

# TALES FROM THE ARCHIVE

HAMMER AND BOLTER EDITION

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JOHN FRENCH

AN IMPERIAL GUARD SHORT STORY

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40,000

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John French

Thaddeus blinked and his world vanished in a scream. Blind darkness surrounded him, caged him in a dream of pain. Then light and sensations came in a burning rush: a white room, a wide face, eyes glowing red in the dark cave of a hood, the ground splitting with cracks of fire, the wetness of tears, anger like a red storm, a ringed hand, then darkness and silence.

He blinked again and was looking an enemy in the eyes. They were black eyes that glittered from a blunt hairless head, jagged patterns burned into the flesh. The man's body was a massive slab of hard muscle, covered in tarnished armour and stained ochre fatigues. His head was cocked as if Thaddeus had stopped speaking in the middle of a sentence and the man was waiting for it to finish. Rusted metal lined the walls around them, their surfaces scratched with evil runes and lit by the fever yellow light of a glow-globe. The air reeked of blood, sweat and raw meat. Every detail told Thaddeus that he stood in a lair of the enemy, and with an enemy in front of him.

A frown creased the man's face and his mouth began to move, forming a question. Thaddeus slammed a fist into his throat. The man gave a strangled cry, staggered, hit the grime-smearred metal wall behind him and exploded forward with a roar, trying to drive Thaddeus off his feet with raw strength. Thaddeus pivoted an instant before the charge struck, grabbed the man's head in both hands and felt his brute power slide past him as he twisted. With a loud snap, the man's body crashed onto the metal floor and was still.

Shaking with adrenaline, Thaddeus looked at the corpse at his feet. Sinuous tattooed patterns and eight-pointed brand scars covered the dead man's skin. He looked at his own hands. Tattoos spiralled around his fingers and palms; they were the marks of ruin and blasphemy, like those on the hands and arms of the man he had just killed. Thaddeus ran his hands over his body, feeling the scars on his scalp and face, the beaten metal of a breast plate and the saw-toothed blades at his waist. Panic surged through him and he fought to keep it down. Who was he? Inside his mind a locked door opened and memories returned: he was a servant of the Imperium, a warrior in a war of shadows and lies. The realisation was like the touch of a cool hand on his head: comforting, removing doubt. He knew where he was and what he had to do: he was in the heart of

enemy territory and far from help. He had to reach a voxcaster, transmit an extraction location to Imperial forces and reach that location at any cost. Beyond this driving need there was something else, something always just beyond his grasp, always out of sight in the labyrinth of his mind.

‘Lost in the land of the damned,’ he muttered to himself and began to run. He passed through narrow tunnels ducking into the shadows as figures passed him. He saw the scars patterning their skin, heard the cruel tongue in which they muttered to each other. The air pulsed to the hiss-thump of air processors shifting foetid air.

When he reached the communications room he slid a long, serrated knife from a sheath and banged on the door until it opened. A renegade trooper in dark fatigues looked out; a fabric mask covered his head, bloodshot eyes wide behind grimy glass eye-holes. Thaddeus could hear static and fragments of distorted noise spilling from the room. It was small and rank with the smell of sweat and ozone, consoles lined the walls, the light of readouts pulsing to the sounds from speaker grilles. There was a moment of stillness the length of a heartbeat.

Thaddeus’s first movement was a backhanded cut with the knife that took the renegade in the throat, severing his neck to the spine. Warm red spray splashed his face. The man collapsed, blood bubbling dark on the floor. Thaddeus stepped forward with the momentum of the cut. Terror and fury flowed through him; he could feel its acid touch in his guts and a copper tang in his mouth. He was screaming. A spindle-limbed man with a face like a dried corpse stood, a laspistol in his hand. Thaddeus heard a crack and felt the shot burn across his temple. He stepped to the outside of the man’s gun arm, reversed his knife and rammed it into the neck. The body jerked as the man died and Thaddeus yanked the blade out in a thick spray.

He stood in pooling blood, gasping air as the rage receded and fear returned. Lurching to the console he examined the equipment, frequencies and ciphers flashing through his mind. His hands moved over controls without guidance, sending the location of the Fallen Spire far out in the no-man’s-land beyond the underground fortress in which he stood.

