



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

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Josh Reynolds

The enemy burst out of the smoky darkness with a raucous, insectile clatter. The swarm of hormagaunts loped towards their prey, talons gleaming in the light of fading luminal panels, driven forward by the pulsing will of monstrous overseers. There were hundreds of them, a seething mass of ravenous jaws and twitching limbs, determined to devour every scrap of bio-matter in the hive-city.

Ghaurkal Hive was the last of the great Kantipur Hollow Mountains, and soon it, like the others, would be claimed by the ravenous servants of Hive Fleet Leviathan. The work of centuries and generations without number would be undone in hours, as the once-prosperous world of Kantipur was stripped barren and rendered down to lifeless rock by the star-borne abominations – the hive-ships of the Leviathan – which even now hung bloated and foul in the upper reaches of the world's atmosphere.

The tyranids pelted through the battle-scarred streets of the hab-block, towards the curved rings of the broad marble steps, many metres across, which led from the cavernous hive to the broad, statue-lined avenue, then out of the mountain-hive and into the open air plateau occupied by the Rana Space port. In better times, hundreds of thousands of travellers would have moved up and down those vast steps, coming and going. Now, they were pockmarked by craters and stained by the blood of humans and monsters alike.

They were crowded with the shattered remnants of a once proud people making all haste for the dubious safety of the stars. It was these bloodied refugees that had drawn the tyranids, but as the creatures swarmed out of the darkness with ravenous intent, other, larger shapes moved out of the mass of panicked humanity to interpose themselves between predator and prey.

‘As per the established stratagem, brothers,’ Varro Tigurius, Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines, said to the blue-armoured shapes of his battle-brothers as they

spread out in formation around him, moving to protect the screaming evacuees. ‘Kill the synapse creatures first. We must be quick. Time is not on our side in this endeavour.’

‘*Thank you for the reminder, Chief Librarian. In the heat of battle I might have forgotten standing orders,*’ the vox crackled in response.

Tigurius smiled thinly. ‘Merely doing my duty, sergeant. As are we all. Proceed at your leisure.’ Clad in azure power armour, his bald, scarred head covered by the ornately engraved psychic hood that was both a sign of his office as well as protection for his body and mind, Tigurius made for an imposing figure, even amongst the finest warriors of his Chapter. Scrolls, parchments of incalculable age and purity seals hung from his battleplate, and he clutched an ornate force staff in one hand as his other rested on the butt of the master-crafted bolt pistol holstered on his hip.

‘*Proceeding.*’

The response was curt, but then he hadn’t expected it to be otherwise. The Sternguard were not men to waste words, and their sergeant, Ricimer, was taciturn even for one of that elite group. He was stolid, efficient and unmoveable – in other words, the perfect choice to command the Sternguard. The sons of Dorn would have been proud to call him one of their own had he the fortune to wear the colours of the Imperial Fists rather than the Ultramarines.

A moment later, bolters began to fire in a staccato rhythm, one after the other. Hellfire rounds thudded into the wide, armour-plated skulls of the tyranid warriors, delivering their deadly payload. The creatures staggered, slewing awkwardly through the swarm of their lesser brethren. One toppled backwards, yellowish smoke rising from its crumpled skull. Another stumbled forward a few paces, the tips of its bone swords dragging along the street, before it sank down and flopped over, twitching. The last ploughed on, ignoring the oozing craters that pockmarked its skull.

‘*Reinforced cranial structure,*’ Ricimer said.

‘Yes,’ Tigurius said. He stalked down the steps. ‘I shall deal with it. Hold position.’ He focused his attentions on the tyranid warrior and formed a killing thought in his mind – a thought of sharp edges and deadly speed, honed to a murderous point in the fires of his righteous anger. He sent it hurtling out with a gesture and felt it strike home as if it had been a physical blow. The tyranid swayed, reared back and shrieked.

He extended his hand as if to gather the tangled strands of the thought and made a swift, twisting motion. The tyranid’s bestial frame gave a spasm, and a

gout of superheated steam burst from its jaws. It sank down with a shrill wail, limbs twitching. The tide of hormagaunts stampeded around and over it, following its last command with mindless ferocity.

