

WARHAMMER
40,000

YARRICK

THE WRECKAGE

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David Annandale

Their fire drove us to shelter. The enemy was at the top of the ridge, dug in, behind cover, invisible. We were exposed. We had nothing to target. The las hit us hard. The night screamed with lethal energy. We lost three more squads before we made it inside the shell. Just ahead of me, a shot struck a pocket of gas. I ducked back, shielding my face from the heat of the explosion. Flames washed over troopers, melting rebreathers into flesh. The barrage drove us on, and I ran through smoke thick with the stench of burning corpses.

Sixth Company of the Armageddon Steel Legion's 252nd Regiment went to ground. Our shelter had been a freighter once. Its provenance, its identity, even its shape, were long gone. I guessed what it had been by the size of the ruin, and by the eroding remains of its former self: the length and curve of the hull. The ship had been destroyed by its crash onto the surface of the moon. The wreck had been stripped of anything worth having, then had been mined for scrap metal. Now it rusted, its bones gnawed by the corrosive rains of Aionos. It had been reduced to a cyclopean, arthritic talon.

'Lures,' Sergeant Otto Hanoszek said to me as I caught my breath behind a wall of pitted iron. 'Those damned ships were lures.' He pulled off his rebreather and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his trenchcoat. He was a thin man, much younger than he looked, with a face in perpetual flush. He was greying, looked like a veteran, and commanded his squad like one, but was only a few years older than I was, and the mantle of commissar still felt new on my shoulders.

'They were lures,' I agreed. 'And they worked.'

Hanoszek waved an arm, encompassing all of Aionos. 'Not for the first time, either.'

He was right about that, too. I ducked my head around the tear in the hull and

looked uphill. I hadn't given up hope of gauging the location and size of the enemy forces. We needed better intelligence than 'high ground' and 'many.' At least a thousand, I guessed.

Night had fallen on Aionos. Its planet, the gas giant Kylasma, took up a third of the sky, and was still only half risen. A green smear through the drizzling clouds, it silhouetted the spires of the moon. They were twisted, broken shapes. They were the accumulated wrecks of thousands of ships, the centuries-old graveyard of the victims of the heretics we had come to purge.

'Lures,' I repeated. 'So the attack on Statheros was one too. Lures to catch what?'

'Us?' asked Hanoszek.

'I think so. But why?'

The incursion into the nearby Statheros System had been an atrocity. Three planetoid mining colonies devastated, their resources plundered, and everywhere the eight-pointed star of Chaos daubed with the blood of slaughtered civilians. Sixth Company's frigate, the *Castellan Belasco*, was dispatched. We had pursued what we had thought to be a force no larger than a squadron of lighters to Aionos. We had made moonfall and descended upon what we had thought was an encampment. It had been just another decoy.

The rain worked its way down behind my cap and down my collar. Its slight acidity burned. The troopers were used to this and worse on Armageddon, but as the precipitation broke down the metal, it released combustible pockets of gas from the wrecks.

'I hear you were on Mistral, commissar,' Hanoszek said.

'That's right.'

'Was it as bad as they say?'

I shrugged. 'We had wind there instead of rain. Take your pick.'

He didn't need to know any more. The wounds were still fresh. Some were still bleeding.

Las-fire streaked past my face as I pulled back. The sergeant grunted in surprise. 'Some good shots up there.'

'In that position, I should hope so,' I said. 'There is nothing impressive about their having the upper hand in these circumstances.'

Hanoszek laughed. 'As you say, commissar. Of course, they also *created* these circumstances.'

He was right, of course. I liked Hanoszek. He had a clear eye for the battlefield and the lunacies of war. What might have sounded like misplaced admiration for

the enemy coming from someone else was, with him, a simple acknowledgement of how things stood.

‘Then let’s see if the captain has something to say about changing them,’ I said. I had seen him move on towards the uphill end of the wreck.

‘Yes, commissar.’ His tone was noncommittal.

We clambered over heaps of broken metal and through the ghosts of the ship. Here and there, a bulkhead still projected sideways from the hull. Doorways without walls or rooms stood like skeletal sentinels. Along the way, we passed small groups of soldiers. Clad in their iron helmets and light-tan trenchcoats, they rested. Many were wounded. I was young, still feeling my way as a commissar, but I was no novice at war. I knew the challenges of this interlude. The relative safety after the punishing, unsuccessful fight was its own form of curse. During combat, there was no time to think of anything except the act itself. Now, in the limbo of inaction, when wounds were felt and when reflection was possible, was when thoughts of what might come next surfaced, and became apparent, and morale suffered. I stopped briefly to speak to a few troopers. I let them speak to me first.

I have known commissars who declare that there is no need to understand the soldiers who are in their charge. They say that it is enough to demand obedience to creed and mission. Perhaps it should be. But to understand the troops is to be better able to direct them. I sometimes think that the coldest commissars are fearful, though they would never admit this. They are afraid that if they get to know the soldiers as human beings, they will find it more difficult to carry out the more merciless aspects of their duty.

If this is so, they are cowards and a disgrace to our uniform.

So I listened to the troopers, and I spoke to them, trying to temper my response to the needs I heard. Where there was firmness of purpose, I gave encouragement. There were only two instances where I heard faltering that required discipline. Both cases, I noticed with some concern, were soldiers who appeared to be close to the captain. I had seen them drinking with him in the *Castellan Belasco*’s dining hall.