He picked up the renegade’s laspistol and stripped power cells from the corpses. The jagged marks and eight-pointed stars cut into the men’s skin made him retch. He thought of the killing rage that had surged through him; its touch

had been alien, like someone touching the inside of his skin. It made him feel tainted, unclean, as if the marks on his skin were scars on his soul. He shook the thought off and pushed himself to his feet again. The one thing that was certain was that if he were to live, he had to reach the Fallen Spire. He stepped out of the chamber, pulled the hatch door shut and began to run.

From the highest tower of the Imperial command fortress Colonel Augustine Tarl looked out on a ruined world. It was sunset, but the sky remained the dull tan of a soiled funeral shroud. From here he would have once looked across a string of hives, their sides rising liked armoured mountains into a cobalt sky. Seismic charges and plasma warheads had reduced those hives to a sea of torn metal and ash that extended to the horizon like a frozen sea; its wave crests ragged edges of metal, its troughs filled with spreading shadows. They were called the Murder Wastes; the vast no-man's land in the war between the Imperium and the forces of Chaos on Hranx.

‘Admiring the rewards of hubris, colonel?’ Inquisitor Sargon said from behind Tarl who turned and snapped a sharp salute. Tarl was tall, with a broad face, bright blue eyes and a strong jaw. It was a face full of confidence, the type of face that inspired trust. Clad in the gloss-red armour of an Inquisitorial storm trooper he stayed at attention as the inquisitor advanced towards him.

‘At ease, colonel,’ said the inquisitor. He was shorter than Tarl, broad-shouldered with a big pockmarked face. Bronze plate armour glittered under a heavy robe of deep purple.

Tarl tried to adopt a casual stance as the inquisitor came to stand next to him; it was difficult to relax in the presence of this man who had the power to kill billions with a word.

‘You summoned me, my lord,’ said Tarl.

‘Yes I did. I am giving you a mission that will be the most important of your service.’ The inquisitor's voice was a bass rumble like the grating of stone. Tarl kept his face impassive but he felt a jolt of anticipation run through his gut. ‘I am trusting in your nature and abilities. The Imperium is trusting in them too.’

‘I understand, my lord,’ said Tarl.

The inquisitor twitched his lips as if at a joke.

‘Not yet, colonel, but you will.’ The inquisitor leaned on the tower’s parapet, his red bionic eyes staring out at the darkening world from within his deep hood. ‘An hour ago we received a signal on a long unused frequency.’ A hand, thick with rings, emerged from under the sleeve of the inquisitor’s robe and handed a brass-framed data-slate to Tarl, who took in the information on its surface with a glance.

‘A set of location coordinates in the Murder Wastes and a single word: Thaddeus?’ Tarl looked up at the inquisitor.

‘You are to take an assault carrier and go to that location. Take a handpicked squad of storm troopers.’ The inquisitor turned away from the parapet to look at Tarl. ‘There you will find and retrieve a man in my service.’

Tarl looked back at the signal data displayed in glowing green symbols on the data-slate.

‘These analysis readings indicate that the signal came out of the renegade’s fortress zone; probably transmitted using enemy equipment.’

‘Yes, the signal came from within the enemy stronghold.’

‘It is not a trick, a lure?’

‘No. It is victory.’ The inquisitor smiled at the puzzled look on the colonel’s face. ‘How long have we been fighting here, Tarl?’

‘At least a decade, my lord.’

‘Too long, and we have paid too high a price.’ The inquisitor gestured at the land below the fortress tower. Tarl knew what the gesture meant: he had been here when the Imperium had levelled the hives hoping to destroy the rebellion within. The Chaos renegades led by the Alpha Legion had been prepared, and had buried themselves beneath the ground in a subterranean fortress complex they called the Pit of the Hydra. There they survived and endured while the Imperium burnt its own flesh to try and kill a disease that had already spread. If Hranx did fall then the Alpha Legion would have secured a gateway for its corruption to spread into other sectors and kill other worlds. The Imperium was caught in a snare: unable to yield and unable to destroy its enemy.

‘And this man will win the war, my lord?’ asked Tarl.

‘Our forces are infiltrated by Alpha Legion agents. They are serpents in our midst, killing us with a thousand bites. How many of our operations and offensives have been blown or crippled? And while they rob us of our strength, theirs grows.’ The inquisitor turned and placed his hand on Tarl’s shoulder and looked directly into his eyes. ‘The man you are to retrieve is a servant of the Imperium who has infiltrated the renegades and remained hidden within them for several years.’ Tarl allowed his shock to show on his face.

‘How is that possible?’