*'Fall back, Chief Librarian.'*

'No, I think not,' Tigurius said, facing the tide. 'I have fought these beasts before and I know how to send them scurrying for their holes. Hold position. Deal with any that get past me. I shall break them here.' He spread his arms and exhaled slowly. The sutras of strength and endurance unspooled in his mind. He brought his hands together, catching his staff between them. The air seemed to congeal about him as he lifted the staff, ramming the end of it down. The pavement cracked and split, venting steam and dust. A ripple of destruction spread outwards, tearing the street apart. A building, weakened by alien growths, collapsed atop the rear of the swarm, burying many of the skittering hormagaunts. The rest continued on, undeterred, plunging through the dust cloud to surge towards him.

'Come then,' he murmured. 'Come and die, little bugs.' Even as he spoke, he could feel the acidic heat of the hive mind bearing down on him from behind the eyes of every scuttling shape. It was an abominable weight on his mind and soul, but he bore it gladly.

Once, perhaps, his soul might have shrunk from that great, black shadow in the warp, but now he knew its secrets. And in knowing them, he could exploit them. Through such contact, he had come to know its wants, its drives and, more importantly, its weaknesses. He could sense the patterns of control and instinct which drove the servants of the hive mind, and disrupt them with ease.

In moments he was surrounded on all sides, the hormagaunts bounding towards him and talons scything through the air. Tigurius drew his bolt pistol. He fired swiftly, placing the shots where the leaping gaunts would be, rather than where they were. The creatures fell, skulls shattered. He pivoted, sweeping his staff out in a wide arc, to smash a third xenos from the air. The reinforced length of the staff, powered by genetically enhanced muscle, pulverised the creature's spiny shell, and dropped it to the ground in a twitching heap.

As the rest of the brood boiled towards him, Tigurius set his staff as if it were a standard, and let his fury flower to its fullest. The air before him ionised and, with a whip-crack of sound loud enough to shatter those few windows remaining in the closest buildings, his will slipped its leash. Leaping 'gaunts were obliterated, their bodies crushed beyond recognition as the cannonade of pure force hammered into their ranks. Ichor soon drenched the walls of the hab-units

and street, and those who escaped the carnage scuttled back the way they had come.

Tigurius could feel the frayed pulse of primal fear that overwhelmed the creatures' natural ravenous inclinations. Without any of the larger synapse creatures to force them on, the broods were reduced to mere animals, with an animal's instinct towards self-preservation. He smiled in satisfaction. It was no longer a challenge to break the back of such swarms. He watched the last of them vanish into the darkness and turned back towards the steps.

'They're regrouping,' he said.

Ricimer didn't reply. The Sternguard sergeant began to issue orders, and Ultramarines moved to obey with crisp precision. Ten of the thirty who had accompanied Tigurius into Ghaurkal Hive moved to aid the evacuees in their efforts to reach safety. The rest split up into combat squads and moved out into the hab-block which extended out around the entryway to the space port. They would fan out and report any contact with the enemy.

Tigurius heard a rumble and looked up, through the shattered remnants of the immense stained-glass canopy that had covered the avenue to the space port. He watched as one of the vessels pressed into service for the evacuation lunged skyward on oscillating columns of flame. *Fly swiftly, fly true*, he thought.

Overhead, swirling clouds of tyranid gargoyles swooped and eddied. From a distance, the aliens looked like birds, moving with an instinctive synchronicity that eluded bipeds. They flew through the heavy, grey clouds and shot through with strands of sickly purple that obscured the sky. The vessel plunged into clouds and gargoyle swarms, rising steadily upwards and leaving the doomed world behind.

Outside of the hive, the air was thick with the black toxicity spewing from the thousands of fuming spore chimneys which had sprouted from the ground. The very stuff of the once-vibrant world was being broken down and reduced to its component parts for ease of alien digestion. Fuel for a fire that might yet claim Ultima Segmentum, unless some stroke of fortune snuffed it out.

Even here, in the last stronghold of humanity on this world, monstrous alien growths had begun to creep in and coil about the battle-scarred ruins. Many-limbed shadows moved through the upper reaches of the hive, scuttling amongst the networks of pipes and cabling which carried power, air and water to every hab-block and Administratum zone. The warble of the tyranid feeder-beasts slithered down from the upper spires, and the ululation of hormagaunts and still worse things rose from the underhive, combining to create a monstrous

background cacophony.

