



— *Angels of Death* —

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GRAHAM McNEILL, JAMES SWALLOW, NICK HYME
CHRIS WRAIGHT, GAU THORPE AND MORE



SPACE MARINES: ANGELS OF DEATH

The Emperor's Angels of Death, the Space Marines are mankind's bulwark against the darkness. Tireless defenders of the Imperium, they bring death to all of humanity's enemies with bolter and blade. The Space Marines are organised into nearly a thousand Chapters, autonomous organisations each with their own history, rituals and battle honours. Each of these Chapters is descended from one of the nine First Founding Legions who remained loyal to the Emperor during the Horus Heresy.

In this volume, you will find thirty-one stories of the Space Marines, each about a different Chapter. They are grouped according to the Legion from which they descend, so all the tales of the Ultramarines and their Successor Chapters, for example, can be found together. Of course, the Imperium is full of mysteries, and at the end are some additional tales about Space Marine Chapters whose lines of descent are not so easily defined...

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 ANTHOLOGY

⚡ Angels of Death ⚡

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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day. so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican. the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst his soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes. the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants — and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

DARK ANGELS

HONOUR TO THE THIRD

Gav Thorpe

‘Seventeen worlds have drowned in blood. Seventeen worlds and countless millions hewn down by the battle-lust of a single man. Now that rage incarnate has beset Durga Principe. Here we will halt the tide.’

So had been the last command of Master Nadael of the Dark Angels Third Company before he too had fallen to the horde of the arch-traitor Furion. In the darkness they had come, cleaving through the outer perimeter like a blade.

Now the warriors from the Tower of Angels looked to Sergeant Belial for leadership even as the night was torn apart by distant battle cries and the baying of Furion’s manic Skull-scythes. In the ruins of the Temple Saturnis, a complex of sandstone and marble that covered several square kilometres, looked down upon by cracked statues of the Emperor and his saints, Belial held swift council with the veterans of the company.

‘We cannot hold the temple. Master Nadael had hoped to fortify before Furion’s arrival, but it is too late. The naves and galleries provide too much cover for the foe and our superiority of firepower is for nought.’ Belial gestured westward to the palace-topped hill that overlooked the Temple Saturnis. ‘We must withdraw to the flanks of Mount Dawon and await the dawn.’

‘Fine strategy, but flawed,’ countered Sergeant Meneus, chosen representative of the company’s Devastator squads. ‘The enemy will fall upon our turned backs before we can quit this place. It will become our mausoleum.’

‘True, brother, but only if we turn tail and flee like rats. This will be a withdrawal, not a rout. A rearguard will entertain the Skull-scythes while the remainder of the company relocates. I shall lead the defence.’

There was no further argument from the others. They well understood the need for rapid action and the sacrifice Belial was willing to make. Returning to his squad, Belial ordered his warriors to break out from the Dark Angels line, heading towards the foe. Augur readings showed the traitors were less than a kilometre away and closing swiftly.

‘I am resolved to my death tonight,’ remarked Lederon, second to only Belial in seniority amongst the squad, ‘but is it wise to hasten that moment with our own advance?’

‘If we cannot hold, we must attack, it is that simple,’ explained Belial as the ten Space Marines marched through the tumble of toppled pillars, collapsed shrines and broken chapels. The skies were clear, allowing the three moons to bathe the ruins in pale blue light. ‘Every second and every metre are vital.’

They met the first traitors in a crumbling, plant-choked cloister. Clad in white armour marked with handprints and smears of dried blood the Skull-scythes spilled through an archway. They were met by the fire of the squad’s bolters, missile launcher and meltagun.

‘No forgiveness! No retreat!’ Belial roared as the enemy tumbled to the ground amidst the torrent of bolts and blasts.

The firefight was brutally short, but the peace that followed was only momentary as more of the slaughter-hungry foe converged on the Dark Angels. To tarry was to invite encirclement. Belial led the squad through the archway into the courtyard beyond, laying down fire with his bolt pistol. Like moths to a flame the Skull-scythes were drawn to the fighting, howling for blood and death.

The Dark Angels took a heavy toll, manoeuvring through the ruins for ambushes and crossfires that cut down the traitors as they plunged headlong into the attack. Through streaks of pale light and shadows in roofless cathedrals and across devastated quadrangles Belial steered the squad, always seeking open ground, knowing that at close quarters his warriors would be overwhelmed. Building by building, street by street, they gave ground to the enemy advance, stopping to give fire when possible, moving back towards their battle-brethren when they could not.

‘We have drawn their sting, brother-sergeant. It would be unwise to remain any longer,’ said Lederon. The veteran’s observation was correct: the rest of the Third were clear of the ancient Ecclesiarchy buildings and the squad was almost at the edge of the ruins.

‘Agreed, brother,’ replied Belial. ‘We fall back to the company.’

As soon as he uttered these words, another force of Skull-scythes appeared in the darkness. At their fore strode a beast of a warrior. His plate was adorned with spiked chains, and from the chains hung trophy-skulls that clattered as they swung. In both hands he bore a massive chain-axe, its teeth glinting in the wan light.

Furion, arch-traitor, thrice-cursed slaughterer.

‘Your little game of hide and seek is over, son of the Lion!’ Furion bellowed as he broke into a run. Behind him, the Skull-scythes screamed dedications to their dark god and followed their champion’s charge.

The Dark Angels opened fire, standing their ground to blaze away at the approaching enemy. Furion ignored the detonations of bolt-rounds on his armour, sprinting through the storm without pause. His axe took Brother Mendeleth’s head clean off in one sweep; the traitor’s return swing eviscerated Lederon in a welter of blood and shattered armour.

‘Keep firing!’ Belial snarled as he bounded forward to meet the attack; too late to save Brother Sabellion, whose torso was cleaved from waist to shoulder. Belial would atone for his slowness if he survived.

As shots from Belial’s pistol exploded across his armour, Furion turned to meet the sergeant’s counterattack. Raising his chainsword for the strike, Belial ducked beneath Furion’s blade as the traitor swept it towards the Dark Angel’s throat. The teeth of the chainsword bit into armour, screeching as they chewed into Furion’s left arm.

Furion lashed out as blood spurted from his wounded limb, smashing the haft of his weapon into the side of Belial’s head. Out of instinct, the sergeant raised his blade to ward away the next blow. Razor-sharp shards of metal showered around him as chain-blade met chain-blade. Furion’s next strike shattered Belial’s weapon and sent him stumbling to his right.

Lifting his axe in victory, the Skull-scythes lord loomed over the sprawling sergeant.

‘Blood for the Bl—’

Furion’s triumphant roar was cut short by the bark of Belial’s bolt pistol. The explosive round pierced the collar of the traitor’s armour and detonated inside his throat to send his head arcing away into the darkness. For a moment Belial was taken aback by his deadly reflex shot.

The headless corpse crashed to the ground and Belial recovered, realising that only he and Brother Ramiel remained standing amongst friend and foe. Thermal registers betrayed the presence of other enemies close at hand.

‘The death of the Skull-scythes’ leader will cause our foe some strife, and let us hope the search for his successor delays them further,’ said Belial. ‘Our duty here is done to my satisfaction, brother. To Mount Dawon, where the guns of the Third wait to greet these traitors.’

WHITE SCARS

THE THRILL OF THE HUNT

Anthony Reynolds

He lowers the magnoculars. He has seen enough. The enemy are here; the Hunt will ride before the twin suns set.

His name is Ajai Khan. He was born in the saddle, on a world of wide skies and open plains. He has not truly been human for seventy-three years, but he still remembers.

He squints against the glare of the lower, yellow sun reflecting off the snow. He is not wearing his helmet – he never does when outriding. His face is the colour of tanned leather. His scalp is shaved on the sides, but he wears his hair long on top. It is charcoal-black and bound in a long tail that hangs down his back. Ritual scars mar his high cheeks. They are jagged, and resemble thunder bolts, mirroring the markings acid-etched upon the heavy white plates of his armour.

Ajai Khan stands astride a heavy bike, a big muscular, brutish thing, as he looks down upon the enemy from the edge of a forested bluff. The wind rippling the razor-leaved pines is bone-numbingly cold. It feels good against his skin.

The wind changes abruptly. It is what saves him.

A new scent reaches his nostrils, something exotic that he cannot instantly place, like an unknown, but not unpleasant, mix of spices. It is close. It is... *alien*.

The enemy are upon him.

His head snaps around and he sees one of them, close. It is coming at him up the lee of the bluff. It is slender, almost spindly, climbing on all fours like an insect, arms and legs splayed. Its armour is a dull grey-green and segmented, and its helm is strangely elongated, ending in jutting mandibles. Its lenses glitter, black and soulless.

He aims and fires. His bolt pistol bucks. There is a distinct double-cough as the bolt is launched from the barrel then ignites, propelling itself towards the target. In the same instant, the bike roars into life beneath him, like a beast angry

at having been disturbed from slumber.

The xenos are quick, inhumanly so. The enemy scuttles to the side, avoiding his first shot. It detonates within the rock hidden beneath the snow. He sees more of them now, creeping and arachnid. The time for stealth is past – the xenos rise as one and sprint towards him, running lightly atop the thin crust of snow.

Ajai Khan brings his bike slewing around, kicking up a spray of white, and snaps off two more shots. Both miss their mark, but they at least slow the enemy. Marginally.

Holstering his pistol, he guns the bike. It launches forward with a throaty roar, like a steed given its head. He thumbs firing runes and twin bolters bark. He catches one of the xenos, the closest, with a glancing blow that tears off an arm. Blood sprays across the snow. Even their blood smells wrong. Stray bolts fell a pine, which crashes earthwards with a torturous groan, and kick up snow and ice.

They try to intercept him, slender chain-blades whirring and delicate pistols flashing. Flickers of light spear from their mandibles and biting pain cuts along his left side. He doesn't have the time or space to draw his long-hafted glaive. He slews his bike into one of them, slamming into it with bone-shattering force. It is hurled away and smashes into a tree. When it falls, its limbs are bent unnaturally beneath it. Then Ajai Khan hunkers down low in the saddle and lays on more power. The bike accelerates willingly.

A chain-blade swings at him and he ducks to the side. It rips out a chunk of his fairing. More dart-like flashes strike at him, biting and stinging, but then he is away, hurtling through the forest at speed. The trees flash by him. He knows that he is hurt – he feels blood trickling inside his plate – but he doesn't feel any pain. All he feels is the rush of wind against his face, and he smiles.

There are others in the trees, running on paths parallel to his own. It defies logic, but they are keeping pace with him, sprinting through the shadow of the bladed firs, ghosting him like pack-predators.

This is not how it is meant to be. The White Scars are the hunters. They are not meant to be the hunted.

He leads them on, never slowing, ducking under low-hanging branches and skidding around ice-encased boulders the size of Warhound Titans.

More of them have joined the hunt now. Dart-like jetbikes are accelerating through the trees behind him, closing fast. For a moment, he feels a pang of what might be jealousy, or longing. Once, the Chapter had ridden above the ground. Now, only a handful of jetbikes remain in the Imperium, and Ajai Khan will be unlikely to ever see one, let alone ride to war in the saddle of one of those

revered steeds.

He pushes the errant thought aside and veers hard to the right. He hits a snow-covered ridge at speed, launching into the air. He stands in the saddle, keeping balance as the engines scream. He hits the ground hard and accelerates, pushing the bike to its limits. He is in open terrain now, relishing the speed. Ahead is a line of trees, but the enemy are fast; he is not going to make it. He slams on the brakes and brings the back wheel around sharply, spinning to face his pursuers. The time for running is done.

It is almost dark now, and the shadows are long. He unhooks his long-hafted glaive, taking the comforting weight in his hand.

The eldar descend on him, coming over the ridge in a wave. They spread wide to encircle him, thinking that this is the last desperate stand of a prey finally realising it can run no further.

They are wrong.

They are out in the open, halfway between him and the ridge, when they realise their folly. By then it is too late – they have come too far to turn back.

With a deafening roar, his brethren emerge from the tree-line behind him. It is a sight to behold – a full arrowhead of charging White Scars, leaning forward in the saddles of their bikes, glaive-points lowering as they come in for the kill.

The engine of Ajai Khan's bike bellows in greeting and he accelerates sharply, lowering his own glaive. His brethren fall in around him, letting him take the point of the arrowhead.

This is the way that war was meant to be waged – at speed.

Ajai Khan laughs aloud, and his brothers laugh with him as they sweep in for the kill.

SPACE WOLVES

IRON PRIEST

Chris Wraight

Olvar goes watchfully, swallowing down fear, remembering what Aeolf told him about the place and how to stay alive in it. The sea smokes and belches, fire dances on the water. The earth moves like a floe cracking. He crouches, trying to see the way ahead through twisting sheets of smog. His skin runs with sweat. He is shivering, ankle-deep in slush and gravel. Ahead of him a mountain rises, vaster even than his imagination had made it, scowl-dark and crowned with fulguration.

He is burning with fatigue. He carries his axe in his right hand. The knapped head feels like a lead block in his trembling fingers.

Olvar knows he should move. For two winters he prepared for the forge-test and he cannot turn back. He had been unable to look into the eyes of his mother, who has already grieved for the loss of a son, expecting to see him again only in the afterworld.

Then Olvar hears it once more, closer this time. He snaps around, staring out into the dark, clutching the axe-hilt. Waters foam at the shoreline, flecked grey with cooling slag.

At first he sees nothing but low outlines of empty stone, streaked with melting snow, jagged against a bulging sky of thunderheads.

But he does hear something: a purr, a growl, a hair-lifting, skin-puckering snarl. It has been on his heels for two days, padding closer, hugging the shadows. He cannot see it, cannot smell it, only hear it. It stays downwind of him, slinking around columns of obsidian and granite, a ghoul of the boiling seas.

Olvar pauses. He should go on. He should head for higher ground, earth that does not shudder and crack as the sea drags it down and over into the abyss.

He waits, though. He shivers and he watches. In the gloom, under an overhang that scrapes into the sky like a sickle, he sees them for the first time.

Eyes, black-pinned, like golden orbs, shining in the dark.

Ragnvald strides toward the burning hab-block. Its internals are gutted and glowing, ringed by melting skeletal struts. The sky burns green, shimmering from refractive ice particles. The *crump* of artillery drums out a steady beat, making the earth shake.

Ahead of him a shattered highway snakes through ruins, strewn with the dead and the harrowed. His grey brothers lope ahead, streaking through shadows, heads low, bolters firing. Ragnvald moves more slowly, feeling ember-dry earth part under his boots.

The Rhino is on its side, half-buried, its smoke stacks still vomiting, its broken tracks stilled. Loer's squad has already abandoned it, charging off towards the enemy, leaving the shell to be salvaged or scuttled.

But the spirit is intact. Ragnvald can sense it, chittering in agony, locked in the coils at the heart of the machine. He stoops and his servo-arm sweeps around, clanking as its jaws unlock. He links to the Rhino's core, opening a service hatch. Wiring spills out like entrails.

Then he hears it – a purr, a growl, a hair-lifting, skin-puckering snarl.

Ragnvald unlocks his thunder hammer and races out from the shadow of the Rhino, but the enemy is already upon him, powering out of the roiling smoke, red-armoured, screaming in a language that makes no sense. Ragnvald sees a flash of copper-chasing, obscene bronze jaws, a chainaxe whirring in a swarm of noise.

They clash – Ragnvald's hammer falls, cracking hard and crackling tight before sheering away. The chain-axe slews across him, digging into Ragnvald's defensive servo-arm. Its blades bite, and he feels pain as if it were his own flesh. He falls back, stumbling as he goes, betrayed by the shifting soils.

The champion's cracked helm-lenses blaze in triumph. He leaps, and the axe scythes down.

It leaps, coming at Olvar at last. All he sees is a barrelling wall of hair and flesh, dark as twilight.

He scrambles away, heart locking in fear. Its jaws gape wide for him, strung with yellow saliva. It is massive – the height of a man at the shoulder, hunch-limbed, long-pelted, slope-muzzled, ridge-backed. It bounds across the shifting rock, paws skidding on the ice.

Olvar stands his ground. He waits for the last moment, right until he can smell the meat-wash of the creature's breath.

Then he swings. His axe collides with the beast's skull, thudding against bone.

He ducks and scrambles, evading the mound of muscle as it crashes over him.

He strikes again, cutting deep, working the axe hard. The beast turns on him, roaring. Its jaws sweep in low, going for his leg. He chops down even as he springs away, connecting, severing sinew.

It keeps coming, snapping, trying to pin him down. It is faster, stronger, bigger, fearless. Olvar slips on the slush and it catches him, clamping teeth on his trailing leg.

He cries out – a strangled yell – and hacks down again. Blood, his own and the creature's, mingles in hot jets. Olvar's movements are jerky, confined, driven by panic. His axe is slick, his fingers slippery.

Its head is over him now, leering and snarling. Golden eyes bear down on his. Slobber slaps on to his exposed chest.

Olvar screams in fury, and hurls the axe-head.

The chainaxe never connects. The champion is hit by something huge and fast. Ragnvald sees it surge past him – matted fur, metal jaws, glittering augmetics. The beast tumbles over and over with its prey, clamping it by the neck, shaking and ripping. The champion screams for as long as he has vocal cords.

Ragnvald gets to his feet, striding over to the blood-speckled scene of slaughter. He watches the creature – hunch-limbed, long-pelted, slope-muzzled, ridge-backed. Its flanks are studded with metal; one leg is a piston-mount, wrapped in cabling.

'Enough,' he voxes, and the beast withdraws from the kill.

Ragnvald stands over the fallen champion, twitching in a pool of black blood. He hefts his thunder hammer and brings it down, shattering the crimson helm and breaking the bronze jaws. The movement ceases.

The beast stands at his side, quivering with hunt-anger, jowls running with blood, pelt clotted with ash and armour-shards.

Ragnvald remembers when he killed it. He remembers dragging the hot, heavy corpse to the iron mountain. He had been called something else then, but that was centuries ago and names of the old ice were no longer important.

He reaches down for the wolf's nape and tugs his fingers through its thick fur. The creature growls and nuzzles against his armour.

It took a long time to make the beast anew – years at the forges, watched by the masters behind the masks. Now its teeth are iron, its spine adamantium, its eyes red orbs of sensor-bundles.

It is better now – his first creation, his favourite.

‘Come,’ Ragnvald growls, and wolf and master lope into the dark.

IMPERIAL FISTS

THE TITHE

Ben Counter

On the horizon stood the greatest man there had ever been, the gilded giant that was Rogal Dorn. He had led them across this bleak wasteland, fighting through the host of cultists and degenerates thrown into their guns by the traitors of the Iron Warriors. Now the Scouring was almost done with this world, the Iron Warriors were nearly driven out and the poor fools who still believed in Horus and his heresy would be swept from another planet.

Brother Scoiven trudged through the knee-deep ash. He had seen his target fall, shot through with a round from Scoiven's Stalker-pattern boltgun. The battle was swift and ever-moving, the fighting reduced to isolated bursts of gunfire, and clear targets were rare. Scoiven had taken the shot faster than thought, and it had hit.

The Iron Warrior's gunmetal armour had not stopped the Stalker round punching through his throat. The ash was churned purple-black by the blood that had left him already.

'You will pay,' gasped the Iron Warrior, his voice metallic and strained through the faceplate of his helmet. 'Whatever you do, wherever you go, you will pay.'

Scoiven drew his combat knife as he wrenched the helmet from the traitor's head. 'My debt is cleared,' he said. 'Your payment has already been taken.'

Scoiven plunged the blade under the Iron Warrior's jaw and felt the heat of his enemy's lifeblood as it flowed.

The sky above was bottle-green, the swirls of nebulae visible through the dense clouds. This world was poisoned. Its atmosphere, its water and the aliens who lived there were poisoned. The blade that had caught Scoiven in the gut as he killed the last of them had forced a venom into his veins that even a Space Marine's constitution could not hold off.

'In the primarch's time,' growled Scoiven, 'the xenos fell to us like wheat before the scythe. No battle-brother would ever have suffered such a damned

insignificant death.’

‘Dorn is long gone, brother,’ said the Apothecary as he hooked another cylinder of humours up to the needle in Scoiven’s vein. It was true. The primarch had been lost on the *Sword of Sacrilege*, that cursed ship, and only his bones remained in the hands of the Chapter.

Scoiven held another bone, that of the Iron Warrior he had killed on the wasteland world while Dorn still lived, lifetimes of men ago. It felt warm in his hand and strangely heavy – a shoulder blade cut from the enemy’s body after the battle, worn on a leather strip around Scoiven’s neck through the centuries that followed. It was a reminder of who he was and who the enemy were. It was in his hand now and he felt his grip weakening.

‘You are not long for this life,’ said the other battle-brother attending to Scoiven, a Techmarine in rust-red armour. ‘Decisions must be made. You have fought for over three hundred years and you are the eldest of all the Imperial Fists. There are few now that breathed while Dorn did. Such a loss is beyond counting.’

Scoiven turned to the Techmarine, Forge-Brother Malkanos, but even that movement hurt. ‘What are you saying?’