‘His personality and memories have been replaced with a constructed identity so that he is incapable of giving himself away.’ The inquisitor let his hand drop, looked away from Tarl. ‘He has believed that he is one of them. Under particular circumstances he is conditioned to shake off his false self and return to us.’

‘What circumstances, my lord?’ Tarl asked, though he thought he knew. The inquisitor smiled revealing silver-inlaid teeth.

‘He was conditioned to return to us once he had learned the identities of the agents the Alpha Legion have infiltrated into our forces,’ he said.

Night was falling when Thaddeus heard the howl of the hunters at his back. It rose in a harsh, high note gathering replies and echoes until it was a wailing chorus calling him to oblivion. He had known that his flight would not go undiscovered, and so once above ground he had run hard, knowing that every stride was a moment stolen from death. He knew the hunters were close; they had tasted his scent on the wind and they howled in anticipation of the kill.

The cries of his pursuers faded as Thaddeus scrambled up another slope of jagged rubble, his hands bloody from a thousand sharp edges. In the distance the Fallen Spire rose above the Murder Wastes like the broken tip of a god’s spear thrust into the ground; a far-away promise of safety. He slithered down a slope of ash into a wide valley, its bottom filled with debris and blade-like shadows; a hundred paces away a wide pool of liquid glittered like a dark mirror. A gust of dry wind brought a thick chemical stench to his nostrils from the pool’s surface.

Thaddeus began to move across the floor of the valley, running from cover to cover, ash rising from his footsteps. A whisper-soft sound of movement reached

his ears; he glanced behind and went very still. Long, lean shapes were slinking down the side of the valley where he had been. Each was humanoid but moved close to the ground on reverse jointed-legs and long arms, their muscles taut under pale skin. The hunters had found him. They were human mutants selectively altered by the renegades to hunt the Murder Wastes. They were blind and stalked by scent, tasting the air with long tongues. Thaddeus gripped the butt of his laspistol. He could count at least three of them and knew there were more. They would be fast. He watched one of them pause on a lip of rubble he had passed seconds before. The hunter crouched, its elongated head turning from side to side, its long tongue flicking between needle teeth.

He began to ease himself into cover, moving one limb at a time, blood hammering in his ears. Could they hear his heart beating, he wondered? He lifted his foot to step forward, and a stone shifted with a small noise; he froze. Another shape bounded onto a rise of rubble ten paces away. Thaddeus felt a drop of sweat run down his face. The hunter bounded towards him. Behind it the others snarled and followed. Thaddeus drew his laspistol and fired. The hunter jinked aside with unnatural speed and the bolt of energy fizzed into the air. He fired again, the shot kicking up a hot splash of melted dust where it hit the ground. He turned and ran, knowing that he could not escape. Even if he killed some of the hunters there were others and they had his scent.

The pool was in front of him, its surface black and still, its chemical stench thick in his throat. The hunters were blind and if his scent vanished so did he. He dived in and felt the liquid darkness swallow him. It was silent under the surface of the pool, and he kept his mouth and eyes closed. He felt the acid burning his skin and pain began to spread from his chest. For a second he thought of letting the liquid wrap him in its corrosive embrace forever. He would not be losing much; he could remember almost nothing but a handful of hours filled with death and fear. There would be nothing in the future but more fear, more blood and the breath of enemies at his back. An image came to him of a world burning around him, and he knew he had seen it happen, had been there as the forces of ruin had destroyed something very dear to him. The loss and anger was like a raw wound in his soul from which snatches of memory poured: a hand on his shoulder, a bronze aquila ring, a face with red eyes. He was a warrior that walked amongst the enemy, it was his purpose; he was a servant of the Imperium.

Thaddeus kicked for the surface, bursting into the air with a suppressed gasp.

He trod water, eyes sweeping the darkness, ears straining for any sound. There was no sign of the hunters. He swam to the pool's edge and pulled himself out, chemical sludge dripping from his body. The smell would hide his scent from the enemies, or so he hoped. He lay on his back for a moment, breathing hard, his eyes looking up towards where the Fallen Spire glinted against the dull black sky. With a grunt of effort he got to his feet and scrambled through the dark, pushing himself until he was in the shadow of the Fallen Spire but could go no further. Exhausted, he found the entrance of a wide pipe and dragged himself inside. Curled and shivering in the dark he fell into a sleep disturbed by dreams filled with burning worlds and a wide face with red eyes.

