonets and daggers still sunk into one another. Desecrated bodies were impaled upon walls or hung from lumen posts, defiled with blasphemous runes carved into their pale flesh. The same ruinous graffiti covered the roadway, while fires burned in impossible colours from dark iron shrines, immune to the torrential rain.

It tore at Crown not to obliterate the shrines with cannon fire. Rationing their remaining ammunition meant they had left many standing. Whenever possible, she ordered Lochna to put the debased altars beneath *Imperial Son*'s treads. The crew soon grew inured to the snap and low tremors rippling up from the deck as the tank crushed corpses beneath them.

The roadway was pitted and cracked, ground down by the weight of many tracked heavy vehicles moving along it at speed. *Imperial Son* could never have been called a gentle ride, but navigating the savaged avenues was as turbulent as moving off road.

The tanks rumbled to a stop as the blackened husk of a Chimera blocked the roadway ahead of them. At several points, the three Leman Russ vehicles had been forced to halt fully, throw out their winches and haul the road clear of burned-out tanks and armoured troop carriers obstructing the way.

'Brydl,' said Crown, as she had said time and again before, 'take the choir boy and get the winch on that Chimera.'

Crown unlocked and swung the top hatch open. Brydl and Heit climbed out from a side hatch behind the sponson, walking along the side of the tank once again towards the tow cable spooled at its prow. Crown stepped up into the cupola, panning the tank's pintle-mounted storm bolter across the street.

Within moments, Heit's uniform was soaked through. His arms burned as he and Brydl decoupled the winch hook from the hull and dragged it forward. He had done the same six times before, hauling aside wrecks to clear a path through these Throne-cursed streets. The Cadian loader seemed unaffected by the exertion, hauling the thick steel cable along with his bionic arms.

Brydl locked the winch onto the rear of the Chimera, careful to avoid attaching it to a weakened section of the vehicle that would simply tear away when they dragged it clear. The loader looked in through a puncture in the hull of the troop transport. Heit joined him, peering inside.

Bodies filled the troop compartment, wearing the colours of the Regallan defence regiments. Their flak armour was riddled with shrapnel and las burns, but not charred and blackened by fire. A pair of waxy eyes stared back at Heit from the face of a dead trooper, slumped atop one of his fallen comrades.

‘What do we have?’ asked Crown.

‘Everyone inside is dead,’ answered Brydl. ‘Might have been an anti-personnel round.’

Brydl looked into another breach of the Chimera’s hull briefly, before turning back to *Imperial Son*.

‘Looks like the engines and fuel cells did not cook off,’ murmured the loader. He looked up at Crown. ‘Might be some promethium we can siphon.’

Crown did not reply for a moment, deep in thought. Her eyes flicked over the streets.

‘Do it. Have a look but be quick. Enemy left traps all over this city and this has all the hallmarks of one.’

Heit and Brydl stepped to either side of the rear assault ramp of the Chimera. Brydl checked the clip in his autopistol, while Heit drew the laspistol from his hip. Brydl nodded once to Heit, and the airman hit the exterior release control.

The ramp came down with a squeal of protesting metal, falling until it locked in place at waist height. Brydl inspected it for a moment, before placing one boot upon it and stepping down hard to lower the ramp to the street.

The myriad smells of recently dead flesh succumbing to rot rolled out from the troop compartment. Even though the air was already filled with ash, smoke and spilled blood, it still made Heit’s eyes water. He blinked rapidly, breathing through his mouth as they stooped to enter.

The compartment was cramped, lined with bench seats on both sides facing inwards towards a narrow aisle. There were ten corpses in the hold. One was sprawled across the bench on Heit’s left, his head propped up by a splinter of iron the length of a man’s forearm pinning him through his eye and into the seat. The rest were heaped atop one another in the aisle, almost as though they were huddling together for warmth. The fires in the street offered intermittent light into the compartment, throwing shadows that changed with each roll of the flames.

Brydl squatted in front of a panel on the wall.

‘Hey,’ he called. Heit hurried over.

‘Put a shot through each of their heads.’ Brydl hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

‘But...’ Heit frowned. ‘They’re dead.’

‘And you are not a medicae,’ replied Brydl, his consistently low tone deepening to lend finality to the words. ‘Through the head, while I access the fuel tanks.’

Heit stood, looking down at the bodies slumped over each other in the aisle of the crew bay. *These men died in defence of their world,* thought Heit. *In defence of the Imperium.* He raised his laspistol.

Now this is their fate. Dead, unremembered, their bodies defiled by our paranoia.

He aimed at the first of the bodies.

Is this all that is waiting for them? he wondered.

Is this all there is for me?

A sharp crack rang through the crew bay as Heit fired. A thin claret beam punched into a dead man’s skull. The corpse twitched as the beam struck it, as if it had been kicked.

Heit began to aim for the next when one of the bodies rose. It leapt forward, wrapping its arms around Heit and tackling him out of the Chimera and into the street.

Crown snarled from the turret, bringing the storm bolter around. A waspish buzzing filled her ears, and she ducked low behind the weapon. A barrage of las and autorifle fire smashed against *Imperial Son*. The Cadian tanker cursed as a bullet sliced across her shoulder.

Small metal cylinders clattered into the street around the tanks. A handful bounced onto the roof of *Imperial Son*. Crown dropped into the turret, hauling the hatch closed.

‘Brace!’ she hissed.

Imperial Son bucked as the munitions detonated across the tank’s hull. The crew pressed their eyes to their periscopes, searching for any sign of the ambushers through the smoke.

‘Do you see them?’ Crown called out into her vox-bead. The replies from the other tanks filtered back, their reports mired by static and the hammer blows against the hull.

The cultist rolled atop Heit, seizing the airman’s wrist and the laspistol he was

holding. Stars exploded across Heit's vision as an elbow cracked against the side of his jaw. The cultist bared teeth engraved with blasphemous runes, hissing in a language that sent blurred shadows fluttering over Heit's eyes.

Heit struggled, his teeth clenched as he fought to wrest his laspistol from the cultist. Rage reddened his face, and with a sharp cry of anger he smashed his head into the cultist's nose. The headbutt threw the man back for a moment, loosening his grip on the laspistol. Heit grabbed the weapon and shoved the barrel between the invader's teeth. The cultist's eyes widened as Heit pulled the trigger.

For a moment, the man's head glowed a pale red as the las-beam carved through it. Fragments of skull and gobbets of sizzling blood sprayed onto the wall as the Chaos soldier's skull tore open. He dropped to the street with a thud, dragging Heit's arm down with him. Heit put a boot in the cultist's chest, kicking him away and shaking scraps of cooked flesh from the laspistol.

Las-beams slashed over the street, and Heit scrambled against the side of the Chimera for cover. The lashing rain had flattened much of the smoke to the height of his shin, revealing squads of heavily armed Chaos troopers pouring into the street. Teams of soldiers bearing heavy missile launchers hunched behind them, kneeling down to take aim at the tanks.

Thick beams of scarlet energy lanced down from windows of the hab blocks on either side of the street. The sound caught Heit's attention. It was unlike a normal lasgun, the difference between the crack of a thin branch and that of a tree limb. Each shot was precise and accurately aimed, unlike the wild firing of the Chaos soldiers.

The cultists screamed as they were immolated. With no cover in the street, they were quickly cut down by the elevated shooters and the Leman Russ transports as they brought their heavy bolters to bear. Heit leaned out from his cover, snapping off a handful of shots, before sprinting back to the troop hold of the Chimera.

Framed in the rear hatchway, Heit saw the kneeling form of Brydl, the loader's back turned to him. Blood caked his arms to the elbows, and he bled from half a dozen cuts across his torso and back. The bodies that had been in the hold were pulverised, skulls crushed by blunt-force trauma. Many of them still clutched hooked daggers in red-stained fists.

Brydl looked over his shoulder at Heit, his barrel chest rising and falling with each heavy breath.

'That is why we shoot them in the head,' said the loader, stooping to collect his

autopistol from the deck.

Heit turned his head. The firing had stopped. He and Brydl stepped carefully from the Chimera, pistols raised as the smoke of the firefight began to clear.

A group of figures approached, stepping out from the smoke. They wore heavily modified carapace armour and fully enclosed helms. Each of them cradled a hellgun across their chests, thick power cabling linking from the weapons to the thrumming power packs on their backs. Rain fizzed as it struck the generators, pattering softly as the downpour began to abate.

‘Ave Imperator,’ said the lead soldier, bearing a sergeant’s markings on his arm, as he stepped forward from his squad. Reaching up, he pulled his helmet free with a hiss of air pressure, revealing a scarred visage and dark sunbaked skin.

‘They have been setting up that ambush since first light,’ said the sergeant, nudging one of the corpses with his boot. ‘Lucky for you we were already setting up the ambush for them.’

The top hatch of *Imperial Son* swung open as Crown emerged from the turret. The sergeant looked up at the tank commander.

‘Sergeant Gavron, Regallan Tempestus Scions.’

‘Lieutenant Knispel, Cadian Forty-Fourth Armoured,’ Crown replied. ‘Appreciate the assistance.’

Gavron shrugged. He looked back over his shoulder, nodding to his men and gesturing to the dead cultists. The Tempestus soldiers moved forward. They turned the bodies over, rifling through their webbing and checking for insignia.

‘*Mazil odon*,’ said one of the storm troopers, waving his comrades closer.

Crown squinted at their gathering.

‘Got one.’ Gavron grinned, and walked over to his men. He waved Crown forward. The Cadian checked her bolt pistol and climbed down from the tank, walking over to where the Tempestus Scions had congregated.

‘There is *zuyevri*, a superstition here,’ said Gavron. ‘From old folklore on this world, since before the God-Emperor brought it back into the fold. When a man dies, his body is visited by the shades of his ancestors.’

The sergeant crouched next to the body as one of his troops pulled it aside from the others. He frowned. ‘Shades, yes? *Pryvdenya*, spirits? Gothic is not our tongue.’

‘Ghosts,’ said Crown.

The Tempestus Scion shrugged again, and continued.

‘The *pryvdenya* appeared before you, in the time before the spirit broke from

body, and they looked through your eyes.’ He pulled a combat blade strapped to his shin from its sheath, testing its tip against a gloved finger. He tapped the blade against his temple.

‘They saw the life you led, every act you ever did, through your own eyes. They made judgement on the life you chose to live. If you were virtuous, you were taken in by them in the afterlife.’

The sergeant hooked the tip of the blade into the skull of the corpse, digging the eyes out with a wet scrape of steel against bone.

‘Of course, if the man’s eyes are taken, the one who holds them has dominion over his shade. If they are destroyed, he is condemned to wander the desert between this life and the next, forever bearing the pain of his last moment.’

Crown stared down at the smiling man.

‘An amusing relic of a more primitive time, yes?’ Gavron pulled the corpse’s eyes free, sawing through the connective tissue anchoring them to the skull with his knife. ‘So, when we find any of our own who turned traitor to join the ones who set our world aflame, we take their eyes.’

He pointed the blade towards one of his soldiers. ‘Pog likes to keep them, thinks it’s worse to own their souls, rather than banish them.’

The soldier smiled, cradling a modified long-las hellgun in one hand as he reached into his webbing. He produced a glass flask that brimmed with the unblinking stare of a dozen eyes.

‘Me, however...’ Gavron looked down at the pair he held in his hand. ‘I like destroying them. No end, no respite.’

Gavron placed the eyes beneath his boot, and slowly pressed down. Bloodshot jelly popped out from beneath the storm trooper’s tread.

‘No peace for traitors, even in death.’

Gavron calmly rose to stand over the corpse. His face screwed up in a hateful grimace as he stomped down upon its skull. He drove his boot down again and again, until the corpse’s head collapsed into a flattened bag of broken bone and meat. Calm reasserted itself quickly over his features as he turned his dark eyes back to Crown.