The Techmarine and the Apothecary exchanged glances. ‘Ancient Kulgatha was lost to the accursed eldar at Venomspire Ridge,’ said Malkanos. ‘His sarcophagus yet lies empty. It is ill fortune to leave a Dreadnought idle for long, especially when a battle-brother worthy of its use lies mortally wounded. But we cannot inter you without your leave, Brother Scoiven. We know you as a man of pride, a warrior who would wish to pass on to the End Time and fight alongside Dorn as a whole man instead of living on crippled within a Dreadnought. But if you choose interment and life as an Ancient, our Chapter will not lose your battle-wisdom for many centuries more.’

Scoiven clenched the Iron Warrior’s bone in his fist, and it took the last of his strength from him. There were a million of them out there, a billion, an untold horde of enemies that begged for death.

‘Do it,’ he said.

The steel of his body was cold and clad in ice. Scoiven’s right arm was a massive hammer, a siege weapon that could bring down a fortress. His left was a battery of rocket launchers. When he walked, the forges of *Phalanx* shook.

The chill clung to him, as if he had not quite outrun death. But the strength, the power, the sheer destructive force to be unleashed on the enemies of mankind –

that was compensation. This was not an unbearable tomb, the living death that some said was the fate of those interred in a Dreadnought. Yes, he was crippled in body and would never leave the machine's embrace, but Brother Scoiven was still a weapon in the hand of Rogal Dorn, and by the Emperor that was worth any sacrifice.

The chill grew deeper. Scoiven checked the runes of the Dreadnought's power readout, projected onto his retina, but the power plant and life support were running normally. Icy fingers ran up what remained of his body, across the skin of his torso, now sallow and puckered inside the steel sarcophagus, and around the inputs where cables pierced his chest and skull.

A face appeared, not a projection but there, inside, *with him*. It was a skull, wrought from pitted and bloodstained iron, locked into a permanent grin. It was the skull that might have sat beneath a face Scoiven remembered from a lifetime ago, one lying in the bloody ash waiting for the death blow.

You could not resist taking a trophy of me, it said. I lay within that shard of bone for three hundred years. I was patient. And now I have something new to haunt.

Scoiven tried to cry out, to scream, but his vocal cords had been removed. He could not move as the cold crept over him and immersed him.

'I told you that you would pay,' said the Iron Warrior.

USAGE OF ZEAL

C Z Dunn

Chaplain Gerataus strides across the battlefield, combat knife drawn and primed in his hand. His crozius arcanum, his symbol of office, hangs dormant by his side. For this task a simple blade will suffice.

The ground is slick underfoot, litre upon litre of blood pooled atop earth so drenched in the stuff that it cannot absorb any more. The black greaves of his armour are stained red as he wades ankle-deep through the incarnadine lake. Piles of greenskin corpses form macabre dams, forcing Gerataus to sidestep or collapse them to reach his objective.

The ork horde made its final charge at dawn's first light.

The Chaplain moved among the Imperial forces, Imperial Guard and Black Templars alike, steeling their resolve with his words. When the noise of the onrushing enemy drowned out his litanies and prayers, he gave the order to open fire. Within moments greenskins were scrambling over the bodies of their front ranks to reach their enemies.

On the orks came, either oblivious or uncaring to the massive casualties they had already suffered. Those few carrying firearms returned the Imperial fusillade but, outgunned, presented themselves only as targets rather than threats.

His own bolter seeking out the largest figures among the ork throng, the Chaplain continued to exalt the Emperor's name and inspire those around him to even greater feats of heroism and sacrifice. He was about to give the order to launch the Imperial countercharge when a neophyte battling alongside him disappeared in a conflagration of blue flame.

Somewhere within the enemy ranks was a weirdboy, an abhorrence of ork genetics that could somehow bend the warp to its own will.

The Chaplain's devotions gave way to a vow: the xenos psyker would not leave the field of battle alive.

Another figure moves amongst the dead, his white armour stark against the blanket of emerald and crimson. The Apothecary's task complete, the two battle-brothers pass each other and exchange solemn nods. These are not gestures of pity or grief but of respect, acknowledgments of the grim labour already undertaken and about to take place. The healer takes his leave, an idling Thunderhawk awaiting his precious cargo. The preacher continues onward.

The ork bodies become more numerous, the piles higher. The Emperor's work was done here and done well; the barbaric xenos will no longer threaten this sub-sector and its inhabitants will sleep a little easier at night in the knowledge that one of the myriad threats they face has been eliminated.

The ork psyker's mental assaults tore through the Imperial lines. Entire squads of Guardsmen burned out of existence in a beat of their hearts, warpfire consuming them with an inexorable hunger.

The Chaplain called out to his brethren and was answered by the voices of their bolters cutting down the weirdboy's minders. The witch-mind smiled as it watched them fall and the corona of energy washing over its body burned brighter. With fat green fingers it motioned to the Chaplain, calling him to a duel. Black Templars raised their bolters, sights trained on their sorcerous foe but the Chaplain bid them hold their fire.

Gripping his crozius tight in both hands, the Chaplain raced to meet the greenskin in personal combat.

Gerataus finds what he seeks. Offering only a simple prayer, he sets about his grisly task.

The corpse already bears three wounds, the fatal gouge through the torso and the incisions to the neck and chest performed post-mortem. Gerataus stabs down and adds a fourth. The adamantium blade parts both flesh and bone and the Black Templar tears through the skull in a sawing motion. His cuts are controlled and measured, this mutilation being no act of desecration or petty vengeance.

The front of the skull comes away, Gerataus carefully removing it with armoured fingers coated in blood. He holds the mask of bone up and studies it in the fading light of the planet's sun before placing it over the front of his helmet. Though too small to fit in its current state, the Chapter's serfs and artificers will stretch and reshape it before fusing it to the metal of his armour.

The crozius connected with the ork's jaw, teeth and blood spilling from its lips as it bellowed a roar of pain. Fixing its gaze upon the Chaplain, warp energy blazed in its eyes and it roared again, this time in defiance rather than pain. Thrusting out a fist, the beast channelled its psychic might and unleashed a bolt of energy. The Black Templar dodged the blastwave, charging in low beneath the deadly beam and collapsing the ork's chest with a single powerful blow.

Enraged, the weirdboy swung its massive fist in the direction of the Chaplain's head but it connected only with the crackling head of the crozius. Power field met the raw stuff of the warp, the ensuing explosion stretching the very fabric of reality and knocking both warriors prone.

The Chaplain was the first to rise, his wrecked weapon now nothing more than a simple club. He launched himself at the xenos witch, staving in its head with wicked blows from the dead crozius. Its resistance mighty even by the standard of orks – or, not knowing it was already dead – the weirdboy drew a blade from its sheath and slashed the Chaplain across his stomach, almost bifurcating the Black Templar with a single blow. Blood gushing from the sucking wound to his midriff, Reclusiarch Deuteron hoisted his staff of office for one final blow, the last of his life expended removing the remains of the ork's head cleanly from its shoulders.

Gerataus looks down upon the torn remains of his former mentor. The ruined crozius is still held tight in Reclusiarch Deuteron's dead hands, the witch-mind of the ork psyker who slew him slick across the haft and shattered head. Other than the gash across the midriff, Deuteron's armour is intact and, like his already recovered gene-seed, will be put to use again by the Chapter.

For his centuries of selfless service and his heroic sacrifice, the Black Templars will honour Deuteron in their annals and his name will forever be engraved upon the walls of the Temple of Dorn.

For his decades of training and advice, and for moulding him into the Chaplain he is today, Gerataus will honour his former mentor by wearing his death mask into battle, a visage of zeal to thrust fear into the hearts of all who would oppose the God-Emperor of Mankind.

BASTIONS

Rob Sanders

The Adeptus Astartes frigate *Vitriol* coasted through the silent void, running alongside the watch fortress at an inertial drift. Below them both, the gas giant Vhospa Mundi turned, swirling with sickly cloud bands and lazy storms. It was an ugly planet, but it served as respite from the brain-aching haze of heliotropic riftspace beyond – for Vhospa Mundi was a fringeworld on the Cadian Gate, bordering the Eye of Terror.

Like the *Semper Vigilare* – the border watch fortress whose automated docking clamps and magna-couplings embraced the arriving frigate like a long-lost cousin – the *Vitriol* was blemished and battle-scarred. It was the practice of the Excoriators Space Marine Chapter. Each boarding impact, each cannon blast and each lance strike was honoured. After the structural damage had been repaired, the battle scars were consecrated and preserved. Annotations were painted onto the hull to commemorate the blemish, identifying the time and place it was incurred. The bastions, warships and personal battle plate of each Excoriators Space Marine bore such shabby remembrance as perpetual reminders of past mistakes; mistakes the Excoriators had no intention of repeating.

As the billowing clouds parted and the airlock trembled aside to reveal the darkened docking barbican, Squad Whip Torban Deker was surprised to find that the watch fortress commander had not organised a party to meet and admit them. This oversight had not gone unnoticed by Titus Rhaddecai, the Chaplain that Deker and his half-squad were accompanying on board.

‘Read back the charges,’ Rhaddecai instructed his seneschal, Phaniel. ‘Squad Whip Deker, you may proceed.’

‘Yes, Chaplain,’ Deker acknowledged, leading the way on board the *Semper Vigilare* with his boltgun. ‘Pattern Tessercarp.’

With Brothers Ezrapha, Ahaz, Udiah and Damaris forming the four corners of an escort about Rhaddecai and his slate-consulting serf, the Excoriators left the airlock of the *Vitriol* and entered the watch fortress.

‘Corpus-Castellan Abnerath has been censured for the following infractions,’ Phaniel declared. ‘Failure to relay augur array data identifying the exodus-course of the enemy capital ship *Terminus Est*. Failure to engage the *Terminus Est* upon system approach. Consequent failure to prevent the destruction of the Quora-Cyriax shipyards by the aforementioned enemy vessel, the Geryon’s World Atrocity and the loss of the White Consuls Strike Cruisers *Hermes* and *Eternal Faith*.’

‘To those contraventions you may add failure to establish approach acknowledgements,’ Rhaddecai rumbled. ‘Dorn knows, I hate talking to cybernetics. Add also the absence of a receiving party at the entry barbican.’

‘Very good, my lord,’ Phaniel said, walking and annotating.

Deker’s nostrils flared. Exchanging the atmosphere of the *Vitriol* for that of the watch fortress, the squad whip found the air stale. A fly droned about his ear with zigzag insistence before being driven away with a waft of his gauntlet. As it departed, the Excoriator discovered that he had been left with the drone of static. Loudhailers cracked and crackled with the emptiness of an open channel. Deker rounded a corner in the corridor, his pace brisk, the hydraulic sigh and imperative clink of his plate the emissary of Rhaddecai’s officious scorn.

As the Excoriator did so he found a battle-brother in the lonely passage beyond. The Adeptus Astartes was dressed in full plate, bar his battle helm which, like those of the Chaplain and his Excoriators escort, was mag-locked to his belt. With his back to Deker, the Space Marine drifted across the breadth of the corridor, his armoured steps dragging drunkenly along with him. It immediately struck the squad whip as strange. The movements lacked the crisp certainty of the Adeptus Astartes and the discipline required of power armour operation.

‘Sir,’ Deker said, stepping to one side. Titus Rhaddecai came forward, the oddness no less lost on the Chaplain.

‘Brother, present yourself,’ Rhaddecai ordered up the corridor. The Space Marine did not. He stumbled and his pauldron scraped lazily up the wall. ‘Excoriator, you will do as you are bid. Present that which Dorn has given you for inspection and inform your corpus-castellan that Titus Rhaddecai is here to judge him.’

When the battle-brother failed to acknowledge them, Deker and the Chaplain exchanged dark glances.

‘Are you injured brother?’ Deker put to the Excoriator as the squad whip advanced. ‘Are you sick?’

At Deker's approach, the Excoriator shuffled around. It was Deker's turn to stumble. The Space Marine's face was barely clinging to his blood-stained skull. What flesh remained was ragged putrescence framing the perfection of lipless teeth and a bone-fused bionic eye. The optic glowed with a life its owner clearly no longer possessed. The Excoriator's plate was splattered with blood and spoilage while his gauntlets appeared to have been dipped in gore. In them, like some monstrous titan of myth and legend, the Space Marine held the half-eaten corpse of a Chapter serf.

Deker's response was instantaneous. The barrel of his boltgun came up as the squad whip backed towards Rhaddecai and his Excoriators escort. The corpse-Marine stumbled at them. Through rotting vision it recognised the Excoriators. For Deker, everything depended upon what was going through the Space Marine's diseased mind, or what was left of it. Did it view the visiting Excoriators as brothers? As a threat? As the future contents of its maggot-swollen belly?

The Space Marine tripped and groaned. It dragged one power-assisted leg behind the other. It came at them, and as it did a gargling roar erupted from its corrupted multi-lung. It was something base and primitive. An intention of unthinking hostility and harm. It boomed about the darkened passageways of the watch-fortress, loop-relayed through the plate's comms-link and across the vox-hailers of the section. It was everywhere.

'Stand down!' Deker ordered, but the dead thing lurched on, unheeding. 'Chaplain?' the squad whip put to Rhaddecai.

'So ordered,' the Chaplain answered grimly.

Fat bolt rounds tore through the corpse-warrior's armoured knees. The savage bursts of shells chewed through plate and bonded plasteel, ripping through the bone and sinew of the joints. The thing went down with a crash, before reaching out for the Excoriators with its gore-splattered gauntlets. With ceramite fingertips clawing at the deck, the aberration hauled its armoured carcass towards them, driven on by an insatiable hunger. It wasn't going to stop. With a second stream of bolt-fire, Deker blew the flesh-eaten head off the thing, spraying the walls of the *Semper Vigilare* with the brains of his battle-brother. Plate – both that of the aberration and the Excoriators escort – sighed to stillness.

The Adeptus Astartes waited. Panic was a redundant state for a Space Marine. Like idle speculation, it was an unnecessary indulgence. They waited. They listened. From the depths of the watch fortress they could hear the corpse-warrior's call of savage anguish answered by a cacophony of rasps, of moans, of

the dread insistence of the dead. It was followed by the shuffling *clunk* of armoured cadavers drawn down on the section.

‘Spread out,’ Deker ordered, prompting Brothers Ezrapha, Ahaz, Udiah and Damaris to break formation. ‘Pattern Imbrica.’

Funnelled into the arterial accessway of Docking Pier East, the seemingly *undead* had arrived. The flesh-stripped, the lifeless carrion, the corpse-hordes – ripe with the fruits of otherworldly corruption. Within moments it was wall-to-wall with bodies: fortress serfs, rag-robed engineers and brother Excoriators, towering above the sea of wasted menials. Without weapons and helms, they were spoiling meat and armour, flooding the corridor with their fly-swarmed stench. An involuntary bellow of flesh-gluttony erupted from the horde. The cleansing storm of consecrated fire unleashed from the half-squad’s boltguns was no less involuntary. Rounds punched through the rotting carcasses and hammered into the plate of corpse-Excoriators. The priesthood and Chapter menials dropped like a carpet of disease and corruption. The armoured and unliving stumbled and lurched into one another, knocked back by the onslaught. They clawed mindlessly at each other for anchorage, thrusting the ruin of their flesh-famished faces forward into the bolt blasts. They shambled into their true deaths, the precision fire of the Excoriators demolishing skulls and boring through the armour plating to the putridity below.

When it was over, when the last of the unliving had received the blessing of the Angels of Death, a dreadful emptiness settled on the scene. The bark of boltguns still echoed through the dark corridors of the *Semper Vigilare* watch fortress. Blood – black with age and virulence – drizzled from the ceiling and back down onto the bolt-mauled carnage below. For what seemed like an age, no one spoke.

‘What warp-spawned devilry is this?’ Deker asked finally.

‘We stand sentinel over the Eye,’ Rhaddecai replied. ‘We watch. We stare. And sometimes... the Eye stares back. Sometimes it drifts right up to the airlock, unannounced and unwelcome.’

‘Chaplain.’ The squad whip stopped him, little in the mood for Rhaddecai’s cryptic observations. ‘This is no longer a matter of cult censure. You should return to the *Vitriol* with your seneschal.’

‘Nobody’s going back to the *Vitriol*,’ Rhaddecai assured the squad whip. ‘We push on. Phaniel and I will make our way to the tactical oratoria where I expect the watch fortress’s machine-spirit will have some answers for us. You will take your squad and search the *Semper Vigilare* for survivors.’

‘Yes, Chaplain,’ Deker acknowledged. He headed up the gore-splashed corridor. It was choked with bodies. There was something strangely comforting about their stillness. Their end might have been violent, but the watch fortress garrison now enjoyed a kind of peace. Deker thought on the dead and Rhaddecai’s instruction that they search for survivors. The squad whip grunted. It was the survivors of this terrible plague that gave Deker most cause for concern.

The Excoriators moved through the darkened corridor of the watch fortress with cold efficiency. The walls and the floor were spattered with brown blood and spoilage, testimony to the miseries endured. As bulkheads were opened and sections explored, the Excoriators were engulfed in swarms of dark movement and sound.

Flies. Black and fat with gore. Their deafening drone rose on the foetid stench. The unliving were to be found everywhere. Stumbling. Shambling. Groaning their spiritual agonies. Deker and his Adeptus Astartes found them congregating in the shadows and gathered about flesh-stripped carrion, the sons of Dorn and their servants, reduced to rot-withered echoes of their former selves. Mindless frames of ruined magnificence, heretically decked in the honoured plate of their Chapter, dead Excoriators came for them. They could not help themselves. A terrible hunger drove them on. A need as imperative as it was unnatural.

Deker felt sick to his pre-stomach. It wasn’t the rot. It wasn’t the indelible stench. These things did not bother an Adeptus Astartes. It was the appalling crash of his boltgun. Each round sending an Excoriator – one of his own, a brother both in battle and spirit – to oblivion. Their duty, down in the depths of the darkened fortress, wasn’t the execution of orders. It wasn’t war. It was extermination. Deker was there, on the dread edge of the Eye, prosecuting the intentions of an already hostile galaxy in which both the alien and humanity as enemy of itself wished an end to the guttering Imperium. In blasting through the crafted plate and flesh of the Excoriators – the living weapons of the Emperor’s grace harbouring the virulence of a spiritual darkness – Deker could not help but feel he was doing the great enemy’s bidding.

As he vox-reported the north section of the *Semper Vigilare* clear to the tactical oratoria, it seemed as though the Chaplain had read his mind. Rhaddecai told him that it was a difficult duty, but that he was doing the Emperor’s work. Deker couldn’t bring himself to believe it. The squad whip suspected that the Chaplain was no less feeling the burden of their calling aboard the watch fortress.

‘Did you feel that?’ Brother Ahaz put to Deker as they moved into the west section. There had been a rumble through the starfort’s superstructure. Deker had felt it, and deep down he knew what it was. He found himself shrugging his pauldrons at his battle-brother. The west section was no less afflicted than the one they had just left. Mobs of wasted serfs howled their hunger at the Excoriators. Corpses reached out for them with the augmented strength of their plate. The section was saturated with decay. As the half-squad entered a hull-galleria, they were treated to the violaceous glower of the Eye, reaching in through a section of thick armaplas. The viewport was smeared with blood and brains. Handprints decorated the transparent surface with the suggestion of panic and maggots squirmed down through rivulets of liquefied blight dribbling their way to the floor.

‘Dorn be damned,’ Udiah swore. Framed in the port was the *Vitriol*, the vessel’s mighty engines turned towards the watch fortress and carrying the frigate away.

‘Whip?’ Brother Ezrapha put to Deker. The Excoriator nodded. He knew why the *Vitriol* was leaving them. He knew why the Chaplain had kept them busy clearing sections. He knew what Rhaddecai was about to say. For the sake of his squad brothers, he asked anyway.

‘My lord Chaplain,’ Deker voxed to the tactical oratoria.

‘Yes, squad whip?’ Rhaddecai came back after a static-strangled pause.

‘The *Vitriol* is leaving.’

‘Yes.’

‘Have the mission parameters changed?’

‘Considerably,’ Rhaddecai voxed back to the squad. His voice transferred from their suits to the section vox-hailers. ‘Have you discovered any survivors?’

‘No,’ Deker reported. ‘No one survived the onboard plague... and I suspect no one will.’

Brothers Damaris, Udiah, Ahaz and Ezrapha looked at their squad whip. For a moment, Rhaddeca didn’t reply.

‘I concur with your assessment, Squad Whip Deker.’

‘Deker?’ Ezrapha said, then, to the Chaplain, ‘When is the *Vitriol* due to return?’

‘The frigate isn’t coming back,’ Deker told the Excoriator.

‘What?’ Damaris said.

‘Chaplain,’ Deker voxed. ‘Could you tell us what you’ve discovered?’

‘Interrogation of the fortress’s machine-spirit has revealed that a number of

months ago the *Semper Vigilare* received the Adeptus Mechanicus forge tender *Augmentra* for minor refitting and repairs, as part of a scheduled tour of Astartes Praeses star forts and watch fortresses along the Cadian Gate. Cross-referencing the *Augmentra*'s identicodes with data from the *Vitriol*'s runebanks, we have discovered that the last time the *Augmentra* was sighted, it was running as a Death Guard Legion fleet tender, a consort craft attached to the *Terminus Est*.'