The Valkyrie swept across the darkened plain towards the Fallen Spire. Its hunched fuselage and wings were a matt charcoal grey broken by a night camouflage pattern of black lines sprayed in an irregular grid. Its cockpit and crew compartment were dark, all readouts and displays disabled, its pilot flying by night-vision and instinct. From its open side door Colonel Tarl watched the ground below, his own night-vision visor showing a rushing expanse of luminous green. From the crew compartment behind him Tarl could hear the low noises of the squad of storm troopers checking equipment and eating rations. Each would be wearing night-vision visors and passing the time with mundane routines to keep their minds focussed. Even for men such as these, who were hardened by years of war, the time before an action was a battle against boredom and fear.

'Hungry, colonel?' came a voice from behind Tarl. It was Kulg, the squad sergeant, a smiling slab of a man who was one of Tarl's best.

Tarl turned and leaned back into the crew compartment, his night vision showing his storm troopers sitting on the flight benches, their black armour making them look like statues carved of obsidian. Each had a hellgun strapped tight across his chest and a bulky grav-chute on his back. Kulg was holding out a foil-wrapped bar in a gloved hand.

'Field rations?' Tarl took the bar and bit into it. The sergeant grinned. 'Thanks,' said Tarl making a face; the rations tasted vile. 'So kind of you to spare some for me.' The sergeant chuckled, his teeth gleaming in the green tint of the night-vision. Tarl grinned back. Kulg and his squad were cold killers to ordinary men, but Tarl had that combination of competence and good humour that made these men like and trust him. 'Now, if you happen to have a flask of

hot caffeine, I might just forget about the taste of this.'

'Here, sir.' The sergeant smiled and handed Tarl a small metal flask.

'Thanks,' said Tarl sipping the hot liquid. Now was a good time to tell them, he thought. 'Listen up,' he said, raising his voice over the drone of the Valkyrie's engines. 'You know the brief: we drop using grav-chutes, form a perimeter, secure the target, and the Valkyrie pulls us out.' He waited for assenting nods. 'The target will look like one of the enemy, a renegade in every detail.' Tarl paused 'Securing him is of absolute importance.'

'We're clear on the plan, sir,' said Kulg.

'Don't forget that the Alpha Legion has used witches, flesh-changers, even turncoats before.' There was a scattering of nods; all of them had seen the tricks and lies used by of the servants the Dark Gods. 'Until we are sure it is him, assume nothing. Be ready to respond if it is a trap, and wait for my authentication of the target's identity.' He looked around at each of them. 'Understand?' Each gave a clipped 'Sir' in reply. Tarl nodded and turned back to looking out of the side hatch; the sky had begun to lighten. The pilot and weapons officer already had their special orders and would be ready if he needed them. He took a sip from the flask and thought of the man out there in the dark, running to him bearing the greatest of secrets.

Thaddeus woke to the sound of whispers. He could not see the speakers and so lay still, and listened. Grey light seeped into the pipe mouth where he shivered in the dawn chill. His vision was restricted to a circular scoop of mud grey sky cut by the looming silhouette of the Fallen Spire. The whispering voices were coming closer; he could hear the soft brush of fabric against webbing, and the low clink of weapons. Whoever they were, they were moving with deliberate slowness: searching, hunting. He prayed that they would not check the pipe that hid him.

A boot crunched a pace away. Adrenaline began to seep into his cold muscles, the instincts of the cornered animal making his mouth dry and his gut twist. Keeping his breath slow, he began to move his hand towards his knife. Memories flicked through his awareness: a smiling face, a bright white room, a world dying around him. Then something else rose from the depths of his mind like a grinning skull pulled from a slaughter pit. Anger overwhelmed his

thoughts; he was not prey to be run to ground and gutted; he was the predator. His hand closed around the handle of his knife, and a red cloud unfolded in his mind like blood pouring into water.

A figure blocked out the light at the pipe opening, a slouch-shouldered silhouette, the barrel of its lasgun pointed into the darkness. A cyclone of rage boiled through Thaddeus's mind and body, its surface alive with flashes of pain and black coils of hatred. He wanted blood; he wanted to feel the warm wash of it on his hands, and to see the life leave his kill's eyes. The figure was three paces away, its wide eyes blind to the death that waited in the darkness. Thaddeus's muscles coiled ready to spring forward in a killing leap.

