



WARHAMMER
40,000

YARRICK

A PLAGUE OF SAINTS

DAVID ANNANDALE

ALSO INCLUDES THE STORY 'SACRIFICIAL'

The logo for Warhammer 40,000, featuring the word "WARHAMMER" in a stylized font above the number "40,000".

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David Annandale

I used to believe there was a romance about command. I was young, then. A few of my illusions hadn't been burned away. There were still some figures who seemed to embody an ideal, as if *command* were something that could take on human form. It was not something I sought for myself. It was a role that kept falling upon me, but one of my youth's illusions was the belief that the role would always be temporary. I was a commissar, a political officer. I commanded morale. I did not lead companies or regiments. If I removed and replaced an unworthy commander, it was my pleasure to turn over the reins of power to the deposed officer's more deserving successor. I wonder now if, at some unconscious level, I believed that I was the guardian of an ineffable, sacred essence, preserving it from unhallowed hands.

Did I believe that *command* should somehow be passed to the care of a military saint? I hope not. I bow to no one in the strength of my faith in the God-Emperor. But I am painfully aware of the weaknesses of the poor vessels that carry out his will. And I choose to believe that, even in the early period of my service as commissar, I could make that distinction.

'Commissar Yarrick,' Artura Brenken said to me as we approached the leadership of Molossus, 'do these people look pleased to see us?'

'They do not.'

We were walking across a landing pad atop one of the upper spires of Hive Pyrrhus. At our backs was the lighter that had brought us down from the frigate *Castellan Belasco*. Brenken was captain of the Armageddon Steel Legion's Sixth Company of the 252nd Regiment. The *Belasco* waited at low anchor to deploy the full strength of the company. For now, the landing party consisted of the two of us and a handful of sergeants. Brenken had been of their number until very recently, and she still carried herself like one of them. She had not yet grown comfortable in her new uniform. Her close-cropped hair and augmented lower jaw marked her as a veteran of the field, at home in the foxhole, out of her natural habitat in an officer's quarters. But she knew her duty, and she was performing it well. She had replaced an unworthy captain. She had, by taking back the captured vessel at the same time as her superior was failing in his duty, proven herself deserving of the promotion. Crucially, she had also proven herself to the

rest of Sixth Company. The previous captain had been weak, but he had also been popular.

This was her first deployment as captain, back in that time before the Second War of Armageddon, when the Steel Legion still brought its might to bear on battlefields across the Imperium. The company and the ship, battered by the events that had elevated her, had been restored in strength. If this mission went well, morale too would be reinforced. In a just universe, we would strike the enemy on Molossus a decisive blow and leave the planet renewed of purpose and confidence. In a just universe.

‘This isn’t going to be simple, is it?’ Brenken muttered.

‘It never is.’ I was still learning too, but that lesson had been branded into my soul on Mistral.

We were thousands of metres above the planet’s surface. The wind at these heights was a desiccating furnace blast. It ripped our words away. We could barely hear each other, so there was no danger of being overheard by the group that had come to greet us, even though they were only a few paces away now. At the head of the party was Lord Governor Hartwig. I had reviewed the man and the world he ruled during the journey here. There had been little of note. He appeared to be one of those aristocrats who was closer to being a functionary, despite the finery of his robes. Molossus paid its tithes punctually and was an entirely unremarkable world. It had never drawn attention to itself until now. It was a rough, baking rock of a planet, so close to its sun that it teetered on the edge of being uninhabitable. Hive Pyrrhus was its lone population centre, and it had arisen around the immense refinery that was, in the end, the closest thing the planet had to a point of interest. It was rich in mineral resources, but most particularly it had vast reserves of promethium. The refinery’s output was prodigious. The sudden falling of its exports was at least as responsible for our presence here as the call for help that had been transmitted by the system’s defensive array.

If Hartwig’s expression was anything to go by, the call had not come from him, and that put me on my guard before the first words were spoken. His was frowning and his lips were pressed tight in anticipation of gross inconvenience. His face was florid, soft and weathered. He had the features of a man who had known hard labour, and had, by whatever means necessary, risen to a position where he could enjoy the luxuries of a sedentary life, and was doing so with a vengeance. His robes of office were lavish but crude. This was not a planet of artisans. I guessed that his pleasures were expansive as they were unrefined.

He was followed by five other people, and as I had a better look at them, I grew uneasy. They varied in age, body type and degree of augmetics. They

walked like they could take care of themselves in combat, but that wasn't what was drawing my attention. It was their eyes, I decided. They were looking at Brenken, at the sergeants, at me, at everything around them with the superiority that comes from a sense of one's own absolute sanctity.

Though their piety was ostentatious before they uttered a word, they were not ecclesiarchs. They wore loose, dark clothing: tunics, breeches, boots and long coats. I could see weapon holsters beneath the flaps of the coats. There were no designs on the clothing, no ribbons or ceremonial sashes, but I knew I was looking at uniforms of some sort. The three men and two women wore silver chains around their necks, but the pendants were concealed beneath the tunics. A halo of servo-skulls floated around them.

Inquisition, I thought. I couldn't guess what Ordo.

Brenken and Hartwig greeted each other. Brenken introduced our party. Hartwig was more reticent about his, giving us names but no mention of rank or reason for the presence of these individuals. The obvious leader of the party was Askonas. One of the men, Brand, looked so much like the woman called Schenk that I strongly suspected they were siblings. They both had the same pronounced brow, and eyebrows that arched downward into a permanent frown. The other woman was Ehrar, and the man Meinhardt. They might as well have been kin. Like the others, they had shaven skulls. While Ehrar's complexion was darker than Meinhardt's, they were twinned by the expressions of self-satisfied piety.

Inquisition, without a doubt.

'We appreciate the aid,' Hartwig began, and it was clear that he appreciated nothing of the kind. 'We aren't convinced that the situation warrants an intervention on this scale.' His tone was cold, but there was a slight twitch about his eyes. He was conflicted about his own lies.

'The request for help was a formal one,' Brenken told him.

'It did not come from me.'

'With respect, governor, the authorisation for deployment is dependent on the situation, not you. The details of the crisis were quite specific: your underhive is experiencing a full-scale uprising.'

'We have a militia—'

'Which, according to the report, is overwhelmed.' It took a bullheaded confidence for a captain to contradict a governor, let alone interrupt him. Brenken was showing a total disregard for politics. That wasn't the shrewdest strategy as far as her long-term career prospects were concerned. For this, I saluted her. She had done enough time in enough trenches that, for her, the concept of *long term* was meaningless.

'We made a preliminary survey of the hive's perimeter on our approach,'

Brenken continued. ‘Governor, there is a lot of smoke rising from the lower levels. We can see at a glance that your problems are becoming worse, not better.’

Hartwig opened his mouth to answer, but he was cut off by Askonas, who stood at his right shoulder. ‘There is nothing to be gained by standing on a point of pride, governor,’ he said. ‘We should be grateful that help has come in our hour of need. We see the hand of the Emperor Himself at work here.’ Though his words were conciliatory, the flatness of his delivery rang in my ears as anger far beyond the reluctance Hartwig was displaying. And yet, when he spoke of the Emperor, his eyes gleamed with faith, and the anger was tempered, as if we had been sent specifically to him as a spiritual test.

Askonas was tall, and the hang of his thin face suggested that he had, at some point in the distant past, been gaunt. His frame was massive. I wasn’t sure how much he still possessed of his original body. He wore gloves, and the full extent of his bionics was hidden by his clothing. But when he folded his arms, the material of his sleeves stretched over ridges, suggesting an exoskeleton. His movements were easy. He had the assurance of a man who knew how to fight and how utterly he would smash anyone who stood in his way. Though he must have been undergoing extensive juvenat treatments, his prominent cheekbones and hollow eye sockets meant that he had been born looking middle-aged.

‘Of course,’ Hartwig said. ‘Of course. We really are grateful.’ More slight tremors around the eyes. He was still lying. At least now it was clear to me that his role was that of figurehead. However indirectly, Askonas was the one with whom we would be dealing. What I wanted to know was what interest the Inquisition had in so mundane a world as Molossus.

Hartwig led us off the landing pad and towards the governance chambers in the uppermost spire. I kept my eyes on the servo-skulls. I waited until the inquisitors had entered the tower, taking their auto-scribes with them, before I spoke to Brenken. ‘We should know who called us,’ I said.

She understood. ‘I’ll start troop deployment immediately.’

‘Thank you, captain.’ The sudden, massive influx of personnel would be disruptive to the order of things in Pyrrhus. There would be, I hoped, enough genuine confusion for me to pursue some lines of inquiry without drawing the eyes of Askonas and his cohorts.

Brenken did well. A few words with Riebauer, the commander of the *Castellan Belasco*, were enough to trigger the action. Hartwig had barely finished giving us a briefing when the skies above Pyrrhus darkened with the flight of Navy transports. The landing pads of the hive’s spires became a mosaic of landing

zones. Hundreds of troops poured through the corridors of the towers.

Hartwig's order broke down. It had already been overwhelmed by the struggle in the lower reaches of the hive. All contact with the underhive was lost, and information coming about the situation for the next ten levels about it was fragmentary. As the uprising gained ground, the populations in the invaded zones fled, and the pressure of their movement spread the disorder further. Space and resources were insufficient. Pyrrhus was inching toward total systemic collapse.

Now, with the influx of troops to the upper levels, the technicians and bureaucrats who answered to Hartwig had no idea where to look. Pyrrhus was governed from chambers that were more administrative than political. The hive's industrial focus was evident here. Hartwig ruled in a control centre, not a palace. His robes of office, which would have been laughable in more ornate surroundings, seemed closer to a work uniform when he was surrounded by work stations. Banks of pict-screens displayed images of a multitude of sectors of the hive. The ones that should have been monitoring the underhive had gone dark. So, curiously, were most of the screens linked to the refinery, though Hartwig assured us that the rebels had not taken the vital heart of Pyrrhus. It was still operational. The extraction and processing functions of Molossus were untroubled. It was getting the promethium off-planet that had become a problem: the spaceport had been stormed by an enormous mob early in the uprising. Ships had taken off and collided with each other. The port was only flames and wreckage now.

