

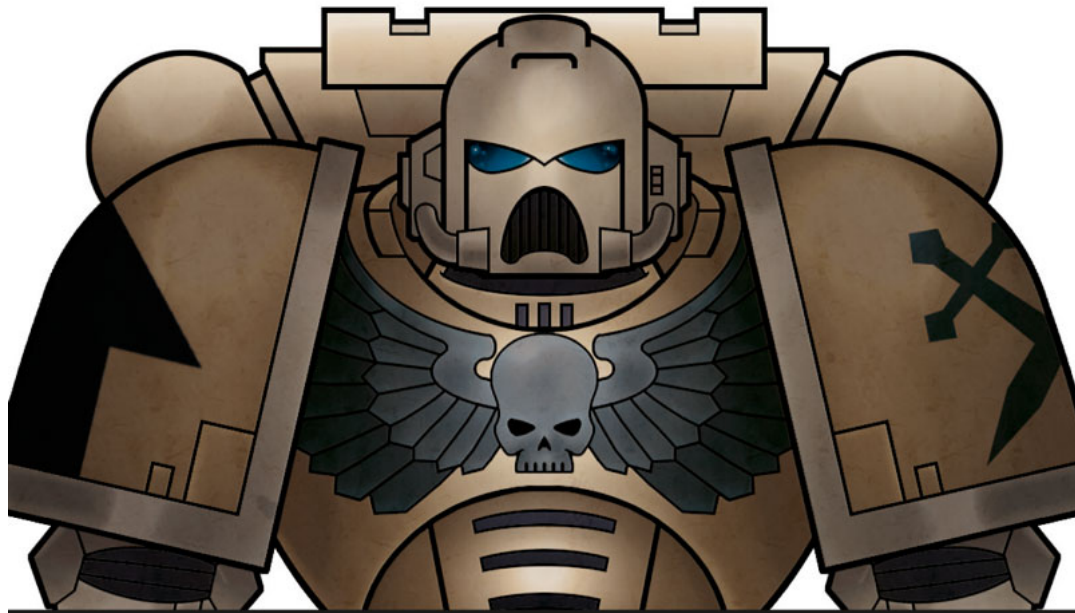
Angels of Death

SETTING THE STAGE

C L W E R N E R



WARHAMMER
40,000



— *Angels of Death* —

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C L Werner

The corpse lay sprawled across the sand, a crimson puddle staining the ground beside it. Fat, carmine-winged bloat-moths buzzed about the body, darting down to deposit their eggs in the dead flesh. Occasionally, one of the soldiers gathered around the corpse would snap the unfolded length of a foil-cloth at the insects, driving them back. Such efforts were half-hearted, however. The soldiers didn't care if the corpse was desecrated by vermin. Indeed, they'd be only too happy to defile the body with their own blades.

Brother-Sergeant Carius scowled behind the view-scope of his needle rifle. It would be so easy to kill these traitors in the midst of their crass mockery of the body at their feet. He could bring down a dozen of them in less time than it took him to put the thought into words. Brother Zosimus would account for at least eight more. In the wink of an eye, a score of the rebels would be twitching in the dirt. A fitting tribute to the dead Sergius.

Carius let the lust for vengeance drain away. Hate was a powerful emotion, but it was one that had to be harnessed, forced to submit to an even more powerful will. Control and discipline, these were the foundations of what it meant to be Adeptus Astartes, what was at the core of a Space Marine. It was what set the Emperor's Warbringers apart from the diseased traitors who raved and ravaged across the galaxy.

The soldiers, borderers of the rebel government that had seised control of Feralis IV, snapped to attention as an officer marched amongst them and stared down at Sergius. Carius noted the absence of the stylised Feralian Dragonspider on the officer's kepi. The pressure of his finger on the trigger relaxed. This officer wasn't the target they were waiting for. Carius wouldn't allow Sergius's sacrifice to go for naught.

More than most, Carius could appreciate the duty and loyalty that had motivated Sergius. Like Sergius, Carius would never become a full initiate of the Chapter, never to wear the power armour of a true Warbringer. Something had gone wrong when the black carapace was being grafted to his body, his flesh rejecting the neural interfaces that would allow him to interact with a suit of power armour as though it were a second skin. His body's rejection of that final implant had condemned Carius to remain among the neophytes, instructing and training them to advance to places their teacher could never go.

Carius had learned to be content with his lot, appreciating that he was still able to take the field with his battle-brothers. He could appreciate how much worse it must have been for Sergius, an aspirant who had served among the Scout squad under the sergeant over ten years previously. His body had proven itself far less viable, rejecting the neuroglottis when it was implanted in his oral cavity. The Chapter's Apothecaries had been able to salvage the man's life, but at the cost of rendering him mute and denying him the hope of ever becoming a Warbringer. The silent wreckage had been allowed to serve as a Chapter serf, a non-combatant menial on one of the Warbringers strike cruisers.

Feralis IV had presented Sergius with the opportunity to perform a more meaningful function for the Chapter. Nearly two centuries of rebel rule over the planet had transformed it into a veritable fortress. Fifty years had passed since an Imperial Guard expedition had been repulsed from the world. The lessons taught by their failure had benefited the Warbringers, highlighting the strengths in the Feralian defence.