There was a blurt of static from out of sight, and a muffled voice speaking clipped Imperial Gothic into a voxcaster. The figure in front of Thaddeus twitched at the sound, took a pace back into the light, and Thaddeus saw the glint of the grubby bronze aquila on the figure's helmet. He remembered a bronze aquila ring, and red eyes staring at him. The tide of anger receded leaving him shaking silently in the darkness. He was a servant of the Imperium, not a beast, but for a moment he had been someone else, someone monstrous. To infiltrate the renegades he had become one of them, and something of that other self remained inside him. He thought he could hear it whispering to him, telling him secrets. The damned still walk in me, he thought.

'Throne, no!' came a voice, loud enough for Thaddeus to hear.

'What is it, sarge?' asked the man Thaddeus could see. He looked young, his green fatigues smeared with ash, eyes shot red with days of fatigue and fear. This was a sweeping patrol, a small unit that probed deep into the Murder Wastes with nothing but their nerves and a lasgun to keep them alive.

Thaddeus thought of stepping out of his hiding place; he was a servant of the Imperium, so were they: they would help. But then what would they see step from the shadows? A man clad in barbed armour and dark cloth, dried blood on his hands, and a face twisted with evil runes. They would see an enemy, a predator like those that took their comrades and stalked their nightmares. They would see a renegade, and how could he persuade them that he was not?

'We pull out now,' said an unseen voice, its tone harsh. As it spoke, the ground began to shake.

‘Wait, what...’ asked another voice out of sight, trailing off as a sound like the beating of great drums became louder and louder.

‘Run!’ Thaddeus could hear more than fear now, he could hear terror. The air shook with a roar like rolling thunder. The man at the pipe mouth stared at the sky and fled. Thaddeus, scrambling to the end of the pipe, looked up and knew why. A wave of flames surged towards him, and above it the sky burned.

The Valkyrie shuddered as black pillars of smoke rose into the air around it. Looking down from the side door of the assault carrier, Tarl could see a tide of fire roll across the Murder Wastes towards the Fallen Spire. There was a stink of burning oil on the furnace-hot air and the ground seemed to ripple under the impact of the artillery fire. The renegades had artillery buried underground that they hoisted up to hidden firing points along the edge of the Murder Wastes. There were hundreds of guns and they were all firing: a rhythmic chorus of war wiping the wastes clean of life. The Chaos forces were burning the land to kill one fleeing traitor. That, or they were driving their quarry into the jaws of the hunter, thought Tarl.

‘Bring us in over the spire’s tip,’ shouted Tarl. The Fallen Spire loomed through a haze of dust and smoke. As tall as a Titan, it was a blackened spit of metal jutting out of the ground at an angle. At its tip there was a flattened point no more than twenty paces across. It had once been the peak of a now dead-hive that had fallen as it burned, embedding itself upright in the ruin below. It thrust above the vast tangle of wreckage like the tip of a sword from a dead man’s back. It was the location the infiltrator, Thaddeus, had transmitted, the place from which the inquisitor had sent Tarl to collect him.

Tarl stood, gripping the rail that ran down the centre of the Valkyrie’s crew compartment. He wore the red storm trooper carapace, a respirator mask hanging unfastened at his cheek. The squad were on their feet, their faces hidden by bug-eyed faceplates, their black armour glistening. A caress of static ran over Tarl’s skin as he powered up his grav pack.

‘Extraction point in twenty kilometres,’ said the pilot. Tarl nodded to Sergeant Kulg.

‘Form up,’ shouted Kulg, and the storm troopers formed two lines facing the closed rear hatch, their shoulders touching, left hands gripping cleats in the

ceiling. The sergeant gave Tarl a thumbs-up.

‘Open rear hatch, and ready for drop,’ said Tarl into his throat mic. The pilot gave a curt reply and the rear hatch split with the hiss of pistons, opening to show the land and sky racing to a vanishing point behind the Valkyrie.

‘Jump on my command,’ said Tarl, and fastened his respirator.

‘Death and honour’ shouted Kulg, and the squad echoed the words.

‘For the Emperor,’ said Tarl, but his words were lost in the roar of the wind.

The firestorm surged towards him and Thaddeus fled before it. White-hot sparks drifted down around him and sweat poured down his soot-smearred face. He did not know where the guardsmen were, his only instinct was to run, to reach safety. The fire tide surged on in a blazing wall that flowed over the rises and gulleys of rubble with a roar as it sucked in air. It was fifty paces behind him and he could feel the heat sear across his exposed skin. Above him the black spiretip of the Fallen Spire thrust into the sky. It was so close that he could see the bent girders that jutted from its sides. Safety was so close, but the fire tide was at his heels.