Hartwig's power was a fiction. It had been for some time. What mattered more to me was how well Askonas and his group were functioning. I didn't expect them to be paralysed by the arrival of the Steel Legion. I did count on their monitoring abilities to be compromised. I had said very little during the initial encounter, hanging back with the sergeants, and I made sure Brenken was the face and voice of the company. I tried to look dull and a little bored. I honoured the rank of commissar, but I knew there were some of my brothers who hardly lived up to it, seeing it more as a vehicle for their own aggrandisement or the wielding of petty tyrannies than as the calling it was. Brenken shot me a wry glance now and then to let me know how much she appreciated having the spotlight to herself, which was not at all. But once more, she demonstrated a canny sense of strategy. She played up her authority, much to the quiet amusement of the sergeants.

I couldn't know that the inquisitors had dismissed me as irrelevant. I had to hope that they had, and act as needed. We were heading into a war whose full nature was being withheld from us. This was unacceptable.

The briefing that Hartwig gave Brenken improved nothing. ‘What is the cause of the uprising?’ she asked.

‘We don’t know,’ Hartwig answered.

‘Have there been no demands?’

‘None. Only the violence itself.’

‘There is no reason behind heretical disobedience,’ Askonas put in. ‘It is the very definition of unreason.’

Brenken didn’t argue the point. I wasn’t sure whether Askonas was lying or naïve.

In the hours that followed our first landing, the command centre grew crowded with logistics personnel. I moved through the increasing uproar, speaking to the Pyrrhus staff. I kept my questions general, innocuous. If Askonas listened in, he would hear me asking about the operation of the refinery, the day-to-day governance of the hive, the volume of exports. If I asked about the conflict, I looking into the morale of the serfs, ensuring that their heads were held high, that their hearts were full of faith in the Emperor and in the Imperial Guard to enforce His will and bring the rebels to heel. What I wanted to know was who worked off-world communications. I wanted to know who had called for help.

I noticed that one of the technicians, a harried woman named Fenner, was dividing her attention between two stations. ‘You appear to have more than your share of work,’ I commented.

‘Just until Ledinek’s replacement is chosen, sir.’ She gave the left-hand station an exasperated glare.

‘Where is this Ledinek when he’s needed?’

‘He’s dead. Killed in the fighting.’

‘Really?’ I raised my eyebrows. ‘What was he doing on levels that far down?’

She hesitated, eying my uniform, looking at the skull on my cap as if it, and not I, were the one truly asking the questions. Then, deciding that sharing gossip with a commissar was likely to be a point in her favour, she leaned towards me, making us conspirators. ‘That’s what we all want to know,’ she said. ‘He had no business down there. None honest, at least.’ She gave me a knowing nod.

I smiled at her and nodded back, lingering a bit longer. While she was busy at her station, trying to make herself understood over the vox to someone based at one of the landing pads, I casually tapped at Ledinek’s data-slates. Their content was sparse. Too much so. They had been purged.

Two hours later, I approached Hans Ledinek’s quarters. Finding the coordinates of his compartment hadn’t been difficult. Reaching the location had taken a bit longer. It was many levels down from the command centre, in the

main mass of the hive. If Pyrrhus had little outright nobility, it nevertheless had plenty of rich merchants and industrialists living in the luxury of the upper spires. In the city proper, I was the realm of the crowds, though I was still far above the underhive, which was the domain of the mob. Hab piled atop hab in Pyrrhus, the city growing on itself until, from a distance, it resembled a single metastasized structure. The difference between interior and exterior, street and corridor was erased. The sky was visible only in brief snatches that became more and more rare the deeper I went. Thousands of kilometres of plumbing and ventilation piping defied any dream of thorough maintenance. Leaks and dripping condensation took the place of rain. In some spots, water had pooled on the rough rockrete surface to the point that I splashed ankle-deep through it.

Ledinek lived above a vender of grox jerky. His home was a door and a single shuttered window in a grey façade that was a long row of twenty identical abodes. I wasn't subtle about my entrance. I was in the middle of an endless stream of humanity. My long coat and cap granted me a slight degree of elbow room as people tried to avoid direct contact with me, but I could not possibly get in unobserved. The question was whether anyone who witnessed my actions would care. A little while longer beneath the inquisitors' notice would suit me well, but I would not flinch before them if their gaze did fall on me now.

The door was a simple affair, corrugated and hinged. Three kicks and I was in. Though the simple fact of extreme population density made the passages and building faces of Pyrrhus squalid even kilometres away from the true desperation of the underhive, the interior of Ledinek's home was well kept. The floor was swept. The furniture – cot, iron chair and table, metal shelving – was pulled away from walls, where the rockrete was slowly crumbling from damp and the acidic atmosphere.

There were two more data-slates on the table. I gave them a cursory glance. As I suspected, these too had been wiped of anything but the most anodyne material. Did Askonas expect anyone to believe that Ledinek kept nothing but shift times and weather reports on his slates? The answer, I knew, was that the inquisitors didn't expect anyone to be curious enough, or brazen enough, to look. The data purge was just thoroughness.

I turned to the shelves. The books were all devotional texts, their leather spines cracked from heavy use. I picked one at random, *The Admonitions Against Tolerance*, and flipped through. Many passages were underlined. Notes in cramped handwriting filled the margins. The book had not just been read; it had been studied. I took down *Lachrymosa de Profundis*. More annotations in the same hand. So these were likely Ledinek's own thoughts. The picture coming together was of a very devout man, and one whose lot in life did not permit

ambition, nor its attendant corruption. In Askonas, I saw the signs of crusading fervour. As I continued to leaf through Ledinek's books, the impression formed of an individual whose temperament bordered on the monastic. 'You were a quiet man, Hans Ledinek,' I said aloud. 'But I think you might have some interesting things to say, all the same.' The sort of faith I saw demonstrated here could run deeper and be formed of a tempered steel even stronger than Askonas's aggressive form.

It was in the first volume of the *Inquiry into the Vigilance of Martyrs* that I found something different. Certain page numbers were circled, but were otherwise free of notations. I flipped through the book, noting the other occurrences. I frowned. There was significance here, but I couldn't see what it was. I scanned the shelf again. The other two volumes of the *Inquiry* were filed at random between other books. I took them to the table. I opened *Volume II* to the same page that had been circled in the first. In the margins, along with the usual amateur exegesis, were dates. The pattern repeated on the other pages. I followed the same key in third volume, and found clusters of numbers scribbled between the lines. Ledinek's handwriting here was so microscopic, it was barely legible, and was hard to pick out from the printed text. If I hadn't been looking closely, I wouldn't have seen anything. That was, I knew, the idea. Which meant these numbers were likely the most important piece of the code, and the biggest risk Ledinek had taken. I stared at them for several minutes before their pattern clicked. They were coordinates, marking locations in the hive.

I went back and forth between the dates and the coordinates. My sense of the layout of Pyrrhus was still crude, but I was able to get a rough idea of what Ledinek had recorded. The hive levels indicated varied greatly. The early ones were in the upper reaches of the spire. Those corresponding to the later dates were so far down, they were close to the underhive. Despite the wide range of the levels, all of the locations appeared to be near the core of the hive. The refinery, I realized.

The last entry had a question mark. That was speculation, then, rather than something he had witnessed. I wondered what he had seen. It had to be something dangerous for him to know, but that he felt he had a moral obligation to track. And now he was dead.

Had he been following the inquisitors? That would explain the caution. It would also explain his death. The last coordinate would have brought him close to the fighting. No one would be surprised if he were killed taking such a foolish risk. It was possible that that was indeed what had happened to him, but there was a convenience to that solution that I distrusted.

I looked up from the books, thinking through my course of action. A

commissar had no right to question the Inquisition. But I had no qualms about questioning the actions of individuals. Any human institution was prone to corruption. Only the Emperor in His divinity was beyond such flaws. At that time, I had barely begun to explore the full breadth and richness of the tapestry of moral rot, but I had still seen enough to be inoculated against most forms of naiveté. My experiences on Mistral had been of great, bitter help in that regard. If Askonas was acting in ways inimical to the good of the Imperium, then I would fight him.

I had few certainties to go on, but those were rare luxuries in war. I had confidence in my guesses. Hartwig was under the thumb of Askonas. Therefore, it was Askonas who was most displeased by the intervention of the Armageddon Steel Legion in the Pyrrhus upheaval. Ledinek had felt driven to investigate something, and was now dead. I had no idea what the inquisitors' agenda was, but I could see enough to feel that it was toxic. The duty of Sixth Company on Molossus was clear. If Askonas opposed it, then I would oppose him.

I replaced the books and stepped out of Ledinek's quarters. I pulled the battered door shut, as a gesture of respect for a man who had tried to do what he knew to be right, and had died in that effort. I would honour him further by not letting his death be in vain.

I had done what I could here. It was time for battle, and I knew that my war would be on two fronts.

I ducked behind the wall. Las streaked past the spot where I had stood a moment before.

Brenken cursed as she waited for her plasma pistol to cool down. 'More rifles,' she said. Her voice was muffled by her rebreather.

I nodded. 'They're getting them from our dead.' My own voice echoed oddly in my ears. The weight of my rebreather tried to pull my head forward.

'So now we're arming the rebels. Wonderful.'

'No glory without struggle, captain.'

She grunted, then whipped around the corner and fired. The superheated plasma vaporized three rebels. The rushing mob fell back. Reloaded, our squad rushed on them, pouring fire into their bodies. The rebels had the numbers, but not the weapons. They had some, scavenged not only from our dead but from the defeated militia and lower level barracks. Most of the rebels, however, carried nothing more lethal than lengths of pipe. The passage we were in was narrow, its length jinking every ten metres. The rebels couldn't advance more than three abreast. As we pushed forward, the crowded conditions worked against the rebels. They weren't soldiers. They had no discipline, no skills to draw on

beyond raw survival. They collided with each other. They panicked. Some tried to run. Others, further back, who couldn't see what was happening, were still trying to advance.

Screams shifted from rage to pain and fear as we cut the enemy down. We waded into a mass of writhing, struggling bodies. We were slowed by the need to clamber over a hill of dying meat. We kept marching, and we kept killing. For the moment, our squad had the momentum.

'Is this what you meant by glory, commissar?' Breknen shouted over the din of the massacre.

'All duty is glory,' I told her. I meant it, but I also understood her distaste. We would have to fight hard to win the war, but individual battles were little more than the extermination of vermin.