'You have despatched the *Vitriol* to intercept the traitor?' Deker asked across the channel.

'Yes,' Rhaddecai admitted. 'The *Augmentra* is the capital ship's envoy, infecting the path before the Death Guard's exodus from the Eye, strategically knocking out fortresses on the Cadian Gate to allow the *Terminus Est* and Emperor knows what else unannounced passage into Imperial space. It must be stopped immediately.'

The Chaplain allowed the Excoriators precious seconds for his dark discovery and realisation to sink in.

'What of the *Semper Vigilare*?' Ezrapha asked, his syllables slow and solemn. 'What of us?'

'Even the mightiest fortresses,' Rhaddecai crackled over the vox-hailer, 'our bastions among the stars, can prove vulnerable to attack. *Semper Vigilare* proved that. The *Augmentra* proved that. We are no less susceptible. Each Adeptus Astartes is his own castle, his own bastion with defences physical, biological and spiritual. Our fallen brothers, the traitors who make the Eye their home, failed in that defence. They were infiltrated. They were infected, perhaps by something as simple and dangerous as an idea. No less have we failed to fortify ourselves against the enemy in its myriad forms.'

'What are you saying, Chaplain?' Ahaz asked.

'He's saying we're compromised,' Torban Deker told his battle-brother. 'That we've been exposed to this warp-borne contagion. That our defences were insufficient and that right now the enemy runs through our very veins, carrying the curse of the unliving through our bodies. We will become that which we have sought to destroy, here in this place.'

The squad was silent. Words seemed insufficient. Sentiment or spleen, a waste. Deker watched Damaris and Udiah look down to their boltguns.

'What do we do? Deker asked grimly.

'Nothing, brother,' Titus Rhaddecai told him with uncommon tenderness. 'This bastion has but one defence left to be deployed. I have done what Corpus Castellan Abnerath failed to. I have initiated the section immolation measures...'

Deker felt it immediately. Doors opened. Vents flushed. Bulkheads rolled aside. In a distant part of the watch fortress, the *Semper Vigilare*'s machine-spirit had unleashed a firestorm that rumbled through chamber and corridor, barbican and accessway, cleansing each with roaring flame. The force of the purification fires feeling their way through the star-fort's architecture turned the unliving to sculptures of ash and cinder before blasting them apart. The cursed brothers in their ceramite staggered through the inferno, their armour razed and the corruption of their diseased forms scorched from the honoured plate.

Deker sensed the approach of the firestorm. The section was about to be bathed in cleansing flame. Across the vox-hailer, the squad whip heard the last gasp of Titus Rhaddecai as the immolation measures claimed the Chaplain. Damaris had a moment to murmur, 'Emperor preserve us'. Udiah managed to reach out for the pauldron of Ahaz, his battle-brother and friend. Ezrapha and Deker just stared at one another, the Excoriator giving his squad whip a nod of acceptance.

As the Adeptus Astartes became lost to him in the oblivion of galleria-consuming flame, Torban Deker kneeled. He brought one fist to his lips and kissed the gauntlet in honour of his Chapter Master and primarch. He was about to meet Lord Dorn. He wanted to be composed. Ready. A warrior prepared for the end. He spared a final thought for those that were to come after, the Excoriators who would find the *Semper Vigilare* scorched from the inside out. All that would be left of their unfortunate brothers would be ash. With any good fortune, they would find the watch fortress *truly* dead.

DEATH SPEAKERS

Andy Smillie

Darkness greeted Chaplain Agrata as he entered the reclusiam. As was tradition, the lumo-candles and electro-braziers had been extinguished. There could be no light until the truth was illuminated by the Recountance. Chaplain Devak and Chaplain Karan awaited him at the far end of the chamber, the dark gunmetal of their armour conspiring with the shadows to render them almost invisible. Only the red glow of their optics gave away their position on the pulpit.

Agrata's armoured boots echoed on the cobbled floor as he joined them.

'You're late.' Devak was the eldest of the trifecta. Age had torn any trace of humanity from his voice.

'I was consecrating my blade.' Out of respect, Agrata kept his annoyance from his tone. There was no formal hierarchy within the Death Speakers. There were three, and always three. Each was as important as the other. Yet it was hard not to feel a measure of deference to Devak.

'Are you prepared?' asked Karan, his voice laden with feral power, like a mighty tide crashing against the rock-face.

'I am.'

'Then let us begin.'

At Devak's instruction the three Chaplains reached into the bronzed vessel positioned on the lectern, sifting through the ashen remains of Sixth Company's fallen to retrieve a lumo-candle.

'Honoured dead.' Devak began the Recountance, twisting the base of his candle so that the tip sparked into flame.

'Your deeds will be tallied,' continued Karan, lighting his candle.

Agrata lit his candle and finished the catechism. 'Your name remembered.' Coiling the chain of his rosarius around his hand, Agrata clenched his fist. 'It is my sadness, and my honour, to begin the recounting of Brother-Captain Jahnu Marut, warlord of the Sixth Company, mortally wounded in the Sargassion Reach battling the forces of Empyrion's Blight, the plague sons of the

Archenemy.’

Agrata paused. He had recounted the deeds of the Executioners’ fallen for almost a century. He had spoken the truths of hundreds of the Chapter’s heroes who had been claimed by battle. But until now, he had never spoken the history of a warrior who had yet to die.

‘Captain Koryn will extract us once our mission is complete.’ Marut had to shout to be heard over the roaring of the drop pod as it thrust them towards Belvasa’s surface.

‘And if the Ravens cannot reach us?’ Sergeant Rudra was harnessed to Marut’s right, an ornate power axe held across his lap.

‘Then our names shall be remembered.’ Marut grinned, though his face held no humour.

Rudra’s reply was lost to a cacophony of noise as the drop pod crashed through the domed ceiling of Belvasa’s central palace. A heartbeat later, its ferrite petals slammed to the ground, disgorging the Executioners attack force into the palace. Marut was first out, spitting a raft of curses, the long braids of his hair whipping free as he tore his twin axes through the bodies of the foe.

‘Their heads or your lives. For the Emperor, kill them all!’ Marut bellowed Sixth Company’s battle cry and charged onwards, bisecting a hulking mutant from groin to shoulder as he powered across the hallway.

The palace had once been the jewel of the sector, a multifaceted building constructed to showcase the wealth of Belvasa’s ruling classes. Now, it was a blight construct, a diseased architecture that dripped with ichor and poison. Pillars of pustules sprouted from the marble floor, which pulsed underfoot with thick veins of translucent flesh.

Lebbeous Sacar sat atop a throne of gibbering wretches, fleshy meat-sacs that had once been human, bent double by Nurgle’s touch.

‘Trespassers!’ Lebbeous’s voice was like warm treacle as it bubbled from his throat. Steaming ichor dripped from his mucous-riven maw, dissolving portions of his bulbous torso. Corroded armour fragments studded the fold of his bloated carcass. Buried under a web of taut flesh, a shorn pauldron still displayed the livery of the Death Guard.

Flanked by Rudra and his assault squad, Marut hacked his way up a set of gore-slicked stairs towards Lebbeous, his twin axes bathing him in putrid filth as he carved apart the Death Guard’s warriors.

‘Lebbeous Sacar, I have come for your head,’ Marut growled as he closed on

his prey.

Lebbeous gurgled in laughter, sending a wash of viscous fluid spilling from his lungs to dissolve a pair of his hunched attendants. ‘An irony, then, that I shall take yours, Space Marine.’ The Death Guard rose from his flesh-throne, convulsing as a stream of bile erupted from his mouth to engulf the Executioners.

Marut pulled one of the larger mutants to him, sheltering behind its bulbous form. To his right, Brothers Chaten and Datta died as the corrosive expellant ate through the ceramite of their armour and liquefied their flesh.

‘Rudra, guard my rear. His head is mine.’ Marut dropped the dissolving mutant and charged Lebbeous.

The Death Guard met Marut’s axes with two blades of sharpened bone that erupted from the meat of his forearms.

Marut snarled as Lebbeous turned aside blow after blow. The Death Guard was faster than he had any right to be. Marut could feel himself slowing, his arms tiring as the fog of pestilence surrounding around Lebbeous leeches the vitality from his bones. He did not have long. Roaring in frustration, Marut sacrificed his defence to shear off Lebbeous’s right forearm and bury an axe in the meat of the opposite shoulder. If the wounds troubled Lebbeous, it didn’t show.

The Executioner winced, stifling a cry as one of the bone blades drove through his armour and up into his ribs. Letting go of his weapons, Marut grabbed hold of one of the armour segments lodged in Lebbeous’s chest. Feeling his primary heart beat its last, Marut pulled himself onto the bone blade, impaling himself further until his face was a hand’s span from Lebbeous’s. He had to fight to stay conscious as the Death Guard’s noxious breath permeated his skin. A foetid stench of rank copper and decay ruined Marut’s olfactory senses and forced blood to run from his nostrils.

‘Your head or my life.’ Marut drew a length of monomolecular wire from his vambrace and looped it over Lebbeous’s head, ripping it through the Death Guard’s neck and beheading him.

‘Brother-Captain Jahnu Marut, warlord of Sixth Company, mortally wounded on Belvasa,’ Agrata concluded.

‘Captain Koryn of the Raven Guard pledges oath to this account,’ said Karan.

‘Then this Recountal shall be recorded as truth,’ Devak finished, placing his palm over each of the candles in turn, extinguishing them.

Darkness held sway for a moment before the vaulted reclusiam doors ground open, bathing the chamber in the harsh light from the *Castagion*'s bridge. A single unarmoured figure stepped over the threshold and knelt.

'I have come to die, Death Speakers.'

Captain Marut's voice rumbled into the chamber, resounding like thunder against the vaulted walls as the doors closed behind him.

'Illuminate.' Agrata snapped the command and strode towards the captain. Above him, a flock of psyber-cherubs drifted from the chamber's rafters to light the central brazier. A ghoulish union of stillborn infant and dark technology, the cherubs acted as attendants to the Death Speakers. Any beauty the babes had once possessed was overshadowed by the distended, obsidian skulls that sat between their shoulders in tribute to the skull helms worn by their masters, and the eerie clicking of the mechanical wings that kept them aloft.

Agrata stopped an arm's length from Marut. The captain was badly wounded, the right side of his torso marred by a dark, pulsating bruise that spread from his ribs up across his shoulder and face. His left arm hung limply by his side and his eyes were pools of cancerous yellow.

Agrata growled, appalled by the stench of the sickness wasting Marut. He could almost taste the disease ruining his captain's innards. The Death Speaker drew his crozius, flicking its activation stud to send a flicker of charge arcing along its axehead. Agrata raised the weapon and hesitated.

'If you do not kill me,' said Marut, 'Chandak or Prasad will. They will challenge me for leadership of the company, and I will lose.'

'That is the way of things, captain,' said Agrata. 'Perhaps it would be for the best.'

'They are not ready,' Marut snarled. His eyes blazed with a strength that belied the weakness of his body. 'The Headhunters will not find glory under their charge.'

'An axe cannot kill if there is no one to wield it.'

'You three. You Death Speakers shall lead until another proves themselves worthy.'

'Our duty is to—'

'Do not lecture me on duty, Chaplain. I did not come here for a sermon. Do as I command and kill me.' Saliva flecked Marut's mouth as he got to his feet. 'Do it. Kill m—'

Agrata sliced his crozius through Marut's neck, pivoting with the stroke so that he heard, rather than saw, the captain's decapitated body slump to the floor.

Sheathing his weapon, Agrata turned to look down on Marut's corpse. He stood a moment, feeling his chest rise and fall, calming his hearts as they beat in protest against the weight of his actions.

'The Emperor calls, my axe obeys.'

Whispering the rite of execution, Agrata retrieved a vial of incendiary from a recess in his thigh and smashed it over the captain's remains, watching as the white flame scoured away his warlord. Stooping low, the Death Speaker scooped up a handful of Marut's ashes.

'Honoured dead. Your deeds have been tallied, your name remembered.'

SETTING THE STAGE

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.

BLOOD ANGELS

THE FURY

James Swallow

The power sword falls in a screaming arc, more a thing alive with its own anger than a weapon controlled by his hands. He sees it descend, the fractions of seconds extended by the chem-stimulated processing of his genhanced brain. He sees it at point of impact, the molecule-fine edge slicing through the armour plate of the traitor cultist's wargear. The momentary flash of sparks as metal is torn apart. The blade sinks into flesh, easy and quick, cutting and burning. Meat-smell. Seared flesh, heavy in his nostrils, triggering scent-memory of a grox butchered for sustenance months ago. The enemy makes a sound that is not a scream, not truly. It is more a moan, a cry of futility. There is understanding in it, now at the end. The cultist knows he is finished.

The blood gushes like wine from a cracked urn, a stream becoming a spray, a jetting, throbbing pulse that pools at the murdered man's feet. He comes apart, shoulder and arm and half his chest cleaved away, the bone-crack sound as it breaks off.

The traitor dies and the warrior moves on, crushing his opponent's skull with one great boot of crimson ceramite as he passes. The act is not deliberate, not planned. It is simply that the Blood Angel has finished his task with this particular foe, and there are so many more yet to be killed. A numberless horde, foul of tongue and screaming their black hymns to Chaos. The Blood Angel and his kinsmen will murder them all before the day is done, and soak the earth of this inconsequential world with the spoil.

He is firing the bolt pistol. It bucks in his armoured gauntlet like a living thing, eager as if it could leap from his fingers if so allowed. Echoing crashes of shot blast thunder-calls cross the reeking battleground, and with each expended round a death follows closely. Skulls explode into pink haze. Limbs are turned to red slurry. No moment of kill-power is wasted. It is how he was trained; it is how his primogenitor fought. Fury, marshalled and controlled like lightning in a bottle. The power of rage, harnessed. A darkest of potentials hidden beneath a mask

And yet, the mask may slip. At his side, a brother fights with greater and greater abandon. He knows this man: Celcinan, of the Third. He is far from his unit, perhaps propelled by the fog of war and the crush of battle. But Brother Celcinan does not seem to pay it any mind. He watches Celcinan fighting as he reloads the pistol.

Celcinan has removed his helmet, but not for any good reason that can be intuited. The warrior's face is drenched in crimson, the back-spray of hearts burst open to the air. His armoured fists end in steel claws, barbed talons that can tear the hulls of tanks. They are smoking with newly spilled blood, hot vapour steaming off them into the cold air. Celcinan is in a fury, and it comes from the Blood Angel like radiation.

He feels it like the aura of an inferno, lapping against him. *Rage*, black as space. *Thirst*, red as blood. Celcinan is deep, swimming in it, awash in it. His battle-brother's anger is something quite magnificent to behold.

Until Celcinan is killed. A brilliant rod of purple light bursts from within the cultist lines as a heavy lascannon discharges at near range. He flinches away, nictating membranes flicking closed over his eyes to protect him from the dazzle-flash. When he blinks back to full sight a tenth of a second later, Celcinan is quite dead.

A charred hole large enough to fit a fist through has cored Brother Celcinan's torso, penetrating armour, flesh and bone. He topples like a felled tree and sinks into the squelching, blood-thick mud. Celcinan's last act is to *look at him*, and something unseen crosses the gap between the two Blood Angels.

That ghostly thing is anger.

The moderated wrath of the warrior suddenly ebbs away and he feels himself fill with a kind of rage that only titans can know. His battle-brother is lost, and now all he wants is to take back the blood cost of Celcinan's murder. It is a death undeserved, for every warrior of the Adeptus Astartes is worth a thousand of these screaming, mewling whorechild zealots. He wants to take the payment *now*.

The Blood Angel forgets his bolter; this is a deed to be done close at hand, eye to eye. Those who perish must go to their warped gods knowing who killed them and why.

Bellowing his primarch's name, the son of Sanguinius hurls himself into the enemy line, his sword becoming a bright and shining blur. Death follows close. The killer with the lascannon is unmanned by the thunder of the Blood Angel's battle-roar, and not even the hypno-imprints of the dark acolytes that turned him

can blot out the sound of such anger and such revenge.

The warrior's sword goes through the cultist's sternum and explodes from his spine in a welter of crimson fluid. They draw closer, into a murderous embrace, and by freak chance the traitor still lives. The warrior acts without thought, and with his free hand he rips open the cultist's throat.

Blood.

Blood erupts in a steaming fountain from his enemy's ruined flesh, splattering across his faceplate and staining his vision red. It clogs the breather grille, the hot coppery perfume saturates the inside of his helm. His mouth instantly floods with saliva, and he wants nothing more than to tear off his armoured helmet and drink deep of the spill. He savours the desire for that rich taste, and the wine-dark flow of the vitae across his tongue and down his throat.

He feels the mask slipping off his face. The perfect, patrician mask of nobility and humble heroism, the outward eternal character of the Blood Angels cast in the likeness of Great Sanguinius. He feels it crumbling, becoming dust. Beneath, the curse-power of his primarch's burning blood rises to the surface. The gift of strength and courage that makes him a superlative warrior now turns dark.

Rage, black as space. Thirst, red as blood.

In this moment, he balances on the edge of the abyss. An Angel of Death, cursed and blessed in equal measure, doused in the vitae of those deserving his fury.

The battle without will be won this day; victory was never in doubt. The battle within...

It lingers still, hidden beneath the mask.

BLOOD CALM

Guy Haley

Chapter Master Caedis was dead.

The call went out. The brethren gathered.

The Blood Drinkers Chapter entire was in the Arena of Horandor. The thin light of San Guisiga's suns poured through the arena windows, illuminating the sand in bands of weak light. Dark and light, the opposing aspects of life; dark and light, the opposing facets of the Chapter.

Radin Castor, captain of the First Company, was on the fighting floor. He wore the tabard and loose trousers that were the robes of his Chapter, his torso bare. San Guisiga was a hot world, and its sons were hot-blooded. He carried a simple steel sword. Of great mass and length, a mortal man could not have borne it, but in his giant fist it seemed of natural proportion.

Opposing him was Captain Sorael of the Fifth Company. Castor snarled. Upstart. Mastery of the Chapter was his right. Who was Sorael to challenge him? He would not have thought so harshly of Sorael, but the blood haze was on him, a subtle filter on his senses, red more pronounced, the smell of iron enticing. Heartbeats rang loudly.

Reclusiarch Mazrael came between them, robed in black silk from head to foot, his feet bare. Twenty metres to the Reclusiarch, another twenty to the pretender. Castor thought already of attack.

Mazrael's words to the crowd were indistinct. Castor's ears buzzed. The combatants had been denied the Rite of Holos for weeks. Sorael bore the signs of the Red Thirst as clearly as Castor: flushed skin, pupils dilated so as to crowd out the iris, long canines growing longer. Sorael seemed a monster. Castor did not feel himself to be one, but he knew what he was well enough.

Mazrael held up a red flag pinched between forefinger and thumb, the chalice and blood drop of their order upon it a nonsense of creases and broken yellow lines. He spoke again, unintelligible men's words. Castor and Sorael were moving away from the realms of men.

The flag fluttered to the sand. Mazrael withdrew. Castor saw Sanguinary Master Teale stand, nostrils flared in excitement. He was there to treat wounds, but in truth Teale rather more enjoyed inflicting them.

Horns blared. The crowd roared, many throats, one voice.

This was the nature of the challenge - martial prowess was not to be tested, but the retention of humanity in the face of the Thirst. The Chapter Master must be able to fight the Thirst under the most testing circumstances. He must be Blood Calm.

Soraël was direct, leaping halfway across the distance between them, his muscles preternaturally strong because of the Thirst. Sword raised double-handed, he came at Castor, face feral.

Castor's head reeled. The beast within him snapped, bloody muzzle threatening to burst through. Castor pushed it back. Restraint. Calm. Blood Calm.

He sidestepped Soraël's wild charge. Soraël checked himself, feet digging a furrow into the sand as he skidded to a halt. Another jump, sword descending. Castor parried it, a clang of steel. He twisted. Soraël landed badly. Castor dropped low, swept a leg out to take the Fifth Captain's feet from under him, but Soraël hopped over them, sending another blow at Castor's head. Castor raised his blade, pushing off on Soraël's with his own to roll away and spring to his feet.

They circled. Soraël crouched, blade gripped two-handed. Castor had one arm behind his back, sword swept out in front of him, point down. Soraël lunged, blond hair sweat-slicked to his brow. Castor ignored the attack.

Chapter Master Caedis had been his friend. The mastery was his right as First Captain. To fail would dishonour them both. He would not be drawn. Restraint, calm. Blood Calm.

The thirst bubbled in him. His veins were on fire. He chased the pain from his body, imprisoned it behind bars of will.

Calm.

Soraël lost patience and attacked.

Castor drew his blade across the other warrior's arm with a deft flick as he pivoted out of the way. Soraël snarled. Both of them were rocked by the bright red that welled up in Soraël's wound and pattered upon the sand.