And through it all, he felt the grotesque, singular pulse of the hive mind, watching, in hungry anticipation.

That was all it was, Tigurius knew. There was no true intelligence to be found there, only the avid hunger of an insect colony, bloated into something vast and far-reaching. The hive fleets were not enemies so much as storms to be weathered, or infestations to be exterminated. And such would be his pleasure, when the time came.

A number of other detachments of the same size and composition as the one he had led to Kantipur were engaged in similar evacuation efforts across the Gohla sub-sector. Indeed, the stratagem had been of his devising, after examining the skeins of fate and chance, and sifting through the premonitions which were his burden and his gift in equal measure. The Leviathan grew stronger with every world it devoured, and so, the Ultramarines had set out to deny this tendril of the hive fleet its provender, if possible. Starve the beast, rob it of strength and make it easy prey for the slaughter.

Exterminatus would have been easier, and had been suggested by others, with the Master of Sanctity, Ortan Cassius, among them. Burn the targeted worlds to cinders and let the swarm starve or devour itself. He knew the Blood Angels and their successor chapters were employing similar tactics in the Cryptus System. Tigurius doubted the long-term viability of such a strategy, however, and not simply because his premonitions had shown him glimpses of its ultimate futility. No, the Leviathan could be beaten, even as the Kraken had been, and the Behemoth. And if they sacrificed the very people whom they were sworn to protect, then what was the point?

Tigurius could feel the heat of every human soul still in Ghaurkal Hive in his mind. Each and every human – young or old, man, woman or child – had a tiny ember of flame within the chambers of their single heart... a flame which could burn as brightly as a sun. They were changeable things, humans, and capable of greatness, if given the opportunity. And for that reason, more than any other, Tigurius intended to make his stand and deny the Leviathan.

*The Emperor made us to defend his chosen people, he thought, and that is what the sons of Guilliman will do, or we will die in the attempt.*

He turned suddenly, looking out into the dark of the hab-block, and the hive-city beyond. He'd felt... something. It stirred in the dark, like an unseen shape sliding through black waters. A ripple of psychic disturbance which leeches his certainties away.

He had fought the mind-predators of the hive fleets before, and recognised their psychic spoor when he sensed it. Mind and body tense, he set his thoughts flying out over the cramped quarters of the hab-block, searching, hunting for any sign of it. The hive-city was full of swarms, mostly feeder-beasts, but worse things as well. Brute-simple warrior-broods and cunning infiltrator-species prowled the access tunnels and lower levels, in search of bio-matter to devour.

Tigurius stiffened as a lance of pain stabbed into his cerebral cortex. Even as he had been searching, so had something else – and it had found him first. He staggered, one hand pressed to his temple. A sound filled his head, swelling as if to drive out all thought and sanity. It was a scream, shrill and inhuman, and he dug his fingers into his skull, trying to marshal some defence against it. It was stronger than anything he'd yet encountered in his struggles with the hive mind.

'Contact,' the vox-feed crackled abruptly, and Tigurius stiffened. He recognised the voice of Geta, one of Ricimer's subordinates. He heard the stolid *crack-crack-crack* of bolter fire as well. Tigurius heard Ricimer speaking swiftly into the vox, making contact with the other squads.

'Estimate?' Tigurius asked into the vox.

'Many,' came the terse reply.

'Care to elaborate, brother?' Tigurius asked.

'Too many.'

'Thank you,' Tigurius said. 'Break contact and withdraw.' Geta didn't reply. Tigurius hoped that meant he was already falling back with the other members of his squad. Given the situation, he might not be able to.

Tigurius frowned and looked at Ricimer, who'd joined him before the steps. Ricimer was a bullet-headed veteran of the Ultramarines First Company. He held his helmet beneath his arm, and the majority of his blunt, chiselled features were hidden beneath the rim of the armoured collar of his Mark VIII armour. The pale furrows of old scars rose across his scalp from his cheek, a reminder of a previous conflict with the scuttling hordes of the hive mind.