And vermin was what the enemy resembled. The men and women were ragged, feral. There was a certain universality to the denizens of underhives across the Imperium. No matter the world, when conditions were at their worst, the final reaches of desperation seemed to produce similar endpoints of human regression. I saw sharpened teeth, nails turned into claws, ritual scarification that turned faces into howls of twisted flesh. Wire, spikes, and broken glass merged from palms, cheeks, arms, shoulders. As the rebels died, flesh and scrap became confused. I didn't know if the crunch beneath my boots was from bones or inorganic detritus.

I was not without sympathy for the most abandoned inhabitants of hive cities. My training as commissar had required that I know all the hells that might birth the troops whose morale would be my responsibility. But I felt no pity here. The rebels had risen like cancerous froth, slaughtering everyone in their way. They deserved nothing but the same in return, nothing but the most brutal annihilation.

We kept moving forward, over and through the bodies of the enemy. Ahead, the passageway straightened for a longer stretch. The filth-stained habs on either side rose twenty metres to the next level. Crumbling rockrete walls, millennia-old, leaned towards each other. A few lumen globes dangled from the roof like moons turned cold and brown from distance. The air that I breathed tasted both stale and sharp, like old rubber on the verge of combusting. It was foul, but it was clean. Without the rebreather, I would be taking in the sludge that passed for an atmosphere in these depths. The greasy smog was breathable, just, if one didn't mind a life that was really just a gradual poisoning.

For the Steel Legion, it must have felt just like home.

I looked to my right and saw the way that trooper Lommell was hacking at the enemy with her sword. She struck with a special ferocity. There was anger there, and a hatred that was personal. She was a product of the underhive of Tartarus

on Armageddon. This must have been even closer to home for her. She attacked as if she imagined that by sheer brutality she could send her own past back into the darkness below. She was punishing the rebels who had not earned, as she had, their place above the ground.

The mob thinned as we cut our way through to the rear elements. I had holstered my bolt pistol. I used my sword too. We all did. There was nothing to be gained in wasting ammunition on a rabble that had, for the moment, lost the will to fight. Most had their backs to us now, and were clawing at each other in their hurry to retreat. A few still attacked, though. One came at me with the ends of his fingers replaced with metal hooks. I brought my sword up in a diagonal slash. I chopped through his left wrist. I threw off his attack, but not the arc of his flight, and we collided. He was malnourished, wiry, and grappled with rabid fury. He sank his claws into my shoulder and used his stump like a club. He lunged his head forward, snapping at my throat. He had replaced his rotted teeth with jagged iron. My rebreather's tube blocked the attack. My right arm was still extended, and I brought the pommel of my sword down on his forehead. There was a sharp crack at impact. I felt something give. Blood poured down his face and into his eyes. He uttered a cry as wild as it was despairing. His entire body shook, his motor control abandoning him. And yet somehow he attacked again. Something beyond reason, some drive that seemed beyond even the logic of death, pushed him forward. I snapped his head back with my left hand, kept my gauntlet on his face, exposing his throat. I slammed the pommel on his windpipe, crushing it. He fell, his claws tearing furrows in my coat. He hadn't hit the ground before another rebel just behind swung a nail-studded pipe at my head. I ducked beneath the blow, reversed my sword and plunged it into my new opponent's belly. I pushed, driving the sword deep even as I stomped on the other man's neck, snapping it.

Dead weight on the end of my sword. I pulled it out of the body, and now the rout was total. What was left of the mob was in full retreat. We pursued, and started firing again. There was no pride to be taken in gunning down enemies in the back, except the pride in doing what was necessary. If we left any alive, in another minute they would be back, attacking either here or somewhere else on this hellish battlefield.

I couldn't call it a front. There was no front here. Only the boiling struggle of insects.

We were still in part of the hive city proper, but the underhive was spreading its infection, collapsing already porous boundaries. When I wasn't walking over bodies, my boots were squelching in a mulch of composting waste half a metre deep. In these far reaches, it seemed that the rebels weren't rising, but that they

were dragging the rest of hive down into their netherworld.

The war for Pyrrhus was a stinking mass of contradictions. The battles raged over a large area, yet they were all struggles in narrow passages, cul-de-sacs and tangles of iron and rockcrete fragments that were either collapsed structures or buildings that had been left unfinished and forgotten for tens of centuries. Brenken had had no choice but to divide the company into autonomously operating squads, each striving to pacify one small area of this warren. There were thousands upon thousands of rebels, many times more than we had troops, but the cramped quarters worked against the full unleashing of a mob's strength. The rebels had overwhelmed an untested militia for whom city warfare had been, until now, only a theory. Against even a single company of the Armageddon Steel Legion, they could do little. Shrouded by trench coats, all human features concealed by helmets, visors and rebreathers, the troopers weren't individuals. They were a collective engine of death that ground the flesh of the enemy into muck.

The rebels were terrified, and well they should be. This arena of war had deprived the Steel Legion of the use of its Chimeras. There could be no mechanized infantry charge here. But the hives of Armageddon were as hellish as its landscape. Lommell was among those who had grown up in the worst of the pits, but every Steel Legionnaire had a deep instinct for urban warfare. On that world, a citizen learned how to navigate a hostile environment, or did not reach adulthood. Against such a force, the rebels had only one weapon: sheer multitude. Trooper Versten, the vox operator, relayed a constant stream of updates to Brenken. At every corner, the Steel Legionnaires were crushing resistance. Yet there was no sign of victory. We killed the rebels, and they kept coming. They retreated, then surged forward again. We were wrestling with a tide, and our numbers were being whittled down. The rebels could not fight an entire company, but a regiment would not be able to stop the gradual advance of the uprising.

Askonas and his team had joined us. They had been as eager to join in the fray as they had been chilly about our arrival. I didn't believe that they were putting on a show of enthusiasm for our benefit. The inquisitor has not been born who gives a moment's thought to the esteem of the Imperial Guard. I chose to believe that their zest for battle was genuine. Somehow, the battle was useful to them.

I wanted to track them. In this maelstrom, there was no way I could keep them under observation if they chose to vanish. But so far, they had kept in constant touch, alerting us to their movements, and helping direct our efforts against larger concentrations of the rebels. They knew the hive intimately, and could guide us around obstacles and along short cuts that did not appear on the

outdated maps and schematics of the hive.

I noted that fact. It meant that they had been here for some time. They weren't locals, though. None of them spoke with the slightly nasal accent of Molossus.

As we pursued the final remnants of the mob we had just broken, another message came from the inquisitors.

'Captain,' Versten called. 'There's a more open space not far from here.' He rattled off the coordinates. 'Askonas says there is a large gathering of the rebels. They will meet us there.'

'Presumptuous fool,' Brenken growled. But she couldn't deny the tactical importance of the information. 'Which way?'

He repeated the coordinates. 'We keep heading in our current direction.'

'Interesting,' I said.

Brenken turned to me. 'Why is that, commissar?'

'We are, with help from Askonas, consistently moving toward the hive core and the refinery.'

'The complex's protection is a priority.'

'These coordinates are also getting closer to the ones Ledinek recorded.' I had told her what I had found in the books. Though I did not share my suspicion of who Askonas and the others were, I knew that she didn't trust them either. That was good enough.

'You think we are being led?' she asked.

'Perhaps. We might be a useful escort. They would find it difficult to get to these areas on their own.'

'Why would they wish to?'

'That is the question.'

The current path ended at a blank wall. We headed left and found an even narrower passage with our original heading. From there, we travelled by whatever means we could towards the coordinates Askonas had given Versten. We climbed over rough barricades, through the gutted shells of habs. When we passed beyond the feeble illumination of what lumen globes and strips there were, the guttering flames of war and riot gave us just enough light to make our way forward. Here and there, details of the detritus would leap out at me. A child's shoe. A water-stained, fungus-covered book. A frying pan. They were fragments of domesticity, reminders that, until a few weeks ago, there had been another struggle in this part of the hive: the struggle to live with even the smallest trace of normality. This would always have been a zone of rampant, random violence, but not of war. Most of the inhabitants had fled the advance of the rebels, putting great strain on the levels higher up. But once we crushed the uprising, the people would return here. This fetid, disintegrating maze of endless

night was their home.

Home.

Not for the first time, I was glad that the word held no meaning for me.

‘We’re close,’ Versten said.

We worked around a tumble of derelict shaftwork, and found a route that might almost have been a street, if it hadn’t been for its large pools of stagnant water. It ran between two walls whose thin windows appeared only every five metres, and in a single row halfway between the ground and the ceiling. Then there was an open space before a large building. The route went straight towards its central doorway, one large enough for vehicular traffic. I was looking at a warehouse, I realised, though I was sure that it had not been used in that capacity for a very long time. The people at these levels were menials of the lowest sort. Nothing of any worth would be stored here anymore. The hive had grown above the warehouse and beyond its utility. I didn’t need to guess what the warehouse had become. I had seen the same phenomenon many times. Prior to the uprising, it would have been shelter for the least fortunate of these regions of the hive – a vast, crowded, stinking store of sleeping, breeding, fighting, miserable, desperate bodies. For many, however nightmarish the conditions inside, it would have been their last fingerhold before a slide into the underhive.

It wasn’t a refuge now. At the doorway, I saw the inquisitors. They were raining fire into a huge mob. A massive concentration of rebels was trying to escape from the warehouse. I wondered why they were inside in the first place. Had they been herded there? I couldn’t see how. Were they using it as a staging ground? That seemed just as unlikely. What I had seen of the uprising so far was just a riot on a vast scale. There was nothing organized about it. The enemy force was a mass of individuals who happened to share the same desperate goal.

The inquisitors were being forced back as we came up behind them. The mob was too huge for five people to contain, though not for lack of skill or equipment. They were all brandishing bolt pistols, except Askonas, who was actually wielding a bolter. There was a pile of the dead before them. The mass-reactive shells had left enormous wounds in the corpses. Many of the bodies were missing heads. I saw more skulls vaporized as we arrived. The inquisitors wore reflex armour beneath their robes. Askonas, again, was the exception. He had power armour, the endo-skeleton linked to the huge bionics of his arms. With his war gear, he was even more massive than when I had first seen him.

I realized that I was evaluating him as a potential adversary. This did not please me. But it didn’t surprise me. Askonas glanced my way as we approached. The look was meant to be dismissive, but I returned his gaze and forced him to hold it a beat longer than he had intended. If he knew what I had

been investigating, and had intended to send me a message, I sent him one in return.