Castor's mouth filled with saliva. His gums ached with longing. He spat out a clear mouthful of saliva, surprised that it was not red.

Soraël came at him again. Castor held his ground, driving his blade down onto

Soraël's with all the force he could muster.

Steel shattered, Soraël jumped back, arms wide, but Castor threw himself forward, shoulder into the other's sternum. The impact collapsed Soraël's lungs. They went down. Castor threw his sword aside, and they were grappling. Their skin was slippery with sweat and blood, fingers skidding from flesh. And then Castor had him. He wrapped his arms around Soraël's neck, choking him in the crook of his left elbow, his right hand applying pressure to the lever of his left arm.

It takes a long time to choke a Space Marine. Soraël fought like a daemon, all fury and unholy strength, nails raking at Castor's arms, scrabbling futilely for Castor's eyes. But Castor was calm, Blood Calm.

Soraël's struggles weakened. His head lolled. Castor kept the pressure on for ten seconds longer, wary of trickery.

He let the unconscious Soraël slide to the floor. He stood.

The crowd roared their acclamations, but Castor did not hear. He stared at the blood pumping slowly from Soraël's arm.

Blood.

His resolve wavered. He imagined it on his tongue. It was all he could do not to fall upon the other and lap at the cut before Soraël's Larraman cells finished their work.

His calm fractured. He fell forward, sank his teeth into his opponent's neck and drank deep. He closed his eyes with shame as the beast within him exulted. He had failed.

A hand on his shoulder. Mazrael. Castor had not fallen. He was upright. His brow creased in confusion. Mazrael was speaking. He thrust a chalice at Castor's mouth. The smell of blood was intoxicating. He took it with shaking hands and drained it.

Sound crashed back on him. The Thirst receded suddenly. The crowd was chanting his name over and over. Soraël was being seen to by the Apothecaries.

'Blood freely given, blood taken,' said Mazrael.

'Blood is life, life is duty. I choose blood. I choose life. I choose duty,' said Castor, his tongue thick and voice hoarse.

Mazrael raised Chapter Master Castor's hand. The assembled Blood Drinkers fell to their knees before their new lord.

Calm suffused Castor. Blood Calm.

THE CROWN OF THORNS

Peter Fehervari

'None fall as far or as fatally as those who soar the highest, for pride does not precede the fall. Pride is the fall.'

– The Lethean Revelation – Psalm 451

I will make my stand today, Montaig vowed to the heavy tome in his hands. I will not cast another neophyte to the Thorns.

The forbidden book had been an anchor to him throughout this benighted decade, a tangible relic of past glories. He ran his fingers over the gilded text, marvelling at the crisp, cursive elegance that other hands had wrought – the hands of a Space Marine like himself. He had never possessed the talent for such things, yet many amongst his Chapter were fine artisans. It was a gift from their progenitor, Divine Sanguinius, passed down the millennia to illuminate the path of His descendants. A gift that Neophyte Phelion would have exemplified in saner times.

Such beauty honours our lineage, Montaig mused. While other Chapters fought for glory, faith or the sheer joy of slaughter, his own had made nobility its creed. And alone amongst the scions of Sanguinius his battle-brothers had been entirely free of the madness that haunted the Angel's bloodline. No Space Marine in the blue and the gold had ever succumbed to the Black Rage.

But that was when we were still Resplendent, Montaig admitted, returning his treasure to its hiding place. Now so many of us have fallen that we have our own Death Company. Perhaps within the century we shall have nothing else. And then what? An ignominious doom that will consign us to a sordid footnote on the Imperium's roll of honour? He glanced across at the neatly arrayed segments of his power armour, scowling at the murky, umber-streaked black plates. We won't even die bearing our true colours.

Reverently he replaced the loose flagstone, sealing the tome beneath his chamber. It was a minor work, but it was the only book Montaig had been able to

save during the Great Purge and that made it priceless. Perhaps in some future age it would be restored to the librarium – after the librarium itself was restored and the fortress-monastery of Kanvolis cast off the Crown of Thorns.

But I shall not live to see any of it, Montaig knew.

‘Beauty blinds the body, hope binds the soul.’

– Psalm 31

The flickering torches along Montaig’s path served only to taunt the shadows as he descended towards the Halls of Contempt, tramping through a mulch of rotting tapestries and pulverised statuary. The Undying Martyr had pronounced this effluvium of desecrated glories sacrosanct – a mockery of treacherous pride. The Great Purge had swept Kanvolis clean of beauty, yet it had left the fortress filthy, just as the Martyr’s words had befouled the Chapter itself.

He has poisoned us with sour faith, Montaig thought, but we chose to drink deep of his lies so perhaps the venom was always in our hearts.

The Undying Martyr had come among them a decade ago, crawling from the churning waters of the River Tristesse that served Kanvolis as a moat. Brother-Sergeant Montaig had led the squad that challenged the intruder, bolters poised to fire upon his word. He could sense his brothers’ fury at this trespass, for it should have been impossible. Few Space Marines could master the Tristesse, so how had a mortal survived the feat?

But was he truly mortal? Montaig had been struck by the raw presence of the man who stood swaying on the riverbank, head bowed and face shrouded in a cascade of black hair. He was a giant amongst ordinary men, powerfully muscled and only a few heads shorter than a battle-brother. His flesh was a patchwork of cuts, boils and blisters and the bleeding wound in his midriff looked fatal, yet he burned with vitality. Only the crude pendant hanging from his neck stayed Montaig’s hand, for it was unmistakably an aquila. In that moment of hesitation the stranger looked up and pinned him with savage, compassionate eyes.

‘Do I still dream?’ he asked.

I should have ended him then, Montaig thought bleakly. Instead he had taken the intruder to Chaplain Malvoisin for interrogation and the fall of his Chapter had begun.

‘Penitence and pain are the hammers and nails of devotion.’

‘It is time,’ Montaig called from the door of the cell.

Phelion reeked of stale sweat and fresh shame. Like all neophytes he was forbidden to cleanse his body until he had earned the black carapace. And like so many who strove under the edicts of the Undying Martyr he had been found wanting, but whereas most fell foul of some minor ritual, Phelion’s sin was catastrophic. Absurdly, it made no difference, for all sinners, great and small alike, were summoned before the Crown of Thorns, the conclave of Chaplains that now presided over the Chapter. Invariably they were offered the same choice.

‘Take the Path of Chains,’ Montaig urged.

‘And condemn myself to be an *ankoryte* until I fall?’

‘You would still be serving your Chapter.’

‘Then tell me, sergeant, which path would you take?’ Phelion challenged. For that Montaig had no answer.

I should have stood with Athanazius, he thought bleakly. It would have been better to die with my Chapter than live to watch it shrivel and devour its own.

But Montaig had not seen it then, for he had been as blinded by Chaplain Malvoisin’s fervour as the rest, just as Malvoisin had been blinded by the Martyr. The Chaplain had conversed with the stranger for nineteen days before proclaiming him a prophet of the God Emperor who bore terrible new insights into the Imperial Creed. Those truths were dark indeed, for he revealed that mankind was corrupt beyond redemption and that its greatest guardians, the Adeptus Astartes, were the basest of all sinners, for had they not faltered and fragmented in the war against the arch-betrayer Horus?

‘Those who stood unblemished yesterday shall fall tomorrow or the day after,’ Malvoisin had declared, ‘for treachery hides in our blood, cloaked in pride.’

There could be no hope of ascension into the Emperor’s light, only penitence and pain for sins past and future. The war was already lost and the only victory was fighting on in the knowledge of certain defeat.

Was it the lurking shame of the Black Rage that drew us to such a barren creed? Montaig wondered. *Were we always so broken?*

‘Rise,’ he commanded the neophyte. ‘Your path awaits.’

‘Better to serve in shame than rule in sin.’

It would have been different if the Knight Resplendent had been with us, Montaig mused as he led his prisoner through the darkness. He would have cast out the snake. But Chapter Master Varzival had been absent for years, campaigning with the First Company. There had been no word of them since the Purge and Malvoisin had declared them lost, but Montaig didn't believe it. The Knight Resplendent would return some day to reclaim and redeem his Chapter.

But I am unworthy of seeing it...

In the absence of the Chapter Master, only Chief Librarian Athanazius and his brethren had spurned the Martyr's testament. Inevitably they were denounced as heretics and Montaig had stormed the librarium alongside his brothers, driven by a loathing he'd never felt before, even in battle with the xenos.

Was that the first stirring of the Black Rage?

Athanazius and his followers had awaited them, absent arms or armour, yet shielded by a contempt that brought the charge to a standstill. The attackers waited for the frigid electric tang that presaged a psychic assault, but when Athanazius spoke it was only words: 'We will rise on burning wings.' Only words, but they were the Chapter's credo, delivered with a conviction that drained the poison from Montaig. It might have been enough, but then Malvoisin bellowed the new credo, the one revealed by the Undying Martyr: 'The Emperor condemns!'

The Angels Resplendent died that day and the Angels Penitent rose from their grave, shadow-bound and bitter.

'The Emperor condemns.'

'This is not the way to the Hall of Thorns,' Phelion protested.

'No,' Montaig admitted. 'It is not. I am taking you to the Harbinger's Gate. Head upriver from there and lose yourself in the mountains.'

The neophyte halted, confused. 'But the Crown of Thorns has summoned me.'

'It has,' Montaig said. 'It has summoned you to tear yourself apart, as all who attempt the Path of Thorns must do.'

'If that is the penitence for my sin—'

'You have committed no sin!' Montaig almost snarled. 'Your scrimshaw

carvings *honour* the primarch.’

‘No...’ Phelion’s eyes were feverish. ‘Art exalts the tyranny of vanity.’

‘We were warrior artisans before the outsider enslaved us. I’ve seen your skill grow over the years – arms and art in harmony, the true path of the Resplendent.’

‘You knew of my heresy?’ The neophyte was aghast.

‘I am your mentor-sergeant. Of course I knew.’ Montaig shook his head gravely. ‘I strove to shield you, but someone must have spied your work and betrayed you.’

‘Nobody betrayed me,’ Phelion said coldly. ‘I confessed my sin to the Crown of Thorns.’

Montaig stared at him.

‘As you must confess yours, mentor-sergeant,’ Phelion accused, ‘for you have broken faith with—’

Montaig’s fist took him in the face, crushing his words with a savagery that sent the neophyte reeling against the wall. Even so, Phelion’s reflexes were magnificent and he turned the stagger into a wild spin, trying to put distance between them, but Montaig gave him no quarter. Stepping in, he caught Phelion by the throat and swung again, then again, letting the Black Rage claim him, absolving him of virtue or honour or the torment of hope.

We have fallen and we cannot rise for our wings are chained and our blood runs cold...

When it was done Montaig stepped away from the broken corpse, breathing hard as he fought down the rage. It had not felt *black* at all, but radiant.

‘The heretic tried to flee,’ he said aloud, testing the words that he would offer the Crown of Thorns. ‘I delivered him unto the Emperor’s spite.’

And I will make my stand another day.

IRON HANDS

IRON SOUL

Phil Kelly

Strobing lumens flickered in the vault like the pulse of a dying man. They threw shadows around the arches and pillars, illuminating a tableau of torn cadavers and shattered stone. Ambient light filtered from the ruined eye sockets of the monotask servitors installed in the walls. Their wiry tendons twitched an idiot code that no one would read, sending gibberish into the night.

Bolt pistol raised, Jathrac Leatherhand kicked through a shattered bulkhead and cast about for life signs. He sniffed as he strode into the gloom. The aftermath of the tyranid wurm's attack was easy for him to read, even with his symbolic lupine helm lost during the previous day's drop raid. Two hundred long years spent as a Wolf Priest and still the sharpness of his senses was a source of pride for him.

The vault's tiled white floor had been opened wide by a burrowing organism the size of a mag-train. The hole the beast had torn in the vault's centre was surrounded by several slain battle brothers, Jathrac's packmate Dvujac amongst them. The Wolf Priest shook his head to see his once ribald old friend lying mangled and pale in a lake of his own blood. Next to a fizzing bank of cogitators at the rear of the vault, the top half of a Dreadnought lay on its engine pack, mayday signals glitching.

The rest of the fallen were Iron Hands, by their heraldry. Two had been ripped bodily in half. Three others had been speared through with wide, triangular stab wounds that not even a Space Marine could hope to survive. Xenos blood was spattered about the walls and the smell of bolter cordite hung in the air, but of the tyranid war-serpent there was no sign. Subterranean ambush, thought Jathrac. Highly effective. Even the logic-prophecies of the Medusans couldn't predict the movements of a worldwide tyranid infestation.

The Wolf Priest sniffed twice, his senses flaring. The smell of burned meat was not wholesome, like that of a roasted ice elk or cinderwolf, but rotten and sharp, a warning taint lingering under the tang of xenos bio-electricity. Servitor-

flesh, thought Jathrac. Not good to eat.

Underneath that layer of scent, on the cusp of cogniscence, was the dull hormonal trace of progenoid glands. Jathrac activated the whirring blades of his Fang of Morkai. After carefully harvesting the gene-seed of his brother Dvujac, he made his way to the corpses of the Iron Hands. Machine-lovers they may have been, but they deserved the rites of heritage, the same as any other Chapter. A dozen burned-out servitors stared sightlessly down as the Wolf Priest went about the ritual of reclamation.

Something moved in the corner of the room. Jathrac spun round, bolt pistol raised and lips curled back. Tiny hairs stood up all over his weatherbeaten skin, but it was the Dreadnought, nothing more. The machine's blunt fist spasmed open and closed with a growl of servos. Still alive, then, thought Jathrac. Systems burned out by bio-electric discharge, crippled beyond recovery and fading fast, but technically alive.

A hiss of static came from the fallen Dreadnought's vox-grille. Jathrac finished flasking the gene-seed of the fallen Iron Hands and made his way over.

'Are you awake, brother?' he asked.

'Reroute,' fizzed the vox-grille of the Dreadnought.

Jathrac read the scrollwork on the burnished metal sarcophagus. One Brother Radamarr, of Clan Dorrrovok. The Wolf Priest raised his armoured knuckles and rapped the giant's front plate twice, as if knocking on a door. 'Xenos war-serpent got you, by the look of it. Cut you in twain and killed the rest.'

'Reroute complete. Those are ill tidings. We failed, then.'

'Aye, you did that. No shame in it, though. Big bastards, those burrowers. Love to have a crack at one myself, but duty calls. Speaking of which,' said Jathrac, tapping the flasks at his waist, 'got the gene-seed from your kin. All intact.'

'Eternal thanks, from clan and Chapter,' said Radamarr, 'though I am not fit to give it.'

'Well, I reckon that depends on the manner of your death,' said Jathrac. 'You've a progenoid tucked away in there too, friend. If I get it back to your brothers, that's you passing on the torch. You can dine at the All-Father's table with your head held high.'

'Negative. My flesh was found wanting.'

'That's not the way it works, old timer. Now open up.'

'Status of sarcophagus clasp unit: disabled.'

'Disabled, eh?' said the Wolf Priest with a sigh. 'Well, I've seen this done

more than once.’ Jathrac pulled out his plasma pistol from its holster of walrus hide, pressing the maxis-node on the gun’s underside whilst intoning the chant of unbinding.

‘Do not open the sarcophagus, brother Wolf,’ said the Dreadnought sombrely.

‘Why not?’ growled Jathrac impatiently.

‘I am not worthy of the rite.’

‘For Russ’s sake. There are billions of *voydwyrms* out there, Radamarr. I have no time to play confessor. Let’s get you flasked.’

‘No!’ shouted the Dreadnought, its vox so loud that dust shook from the vaulted ceiling above.

Jathrac tucked the fat barrel of the plasma pistol under the lip of the sarcophagus. He shielded his face to avoid the blast of energy and the subsequent burst of amniotic steam that would leave the Dreadnought’s crippled pilot naked inside. Gritting his teeth, he pulled the trigger. The sarcophagus flew open with a deafening bang.

Nothing came out but a blast of warm, stale air.

Jathrac sniffed once, nose and forehead wrinkled in confusion. His horror mounted as he turned back to the yawning sarcophagus that had swung open before him. The Dreadnought’s interior contained a mass of wires, a few pitted bone cogs... and nothing else.

‘What in the name of Russ?’

‘Expediency,’ said the Dreadnought, its vox-tone flat.

‘Abomination!’ shouted the Wolf Priest, his plasma pistol whipping round with a whine of recharging power cells.

Suddenly the vault went pitch black. There was a whirr, a crunch of ceramite, and then silence.

NO WORSE SIN

Joe Parrino

They gathered on the edge of the Great Eye. A Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, the Brazen Claws, loyal sons of the Gorgon, called to council by their Chapter Master. They assembled for the first time in two decades.

‘Where is my Chapter?’

The words rang out with force, deep and rumbling like distant thunder. Ships floated through the void behind the Chapter Master, oddly serene against the madness. Their hulls were painted pelagic blue and clotted red.

The gathered captains met their Chapter Master’s bloodshot eyes with stoic determination. Five stood where there had once been ten.

The Chapter Master thundered again, eyelids twitching, tics marring his bearded face.

Embrose Kalgach, Third Captain, stepped forward from the knot of his brethren. His right arm refused to move. Sparks showered out from the augmetic that replaced the limb. With his left, he pointed behind him at the four hundred Space Marines of the Brazen Claws standing at attention.

‘They stand here, Caul.’

‘You have called and we have answered,’ said Macklen Eogh, captain of the First Company. The other captains, the other four, echoed his words like a tragic chorus of the ancient Grekans.

There was no honorific, no deference. Just the merest hint of a weary respect. They’d lost what little desire they had once harboured for pomp and ceremony in the past twenty years, after the loss of Talus, after so many had died on this ill-fated crusade of vengeance. Now they were here to speak their minds. Twenty years they had waited to do so. Twenty years ago they should have. Now they had learned the cost of those words, learned the true price of vengeance.

Twenty years of hubris, pride and death.

Caul Engentre, Chapter Master of the Brazen Claws, rested his head in one red gauntlet. The choice was his, uttered in the ashes of his home world, the oath

sworn amidst the fires of their fortress-monastery. The memories had lost their fury.

It was minutes before he spoke.

‘Tell me,’ he said. The anger bled from his voice.

Julas Imbolkh, fiery hair turning to grey, face a mess of scars, stepped forward to face the Chapter Master. The Seventh Captain struggled to keep his gaze from staring out of the observation window behind Engentre. ‘Erod took the Second out. He told me he was done. He had no wish to die in this damned place. He had no wish to die fighting this damned war, so he turned tail and went back to what we should be doing.’

The words were bold, brave, *brazen*. It was their nature, in their blood and in their name. Engentre let them slide, for he knew the truth when he heard it. The Seventh Captain stepped away, tearing his drifting eyes from the window.

‘What of Duro and the Eighth?’ the Chapter Master asked.

‘Lost along with the Ninth,’ answered Firlus Ghad. The words were blunt, suited to the augmetics that crouched on his throat and left his voice awash with static. ‘The fools chased the Children into the Eye after Hrtel. I’ve not seen them since.’

Two companies gone. It was a massive blow to the Chapter, taken away in three sentences.

Engentre stared out at the gathered Chapter, at the battered men left. There were gaps in squads, gaps in companies, once filled by men he had known and called brother. Even now, even standing at attention, they could not remain still. Their limbs danced, machinery grinding, clanking, ill-maintained. Their bodies were beset by random flashes of neuronc misfire as the Eye slowly wore away at their minds.

‘The flesh is weak,’ murmured Engentre. ‘But it can be made strong, unified with the machine. The mind... that we cannot fix.’ The Chapter Master, a hero with four centuries of facing down the slaving darkness, shuddered as his bloodshot eyes fixed on the knot of fifty Castigatii who stood unmoving in the shadows.

‘So many,’ he whispered. He turned to the rest of his Chapter. ‘So few.’

Silence stretched in the wake of his words.

Eogh broke it, arms stretched wide, dented power fist clenching and unclenching. ‘We are dying, Caul.’

The other captains nodded.

‘This crusade is failing,’ added Kalgach.

‘This Chapter is failing,’ continued Ghad.

‘Talus cannot be avenged,’ entreated Eogh. ‘But we can atone for its loss.’

Brave Eogh, voicing the harsh words that knifed to Engentre’s core. The Chapter Master rocked backwards as if slapped. His captains pressed close, pushing him towards the window, towards the view that stained their eyes and cast their features in a thousand shades of every colour.

Engentre roared. Spittle flew from his mouth. ‘Enough!’ he yelled.

His eyes flew towards the gathered Brazen Claws, past his captains. Something clicked in his head. ‘We leave the Eye,’ he whispered.

The captains nodded and moved towards their men, barking orders.

Proximity alarms blared: sudden, loud and wailing. The ship rocked as if caught by a great wave. Guns thundered, massive batteries opening fire.

The vox channels erupted with a screech. Voices spewed out, familiar and haunting.

Their words were Gothic, the accent Talusian. Ships hove into view, blotting out the Eye, but illuminated by it. They were covered in flesh and coated in sickly-looking organs, but beneath it, scrawled in red paint on a field of blue, was a red claw. Clutched in its talons was the number eight.