Context matters. So I had been taught, and so I had already learned, through hard lessons in the field. Context was why I tried, in those early days, to memorise the names of every soldier who fell within my remit. The day would come when that was no longer possible. I am pained by the thought of the anonymous thousands who, in later years, would die because of my decisions. I am pained, but not haunted. I know that if I had not made those decisions, the

numbers would be infinitely worse. Context matters.

And on that day, on Aionos, I could still know all the names. I noted the problem cases, and a doubt festered.

We found Captain Jeren Marsec near the uphill end of the hull. He stood between two pieces of bulkhead that rose twenty metres above our heads. He was well under cover, but ahead of him was a large gap in the shell, wide enough for ten men to pass through. The other sergeants were there too, and a large number of troopers had gathered to listen. Marsec stood on a heap of refuse so all could see him. He was grinning. He could grin well. Though he had the flash, pride and handsome profile, he was no aristocrat. Before conscription, he had been a foreman in a Helsreach manufactory. His natural charisma had carried him far. He was as popular with his superiors as he was with his subordinates.

‘So, Yarrick,’ he said when he spotted me, ‘ready to spoil the enemy’s little game?’

‘What does he think he’s playing at?’ Hanoszek muttered under his breath. I almost didn’t hear him.

I frowned. I didn’t mind the sergeant’s borderline insubordination. What I disliked was Marsec’s flippancy. He should show confidence in our ultimate triumph. But the confidence he radiated seemed to be based solely on his own self-admitted brilliance. It was perhaps true that, on the tactical level, we were engaged in a game with the cultists. But it was a serious one, and the enemy was winning. There was something in Marsec’s tone of voice that suggested he did not respect our foe’s skills. We had already been given ample evidence that we should.

Cheers greeted the captain’s question. Perhaps I was wrong. Hanoszek wasn’t happy, and some of the other sergeants were looking grim, but most of the soldiers around us hooted their approval of Marsec. He had, it was true, led many successful missions. So I swallowed my doubts for the moment and said, ‘I am always ready to ruin the day of a renegade, captain.’

‘Good.’ He pointed at the gap. ‘What do you see there?’

‘A way into the field of fire.’

He wagged a finger at me. That summoned a somewhat more nervous laugh from the troops. The commissar’s uniform is not well-loved. Nor should it be. It is meant to be respected and feared. Marsec’s little show at my office’s expense was expertly calculated to endear him even more to his company, but it was a brave soul who openly enjoyed mockery of that sort. ‘You lack imagination, Yarrick. I expected better of you. Where you see a death trap, I see opportunity.’

‘Oh?’ I grew uneasy.

‘The entire company is going to charge through that opening.’

My doubts about Marsec were twofold. In the first place, his very popularity was, I thought, a problem. He loved his troops, that was clear, and they loved him back. That was all very well, but I worried that the affection he felt would get in the way of making the hard choices that befell every command sooner or later. Would he be able to issue the orders that would lead to the sacrifice of some squads for the preservation of the rest of the company?

Secondly, and paradoxically, he was reckless. I believe this was because he was aware of his popularity. He wanted to be worthy of it. He wanted to give his troops glory. It is one thing to send soldiers to their death with the full knowledge that one is doing so, and of the necessity of this action. It is another to make a grand gesture with no thought of the consequences. And because his troops loved him, they would throw themselves after his dream no matter how unsound. There was a cult of personality growing around Marsec. That was dangerous. They always are. I still believe that today as I wrestle with my own.

‘He’s mad,’ said Hanoszek.

I silenced him with a look. I approached Marsec. At the base of his makeshift podium I said, ‘I wonder if you might explain a few details to me, captain.’ I kept my voice low, hoping he would take the hint. I had no desire to undermine his authority without sufficient cause.

He understood perfectly well. He remained where he was, and announced, ‘Commissar Yarrick is worried. He thinks I’m about to order a suicidal charge. Let me reassure you, comrades, I am doing no such thing. There is a risk. Of course there is. This is war! And without risk, there is no glory!’

Shouts of affirmation from the company. A bit muted, though. Hanoszek and I weren’t the only ones to see the obvious drawback of running straight into enemy fire.

‘I am in constant touch with the *Castellan Belasco*,’ Marsec continued. ‘We have the means to destroy this nest of rats in one swift move. We will present such a target, and such a threat, to our foes that they will be forced to respond in kind. They will mount a counter-charge, or they will have to concentrate their fire massively. Either way, they will be giving away their precise position. At that moment, the *Belasco* will strike with an orbital barrage. Comrades, are you with me?’

The roar was unequivocal. They were.

Marsec stepped down with the cheers still deafening.

‘So?’ he asked me. He had to speak into my ear and raise his voice so I could hear him. ‘What do you think, Yarrick?’

‘It’s a big gamble.’

‘Worth taking, though. We have to try something to break out of this box they’ve put us in.’

‘And if you’re wrong? If it doesn’t work? We could lose this war in this single action.’

‘We won’t,’ Marsec assured me. He clapped my back. ‘The rockets are ready to fly. The ship’s augurs almost have the enemy’s position. The problem is that those vermin are a bit too spread out, and under cover. We need to draw them out.’

‘We’re likely to do that,’ I conceded. I still didn’t like the plan. It felt wrong. Wars were rarely won by glamorous schemes.

‘So we shall!’ he said, delighted. He thought he’d won me over.