He was a poor judge of character if he thought I would be intimidated. If his actions could hurt the Imperium in any fashion, then he did not yet know the meaning of contempt.

The inquisitors no longer appeared to be concerned with discretion. Whatever they were playing was reaching its endgame. Brenken and the other Steel Legionnaires took in the Inquisitorial insignia on their weapons, the great skull on Askonas's breastplate. They said nothing, showing instinctive wisdom. They might not know exactly what authority was vested in these men and women, but the quality of the equipment and the imperiousness of their attitude left the soldiers in no doubt that these people represented real power.

Brenken had a dozen troopers in her squad. They added their fire. Las and bolter shells stopped the rebels' advance. We pushed forward with the inquisitors, and closed in on the warehouse entrance.

'Why have they gone in there?' Brenken asked Askonas.

'They didn't go in,' he said. 'They're coming out.'

We reached the doorway, and saw what he meant. The warehouse was gigantic. It must have had twenty or thirty levels, each over ten metres in height. We were at entrance to the top one. The warehouse reached down and down and down. Large portions from the centre of the floors were missing, though wide strips along the perimeter were still intact. The floors had been metal grating, and must have been scavenged for scrap. Now the building was a vast hollow shell, a conduit up from the underhive. The ladders between the levels were still intact, and the rebels were swarming up them. Thousands of them. Tens of thousands. The ground floor, barely visible in the light of makeshift torches, writhed with the struggling crowd. From this distance, the rebels resembled a carpet of maggots.

We blasted another cluster of rebels before us. There was no more room for them to retreat. As their corpses fell back, they knocked their fellows off the ragged ledge of the floor. Scores plummeted, shrieking, into the depths. There was a gap, then, as more scrambled up the ladders to the top level. We had a few moments to breathe and plan our next move. It was difficult to look away from the grim multitude. The task before us had no end. The sight was an invitation to despair.

'Too many,' Trooper Rohm muttered. His grenade launcher sagged in his arms.

'There is no such thing as too many,' I snapped. 'Not when there is a duty to fulfil. We are here, we are called to serve, and we are the hammer of the

Emperor. That makes us legion. We are too much for the enemy.'

Rohm straightened. 'I apologise, commissar.'

I gave him a curt nod.

'He's right, though,' Brenken said to me, too softly for the other to hear. 'We can't fight them all.' She looked around. 'We need an alternative.'

I turned to Askonas to see if the inquisitors had anything to propose. This, it seemed, was where they wanted to be. They weren't paying any attention to us. Their focus was entirely on the rebels. They kept firing, at the ladders and at the groups that rushed along the periphery of the level. But they seemed at least as interested in *studying* the rebels as they were in killing them.

I resisted the temptation to do the same. No time. If I could steal a moment later, perhaps. Now we had to act before we squandered the opportunity before us. This was by far the largest concentration of rebels we had encountered. If we could find the means to crush them here, then...

'Crush them,' I said, repeating my thought. 'Like insects.'

Brenken turned to me. The inspiration striking her too, she tilted her head back. The ceiling was a ribbed vault. It had long since lost whatever pretence of grandeur it might once have possessed. The fresco had flaked away, leaving only the black smear of centuries of oily smoke. The pillars at the four corners of the warehouse were pitted, rotten rockcrete. 'Risky,' Brenken said. The ceiling was also part of the ground for the next level of the hive. If we brought it down, we might trigger a pancaking collapse.

'Necessary,' I replied. The next few regions above us were as derelict as this one. Those who could flee the fighting had done so. However, the monstrous density of Pyrrhus meant that there was there was no room for everyone to go. Many of the wretched still cowered in the dank, fetid blocks that erased the distinction between habs, prisons and hells. The avalanche could kill them. Though the decision was Brenken's, I took on the responsibility. The idea was mine. The innocent blood to be shed would be on my hands.

Brenken thought for another few seconds. She shot more rebels down. The pressure of the rising tide was growing. We wouldn't be able to contain the situation here for much longer. 'Kaldis, Rohm,' she called. 'Demolition charges on the pillars to our right and left. Grenade launchers, concentrated fire on the supports opposite. Everyone else, we hold the enemy inside.'

'A sound decision,' Askonas said. 'This ground is contaminated with sin. It must be purged.'

Brenken grunted in reply. She didn't look at the inquisitor. We didn't need his approval for the action, though he was giving it to us all the same. He turned from the hordes long enough to smile at us and nod his head. There was no

mistaking his gesture. He was *blessing* us. Behind my rebreather, my lips pulled back in distaste. The man was so convinced of his own spiritual purity that he was starting to behave like an ecclesiarch. The Inquisition's powers were vast. They did not, however, extend to the care for my soul.

Rohm and Kladdis shouldered their lasrifles and ran to the corners, already pulling demolition charges out of their backpacks. We redoubled our fire to keep the rebels clear of our side long enough for the explosives to be planted. It took the two men less than a minute. On the other side of the warehouse, grenades blasted chunks out of the pillars. Rohm and Kladdis returned, and Brenken signalled the withdrawal. We backed up slowly, never letting up the barrage. Las, shells and grenades shredded the rebels. My bolt pistol clicked empty. I grabbed a krak grenade from my belt before a new clip. I rolled the explosive on the floor before us. It went off at the head of a ladder. Floor and rungs melted and dropped, taking with them the burning corpses of rebels. The rush in our vicinity slowed by another small increment.

The inquisitors withdrew too, but a bit more reluctantly. I noted again their intense scrutiny of the rebels. *This is important*, I told myself. Their interest could not be strategic. There was nothing of note in the way the mob attacked. It was a simple, savage rush. Whatever held Askonas's attention, or whatever he was looking for, was something else.

We were shooting into a solid wall of bodies. There was no way to miss. Without taking my finger off the trigger, I turned my head to study the inquisitor's face. His eyes were flicking from rebel to rebel.

I looked back at the enemy. *This mob is different*, I thought. *Find the difference.*

The raggedness and the crude body modifications were not unusual. Nor were the signs of mutations. These people were not heretics. They were in revolt, but they were not cultists. There was no fanaticism in their faces. They were afraid.

Afraid.

I had thought, earlier, that the rebels feared *us*. Now I saw that I had been mistaken. Every wretch that climbed and ran and lunged in our direction bore the same rictus of fright. Terror was at the root of the uprising. These people were not launching an invasion of the upper reaches of Pyrrhus. They were fleeing the underhive.

I felt a brief spasm of sympathy. I crushed it. My discovery did not change the need to shatter the rebellion. Whatever their motivations, these people had disobeyed Imperial law. The source of terror would be dealt with, but order would be restored. By any means necessary.

We had backed out of the entrance now. Only a few metres separated us from a large crush of rebels. The mob pressed forward harder and harder. The people at the front slowed and died, but the push from those coming up was relentless. We could not force any kind of retreat. The mass of desperate humanity advanced with hydraulic inexorability. Only sudden, mass death would stop the mob now.

The lead rebels reached the doorway. We gunned them down, but they were the first to die outside the warehouse.

‘Run!’ Brenken shouted.

A final volley of grenades held back the mob for a few more seconds as we fled back towards the habs and the hope of shelter.

We reached a narrow passage. ‘Do it!’ Brenken ordered.

Rohm squeezed a detonator. There was a rippling *krump* from inside the warehouse of the charges going off and stone falling. The structure lost all vertical strength. It collapsed all at once, its shape vanishing in a roar of rubble and billow of choking dust. The roof fell, and with it everything it had been supporting from the level above. A terrible chain reaction took hold. The cascade of wreckage escalated, as if the entire hive sought to pour itself into the funnel of the warehouse. The fall spread over our heads. Stone and metal rained down. The ground shook with impacts. A crack opened before my feet, and I imagined this level too collapsing to the ones below, crushing us in its death throes. A chunk of rockrete the size of a man bashed back and forth between the two walls, breaking itself into pieces just before it flattened me. We pushed deeper into the space between buildings. We were shielded from the worst of the debris, unless these habs collapsed too.

The roar above us faded, and we stopped. I turned around to face the direction of the warehouse.

The dust blotted out all light. I did not taste it with the rebreather, yet my lungs still wanted to labour. The thunder of the destruction was deafening, so I could not hear the screams. With the blindness of the dust, I could not see any victims. Some might have considered this a mercy. I refused it. I made myself think about the victims, whether rebels or blameless. Tens of thousands of rebels had just died. How many loyal citizens of the Imperium had also met their end? No way of knowing. It would have been easy to take refuge in that ignorance. I confronted the cost. I would be failing myself and my duty if I tried to ignore it, if I tried to do anything other than acknowledge the full reality of my actions, and the consequences of my decisions. Telling myself that this had been Brenken’s call was dishonest. I had thought of the strategy, and I had urged it.

Never look away, I told myself.

I was, at that instant, learning a lesson. It is one that I am still learning, so many decades and dark choices later. Though I am not glad of the innocent lives I sacrificed that day, I am grateful that I had the wisdom to recognise the importance of the moment, and what I should take from it. I am grateful that I had the strength to do so. I am grateful that my reaction was not to recoil in horror, and vow never to take such action again. I knew that I *would* face these choices anew. I did not welcome them, but I did feel ready for them.

The roar of the collapse faded. The dust lingered. It slowed the progress of the battle. The sound of struggles in other quarters of the level diminished as the cloud choked and blinded the rebels. It was several minutes before we could see again. We stood in an oasis of calm. All the enemies in our vicinity had been annihilated. The quiet was, I knew, temporary. The sense of victory was an illusion. For the time being, we had stymied the rebel advance in this quarter. Nothing more. At best, that bought us some time and some choice.

We returned to where the warehouse had stood. The shattered bulk in its place was just beginning to become visible through the dust.

‘Where’s Askonas?’ Brenken asked.

I looked around. The inquisitors had vanished. ‘Pursuing an agenda,’ I said.

‘Try raising him,’ she told Versten.

Versten tried, but received nothing back on the vox.

‘What agenda, do you think?’ Brenken said to me.

‘I don’t know. But it is linked to the uprising. Askonas was looking at the rebels as if they were specimens.’ I thought for a moment. ‘I believe he and his group have headed further down. Becoming part of this mission gave them the opportunity to study the uprising at close quarters. We may have just opened the way for them to go much deeper.’