'How long do we have, brother?' Tigurius asked, without preamble.

'There are still a few hundred left in the avenue. They're beginning to panic,' Ricimer said. He hefted his helmet and set it over his head, locking it in place with a hiss of pneumatic seals. 'We need to buy time, so the crew can finish getting them aboard.'

'Suggestions?'

'Offhand, I'd suggest shooting the tyrannids,' Ricimer said. 'I've taken the liberty of ordering Metellus and the others to fall back. Stormravens are already

en route. As soon as the last human is aboard and the transports are away, we can leave as well. We just need to hold until then.'

'And can we?' Tigurius asked.

'Emperor willing,' Ricimer said. He glanced at the shattered gates that marked the entrance to the avenue. 'Ten of us can hold that entry point, if they come in force. Less, if Metellus and Oriches get back here with the heavy flamers.' He turned and pointed through the gates, towards the avenue. 'Three possible strongpoints there, there and there, giving overlapping fields of fire for the gateway, allowing for withdrawal. Two more potential strongpoints at the avenue's mid-point. Even factoring in heavy losses, a fighting withdrawal should be possible.'

Tigurius smiled. Ricimer had his faults, but a lack of tactical acumen was not one of them. 'I'll defer to you then, brother. Arrange our withdrawal as you see fit.' The vox crackled again, loudly, in his ear. A garbled voice floundered in a wash of interference and then fell silent. The sound of bolter fire echoed up from the hab-block.

Ricimer cocked his head. 'Geta... report,' he said, hesitating. 'Metellus, Oriches, sound off.' Voices crackled over the vox, and Tigurius turned to see one of the combat squads hurrying towards them. 'Metellus,' Ricimer said.

'There's Oriches,' Tigurius said, gesturing with his staff. The second of the three squads came into view, firing behind them as they moved. One of the Space Marines, clutching the bulky shape of a heavy bolter, stopped and turned, levelling the weapon at some unseen enemy. The heavy bolter roared, and Tigurius heard the high-pitched cries of dying tyrannid beasts.

'They're massing. Something's driving them forward again,' Oriches shouted, as he climbed the steps. His armour, as well as that of his men, was scorched and scored by blistering venom and alien claws. 'It's big, whatever it is.'

'One of the command-caste, perhaps,' Ricimer said.

'No,' Tigurius said. The echo of the scream was still in his head like an ache. 'It's something else. I can feel it.' He looked out into the dark. 'Geta?' he asked, looking up at Ricimer. Ricimer said nothing. He stared out into the ruins of the block. Tigurius could tell from the sudden flickering of his aura that the other Ultramarine was concerned. Geta should have fallen back with the others. If he hadn't, that meant his squad had engaged the enemy. The sound of bolter fire ratcheted through the still air.

Tigurius looked at Ricimer. 'Fall back into the space port, as planned. If I have not returned by the time of extraction, you are to follow standing orders.'

Evacuate and turn this planet to ashes from orbit.’

‘Where are you going?’ Ricimer asked.

‘I shall meet the enemy in the field, as is my right and privilege,’ Tigurius said. ‘Someone must remind them that the sons of Guilliman are not a meal that agrees with them.’ *And I want to know what that was that I felt*, he thought. If the hive fleets had given birth to some new monstrosity, he wanted to know about it and test its might if possible. Knowledge was power.

‘One of us should come with you,’ Ricimer said.

‘Geta will serve in that capacity,’ Tigurius said, over his shoulder. ‘When you see us, know that the enemy will not be far behind.’

‘I don’t need to be Chief Librarian to know that, brother,’ Ricimer called.

Tigurius chuckled, but didn’t reply. He moved quickly, gathering his strength as he did so. Something, some flicker of foresight, told him he would need it. He broke into a run, sprinting into the labyrinthine confines of the hab-block. He trusted in his senses, physical and otherwise, to lead him to Geta and the others.

As he continued on, the sound of bolter fire grew steadily louder, drawing closer. Geta and his brothers were hard-pressed, Tigurius suspected. Then, if what he’d felt were any indication, they might soon be a good deal worse than that. He’d never felt such raw power, not from any alien psyker he’d ever encountered. He hurtled along a broad avenue, moving smoothly, until a flash of movement caught his attention. He smelled the acrid tang of fear, mingled with blood, as he slid to a stop.