I was not convinced. Even so, I took my place at the front of the line as the company prepared to charge out of the hull. I would be coming out of the left-hand side of the gap. Marsec was in the centre. Hanoszek’s squad was a few rows back and on the right. The sergeant made a point of walking past me before joining his troopers.

‘What do you think, commissar?’ he asked. ‘Is this going to be a good death?’

His question was honestly meant. He wasn’t joking.

‘If this tactic achieves what the captain expects, then yes, to fall in this effort would be a good death.’

Hanoszek gave me a lopsided grin. ‘I already knew that. Do you think it will work?’

That was his true question: were the deaths going to be worth it? Was he about to die for a good cause, or in the service of another man’s ego? And I had answered him like a politician. I was a political officer. That wasn’t the same thing at all. Not if I could help it. So I gave a direct answer to his direct question. ‘I don’t know.’

His grin became broader. ‘Fair enough.’ He moved on.

‘The *Castellan Belasco* stands ready for our signal,’ Marsec announced a few moments later. ‘Warriors of Armageddon, forward!’

We charged out of the shelter and emerged halfway up the slope towards the ridge. On all sides, the corpses of the renegades’ victims loomed over us. We were storming up a valley of wrecked ships. Few bore any resemblance to what they had once been. They had become massive tombstones, designed by lunatics.

Metal reached for the sky with twisted desire. There were jagged angles the size of habs. Rotting husks, broken cylinders, fragments of towers and tumbled superstructures stretched away forever. We were in the land of industry's death.

I yelled my challenge at our enemies, daring them to cut me down. I raced with pistol drawn and sword upheld. I fired blindly into the night. And though I threw myself completely into the task of killing and survival, a part of my mind looked at the wider picture of two forces clashing in an ocean of wreckage and was dismayed.

The enemy did not return fire. There was no response at all to our attack. I stopped firing. Was anyone still there? We kept up the advance. In less than a minute, those of us at the front were almost at the ridge. I looked back. The totality of Sixth Company was now on the slope.

We reached the top. Before us was a landscape of exposed corridors and gigantic heaps of slag. There was no sign of the renegades. We stopped. If we advanced further, the footing would be treacherous and slow.

'Captain?' I asked. I knew we had fallen into another trap, but I couldn't see what it was. Seconds were ticking by. With each one that passed, I cursed myself for failing to see what had to be done.

Marsec was just as confused. 'Get me the vox!' he yelled.

Trooper Versten ran up with the communications equipment. 'I have the ship,' he said.

Marsec grabbed the handset. 'Come in, *Castellan Belasco*,' he said.

'We are here, Captain Marsec,' a voice from the frigate crackled back. I moved closer to hear the exchange. 'Are you in position?'

I didn't recognise the speaker.

'We are,' Marsec replied. 'But there's no one here. Abort mission.'

'We have you,' said the voice.

We have you. What did that mean? Marsec stared at the handset, then at me. His face was blank with confusion. I'm sure mine was too. When the realisation hit, it couldn't have taken more than two heartbeats after Marsec had received that answer. It was still too long. When I pick at this memory, I want to grab that commissar by the lapels and shake the young fool into action. How could he not see what was coming? How did he not realise the danger the moment he stared at that empty ridge?

My anger with my younger self is not rational. I realise this. It is powered by hindsight, motivated by my wish that I could have averted what happened next, and by other, later, greater frustrations. I have become much better at foreseeing

disaster. But thanks to the stupidity of powerful men, I don't necessarily have any better luck at heading it off.

So it took me those few beats. Even then I was still confused, but the presentiment of doom was strong. I knew enough to listen to it.

'*Take cover!*' I yelled. I plunged back down the hill. '*With me!*' I didn't worry about the protocols of the chain of command. I was obeying dire necessity. I ran in a diagonal path, abandoning the clear route of the slope to forge into the thickets of wreckage. It was slower going, but there was cover, and I had to get us away from where the enemy wanted us to be.

I glanced back. Marsec was among those following me. Another contingent was disappearing into the ruins on the other side of the path. Then a comet pierced the night. The orbital bombardment was coming, and it was aimed at *us*. The barrage bombs landed on the peak of the ridge. They were little more than large masses. But then, so are meteors. Dropped from space, their impact was devastating. The hill became a volcano. Tonnes of metal were vaporised or turned molten. An angry god hammered the ground, smashing it, reshaping it. Hundreds of little insects in human form died in an instant. I was running, and then I was tumbling, and then I didn't know if I was on my feet or not. The world had become a riot of sense impressions, all of them too much, too loud, too painful. I kept moving. I didn't know where I was going. As the night screamed, I barely even knew who I was. But if I stopped, I would die, and so would the soldiers who had followed me down the hill. That I knew. So I struggled on, buffeted by the monster sound, pursued by the heat of metallic lava. Behind us, the world flew upward in blazing fragments. Wreckage became ash. The air was choked with rust.

It ended. The thunder faded to the sullen crackling of flame and the groans of settling metal. After the blaze of the impact, night came back down, thicker and darker than before. It was difficult to breathe. I stood for a few moments, mind and body thrumming like a struck bell, trying to clear my head and understand where I was. The scrap heap that surrounded me was even more fragmentary than the hull we had sheltered in before. It was bits of framework and shards of bulkhead, piled every which way on top of each other. I felt as if I were viewing reality through a cracked lens.