He heard howls rise over the roar of the fire as the long, lean shapes of the hunters appeared out of the smoke-filled air, their pale bodies black against the fire, oblivious to the danger now that they had found their prey. There were dozens of them, their skin scorched and blistered but their fanged mouths wide with glee. He could not turn, could not fight, he could only run. His lungs felt as if they were on fire, his legs shot with pain. Then he was over the crest of an ash dune and the side of the Fallen Spire was in front of him. He gripped a jutting girder, swung up and began to climb without thinking, feet and hands scrabbling for purchase.

He was ten feet off the ground when the hunters crested the dune behind him. The first bounded to the base of the spire’s side and leapt, springing up the tangle of projecting girders. With a snarl of triumph it was on him, talons raking his leg. Thaddeus screamed as pain ran up his body, but inside he felt a part of him bellow for blood. He kicked down with his other leg and felt bone crunch beneath his boot. The mutant fell, its limbs thrashing, its mouth snapping at the air. More were climbing, pulling themselves up with long arms, their claws screeching on the metal. He looked up at the spire’s summit and took another

grip. With a shriek of super-heated air the fire tide crested the dune and crashed into the base of the Fallen Spire. The hunters that had only just begun to climb were vapourised, others higher up screamed as the heat cooked their flesh and they fell into the inferno. Those above the tide of flame came up faster, their arms reaching for Thaddeus, tongues flicking at the blood dribbling from his leg.

With a grunt of pain Thaddeus gripped the girder above him with one hand and drew his laspistol with the other. Twisting to look down, he thumbed the safety off and pulled the trigger. Glowing bolts of energy plunged onto the hunters, burning through flesh and bone. Thaddeus kept the trigger squeezed until the clip was empty and the pistol was hot in his hand. He dropped the spent pistol and climbed, shutting out the numbness spreading from his shredded leg and the scrabbling noise of the surviving hunters climbing after him.

The Valkyrie turned hard, dropping in a controlled spiral towards the Fallen Spire. In the crew compartment the high pitched whine of grav-chutes cut through the bass rumble of the engines. A view of the spire's blunt summit, set above a surging ocean of flame, filled the open hatch.

'Jump!' shouted Tarl and the storm troopers leapt into the smoke-darkened air.

Thaddeus heaved himself onto the flat summit of the Fallen Spire. It was no more than twenty paces across, a sheer drop all around and the burning plateau below. He could hear shouted orders and see blurred images out of the corner of his eyes. Storm troopers in black armour were landing around him, tucking into tight rolls as they landed with the lightness of windblown seeds. They fanned out with mechanical precision and speed, scanning for targets. He tried to stand but his savaged leg gave way and he sprawled onto the rough metal, blood dripping from him in thick runnels. He rolled onto his stomach, the storm troopers ringing him; they had come for him, he had reached the extraction location, and the secrets he held would reach his master.

A tall man, the only one in red plate, crouched down by Thaddeus, his face hidden by a respirator, a bolt pistol held loose in his hand.

'Who are you?' said the red-armoured man.

'I am a servant of the Imperium. I am Thaddeus,' he said. The man leaned closer, unclipping the respirator to show a smooth, handsome face.

‘Do you know who I am?’ his voice was low. Thaddeus felt something whisper inside his head as a feeling like the pricking of needles ran over his skin. He could feel the red cloud of his other self within him thrashing as though it sensed and saw something he did not.

‘Colonel Tarl, the Valkyrie’s inbound. Is the target cleared for extraction?’ shouted one of the storm troopers, and in that instant Thaddeus knew. Tarl. The name echoed in his mind. Colonel Tarl. Names, faces, details flickered past an inner eye, as secrets unlocked inside his skull. He knew this man, knew what monster lay beneath his unscarred skin. He saw the bolt pistol held casually at the man’s side, a finger on the trigger, and the unscarred face. It was the face of an Alpha Legion infiltrator, an enemy of the Imperium. Tarl’s eyes met his.

Tarl saw the recognition in Thaddeus’s eyes and brought the bolt pistol up to fire. Thaddeus rammed his fist into Tarl’s face with bone-splintering force. Teeth and blood arced up as Tarl’s head snapped back. Thaddeus pushed away from the floor, raw anger blotting out pain and exhaustion.

‘It’s a trick,’ shouted Tarl, through blood and ruined teeth.