A group of ragged figures stumbled out of a side-street. He raised his staff, then lowered it as two of his battle-brothers came into view just behind them. He recognised them both – Valens and Appius – as members of Geta’s squad.

‘Chief Librarian,’ Valens said, smashing a fist against his chestplate in a hasty salute.

Several of the humans wore the battle-tattered remnants of the uniform of the local defence forces. The rest were clad in Administratum robes. All were wounded, some worse than others. They looked at Tigurius dully, exhausted and drained of emotion.

‘We found them holed up in a signatorium,’ Valens said. ‘We almost missed them, but one of them managed to signal us.’ He gestured back the way they had come. ‘Geta and Castus stayed behind, to give us time to get the humans clear. The enemy were right behind us – swarms of them, ’gaunts and more besides.’

‘Forgive me, brother, but I am more concerned about what might be behind the chaff,’ Tigurius said. He could feel something coming closer, like the rumble of

distant thunder. He tapped Valens on the shoulder-plate with his staff. ‘I need you to follow your orders. Go. I will find the others.’

Valens hesitated. ‘But...’

Tigurius reeled as a sudden flare of pain seared his mind. The humans screamed and staggered, one falling to the ground, her eyes rolling to the whites, and blood pouring from her nose and mouth. Valens and Appius felt it as well, the former shaking his head like a stunned bovid. ‘What in Guilliman’s name...?’ he croaked.

Tigurius didn’t reply. A bolter roared close by, and he saw Geta stumble out into view from the same side-street that Valens and the others had come from, shoving another battle-brother ahead of him. Their armour was scorched black where the bare ceramite wasn’t showing, and it was wreathed in smoke. As the wounded Space Marine stumbled, Geta whirled about, his bolter rising. Something pale and radiating a sickly luminescence stretched out towards him. The wriggling ectoplasmic tendrils briefly fluttered over the Space Marine’s head. His helmet burst asunder in a welter of blood, bone and brain-matter.

Tigurius’s eyes widened as Geta’s body sank to its knees, and slowly toppled over, covering the form of his wounded brother.

‘Custus,’ Valens began, starting forward. Tigurius caught his arm. He could feel a cold scrabbling at the edges of his mind, as if something were trying to pry back his thoughts, in the wake of that searing scream. Whatever had killed Geta was more dangerous than any mind-beast he’d encountered before.

‘I’ll go. Withdraw, get the humans to safety,’ he said.

Valens hesitated, but only for the briefest of moments. Then he and Appius were moving swiftly, following orders, falling in around the small group of bedraggled soldiers and civilians. Quickly, the Ultramarines scooped up those humans who were too injured to walk by themselves, or bent so that the latter could climb onto their backs. Valens held a small child cradled to his chest, the girl’s mother clinging to his neck. Tigurius felt a flicker of pride at the sight. *Let them bestride the galaxy like the gods of old, sheltering mankind from destruction at the hands of an uncaring universe*, he thought. A line from the Codex Astartes, and a good one.

That was what it meant to be a Space Marine. That was what it meant to bear the colours of the Chapter into war. Theirs was not merely to bring death to the enemies of mankind, but to preserve life, where they could. They were the shield, as well as the sword, of humanity, and Tigurius did not intend to falter in that duty. *Emperor guide my hand*, he thought, letting his mind reach out towards

the distant, flickering star that was the holy Astronomican.

As he did so, however, he recoiled in disgust. An intrusive, creeping miasma spread across his thoughts, plucking at his senses. It felt like acid splashed on flesh, and he staggered, his hand flying to his head. Pain flooded his nerves, and he fought to regain control of himself. It was worse even than the scream had been. He turned, teeth gritted, and saw Geta's killer stride into sight.

It was a centaur of sorts, moving forward on four thick limbs, but possessing a barrel torso, topped by a heavy, pulsing braincase and two long, deadly looking talons. Cruel spikes rose from its segmented carapace, and the squirming meat of its mind pulsed wetly, filling the air with a diseased radiance. The world turned soft around it, and he could feel the terrible weight of its regard as it turned its eyeless skull towards him. Its fang-studded jaws champed eagerly as it stalked towards him.