‘It surprises me, seeing tanks out here. You are on the wrong side of the shooting, I think.’

‘We are moving to intercept the Chaos armour that hit our lines,’ said Crown.

‘Ah, hunters like us.’ A thin smile tugged at Gavron’s lips as he looked down at the dead cultists. ‘You pursue a greater prey, I think. So you seek to prevent them from using the tunnels, then?’

‘The tunnels?’ asked Crown.

‘You have maps?’

Crown nodded. They walked back to *Imperial Son*, and Crown pulled a small hololithic projector from the cabin. She keyed in a sequence on the runepad of the projector, which hummed to life with the whir of spinning machinery. An image of the hive city appeared in stuttering pale light.

‘No,’ Gavron shook his head. ‘Under, under.’

Crown adjusted the projection. The city shrank, drawing back to reveal a colossal structure beneath the surface. Like an iceberg, the vast majority of the hive was beneath the ground.

‘The hive extends below the surface for kilometres,’ said Gavron. ‘All of the main lifts and conveyor points are collapsed. They cannot enter there.’

‘How do you know they are all destroyed?’ asked Crown.

Gavron looked at the Cadian. ‘Because I am the one who collapsed them. But there are smaller points across the surface.’

‘How small?’

‘They are for maintenance passages, but a tank could pass through them.’

‘If the enemy were to find an access point, they could move below and circumnavigate anything we have topside.’ Crown looked to Gavron. ‘Are there any of them around here?’

The Scion nodded. ‘Yes, we were to destroy it after we had finished with our ambush here. By the trail you were following, your beast knows precisely where it is as well.’

‘Then come with us,’ said Crown. ‘We can move faster than you can on foot, and I could use your shooters. Our target is a Land Raider – we could use all the help we can get out here.’

Gavron appeared thoughtful for a moment, and looked to his men. The five Scions under his command drew their knives, spinning them in their hands to offer the hilts to Gavron in submission.

Gavron spoke to his squad in their clipped, guttural tongue, and they sheathed their blades. The Tempestus sergeant turned to Crown. ‘Our goals align. We shall hunt this beast with you, yes.’

‘Thank you, sergeant. The Emperor protects.’

‘He aids those who aid themselves,’ said Gavron matter-of-factly, his calm veneer darkening. ‘By that maxim, there is much we must give, then, to halt this foe. To bring vengeance for our dead. This is our world.’ He gestured to the ruined city. ‘They have taken our world from us.’

Crown met the battered Tempestus sergeant's steely gaze. 'Not just yours.'

The Regallan Tempestus Scions rode on the roof of *Imperial Son* as the Cadian tanks rumbled through the streets. The storm troopers would disembark regularly as the tanks encountered obstacles, clearing intersections and disarming mines and tank traps. When the Lemman Russ transports came under fire from isolated sniper teams left scattered throughout the city, they cleared the ruins of buildings and towers until the shooters were rooted out and eliminated, the strict rationing of ammunition the only thing keeping the tank crews from simply bringing the buildings down with their battle cannons. More eyes were taken.

Crown ordered the column to a halt as the sun sank beneath the horizon, and checked her auspex. Gavron had dispatched a pair of his Scions to scout the path ahead hours before, and the three Lemman Russes had now reached the designated rendezvous point to regroup with them.

Gavron and his Scions rolled off *Imperial Son*, dispersing in a ring around the tanks. Half their number entered the surrounding structures to secure their position, while the others knelt in overwatch, hellguns panning for threats.

Gavron's vox clicked with two short bursts of static. He clicked his own vox three times. A pair of figures emerged from concealment and approached the tanks.

The two Scions trotted back to the three Lemman Russ tanks, making their report to Gavron. Crown emerged from the turret of *Imperial Son*.

'Well?' she asked.

Gavron clambered up to stand upon the engine deck of the Lemman Russ. 'We have found the access point.' The Scion pointed ahead of the column. 'It is in a square two kilometres ahead, and there are many of the Archenemy standing upon it.'

Gavron breathed slowly through the rebreather of his helm, making short gestures to his troops in battle-sign. They moved through the streets towards the square, the stocks of their hellguns crunching tightly against their shoulders. The Scions fanned out in a hunched trot, flowing from points of cover.

Gavron came to a halt at the edge of the square. It was a massive rockcrete courtyard, framed on three sides by hab blocks and on one by a major roadway. Once the square had been a place of community, where small bazaars would sell their wares, citizens would meet and priests of the Ecclesiarchy would sermonise to crowds of rapt onlookers. Now, it was as broken as the rest of the city. Great fractures wound over the rockcrete. One of the hab blocks had absorbed artillery

fire, its broken walls dropping into mounds of rubble like spilled entrails from a rent gut. Corpses had carpeted the square, now piled in gruesome heaps in corners.

Gavron took in the disposition of the enemy occupying the square. There were easily a hundred cultists and Chaos soldiers filling the area, and the Scion could even spot a handful of traitor Space Marines, standing at a distance from the rest of the rabble. Gavron had never seen one of the Adeptus Astartes before the Crimson Slaughter had made planetfall. They were utterly terrifying, consummate killing machines. The sergeant took a deep breath, making peace with the casualties in his squad that were inevitably to come.

The mortal soldiery of the Archenemy had gathered at the centre of the square. In some twisted parody of the Ecclesiarchal priests that had often garnered crowds with their zealous oratory, the cultists were enthralled by the snarling declamations of a wild shaman. The twisted, deformed priest flailed his arms, shrieking in a language Gavron did not understand, and did not want to.

The assembled force of the Crimson Slaughter were standing directly over the entrance to the maintenance passage leading deeper into the hive. In spite of this, they failed to show any regard for it, other than stationing guards at each corner of the sunken bulkhead set into the ground. Gavron frowned. Perhaps their orders were to capture the access point, not enter it. To safeguard it for the imminent arrival of Chaos armour.

The Scions watched as one of the cultists shambled up towards the priest. With fanatical deference, the man prostrated himself before the shaman. The sage of the dark gods looked to the crowd and made some declaration to them before seizing the man by his long, unkempt hair. In a moment a ritual dagger of glittering black stone was in the priest's hand. Holding the cultist in place, the elder slashed his throat, sawing through the bleeding meat until he held the severed head aloft for his congregation. The cultists erupted in ecstatic cheers, singing foul canticles in the language of their dark patrons.

'This is Gavron,' the sergeant whispered into the vox-bead in his helm. 'Status?'

'We are in position,' crackled Crown's reply. *'Hit them.'*

'Acknowledged.' Gavron nodded to his squad, who dispersed behind cover and readied their hellguns with a low thrum. Gavron looked down at Pog, the sniper lying prone as he adjusted the optics of his hot-shot lasgun.

'Zystaci nukil, ne tykli?' said Gavron.

Get us started, won't you?

Pog lined up the gesticulating shaman in his sights, and squeezed the trigger. The powerful las-bolt struck the man in the temple, and he dropped in a cloud of sizzling blood. Cries of surprise and anger consumed the crowd as disarray gripped the ranks of the Archenemy.

The Scions pushed into the square. The cultists turned, seeing the advancing Imperials, and charged them.

Gavron's squad opened fire, sending disciplined volleys of hot-shot las into the wall of clamouring humanity. Men and women screamed as they were cut down, their flesh and clothing catching fire from the storm troopers' supercharged weaponry. Energy bolts punched clear through cultists in the front ranks, travelling on to kill one and sometimes two more soldiers behind them.

Steam began to curl from the thrumming power packs upon the Scions' backs, visible even in the heat of the burning city. They continued firing, the dazzling red las-beams slashing out like a surging wind fighting the press of an ocean wave. The cultists came on, trampling their dead and dying into the broken street in a frenzied lust to close with their enemy. The distance between the forces, bridged by hellgun fire, rapidly shrank.

The first several ranks, made up of emaciated and half-crazed slaves to the dark gods, were eradicated by the Scions. Their role serving as a meat shield fulfilled, the even drum of boots filled the street from behind their cooling corpses. Clad in looted flak armour and equipment from the planetary defence forces of a hundred worlds, ranks of Chaos heavy infantry in thrall to the Crimson Slaughter marched forward in disciplined formation, firing lasguns from the hip as they advanced.

Gavron swung out from a mound of rubble, stitching a burst of fire from his hellgun that immolated a pair of invaders. Barking a command to his squad, he pivoted back behind cover and reached for his webbing. He crouched, resting his hellgun against the rubble as he took hold of a frag grenade with each hand.

With a dull clink of metal, Gavron thumbed the pin from each bomb and hurled them into the advancing Chaos infantry. He watched the small black shapes of more grenades arc into the air as his squad mirrored his action. Gavron ducked back behind cover as the bombs bounced to land at the feet of the enemy.

A chain of overlapping detonations filled the street with shrapnel, smoke and screams. The front of the Chaos charge was pulverised, as if the fist of the God-Emperor had smashed down from the heavens to crush them. The wounded howled, clutching the stumps of severed limbs as blood sprayed from between their fingers. As they died, more rushed over them to take their place.

A hulking brute of a cultist, head and shoulders taller than Gavron, roared a challenge as he broke from the pack of his brethren. He held a massive flail in his meaty fist, its dark chain threaded with human vertebrae, ending in a spiked head crudely fashioned to resemble a flensed skull. The man was completely soaked in blood, both new and old, forming an uneven crust over the carapace armour wrapped around his barrel chest and the scar tissue covering his bare arms. The flail blurred into a ring of dirty pinkish-white as the cultist began to swing it over his head.

Gavron fired a burst into the cultist's chest. The bolts carved into the filthy armour, pushing him back but failing to penetrate. A low chuckle spilled from the cultist's lips.

The flail smashed down as Gavron rolled away, cracking into the rockcrete. The Scion came to his knees, took aim, and fired high at the warrior. The bolt struck the cultist in the face. His head vanished, burned away to nothing by the blast. The body stood for a moment, swaying before it toppled to the ground.

'Now, tank woman!' Gavron barked into his vox-bead. 'Make corpses with your war machine!'

A roar of promethium-fuelled engines filled a side alley between two of the hab blocks. Dozer lowered, *Imperial Son* launched forward into the square, ploughing into the tightly packed mass of cultists. Men and women became liquid as they exploded beneath the treads of the Leman Russ. Thrashing bodies were impaled upon the teeth of the dozer blades, dropping and tearing free only to be crushed to mulch under the tank.

Inside the cabin, Heit moved his face back, away from the periscope. The vision slit was dark, rendered useless by the press of bodies. It was so thick it was as if *Imperial Son* had driven into a river of blood and rending flesh. Muffled screams battered against the hull, punctuated by thin screeches of metal as they broke the blades of their daggers against the dense armour.

'Just fire,' said Jesh distractedly as she fired her own weapon.

Heit fought to turn his heavy bolter, struggling against the press of invader flesh.

'Just shoot, you idiot!' hissed Zevsin, firing the hull-mounted lascannon into the howling masses enveloping them. The gunner blasted swathes of the cultists to cinders with every shot.

Heit gritted his teeth and fired the heavy bolter. The compressed bodies of the invaders confined and amplified the report of the cannon, making every shot a

thunderous boom. The noise grew louder as Heit slammed round after round into the swell of enemies at point-blank range. Fresh, high screams peaked and silenced in time with the secondary detonations as the heavy mass-reactives exploded, ruining flesh and shattering bone. Blood and torn ribbons of flesh were flung into the air, falling back down upon the Lemman Russ in such volume that to the crew it sounded as if the tank were moving through a rainstorm.