Hellgun blasts sliced the air where Thaddeus had been. Inside his mind he could hear the beast within howling at the gates of his will, laughing; he was going to die at the hands of his own side because of a traitor. He spun looking for safety, but there was none, only death waiting in the hellguns’ muzzles.

There was a howl and mutants were leaping onto the summit, their bare skin blistered from the fires below, and their mouths wide as they tore into the ring of storm troopers, clawing and biting. In an instant everything was confusion and bloodletting. A storm trooper fell to the ground, a mutant on top of him, its jaws fastened upon his neck. Glowing energy from a hellgun punched through a mutant in mid-leap, burning through its chest. The storm trooper that had fired shifted target and fired again, his shot hissing wide, and then a mutant had him in its clawed grasp. Gore sprayed across the platform. Thaddeus had his knife in his hand as a mutant came at him, its claws raking over his arms and face, the anticipation of the kill in its rank breath. He brought the tip of the blade up under its ribs and felt it die with a surge of delight.

A bolt round passed over Thaddeus’s shoulder, hit the corpse of the mutant he had just killed, and exploded in a spray of flesh. Thaddeus reeled and stumbled

as another explosive round passed over his head. Tarl stalked towards Thaddeus, uncaring of the slaughter around him, his pistol aimed, his face a mask of blood and triumph. Thaddeus stared back into the waiting blackness of the bolt pistol's iron mouth. Blood dripped from the tip of his knife and he felt the red cloud rise within him. He stopped resisting it and let it slide into his limbs and senses. Pain like a hot knife stabbed into his head, and images rushed through his mind: a wide smile, a hand, a white room. Then it was gone and the beast had him.

Thaddeus leapt towards Tarl, his knife held high, face locked into a snarl. Tarl's bolt pistol roared fire into empty air, as Thaddeus landed and cut down at Tarl's neck. It was a fast cut, but Tarl was faster, pivoting around the blow and hammering a kick into Thaddeus's chest. Bones cracked and Thaddeus stumbled, his lungs empty. Tarl brought the pistol up and Thaddeus sprung at the arm forcing it up as it fired. Hands locked around Tarl's bolt pistol, Thaddeus twisted with all his strength. Tarl's fingers snapped in the trigger guard and Thaddeus ripped the pistol free. Tarl stumbled near to the summit's edge, his splintered fingers clutched to his chest, his other hand gripping his throat mic. Thaddeus levelled the bolt pistol at Tarl and smiled.

'Now,' said Tarl.

With a roar of engines the Valkyrie rose up next to the platform. It was so close that Thaddeus could see the pilot's thumb poised over a firing stud. Multi-laser fire poured across the spire's summit, incinerating mutants and storm troopers alike. Thaddeus rolled as the surface of the summit melted around him. Tarl was on his feet as the Valkyrie slewed around, its side door open. He jumped, landing on the deck of the crew compartment with a clang. Thaddeus came up from his roll and sprinted towards the Valkyrie. He saw the pilot looking at him, shock on his face. He reached the edge and leapt, hitting the edge of the Valkyrie's side door, his legs swinging in space, his free hand scrabbling for a hold. Tarl came at him, kicking at his head as Thaddeus pulled himself into the vehicle. The kick sent Thaddeus lurching against the metal wall at the front of the compartment, and the bolt pistol slipped from his hand. Tarl was on him, hands locked around his throat. Thaddeus saw the bolt pistol sliding across the floor of the crew compartment towards the open hatch. The summit of the Fallen Spire loomed in the opening as the Valkyrie pitched and yawed. Thaddeus slammed his forehead into Tarl's face, ducked, grabbed the pistol and brought it up to fire. Tarl's good hand locked on Thaddeus's wrist, and the false colonel snarled with effort as he twisted the gun arm upwards. Thaddeus felt his strength

breaking, the killing rage draining away. Thaddeus looked into Tarl's face and pulled the trigger.

The bolt round ripped through the roof of the crew compartment, hit the engine, and exploded. The Valkyrie began to spin, trailing debris and black smoke. Tarl fell back across the compartment as the floor tilted, fumbling to keep his grip on Thaddeus. The summit of the Fallen Spire spun into view beyond the open hatch as Thaddeus broke from Tarl's grip, scrambled to the hatch, and jumped. He hit the blood and fire-marked summit as the Valkyrie exploded in a black edged cloud, debris spilling down the spire in a cascade of flame.