Tigurius did not recognise the beast, but he knew what it was, regardless. It was all the horror and fear that flowed in the wake of the hive fleets made manifest, and its servants bounded past it, screeching in predatory anticipation.

Tigurius tore his eyes from the larger creature and sent a killing thought smashing into the scuttling hormagaunts. Even as they died, he wrenched his gaze back to the thing that had killed Geta. Whatever it was, it would die, as easily as all the rest. He sent a bolt of shimmering psychic force thundering towards it.

The sixfold mind-nodes which clustered on its skull flexed unpleasantly, and the bolt washed harmlessly across the shimmering barrier that had suddenly formed about the beast. Tigurius stepped back, readying another bolt, but his enemy was quick to take advantage of his moment of hesitation.

Its jaws opened soundlessly, as energy speared from its sightless cranium. The psychic scream carved through his defences, obliterating the sutras that guarded his thoughts from the vast, alien mindscape that pressed down on his psyche. His skull felt as if it were swelling within the envelope of his flesh, and he clutched at his head. Streamers of vibrant agony ran up and down his spine, and he could taste blood and bile. The alien mind bore down on him, like a wrestler pressing an opponent to the ground. He sank down beneath its pressure until one knee touched the ground.

Tigurius drove the end of his staff into the broken pavement, as if it might anchor him in place. His thoughts clung to the intricate designs, finding strength in the millennia-old patterns. He had found it beneath the Great Bastion on Andraxas, and it was said, by the artificer-scribes of Corinth, that the staff might

once have belonged to Malcador the Sigillite, First Lord of Terra. Sometimes, in moments of great stress, moments like this, he thought he could hear the rasp of a voice out of antiquity. A ghost of a memory of the man who had once fought to defend the Imperium, even as Tigurius himself now did.

He focused on that dry, rustling murmur, and strove to block out the pain that sought to drown his mind. He reached up and clamped his free hand around the staff. Grasping it in both hands, he hauled himself to his feet.

The creature loped towards him, its four legs pumping like pistons. Its great talons swept out, and he only narrowly dodged aside. He rolled away, drawing his bolt pistol as he came to his feet, and fired. The tyranid shrieked as bilious ichor spurted from its flesh. It turned swiftly, and the tip of one talon scored a line across his chestplate, sending bits of ancient parchment fluttering to the ground. He fired again, ignoring the growing ache in his head, trusting in his mental shields to hold against the creature as its mind-nodes pulsed. That trust, however, was in vain. Smoke boiled from the circuitry that lined the interior of his psychic hood as its synaptic connectors burned out one by one.

Tigurius staggered. His staff and bolt pistol slipped from numb fingers. The creature hissed and slunk around him. He could feel it prying at the gates of his mind, scrabbling about in the shadows of his consciousness. His limbs felt heavy and awkward, and he sank down once more, borne under by the enormity of its will. The world gave a spasm, like a faulty pict-feed. He smelled rancid meat, and heard a riotous murmur that overwhelmed his thoughts, smashing them aside. He felt heat, and hunger... a terrible hunger.

That hunger tore through Tigurius, smashing aside his certainties and assurances, his confidence and surety, in a way it had never done before. All of it, all of his training, his skill, his power as Chief Librarian, was as nothing before that inhuman ache, and he realised with a growing horror that he had never truly faced the hive mind before – that this hunger was a roaring inferno compared to the flickering spark he had touched previously.

It was a hunger such as a fire might feel, enormous and unending. A hunger which would never know appeasement and would never abate, not even when the last sun had flickered and died, leaving the galaxy a cold, barren void at last. Even then, the hunger would not end, even then the hive mind would hunt, feeding on itself until, at last, the surviving shard of its intelligence withered and starved, alone in the dark and quiet.

But before that, it would feed on every world. It would batten on every star, and strip every system and sector of life. The Imperium would fall to it. There

would be no salvation, no last minute reprieve. The murmurs grew in volume, and he clutched uselessly at his head, trying to block them out.