The Archenemy attack waned as the Lemman Russ butchered the massed charge. Heit began to see through his periscope again. More cultists were shuffling towards *Imperial Son*. Thick black chains lashed the bulky forms of melta bombs and crude improvised explosives to their bodies and to each other, creating a net of suicidal fanatics. They shrieked, chanting in a language whose conception had never come by the will of man. Dark blood foamed down their chins and sprayed from their lips as they howled the unwords of the daemonic language, eyes bulging with psychotic glee as they bore their arcane procession forward.

Heit swivelled his heavy bolter around and opened fire on the suicide bombers. Bolts tore into the chanting wretches, reducing them to puffs of red mist and ragged hunks of meat. A bolt struck one of the explosive charges, detonating in a huge explosion that shook *Imperial Son* like a siege hammer blow.

‘Good,’ called Crown. ‘Keep piling them up.’

Heit wasn’t sure if the commander was speaking to him, but a righteous pride swelled in his chest as he blew the forces of the Archenemy apart.

Crown peered through her periscope. *Morningstar* and *Butcher’s Block* had leapt into the square on either side of *Imperial Son* to envelop the remaining Chaos infantry. *Morningstar* blasted packs of cultists to ash with its sponson multi-meltas, while *Butcher’s Block* doused the invaders in burning promethium from its side-mounted heavy flammers. She saw the flank of *Morningstar* blur with smoke as detonations stitched across its flank. The Lemman Russ tracked its turret in the direction of the attack, as massive figures strode forward.

Clad in brutish and twisted power armour slathered in blood, Chaos Space Marines advanced forward at a walk, unleashing fire from their boltguns into *Morningstar*. At some unheard command, they stowed their bolters as one, clamping them to thigh plates and drawing massive chainblades and axes. The street filled with a mechanised scream as monomolecular chain teeth chewed the air, and the traitors began to run towards them.

‘Crimson Slaughter,’ breathed Crown. ‘Lochna, turn us around.’

Lochna hauled on the controls, fighting to rotate *Imperial Son* through growing mounds of the dead. Bodies piled to the tops of the track assemblies. Gore choked the workings of the tracks in such horrendous quantities that the tank laboured just to generate movement. Slowly, the Leman Russ came around.

‘Traverse right,’ shouted Crown. ‘Load, Infernus.’

Brydl pulled a shell from the magazine and pushed it into the breech. ‘Infernus up!’

‘Zev, put it down in the middle of those bastards.’

Zevsin tracked *Imperial Son*’s main gun to the right, levelling it dead centre on the charging Chaos Space Marines.

‘Fire!’

‘Sending!’

Zevsin fired, launching the shell screaming over *Morningstar* towards the enemy. The shell exploded in the air just before impact, throwing out a blinding sheet of rapidly igniting incendiary gel. The traitors vanished in the flash, consumed by the searing wall of flame. Darkened shapes materialised within it, stumbling and falling to the ground as their mutated armour liquefied. Others staggered forward, impossibly managing to survive as they strode clear of the flames.

The turret of *Butcher’s Block* swivelled around, depressing to centre on the surviving Crimson Slaughter warriors. The report of its battle cannon was made all the louder by the hab blocks enclosing the square. The shell smashed into the traitor Space Marines, leaving nothing remaining but a smouldering crater.

‘Good hit, Jayne,’ said Crown.

‘About time some of them started doing the dying,’ grumbled Jayne.

Crown smirked, about to reply when a deafening wail tore across the square. The crew slapped their hands over their ears. It was a blood-chilling noise, like some unholy melding of animal and machine.

‘Throne alive, what is that?’ exclaimed Jesh. ‘More cultists?’

Crown clenched her teeth in a snarl.

‘Worse.’

PART 3

The source of the keening metallic scream made itself known to Crown and the crew of *Imperial Son*. The side of a hab block exploded in an expanding cloud of dust and rockcrete splinters. A shadow darkened the centre of the cloud, rapidly resolving into a firm shape.

Spiked armour plates covered its every surface, from the corroded cube of black iron at its core to the tips of its six insectoid legs. The foremost of the legs ended in a pair of massive snapping claws raised before it, emitting shrieks of shearing metal as they ground open and closed. It strode through the smoke with an abominable animal grace no machine could possess, fuelled by the essence and infinite fury of the Neverborn.

'Defiler!' Jayne called out over the vox.

'Hatches,' ordered Crown. *'Let's go, lock and engage seals!'*

At the centre of the daemon engine, a face of rippling mercury released another blood-curdling scream, its wailing maw stretching wider and wider as the twisting barrel of a battle cannon extended between its misshapen fangs.

'Incoming!' Lochna shouted.

Crimson smoke rippled off the Defiler as it fired. A shell forged by means known to none within reality hurtled into *Butcher's Block*, ripping a gouge through its right side and shearing the sponson completely away.

'Right sponson's gone,' Jayne breathed. Crown saw smoke billow from the cabin of *Butcher's Block*, thinning as its crew fought the fire with suppressant foam. The wounded Lemman Russ reversed, angling back to the left to protect its fractured side armour.

'Morningstar,' said Crown over the vox. *'Harvick, I need you to shift and move up on its left. We're moving right. Let's split its fire. Butcher's Block, you're in*

this fight so throw some high-ex its way!’

‘*Moving,*’ replied Harvick. ‘*Engaging left side.*’

Butcher’s Block fired its battle cannon as it slewed sluggishly backwards. The shot went wide of the Defiler, smashing into the ruins of the hab block behind it. The daemon engine howled, propelling itself forward with incredible speed. Foul warp energies shivered over its body, melting the ground beneath it into steaming black slurry.

‘Let’s go right at it!’ Crown rapped her fist against Zevsin’s back. ‘Load, high-ex. Zev, get me a clear shot on it, no mistakes.’

‘Identified!’ Zevsin called back, manipulating the elevation of the Vanquisher cannon to centre it on the Defiler.

Brydl slammed a high-explosive shell into the cannon’s breech. ‘High-ex up!’

‘Fire!’

‘Sending!’

The shell fell short, skipping up and over the daemon engine as it charged.

‘Damn,’ snarled Crown. She fired the lascannon, knocking the Defiler’s shoulder back but doing no damage. ‘Repeat, get it up!’

‘Clear!’ bellowed Brydl as the shell clanged into the breech.

‘Sending!’

The Defiler lunged to the side, ducking clear as the shell screamed past it.

‘Reload,’ said Crown, checking her periscope. ‘Eyes up, we’ve got more infantry inbound!’

Chaos shock troops spilled into the square from the ruined hab block the Defiler had emerged from. They fired as they moved, careful to keep their distance from the blood-maddened machine. Cultists in battered and mismatched armour leapt forward, firing their weapons and hurling grenades towards the tanks and the squad of Tempestus Scions. Behind them, the hulking forms of Chaos Space Marines of the Crimson Slaughter advanced, their march measured and implacable where the mortal soldiers had been wild and disordered.

‘Get your men back,’ Heit heard Crown bark into her headset at Sergeant Gavron. ‘Get elevation and keep those infantry off our backs.’

The commander looked down at Heit and Jesh. ‘Let’s go – heavy bolters, spray ’em!’

Jesh opened fire, scything down a wave of rushing cultists in a cloud of scarlet. A pair of invaders crouched, loading a shoulder-fired missile launcher. Jesh took aim and blasted them apart. Bolt-rounds detonated their store of munitions,

sending a burst of flame and shrapnel scything into their comrades.

‘Loading!’ Jesh called out, the Whiteshield’s hands a blur as she disconnected and dropped the empty ammunition feed, then locked another in place.

Heit braced, set his shoulder and fired. The deep percussive bang of the heavy bolter firing filled his ears. He dragged his fire across the ranks of cultists, shredding them into tatters of broken armour and torn meat.

Heit sighted a traitor Space Marine firing his boltgun and throwing more cultists forward into the charge. He levelled the heavy bolter and opened fire.

A fusillade of heavy mass-reactive bolts stitched up the renegade’s warped armour, exploding in puffs of broken ceramite and horn. The Space Marine’s arm was torn away at the shoulder, but still he marched forward, firing his weapon with one hand. Another burst dropped him to one knee. Impossibly, the Space Marine surged back to his feet. He staggered forward, still firing, before one of Heit’s shells struck him at the collar and blasted his head into splinters. Headless, the traitor took half a stride before collapsing to the ground.

Morningstar and *Imperial Son* struck at the flanks of the Defiler. Despite being attacked by enemies on both sides, the savage intelligence of the daemon engine ignored the fire lashing at it and charged forward, darting between and past the attacking tanks, directly for *Butcher’s Block*. It had wounded its prey, and now it hungered for the kill.

‘Bring us around,’ hissed Crown. Heit could almost feel the steely concentration in her words. ‘Bring us back around now!’

The two Leman Russ transports skidded to an abrupt halt, rotating ponderously as they strained to bring their weapons to bear in defence of their comrade. *Butcher’s Block* fired its battle cannon. The shell exploded against the Defiler’s armour in a cloud of sparks and black smoke. With another deafening screech, the Defiler leapt forward through the smoke, trailing mercury and magenta ectoplasm in its wake.

In an instant the Defiler had closed upon *Butcher’s Block*. The daemon engine’s claws latched onto the turret of the stricken Leman Russ. The dense armour plating around *Butcher’s Block*’s battle cannon twisted, filling the air with a keening wail of shearing metal.

The Defiler snarled as it drew its prey closer. Thick black smoke streamed from the rear of *Butcher’s Block* as it overloaded its engines in a last-ditch effort to fight off the walker and break free. With an unholy biomechanical roar, the daemon engine vomited a stream of sorcerous fire down upon the disabled *Butcher’s Block*. Flames of neon indigo veined with black surged through the

Leman Russ, immolating the tank in a maelstrom of immaterial energy.

Crown flinched as if struck, hurling her headset down around her neck as it filled with an unholy scream. A leaping cloud of fire and smoke was thrown into the sky as the fuel tanks of *Butcher's Block* ignited, bathing the Defiler in hellish light as it drowned the husk in more of its unholy conflagration. Heit's eyes widened through his periscope as he glimpsed howling faces materialise across the kaleidoscopic flames engulfing the ruined tank.

Crown seethed. *Imperial Son* fired its Vanquisher Cannon, striking the Defiler in its flank and sending biomechanical armour spinning across the square. The Chaos walker rounded on the charging Leman Russ. Fire slashed out from the arcane autocannon mounted upon its thorax, drowning the Imperial tank in high-velocity shells.

The crew of *Imperial Son* reeled as the autocannon fire smashed against the hull. The tank quaked, as though a Titan had seized hold of it in its immense fist and shaken it.

'Fire!' roared Crown.

'Sending!'

Another shell smashed into the Defiler, shearing one of its legs away in a torrent of azure sparks. The walker shrieked in pain and anger, firing its battle cannon but throwing the shell wildly over *Imperial Son*. Streams of superheated plasma blasted from the sponson multi-meltas of *Morningstar*, liquefying plates of the Defiler's armour to slough away as molten slag. The walker twitched like a cornered beast, unsure of where to focus its aggression between the two oncoming foes.

The Cadian tanks bracketed the Defiler with devastating blasts from their main guns. Unholy armour shattered under the hammer blows of *Morningstar's* battle cannon. A Vanquisher shell destroyed another of the daemoniac war machine's legs, tearing it away in a cloud of industrial gore. The Defiler crashed onto its side, its remaining legs clawing gouges into the rockcrete as it fought for the purchase to right itself.

Imperial Son and *Morningstar* ground to a halt, staying beyond the range of the Defiler's flailing claws. Like the huntsmen of an ancient plain repeatedly thrusting the points of their spears into a wounded beast, the Leman Russ tanks hammered the Defiler with their cannons. Blast after blast tore more of the walker away until, in a blinding flash, it ruptured.