‘But why, in the Emperor’s name, would they want to?’

‘The fact that they do is reason enough to learn for ourselves.’

I couldn’t see Brenken’s face behind her visor and rebreather, but the tilt of her head was expressive. She was less than overjoyed by the political slant her operation was taking. ‘Would you have us fighting another official branch of the Imperium, commissar?’ Her question made me wonder how much she guessed about who Askonas might be.

‘Not if it can be helped,’ I said, and meant it. ‘There are some tasks that might fall to me alone.’

‘You take the title of political officer very seriously, Yarrick.’

‘My oath of office is what I take seriously.’

I walked forward through the slowly settling dust, starting for the position where I had last seen the inquisitors and angled towards the right of the collapse.

I was making a wild guess. I had little enough to go on, though I reasoned that wherever the route Askonas had taken couldn't be very far. I put my faith in the Emperor to guide my path, and He did. Ten metres from the rubble, between the shells of two buildings whose original purpose had been lost to squatters and grime, a narrow passage led to a rusted metal staircase descending into the depths. As I looked into its darkness, I heard the occasional distant shots echoing up from below. The gunfire stood out from a background of white noise. It was the murmur of a crowd. It was somehow unclean, like the rush of sewage, and the vibrating complaint of flies.

I turned around. Brenken had brought the rest of the squad to the passageway's entrance. 'We should take these stairs,' I said.

She shook her head. 'There are many other battles still underway on this level.'

'And they will continue without cease. This will be a war of attrition, and that is one we will lose,' I said. 'Captain, if we want to win, we must stop the uprising at its source. To do that, we have to know what that source is.'

'Find out why the rebels are frightened,' she said quietly.

'You saw that too, then.'

'Yes.' She joined me at the head of the stairs. 'Not a lot of room,' she observed. The staircase was wide enough for three troopers to walk abreast. More than enough for the squad to descend quickly. Cramped, though, if she was thinking in terms of a larger action.

'The full company?' I asked, hoping I had understood her. I would be relieved not to have to make the argument myself.

'If there is something in the underhive that is terrifying the entire population, we'll need more than a squad to deal with it, I would think.'

'Quite so, captain.'

She called Versten over. While we waited, she said to me, 'We're going to regret this descent, Yarrick.'

'I'm sure we will. And we would be derelict in our duties not to make it.'

'That won't happen in this company again.'

'I know it won't.'

Versten arrived with the vox unit. Brenken sent out the order for all squads to disengage from their current battles and converge on our position.

From far below us came the sound of moans.

The wailing grew louder as Sixth Company dropped down into the underhive. The staircase was a straight route down through the same levels that the warehouse had reached, and a few more beyond that. It switchbacked down

though a graveyard of broken foundations, disused conduits, and façades that had gone blind with ruin. We were in the roots of the hive, those early beginnings that could not be amputated no matter how gangrenous they had become. The troopers lit our way with hand torches.

The further down we went, the more distinct the sounds became. There was no longer any gunfire, but there were screams, all forms of them. I heard fear, agony, madness and rage. But these shrieks were sharp slashes that rose above the endless moaning. It was as if the waves of a great sea in a storm had found their voice, and it was a mindless, hungry, predatory howl.

The staircase reached a level metal floor that might once have been a loading platform. It was about twenty metres wide, and over a hundred long, reaching along the full length of the wall at one end of a large open space. It rested on top of a pile of rubble that had turned into a crumbling, jagged hill. This expanse too had been a warehouse. What I could see of the walls near us still ran straight, though they were pocked with holes, some large enough to be caves. Girders stabbed down from the ceiling, stalactites jutting at impossible angles. Thick, glistening, black moss dangled from them, dripping water and slime. Water stagnated a metre deep on the chamber floor. The foam of decaying chemicals covered its surface.

Here too was the cause of the uprising. Here was the source of the fear.

‘Zombies,’ shouted Rohm.

‘Trooper!’ Brenken snapped. ‘Remember yourself.’

‘Yes, captain.’

Rohm apologised for his cry of fear, but he was right. Zombies filled the space before us. There were easily five thousand here, and the torch beams revealed more and more and more shambling through the chamber entrances. The Curse of Unbelief was still a fairly recent threat to the Imperium at this time, but it had happened on enough worlds for its legend to spread across the galaxy on anxious whispers, and all of us had heard one tale or another about. Some of those stories were more accurate than others. But they all agreed on the main points. Every member of Sixth Company knew what was before us. Thanks to the concrete knowledge of the zombie plague that had been given to me at the schola progenium, I knew exactly how dangerous the threat was. The troopers feared contagion, and they were right to do so. They thought their rebreathers would protect them. On that point, they were only half-right.

The victims of the plague staggered and gibbered. Their lips had shrivelled and pulled back over rotted teeth. Their flesh was putrefying. It bubbled and hung from their bones, dropped in flaps from their skulls. Many of them had the same sore marking their foreheads. It resembled three circles in a triangular

formation. They were, to all appearances, corpses that had been decomposing for months, and yet they walked. And they breathed. A green, writhing vapour poured from their jaws. It hung in the air like a slick. With every passing second, more and more of the space was filled with the miasma. It was a cloud fed by the dead, its tendrils reaching out to drag more victims to living death.

The Steel Legionnaires' rebreathers would protect them from the gas. Their uniforms would give them some protection from the clawing and biting of the dead. But the true insidiousness of the plague did not depend on physical transmission.

The zombies lurched and grasped for the uninfected humans still in this chamber. There were perhaps a hundred of them. They had rushed in here just ahead of the zombies, and had reached a dead end. The only way up and out from this space, away from the levels that had fallen to the plague, was the staircase. Sixth Company, occupying on the platform, blocked access. There were dozens of uninfected bodies around us. They had been shot. The gunfire I had heard earlier, I now realised, had been from the inquisitors clearing their way through clusters of rebels.

Our torches picked out the rest of the refugees gathered along the periphery of the chamber, scrambling up the slopes of refuse. The zombies were clumsy and slow, their reflexes and motor functions as rotted as everything else. But what drove them was inexorable. They did not know failure. They hit the slopes like waves. They stumbled up, slipped and fell, rose again, and little by little, through the sheer pressure of their hungry mass, reached their prey. They tore the rebels apart. They pulled flesh off in strips, yanked organs from open torsos. They feasted while those further back shrieked their hunger. They feasted, but found no relief.

Some of the rebels were left alone. They moved away from the knots of slaughter. They appeared stunned, sluggish. They coughed without cease. The infection had taken hold.

The current flowing through the mass of zombies shifted as they became aware of Sixth Company. They came for us. Their howl rose higher at the appearance of fresh prey. The Armageddon Steel Legion opened fire. Serried ranks of lasguns and flamers rained purging destruction on the creatures. Waves of zombies perished, but the flood entering the warehouse was unending.

There was a new urgency to the company's attack. There was also fear. That was good. We were simple mortals. We had not been transformed into demi-gods like the Adeptus Astartes. Nor did we have the invulnerable faith of the Adepta Sororitas. Our flesh could fail. We could know doubt. We were the prey for the zombies, but we were also prey for the plague itself. We were right to be afraid.

We had to keep the zombies from reaching the platform. If their tide rose that high, they would kill us.

It was the doubt, though, that could doom us. Despite their physical protection, the troopers were vulnerable because of that weakness. I knew this. More important than any shots from my bolt pistol was my role as commissar. Faith was the shield. I had to keep it raised against the cancer of doubt.

I moved back and forth along the length of the platform, raising my voice over the constant fire, taking my exhortations to the entire company. 'Heroes of the Imperium,' I called, 'now we find our calling here! Now we can truly be the salvation of Molossus. The unholy stands before us, but what can it do against our faith? Against the strength of the God-Emperor, it can do nothing. Nothing! What can death threaten? We face it every moment of our service. It is sweet and fitting to die for our Emperor, even here. Has honour left us in this dark place? No. Has courage? No. Has faith? No and no and no! Rejoice in your faith. Revel in it. Strike these wretches with the force of infinite righteousness. And if you die, know that you do so in the light of the Father of Mankind!'

And now there was a new sound in this place of damnation. It was the sound of hundreds of warriors of the Imperial Guard releasing all of their hate, anger and revulsion in a primal roar of defiance. It was more powerful than any words I could speak. It was the voice of faith itself. It could do nothing against the zombies, yet it felt like a weapon of great power. The mystery and threat of the creatures appeared to drain away. For the moment, they were just another enemy to be exterminated.

For the moment.

The Steel Legion uniform was another source of strength, buying us a bit more time. The troopers could not see each other's faces. The menacing, implacable appearance of the warriors had no effect on the zombies, but concealed fear, and so reinforced morale.

Brenken stood in the centre of the defensive wall, at the very edge of the platform, visible to all her troops. As I strode past her, she said, 'We need another move, Yarrick.'

She was right. If we did not have the means to stop the push of the uprising, we had even less of a chance of ending the zombie plague. We would be lucky to hold out for more than a few minutes in this room, never mind destroy what could be millions of the infected. We were on the edge of having to stage a full retreat, and abandon Molossus to its fate of quarantine and Exterminatus.

That would have been surrender. If not to the zombies, then to Askonas, because I *knew* that he had some responsibility for the catastrophe engulfing Hive Pyrrhus. I do not believe in surrender now. I didn't then. Neither did

Brenken.

There was no sign of the inquisitors. They had passed through this space. If I could find their path, I might know what ours should be. I made my way toward the far end of the platform. It extended another ten metres beyond the last members of Sixth Company. Where it met the wall, I saw another doorway. It was a small one, originally a maintenance access. It was easy to miss in the darkness and the shadows of other fissures. I ran towards it.

I was a few steps away when a zombie lunged over the edge of the platform. It clutched my coat with talons that had lost most of their flesh. It arrested my run. I swung my bolt pistol into its face and blew its head apart. More of the infected were clambering up behind it. I kept firing. I did not want to find myself trapped if the passage beyond that doorway was blocked, and I could not have the zombies flanking the company. But every moment I spent in combat here was a second closer to a greater defeat.

Two came at me. I killed one. The other fell and grabbed my boots. Its grip was stronger than it had any right to be. It was gripping me with the force of the disease. It yanked hard. I felt my balance go. I tore my left foot from the thing's grasp and took a hard step back. The jar ran up my spine. I shot the zombie in the back, severing its torso in two. It moved still, trying to gnaw through my boots, but it had lost its leverage. Steady again, I jammed my sword through its head, then kicked the corpse away.