As Tigurius fought, trying to shutter the gates of his mind, scraps of sound and memory burned across the horizon of his thoughts. He saw flickering images, as if he were seeing through the eyes of the hive mind as it spread out to consume Ultima Segmentum. He heard the slow scrape of the monster's claws as it advanced towards him, across the street. But he could not rise to confront it, could not stifle the images which overwhelmed his mind with thoughts and memories not his own.

They were flashes only, brief moments of time, crystallised and vivid.

He saw Sisters of Battle fighting back-to-back with Militarum Tempestus Scions as a tidal wave of chitin and talons loomed over them, ready to sweep them aside. He felt their fear and pain as the image burst like a bubble, parting to reveal a Terminator, clad in the crimson heraldry of the Blood Angels Chapter, grappling with a multi-limbed broodlord in the burning ruins of an Imperial palace. As the broodlord swiped its cruel claws across his brother Space Marine's chestplate, Tigurius clutched at his own chest, feeling the pain of the blow as if he'd taken it himself.

His mind reeled as the scene wavered and tore, revealing the sleek void-craft of the Eldar, locked in battle with a swarm of flying horrors birthed by the hive fleet. He felt the ground tremble beneath him as the beast drew closer. The alien stink of it was thick in his nostrils, but he could not focus, could not even see it.

The images came faster and faster, overwhelming him with their intensity. Some small part of his mind knew that the creature was using them to batter him, to weaken him, even as Tigurius himself had used his powers so many times to weaken the tyranid swarms – to make them easy prey. His head felt full to bursting. He saw a warrior of the Grey Knights, trapped between the gibbering filth of the warp and a horde of hormagaunts. Even as the Grey Knight moved to confront his foes, the image came apart like sand in the tide, and suddenly, Tigurius was caught in stultifying darkness. He saw green lights, and heard the squeal of ancient machinery coming to life, but too late. The steel-limbed necron warriors awoke from the slumber of ages as the tyranids flooded the tomb, smashing the automatons down as they rose.

He smelled and tasted blood. Blood Angels and Flesh Tearers fought against overwhelming hordes beneath a blood-red star, and he felt their rage and madness as if it were his own. It threatened to overwhelm him, and he cried out. The image shattered and he was smashed to the ground by a heavy blow.

Another blow caught him across the back and he felt his armour rupture. He rolled over with a groan, mind sluggish, body barely responding. Hoses popped and seals burst in his armour as its weight settled on him, driving his wounded back against the street.

Its featureless skull loomed over him as he struggled uselessly against it. Blossoms of ectoplasm sprouted on its head, unfurling and growing, becoming tendrils like the ones which had been the cause of Geta's death. The tendrils quivered, and then stiffened and shot towards him. Something cold touched him and darkness invaded him. It was stronger than the scream, impossible to resist.

His thoughts were ground under the relentless clamour of an alien intelligence far older and crueller than he had ever suspected – this intelligence was nothing like the others; the Leviathan was stronger than the Behemoth, and more dangerous than the Kraken. Worse, he'd been wrong. There was a mind there, amidst the hunger, a true mind, a fierce self-awareness that put the torch to every assumption and scrap of knowledge about the tyranids that he'd possessed.

And that mind hated him. It wanted vengeance. It wanted him. For the first time, Varro Tigurius felt the first stirrings of fear. Such a thing could not be defeated. His will was as nothing next to that of the hive mind. It would devour him, and then Kantipur, and after that, the sub-sector. It could not be stopped. Even Holy Terra would fall.

*No!*

Even as the thought filled his mind, he refused it. Terra would not – *could* not – fall. He focused, looking past the horror that held him, and up into the darkness beyond it. He could still hear the voice of the staff, even though it was out of reach. It whispered to him and he closed his eyes, trying to focus on it rather than the horror reaching out to engulf him. He could feel the heat and light of the Astronomican, he could hear its song, swelling in his mind, dimly at first, and then more loudly.

Tigurius reached out, even as he drowned in that cold, hungry darkness, and felt the light of the Emperor's grace, just at the tips of his fingers. Was it the same light that Malcador had felt, the day he took the Emperor's place on the Golden Throne? Had the Sigillite felt the light of the Astronomican on him, the day he'd sacrificed his life for the good of the Imperium? The whispers grew in strength, filling his mind, driving out doubt and hesitation. Malcador had died for the Imperium – could he do any less?