A mushroom cloud of warpfire exploded out as the Defiler died. It had the thick oily blackness of smoke, veined with purple lightning, but moved like flame as it

licked upwards towards the sky. Frost crawled out over the broken ground from it, and a shrieking howl of agony and frustration pierced the sky as the essence of the Neverborn within the walker lost the vessel mooring it to reality.

Even through the thick armour of *Imperial Son's* hull, Heit heard the distinct sound of claws tearing at the air, followed by silence as the daemon was banished back into the anarchic madness of the warp.

The howl that ripped from the loudhailers of *The Hunger* was a tectonic thing. Cultists and slaves within proximity to the Land Raider collapsed dead from the scream, those in direct contact annihilated into red mist by its force. Even with the auditory dampeners in his helm engaged to their limit, Hakaron's ears bled. It existed as much in the psychic realm as it did within the mundane one, a blinding arc of expanding rage that ripped outwards like the shockwave cast by an exploding star.

'Hunger!' shrieked the warpsmith, blood and oil spraying from his lips as he writhed within his bonds. '*Hunger!*'

Hakaron slammed on the brakes, dragging the Land Raider to a grinding halt. He wrestled control back from the beast, reasserting his dominance as if he were snapping taut the leash of a disobedient hound. The spoor of *The Hunger's* dirge still rang through the Chaos Space Marine's head, pouring its molten rage over the meat of his mind.

The source of the war machine's outrage was clear to Hakaron. A Defiler had just died. Its shell of flesh and metal was destroyed, its daemoniac essence banished back into the cauldron of the Immaterium from whence it had come after its host had been shattered.

But the cry of the daemon that possessed *The Hunger* was not in furious grief for butchered kin; there was something more inwardly focused about it. Selfish. Perhaps the daemon inhabiting the Defiler had been a kill *The Hunger* had sought for itself when the time had been right. Now such prey had been stolen from it, snatched away by the cowering slaves of the Corpse-God.

An overwhelming lust for revenge radiated from the Land Raider's cruel intelligence, tickling Hakaron's conscience with sickly-sweet tendrils. The traitor's lips twitched with amusement. The daemon was cunning. Vengeance was the fuel of the Crimson Slaughter. It was what drove the entire Black Crusade that was setting the galaxy on fire. It was what kept warriors like Hakaron alive.

The flesh auspex shivered, expanding to show an overlay of the city. A point of

flesh rose, ticking and pulsing insistently at the site where the daemon within the Defiler had been banished. Hakaron's eyes narrowed. It was behind the Crimson Slaughter's advance, near one of the larger access points to the underground of the Imperial hive the Crimson Slaughter had been seeking to exploit. Imperials concentrated there represented remnants of their purge as yet incomplete. Forces of sufficient strength to bring a Defiler low could not be allowed to live.

The Hunger's engine roared as the daemon brushed over Hakaron's thoughts. The warpsmith shuddered, twitching and straining against his confinement in fitful spasms. Hakaron looked down at his corrupted brother for a moment, then back to the auspex. Slowly, with the deliberation of one demonstrating the totality of their control, Hakaron punched in the coordinates of the auspex reading, and released the brake.

'So be it.'

The side hatch of *Imperial Son* levered open, and Heit crawled out, drawing in gulping lungfuls of air. Even the ash-soaked state of the city's atmosphere was an improvement over the hot, smoke-laced condition billowing out from within the Lemman Russ. Extended periods with the tank fully sealed would begin to overload its meagre air scrubbers, which did little to filter out the caustic gunsmoke and electric haze that filled the cabin, even at peak efficiency.

Heit wiped at the grimy sweat pouring down his face, blinking away its sting as it slid into his eyes. He heard the thump of heavy boots on the roof of *Imperial Son* as the rest of the crew disembarked to assess the damage to the tank.

The glacis armour of *Imperial Son* was severely compromised. The plating was so pitted by absorbing the impact of the Defiler's autocannon fusillade that it looked as though it had been liquefied, with the countless shell craters like bubbles boiling up to the surface. It was a testament to the rugged durability of the Lemman Russ' design and construction that none of the shells had managed to penetrate the armour and kill any of the crew.

'Loch,' said Crown, pulling her headset around her neck as she jumped down from the turret. 'Give us a once over, and grab Brydl too.'

'Got it, Crown.' Lho smoke mingled with the cordite billowing into the air as the driver opened his overhead hatch.

Zevsin hauled herself out of the turret behind Crown, her bionic limbs whirring and clanking as they clanged against *Imperial Son's* hull. Out in the light, Heit could see that none of her augmetics matched, each a different design and shape, and likely manufactured by separate forge worlds. Even for a Cadian sniper and

tank gunner, being provided with customised bionics was a long shot. The much more likely scenario was that the limbs she now used to walk with had been pulled from the bodies of dead comrades, recycled by medicae and field surgeon teams with far more amputees to see to than bionics to requisition and supply them with. The mismatched limbs made Zevsin's walk a clumsy and noisy thing, and Heit could see the bitterness in her eyes at having her sniper's grace reduced to this.

Jesh pulled herself up from the turret last, scratching at the oil-stained stubble of her shaved scalp. Heit heard her slow, even breathing as she strode towards *Butcher's Block*. He heard the soft creak of leather as her gloved hands balled into fists.

The warped flames that had consumed *Butcher's Block* had vanished with the daemon that had cast them. The shell was blackened and pitted, yet intact. Jesh placed her hand on the ruined tank. Heit did the same. The metal was as cold as glacial ice.

Heit peered inside the tank's cabin. There were no bodies. No ash, no bone. Nothing. After days of seeing thousands of corpses carpet the surface of Regallus, their absence here was somehow more frightening than anything.

'Nothing to bury,' whispered Jesh. Heit looked at her. The Whiteshield's eyes still had a glimmer of childhood in them, or as much of it as a Cadian could possess. This war would take that from her.

'Bury?' asked Heit.

Jesh made to reply before Crown clapped a hand on her shoulder. 'I need fuel and ammo inventory, check with *Morningstar* as well.'

The Whiteshield spared a moment, looking back at the husk of *Butcher's Block*, before turning away and walking to *Imperial Son*.

Heit looked at Crown, the question writ across his face. She nodded to the husk.

'Korev,' said Crown, placing her hands on her hips as she stared at *Butcher's Block*. 'Their loader. He and Jesh were part of the same unit in the Whiteshields. Came up from the same Kasr, same breeding tithe, though she was a year older. She was always protective of him.'

'Like a sibling,' said Heit.

'Leave it alone,' replied Crown, her voice low.

Heit turned back to the tank, and the two spent a silent moment looking upon it.

'We are all going to die here,' said Heit, 'aren't we?'

'My money would be on yes,' answered Crown. 'Cadians are bred for the task. There's never been any other outcome for us. We will do our duty, and if death

comes here, so be it. Though that doesn't mean we don't have regrets.'

'What do you regret?' asked Heit.

Crown looked at him.

'Not dying on Cadia,' she replied.

Heit studied the ruined tank shell. He had no way to relate to Crown. Linoldia was a core world, insulated from the constant warfare tearing at the planets of the Imperium's frontier. Planets like Cadia.

What could be going through their minds? wondered Heit. *Trained from birth to kill, to sacrifice everything in defence of their world. To survive that life, and to be here while everything they were created to protect burns.*

'Heit,' said Crown as she turned away.

'Ma'am?'

'Your shooting did not inspire me to execute you this time,' said the Cadian as she walked back to *Imperial Son*. 'A marked improvement – let's keep it that way.'

Heit felt a thin smile curl at his lip. He quickly repressed it, and followed her.

The streets of the hive city blurred around Hakaron as *The Hunger* hurtled over the broken rockcrete. The riotous chorus of mechanical snarls and firing engines resounding within the cabin of the Land Raider barely reached his ears. He could hear almost nothing above the whispers that caught and snagged against his mind, bladed and insistent. His head swelled with the locust's hiss of their voices. Tics and spasms rippled over his flesh as they clawed at his mind.

Hakaron tightened his jaw, the bones creaking as he clenched harder. He had to kill. Nothing else would draw them to silence, and give him a fleeting moment of serenity.

'Hunger,' hissed the warpsmith from behind Hakaron, twitching in a discordant rhythm from his prison within the machine.

Hakaron flicked his eyes back to the warpsmith. Did his kindred even know who he was any longer? Or had the daemon inhabiting this machine drunk the last meagre scraps of his identity, rendering him nothing more than a puppet, a resource to be exhausted and discarded once it was no longer of use? Hakaron struggled to recall his brother's name. Did *The Hunger* know it? Did it care? Names were things of power to those who manifested out of the Immaterium. Was the warpsmith's name something of value, or was it less than meaningless? His brother was a tool, meat and tubes and a fleeting spark of life. The daemon did not need his name, only his flesh and the fruit of his labour. It owned him,

and could reshape or rename him into whatever it wished.

Would the daemon turn its foul tendrils upon him now, with his brother fully consumed? Would it seek to join the haunted choir shrieking within his mind? Would the other voices cease, if he allowed it? Was there peace in his brother's oblivion?

A low snarl built within Hakaron's chest. He smashed his head forward, crashing it against the wall of the Land Raider's hull. Deep pain, hot and the red of dark wine, bloomed across his skull as he brought his face down again, and again. The pain was like a cleansing balm, wrapping his mind in the thin shield of its sting.

The daemon was pressing for control of Hakaron's mind, and for the first time in centuries, the traitor Space Marine was not certain he would win.

The ragged crews of *Imperial Son* and *Morningstar* gathered between the two Leman Russ tanks at the centre of the city square. The Tempestus Scion squad had deployed across the hab blocks surrounding the expansive courtyard, forming a thin perimeter of hellgun firing positions. Sergeant Gavron had left his squad to their posts, descending to join the tankers as they assessed their situation.

'Right,' said Crown as Sergeant Harvick led his crew over from *Morningstar*. 'The target will be moving here to gain access to the tunnel network, and so here is where we strike.'

'Two tanks against a Land Raider?' asked Lochna, taking a deep drag from his lho stick.

'They're tough, but they aren't unbeatable.' Crown gestured to several points across the courtyard. 'We need to make this square a killing ground. We place any tank traps we can and draw the beast here into close quarters.'

'We don't have many anti-armour mines,' said Gavron. 'Near all of our melta charges were expended bringing the other tunnels down.'

'Then we rig up our own,' said Crown. 'Set delays on high-ex shells with improvised triggers, spare fuel cells, whatever ordnance we can scrounge up. Anything that will funnel it here, and we hit it from the sides. In a confined combat zone we can outmanoeuvre it, and that means we can kill it.'

'And what exactly will we be using to lure it here?' asked Harvick, scratching at a scar on his jawline.

Crown turned, looking upon the husk of *Butcher's Block*.

'Do you still have your camo netting?'

The Cadian tank crews set to work. Locking their tow winches to the shell of *Butcher's Block*, *Morningstar* and *Imperial Son* hauled the knocked-out Leman Russ back to the edge of the square. They set the tank in a corner between two hab blocks, angling its turret out to the centre of the courtyard and heaping rubble and broken rockcrete around it. Using the camouflage netting from *Morningstar*, the Cadians swathed *Butcher's Block* in its dust-grey shroud, heaping additional piles of dust and rubble onto it to disrupt the tank's silhouette.

To the untrained eye, the husk of *Butcher's Block* was invisible, no different than the other angular mounds of ruined architecture and broken masonry. To the crew of the steel daemon, it would be a concealed but obvious target, and based on what they had seen of the tactics it employed, irresistible. Heit repressed a shiver, as even thinking of the monstrous Archenemy tank set him on edge.