I found the direction of the slope, reoriented myself, and looked for other survivors. We came together bit by bit, moving slowly back towards the centre of the bombardment. What was left of Sixth Company on this side of the wreckage began to cohere. Our losses were great. We were down by well over

half our strength. I hoped, but didn't dare expect, that there were some survivors on the other side of where the path had been.

We approached a transformed landscape. The closer we came to the point of impact, the more the wreckage lost all semblance of form. It was just vague shapes and angles now. There were still some big fragments, but for the most part we were moving between and over hills of scrap.

I found Marsec. At first he just followed me like a servitor. Gradually, he became functional again. He was a long way from leading, but he remembered his role well enough to be the visible centre around which the company could reform. There were a few dozen of us when we neared the crater. The soldiers had donned their rebreathers to better deal with the clogged air. I kept coughing up black phlegm.

'They took the ship,' Marsec was saying. His voice was hoarse. His eyes were full of a horror that was greater than the tactical disaster. He seemed to be trying to focus on something concrete. But his gaze flicked and flinched over every burned, mutilated corpse we passed. 'They took the ship. How is that possible? We saw their fleet. They couldn't take a frigate.'

'They've been taking ships for centuries,' I pointed out.

'Civilian vessels. I haven't seen any Imperial Navy wreckage here, have you?'
None that was recent, true.

Marsec didn't wait for my answer. 'How did they do it? They couldn't have. But they did. How—'

He stopped as we passed a wide pool of congealing metal. Its heat baked our exposed skin. Heads and limbs of men and women poked up from the surface, silvery-grey statues of agony. There must have been at least fifteen dead in this location alone. Marsec's face twisted. I saw a man who was experiencing guilt as a physical blow. He looked at me as if he would say something, but his personal horror was beyond his ability to communicate. I had no forgiveness to offer, and he didn't seek it. His decision had brought this fate to the troops he loved, and he knew it. I nodded that I understood, and we moved on.

I wasn't sure where we were going. It made a kind of sense to attempt to regroup close the point where we had been scattered. Beyond that, I had no ideas. I didn't know where the enemy was.

The entire top half of the ridge had vanished. The barrage bombs had left two gigantic craters. Our initial charge had been to the north, and we now stopped at the edge of the western crater. It was deep, wide and unnatural. Something massive poked up from the bowl. It had been untouched by the explosions,

which had simply brushed away the centuries of soil. It was the tip of a pyramid. The stone was black, with a green tinge. Its designs were complex, alien and completely unfamiliar to me. They were not Chaotic, that much I could tell. They were too regular. If anything, they spoke of a deathly, soulless order. Part of the formation of a commissar at the schola progenium was necessarily instruction in the enemies of the Imperium, their nature and kind. This was something new. It looked like a tomb. And if, as seemed to be the case, this was just the peak of the structure, and its lines continued underground, it was a tomb the size of a city.

One of the survivors was Versten, and he had been trying the vox every few seconds as we reassembled what we could of the company. We were down to not much more than platoon strength, almost all regular infantry. We had lost all of our heavy weapons, and had precious few grenade launchers and flamers remaining.

Perhaps because we were on higher ground now, or perhaps because the air was beginning to clear, he finally made contact with another operator. The sliver of good news shook Marsec out of his lethargy. There were other survivors, led by Hanoszek, and they had reached the lip of the other crater.

‘What are you seeing there?’ Marsec asked the sergeant.

‘There’s a... captain, I’m not sure what it is.’

‘That’s all right. There’s one here too.’

‘What are your orders?’

‘Hook up with us here. We will hold our position until—’

The las streak missed Marsec’s head by a hair’s breadth. We dropped to the ground. The single shot was joined by dozens. They were coming from the other side of the crater, and to our left. At the same moment, Hanoszek’s voice started yelling that they were taking fire.

‘Back down the slope.’ Marsec shouted into the vox unit. ‘Full retreat!’

But as we turned to start down, that path was closed to us too. With a roar, something dropped down from the clouds, and landed at the base of the slope. It trapped us, and it revealed how the ship had been taken. It was a Thunderhawk.

‘We’re saved,’ a trooper gasped. His name was Rohm, and I made a mental note to terrorise him thoroughly, should we survive this day.

‘We are *not*,’ I hissed. ‘Look at the markings.’

The air was still dusty, but even from several hundred metres away, the gunship’s livery was unmistakable: two scythes the colour of magma, crossed over a background of night, between them a cluster of burning skulls. I didn’t

expect the trooper to know the beings who fought under that emblem. I *did* expect him to know that this design belonged on no flag of the Emperor's Adeptus Astartes.

The xenos who had built the pyramid in the crater were a mystery to me, but I knew of the Chaos Space Marines who descended from the Thunderhawk's assault ramp. They were part of the store of dark knowledge that it had been my responsibility to learn. The need to punish ourselves with this dangerous lore had been impressed upon me and my fellow students in an address given by the Lord Commissar Simeon Rasp. 'You are the guardians of the Guard,' he had told us. 'Vigilance requires knowledge. Some knowledge requires faith to be withstood. Hold fast to all three.'

I did so now. 'Those are Harkanor's Reavers,' I said.

The squad of five massive figures began moving up the slope. Their armour was a deep black, broken up by lines that glowed like flame. As they drew nearer, it seemed to me that those lines were not markings. They were too irregular. And they seemed to be moving.