And exposing its weaknesses.

Cold as ice, Carius watched as the Feralian officer kicked Sergius's head, sending the armaplas helmet rolling in the dust. The borderers all laughed, their lilting accents striking the Scout-sergeant's ears like a physical blow. Through the display in the ocular lens covering his left eye, he could see the chronometer steadily ticking away. If the target didn't reveal himself soon, the mission would be scrubbed and the Warbringers would be forced to find another way.

For three weeks Carius and his squad had stalked the hinterlands of Quadrant Azure as the Warbringers had designated the vast stretch of desert straddling the planet's equator. In that time, the Space Marines had

killed over two hundred men, dropping them at range with their needle rifles. Always, they were careful when they killed, taking pains to make it seem the work of a single sniper. Always, they ensured evidence was left behind to point to the off-world origins of that sniper.

For three weeks they had been picking away at the discipline and resolve of the borderers, undermining the authority of their commanders with the double poison of fear and hate. Every effort on the part of the rebel military to root out the unseen killer had failed. In their desperation they had even resorted to artillery barrages and air strikes on regions where they suspected the sniper might be hidden. After each attack, the Space Marines had been quiet for a few days, lulling the borderers into a false sense of security, deceiving them that the menace had been eradicated. Then, from some new quarter, they would strike once more and panic would sweep through the rebel ranks.

Now, as the Feralians glared at Sergius, they thought the hunt was truly over. It had been a hard thing, keeping the Chapter serf alive these many weeks, pressing his puny human stamina to maintain the pace of even a neophyte Warbringer. Carius had seen the sense of shame growing in Sergius each day, the knowledge that his weakness was placing an extra burden on the Scout Marines. When the moment came for his sacrifice, Sergius had accepted his role with gratitude.

After the final attack of the ‘sniper’, Carius left behind evidence that the slaughtered borderers had wounded their killer. A trail of off-world blood led the Feralians back to Sergius’s body and the killing ground Carius had prepared.

All that was left now was for the commander of Quadrant Azure to show himself. The colonel had been an officer in the Feralian Cheka before trading his position for a military commission. After all the trouble the sniper had caused his command, it was a certainty that the colonel would come to personally examine the dead man in the natural surroundings of what his analytical mind would consider a crime scene. The psychological profile developed by the Chapter’s cogitators from intelligence siphoned from Feralian relays predicted such a response.

The moment he arrived, Carius would tap the vox-bead around his throat. Simultaneously, both he and Zosimus would fire and eliminate the rebel colonel in a vicious crossfire. At the same time, Brother Domitian

and the rest of his squad would begin detonating the charges they had placed in the borderers' communication hub.

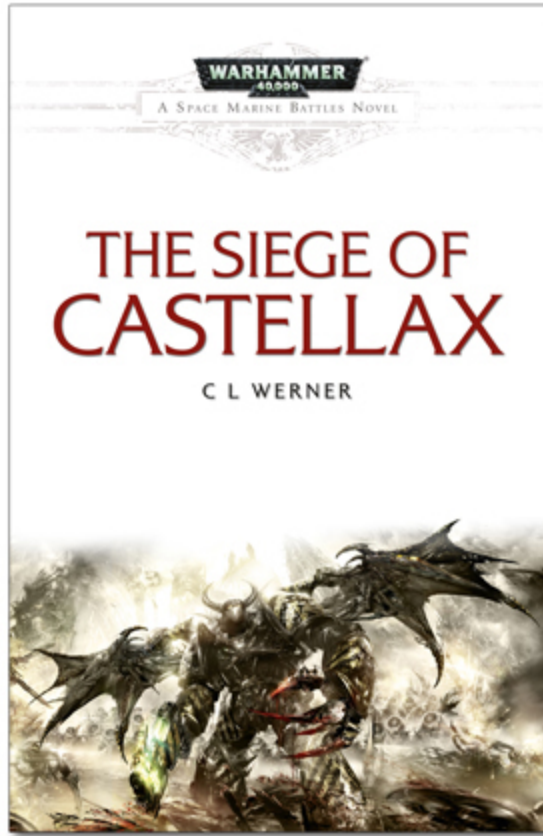
Deprived of both communication and command, Quadrant Azure would be thrown into confusion. It might be a question of only a few hours before order was restored, but for the borderers there would be no time. Without command or communication, the defence batteries scattered about the desert would be incapable of mounting a co-ordinated attack when the drop pods of the Emperor's Warbringers began their descent. Once the Space Marines made planetfall, the fate of Feralis IV was sealed.

A rebel world would be purged with bolter and chainsword, brought back into the light of the Imperium. All through the sacrifice of a man who had been deprived of a great destiny.

Carius smiled as he spotted a tall officer with the Feralian Dragonspider on his kepi approach Sergius. 'For you, brother,' the sergeant whispered as his finger pulled the trigger.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C L WERNER's Black Library credits include the Space Marine Battles novel *The Siege of Castellax*, *Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang*, the Brunner the Bounty Hunter trilogy, the Thanquol and Boneripper series and Time of Legends: The Black Plague. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He claims that he was a diseased servant of the Horned Rat long before his first story was ever published.



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