The Tempestus Scions stripped *Imperial Son* and *Morningstar* of anything that would not compromise their combat effectiveness to craft an arsenal of improvised explosives. Expert sappers, the storm troopers picked through the courtyard, transforming it into a kill zone. Traps were set into every shell crater pockmarking the square, rigged with pressure triggers and remote detonation cables. The mangled wreck of the Chaos Defiler was hauled into the centre of the square, where the Scions set to work packing its twisted husk with makeshift charges crafted from spare fuel tanks and high-explosive battle-cannon ammunition. The foundations of the hab blocks were wired to explode, poised to bring tonnes of rockcrete smashing down upon anything caught in the vicinity.

Fuel and ammunition were inventoried and spread evenly across the remaining Imperials. Hasty repairs were made to *Morningstar* and *Imperial Son*, patching shattered armour and welding reserve plating over hull breaches. Heit and Jesh loaded belts of heavy bolter ammunition into the sponson hoppers, splitting their dwindling supply of mass-reactives between them.

With their ambush as prepared as it could be, *Morningstar* and *Imperial Son* moved into concealed positions between the hab blocks, setting up on either side of *Butcher's Block*. The Tempestus Scions scattered across the hab blocks, setting up sniper perches from elevated levels while a sapper team concentrated at ground level, armed with the last of their remaining krak grenades.

Heit checked the belt feed of his heavy bolter, ensuring that the weapon was ready to fire. The cabin of *Imperial Son* was quiet, the crew silent as they inspected their equipment.

'Heit,' said Crown, a hand pressed to her headset.

'Ma'am?' he replied.

‘Scions are sending out a scout to set up a forward observation post. You’ve got first shift, so go with him.’

Heit nodded, catching a lascarbine Brydl tossed to him and slipping out from the side hatch.

Pog stood waiting in the square, cradling his hot-shot las as Heit approached. The sniper nodded once, and the pair walked out from the courtyard.

Umidia.

The scars of that world wound over Hakaron’s mind, never to heal. How long ago had he and his brothers burned that planet, pushing the Crimson Sabres Chapter over the precipice? Had it been centuries? Had there ever been a time before the voices?

A growing number of his kindred had rejected that such a past had ever existed. To them, the Crimson Slaughter had always been, the brotherhood’s days of loyalty to the Golden Throne and the Imperium of Man nothing more than a trick of the mind.

Hakaron remembered. Though the memories waned, rendered into an indistinct haze by the relentless susurrus of the haunted whispers, he held fast to where he had come from. To surrender his past made the spirits something that had always been a part of him, rather than the invading presence they were. As his brethren slipped away into the storm, one by one, Hakaron resisted.

The Hunger was fraying Hakaron’s resolve. It split his mental defences, forcing him to choose between fighting the monsters within, or the one without. The war machine seized upon this, drawing more and more control from the traitor Space Marine as it roared forward with abandon.

Vox traffic flittered through Hakaron’s helm. He half listened to reports from across the continent-sized city as the Crimson Slaughter pressed further for the centre. The Imperial defences were breaking, and soon the true butchery would begin in earnest. To Hakaron’s surprise, the lure of such genocide was weaker than the daemon’s lust for vengeance, and he watched with increasing detachment as it tore down the streets towards the site of the Defiler’s destruction.

It took Heit more than an hour to scale the cooling tower, the tallest structure left standing in the surrounding hive for miles. He followed Pog, the Tempestus sniper, silently as he padded up crumbling stairwells, clambered up pitted rockcrete walls, and climbed groaning iron vanes that covered the exterior of the tower like rusted vines. The ascent left Heit exhausted as they reached the

summit, the shallow bowl of an inactive comms array Pog chose as a makeshift perch. The Scion didn't even appear to be breathing hard, though Heit could only guess that from the even rasp whispering from Pog's impassive rebreather mask.

Heit drew deep breaths in through his nose, crouching in the wind-scraped iron of the comms dish. He looked over at Pog, who had crawled to the lip of the array. The sniper had extended the spring-loaded forks of his lasgun's bipod, setting the rifle beside him as he scanned the streets below with his magnoculars. Heit moved next to him, ducking against the wind clawing at his uniform as it tore overhead.

'Anything?' asked Heit, squinting down at the urban sprawl that spilled out below them clear through to the horizon.

'There are many things,' Pog replied, his mask lending a mechanical edge to his soft tones. 'As for your beast, it has yet to present itself.'

'Here.' Pog handed Heit a spool of high-tensile rappelling cord and an anchor spike. He pointed to the edge of the array behind them. 'Affix this to the end, securely.'

Heit's brow furrowed, but he thought better of questioning the Tempestus sharpshooter. Crouched, he moved over to the opposite lip of the comms dish. Pressing the anchor against the hardened plasteel, the device drove the spike in with a blast of compressed air. Heit tugged at the anchor, and, satisfied it was secure, locked one end of the rappelling cord to it.

'Why do your eyes not shine?'

Heit turned. He crept back over to Pog, who stared at him through the crimson lenses of his mask.

'What?'

A low rasp hissed from the sniper's rebreather, perhaps a sigh. Pog reached for his collar, popping loose the seals. With a short gasp of equalising pressure, he pulled the mask from his head, the collar dripping with collected sweat as he placed it at his side. Pog looked at Heit with copper-coloured eyes, peering from a scarred, hawkish face.

'Your eyes,' Pog said. 'Yours do not shine like the other tankers' do.'

A thin smile of understanding curled Heit's lips as he nodded. 'Ah, no. I am not born of Cadia. I do not have violet eyes like them.'

Pog grunted an affirmation. 'Hmm, as I thought. You are too small for their kind. Why then are you here? The gatekeepers are not ones to mix their numbers with outsiders.'

'I was serving on a bomber,' said Heit. He told Pog of his crash, and how he

had come to fight aboard *Imperial Son*. Pog remained silent, his gaze flicking between Heit and his magnoculars as he listened.

‘War is different down here,’ said Pog as Heit finished. The sniper turned his eyes up to the sky. ‘I was once aboard a naval ship, when my regiment moved to join a crusade through the Gyzak Expanse. Months within an iron city as it plied the dark. Everything cramped.’ He sneered at the last word.

‘Along the way, our convoy was attacked by pirates. It was a small raiding party, only a few ships, easily destroyed. Such things were common, I was told. I struggled at the strangeness of their fighting, a crew of warriors who have never seen the faces of those they have killed.’

Pog looked down at his rifle. ‘I have never not. War must not be a detached thing, I think.’ He looked back at Heit. ‘We would quickly forget why we fight.’

Heit nodded. From this height, the cityscape looked the closest it had ever been to him before his crash. The rockcrete labyrinth, monolithic towers of hab blocks stacked atop one another, streets and gridlines and manufactorum complexes had been rendered so distant in the aerial reconnaissance pics and Administratum schematics provided during his mission briefings. It had been even further from him when conducting sorties, a blurred haze of black and grey, shrouded in the smoke of thousands of raging fires. His auspex had rendered it further into arithmetic and text, data and signal echoes.

He had never seen the millions dying on the surface, the armies cutting each other apart for every metre of rockcrete, the population burning alive as the frontlines reached their crumbling tenements. It had all been so academic in the air, almost sterile. The past days locked within the rumbling hull of *Imperial Son*, staring the enemy in the eye as they killed, and as he killed them, had taken that detachment from Heit, never to return.

The wind changed, and Heit’s nostrils filled with the smell of ozone. The hair on his neck raised, and he felt heat prick at his back. He turned, his hand rising over his eyes as the sky filled with blinding light.

Great pillars of crimson light struck through the churning haze of smoke and acid rain, smashing down into the city. The sound came a moment later, a seismic rumble that led to a rising wall of dust and ash from the impact sites. Clouds of dirty fire leapt up, feeding on the tainted air as they swelled around the carnage.

‘Lances,’ whispered Heit, crouching lower as the shockwave caused the tower to groan and sway.

‘Then the defensive guns are gone,’ said Pog, his tone still even and soft. ‘Now

the hives will truly burn.'

More lance strikes seared down from orbit, reaching for the surface of Regallus like slender fingers soaked in blood and fire. Waves of dust and ash tore over the streets, buffeting the tower. The dish beneath Heit's boots quaked.

'Wait,' whispered Pog, eyes pressed to his magnoculars. He gripped Heit by the shoulder, passing him the scope.

Heit peered through the sight, his breath catching in his throat when he saw it.

'It's here.' Heit watched the small shape of deep red as it moved through the twisted streets. 'It's heading right for the ambush.'

Heit lost sight of the Land Raider when the magnoculars' lenses overloaded. Blinding scarlet light filled the air as a lance strike slashed down from orbit mere kilometres distant. The tower bucked, the force of the lance's impact and the resulting detonations tearing across the city. The deep chorus of protesting metal from within the tower was punctuated with the gunshot cracks of snapping girders and shattering rockcrete.

'We must go.' Pog slung his rifle across his back. 'Now!'

The two scrambled across the swaying comms dish towards the anchored rappelling cord. Heit stumbled as the tower began to tilt. Pog seized him by his collar, hauling him back to his feet.

They skidded to a halt at the dish's edge. Pog locked the cord to Heit's belt before securing another line to his own webbing.

'Wait,' shouted Heit over the din of the tower. 'How are we—'

Pog put his palm on Heit's chest, and pushed him over the side of the dish.

Heit's short bark of surprise was quickly lost in the swirling maelstrom of shockwaves and tearing dust. The tower's disintegrating edifice blurred past him as he fell. He held on to the rappelling cord for dear life, feeling the high-tensile line burning through the beaten leather of his gloves.

With a jarring crack through his lower back, Heit reached the end of the cord's length. The air was driven from his lungs as his momentum was violently halted, and he twisted at the end of the line.

Pog appeared beside him, descending smoothly. 'We must cut free from here!'

Heit twisted, looking down. The dust had cleared enough below for him to see the ground, a short distance from where he dangled.

'That's still ten, fifteen metres,' Heit gasped, fighting to breathe normally.

Pog grunted. 'Welcome to war on the surface.'

The sniper pulled a combat blade from its sheath on his chest, and cut Heit's line.

Once again, Heit found himself in freefall. Despite the panic that gripped him, he observed as the top of the tower sloughed off into the street, kicking up a wall of dust. This fall lasted briefly, only a few moments of weightless terror, before he crashed to the ground. A mound of plastek sheeting and empty fuel bladders cushioned his fall, if only enough not to kill him.

Heit moaned as he pushed himself to his knees, spitting a pair of blood-pinked teeth from split lips. Pog crashed beside him, the sniper quickly staggering to his feet and pulling Heit up. It was as he came to his feet that he heard the shouting.

A cluster of dark shapes were marked against the edge of the wall of dust churned up from the tower's collapse. The silhouettes resolved into a loose mob of red-armoured men and women, moving up the street. Hissing in uneven tones, the foremost of their number motioned towards the two Imperial soldiers, raising autoguns to shoulders.

Heit brought up the lascarbine slung at his side, stitching a burst of stark energy beams across the line of cultists. Bullets buzzed past his head and masonry popped around him as the enemy's wild fire sought him out.

A beam of deep red slashed out, taking the head from the lead cultist. Even from such a distance, the air carried the barest trace of the scent of iron and roasted meat. Two more beams shot out, and two more of the Archenemy's rabble died, punched from their feet into the dust.

Heit looked over his shoulder to where Pog knelt, his lasgun trailing tendrils of steam from its barrel.

'Go now,' Pog barked, his back-mounted power pack flaring as he fired another shot. 'Alert the others the beast draws near.'

Heit turned back, snapping off another burst from his carbine that cored through a screaming man's chest in a puff of flash-fried blood.

'Go, I said!'

Heit bit down, drawing his carbine to his chest, and sprinted down the street towards where the tanks were waiting.

Pog plucked a frag grenade from his webbing, hurling it into the charging cultists. He spent the moment earned as the enemy were cut through with fire and shrapnel to pull the glass flask from his hip. A dozen eyes stared out from it as the Scion set it down beside him.