‘You have called, Lord Engentre, and we have answered,’ hissed a voice thick with corruption, familiar and vile.

ULTRAMARINES

CODEX

Graham McNeill

‘You take a grave risk, Captain Ventris,’ said Adept Komeda, peering at the Rhino’s hololithic command display. His cherry-red optics flickered as they processed the incoming data.

‘The risk is negligible,’ replied Uriel. ‘My warriors know their Codex.’

‘Adept Komeda certainly hopes so,’ said Komeda. ‘House Nassaur and the Mechanicus will be greatly displeased should our people come to harm.’

‘They won’t,’ said Uriel.

‘Adept Komeda does not share your confidence.’

Uriel pulled Komeda from the display and a binaric squall of irritation pulsed from the adept’s mechanised mouth parts.

‘You are used to dealing with Skitarii, so I will excuse the insult to our competence this once,’ said Uriel. ‘But doubt us again and you and I will have a problem.’

‘Apologies,’ said the tech-priest. ‘Adept Komeda meant no offence.’

‘Then count this a lesson learned,’ said Uriel, nodding to the warriors in the Rhino’s troop compartment. Brutus Cyprian racked the slide on his bolter and tapped the weapon on the metal of his augmetic knee. A pervasive hum filled the compartment as Livius Hadrianus fired up his meltagun’s charge-coils. The warriors returned his nod. No words were needed. The plan was Codex and both men knew their part in it.

Uriel had forgone a command squad for so long, but now it felt strange going into battle without the Swords of Calth assembled. Petronius Nero and Ancient Peleus had other roles to play and Apothecary Selenus was back on Calth, helping root out the last of the Bloodborn from its deep caverns.

The vox-bead in Uriel’s ear chirruped and a gruff voice spoke in clipped, efficient tones.

‘All tier-one targets in sight,’ said Torias Telion.

‘On my mark,’ said Uriel, spinning the locking wheel of the Rhino’s command

hatch and pushing it open. The wet, muddy reek of Sycorax's atmosphere rushed in, an astringent reek of churned earth and volcanic sulphurs.

Uriel hauled himself up, seeing the ugly collection of towers, barricades and titanic drilling equipment ahead, squatting in the haunches of mud-caked hills where Pasanius's Firebrands squad was concealed.

'Pasanius,' said Uriel. 'Telion has made a positive identification of Fabricatus Ubrique, Alexia Nassaur and Casimir Nassaur.'

'They're alive?' replied Pasanius. 'That's a new combat blade I owe Brutus. Telion's sure it's them? Hard to be sure of anything with all this damn mud.'

'If the old man says it's them, I'll not be the one to question him.'

'True enough,' agreed Pasanius, signing off.

The Rhino churned the sodden surface of Sycorax as it laboured towards the ruin of the drilling site. Its structure was partially sunken into the deep mud, its rig-towers listing drunkenly or collapsed entirely. What little remained had been reinforced with ad-hoc panels and hastily-rigged steel props. This had once been a temporary Mechanicus outpost, designed to siphon the promethium oceans beneath the planet's lithosphere until the mud claimed it, but was now an ork fort.

Crude glyphs defaced the silver aquilas and Icons Mechanicus, and horned totems had been raised over the gateway. These and the pillars of petrochemical fumes testified to the presence of greenskins. It was unusual for the orks to remain fixed in place for so long after a supply raid, but it wasn't every day they captured the planet's senior Fabricatus and the highborn twins of the planetary governor engaged in a surprise inspection.

That the greenskins hadn't just killed them outright told Uriel the orks had recognised their captives as valuable. Response teams of Skitarii and Defence Auxilia were keeping their distance, wary of moving closer for fear of the hostages being executed.

But now the Ultramarines were here.

A chime sounded in Uriel's ear as the Rhino came within range of the ork-held structure. The vehicle surged forward, throwing up huge sprays of mud behind it.

Rocket contrails bloomed on the walls of the outpost, corkscrewing wildly in the Rhino's general direction. Two were clearly flying wide of the mark, a third buried itself in the ground before the gate in a shower of mud and rock, but the fourth fang-painted missile was weaving a wobbling path that might actually intercept them.

'All units, engage,' said Uriel.

The elongated form of a Land Speeder Storm dropped through the toxic smoke above the outpost, and Uriel saw four muzzle flashes as Ancient Peleus and Torias Telion took their shots. Stalker-pattern bolter shells took out the rocket crews, ensuring no more would be fired, but there was still one incoming round.

Uriel swung the cupola-mounted storm bolter around and mashed the triggers.

A hail of explosive rounds filled the air, and Uriel calmly walked his fire into the missile's erratic path. The rocket exploded with a dull cough, its armour-penetrating warhead detonating fifty metres away.

The Land Speeder flew a screaming evasion pattern over the outpost, Telion and Peleus picking off targets with every shot. Rockets flew up towards them, but none came anywhere near the nimble flyer.

'Hadrianus,' said Uriel as the Rhino reached the outpost's mismatched gates. The assault doors slammed back and Livius Hadrianus stepped onto the Rhino's running boards. He fired two blasts from his meltagun and the gates vanished in a thunderous bang of superheated air and vaporised metal. Sagging nubs of molten steel were all that remained of the gates, and the Rhino skidded into the compound.

Uriel saw dead greenskins everywhere he looked, each killed cleanly with a bolt-round to the head. Fabricatus Ubrique and the highborn twins of House Nassaur were bound to oil-soaked crucifixes, their elaborate attire now ruined with mud and blood. All three were alive, their executioners-in-waiting lying at their feet with the tops of their skulls missing.

Two dozen greenskins remained on the overlooking gantries, and Uriel turned the storm bolters on those on the eastern sections. Thudding blasts blew orks back and ripped them apart in quick succession. Distant echoes of ranged bolter fire sounded from the hills as Pasanius's covering squad opened up from concealment.

The greenskins milled in confusion.

The attack had come so suddenly, so brutally, that they had no idea in which direction to concentrate their force. A brute of an ork ran towards his captives, bigger than the rest and boasting a horned helm and monstrously clawed arm. The greenskin leader knew his fleeting defiance was over, but was determined to murder his prisoners.

A figure in cobalt-blue armour dropped from the circling speeder and landed with a grace that should have been impossible in the cloying mud. Petronius Nero rose and drew his sword in one sinuous motion. He spun with his newly-forged blade extended at shoulder height, and the horned helm and head of the

greenskin was cut cleanly from its neck.

Uriel dropped from the Rhino and accepted his own bolter from Brutus Cyprian, who finished off the few remaining orks with kill-shots from his pistol. The Land Speeder skimmed lower, allowing Telion and Peleus to drop from its crew spaces. Two Ultramarines Scouts followed swiftly after and moved to high vantage points.

‘Outpost clear,’ voxed Telion, scanning the outpost with his hunter’s gaze.

Uriel nodded and banged a fist on the side of the Rhino.

Adept Komeda emerged from the troop compartment, his optics clicking as they adjusted for the change in light levels. A delighted squeal of sycophantic binary hissed from his clattering mouth as he saw Fabricatus Ubrique.

‘Adept Komeda was wrong to doubt you, Captain Ventris, this is an entirely satisfactory outcome,’ said Komeda. ‘The Mechanicus owes you a debt of gratitude.’

‘Sycorax is part of Ultramar.’ said Uriel. ‘Your gratitude is unnecessary.’

‘Adept Komeda offers it nonetheless.’

The Swords of Calth formed up around Uriel as Komeda hurried over to the Fabricatus and units of Skitarii moved in to secure the site.

‘What now, captain?’ asked Ancient Peleus.

‘Now we get these highborns home in one piece,’ said Uriel.

DUTY'S END

Robin Cruddace

The world turned black.

His vision returned moments later. The Space Marine had not been unconscious for long – he could tell that from the debris still falling from the explosion. There was an elusive thought at the back of his brain, a question that refused to surface, but then he took his first breath of air and pain stabbed through his chest. With an effort, he picked himself up from the blood-slicked mud and almost fell as his body doubled over in agony.

Something is wrong. You are of the Adeptus Astartes and should not have felt pain like that, not unless...

With a thought, he activated his auto-senses' medicae augurs. A multitude of red lights flashed in front of his eyes, warning him that the damage to his body was severe. His secondary heart had stopped beating, his Larraman's organ was failing and massive internal bleeding had been detected. The warning sigils continued to flash urgently for a few seconds, but then the Space Marine blink-clicked the display away. He didn't need an Apothecary to interpret the extent of the damage. He was losing blood quickly, his genhanced body unable to stem the tide. He was dying, and fast. The knowledge brought with it a calming peace, and then the question that had been gnawing at the back of his mind suddenly swam into clarity.

What is your name?

He looked down at his body, the coating of mud and blood not quite obscuring the red and yellow of his battle-scarred power armour. *Howling Griffon, Scion of Guilliman, Angel of Death*. He was all these things, but they were titles, not names. The Space Marine surveyed the mist-wreathed battlefield, unsure of where exactly he was. A great battle had certainly been fought here, for he could see several other armoured figures lying dead in the churned mud. They were his battle-brothers. He could name each and every one of them and recall fighting at their side on a hundred worlds.

So why can't you remember your name?

A shape loomed on the edge of his vision, pushing through the pall shrouding the battlefield. The figure resolved into an over-muscled, green-skinned brute, the unmistakable sight of an ork. Several others lumbered up behind the first, and as soon as they caught sight of the Space Marine they bellowed deep-throated war cries and charged.

The sight of the orks jogged something in his brain, a memory of his captain issuing orders. 'Hold the line', he had said simply. 'Secure the beachhead until the company reaches your position. The greenskins must not break through.'

Thoughts of his name were put aside for a time. The enemy was upon him and he had a duty to perform.

He moved without thinking, bringing his bolter up in a smooth arc and drawing a bead on the shape at the lead of the mob. He pulled the trigger and the weapon roared. The Space Marine could see the bolt-round fly towards its target, see the infinitesimal delay between punching through the ork's skull and blowing it apart from the inside. The headless corpse toppled forwards, a red mist hanging in the air as the body pitched into the mud. He was already tracking his bolter to the right, aiming at the next alien savage. The bolter barked again and again, each shot a hammer blow that punched another shape from its feet. Four more orks fell in quick succession, yet three more came on, iron-shod boots trampling the slain deeper into the blood-soaked muck.

The Howling Griffon drew a careful bead on the nearest ork, lining his bolter's sights between the alien's eyes before pulling the trigger. He heard a click. It was a small sound, but echoed loudly in his ears. He was dimly aware of a meter flashing zero on his helmet's lens, a peripheral image that brought unbidden a flash of an ancient memory: a grizzled sergeant chastising him as a recruit for making just such an error.

How can you remember that but not your name?

A roar snapped his attention back to the now, the first greenskin mere strides from him, weapon raised. Though his body burned with pain, the Space Marine moved on instinct, stepping to the side and smashing the butt of his bolter's grip into the greenskin's throat. The blow crunched through cartilage back to the ork's spine and the alien was dead before its body hit the ground. The move was muscle-memory, born of years of training. The same reflexes saved him as the second ork swung its axe.

The Howling Griffon dropped his empty bolter and caught the haft of the weapon in his open palm. The impact almost broke his arm, but the axe came to

a shuddering halt and the Space Marine smashed his other fist into the ork's jaw. Teeth broke with the impact and the ork's head snapped back violently. It was a punch that would have pulped a man's head, but the ork was tough and recovered quickly. The alien roared fury into the Space Marine's face, bloody drool spattering against his helmet. The deafening noise was cut off with a rasping gurgle when the Howling Griffon unsheathed his combat blade and rammed it into his foe's throat. With a grunt, he kicked the corpse off his knife, but not in time to block the last ork's arcing punch.

The Howling Griffon was knocked flying and landed hard on his back, pain lancing through his battered body once more. The ork, the biggest and ugliest one yet, looked down at its stricken prey and grinned as it advanced, the jaws of the great mechanical shears it had in place of an arm snapping open and shut in hungry anticipation. The Space Marine had lost his knife and tried to rise and draw his pistol. The ork's boot smashed down on his breastplate, pinning him to the floor as the metal pincers clamped shut around his gun arm, cleaving through ceramite, flesh and bone in one piston-driven instant. The Howling Griffon was beyond pain now, on the brink of death, his vision growing dim. The ork loomed over him and raised its gleaming claw to finish the kill.

The death blow never came. The ork jerked backwards without warning, a fist-sized hole punching through its chest. One shot, then another. The third blew the hulking brute backwards and as the Space Marine tilted his head, he caught sight of gold and crimson figures striding towards him, smoking bolters searching the distance for more foes to slay. They were calling out to him. It was his name, he was sure, but he could not make it out, muffled as it was over the echoing thump of his very last heartbeat in his ears. It didn't matter anyway. His name, whatever it was, would be added to the Chapter's roll of honour. He was a Space Marine, a Howling Griffon, and he had done his duty.

The world turned black for the last time.

THE THIRO WAR

Ray Harrison

I breathe in and taste ashes. Ashes and death.

The sun squints out from behind yellow clouds and smog. Acid rain hits my battleplate, hissing softly and curdling the black and bone paintwork. Hundreds of my Mortifactors brothers stand behind me, unmoving statues. Steam and smoke rises from their armour. Before us lies a hive city that reaches up into the sky like a desperate, grasping hand.

The hive is burning.

The distant wailing of hundreds of thousands of human voices carries on the wind. It is near-constant, like background distortion on a vox-channel. Titans move through the smog, illuminated by the fires and the flaring discharge of their weapons. I can feel their tread, even out here.

We stand at the foot of the city walls but we are not alone. Legions of dirty, grey-brown tanks churn the ground and rattle and squeal behind us. Hordes of mortal men in breather masks clutch their lasguns with grim determination. I smell the fear on them despite the stink of the chemical rain.

Inside the city, the enemy burn and ruin and roar.

I take a step forward and I falter, falling to one knee. My chest burns.

A hand on my arm. I look up. It is one of my brothers. He pulls me to my feet without a word.

I do not recognise him.

Inside the city, the Titan-tread rattles my teeth.

The smog is thicker here. It coils around my limbs as if it is sentient. I can no longer see the battle tanks, though I can still hear their engines chugging.

At a crossroads, we meet our foe.

A huddle of thick-necked orks bark and snap at each other beside the smoking hull of a Chimera transport. They club at the access hatches, knocking great ugly dents into the metal.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I start to run and the rhythmic pounding echoes in my ears. My chest burns.

The orks only turn to face me when I am close enough to see every pitted crack in their monstrous faces. I bring my bolter to bear. Three shots tear the first ork to pieces, separating his top and bottom jaws like a flower opening. The next ork in line howls in animal pain, shattered pieces of tooth and bone lacerating its face and neck, blinding it.

I silence its wailing with a clubbing strike from my crozius, caving in its brow. It lands a lucky strike with its blade as it dies, the rusty metal digging deep underneath my chest plate. I try to curse but it is blood that leaves my lips, not words.

I haul myself up onto the top of the transport. The other greenskins are gone. I cannot see my brothers either. Perhaps the smog hides them from me.

I hear a noise behind me and turn.

A huge, rusted claw clamps on to the hull of the transport, bending the metal shell of the tank. A massive black-skinned ork uses the claw to drag its bulk up onto the roof of the tank beside me. The creature is vast, at least twice my height. Strapped to its shoulders are huge pieces of curved metal.

Tank armour. It is wearing tank armour.

I ready my weapons and the ork roars.

The metal claw connects with my chest, knocking the air out of my body in a bloody gasp.

I see ground, sky, ground, sky.

Ground.

I blink heavily. I am lying at the base of a rockcrete wall. Pieces of my fused ribcage grind together as I breathe. My chest burns. I roll onto my back and reach for my weapons but they are gone.

A huge shape blocks the light out. The ork. It plants its foot on my chest, pressing my body into the stinking mud. I can't breathe.

The claw comes down and closes around my battle-helm. I draw my combat blade, jamming it into the meat of the ork's thigh. The creature doesn't seem to notice. It just pushes down harder with its foot, splitting the ceramite of my plastron. Something inside my chest bursts under the pressure. Blood washes into my mouth.

The claw tightens around my helm and twists. The seals snap and hiss, and it is torn loose from the collar of my suit. The ork wrenches it free and throws it to one side. I see it land in the dirt, crushed. The acid rain starts to sting my face.

The pressure on my chest eases for a moment as the ork removes its foot. I try to get to my feet.

I manage to get to my knees.

The ork's unarmoured hand closes around my neck, lifting me from the ground.

I stare it in the eyes. Those tiny eyes set deep in its head, burning like the last embers in an untended grate. The ork grunts and barks through a mouthful of yellowing tusks. I think it is laughing.

I spit in its face. In its *eyes*. The acidic saliva eats into the ork's flesh and it roars, enraged. The metal claw wraps around my chest and squeezes.

My lungs burst.

My hearts judder.

My chest *burns*.

I awaken. It is like breaking the surface after swimming up from the aphotic depths of an ocean.

'Gavador,' a voice from beside me says the name. My name.

I blink heavily and breathe deep. I should not be alive. I should...

'Gavador,' the voice repeats.

The lights are bright and my eyes adjust slowly. I am in an apothecarion.

No.

The apothecarion. I am in the main apothecarion aboard the *Basilica Mortis*.

'Gavador, can you hear me?' the voice says again.

I look now and I actually see. Apothecary Hekimar stands beside me. The bright white light reflects glaringly off his armour-plate.

'The vision nearly killed you this time,' He says with a cold smile. 'Both your hearts arrested whilst you dreamt. I have never seen the like.'

I remember. The vision-quest. The battle with the orks. It was a premonition. It was an omen.

'Armageddon,' I say. My voice is a rattling gasp. 'I saw it. We must go to Armageddon.'

Hekimar nods solemnly.

'You were not the only Chaplain to see Armageddon.'

I sit up, breathless.

'Who else?'

Hekimar looks at me with another cold smile.

'All of them.'

JUDGEMENT

Mark Latham

‘I suppose that concludes our business, Lord Konstantos. I must say that the... *famously inhospitable* nature of the Doom Legion has not been exaggerated.’

Konstantos, the Chapter Master of the Doom Legion, looked down at the inquisitor with a mixture of cool cordiality and barely concealed contempt.

‘Given the nature of your mission, Inquisitor Hassan, I feel that I have been more than hospitable. You will be eager to return to your own ship, where you may seek more... *comfort*.’

The Space Marine’s words were ice. The inquisitor sighed and nodded, handing the Chapter Master a holo-scroll bearing his seal.

‘Very well, I will depart immediately. Our agreement is contained within those documents, a copy of which will be sent to Holy Terra. I suppose, Lord Konstantos, that we must be thankful that your entire Chapter did not enter the Eye of Terror, or perhaps you would all have fallen from the path of righteousness.’

‘My men have ever been loyal. I cannot begin to imagine what horrors they must have faced to turn their backs on the Imperium, and I would not be so sure that you could have fared better. I warn you, inquisitor, that I will not tolerate insinuations about the loyalty of the Doom Legion. Four companies remain, and we will eradicate the stain on our honour. Be sure of it.’

‘Oh, I hope so. But I will not be sure of anything until the gene-seed has been tested. You know the procedure, my lord. Should your stock be found wanting, there will be great challenges ahead of you.’

‘The Adeptus Terra will find no hint of corruption. We were born of Guilliman himself and have fought proudly for millennia.’

‘Indeed you have. Then again, the Dionys storm claimed many a noble servant of the Emperor, did it not?’

‘Perhaps. Though we only have the word of a false saint to that effect. Tell me, inquisitor, do you seek to damn us with the word of Basillius? Is such a decision

in itself not heretical?’

It was the inquisitor’s turn to glare at the Space Marine who towered over him. He suddenly felt very alone on the bridge of the *Faithful’s Deliverance*. The large chamber had been vacated so that they may speak freely. Hassan had with him two servo-scribes, whilst Konstantos had kept Chaplain Vincenzo by his side. The Chaplain was silent as the grave, as always.

‘That was not my meaning, my lord,’ said the inquisitor icily. ‘I see that there is no more discussion to be had, though. I will take my leave, but must tell you this – just as you wish to prove your honour and loyalty, so does the Adeptus Terra wish to clear the Doom Legion of any blemish on its record. The tests will be rigorous, the sanctions harsh. Were you not entrusted with the stewardship of the Elusian Maze, you would already have felt the squeeze of the tithes. This is not my doing. I am but a humble servant of the Emperor, as are we all.’

‘Were it not for our duty over the Elusian Maze, inquisitor, we would all have joined the Abyssal Crusade. And what then? Could our combined strength have saved our brothers from damnation and visited swifter justice on the false saint? Or would we all have fallen? I ask myself this question daily. None can judge a son of Guilliman harder than he judges himself... You would do well to remember that.’

The inquisitor held the Space Marine’s gaze. He seemed infallible, as did every elder of the Adeptus Astartes, but one thing that Hassan knew after a hundred years in the Emperor’s service was that appearances were often deceptive. And yet Hassan merely nodded, and turned towards the door.