'We cannot fight them,' I said. Not so reduced in number, and under harrying fire.

'We can't stay here,' Marsec said.

I waited for him to issue orders. He did not. If we paused much longer, we would be finished. I turned my head to look down into the crater. There was one route left to us. 'Some of those doorways are open,' I said, pointing at the pyramid.

Marsec grunted in surprise. He hesitated. I gave him a second longer, thinking that even that might be a mistake. Then he called out, 'We go down!'

The fire from the heretics intensified as we descended the slope. We shot back, but they were still attacking us from behind strong shelter, and our only sense of where they were came from the flashes of las. We lost several more troopers on the way down. Not all of them died right away. But we could not stop.

There was an open vault at the base of the pyramid. We made for it. As its bulk loomed over us, an ancient night made of stone, my instincts cried out to stop, to run another way, to try anything other than go inside. I didn't listen. There was no choice. I forced myself to run even faster as I hit the threshold. If I displayed reluctance, my example would be ruinous. So I plunged in, calling out as I did, so all would know that I was still alive. Marsec was right behind me, and once I was inside, he came too, bellowing something that wasn't coherent but sounded enough like an order to get the company to follow.

Once we were all inside, we paused. Our eyes adjusted to the darkness. It wasn't total. The green designs in the smooth stone glowed like near-dormant lumen strips. They showed that we were in a corridor that carried on in a perfectly straight line for some distance. We could see just enough to advance, if that was what we had to do. Marsec posted a watch at the door while Versten and I contacted Hanoszek's contingent. I had to warn him about the Traitor Space Marines.

'We saw them,' he replied. They had taken refuge in the other pyramid. 'What are the orders?' he asked.

A good question. I suspected that Hanoszek knew that it was. 'Stand by,' I told him, and had Versten fetch Marsec. When the captain arrived, I filled him in. 'The sergeant wants to know what action he should take,' I said, and offered the handset.

Marsec stared at it, then took it. As he did, a call came from the entrance. 'Enemies approaching!'

That seemed to be the additional jolt Marsec needed. His voice was sharper, more in the present moment, when he spoke to Hanoszek. 'Any sign of hostiles, sergeant?'

'Yes, captain. They're coming down the slope.'

'Go deeper into the pyramid,' Marsec said. 'Use the space as best you can. So will we. When we make it out again, we'll link up with you.'

There was a pause. Then Hanoszek said, 'Captain, there are lights in here. These structures might not be quite dead.'

'They must have been buried for thousands of years. Whatever was in them most certainly is dead. We have no time to do anything else, sergeant. You have your orders. Go!'

'Understood.'

Marsec passed the handset back to Versten. He looked as if he wanted something from me. I nodded. That seemed to satisfy him. 'Let's go,' he said.

He led the way down the corridor. He sent no scouting party ahead. He was right. We had no other options. Our best hopes at this moment were speed and luck. And yet, I felt that he would have charged into the darkness even if there had been time to feel our way more carefully through possible enemy territory. I wondered if he really had learned anything from the disaster we had suffered.

We moved down the corridor. After a hundred metres, it branched left and right, while straight ahead was a steep ramp. We went down. The ramp switchbacked a hundred and eighty degrees, and deposited us in another wide

corridor. This one had many forks along its length.

We could hear voice and the tread of many boots echoing down from above. The heretics had entered the pyramid.

‘I want an ambush point,’ Marsec said as we jogged down the corridor. Either our eyes were finding it easier to see in the ghostly green half-light, or it was growing stronger.

‘Plenty of intersections here,’ I pointed out.

He shook his head. ‘Main tunnel’s too wide. After the surprise, they’ll still be able to use their numbers.’

He was right. I didn’t bother to mention that it was not just the numbers we had to worry about. I was relieved to hear him thinking like a warrior again.

We hurried down to the end of the corridor, and followed another ramp down to the next level. We were rushing to put more distance between us and our pursuers, to gain a little bit more time, but I was uneasy about venturing so far into the xenos construct. The risks behind us were bad enough. If we ran into something worse ahead, we could lose the entire company.

The third level down had even more branching corridors. We were in a maze. Though we had to take a side passage, it would be very easy to get lost once we were off the main path. The thought must have crossed Marsec’s mind, too. He took in all the choices and hesitated. We didn’t have long. I could still hear the heretics coming. Our lead had only grown by a few seconds at most. Worse, I could distinguish, above the general echoes of the pursuit, the heavy tread of something very large. The Traitor Space Marines were in the pyramid.

Trooper Lommell said, ‘With your permission, captain,’ and he barely nodded before she ran forward, ducking down one corridor, then another. The third seemed to offer what she wanted.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘We should set up an ambush down here.’

‘Why there?’ Marsec asked, but he brought the rest of the company forward.

‘It’s very tight, and it gives us a usable back exit. I ran with a gang in the underhive of Tartarus on Armageddon, sir.’ She carried the marks of her background. Her face was scarred with slashes in a cracked-glass pattern. When I had first seen her, I had assumed I was looking at an injury. It was not. It was a survival tactic in Tartarus. She had sliced her face herself, as a warning to her foes of how far she was willing to go. ‘This environment isn’t that different,’ she said. ‘It’s just cleaner.’

‘Good. Give us your expertise, trooper.’

She took us a few twists deeper into the labyrinth. The passageways were all

empty, silent. They were dead. Except for the light. Why was it present? Whose purpose did it serve? The pyramid felt like a tomb, yet we had seen nothing that looked like markers, and what need did a tomb have for illumination?