'Watch then, fiends,' Pog growled, firing his rifle until the power pack fused into slag. He shrugged the pack and weapon off, drawing his blade and a large-calibre autopistol. 'Watch as I add to your number.'

Pog leapt forward into the cultists who charged out from the smoke of the grenade's detonation. The autopistol bucked in his fist as he hammered the enemy with shots that severed limbs and tore heads from shoulders. He rammed his combat knife in under a man's jaw, punching up into the brainpan. Pog twisted the blade, wrenching it free as dark blood sluiced down his arm.

Pog felt the cold hammer blow of a dagger punching between the plates of his carapace armour. He smashed an elbow into the woman holding it, breaking her face. A broken stanchion, wrapped in razor wire and wielded by an enormous man as a makeshift club, slammed into Pog's abdomen, doubling him over.

The cultists swarmed, clubbing and slashing with rifle butts, knives, their own hands and teeth. Blood soaked into the rubble and rockcrete dust, colouring it a ruddy brown.

The mob did not break until a sinewy woman, shrieking from a toothless maw, raised Pog's severed head above the chanting mass. His eyes were gone.

Crown spotted Heit from the cupola of *Imperial Son*'s turret as he skidded into the square, her arm draped over the pintle-mounted storm bolter. She watched as he scrambled over the broken streets into the square, to where the Cadian tankers lay in wait.

'Look alive,' said Crown into her headset, watching as Heit loped breathlessly towards the alley where *Imperial Son* was concealed. She heard two sets of clicks over the vox, affirmations from *Morningstar* and Gavron's Scions.

'It's coming,' gasped Heit, bent double as he leaned against the nose of *Imperial Son*. 'Fast.'

Crown's hand cupped her headset. 'Where is the sniper, Pog?'

Heit looked up, sweat streaming lines through the grime coating his face as he locked eyes with Crown. He shook his head.

Crown pursed her lips in a grim line, muttering a quiet reply into her vox. She looked back down at Heit. 'All right, saddle up and check your weapon.'

Heit rounded for the access hatch behind his sponson. Crown inspected the ammunition feed of the storm bolter, racking the weapon's slide to load a pair of mass-reactive rounds into its twin chambers. The Cadian's violet eyes flashed towards the horizon.

'Things are going to get very loud, very soon.'

When Hakaron awoke, he was drowning in blood. He tumbled end over end through an ocean of dark crimson. Blood rushed into his mouth and nose, pouring down his throat to fill his lungs with slick, hot iron. It stole his eyesight,

denying him anything but red, red, red. No sound passed but the thunder of his hearts as he thrashed through the sanguinary morass. There was nothing but blood.

Blood, and rage. And... *hunger*.

Hakaron realised then what was happening. The spirit of *The Hunger* had swallowed his mind, consuming his thoughts and casting him into its endless need for atrocity. It had assumed control of the Land Raider, Hakaron's weakling brother the warpsmith nothing but a puppet since it had entombed him within itself. And now it was doing the same to him.

No. *No*.

Hakaron roared his defiance, the noise swallowed by the blood. The scarlet sea thinned around him fractionally, drawing back from his fury. He began to hear the faintest thrum of engines.

Hakaron seethed. His outrage gave him clarity. He would not fall to the daemon within the machine. He would not become another puppet. He would not serve the daemon; it would serve him.

As the blood melted back from him, Hakaron arched his back, loosing a scream of primal rage until his throat tore and the blood shattered into dust. A veil ripped away, and the traitor Space Marine's vision returned to the cabin of the Land Raider, just as the tank smashed into the silent form of an Imperial Leman Russ tank, swathed in camouflage within a courtyard square.

Trip wires and remote detonators triggered as the Chaos tank crashed into the decoy of *Butcher's Block*. The husk of the Leman Russ, packed with shrapnel and improvised explosives, vanished in a searing explosion. A chain of detonations tore up the face of the hab block behind the crash in a wave of fire and smoke. The entire wall of the massive structure detached, raining tonnes of rubble and rockcrete masonry onto the Chaos war engine and filling the square with dust.

Imperial Son and *Morningstar* roared out from their concealed positions, smoke and dust streaming from their hulls as they brought their turrets around. The square filled with the roar of high-velocity shells as the main guns of the Leman Russ tanks spoke, hurling explosives at the site of the enemy tank through the swirling veil of destruction. The Cadian tanks hammered the obscured target, their main guns firing again and again, until Crown gave the order to cease fire.

The expanding cloud of grit washed over the Imperial tanks, filling the square with a grinding industrial fog. The crews waited nervous seconds for the sight of

the target to clear, eyes pressed anxiously to scopes and auspex readouts. Heit blinked away the sting of dirty sweat from his eyes as he desperately scanned the area through the narrow slit of his gunsight.

A mound of broken rubble resolved itself from the haze, still shifting as crumbling stone and masonry continued to fall from the shattered hab block. The deafening din of explosions and blasting cannons was replaced by an eerie silence, more stark than the fire of the guns and bombs as the tankers waited, waited.

A low, mechanical growl cut through the silence. The mound of ruins began to stir, small chunks shaking and rattling loose. Red-tinged smoke curled out from beneath the rockcrete.

A blurred shape of dark scarlet exploded from the heap, throwing chunks of wreckage in all directions. With a terrifyingly organic roar, the Chaos Land Raider spun around to face the Cadians. Blood and viscous black oil streamed from its glistening hull, and the barrels of its lascannons writhed with coruscating chains of dark energy as they tracked like a predator's talons towards its enemies.

Morningstar fired its main gun, the high-explosive shell streaking low to ricochet harmlessly off the ground beside the steel daemon and up into the hab block. The Leman Russ rocked back, its treads grinding over the tortured pavement as a fusillade of las-bolts lanced through its hull. More energy blasts slashed through its armour, striking its power plant and shattering the tank in a deafening explosion. Crown winced as the wreckage of *Morningstar* smashed against the hull of *Imperial Son*, the sounds of rattling crashes amplified within the cabin.

'Gavron,' barked Crown into her headset. 'Get your men in the fight!'

A short burst of static came through the Cadian's vox in affirmation. Thin black lines criss-crossed over the steel daemon, their hooked ends crunching into the ground on either side of the tank and pulling taut. Leaping from the windows of the surrounding hab blocks, Tempestus Scions zip-lined to the street, hellguns blazing as they hurtled down towards the steel daemon.

The Tempestus shock troops disengaged from their zip-lines as they hit the Land Raider's hull. Their boots thudded down, sinking into the spongy skin of the corrupted tank. Blood and ichor welled up as they fired down with their hellguns.

The steel daemon spun, tracks screaming in opposite directions. The Scions

stumbled, crouching and grabbing hold of the tank to steady themselves as they drew Krak grenades and readied melta bombs.

The spongy hull of the Land Raider rippled. Snapping jaws and lamprey mouths formed in its crimson armour, tearing arms and legs from the howling Imperial shock troops. One soldier was swallowed whole, sucked slowly down and devoured as his comrades struggled in vain to pull him loose. Others were thrown clear of the tank, quickly shredded by its heavy bolters or crushed to pulp as the steel daemon brought its tracks over their bodies.

Crown glimpsed Gavron through her scope as he struggled against the tank's living hull. Within moments it was consuming him, mouths forming beneath his boots to drag him down into rows of snapping fangs. She watched as he sank to his waist, bringing his hands to his chest where he carried a melta bomb. The charge detonated in a burst of smoke and flame. The steel daemon charged through it, bleeding from deep lacerations in its hull but its momentum unbroken.

Crown cursed as Gavron's vox link was severed, and she hurled the headset off. 'Vanquisher round, load and fire now!'

Brydl threw the shell into *Imperial Son's* breech, and Zevsin traversed the turret to lock onto the steel daemon.

'Sending!'

The Leman Russ jumped back as the main gun roared. The shell ripped past the target, grazing its hull and spilling a tide of corrupted engine fluids but failing to pierce its hide.

'Repeat!' shouted Crown. 'Lochna, get us moving now!'

Lochna hauled back on the control sticks. *Imperial Son* slewed back to gain distance from the steel daemon. Blinding flashes filled the cabin from the driver's vision slit as the Chaos tank fired its lascannons, the air within the tank spiking in temperature.

'Crown,' barked Lochna as his control console wailed with warning klaxons. 'We can't—'

Fire and smoke filled the front of the cabin as a las-beam pierced *Imperial Son's* glacis plate. Bits of cooked blood and scorched meat spattered over Heit as the tank listed to a grinding halt.

'We've lost drive function!' shouted Jesh over the din. Another blinding flash came, and the young Cadian screamed as the right sponson was sheared away. Smoke leapt over the rest of the cabin in a suffocating pall, whipping free into the square through the ragged hole in the tank's right flank where Jesh had been

moments before.

Heit shouted a wordless cry of anger and pain, wildly firing his heavy bolter. The weapon rattled, loose and off-kilter in his hands as he blazed through his remaining ammunition. He glimpsed the enemy tank in half-moments through the morass of smoke and flame, his fire blasting hunks of metallic meat from the steel daemon but doing nothing to halt it.

‘Get that cannon loaded!’ roared Crown. She looked down and Heit followed her gaze, seeing Brydl slumped over his station, a spar of metal through his neck. Crown leapt down from her seat, pushing the dead loader to the deck and pulling the shell from his blood-slicked hands. She slammed the round home, locking the breech closed.

‘Fire!’

Zevsin blasted the steel daemon, striking a glancing blow on its side that sent a cloud of smoke and oily blood spraying into the air. The Chaos machine fired back, and *Imperial Son* was wrenched around as another las salvo tore through its failing armour.

Heit’s heavy bolter clicked dry as its ammunition was depleted. He snarled, kicking the ammo feed in frustration.

‘Get clear, choir boy,’ shouted Crown, grunting as she lifted another shell. ‘You don’t have to die here, but I’m killing this bastard before I do!’

Heit looked for a moment at the side hatch, then back to Crown and Zevsin. Gritting his teeth, he pushed past the Cadian commander, squeezing up through the turret and into the cupola.

The air was superheated outside the tank, filled with the stink of exhaust and burning blood. Heit blinked away tears from the acrid haze as he gripped the cupola’s storm bolter. He raged as he opened fire, sending streams of bolts at the rushing steel daemon.

Imperial Son’s main gun fired, nearly throwing Heit from the turret. He clung to the storm bolter as his legs braced under the cupola. Looking up, he watched as the tank-killing Vanquisher round struck a direct hit on the steel daemon. The Chaos war machine vanished in a cloud of bloody fire and spiralling smoke. A rain of twisted carapace and corrupted machinery spattered over the hull of *Imperial Son*, hissing and leaving patches of frost where it landed.

‘We got it!’ Heit cried, as a cheer rang up from the Cadians within the turret. ‘We killed the steel daemon!’

Heit’s exhausted smile died as pinpricks of light grew from within the pall of

smoke. Dark beams, thick as tree trunks and cored by silver lightning, slashed out from the cloud through *Imperial Son*'s broken hull.

A crushing wave of heat and pressure tore over Heit as once again he found himself falling. This time, he did not feel himself strike the ground.

Hakaron stepped from the assault ramp of *The Hunger*, his boots crunching down on the shattered rockcrete of the square. A viscous cocktail of blood, fuel and engine oil pooled beneath the Land Raider in a dozen places, oozing from craters of fractured armour plating and shorn vascular networks. The beast would need rest, repair, and the souls of dozens of slaves before it could take to battle again. The warpsmith within was near death, his pittance of remaining self slowly yielding to the suffocating influence of the daemon.