I looked up. Lommell and Rohm were racing to shore up my position. I gave them a few seconds to arrive, during which I fired and swung, fired and swung. During those moments, I allowed myself the full rein of my spiritual disgust. The threat that the zombie plague represented was enormous. So was its obscenity. It was Chaos's special mockery of the Emperor. If my hatred could have taken on physical form, it would have crushed even the idea of the plague.

Lasfire joined my efforts, jolting me from my fugue of destruction. I blinked. My uniform was covered in spatters of blood and bits of putrescent flesh. I brushed them away, nodded to the two troopers, and ran through the doorway.

The passageway beyond was clear. I had expected to have to pull out my torch, but there was a faint glow visible through the opening at the other end. I made my way forward as quickly as I could over the uneven floor. Old bones snapped beneath my heels. I reached the exit, and found myself on a broken catwalk. It extended a few dozen metres into the air, sagging and twisting before coming to a ragged end. I had come to a vast open area, the largest I had seen in the entire hive. The floor here was another level lower than in the chamber I had just left. The zombies formed a carpet of squirming, struggling, ululating flesh. They were packed so tightly that they could barely move. To my far left was a

steep ramp that took the hordes toward the warehouse. They moved up it, shambling worms, in a monstrous parody of pilgrims advancing to a shrine. The zombies directly below saw me. They lifted their arms. Their screeches gurgled as slime and vapour spilled from their throats. Awareness of my presence spread over the floor, and a hundred thousand claws reached for me.

Ahead of me, in the centre of the space, I finally saw the Pyrrhus refinery. The main bulk of it was several levels further up, but the casing of its gigantic spar dropped past me, through the floor of the level, and down again, where it entered the bedrock of Molossus. The casing was a hundred metres in diameter. From inside came the heartbeat rhythm of pumping. A walkway circled the spar. It was level with the catwalk. Perhaps there had once been a means of linking the two. The refinery was as old as the deepest levels of Pyrrhus. The metal was stained just as black as the disintegrating girders back in the warehouse. It seemed more recent because it had been maintained. Even the lumen strips that ran in vertical lines down the casing were in good order, illuminating the space. The catwalk had been abandoned to decay, but the gap between it and the walkway was not great. It could be leapt.

I was sure it had been, not many minutes before.

Higher up, I could see a small portion of the base of the reservoir. I was seeing part of the easternmost end. West of my position, it reached for kilometres. An ocean of promethium was suspended three levels above me.

I knew what I had to do.

I rushed back to the warehouse. The density of zombies had increased in the seconds I had been gone. Sixth Company was losing by degrees, though it fought on, and still held the infected away from the platform. Not for much longer, though. What worried me more was how long it would be before the soldiers' religious fervour faltered, and they opened themselves up to the curse.

I used my bolt pistol again as I ran to Brenken. I added to the kills, and I called to the troopers once more. When I reached the captain, I told her what I had in mind.

When I had finished, she repeated, 'Open the reservoir?' The scale of what would follow gave her pause.

'There is no other way,' I said. If I succeeded, the lower levels of the hive would be submerged by a deluge of liquid flame.

'And just you?'

'A lone individual might escape notice.'

We were occupied for a few moments in beating back a sudden surge of zombies. Without lowering her lasgun, without ceasing in her steady burning away of the wretches' brains, she said, 'You seem certain Askonas is an enemy.'

‘I can’t take the risk of assuming that he isn’t.’

She nodded. ‘What do you need?’

‘Time.’

She gave a short bark of laughter. ‘Is that all?’ Two more of the infected fell.

There was a cry to the right. The zombies hauled a trooper off the platform and fell on him. He was disembowelled in seconds. His comrades cut his suffering short by dropping a frag grenade into his attackers, blowing them all to pieces.

‘We’ll head back up,’ Brenken said. ‘Contain the advance for as long as we can.’

‘Ignore the rebels,’ I told her. ‘Those who survive will be easily neutralised once this is over.’

‘Agreed. The Emperor guide you, commissar.’

‘And you, captain. I will try to sound a warning.’

‘Do what is necessary. We are our own responsibility.’

I left her, stopping beside Rohm long enough to get a melta bomb and remote detonator from him. Then I ran to the doorway and through the passage, holstering pistol and sword. I hit the catwalk at top speed. The infected below shrieked their hunger again as I clattered across the warping metal. The span creaked. It shook beneath me. I had time to picture the ruin collapsing, taking me down to the hell below. Then I reached the end of the catwalk.

I leaped. The hunger reached for me. I was in the air, and the hunger tried to pull me down. It failed. I landed on the walkway. The metal rang from the impact, but there was no give. The construction here was still solid.

The casing was featureless. I worked my way around counterclockwise. After a quarter of the circumference, I found a door. I hauled on its handle, but it refused to slide back. Locked.

I as yet had no proof that the inquisitors were inside, but I had the absolute conviction that they were. The spar would be a useful escape from the lower hive, but was that all? I didn’t think so.

I kept going. On the other side of the casing from where I had landed, there were rungs leading up the spar to another walkway in line with the next level of the hive. I climbed. I moved as quickly as I could, but I was an ant crawling up the monumental column. The time it took to rise up that single level seemed an age. Part of my mind wanted to calculate how long it would take the zombies to reach the stairs, to shamble up that staircase and whatever other routes upward existed, and finally overwhelm attempts to hold them back. I suppressed the impulse. How long I had could not be known. I would take the action required, and it would grant us victory or it would not. But it was the only chance we had.

I reached the next walkway. This one was completely isolated from the rest of the level. It was surrounded by blank façades. I found a door in the same position as the one below. It opened. Inside the spar, I was almost deafened by the hum and percussion of the machinery. The pumps formed a cage around the colossal drill. Far below, the earth cried out as it was gored. Its combustible blood ran up the artificial veins with the sound of muted cataracts. Not far from me was an elevator built into the inner wall of the casing. Beside it were more rungs. I looked up. It would take me the best part of an hour just to reach the level of the reservoir. I would have to take the risk of drawing attention.

The elevator's mechanism was basic. A lever beside the mechanism summoned the car. It took several minutes of clanking chain for the open platform to complete its descent. I stepped aboard. The only control was another lever, set in a panel next to the mechanism that attached the platform to the chain. I pull the lever up, and began the ascent.

I drew my bolt pistol and braced for attack at each landing that I passed, but nothing happened. I was alone inside the spar. I stopped the elevator at a level that I judged was close to the lower section of the reservoir. When I emerged from the casing onto the exterior walkway, I saw that I was right. The massive bulk of the reservoir rose before me like a solid cliff face of black steel. From this point upward, the walkways around the casing extended spurs to the reservoir. A maintenance grid, thin as an arachnid's web, spread over the great bulk. I ran to the reservoir. I attached the melta bomb. The weapon seemed trivial beside a structure as large as a factory ship. It would be a mere pinprick.

But an incendiary one.

The job was half done. I could trigger the bomb at any time. Now I wanted to send a warning to Brenken. Askonas was here too. I put my desire to confront him to one side. I had only circumstantial evidence pointing to something undefined. I could not let my suspicions of the inquisitor distract me from the urgency of my task.

I returned to the elevator and kept rising. Halfway up the spar, I reached a major landing. It was no larger than the rest, but its importance was signalled by the fact that the elevator stopped here automatically. I would have to use the lever a second time if I wanted to carry on upwards. I guessed that I had reached my destination. To get a warning out to Brenken, I had to sound a siren or klaxon. In order to do that, I needed the refinery's control centre.

When I passed through the exit, another walkway spur crossed into the structure built above the reservoir. After an open doorway, I found myself in a corridor whose branches opened into vast chambers of engines, monitoring stations and banks of cogitators. The air was hot and damp with escaping steam.

Servitors moved along the hall and tended to their programmed duties. I saw no one else. My suspicions deepened. It was possible that the refinery could function without human supervision for a short time. In the long term, however, a system this complex would suffer breakdowns in unanticipated forms and configurations. No matter how large the army of servitors, unfettered minds would be needed to prevent a collapse into ruin and huge catastrophe. Precisely the sort of catastrophe I was about to unleash. The refinery was so well insulated from both the uprising and the plague that I doubted its workers had fled. Which meant they had been made to leave.

If the inquisitors wanted the control centre of the refinery for themselves, they could order such an expulsion. For a limited period, the machinery would continue to function. That might be all the time they needed.

The uprising had only begun in the last few weeks. The dates in Ledinek's journal, the ones whose coordinates all pointed to some locations in and around the refinery, went back to *before* the violence began. The inquisitors had been here from the start.

The corridor I was in appeared to be its central axis of the complex. It was ten metres wide, vaulted, and kept going in an endless straight line. It was intersected by myriad other passages. I was striding down the hall without knowing where I was heading. I made myself stop. There was no time to run through the complex at random. I watched the movements of the servitors. There was a consistent pattern of large numbers arriving, leaving and returning to a doorway another hundred metres down from me and on the right. *There*, I thought. I closed in, walking quietly and hugging the wall for the last few metres.

I heard voices as I drew near. 'We need new specimens,' Ehrar said. 'How can we see if there have been any mutations in the pathogen from distant observation?'

'Without a magos biologis,' Meinhardt said, 'even close observation will be limit—'

'No,' Askonas said, ending the discussion. 'There can be no involvement of the Mechanicus until we have a certainty of success. Even then, we'll have to use extreme caution. The lack of specimens is regrettable, but there was no opportunity. Still, we saw much. We have a clearer idea of the strength of the virus, its speed of propagation, and its infiltration. I saw many rebels showing early signs of the onset.'

Askonas stopped speaking. Silence fell. There were no sounds of movement. My hackles rose.

Askonas said, 'Now, I think.'

Movement behind me. I whirled. Two bolt pistols were trained on me, from opposite sides of the corridor. My finger twitched on the trigger, but I did not fire. I could have taken out one of the inquisitors, before being gunned down myself, but not both. And even though my suspicions were fast becoming certainties, it would take a formidable effort of will to bring myself to kill an officer of the Inquisition. I lowered my pistol.