He grabbed hold of the light with all of his strength, and sent it pulsing outward, against the dark. There was a scream, like that of a startled animal, as

the shadow in the warp met the blinding light of humanity's guiding star, and then the weight was gone and he could breathe again. His eyes popped open and he saw the xenos monster stumble away, shaking its head. Greasy smoke rose from its brain-case, and could smell the stench of rancid, burning meat. He lunged to his feet.

Acting on instinct, he snatched up his bolt pistol and flung himself at the monster. He caught hold of its carapace and swung himself up. It heaved, trying to buck him off, but to no avail. He shoved the barrel of his bolt pistol against the meat of its mind, and emptied the clip. The great body convulsed, and it took a faltering step. Then, with a sibilant whine, it toppled, slamming into the street hard enough to crack the pavement. Tigurius rolled clear.

He came to his feet and retrieved his staff. As his fingers tightened about it, he spun and extended it towards the twitching hulk, ready for it to spring to life once more. Thankfully, it did not. It sagged, and the acidic bile that passed for its blood began to eat its way free of the armoured shell.

Weary, his mind awash in pain, Tigurius turned towards Geta's body. He could hear the sound of tyranids scuttling in the dark, and knew that they would come again, and again and again, until Kantipur was theirs. They knew neither defeat nor victory, only hunger. And when this world had fallen, they would hurtle into the void, in search of another. Unless they were stopped, once and for all. Emperor willing, Tigurius would be there when it was accomplished. Even if it meant his death.

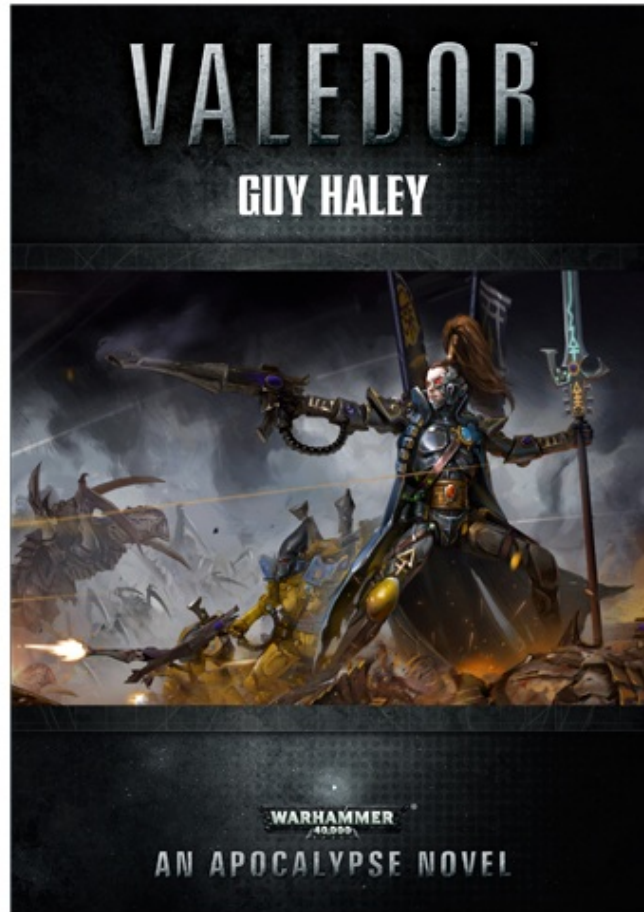
But for now, his fight was done, and it was time to leave. He dragged Geta's body up, and slung it awkwardly over his shoulder. He would not let the hive fleet have it.

The other Ultramarine, Castus, groaned. Tigurius bent low and hooked his arm. 'Up, brother,' Tigurius said, dragging Castus to his feet. 'It is time to go. Kantipur is lost. But there are worlds yet that might be saved.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Josh Reynolds** is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*, all three featuring the White Scars, and the Blood Angels novel *Deathstorm*. In the Warhammer World, he has written *The End Times: The Return of Nagash*, the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*, and the novels *Neferata*, *Master of Death* and *Knight of the Blazing Sun*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

The disparate kindred of the eldar unite to face the combined might of two tyranid hive fleets.



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