The traitor Space Marine looked back at the tank. Its brief usurpation over him was just the beginning. Soon the beast would be beyond even his control. Once Regallus burned to ashes, *The Hunger* would have to be subdued, and hauled back to the war fleet in chains. Like so much of the Crimson Slaughter, it would become savage, governed only by the rage of the Neverborn who had claimed it for its own. *The Hunger* would join countless other weapons of war, kept imprisoned and guarded with sorcerous wards in the black depths of the warband's dungeons, only to be unleashed when the shedding of blood was needed.

It would never have long to wait.

Hakaron's head turned, hearing the shot before he saw it. With instincts he knew in his soul were unnatural, even for a transhuman, he lifted his pauldron. The round smashed against his shoulder guard, ricocheting off in a burst of ceramite chips before exploding in the air. The dissipating shock of the impact jinked him back for a moment, but he remained standing.

A second shot hissed past Hakaron, wide by a good margin. His would-be assailant was either untrained or rapidly losing strength. He had seen the telltale spark of a boltgun's muzzle flash this time, and with long strides he threw his power-armoured form ahead.

Another shot rang out, the bolt falling short and detonating in a burst of gravel beside Hakaron. He leapt upon the shattered husk of the Imperial tank he had destroyed. The mortals within it had thought to ambush Hakaron, and bring low the daemon engine he had brought to drown this world in blood.

The mortals had been foolish to think such fantasies. Hakaron had torn their delusions away from them as surely as he had torn away their lives. For a

warrior who straddled the realms of reality and unreality, Hakaron had always excelled at enforcing the cold truth of war.

Hakaron heard the click of a weapon hollow of its ammunition. He looked down, the icy sapphire lenses of his helm settling upon a ragged figure hanging from the turret.

It was a woman. Hakaron could hear the staggered rhythm of her heart fighting to push lifeblood through dying flesh. What paltry store of energy she had left was spent firing a bolt pistol starved of munitions, as the light began to drain from her bright violet eyes.

Cadian, thought Hakaron. The little gatekeepers of their carrion god's domain. Had she not been so close to death, Hakaron might have considered keeping her alive long enough to barter to one of the Black Legion. The Despoiler's chieftains so delighted in the torment of those who watched the Cadian Gate.

She pulled the trigger once more, snarling at the pain unleashed by even that small exertion. Hakaron nearly smiled. The audacity of hope. He had never known of a greater farce. There would be no hope where she was going. The Chaos Space Marine looked out upon a burning city that spanned a continent, and turned back to his tank.

'No...'

Hakaron looked down, seeing pale arms wrapped around his greave. The Cadian woman clutched feebly to him, the act pulling her out fully from the turret. There was nothing left of her below the waist as she sold her last moments scrabbling at Hakaron, one final defiance from a being too small to stop what was coming. The Crimson Slaughter were going to murder this world, as they would every world to fall beneath the Black Crusade until the Corpse-God was cast down from his throne of lies and his diseased kingdom was naught but ashes.

'Heroic nonsense,' whispered Hakaron, as he levelled his bolt pistol at her head, and fired.

Heit heard the shot boom across the broken square, jarring him into consciousness. He groped at the broken ground, trying to push himself to his feet. A marrow-deep agony drove the air from his lungs, and he collapsed. His leg throbbed with blinding tides of pain. Choking, he pulled himself forward, towards the edge of the square. If he could just make the edge of the hab block, he could get to safety. He dragged himself faster, clawing at the loose rubble.

Heit's mind swam as he crawled. The pain forced his thoughts into a tight

channel of instinct. He had to keep going. He had to survive.

Heit gasped as he pulled himself over the lip of a broken wall and out of the square. He forced his mind away from the pain in his leg. He had to find help.

They had wounded the beast. Maybe not killed it, but they had stopped it, for a time. Perhaps an entire regiment of the Astra Militarum was roaring towards them just this moment. Heit grinned with broken teeth as he indulged the fantasy. They had heard their vox chatter, and were sweeping forward in a devastating counterattack that would rout the forces of Chaos and kill the steel daemon.

That's right, thought Heit. They are coming.

Heit pulled himself into the corner of a bombed-out hab block, propping himself up into a sitting position with his back against a crumbling stone wall. His head was swimming. He blinked, trying in vain to focus his eyes. He worked his jaw, feeling a crust of dried blood covering the side of his head crack loose. At least his leg had stopped hurting. He could not feel much of anything any longer. No more pain. Just a gentle... spreading... numbness.

They are coming, his thoughts insisted. They will find you and evacuate you to a field hospital. Yes. They have to. You were one of the soldiers who hurt the beast.

Heit bent forward, bringing his hands to his mouth to cover a hacking wet cough. He looked down at his hands, sticky with his own blood.

They might even call you a hero.

Heit's head lolled forward, and he shook his head, throwing it back drunkenly against the wall behind him. He tried to focus on a small flame guttering in front of him in the rubble, though he could not feel its warmth. He was so very, very tired. His body was so heavy. Throne, more than anything in the world he wanted to just rest his eyes for a moment. He deserved a short rest before continuing on. The flame shrank, its shadows rippling over his waxen face.

A hero.

No, thought Heit. No, not me. The flame wavered, vanishing as his leaden eyelids slowly closed.

The real heroes are still in that tank.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian St. Martin is the author of the Horus Heresy: Primarchs audio drama *Konrad Curze: A Lesson in Darkness*. He has also written the Space Marine Conquests novel *Of Honour and Iron* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Lucius: The Faultless Blade* and *Deathwatch: Kryptman's War*, along with the short stories 'Adeptus Titanicus: Hunting Ground', 'City of Ruin' and 'In Wolves' Clothing'. He lives and works in Washington DC, caring for his cat and reading anything within reach.

An extract from *The Bloodied Rose*.



The things were still out there.

On the altar steps, Sister Felicity stood waiting for them. Her red armour was stained with gore, her black-and-white cloak in tatters. At one hip rested her now-empty bolter, at the other, her silent chainsword.

A small, upright figure in the heart of the broken cathedral, Felicity stood alone.

Before her, scattered about the cathedral nave, the tech-priest's servitors lay dead, their haphazard defence overwhelmed, their repairs all brought to an unready end. Jencir had commanded them to protect, and they had done so with utter brutality, hurling rubble and using their mechanised limbs to horrific effect – yet the incoming numbers had just been too many. Overcome by the rising tide, they had fallen as they had fought – mindless to the last.

In a ruined state, around the base of the steps, lay the five Sisters of Felicity's squad, their last stand thrown down. They too had fallen fighting, blade and bolter, fist and faith, savage to the last woman.

In her head, she bade them farewell: *blessed be their memories*. She would not be able to give them their Last Rites, but they had perished with courage, and they stood now at the hand of the Emperor.

With them lay the tech-priest Jencir, his back ripped open as he'd tried to flee – not an act of cowardice, but a failed attempt to reach the exterior vox-transmitters. And finally, slumped against the ruined wall, the missionary Lyconides was too broken to stand, his last breaths now rasping bloody, his lasrifle still gripped in his hand. His other hand was in his lap, as if trying to stuff his steaming bowels back into his belly.

She respected the man's courage – he was no soldier, but he'd given his best.

As Felicity listened, his final prayer drifted like a ghost across the emptiness, and was gone.

'Requiescet in lumine suo,' she whispered softly. *Rest in His Light.*

The missionary toppled over sideways and lay still.

Down in the nave, the things yammered.

They were coming closer now, skulking and sneaking – she could hear their claws scraping on the ancient stone. They were circling round to her sides, lurking in the hot, ruined darkness of transept and cloister. She could feel them pacing, feel their presence like a crawl of sweat across her skin. She didn't know if they were taunting her, waiting to see if she would falter, or if they were simply awaiting commands – but she knew that there were dozens of them.

Hundreds.

She drew the chainsword.

If she stood fast against the beasts' onslaught, she thought, she may yet get a strike at their master...

Before she died.

Slowly, Felicity walked up the final steps. She looked back at the fallen Jencir, his eye-clusters and mechadendrites hanging damaged and broken, his red Mechanicus cloak spread about him like a pool of blood.

She reached the high altar, and stopped before the final step.

Above her, the great window was missing, fallen from its stone frame thousands of years before; the new electro-candles, bought as a promise of reconsecration, burned with a tiny and defiant light. Despite the creatures behind her, she took a moment to bend one knee, her free hand tracing the fleur-de-lys on the front of her armour.

'A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos.'

And then she stood up.

And turned around.

The Sisters had not known.

Felicity's directive had come from Ophelia VII, direct from the canoness of her Order, Ianthe herself – and she and her squad had been sent all the way across the segmentum to this tiny world, this sweat of overgrowth and jungle. The previous deployment of Sisters had declared the location secure – they'd driven back the marauding orks, and had cleared the area enough to allow the tech-priest in. Felicity had come as security, and – more importantly – to ensure that the cathedral stayed within the ownership of the Order of the Bloody Rose, and of the Convent Sanctorum.

An icon of Saint Mina, or so it was rumoured, still lay within this building – and her Order were not about to relinquish it.

But their restoration had been interrupted.

Jencir had raised the alarm – his deployed servitors, seeking to understand the extent of the repair, had ventured into the crypts. They'd detected movement, and the Sisters had gone down on reconnaissance.

The first encounter had been small, and easily defeated.

But they'd had no time. Even as they'd regrouped, taken a tactical defence position at the head of the crypt's steps, more of the creatures had come.

And then more.

A welter of horrors, surging up from the depths. The servitors had been overcome in moments; the incoming beasts had seethed like nightmares, like a surge of teeth and blood. Outnumbered, surrounded, the Sisters had been cut off from their makeshift, modular habitations, and from any hope of off-planet communication.

They'd done the only thing they could – they'd fought back. They'd retreated, defended the altar with every prayer, with every breath, with every last expended round... and they'd *sung* with the fury of it, their voices raised to the cathedral's roofless, ruinous silence.

But the things had just kept coming, mindless and slavering, attacking from every angle. Krak grenades had slain hundreds of them, brought walls down in cascading rumbles of broken stone; the creatures hadn't cared. Felicity had seen her squad fight and fall, one after another, had watched the things dismember them, watched the creatures drag her Sisters' limbs away in their teeth and worry at them, gnawing on them like old bones. They'd scattered the women's remains in some deliberate pattern, some vile act of blasphemous worship.

It was too hot in here, close and suffocatingly still. Under her blood-scarlet armour, sweat slid down her spine. Her gauntlet tightened on the hilt of her still-silent chainsword.

Noli timere, she told them silently. *I do not fear you.*

Felicity did not know why she still stood while the others had all perished, but she suspected that the things had some greater purpose for her, more than just their thirst for her life.

Calmly, she recited the hymnal.

*'That Thou wouldst bring them only death,
That Thou shouldst spare none,
That Thou shouldst pardon none
We beseech Thee, destroy them.'*

And the creatures heard.

They were creeping into view, now, letting her see them. They came down the

aisle, and around the bases of the headless pillars; they rose up over the rubble like the slow advance of some thick, red tide. They came patiently this time, almost as if they savoured it; they came sniffing and snarling and licking, their long teeth bared and their spiked shoulders slinking low.

They were taunting her, and she knew it.

She raised her blade. She wanted to go down there, punish them for the deaths of her Sisters; she wanted to hack them to gobbets, pick them up and throw them against the walls, slam them into the cracked and weed-grown floor until they howled in pain and their bones broke and shattered—

But she was the Emperor's Daughter and her thoughts were clear.

She stood where she was, His light at her back.

The things came on, closer, closer. Their eyes were sharp as fangs, yellow and glinting. They reached the foot of the altar steps, and more and more came in behind them until the whole floor of the cathedral was alive, a writhing mass of red and glistening bodies.

With a rasping snarl, she started the chainsword. The sudden roar echoed through the building, and the things leapt forwards as if goaded. They bounded up the steps, baying with impatience, jumping for her throat.