‘Leave it on the ground,’ Schenk ordered. She was on my side of the hall. She was a safe five metres away. Neither she nor Brand showed any interest in coming any closer to me. I crouched, placing my bolt pistol on the floor. ‘The sword too,’ she said. I obeyed. She gestured with her pistol. I raised my hands and walked into the room. Inside my long coat, the detonator brushed against my ribs.

Askonas and the other two inquisitors were waiting.

I had found the nerve centre of the refinery. The room was smaller most of the others I had passed. Instead of labouring machines, here were rows of work stations and cogitators. Banks of pict screens on the wall at the far end showed feeds from all over the complex. Of course Askonas had seen me coming. Below the screens, occupying almost a quarter of the floor space, was a bulky conglomeration of augurs and control devices. Half a dozen servitors stood around it, responding to tones and light flashes with calm, mindless regularity. There was another doorway in the far left-hand corner. I couldn’t see where it led, but something was keening down there, something as mindless as the servitors but far more hungry.

Askonas eyed me with patient, superior contempt. ‘What do you think you are doing, commissar?’ he asked.

‘Among other things, witnessing treacherous folly.’

He didn’t like that. His cheeks coloured with ragged patches. ‘You know nothing of what you say.’

‘Don’t I?’ I nodded towards the doorway. ‘You have at least one of the cursed down there. Are you going to tell me that you didn’t bring the plague to this world?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I won’t.’ He was proud. His conviction of his own righteousness stood firm. ‘To deny our actions would imply shame. We have been engaged in a great work here, and you have no right to question it.’

‘It isn’t a question of my right. It is my duty.’

‘That’s enough,’ Brand said. He took a step forward.

I braced for execution or fight.

Askonas held up a hand. ‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘He should understand how he has erred.’ He smiled at me. ‘Besides, I think you know who we are. Attacking

one of our number would put you beyond the pale.'

'That wouldn't stop me,' I assured him.

He laughed, and his eyes twinkled with genuine benevolence, the fatuous generosity of a man at ease in the confidence of his sanctity. 'I think it would. I believe you to be a righteous man, Commissar Yarrick, if misguided. What do you think has happened here?'

'Heresy and treachery. You unleashed a plague of Chaos in the underhive.'

Askonas nodded, eager for me to see and understand. 'Indeed we did. It was no simple matter transporting infected individuals from quarantined worlds to here, even for us.'

'You confess your guilt,' I said, aware that I was speaking words better suited to the Inquisition itself.

'No. You haven't asked *why* we would do this.'

'There is no answer that could justify the act.'

Askonas's smile was sad now. The emotion was just as much a luxury, an indulgence, as the benevolence had been. 'If you truly believe that, then you have never had to sacrifice the few for the benefit of the many.'

My throat was still dry with the dust of sacrifice. My resolve did not waver. My hatred for this self-anointed saint intensified.

'The study of this plague is necessary,' Askonas continued. 'If we can unlock its secrets, think what it might mean. We could bring the dead back to life. Even the Father of Mankind Himself.'

That madness didn't deserve a response. I had heard rumours of this faction of the Inquisition. Revivificators. Lunatics at best. There was no arguing with this insanity.

'Don't you see?' Askonas asked.

The question surprised me. It was genuine. He really wanted me to applaud their efforts. I wondered why. 'All I see,' I said, 'is failure.'

The good humour evaporated. Askonas pressed his lips together. His eyes appeared to retreat back into the darkness of their sockets. 'You're wrong,' he said.

I heard it, then. In those two syllables, I heard the crack in his mental and spiritual armour. I heard the sound of my victory. I heard his doubt. His need to have me agree was the sign of his weakening faith.

He turned his back on me. 'Bring him,' he said. He headed towards the doorway.

Ehrrar and Meinhardt stepped aside, gesturing for me to follow. I looked over my shoulder. Schenk and Brand, pistols unwavering, were still out of reach. I started after Askonas. I walked past the work stations, drew abreast of the augur

monolith. It was almost as tall as I was. There were three servitors on this side. Two of them were fully mobile. The third would never leave the room. Its torso was attached to a mechanical plinth that rode back and forth on a narrow rail before the massed readings and gauges. One step beyond the servitor, I spun to the right and ducked behind the plinth.

The inquisitors fired a full volley. The shells slammed into the servitor and the array. Blood, bone fragments, shards of glass and iron sprayed hard. Shrapnel gouged my face. I scrambled back in a cloud of stinging debris. As I reached the far end of the augur bank, Askonas shouted, 'Stop!'

Whether he was calling out to me, his cohorts, or both, he was too late. The damage to the array was catastrophic. Fail-safes engaged. The refinery believed itself to be in crisis. Klaxons wailed from all corners of the complex. The walls shook with the sound. The shriek was enough to deafen the entire hive. The heart of Pyrrhus was under threat, and that organ's death could kill millions.

Brenken had her warning. I stayed crouched where I was. I held the detonator. The gunfire stopped. I heard the inquisitors rush for me. I waited another second, sorry I couldn't grant Sixth Company longer notice.

I pressed the trigger. I gave the refinery its disaster.

At first there was no sign that anything had happened. Brand came around the corner on my right. I rushed towards him. His shot went wide, and I rammed into him. He took the impact and leapt backward. He swung the pistol barrel at my face.

The explosion hit. Far below, the melta bomb had pierced the shell of the reservoir. Its solar heat ignited the promethium as it burst into the air, a severed artery. Gas pockets blew up. The tank cracked wider. It was not full. The fire found its way in seconds to the vapour in the upper reaches.

The control complex shook. Beneath it, a volcano had burst to life. Vital supports buckled. The floor dropped a full metre and tilted sharply towards the bank of pict screens. We were all knocked off our feet. Brand went flying into the screens. He hit one face first. It shattered. He fell, blinded, clawing at glass and lacerations. I grabbed at the augurs as I fell, hung on, then pulled myself up and staggered up the incline to the exit. The other inquisitors were still on the ground, but to my right, Askonas regained his feet and headed my way.

There was another boom, thunderous and muffled. The floor tilted further, throwing Askonas back. I lurched forward, leaning into the steepening slope. I stayed on my feet. I used the work station rows to assist my climb.

At the last row, I heard an electrical crackle behind me. I looked back. Askonas was closing again, his bionic limbs powering him upwards. He raised his left arm. A neural whip lashed out from his rebuilt wrists. The coil snapped

with energy. I ducked and jerked to the right. The whip was long. The tip burned the air beside my head.

I reached the doorway and pulled myself around just as Askonas lashed at me again. I had to neutralise the whip. Once in its grip, I would be paralysed, my nervous system in full convulsion. My pistol and sword were still in the corridor. They had slid against the downslope wall.

Another blast. The floor of the complex levelled for a moment, then tilted even more. I grabbed my weapons and stood with one foot on the wall. Askonas hauled himself out of the control centre. I fired my bolt pistol at his left hand. The shots went true. The shells smashed the prosthetic into a shapeless mass. The whip fell limp.

Askonas bellowed and stomped after me, drawing his bolter one-handed. Behind him, Ehrar came through the doorway. I was about to be outnumbered.

I tossed a frag grenade at their feet. I didn't expect it to kill them. It bought me a few more seconds as they evaded the blast. I headed back down the corridor at as close to a run as I could manage, balanced on two walls. Three seconds went by without a shell blowing my head apart. The grenade went off. It gave me a few more seconds. As if in answer to my frag, a chain of large explosions rocked the complex. Gravity shifted back and forth. I did not allow myself to fall. The inquisitors were shooting now. The violent movement beneath our feet spoiled their aim. They shouted, and then I heard them give chase. Good.

Doorways and intersections had become yawning traps. I sprinted towards the centre whenever I reached a gap. Momentum gave just enough of an arc to my path to see me across. A yell from behind told me that Meinhardt had failed a jump.

I came to the end of the corridor. The walkway between the complex and the casing had buckled and warped. The spar stood straight, indifferent to the agony of the refinery. I ran across to the exterior walkway. Below me was nothing but fire. It flowed and stormed. Burning waves crashed against building façades. The metal bridge groaned as I ran over it. Metal twisted and snapped. The vibrations became a violent bucking. It barely held.

Once on the walkway, I faced the doorway, now tilted at a strong diagonal, and backed away around the casing. I was on a pillar that rose from the centre of a raging sea of flame.

The scale of what I had done pressed in on me. I stayed true to my vow. I accepted the reality of the event. When I knew the full extent of its consequences, I would accept them too.

Askonas charged out of the doorway and over the bridge. He was much heavier than I was. Every step he took caused a sharp *spang* of dying metal. The

other inquisitors hesitated before crossing. I fired at the bridge where it joined the complex. The metal shrieked. Askonas stepped onto the walkway just as the complex shook again and the bridge collapsed into the burning flood.

The rest of his team could not reach us now. They stood in the doorway, silhouettes of mad piety. They held their fire. Their leader was now between them and me.

‘What have you done?’ Askonas snarled. He didn’t shoot. His rage would not permit granting me a quick death.

I didn’t shoot either. His armour would take a lot of damage. His head, though, was bare. Inquisition or not, he had betrayed the Imperium. My very soul condemned him. But I didn’t shoot.

We both needed to understand the other. I realised that he was as baffled by my certainty of being in the right as I was by his.

‘I know precisely what I’ve done,’ I told him. ‘I’ve purged this world of your insanity.’

‘We could have learned so much.’

‘Since when do we listen to the teachings of Chaos?’

He stared at me. My absence of doubt was causing him greater damage than my shells could. ‘You’re wrong...’ he began, but started to cough.

‘No. You are.’

He kept coughing, and the import of that fit burst upon me. ‘You know you are wrong. You want me to believe in the sanctity of your cause, because you don’t anymore. And you are infected.’

He roared. His eyes blazed with desperate fury. His left hand was a shapeless mass that could crush my skull. The fingers of his right gauntlet stretched for my throat. I reacted with clarity, and surety of purpose. I raised my pistol and put a bolter shell through the brain of this fallen saint.

I stood over his corpse and faced the other inquisitors. They could not have heard our exchange over the roar of promethium torrent, but they didn’t retaliate. They knew they had lost.

The complex continued to shake, its tilt growing still more pronounced, as the fireflood raged. At the edge of full collapse, there was another sudden drop on the other side as supports there fell away. The structure settled with the rasping groan of exploding rockcrete and tortured metal. The inquisitors fell to their knees, then rose again. Their refusal to retreat was an act of defiance. Why should they run when the moral high ground was theirs? The Revivificators and I remained as we were, committing our enemies to memory. I answered their righteousness with my own.