I managed to keep track of our turns. Lommell set us up at a point where the narrow corridor we had taken had two intersections ten metres apart. Those branches, narrower still, fed on either side to other halls that would take us back to the main one. We had a perfect kill zone, and an easy retreat.

‘Tartarus gave you a fine education,’ I whispered to her as we waited for our foe.

‘I didn’t think so at the time.’

‘We rarely do.’

We made just enough noise to give away which branch we had taken. Marsec sent a few soldiers on to create the illusion that we were still on the move, further along this passageway. The renegades took the bait. They rushed into our trap, laughing at the sport they were having.

This was my first look at them. In the dim green light of the pyramid, I couldn’t see many details, but I had a sense of degraded human beings, wearing patchwork uniforms, no doubt stolen from their multitude of victims over the years. Their corruption had a hundred shades, yet it also had a unity. Across all the faces were runic tattoos and scarification. All the designs, however varied and however hard to make out, were an affront to the soul. They were, in the end, a single thing: the brand of Chaos.

The cultists were charging in without discipline or caution, which was madness, doubly so in a structure that must have been as alien to them as it was to us. I regarded them with contempt as they crossed the kill zone.

Just before we opened fire, I saw one of the Harkanor’s Reavers loom out of the darkness. He brought with him his own terrible light. The designs on his armour that had puzzled me stood out clearly. They were cracks in the ceramite. Sorcerous heat spread fissures in the armour as if it were an eggshell. Baleful flame shone through. Then the cracks would seal, and new ones would appear. He was a mass of cooling lava given the shape of a man. That such a monster had once been human was beyond belief.

There was little chance that our ambush would take him down. We had no choice but to try. Culling the numbers of his followers would be a meaningless gesture if he still came after us. I prayed that Marsec, positioned in the shadows opposite me, realised this truth and waited.

He did. The forward elements of the cultists moved beyond the kill zone. The

Reaver entered it. Marsec waited a few seconds more, letting another dozen renegades escape, waiting until the Traitor Space Marine was close to the centre of the trap. Then he gave the signal by firing his laspistol.

We opened up. Enfilading fire filled the space of the corridor. The las was so bright, it was as if we had brought day to the tomb. The heretics caught in the web of energy beams went down in seconds. The concentrated fire was such that they didn't have a chance to retaliate. Their comrades ahead doubled back. They tried to mount a counter-attack, but by staying out of our field of fire, they had no angle on our positions in the side passageways. We had reversed the situation that we had faced outside. Now we were the ones under cover, ripping our foes apart.

Then there was the Reaver. He stood in the middle of the barrage with no more concern than if it were a rain shower. He raised a flamer and launched a stream of burning promethium into the nearest passageway. Screams filled the corridors. A corner of our ambush failed.

Lommell trained her fire on the Reaver's flamer as he fired into the passageway one down from ours. The weapon exploded, drenching the Chaos Space Marine in liquid flame. From the grille of his helmet came an inhuman snarl. He staggered back a step. He wiped at the promethium. It seemed to annoy him rather than harm him, but he could not see with fire engulfing his head.

From the other end of the ambush, Trooper Rohm fired his grenade launcher. The frag struck the Reaver full in the chest. It blew out the flames, but rocked the monster to the core. He roared in anger and pain even as he yanked a bolt pistol from his thigh and fired a wide barrage of shells. They didn't need accuracy. Any that hit one of our positions killed the troopers in the front line.

Where the grenade had hit, the Reaver's armour was a molten mass. Instead of cracks, here was a wide gap, blazing with eldritch fire. The ceramite was slow to reform. I leapt out of the passageway in a forward roll, staying low, beneath the spray of bolter shells. I came out of the roll in a crouch. I was right at the Reaver's feet. I aimed my bolt pistol at the roiling, burning chest, and shot the Traitor Space Marine point blank. Energies from the materium and the warp collided. The explosion knocked me flat. The Reaver stood there with a great void where his chest had been. His ribcage poked out, burned and broken. Where his hearts and lungs should have been there was now nothing. The fire went out. The monster's arms hung limp, and then he toppled backward.

The cultists faltered. We turned our attention to them. They had thought to trap us between themselves and their superhuman master. Now *they* were caught,

exposed, in the narrow corridor. We cut them down. I moved, crouching low, back to cover, and added my fire to the assault. I was exhilarated. We all were. The ambush had worked better than we could possibly have hoped.

As the last of the heretics fell, I glanced back, and my heart sank. The enemy had been cautious after all. A second force, larger than the first, was approaching. With it came another Reaver.

We were outnumbered, we had lost the element of surprise, and our cover was useless against power armour and a flamer. If we fought, we would die.

‘Go!’ Marsec shouted.

We bolted down the side passageways, taking the route Lommell had mapped out for us. Our only advantage now was speed. We knew where we were going. We sprinted, once more putting distance and time between us and the enemy. As I took corners at high speed, I blinked away the effect of the glowing designs. It would have been easy, at this pace, to follow their lines straight into a black wall. I turned into a wider corridor, and took it back to the main hall. Our portion of the company linked up. Marsec looked towards the way back up, but there was the sound of more pursuit coming from that direction, so we plunged on deeper into the pyramid.