Thaddeus opened his eyes, and blinked at the bright light. He sat on a chair in a white room, his body covered in a loose smock. His wounds had been sealed and clean bandages covered burned skin and there was an empty chair opposite him. A door opened in the smooth white wall, and a man in deep purple robes over bronze battle plate stepped in.

'Good, you are with us again,' said the man, settling himself into the empty chair.

'Where am I?' asked Thaddeus.

'Don't you recognise it?' Thaddeus looked around. It was a bright white room. He snapped his eyes back to the man who sat opposite him. He saw the broad face and the red lenses of bionic eyes looking back at him.

'You are-'

'Yes,' said the inquisitor.

'I made it then,' breathed Thaddeus, relief washing through him.

'Yes, you did. Even if we had to dig you out of the debris. That leap onto the spire saved your life.' Thaddeus thought of the spinning Valkyrie, of the fireball and of falling, the summit of the spire coming up to meet him with a hard kiss.

'So...' began Thaddeus. Confusion was replacing relief; he had to give something to this man, something he could not remember.

‘I have already obtained and acted upon the information you brought to me. I removed it from your mind while you were unconscious.’ The inquisitor smiled but his flame red stare made it seem grotesque. ‘And thank you for dealing with Colonel Tarl. I had my suspicions, and you provided not only the confirmation but the solution.’

‘What?’ Thaddeus frowned at the inquisitor.

‘Ah yes, you don’t remember that. Sorry, I had to be sure.’

‘What are you talking about?’

The inquisitor just smiled. Thaddeus could feel anger building inside him. He could remember what he had done to survive, but he could not remember the exact reason why. ‘Tell me.’ He was nearly shouting, rising from his chair. Something was whispering on the edge of his thoughts, begging to be set free.

‘Yes, the beast is close isn’t it?’ The inquisitor had not moved but Thaddeus could feel an atmosphere like a gathering storm pressing against his skin. He felt as if the inquisitor was looking into his skull. ‘Can you feel it?’ Thaddeus slumped back into his chair. He felt sick; it was still part of him, that shard of the renegade he had become to serve this inquisitor.

‘Why is it-‘

‘Still part of you?’

‘Yes.’ Thaddeus watched as the inquisitor examined a ring-covered hand, watching the light play over metal and jewels.

‘How much can you remember of your time before you infiltrated the renegades?’

‘Not much,’ replied Thaddeus. ‘Snatches. I can remember a face, an aquila ring.’ He looked up at the inquisitor. ‘I saw a world destroyed once, it makes me-‘

‘Angry. Yes it would. It still makes me angry.’

‘What?’ Thaddeus looked at the inquisitor, his mouth open. The inquisitor let

the hand he had been examining drop and looked straight into Thaddeus's eyes.

'Those snatches of memory are not yours. They are mine.' Thaddeus felt as if he was drowning in his own fragmented thoughts and memories. He tried to grab on to something that would make sense of what the inquisitor was saying.

'I...' Thaddeus began.

'They are selected instances in my life: things that drive me to do what I do; to hate the enemy, to be an inquisitor.' he was leaning forwards a look of pride on his face. 'That drive to serve is mine: your loyalty to the Imperium, all the imperatives that made you return to me are mine. They are all mine. I gave them to you. I put them into you.'

'But I am...' stammered Thaddeus, and inside he thought he could feel another self howl with mirth.

'Real renegades make the best infiltrators, Thaddeus.' The inquisitor's voice was low, the whisper of a priest speaking a secret in a dying man's ear. 'Why make a loyal Imperial servant believe they are a soldier of Chaos? Why? When I can take a soldier of Chaos and make them what I need?'

'I am not... I have never been...' said Thaddeus.

'No you have not. You are a renegade, Thaddeus. The beast caged inside you is not a remnant of a false life. It is you caged behind lies that I created.' The inquisitor stood up. Thaddeus watched him through tear-filled eyes as he reached out a hand. The ring-covered fingers were cool against his hairless scalp. He felt the air take on a charged lightning storm quality. The inquisitor, his master, looked down at Thaddeus and spoke in a voice that echoed inside his skull. 'You have served the Imperium many times, and you will serve again.' Darkness swallowed him with a scream.

Thaddeus woke amongst the dead. There was a knife in his hand and blood on its blade. He looked at the corpses around him, their dark robes woven with twisting runes. He looked at his own hands and saw the jagged scars and sinuous patterns marking his skin; he was alone amongst the damned. He remembered a white room, a man with a broad face and red eyes; he must return to his Imperial masters.

He began to run.