After an hour, the flames began to subside. The thunder of annihilation faded.

Soon after, armed figures appeared behind the inquisitors. They must have made their way into the complex from the upper-level entrances. Sixth Company had arrived.

The inquisitors were placed in quarantine. I monitored them during the entire mopping up period. All of the underhive, and the first levels above it, had been incinerated. The zombies were ash. Brenken had the remaining specimen carbonized by flamers. The few surviving rebels were rounded up and shot.

We had brought peace to Molossus.

The hive's structural integrity was compromised. How badly, no one yet knew. Casualties were in the hundreds of thousands. The depletion of the work force, however, was an irrelevance since the refinery was beyond repair, and the promethium reserves would continue to burn underground for centuries. The world has lost its usefulness to the Imperium.

Yes, I had brought peace to Molossus. The peace that kills. I wondered how long it would take before Pyrrhus was a ghost hive. I could tell myself that at least its citizens didn't face Exterminatus. I had saved them from that.

I didn't think they would thank me.

Ehrar, Schenk, Brand and Meinhardt showed no sign of infection, or of repentance. The two states were functions of each other. They lacked Askonas's intellectual honesty. He realised that they had failed, and so he fell. Their self-regard was worthy of ceramite. They didn't know the meaning of doubt.

'What do we do with them?' Governor Hartwig asked me on the day that Sixth Company prepared to depart.

'Nothing. You can monitor them until more of their order comes for them. None of us has authority over them once we are certain they aren't carriers.'

I did one more thing before we left. Alone, I walked through the purged levels of Pyrrhus. I looked at the gutted buildings, the mountains of burned rubble, and the twisted limbs of the carbonized dead. I took ownership of my consequences.

I walked with a torch. The devastated region was a place of eternal night now. The shadows of the wreckage danced in my beam. They melded into nightmare shapes. At one point, I thought I saw, standing to my left, a huge shape, much larger than a man, with funnels spiking from its silhouette. When I trained the light on it, of course it was only the remains of pipes and shattered rockcrete.

I wandered for three hours more. I forced myself to stay until I could feel no pride in the horrors I had wrought, and only a grim acceptance. I had finally reached that point when Brenken found me.

'Seeking fellowship among the dead?' she asked.

‘Better than the company of saints.’
We began the long walk back from the burn.

SACRIFICIAL

David Annandale

The las-fire came from the medicae centre.

'I thought we had killed them all,' Sergeant Brenken said. We led the squad at a run through the corridors.

'So did I,' I told her. We had retaken the frigate *Castellan Belasco* from the heretics. What was left of Sixth Company, of the Armageddon Steel Legion's 252nd Regiment, deserved that much of a victory. It had been through enough. It had been savaged by events on Aionos, reduced to a shell with a young commissar named Yarrick at its head. I took no pleasure in my provisional command. I took no pleasure in anything that had occurred on the surface of that moon.

But at least it was not Mistral.

The company did more than kill the cultists aboard the *Belasco*. The Steel Legionnaires shot them until their corpses blended together. They erased any trace that the wretches had once been human. When the frigate left the system, it did so having drunk the blood of its defilers.

Now, the gunfire. There was a cluster of the enemy that we had missed. Our bitterly small victory was snatched away.

The shooting had stopped before we reached the centre. There was a trail of blood leading away from the open doors, but I ran inside to learn the worst.

Bodies everywhere. Troopers slaughtered in their beds, some shot, most hacked apart with surgical instruments. The floor and deck awash with blood. I stood still, rooted by a collision of angers: rage at the heretics and corrosive shame that I had brought these soldiers safely from Aionos for them to be murdered here. Beside me, I heard Brenken's breathing turn into a snarl. She had been aboard the ship when it had been taken and had performed miracles to free herself and the armsmen. We were both seeing a mockery made of our efforts.

I looked around, counting. 'There aren't enough bodies,' I said. 'They've taken prisoners.'

We left the medicae centre, following the trail. It was a clear path. The cultists might as well have left signposts directing us down the levels of the ship. We were in a stairwell when I realised where we were heading.

So did Brenken. As we left the stairwell at the next to lowest deck, she said,

‘They’ve gone to the chapel.’

I glanced at her. She couldn’t know the full implications of that fact. None of the soldiers did. But she had fought enough battles to have dark hints. Her home was the equatorial jungles of Armageddon, and even at that time, so many decades before the coming of Ghazghkull Thraka, reaching adulthood on that planet was tantamount to being a veteran on most other worlds. She looked much older than she was. So did most of her comrades.

At the first intersection, I stepped through the bulkhead and looked left towards the chapel. The doors were shut. They muffled the sounds of the screams and ritualistic chanting, but some of the chanting was not coming from human mouths.

I thought about our location in the ship and seized on the desperate path that opened before me. I was grateful we hadn’t yet made the jump into the warp. I looked back at Brenken and the troopers. ‘They won’t be staying in there,’ I said. ‘When the chapel doors open I will head inside. You will provide covering fire for me from the corner, and no closer. Is that clear?’

The squad looked confused. Brenken said, ‘Understood, commissar.’ She didn’t, but she recognised that I had reasons for the order.

‘Thank you,’ I said, grateful. I walked over to Ladengast, a wiry trooper with a flair for demolitions. ‘Give me a melta bomb,’ I said.

‘Why go in alone?’ Brenken asked me under her breath as I headed back to the intersection.

‘Because I must.’

Preservation of morale and discipline meant more than executing shirking soldiers. My duty now was to protect what was left of the company from a harm that was even more spiritual than physical.

‘The embarkation bays are directly below us,’ I said. ‘When I go, seal this area and open the hangar doors.’

‘Vent the bays?’

‘Yes.’

I advanced to the corner. Brenken voxed the bridge to prepare the actions I had ordered. Then she and the squad followed me, a war machine in light tan coats, as ready for battle as if they hadn’t been fighting continuously for over twenty-four hours.

I heard the doors open. Las-fire streaked down the hall. The cultists were smart: they were expecting us. I prayed to the Emperor that I was about to give them something they were not expecting.

I rounded the corner, hunching low and firing my bolt pistol for effect. Over

my shoulder, the squad unleashed their own las. The cultists, clad in their motley of stolen and defiled uniforms, fell back. I took my chance. 'Back!' I yelled and lunged into the chapel.

I threw myself down behind the nearest pew. I blew the head off a heretic at the end of the row. The others stayed out of reach. They did not attack. They chanted. There was something else here too. I heard leaping movements, like the roar of flame and the whispering of many mouths, that spoke inside my head as much as in my ears. They wanted me to utter a name.

Drawing on hard-won strength and lifelong faith, I refused. I grabbed the melta bomb, popped up over the pew and threw the explosive towards the centre of the chapel. I tried not to see what was there. Even so, images of ritualised mutilation seared my vision. Worse was the flowing column of flesh and flame and mouths. I dropped back down immediately, but the sight of it coming in my direction was a scar on my soul.

The bomb went off. The chapel flashed with a sun's purifying light. I heard the cultists scream. The inhuman chorus still spoke to me but I had not expected to wound the being. My target was the decking. I held tight to the pew.

The centre of the chapel collapsed into the embarkation bay, where a vacuum now reigned. The atmosphere shrieked out of the chapel and the surrounding corridors. The voices raged and I knew the daemon had been caught in the suction.

Blood flowed from my ears and nose. I gasped for air. I clutched at the slanting deck and dragged myself forward. My eyes burned and watered as I fought against the wind, but what I dreaded was the worse calm that would follow. I reached the doorway, scrambled around the bulkhead, then struggled to my feet and hit the wall stud. The chapel doors closed, ending the storm's scream.

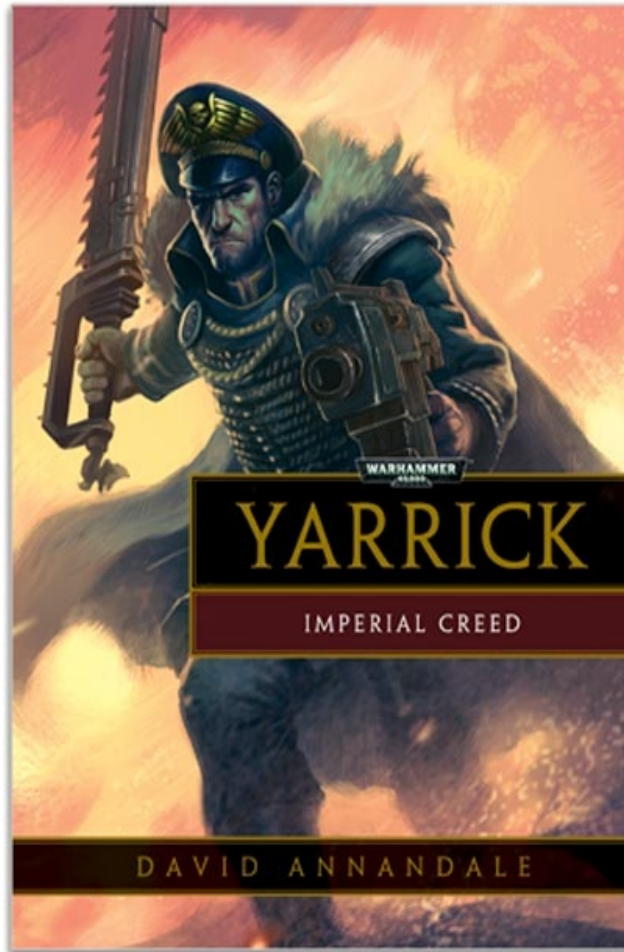
I slumped to the ground, breathing heavily in the thin air. There was silence inside the chapel now. Silence, too, from the dark voices. But the name I had been urged to speak still echoed. I knew it too well. This battle was won, but some sacrifices were unending.

So be it, I thought. I can give more than this.

And, in the fullness of time, I would.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID ANNANDALE is the author of the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novel *Imperial Creed*, as well as the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. For the Space Marine Battles series he has written one novel, *The Death of Antagonis*, and three novellas. 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.



Before he was a legend, Sebastian Yarrick was already a hero. On the world of Mistral, Yarrick must contend with Chaos cults, the fanatical Adepta Sororitas and clandestine inquisitors if he is to survive his first mission...

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