‘Farewell, Lord Konstantos. Until we meet again.’

He strode from the command centre, his cloak billowing out behind him and his servitors scurrying with him like children. Neither Konstantos nor Vincenzo said a word. Instead, they turned to the massive viewport that overlooked the main shuttle bay. It took Inquisitor Hassan some time to reach it, for the labyrinthine innards of the *Faithful’s Deliverance* were not easily traversed. The inquisitor’s honour detail loaded the precious cargo of gene-seed onto the shuttle. There was enough material to create fifty battle-brothers – Space Marines who would be sorely needed should the Chapter hope to rebuild after this disaster. But there was no arguing. The Adeptus Terra held the authority of the Emperor, and the Doom Legion would obey.

Konstantos breathed easier when the hangar doors opened and the inquisitor’s craft left the vast star fortress to return to the nearby frigate. Even from here, the Elusian asteroid fields could be seen, floating against a purple scar in the depths

of space. The Doom Legion had been all but forgotten for so long, left here in this distant outpost, fighting endless wars against the denizens of this accursed sector. And this was the thanks they received... He clenched a powerful fist until he felt calm restored. Only when the Inquisitorial frigate *Talon of Vigilance* engaged its warp drives did either of the Space Marines speak again.

‘Let us end this sorry business,’ said Konstantos. Vincenzo only nodded.

‘I thought you were going to leave me in here forever. Is this any way to treat an honoured brother?’

The emissary’s words were calculating, but Konstantos did not rise to them. The Space Marine before him was garbed in dark green robes, like the Chapter’s own ceremonial dress, but stained and tattered. He smelled of death.

‘Captain Viktarion. You were once the first among us, and now look at you: fallen, piteous. You have invoked our ancient tradition of sanctuary, and you have parleyed with us, but negotiations are over. I have perhaps taken a step towards corruption, for I have shielded you from the Emperor’s justice. Am I like you? Could I become so? I think not, but I would rather you were far from my sight, so as not to remind us how far the mighty can fall.’

‘Pious words, but you have not shielded me from the Emperor’s justice, only from the justice of a weak man, who is like but an insect to warriors such as us. I offer you this chance once more, my lord. Join our cause, reunite brother with brother, and we will gladly follow you as we did before. Rebuild not just the Chapter, but a Legion in truth as well as in name, worthy to stand beside those mighty warriors of old, who still fight the Long War.’

‘Enough!’ Konstantos roared, losing control of his emotions for the first time in years; for the first time since the news had come that five of his companies had turned. ‘Never speak the name of our Chapter again. You call yourselves the “Vectors of Pox” now, do you not? You are a traitor and a heretic, and I will suffer not your presence here. Brother Werner, Brother Lazaric – take this... “emissary” to his ship and make sure he leaves.’

Konstantos and Vincenzo returned to the bridge, now fully staffed with Techmarines and thralls. They watched as Viktarion, once captain of the First Company, boarded his sleek fighter. They watched as the hangar doors opened. They watched as the renegade vessel flew out into the purple void. And they watched as it was blown apart by a fusion warhead from the *Faithful’s Deliverance*.

‘He has our answer,’ muttered Konstantos. ‘Emperor save us all.’

FINAL JOURNEY

Guy Haley

‘In the name of the Emperor, and of mankind, and of duty,’ intoned Chaplain Odon. Clad in newly polished armour, robed and carrying the symbols of his office, he led the funeral procession. His voice was metallic though his skull-helmet’s speakers.

‘The Emperor. Mankind. Duty,’ replied the brothers. There were twenty-five of them. Rearmost were twenty in two files, empty-handed but for one who bore a white veteran sergeant’s helmet in his hands. Four pall bearers were at their head. These, members of Voldo’s squad, remained silent, heads down, muscles straining under the weight of the armoured corpse of Sergeant Voldo on the bier. More than one was new to the squad, replacements for others dead, but that did not matter. They shared a bond with Voldo, whether they knew him well before or not.

Sergeant Arendo was the twenty-fifth, walking between the bier and Odon. Helmless, grim-faced, lips painted black with ash. This would not be wiped free until Sergeant Voldo was laid to rest and he would utter his first orders to squad Wisdom of Lucretius.

‘In the cause of the Emperor, the defence of mankind, and our oath,’ said Chaplain Odon.

‘We give our lives freely.’

With each response to Odon’s chanted words, the Space Marines descended a single step, stamping their armoured boots with a crash that resounded down the kilometre-long stairway and into the darkness at the roots of the mountain. They waited for the sound to die away, until only their breathing, the faint whining of their bone and blue armour and the spitting of the lumen globe hovering over Odon’s head remained.

Odon shattered the quiet again with his ringing voice.

‘Each to themselves, each to their duty. Each to the oath of Corvo.’

‘Our duty is ourselves, our duty is the fulfilment of Corvo’s Oath.’

Crash.

They neared the bottom. The catacomb of the Red Millennium was ahead, dug deep into the cold hard rock of the Heavenward Mountains as every catacomb had been and every catacomb would be until the Novamarines were extinct, and their fortress home finally finished.

‘Glory to the dead, glory to sacrifice, glory to the children of men.’

‘May they forever rule the stars.’

Crash.

‘We bring our brother home, may he rest peacefully until the final battle is begun.’

‘May the Emperor deem him worthy, and bring him again to war.’

Crash.

So it went on, until the entire procession had descended to the level floor of the catacomb. The corridor was a perfect rectangle, and if the light of the lumen globe were powerful enough, the Space Marines would have seen it stretch away until its sides, ceiling and floor were forced together by perspective.

Somewhere far ahead, a pair of servitors waited by a raw rockface for the ceremony to cease so that they might continue their digging. Only when the millennium turned would they stop extending the catacomb, and another would be begun. Perhaps ten thousand cold beds lined the walls already, perhaps more. They would never all be filled, but that was not the point.

Odon bowed his head. The brothers followed suit, moving with perfect synchronicity. They remembered Sergeant Voldo in life, they reflected upon his death; all but black-lipped Sergeant Arendo. His task was to stare ahead, past the feeble glow of the lumen globe and into the darkness, thinking on his duty. He did so unblinkingly.

Two minutes past. Odon sang, and started off again. The corridor reverberated to the dirge as they went slowly on, past the remains of hundreds of fallen brothers. The further they went, the more complete the remains became: dust to bone fragment, bone fragment to yellowed skeleton, yellowed skeleton to mummy, flesh desiccated in the dry air. Mummy to cadaver, cadaver to fresh corpse whose rot was slow in the aseptic tomb. The corpses were laid in no order, each was simply put into the next available slot. They came to the last such recess. Odon paused by it, finished his song, and looked within.

‘Rank, squad and company have no place here, in the halls of the dead.’

‘In life we are brothers. In death we are brothers,’ said the others.

Odon led the procession a short way to a chamber let off the corridor. Here the

bier was placed, and with great reverence the men of Squad Wisdom of Lucretius removed Voldo's armour piece by piece, passing the components down the column with care.

Voldo lay naked, his skin dark with tattoos from his ankles to the crown of his head. His bolter was replaced in his hands.

'See the wounds that brought him low, and mark them well, for similar will one day pierce all our flesh,' said Odon.

'No scars form on the flesh of the dead.'

'See ye also, the marks of pride. The flesh tally of his deeds.' Odon pointed. 'By these will the Emperor know his worth.'

'And call him to war once again.'

Odon began a description of Voldo's tattoos, the manner in which they were won. This took time, for Voldo had been valiant and much decorated.

'To the final sleep he must go,' he said eventually.

'There to await the call,' responded the brothers.

The squad members lifted him, easily now that his armour had been removed. They returned to the recess and laid Voldo gently in place, his head upon a low shelf at one end, his feet pointing back down the corridor.

'Stone for pillow, stone for bed, his comfort is great, for his brothers are his companions.'

'In life and death we are never alone.'

Odon handed his crozius and boltgun to Sergeant Arendo. With an armoured fingertip, he wiped the ashes from his lips. He took Arendo's helmet from the Space Marine that carried it, and placed it upon the sergeant's head.

'You are sergeant. You may speak,' said Odon.

'Company!' Arendo shouted, his voice filling the catacomb as surely as a gun report. 'About turn!'

'We obey,' they said. As one, they swivelled on their heels. Each held a piece of Voldo's armour.

'March!' shouted Arendo.

The Novamarines thundered off down the corridor, away from Odon and the light. The noise of their feet boomed long after they were out of sight.

When quiet returned, Odon reached in to the recess and gently took Voldo's bolter.

'Honour the battlegear of the dead,' he said, and left Voldo to the eternal night under the mountains.

RECLAMATION

L.J. Goulding

The crates were old, heavy-duty ammunition cases, their edges worn and battered by months of indelicate handling by cargo servitors, their security tabs drilled through. They both bore serial numbers and the forge worlds of origin for their original shipments, though the stencilled, yellow letters were now almost completely illegible. Like almost everything on board the *Heart of Cronus*, the cases had been salvaged. Repurposed.

Fresh from the decontamination vestibules, Bokari led three of his neophyte brethren through the hatchway and into the sweltering forge. The young Space Marines carried their burden with a weary reverence - like pilgrims who had grown too used to the same, oft-trodden path.

Sebastion turned from the vibro-lathe, allowing his serf menials to continue in their work, the air ringing with the sounds of hammering and heavy machinery. He swallowed hard, and cleared his throat a few times before speaking. He was still unused to conversing verbally in his daily duties.

'Novice Bokari. What have you brought me?'

Bokari grunted as he and Medon set their crate upon the deck, and then rubbed his sore palms together. 'Such spoils, forge master!' he exclaimed wryly, pulling back the lid with a flourish. 'Have you ever seen treasures like these?'

Without humour, Sebastion peered down into the crate. His bulky ocular array clicked and refocused.

'Actually, there was precious little worth saving,' Bokari muttered, 'and certainly nothing from your list.' He knelt, sifting through the contents and holding out a few items for closer inspection. 'Some choice pieces, though. At least one complete Corvus helm, by my reckoning - although you might need to machine out the... uhh...'

The forge master took the pitted dome of the helmet from him, pairing it with an appropriate faceplate. The *crest sensor ridge*, Novice Bokari. Unique in the Imperial Mark VI power armour variant, in that it is off- centre towards the

shield arm.' He ran a finger down the length of the crest. 'Do you know why that is?'

Bokari hung his head. 'I do not, my lord.'

Sebastion tossed the two unattached pieces back into the crate and retrieved an equally battered vambrace-and-cannon assembly. Then there is still much for you to learn. Our honoured battleplate is a wonder of Martian ingenuity. The component parts can be combined in virtually any battlefield configuration, regardless of variant design or origin, and with a few minor adjustments it can be made to run as efficiently as a suit fresh from the forges.'

He held the vambrace up to the light. It had once been painted a dull green, though the ceramite outer layer had been so extensively burned away - at the cuff, almost down to the structural shell beneath - that it had a mottled, vaguely organic appearance.

This, however, is useless to me.'

Sebastion squeezed the plates, and the corroded metal buckled and fractured in his grip like nothing more than flawed husk-iron. Bokari watched the fragments tumble to the floor.

'But what about the rest, my lord?' he asked. 'Some of this looks like fine salvage. Fit for spares, at least?'

Flexing his shoulders, Sebastion brought the two uppermost limbs of his servo-harness forwards to pick through the rest of the crate. This is tyrannid reclamation pool detritus, is it not?'

Bokari looked to Medon, who nodded. 'Aye, forge master. The Forty- Ninth Salvation Team just returned from an insertion into hive ship #78114 *Rocola*. They have the full salvage documents from the quarantine officials, though - it's all been cleared.'

Sebastion drew a survey module from his belt, pressing it against the surface of a high-rimmed pauldron. The shoulder pad was a grubby red, its surface scored by xenos bio-acid, and bore the symbol of a lion rampant. The forge master regarded it with a craftsman's eye.

'I don't have time for restoration projects, novice. We are at war. The environmental seals on all of these plates are gone, and I doubt that the remaining fibre-bundles will carry a charge. All of the servos will need replacing, too, and we're not going to pull spares from the reserve stores' He handed the pauldron to Bokari. 'Melt down the plates that are at less than fifty per cent frame-integrity, and take the rest to your workstation. If you can put together a suit worthy of blessing, then I'll gladly recommend you for

apprenticeship to the forge.'

Bokari smiled broadly and bowed. Thank you, forge master.'

Sebastion made to return to his work, but Bokari pointed to the second crate.

'Forgive me, my lord, but I have brought you something else. Something you will definitely want to see.'

The other two neophytes drew back the lid and the forge master's eye widened.

Bulky and supine, the upper torso and right arm of a suit of heavy Indomitus-pattern Terminator armour lay in the crate, as though it might be a burial casket for some martyred hero. Though the metal was stripped almost bare, it had clearly once borne a dark blue Chapter livery.

At the sight, the nearest serf menials halted in their tasks and made the sign of the aquila over their hearts, awe written openly upon their faces.

Sebastion could hardly speak. 'Where... Where did you find this?'

Medon stepped forwards. 'In an outer blister, my lord. There was no gravity - no blood, either. He was just sort of *drifting* there.'

'He?'

The former occupant. He'd been dead a long time, I think, but we took what was left of him to the Apothecaries. With dignity, my lord. They'll see to him properly.'

The forge master raised up the incomplete arm of the suit, noting every mark and blemish upon its surface, and measuring the strained interface spacings with a pair of callipers. A single tear ran down his cheek.

Bokari placed a hand upon the tarnished eagle across the breastplate.

'It's not perfect, I know - the gauntlet has no fingers, but the weapon mounts are intact. I thought it would certainly be worthy of restoration, until we can find more. A fourth suit of Terminator armour still wouldn't be enough to assemble a full Codex squad formation, but I imagine it'd go a long way to restoring some morale in the fleet.'

Sebastion did not look up. 'Aye. To the Scythes of the Emperor, this is a treasure indeed, Bokari. Worth more than all the rest put together, and more than the life of any single Space Marine. The Forty-Ninth team should be commended and honoured for this.'

The forge master issued a signal-command to a loading servitor to bear the suit away to his workshop sanctum. Activity in the forge resumed, but Sebastion looked pensive.

'Do you know what some of our battle-brothers say, Novice Bokari? They say that we dishonour the memory of these fallen warriors and their Chapters by

cannibalising the remains of their wargear for our own needs.'

Bokari frowned. These fallen warriors have no need of it anymore. If I were to fall in battle, I would want everything I owned to be gathered up and thrown back at the bastard xenos.'

Sebastion's ocular array whirred as he looked the neophyte in the eye. His machine-gaze was suitably cold and detached, but tinged with a hint of regret.

'One way or another, Bokari, it will be.'

SKIN DEEP

S P Cawkwell

After any battle, there was a period of observed silence. A time to remember the fallen. A time to take pride in a hard-fought victory. Most Silver Skulls retreated to the chapel on board whichever ship had brought them to the warzones. Some remained in their own cells, meditating or scribing accounts of the battle. This time, there was something else that required Lord Commander Argentius's attention.

He strode through the corridors and walkways of the ship, his heavy footfalls muffled by the soft leather boots he wore when he was not armoured. Wherever he walked, subordinates bowed and crossed their hands over their chests in respect. He commanded the awe and might of not only his Chapter, but all who served the Silver Skulls unto death.

He reached his destination, ducking his head to pass in beyond the threshold of a door that he could barely squeeze through. The room's occupant looked up, grunting a greeting. He did not bow before the Chapter Master. Instead, the Chapter Master bowed before him.

'Away with you, boy. Stop all that bowing and scraping.' The wizened husk of a man moved slowly with the aid of a silver-tipped cane, settling aching bones down on the chair beside the inking bench.

At seventy years old, Ignatius had been Cruor Primaris for more than five decades. Gifted beyond any artist on Varsavia, examples of the man's work were carried on the bodies of Silver Skulls warriors across the galaxy and admired by many. Denied ascension in his youth, Ignatius fought the wars of the Imperium through exquisite pieces of art that told stories he yearned to be a part of. More slowly now, though. Argentius knew that it hurt the man beyond measure to hold the beautifully hand-crafted inking needles for any length of time in his arthritic hands, but the work remained exquisite.

'Sit down, boy. Get that tunic off. Let's see the damage.'

Boy. Only Ignatius could get away with that kind of insubordination.

Argentius tugged off the heavy linen tunic, sitting down. Ignatius's rheumy eyes scanned the broad, muscular back. The olive complexion was marred by countless battle scars that sketched unsightly valleys and mountains across the flesh. The ridges caused Ignatius's lips to purse. Not because of the evidence of injury, but because they distorted the otherwise perfect imagery he had already drawn and re-drawn countless times on the living canvas of Argentius's back.

'Turn around. Let's see the rest.'

Argentius shifted position until he was facing the Cruor Primaris. The flat, fused ribcage of his chest was smooth and hairless and the tattoos from his back curled around his sides and across the stomach. There was not much room left, but a patch remained. All the Silver Skulls left a patch for their last story, the one which would recount their final battle and go to the mausoleums of Pax Argentius with them, were they fortunate enough to be returned for interment.

'How is it looking, Ignatius?'

Ignatius smacked his lips together as he considered his answer. 'I can cover the worst of it,' he eventually replied. 'Alas, I'm afraid that the moment you triumphed over that ork warboss may now have to feature a few additional orks. To cover the new scars here...' He traced a finger across the Chapter Master's back, 'and here.' His fingers ran lightly across the depiction, a beautiful rendering of a great battle that captured perfectly the moment Argentius's flail wrapped itself around the neck of the warboss.

'Telling the world that I destroyed more greenskins than I actually did? Lies, my old friend?'

'Not lies, my lord!' Ignatius's indignation was palpable. 'An artistic liberty. Besides, more orks is probably closer to the truth.'

'Flattery, old man?'

'Truth.'

A comfortable silence fell across the room as Ignatius began the task of restoring the masterpiece to some semblance of glory. The needle whirred softly, injecting ink rapidly beneath Argentius's flesh, bringing to life the faded distortion of the great battle.

For years this relationship had existed, master and servant, and it was built on mutual respect. But Ignatius was an old man, while Argentius was functionally immortal. The tattooist's life was a flash in the grand scheme of a Space Marine's existence. The Chapter Master sighed softly, making no sound.

'Is your mind troubled, boy? Unburden your load.'

'I fear that I cannot, Ignatius. Not this time.' Every sitting was the same. More

than receiving a tattoo, these sessions were a soothing balm in the tempestuous turmoil of Argentius's war-filled existence.

'There may be precious few times more that you *can*,' said Ignatius. He pursed his lips, leaning back to study his progress. 'This is going to take more than one session. Three, maybe four sittings. Ryall will complete it if I am unable to.'

'You will complete it, Ignatius. That's an order.' Something cold ran down Argentius's spine.

'Now then, boy. You may be great and powerful, but even *you* can't order a dying man to keep living.' Ignatius let out a wheezing laugh and slapped a hand against Argentius's back.

The painful nakedness of the truth was glaring and Argentius felt a keen pang of separation spear him. The disease that ate Ignatius away from the inside was in its final stages, so Apothecary Malus had told him. There was little that could be done for the old man other than to keep the pain at bay. He'd refused rejuvenat treatments. 'I was not destined for the honour of ascension,' was his calm argument. 'I will accept the destiny my mortality brings.'

So he bore tests, diagnosis and treatments with astonishing grace, humbling others with his strength and pride. In Argentius's eyes, the mortal exemplified all that the Silver Skulls stood for. This tattoo would be his last piece. It was fitting that it should be on the Chapter Master's skin.

'Now, can I finish?' Ignatius steadied himself, focusing on the ridges in the skin, concentrating and dragging ink through the needles into the big warrior's back. With the deft ease of a true artist, he turned unsightly scar tissue into ork flesh. Argentius knew that when he finished, there would be a superb recreation of his great triumph there for the world to see. In that image the battle would live on, recounted for all time by a man who had assured his immortality amongst the warriors of the Silver Skulls.

UIGIL

James Swallow

I am dead.

The vigil must go on. It must not end, for a single instance of laxity or distraction could prove fatal to my battle-brothers. So here I stand, a dead man clad in silver-grey ceramite and fortified with fathomless will, watching and waiting atop this poisoned hill.

My jump pack weighs upon my back; I do not consider it. My bolter, crimson-lined and marked with honour-signs, is forever in my hand; I do not think of it. My Chapter's grave sigil, a bleak skull against the wings of an angry raptor, is the heaviest thing I carry this day; I do not begrudge it.

I am Brother-Sergeant Suhr Tarikus, born of the desolate crags of Gathis, a warrior of the Doom Eagles, sworn son of great Aquila and remade in his image... And as I have said, *I am dead.*

I was dead the moment my boots touched the blighted dirt of this ashen wasteland of a world, the instant I stepped off the deck of the Thunderhawk and took my first mask-filtered breath of alien air. My squad, my brothers too, all standing with me. All dead.