We went down three more levels. The heretics were close. We didn’t have time to set up another ambush. We kept moving forward, even when we reached a level that was ominously different. It still had a maze of corridors along its periphery, but the centre was a massive block. Its rectilinear designs were the most complex yet, and their light was the brightest, and most deathly. The main hall widened out before the monolith, and became a series of parallel tunnels that dropped beneath it. When we reached the tunnels, we paused. Their slope was steep, almost a fall. In their depths glowed a green mist.

And there was something moving. We could hear what sounded like the shifting of weights. Worse, we heard footsteps. The light flickered, as if something had passed between us and the source. There were other noises too. They were uncomfortably like voices. They spoke no recognisable words, and they could not come from any living throat. But down there, something walked and spoke. Whatever had built this pyramid was not done with it yet.

We couldn’t have been perched at the edge of that descent for more than a second or two. That was long enough for us to hear and see all that was necessary. Marsec looked at me. We were trapped, yes. But we had one option. Perhaps it would be enough.

‘We hide,’ I said.

Marsec nodded. He raised his arm, waved his finger in a circular motion, giving the order to scatter. There were plenty of side corridors within reach, and we took them, racing for their shadows where we crouched down, motionless, silent, waiting for the arrival of our pursuers.

Throwing the dice on the fate of Sixth Company.

The Steel Legion is a proud fighting force. It has every reason to be so. It did then, too, though its time of greatest glory and most painful sacrifice, which would also be mine, still lay over a century in the future. This, now, was not a moment relished by any of the soldiers of Sixth Company as we hid in the dark and hoped that the enemy passed by. Doing so grated against my self-worth as well. But the Steel Legion has not earned its triumphs by fighting blindly, or without sense. We had a chance of victory here, and to seize it meant swallowing pride. That requires its own form of courage.

We waited. I watched, as close to the exit of my refuge as I dared, as the cultists arrived. Even with the damage we had done, they were still three times our number. The Reaver towered over them. They advanced to the edge of the tunnels. The Reaver barely paused long enough to look ahead before he led the renegades down the central tunnel. I listened to their war cries as they descended. A minute later, the cries became screams.

The first screams were of fear. Then, as I heard what sounded like energy discharges of some kind, I heard screams of agony. The Reaver roared. Guns fired. The sounds of alien energy intensified. The green glow became brilliant, a strobing, slashing light. The screams stopped as if severed. The Reaver's bellows filled with shock and pain. Then they too, fell silent.

Marsec stepped back out of the shadows. I joined him. We stared down into the tunnels. There was still movement down there, still the alien sounds. For the moment, at least, they weren't moving upward.

Marsec whispered, 'What's down there?'

'Something we are not equipped to fight, captain. But we can report its existence.'

'Agreed.'

Moving quietly, limiting himself to hand gestures alone, Marsec signalled our withdrawal. We maintained silence for the first two levels. When it became clear that the pyramid's denizens weren't following, and that the last of our enemies had gone down to their annihilation, Versten went back to work with the vox, trying to raise the scattered elements of Sixth Company.

Marsec called him up to the front with us. 'Anything?' he asked.

‘No answer from Sergeant Hanoszek, sir. But I received a transmission from Sergeant Brenken on the *Castellan Belasco*. She and some armsmen have freed themselves and are fighting back. She says that the occupying force is small. The Traitor Space Marines were the ones who captured our ship, and they left behind only a minimal group of cultists. They’re armed, of course, but...’

‘But it wouldn’t take much to dislodge them,’ I finished.

‘That’s what she thinks, commissar, yes.’

I gave Marsec a significant look. Our Valkyries, some distance from the ridge, should still be intact. Even with our numbers reduced to not much more than two squads’ worth, we could retake the ship.

‘Good,’ Marsec said. ‘We’ll link up with Sergeant Hanoszek. With our company reunited, we shall purge the scum from our decks.’

I frowned. He was assuming that Hanoszek’s contingent still existed. Two Reavers had come after us. Unless some were mounting guard outside the pyramids, which seemed unlikely, that meant the other three were pursuing Hanoszek and his troops. Those were formidable odds. Marsec was basing his strategy on an assumption for which we had no evidence. I was uneasy, but decided to say nothing until we had reached the surface.

As we were climbing out of the crater, Versten managed to get through to Hanoszek’s vox operator for a few seconds. The other fragment of Sixth Company was being pressed hard, and driven deeper into the pyramid. There was no question of their being able to set up an ambush. The heretics and the Reavers were upon them. They could not break off.

‘Send a message that help is coming,’ Marsec said.

‘Belay that, trooper,’ I told Versten. To Marsec, I said, ‘Captain, a word.’

I expected him to be furious at my intervention. Instead, he seemed eager to talk, as if it was important to him that he bring me about to his perspective. We left the troops at the lip of the crater, and moved down the slope a short distance to speak behind a rounded heap of congealed slag.

‘We cannot rescue them,’ I said.

‘We have to try.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘we are duty-bound not to. Such an attempt would be doomed. You know that as well as I do. We would then be leaving a frigate of the Imperial Navy in enemy hands. That would be an unforgivable failure.’

‘I have already failed my troops once this day,’ Marsec said. ‘I won’t do it again.’

‘You will if you follow this course. They will all die.’

‘I have to try.’