'Mori blasphemous fui!'

Die, blasphemer!

She cut the first two clean in half, caught another on the backswing and sent it flying, its ribs half pulled from its body. Blood slicked her already-red armour. They were all round her in moments, worrying at her cloak, their teeth and claws scraping over ceramite and plasteel. She kicked with her boots, hitting skulls and spines; the things snarled and yelped. Her free hand grabbed a leaping creature; she snapped its neck with a jerk of her wrist and threw it aside.

The chainsword rasped its way through more.

Her blood and voice *sang*.

But still, they just kept coming. The cathedral was full of them, the whole floor rippling with spike-shouldered motion. They surged round her to get at Lyconides, and at the remains of the tech-priest. They threw themselves at her bodily, one after another, trying to knock her from her feet. She fought them off with knees and elbows and head-butts; she sawed into their red flesh, she kicked and stamped at them. Her free hand grabbed them by their collars and tossed them aside. But they had no regard for their own lives; they were driven by a bloodlust that burned from their skin.

Ten more died, exploding into mist and gore.

Twenty.

Twenty-five.

They just kept coming.

Piles of crippled creatures grew around her, slowing their advance. One sank its teeth into her vambrace and hung from her forearm, the weight dragging at her shoulder. But she was still fighting, still singing the words of the hymnal, still defiant and exultant, still burning with her faith that was every bit as powerful as their craving for blood—

They stopped.

She staggered, suddenly bereft of resistance. The one on her arm hung limp; she had no recollection of having struck it. She sawed it off at the neck, watching the body detonate before it hit the floor.

Recoiling almost reluctantly, the things shrank away. They growled at her, baring gore-smeared, yellow teeth. Coiling like curs, they slunk to the bottom of the steps and then stayed there, snapping at each other and pacing, restless.

They watched her as they did so, their eyes burning.

Felicity felt a rush of pure zeal; the Emperor was with her. She was still alive, still on her feet, still fighting. Her armour was scarred but intact.

And she was still singing, her voice loud in the vox though there was no one left to hear it.

But her discipline was strong – this was not victory, not yet. Those hounds were not beaten, they were waiting for something. She'd proven that she could best them, and they'd been called off...

By something bigger.

By something that wanted to face her itself.

Not victory – but perhaps the single highest purpose of her life.

Felicity was a Sister Superior of the Order of the Bloody Rose, here to reclaim this cathedral in the name of Saint Mina, and of the God-Emperor Himself.

She had failed.

Nevertheless, her final task was clear.

Her bloody chainsword in one hand, she laid the other on the very last of her krak grenades.

Whatever this warp-spawned horror may be, it did not daunt her. And she would take it down as she offered her life to the Emperor.

Defended by the high walls of the Convent Sanctorum, Sister Superior Augusta wore her padded scarlet underarmour and a chasuble of black and white. Her

steel-grey bob of hair fell forwards over her face as she bowed her head. Murmuring the Litany of Cleansing, she knelt upon the cold stone floor of her chamber, and she cleared her mind, her soul and her heart.

Augusta was a warrior, a Daughter of the Emperor and the fighting fist of His Imperial Creed – but these ritual moments were just as sacred as the bloodshed and the battlefield.

On the floor before her, laid out on its familiar red cloth, was her Sabbat-pattern ceramite armour, each piece positioned correctly, as illustrated in The Accords of Deacis VI. Her chainsword, stilled and silent, lay down one edge; her bolter, stripped and cleaned, on the other. The arrangement was as much a part of her as her litanies and the fleur-de-lys tattoo upon her cheek.

Coloured light tumbled from her tiny, narrow window, catching the scarlet curve of her helmet and making it shine.

It was dawn, and this was Lauds, and the ritual that came with each morning.

She recited, *'Et promissa – daturum adversus vires hostium Arma omnium qui oderunt nos.'*

He promised that He would grant us strength to face our enemies, the weapons of all who hate us.

As she intoned the words, she picked up the armour, piece by piece. She checked its fastenings, its purity seals, its strength and integrity; she studied it for damage, for cracks and dents, for uncleaned bloodstains.

A Sister's wargear was her second skin – one of the first battle-lessons Augusta had ever learned. 'Every Sister walks with the Emperor,' her tutor had told her, many years before. 'But she must also depend on three things – her armour, her weapons, and her Sisters that surround her'.

It was a lesson that Augusta had never forgotten.

Continuing her recitation, she picked up her vambrace to check its inbuilt chrono-compass, her pauldrons, and then her breastplate to examine its semi-hidden fleur-de-lys blade. Then she laid the last piece back upon the cloth and sat back on her heels, head bowed.

A familiar, armoured footstep sounded at the chamber doorway. Without turning, Augusta knew who it was, standing in the outer cloister and waiting for her to finish her morning devotions.

'Sister Superior,' said Sister Jatoya respectfully, as Augusta raised her head. 'I did not wish to interrupt.'

In one smooth move, Augusta came to her feet and turned around.

Her second-in-command stood waiting in the cloisters' biolume, her head bare,

her helm upturned under her arm. Her dark skin gleamed, but there was expectation in her stance – she was here with a request.

Or an order.

‘You’re early,’ Augusta said. ‘Do you not have a class this morning?’

‘Aye,’ Jatoya said. ‘Teaching the schola’s novices the finer tricks of open-handed combat.’ She gave a faint smile, and the light from the window lit her face with the reflection of the Saint, and with the deep colours of the Bloody Rose. ‘But Canoness Ianthe has requested our presence, Sister. When our devotions are done, we’re to report to the Order chapel.’

A rush flickered through Augusta’s skin. ‘Do you know why?’

‘No.’ Jatoya shook her head. ‘I’m not privy to such knowledge, and the servitor was little help.’ The smile spread, then faded. ‘But for the summons to come before the morning begins...’

Jatoya let the implication speak for itself. A personal summons from Canoness Ianthe was rare – in twenty years, half of them as the Sister Superior of her squad, Augusta had responded to maybe a dozen... and every one of them a call to war.

The rush grew stronger, but it was instinctive, recognisable. It was the touch of her faith, that so-familiar flare of passion and hope.

She looked up at the Saint in the window, at the holy light that haloed her stern, sword-bearing form, and gave a moment of thanks.

Jatoya said softly, her tone amused, ‘I feel the nature of our devotions is about to change, Sister.’

It wasn’t Jatoya’s place to speculate – but the two women had known each other for more than a decade. They’d stood side by side against the orks on Lautis, the aeldari at Mis’bah, the tyrannid invasion at the war-ravaged cities of Yulzond Cross. The trust between them was battle-honed, and strong.

‘You may be right.’ Augusta began to pick up her armour, donning it piece-by-piece – breast- and back-plate, cuisses, greaves. She closed her gorget around her throat, slung her blade at her hip, picked up her bolter and snicked the sight and magazine back into place. Then she opened the breech, sighted briefly down the barrel, and closed it again.

‘Very well,’ she said, holstering the bolter and picking up her helmet. ‘It would hardly do to keep the canoness waiting.’

They walked through the cloisters together, the huge drop of the convent’s outer walls to one side, the black rise of the Hallowed Spire to the other. The great,

stained-glassaic windows ran with rain, and the blur of starships – the war vessels of the Imperium, the cargo and transport ships of the Ecclesiarchy – moved across them like shadows.

The Chapel of Saint Mina was a later addition to the Convent Sanctorum, built by Deacis VI some two and a half thousand years after the ascension of Sebastian Thor. The Order of the Bloody Rose was young, but as warlike as its Saint had been, and no less militant.

Walking past the votive candles and the floating cherubim, past the statues of the Saints and the engraved prayers, Augusta murmured the Litany of Mettle like a reflex, words of hope and strength.

Beside her, Jatoya echoed each line.

Age and faith surrounded them. Since the days of Thor himself, the Sisters of Battle had carried the flame of their devotion to all corners of the galaxy, had waged a ceaseless war against the Emperor's foes – every witch, every mutant, every heretic, every xenos, every trace of Chaos wherever it could be found.

As if eager, Augusta's sword rattled against her thigh. She placed her hand on the pommel. Her squad been cooling their heels in the convent for almost a month – studying, practising, teaching the arts of war to their less experienced Sisters.

It was rare for a veteran of Augusta's rank to be at rest for this long, and peace was not in her nature. She missed praising the Emperor with bolter and blade.

From the convent, voices began the morning hymnal, the verses immediately lifting into crystal-pure, four-part harmony.

Gooseflesh prickled down Augusta's arms.

Jatoya said softly, 'I will be glad if this hiatus is at an end. By Dominica's eyes, if I have to spend another evening playing Tall Card...'

'Only because Sister Caia always wins.' Augusta chuckled, but briefly. 'But beware, Sister Militant. You may say those words to me, but in the presence of the canoness, you will show the proper respect.'

'Aye,' Jatoya agreed. 'I understand.'

She was nervous, Augusta realised – curious, as Jatoya had never once shown fear in the face of an enemy.

'But...' Jatoya made a final comment as they neared the chapel doors. 'Tell me you don't long for a new mission.'

They knew each other too well, and Augusta did not need to speak her answer aloud.

Click here to buy *The Bloodied Rose*.

THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER



Sign up today for regular updates on the
latest Black Library news and releases

[SIGN UP NOW](#)

JOIN THE FIGHT AGAINST CHAOS WITH THESE COMIC COLLECTIONS



WARHAMMER 40,000
VOL 1 / WILL OF IRON

GEORGE MANN
TAZIO BETTIN
ENRICA ANGLIOLINI



WARHAMMER 40,000
VOL 2 / REVELATIONS

GEORGE MANN
TAZIO BETTIN
ENRICA ANGLIOLINI



WARHAMMER 40,000
VOL 3 / FALLEN

GEORGE MANN
TAZIO BETTIN
ENRICA ANGLIOLINI



WARHAMMER 40,000
DEATHWATCH

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN
TAZIO BETTIN
KEVIN ENHART



BLOOD BOWL
MORE GUTS, MORE GLORY!

NICK KYME
JACK JADSON
FABRICIO GUERRA



DAWN OF WAR III
THE HUNT FOR GABRIEL ANGELOS

RYAN O'SULLIVAN
DANIEL INDRIO
KEVIN ENHART

Available in print and digitally at
TITAN-COMICS.COM

NOVELLA SERIES 1

1

THE BLOODIED ROSE
DANIE WARE



2

STEEL DAEMON
IAN ST. MARTIN



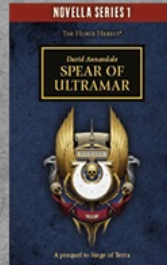
3

AURIC GODS
NICK KYME



4

SPEAR OF ULTRAMAR
DAVID ANNANDALE



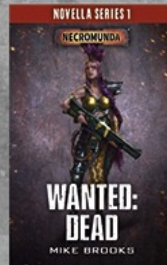
5

DREADWING
DAVID GUYMER



6

WANTED: DEAD
MIKE BROOKS



7

WARQUEEN
DARIUS HINKS



8

THE RED HOURS
EVAN DICKEN



9

**GOTREK GURNISSON:
THE BONE DESERT**
ROBBIE MacNIVEN



10

HEART OF WINTER
NICK HORTH



COLLECT THEM ALL

To Emma Grasmeder, my own Berlin-dwelling cyber-Valkyrie and muse. I'll always be confused why you would want to call me your friend, but I'll always be grateful that I can call you mine.

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2018.

This eBook edition published in 2018 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by David Alvarez.

Steel Daemon © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2018. Steel Daemon, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.

All Rights Reserved.

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

ISBN: 978-1-78030-823-4

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

See Black Library on the internet at
blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at
games-workshop.com

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in ‘seeding’ or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.