I was dead when we battled to rescue the Order of Our Martyred Lady at the fall of Zhodon Orbital. I was dead in the Battle for Soule and the boarding action that took the star cruiser *Burned Figure* from the Thousand Sons. Dead on Merron, Aerius and Serek. Almost so in the void and again when I was imprisoned for a time on the fourth world of the Dynikas System. Aye, I am indeed dead, but by the grace of fate and the Emperor's will, *I have yet to be killed.*

And this is what I think upon as I wait out the vigil. It has been thirty-three days now, Terran standard calendar. On this world, time runs a little faster, sunrise and nightfall speeding past me as I allow myself the respite of half-sleep, my brain partitioning itself to rest one lobe while the other remains alert.

I will stand sentinel for as long as it takes. An eon, if I endure so. Out there,

across the fog-soaked plains and in among the gnarled stonetrees, the enemy is lurking. They cannot hold their fire forever. It is not in their nature. Eventually they will come, they will show their faces and I will be here. I will see them. I will kill them, and this world will become thick with the ghost of death, thick enough that those with eyes to see will read it in the clouds and the tracks of glassy sand.

I have undertaken many pilgrimages to war-worlds and places of great tragedy. It is the way of the Doom Eagles, and others never understand. Our cousin Chapters, even those of our parent Legion, the Ultramarines, do not see as clearly as we do. They think us morbid souls to a man, obsessed with death. I have been asked why the Doom Eagles grub in the dirt of failed wars and brutal betrayals, why it is we each seek out a relic of those atrocities and covet it as if it is precious. I say that it *is* precious, as *life* is precious, as death is eternal and inescapable. For only in the knowledge of how wars are lost and how treachery rises can we ever know how to defeat such things when they come again, as perpetual as sunrise and nightfall.

I know this, because the gift my Chapter gave to me when I joined the Adeptus Astartes was *clarity*. I understand. I am dead. I have always been so, from the moment I first slipped from my long-passed mother's womb. All life is born dying, trapped in the teeth of entropy. This is not fatalism or ennui that colours my thoughts. It is certainty. *It is truth*.

I am dead, and so are my enemies. The question only remains as to which of us will succumb first. I am a spectre sheathed in meat and bone and metal, already fading, the moment of true oblivion always within reach.

This is what makes me free of doubt. It is what means that I know no fear. A dead man has nothing to lose, so he strides into battle to claim not just victory over his foes, but the one thing for which he forever strives. I am dead and I go to war to take back my life.

I have yet to find it, and perhaps I never will. Perhaps this is the dawn that will be my last, thirty-three days of vigil and silence ending in fire and blood. If I am to be killed, then let it come. I will not pass without sounding the echo of my ending for all to hear. And when the moment is upon me, the relic I will leave shall be the bright and shining brass of spent shells from my bolter, or the jagged splinters of my blade in the heart of the foe, catching light of alien suns. Gathis will remember my name, even if it is called a hundred light-years from the shores of black sand, where I took my first steps toward this day.

I see movement.

And at last they come, the enemy. I see them emerging from the treeline in fell rows, the dull glitter of their weapons in the mist. They are many, and they are fuelled by the desire for our deaths. But they are fools, and the trap laid for them by the Doom Eagles is now sprung; the hills they thought to be barren and devoid of threat are not.

My vigil ends thus; muscles that moments before were frozen solid by chem-shunts and blood control now flash back into life and I burst into motion. The camo-cloak that shrouded me from their gaze snaps away and catches in the wind, freeing me to fight. My bolter rises, and I have so many targets to choose from.

The air fills my lungs and I speak for what seems like the first time in an age. Only two words, the battle cry of my Chapter. Two words that promise all the fury and fire that only the Emperor's angels of death can provide.

The shout echoes down the hillside. '*Woe betide!*'

And with it, my brothers rise to join me. Hundreds of foxholes and hide-pits explode into sight, Doom Eagle upon Doom Eagle breaking out of their concealment, swords and bolters and missiles at the ready.

My jump pack burns and now I am in the foggy sky, my bolter crashing as shot after shot screams down into the enemy lines, ending their paths wherever they stand.

Gravity takes me at the apex of the powered leap, and I fall toward the war.

My enemy is dead, and so am I. But I will make them take that fatal embrace a thousand times over before it claims me.

SALAMANDERS

RITE OF PAIN

Nick Kyme

‘Again.’

A prickling heat presaged the actual fire, followed a split-second later by the stench of his flesh burning.

The prisoner strapped down to the stone slab convulsed, his pelvis thrusting upwards in response to the pain. His wrists and fingers twisted, struggling against their bonds. His legs thrashed impotently in the manacles fastened to his ankles.

‘Don’t struggle,’ the voice warned. ‘Struggling only makes it worse.’

There were three others in the room with the prisoner. One, his actual torturer, never spoke. He carried the burning brand, the fork at the end of it blazing like a tiny sun. Another observed, keeping back and out of the weak light shining from above. The few glimpses the prisoner managed to snatch in his throes of agony suggested that the observer had his arms folded and shifted irritably.

The third, the one who had spoken, rasped and stayed close. His eyes were coals, smouldering red, the mirror image of the branding iron’s business end. He and the observer were hulking, armoured in war-plate that growled and whirred as they moved, as if some animus of their draconic namesake was still trapped within and trying to escape.

‘I will kill you both!’ spat the prisoner, baring his fangs and snarling.

The third nodded, his black armour rimed a dusky orange from the forge-flame being pressed to the prisoner’s exposed skin. It burned again, inscribing a line in his flesh, drawing pain.

‘He is savage,’ said the observer after the torturer had ceased. The torturer was smaller, dressed in robes rather than battle armour. He would die last, the prisoner decided.

‘How many did he kill?’ asked the observer.

‘Seven. He killed seven brander-priests before I took him,’ the black-armoured warrior replied.

The observer muttered something in response to that fact. The figure could not hear the exact detail, but the tone suggested disbelief.

‘Are you certain this is right? He *is* savage,’ repeated the observer.

‘A monster,’ said the third, leaning in close to talk to his prisoner. ‘Are you ready to submit to the rite of pain?’

Deep, heavy breathing, with a growling undercurrent, answered. Cold, dark eyes like chips of flint regarded the third. He smiled.

‘You want to gut me, don’t you? Even now, you are working to release yourself from your bonds, planning your escape?’

For a few seconds there was no response, then the figure nodded. Slowly. Certainly.

The black-armoured warrior laughed, hollow and echoing in the solitorium. The torturer was about to advance when he raised a hand, stopping the human.

‘This isn’t working.’

‘Then what do you suggest, Elysius?’

Elysius had been talking to himself, and hadn’t expected a response.

‘You need him, Agatone,’ he answered. ‘If you’re going to hunt, this one will be of great use. But not before the rite.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’ Agatone repeated his previous question.

After a moment of silence, Elysius said, ‘Out. Both of you.’

The human brander-priest obeyed at once, bowing his head and shuffling out of the chamber. Agatone was more reluctant.

‘What are you going to do, Chaplain?’

‘Teach him.’

Agatone lingered.

Elysius never let his gaze waver from the prisoner, though he turned his face a fraction towards the captain behind him.

‘I said *out*. You might captain the Third, Agatone, but here in this solitorium chamber, I am in charge.’

Sensing a change, the prisoner began to relax, though his breathing was still frantic, heightened to battlefield intensity.

‘And what if he kills you?’ Agatone nodded at the prisoner. ‘You’ve seen the state he’s in. Even when he’s not under the branding iron, he’s still a savage creature.’

Elysius smiled again. ‘No captain, he isn’t. He’s much worse than that. Now, please leave.’

Agatone was out of objections. He did as Elysius asked, leaving him alone in

the dark with the monster.

‘Just you and I now,’ Elysius said once Agatone was gone.

‘Your mistake.’

‘I think not.’ The Chaplain picked up the branding iron left behind by the human priest. The coals of the brazier in which it was kept hot crackled and spat as it was pulled free. ‘Stings, doesn’t it?’

‘Not as much as my claws will.’

Elysius chuckled mirthlessly.

‘Very well then,’ he said. ‘Time to earn your rite.’

A sub-vocal command issued through his gorget quick-released the manacles on the prisoner’s ankles.

The prisoner laughed, ‘You’re really going to regret this...’

A second command released the collar fastened to the prisoner’s neck.

Rotating his wrist, Elysius swung the branding iron around as if it were a sword, leaving fire trailing in the dark behind it. His other arm ended in a stump at the elbow. His prisoner would think him disadvantaged, crippled even. That would be his mistake.

‘Come then. Show me.’ Elysius released the last bindings, the straps and chains spilling loose in a flood of leather and metal. Before his bonds had even hit the floor, the prisoner was up. He sprang off the slab and launched himself at Elysius with a roar.

The Chaplain cuffed him with a well-timed uppercut that stunned his jaw and sent the prisoner sprawling back with his own negated momentum. Then he advanced, lunging with the branding iron, searing flesh.

Screaming, wrathful, the prisoner tried to fight, but Elysius butted him, shattering his nose. Dazed, the prisoner swung, bone claws extending from his forearms. Elysius parried with the iron, smacking the claws away to deliver a second burning brand. He dodged an overhead slash and heard bone scraping metal as he brought his armoured knee up into the stomach of the prisoner, who gagged and spat.

Elysius kicked him over, lashing out with the brand again and again.

‘You *are* a savage creature!’ he snapped. ‘But do not think you are more brutal than I. This is an infirmary and I am the surgeon, cutting out weakness, flensing doubt and disloyalty. Tell me whelp, whom do you serve? With whom do you forge your bonds of brotherhood?’ Elysius burned the prisoner one final time, finishing the mark, ending the rite of pain.

The prisoner did not struggle. He was too beaten for that. He let the burning in,

allowing the brand to scorch his skin.

‘I am fire-born,’ croaked the prisoner, all defiance leaving him. ‘I forge my bonds with the Salamanders.’

‘And whose flame ignites your fury?’

‘Vulkan’s fire... beats in my breast. With it I shall smite the foes of the Emperor.’

Elysius backed down, allowing his breathing to return to normal. He ached. The rite had taken as much out of him as it had the prisoner before him. He put the brand down and held out his hand.

‘Then rise, and be my brother.’

The figure touched the scar upon his chest. It was shaped in the head of a drake. He let Elysius help him up and felt his anger draining away, to be replaced by something more lasting, permanent... He felt a sense of *belonging*.

‘How do you feel?’ Elysius asked.

‘Raw... but strong.’

‘You are fresh-forged, that’s why. Your armour is waiting for you, as are your other trappings.’

The prisoner snarled, ‘Then to war.’

There was a glint in Elysius’s eyes, a stoking of the fire within at hearing that word.

‘Indeed, Brother Zartath. To war.’

RAVEN GUARD

BY ARTIFICE, ALONE

George Mann

The disrobing chamber was shrouded in a thick, comfortable silence, broken only by the *skritch-scratch* of a knife tip working insistently back and forth across ceramite, and the distant, tortured sigh of the battle-barge's warp engines.

Captain Aremis Koryn of the Raven Guard sat alone, observed by the dead stone eyes of a hundred primitive statues, each of them peering down at him from one of the shadowy alcoves that lined the edges of the chamber.

All around him lay the carefully placed pauldrons, vambraces, and chest panels of his venerable armour, every inch of its surface etched with the names of the long-dead veterans who had once worn it before him. A little pool of *corvia* – the bleached skulls of ravens, carried to honour those who had died in combat – lay beside the armour, bound by fine silver chain.

Koryn was wrapped in a loose-fitting cotton robe, the ghostly-white flesh of his chest, shoulders and arms exposed as he sat on the cool marble floor, hunched over one of the pauldrons, worrying away with his blade. His black eyes flicked towards the open doorway at the sound of movement from the passageway outside.

‘Come, Cordae. Your loitering makes me ill at ease.’

The Chaplain stalked slowly into the room, his heavy boot steps ringing out like bolter fire in the empty space. ‘I thought you had come here to make preparations for the deployment?’ said Cordae, standing over Koryn so that his shadow fell across the captain's work.

Koryn stilled his hand and glanced up at the Chaplain. Cordae was still clad in his full battledress, his ebon armour adorned with the skeletal remains of a giant Kiavahran roc. The creature's ribcage formed a brace across his chest, its wings were spread upon his jump pack as if in stilted flight and its skull leered at Koryn like a grim, jutting death mask. Cordae cocked his head in a gesture that mimicked the creature whose spirit he claimed to share. Koryn could not recall

the time when he had last seen Cordae without the macabre totems.

‘I did,’ replied Koryn simply, and returned to his work.

Cordae did not move. After a moment, he spoke again. ‘I fear you place too much trust in Captain Daed and the Librarian, Theseon. They have all but taken us captive upon this barge. We labour under the illusion of freedom, captain, but this place is, in truth, a prison.’

‘We must place our faith in our brothers, Cordae,’ replied Koryn, his voice low and even. ‘They fight in the name of the Emperor. Their methods may seem brittle and unfamiliar – ignorant, even – but nevertheless, their motivations remain sound.’

‘Can you be sure?’ asked Cordae, and it was clear he was not.

Koryn glanced up at Cordae. ‘I am sure,’ he said, sharply. ‘I will hear no argument. We do what we must. Gideous Krall and his foul cadre of traitors must be destroyed, before the whole of the Sargassion Reach succumbs to their blight, their sickness.’

Cordae made a gesture that might have been a shrug, or a nod of acquiescence. ‘I understand that Krall has fashioned a floating cathedral from bone and rotten flesh,’ said Cordae. ‘It sits amongst a flotilla of smaller warships, formed from the lashed-together remains of bloated plague corpses and the abandoned vessels of daemons that have returned to the warp.’

‘They shall all burn,’ said Koryn, with conviction. ‘The light of the Emperor shall banish them.’

‘We are few, captain,’ said Cordae, with a note of warning. ‘Even counting the Brazen Minotaurs amongst our allies.’

‘Then we shall fight harder, and longer, and with greater conviction than our enemies,’ replied Koryn.

‘You speak with the confidence of one who foresees the future, with the certainty that we will triumph. And yet, here you sit, alone and stripped of your armour, scratching your name into a pauldron with the end of a blunted dagger instead of preparing for war. Your actions do not mirror your words.’

Koryn glowered at the Chaplain. He knew what Cordae was doing. Koryn was being tested. This was Cordae’s way of preparing him for the trials to come.

‘I am etching my name alongside those of my ancestors. It is an honourable pursuit,’ said Koryn. ‘This is *how* I am preparing for battle.’

‘Aren’t the artificers supposed to do that when you’re dead?’ asked Cordae, bluntly.

‘We’re about to mount a boarding action against the enemy’s orbital fortress

and attempt to smuggle a living bomb deep inside their leader's palace of flesh and bone,' replied Koryn. 'None of us are coming back, Cordae. The artificers won't ever lay their hands upon my armour.'

'Yet you speak of victory and the light of the Emperor,' said Cordae.

'I speak the truth. I am nothing if not pragmatic. I do not wish to die without adding my name to those of my forebears. My honour demands it. Their spirits walk with me, Cordae, just as you share your armour with the spirit of the roc whose bones you wear. I cannot lead our brothers to victory unless I know that my ancestors are by my side. Unless I know that when I die, I cannot join them in honour.'

'It is not your ancestors that worry me,' said Cordae, 'but our allies.'

'I will hear no more of this, Cordae,' said Koryn, sternly. 'You shall not shake me from the path I have chosen.'

'Then my work here is done,' replied Cordae. 'We shall die together, brother, side by side in glorious battle, as we smite the enemies of mankind.' He placed a gauntleted hand upon Koryn's naked shoulder. 'I shall leave you to your preparations,' he said, then turned and quit the chamber.

The test was over. Koryn was unsure whether or not he had passed.

He waited until the sound of the Chaplain's footsteps had died away, before making the last few strokes with the tip of his blade.

He placed the pauldron on the floor beside its twin and stood, tucking the knife into his belt.

'Calix. I wish to dress for battle!' he called, and immediately heard the serf scuttling along the passageway vacated only moments before by Cordae.

Soon he would be ready. It was, he knew, going to be a glorious death.

He glanced at the pauldron, at the words **AREMIS KORYN** roughly hewn into the black ceramite, and smiled.

TROPHIES

Cavan Scott

Brother Grissan dreamed of his death. He always knew how it would be. Chainsword in hand, the din of battle in his ears. From the moment he had been initiated into the ranks of the Death Spectres, Grissan had been convinced that when he was finally struck down, he would take his enemy with him. A glorious day. The stuff of legends.

Then he awoke, every pain-receptor on fire. A fevered groan slipped past his chapped lips, the blistered skin tight across his face. Without a functioning Mucranoid, all sons of Occludus were susceptible to extreme heat, but exposure was the least of the Space Marine's concerns. He could barely move, his body hanging limply from the tree. For a second he couldn't remember where he was, what had led him here – or why pain was lancing through his back.

Then it all came flooding back.

Grissan forced his sunburnt eyelids open, grimacing at the sudden glare. A face stared back at him, closer than expected. He recognised it immediately. Old craggy features and tattooed skin. A native of this accursed world.

The Space Marine stared into the eyes of the dead man.

His name had been Matana.

'Leave now,' Grissan ordered, his bolter's sights resting between the tattooed man's eyes.

The native just laughed, the sudden noise sending birds flapping from the jungle canopy. The maniac was going to ruin everything.

'You same as me, yes?' the tribesman asked, placing a gnarled, arthritic hand against his narrow chest. 'Same as old Matana?'

'I am nothing like you,' Grissan insisted, his finger tightening around the trigger.

Matana chuckled again, leaning heavily on his staff and look around the clearing. Grissan followed the interloper's gaze, his eyes flicking to the bodies of

the gutted dire boars.

'You set bait,' the man observed, wagging a bony finger at the Space Marine. 'You hunter, like Matana. You want trophy.' His abnormally large eyes narrowed. 'You want sanilu.'

Matana had been correct. Grissan had wanted a trophy, but not for himself. From the moment he had heard of the sanilu, Grissan was obsessed. The creatures had spread throughout the Ghoul Stars eons ago, terrorising the indigenous people. Children lay awake at night, having been told that the sanilu would take them unless they were good, but even the adults watched the skies. Hideous, chimera-like beasts, the sanilu were more than just a cautionary tale. With the body of an ape, leathery dragon-like wings and a barbed, poisonous tail they had been hunted to extinction – or so everyone thought. Grissan had heard whispers to the contrary, nothing more than rumours at first. The last sanilu in existence was said to stalk the primitive forest world of Ashon. It swept down silently from the treetops to grab its prey, spiriting them away to its nest, high in the mountains of Kapec Tarn. Grissan had pledged there and then that he would travel to Ashon and slay the alien. The eradication of an entire xenos species in the Emperor's name. The holiest of quests.

Tracking the creature to its hunting ground was simple enough, as was capturing the dire boars. He had opened the animals with his combat knife, daubing the glistening entrails over his power armour. Matana had been right – he was setting bait.

Himself.

The savage had appeared from nowhere. Grissan was almost impressed. No one ever crept up on him. It was the only reason that he had given Matana the chance to walk away.

'Many come,' Matana babbled, leaning on his staff. 'Many hunt sanilu. Many die.'

'Not I,' Grissan spat. 'The last of the sanilu will be mine. It is the Emperor's will.'

Matana's thin lips drew up into a wry smile.

'The last?' he repeated, before snorting with derision. 'You want last of sanilu?' The wizened native threw back his head and rocked with laughter. 'You not like Matana at all. You are fool.'

A bolt through the brain had finally silenced the idiot.

But it had been too late.

The sanilu had struck before Matana's body even hit the ground. Grissan had twisted, bringing his bolter to bear, before grunting in pain. The Death Spectre had removed his helm earlier in the day, wanting to rely on his own senses rather than the power armour's many instruments and auguries. A mistake. The sanilu's barbed tail had scraped across Grissan's cheek, his body immediately dropping into convulsions as the toxins had ravaged even his augmented physiology.

Holy Terra, the beast was as tenacious as it was strong. Each beat of the gargantuan wings was accompanied by an animalistic snort. Remarkable as it was, who would have thought the sanilu could fly the dead weight of a Space Marine up the side of a mountain? Grissan's muscles twitched, his limbs no longer responding, so focused instead on their destination. At least he could still move his eyes.

Shrubs covered the mountainside, but there was something odd about the narrow trees that jutted out of the crags. The branches had been stripped away, leaving nothing but stake-like trunks, each crowned with a jagged, vicious-looking point.

As they drew nearer, he could see why. The trunks were far from empty. Each was lined by the impaled carcasses of the sanilu's victims. Some were nothing more than skeletons, blackened by the sun. Others had flesh still clinging to their bones. It was a larder, high above the forests – but that wasn't the end of it.

The bodies were more than just food.

They were trophies.

The pain of the spike puncturing his back had been unbearable, but was nothing compared to the trunk pushing a path through his innards. The point bursting from his left shoulder had almost come as a relief. The animal had been lucky, the spike slipping between his armour's plating. A human would never have survived the trauma, but Grissan was a Death Spectre, the personification of death itself. His moment would come.