I looked at him steadily. He did not blink. He knew exactly what he was saying. He knew the consequences. His ego had led us to this pass. He understood this, and sought redemption. But we didn’t have the luxury for redemption. We needed victory. Before me stood a good man. The Imperium needed him to be something more, though. It needed him to be a good officer. Instead, he was the ruin of one. He was, in this moment of crisis, proving himself unable to make the truly hard decision. He was throwing that responsibility onto me.

‘I cannot allow you to jeopardise this mission,’ I told him.

‘No,’ he said softly. ‘No, you can’t. But you cannot make me abandon my troops.’

I pulled my pistol from its holster.

Marsec gave me a sad smile. He got down on his knees. ‘Do what is necessary, Commissar Yarrick.’

‘Why are you forcing my hand?’

‘Stop me or let me do what I must.’

I put the muzzle of the pistol against his forehead. He closed his eyes. Peace suffused his features. I felt a grimace contort mine. I knew what I was doing was correct. I have had to use this ultimate sanction against officers more often than I care to count. Each instance is a tragedy, a necessity whose causes are so *unnecessary*. But never before or since have I encountered a soldier who accepted my judgement with such grace. I hope I never will again.

The hard decision was mine, as was the harder action. Silently, I cursed Marsec for this moment that I would have to live with for all my years to come. I curse him still. He was, even then, still not fully honest with either of us. He was seeking a martyr’s end as redemption for his failure. In this way, he turned away from the hard decision. He made it mine instead. Mine the choice, and mine the even harder action.

So be it.

I pulled the trigger.

I marched back to the company. A horrified silence had fallen over it. ‘We make for the landing site,’ I said. ‘We are retaking the *Castellan Belasco*.’ I didn’t mind the gazes, whether averted or hostile. They couldn’t add to the burden I was already carrying, or to the further weight I was about to shoulder.

‘Get Hanoszek,’ I told Versten. ‘Don’t stop trying until you do.’

We had reached the base of the slope when Versten passed me the handset. It

was hard to make out what Hanoszek was saying. His words kept being cut off by what sounded like static, but I knew to be weapons fire. He was asking for help.

‘Sergeant,’ I said, ‘this is Yarrick. We cannot provide assistance. The ship is being held. That is the key to this mission’s success. Do you understand?’

More explosions and cries in the background. Then, ‘Yes.’

‘Is there any way you can bypass the enemy?’

‘No. We’ve already lost half our strength. They’re backing us down a tunnel. Commissar, there’s movement down there.’

I closed my eyes for a moment, hating what I was about to say. ‘Sergeant, go deeper. Head towards that movement.’

Another pause. I didn’t think it was only due to the fighting. ‘Commissar?’

‘What is down there will kill the enemy. Sixth Company will be victorious.’ Again, I asked, ‘Do you understand?’

There was no pause this time. ‘I do.’

‘The Imperium thanks you, Sergeant Hanoszek.’

‘This is simply our duty, sir.’

He would have made a fine officer.

‘I will remain on the vox,’ I told him. ‘All the way.’

‘Thank you.’

We had no more exchanges after that. He left the channel open. I heard the sounds of the end. I kept my promise, and stayed present, bearing what witness I could. I was there as we reached the landing site, and boarded the Valkyries. Hanoszek and his portion of the Sixth fought well and hard and as long as they could, luring the enemy inexorably to disaster. The fight was still going on as we reached the frigate, and the immoral, leaderless rabble that occupied the bridge was confronted with the anger of the Steel Legion.

I was barely aware of our victory on the ship. All of my attention was focused on the terrible victory inside that pyramid on Aionos. I was there to hear Hanoszek, in mortal fear but still fighting, cry, ‘Throne, what are they?’

He would receive no answer. None of us would for many years to come. Years of blessed ignorance.

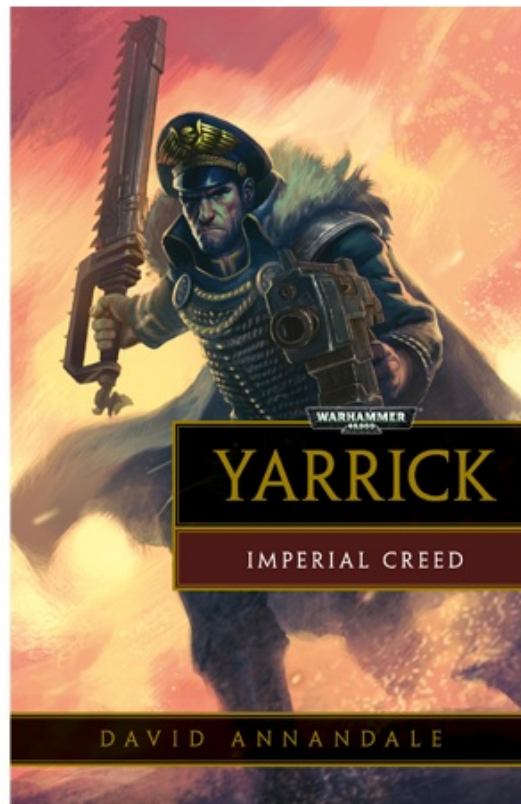
But on that day, I still sought the pain of knowledge. I forced myself to learn the cost of my decision. I listened to the transmission until the sounds of battle ceased. I listened for almost an hour after that. I listened as the reclaimed *Castellan Belasco* prepared to leave the system.

I listened to the hollow, hissing remains of the hard choices.

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David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. He also writes the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novels *Imperial Creed* and *The Pyres of Armageddon*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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