He had no idea how long he hung from the tree, drifting in and out of consciousness as his augmented organs fought the sanilu's poison and repaired the damage caused by the impaling. The fact that Matana's corpse had yet to discolour told him that it hadn't been long. The sanilu had obviously retrieved the hunter while Grissan was sleeping. No use in letting meals go to waste.

Good. Let it wear itself out flying its spoils back to the nest. In the meantime Grissan needed to try to keep himself awake. If his Sus-an Membrane sent him into a restorative coma, no one would be on hand to administer the chemicals needed to bring him out of hibernation. All would be lost.

Wings beat in the thin air. The monster was returning. Grissan let his head loll forward, gambling that the sanilu wouldn't expect its prey to survive the impaling. It had never encountered a Space Marine before.

Grissan's nostrils filled with the creature's pungent musk, the sound of flesh being ripped from Matana's bones telling him why the sanilu had returned. Time to feed. He had guessed right. The sanilu had made straight for the native. No ceramite armour to prise away from the old man's corpse.

No lightning claws.

Clenching his teeth, Grissan forced his left arm up, grabbing the spike covered in his own dried blood. He couldn't help but cry out as he swung his body around, his power-gauntlet's adamantium claws cracking with energy as they arched through the air. The sanilu reacted, but too slowly, the blades slicing deep into its hair-covered side.

The creature bellowed in pain, its pronged tail lashing out, but this time Grissan was ready. He let go of the trunk, grunting as gravity shifted his body an inch or two back down the spike, and grabbed the tail, holding it tight with gloved fingers. The end of the deadly appendage curled around Grissan's forearm, but this time the quills found only armour, impervious to their toxins.

Panicking, the sanilu threw itself into the air with just one beat of its wings. Grissan retracted his claws but refused to let go of the tail, even as he was yanked roughly from the spike.

'No pain,' he hissed through clenched teeth. 'I am death incarnate. I will feel no pain.'

The sanilu screeched, its wings thrashing frantically, kicking at Grissan with curved talons. The Death Spectre considered striking again, dealing the killing blow, but could see there was no need. His weight, and the injury he had already hammered home, was all that was needed. Above him, the creature was gasping for breath, blood running freely from the four wounds in its side, dousing Grissan's face.

'All shall fall beneath the Emperor's might,' he barked, spitting the creature's foul cruor from his mouth. 'From the daemons of the warp to the devils of the air.'

With a final cry, the sanilu faltered, its wings missing a beat and it tumbled,

pulled down by Grissan's sheer bulk. The stake pierced its stomach before bursting from its back in a red haze. It slid down the trunk, wings flapping desperately before slowing and falling still, the creature's breath rattling in its chest.

And then it was over, Grissan swinging from the lank tail, staring into the creature's lifeless eyes.

'Victory,' Grissan grunted, although the word tasted worse than the sanilu's blood in his mouth.

It took an age for Grissan to make his way down the mountain, scrabbling down the scree-covered slopes. His injuries meant he had to keep stopping, gasping for air in the thin atmosphere.

And all the while he could hear mocking laughter in his ears.

He could remember the glee on Matana's face as the old hunter revealed that there was another nest, maybe two hundred kilometres to the east. The sanilu Grissan sought hunted alone, but was far from being the last of its kind. There were others. Possibly an entire family group.

'Fool, fool, fool,' Matana had chanted until Grissan had pulled his trigger.

'I will have the last laugh,' the Death Spectre yelled down at the forest, letting his body slide down to rest on a ledge. 'My quest shall continue, the last of the sanilu will die at my hand.'

He just needed to recover first. The sun was blazing down and his body was so, so tired.

'It will be a glorious day,' he croaked, his head pitching forward. 'The stuff of... stuff of...'

Grissan's bloodstained chin rested on his chestplate and he slept, forever.

OTHER CHAPTERS

THE GHOST HALLS

L J Goulding

Though the Purifiers had been prepared to stand in solemn vigil for as long as necessary, the xenos arrived after only thirty-seven days.

Their sleek craft ghosted out of the void like silent hunters in the night. The strike cruiser *Argent Sceptre* hung at anchor above the glittering false horizon with its weapons trained and ready, but her serf crews did not open fire. Instead they allowed the eldar vessels to cut graceful lines across her prow and flanks, circling in an aggressive but carefully postured void-dance.

Brother-Captain Pelenas watched as the display drew on overhead. The pitted crystal of the great atmospheric dome above him scattered and distorted the starlight, but the predatory shadows of the xenos craft glided over the surface as they broke off and moved towards the nearest docking ports. They would have known that the Space Marines were waiting for them – armed and armoured, and ready for combat – and yet they had come regardless.

Pelenas had never seen an eldar in person. Not living, anyway.

The old-incense reek of the ancient halls was disturbed by the smooth equalisation of pressure from the alien void-locks, somewhere beyond the curve of the debris-strewn passageway, and the Purifiers took up position around their captain. With helms sealed in place and swords drawn, they waited in grim silence.

There was no bustle of insertion, no clamour of booted feet. The aliens moved quickly and quietly, picking their way between scarred wraithbone columns and the remains of long-dead tyranid bio-forms that still littered the craftworld.

Vanguard warriors appeared out of the gloom – their chameleon-cloaks rendered them all but invisible to the naked eye, but their guarded souls burned hot in Pelenas's psychic sight.

The eldar were outraged. Vengeful. Filled with sorrow and anguish.

It was difficult to track all of them as they spread out, securing the ruined dome. Some of the more twitchy battle-brothers started to edge into a tighter

defensive formation, but Pelenas waved them back. With his blade resting upon the deck, he stood in his scarred Terminator battleplate, ready to receive the xenos delegation.

There were five of them in all. Bedecked in long, flowing robes and crystalline hoods, they strode into the hall flanked by a dozen more guardian warriors armed with projectile rifles. Pelenas noted the runic talismans, the gemstones and intricate psi-webbing that festooned the seers' panoply; though he did not doubt that their mastery was great, they put him in mind of nothing more than primitive totem-shamans. They regarded him with the cold, blue glare of their faceless masks as they approached.

The leading seer – a particularly lithe creature carrying a great staff that struck the deck noisily with every fifth step that he took – pointed at Pelenas with a slender finger.

'Your presence here is a travesty, *human*,' he uttered in harshly accented but flawless Gothic. 'You trespass upon our domain. The lost souls of Craftworld Malan'tai – after the doom that has already been heaped upon them, how much more must they suffer at the hands of your ignoble breed?'

The delegation drew up before the Purifiers, surrounded by their guardians. Even armed for war, the eldar were as consumptive children before the hulking Space Marines.

Pelenas removed his helm, and handed it off to one of his brothers. 'I am Brother-Captain Ornhem Pelenas, of the Grey Knights Chapter Adeptus Astartes,' he said, 'and I must beg your worthy forgiveness. I have no quarrel with you or your kind, xenos, and no servant of the Imperium knows the horrors of the warp better than the battle-brothers of Titan.'

Planting his blade before him, he and the Purifiers knelt as one in supplication before the startled seer council. For a long while, the hall was utterly silent.

The captain drew a simple cloth bag from his belt, and held it out before him. It rattled with the handful of plucked eldar soul-stones that it contained – those that Pelenas had personally wrested from the hungry grasp of the warp-beasts that had overrun Malan'tai.

'As was our message to you, we traced our daemonic enemies to this place, though I fear we arrived too late to save all the imprisoned spirits of your kinsmen. Our foe is vanquished for now, but this is your holy ground, and we have indeed besmirched it with our presence. I would not sully it further by leaving it unattended and open to the depredations of those-that-wait-beyond.'

The eldar were clearly staggered, though their discipline was enough that they

managed to remain quietly aloof in spite of it. An attendant seer stepped forward and took the stones from Pelenas with a reverential nod, which the captain returned.

The leader of the delegation slid back his featureless visor, and bid the Grey Knights to rise. ‘Forgive me, Pelenas of Titan. We are... *unused* to seeing your kind, unless it be upon the field of war. The respect that you do us here is great, and will not be forgotten by the living or the dead.’ He gestured to his guardians, who parted to clear the way to the void-locks. ‘You will be accorded safe passage to your starship, and an escort from this system. As our honoured guests, if there is anything else you would have in return for this kindness, name it now.’

Pelenas drew a long, calming breath. When he spoke again, his voice was edged with bitterness.

‘There is nothing that you can offer us, xenos, except to know that we suffered greatly in preserving this place for you. The most noble of our number is fallen...’

He took his proffered helm, and gazed into its dark retinal lenses.

‘If you would praise the architect of Malan’tai’s deliverance, then remember he who gave his life most selflessly to defend it. He martyred himself so that we – so that *I* – might live to fight on against the daemon-spawn.’

The seer nodded.

‘So shall it be. This warrior shall be noted in the annals of my people.’

Pelenas replaced his helm with a snap-hiss of pressurisation, and made to leave with his battle-brothers. ‘Then always remember the name of Anval Thawn.’

The eldar’s eyes widened, almost imperceptibly, and he faltered for a moment before glancing at his fellow seers. Pelenas caught a flicker of alarm in the creature’s aura, before it was swallowed once more in a careful projection of calm indifference, and his alien features broke in a forced simulacrum of a smile.

‘So shall it be.’

The spiritseer’s haste was evident. Returned to his own craftworld and with the waystones of Malan’tai restored to the infinity circuit, he now made for the farseer enclave.

He alone had been made emissary for the council. The message that he bore was simple, but filled with grave import. They would need to know.

‘The mon-keigh have rediscovered the last Perpetual – Anval Thawn has ascended to the ranks of the Grey Knights. I await your guidance.’

BITTER SALVAGE

Nick Kyme

They stank, the greenskins, and their rancid corpses littered the main deck of the *Byzantine*. Formerly, it had been a battleship, a vast Castellan-class war cruiser that had dominated the stars. Now it was a wreck, part of a hulk and floating through space, infested with vermin.

As battlefields went, it was hardly prestigious.

Tiamed scowled as he withdrew his sword from the warlord's bolt-ravaged torso, wiping off the blood and transferring the stink of it onto the ork's crude armour.

'This is dirty work, brothers,' he remarked to Vorda and Mageln.

'Aye, the greenskin are noisome creatures,' said Vorda, a brute of a Templar, as he redressed the broken oath-chain of his power axe.

'Foul indeed,' said Mageln, though he saluted what he regarded as worthy foes.

'Not so vile as the stink of dishonour around your final deed, Tiamed,' another voice put it.

Three warriors, ramshackle in yellow and black armour, moved slowly into the light.

'*What did you say?*' Tiamed bristled with anger as he turned to face his accuser.

Servos in the newcomers' powered forms growled and whirred as they moved, but in a throaty, staccato fashion. As the speaker advanced a step, he turned a little. It made the winged lightning bolt on his left shoulder guard visible.

'Malevolents,' sneered Mageln, unable to keep out the distaste in his voice. He finished off his own kill to stand alongside Tiamed. Gore-splattered from the blow, Mageln's power maul dripped menacingly with greenskin blood.

Vorda took up position on the opposite side, power axe unsheathed.

Tiamed said nothing, but rose to his full height before scabbarding his own blade. Then he stooped and, taking a firm grip, wrenched one of the warlord's

tusks from its dead, drooling maw.

‘What dishonour?’ he snapped, his open hand, low and by his side, the signal for his brothers to stand down. ‘Speak quickly, Ballak, before I misunderstand you and interpret your words as a challenge.’

Black Templars were, by their nature, belligerent. So too were the Marines Malovelent, though the source of their fury came from a subtly different source. It didn’t provide much of an accord, this similarity. In fact, it promoted just the opposite.

‘The beast was mine,’ he snarled, garnering grunts and nods of approval from his kin, ‘and so too the honour of the kill.’

Tiamed went unhelmeted. A black cross adorned his face, painted over eyes and nose. It could not hide his anger or his incredulity.

‘And yet my blade pierced its rugous hide and ended its miserable existence, as I will gladly end yours if you persist with this insult.’

The leather cracking on the haft of Vorda’s axe was audible above the ship’s background hum as his fist clenched around it.

‘Those are my bolter wounds in its torso, Tiamed. I would not waste ammunition to merely stun the beast.’

‘That much is true,’ whispered Mageln, but not so quietly as to be unheard. ‘These scavengers waste little and covet scraps. They are dogs.’

Ballack stepped forward again.

‘Dogs are we?’ he asked, taking the Templar’s bait. ‘Would you like to see us bite?’

Relations between the Templars and the Malevolents had been less than cordial ever since they had discovered each other’s presence on board the hulk. They met with warm enough welcome but their war philosophy was at odds and now, it seemed, would come to blows.

Ballak came to stand in the midst of the greenskin charnel house created by the six Space Marines squaring off on the *Byzantine*’s main deck. He thumbed the guard back on the serrated blade he wore at his hip. Two finger widths of adamantium shone dully in the ship’s half-light.

Even obscured by the gloom of the capacious deck, swimming now in blood as well as filth, the gesture was obvious.

Tiamed nodded, understanding. He tried to keep the smile from his lips, not that they would see it in the shadows. This was about honour, upholding the virtues of the Black Templars in the face of these... *pirates* who gave the Adeptus Astartes a bad reputation; it was not about personal satisfaction or

settling the verbal slights that had issued from the Malevolents ever since they had boarded. Tiamed promised himself he would try not to enjoy this too much.

‘Very well,’ he said, stony-faced.

Vorda quickly came to Tiamed’s ear.

‘What are you doing?’ he hissed. ‘Don’t lower yourself to their base level.’

Mageln was of a different mind. ‘Kill him, brother. Then we vanquish the rest. They are barely Space Marines. We would be doing the Imperium a service by ridding it of them.’

Ignoring his fellow Sword Brethren, Tiamed unclasped his cloak and took off his weapons belt.

‘Name your challenge,’ he called to Ballack, whose own seconds had now come to his side.

‘A trophy, if I win this duel,’ uttered Ballack, fully drawing his chain-blade and setting the weapon’s teeth burring. ‘Any of my choosing on this deck.’

‘Agreed,’ answered Tiamed, and handed his red cloak to Vorda whose warning gaze through his war-helm did not dissuade the other Sword Brethren.

Ballack nodded slowly before removing his own belt. Blade versus blade, no secondaries. He turned for a moment, giving up his trappings to the waiting arms of Nathlec, who glared intently at Ballack through his vision slit.

‘None of the rounds you fired would’ve killed that thing,’ he whispered.

Ballack smiled.

‘I have a greater prize in mind.’

He turned again, and the duel began.

Tiamed went first, carving a brutal overhead that would have cleaved Ballack in two had he not thrown his body aside at the last moment.

‘To the death then, is it?’ he roared at the Templar, coming up from a crouch, his face a mask of pure rage.

‘Yours, yes!’ snapped Tiamed, and lunged.

Ballack was taken off balance, his half-parry only partially blocking the attack and snarling in pain as the Templar’s blade cut into his forearm. The stench of rapidly cauterised flesh pricked at the Malevolent’s nostrils.

A flurry of fast and heavy blows from the Templar forced Ballack into a hasty defence. The last, the hardest, put him on one knee. Tiamed kicked out and sent the Malevolent sprawling.

Ballack almost lost his chainsword and as he was rising managed to lash out with an improvised swipe that Tiamed repelled easily, then backed up to get some distance between his vengeful opponent.

‘More cowardice, Ballack?’ Tiamed growled, sensing victory but incensed at how low the Malevolents had stooped, at their patchwork armour and battered blades, at their mercenary sensibilities.

‘I did not kill an already half-dead ork and claim its head as my own, brother.’

Tiamed, coming at Ballack with a deadly cross, was quick to bite back.

‘I am not your, brother, you sc– *hrrrkk!*’

The Templar stopped short, his charge arrested by the half metre of snarling chain-blade sticking out of his chest.

In a display of consummate swordsmanship belied by his earlier missteps, Ballack had weaved around Tiamed’s anger-fuelled blow and pierced his unprotected flank. He gave a second thrust, silently enjoying the shock of the other Templars who had gone from anticipating their brother’s victory to witnessing him spitting up his own blood all over the deck.

Tiamed jerked, mustering the last of his energy to turn and regard Ballack with an imperious, yet despairing, glance.

‘I may look ragged,’ Ballack told him before the Templar died, ‘but my blade craft is anything but.’

As he tore out the chain-blade, noble Tiamed slumped first to his knees and then fell forwards. His sword, still chained to his wrist, slipped from his hand, as did the ork tusk.

Ballack eyed the other two Templars, who looked ready to kill him but stalled when they saw the pair of bolters aimed at them by the Malevolent’s battle-brothers.

‘Narlec and Sykar are both excellent marksmen,’ he said, kicking away the tusk from where it had rolled near to his boot.

‘You refuse your trophy even now,’ snapped Vorda. ‘Is his blood not enough to slake your sense of dishonour?’

‘I do not refuse it,’ said Ballack, sinking to one knee beside Tiamed’s slowly cooling body. He began to unstrap the armour. ‘I simply choose one that is of use on the battlefield and not a hollow chamber of honours. It is a pity I had to damage the breastplate, though. They are hard to find intact.’

‘*Whoresons!*’ Mageln looked about ready to brave the bolter storm when Vorda stopped him, one arm across his chest.

‘No...’ he said. ‘*No, brother!*’ he hissed sharply when Mageln didn’t take the first hint. ‘We’ve lost enough to their perfidy already. Leave them to their scavenging.’

Ballack stood, having removed Tiamed’s vambraces and greaves. He took both

pauldrons too, handing off the pieces of armour to Narlec, whilst Sykar kept the other Templars in his sights.

‘Know this,’ said Vorda. ‘When we meet again – and we will – there will be no duel, no quarter given.’

‘If I were you, Vorda,’ said Ballack, looking up from the half-stripped corpse, ‘I would have shown no such restraint.’

‘It is honour, for Tiamed, for his sacrifice that I do this. Restraint has no part in it.’

Ballack shrugged. ‘Then I suspect you will die for it. The body will be waiting for you upon your return. Its intact trappings, including this magnificent sword,’ he held the blade up, one-handed, to the light, ‘will not.’

The Templars went back the way they had come, back to their ship and the Apothecary that waited on board.

Alone, Sykar lowered his sights and Narlec spoke up.

‘You planned this, didn’t you?’

‘I said we do not waste our ammunition.’ He examined a vambrace, in pristine condition against his own battered armour. ‘I would say it was well spent, the rewards commensurate with the price paid.’

‘Aye,’ said Narlec, admiring the armour pieces. ‘It is a fine reaping.’

Ballack rose to his feet and smiled ruefully. Vorda did not lie. The Templars would want recompense in blood. Only their sense of honour had kept them acting on their instincts thus far.

‘No,’ said Ballack, his smile turning into a scowl. ‘It is bitter salvage, brother, and worth every drop of their ire.’

CAORE

Josh Reynolds

The ground trembled beneath the worn treads of the Munitorum half-tracks. The grey-hulled, trough-shaped vehicles had been scoured of all Imperial insignia, and now their armour plates dripped with exotic unguents and sinister sigils that scarred the eye of any who looked at them for too long. Each of the half-tracks carried ammunition and power cells for the hive city's defence batteries.

Badly grafted vox-speakers blared out abominable hymns to unspeakable gods as the half-tracks navigated the devastated streets, and pintle-mounted stubbers swung to and fro as the gunners watched warily for attack as overcharged engines vomited oily black clouds into the already smoky air of the fallen hive city.

Over the roar of the debased vehicles, the thunder of siege-guns could be heard. The hive shuddered to its very foundations with every impact upon its outer defences. The Imperium did not intend to let Khost Hive remain in the hands of its renegade aristocracy. One way or another, the hive city would fall. Whether to the forces without, or to those within, it would fall. The only question was one of time.

At least, that was the only question that Manse Jah-Hlley, Tutor of the Mentors Chapter, considered worthy of consideration, in the three-point-eight seconds prior to the destruction of the second of the three half-tracks. The Space Marine noted the time as it registered on his helmet's built-in chronometer and recorded it for future review, even as he swept aside the debris that had concealed him. His normally ivory and emerald hued power armour was covered in a coat of ash and dirt, in order to blend in with his surroundings. It would require many months to purify the armour after this campaign was concluded, but, on the whole Jah-Hlley considered the tedium of purification rituals preferable to dying. The Codex tactica relating to the preservation of all resources necessary to prosecute further stratagems applied as much to battle-brothers as bolter ammunition.

Jah-Hlley, a grenade in either hand, rose up in front of the second half-track before the driver of the vehicle had even registered his presence. A frag grenade bounced into the open compartment, even as a krak grenade rolled between the vehicle's treads. The two explosions were nearly simultaneous. Jah-Hlley pivoted, raising his bolter. He fired methodically, targeting the gunners on the back of the lead vehicle. The latter exploded a moment later, pelting Jah-Hlley with flaming debris. He clucked disparagingly over the vox-channel.

'Oh what now?' someone complained, their exasperation obvious despite the crackle of static that marred the channel. *Harper*, Jah-Hlley thought, *of course*.

'You blew up the lead track, Harper. You were supposed to take out the *last* one,' Jah-Hlley said as he stepped around the burning hulk of the second vehicle.

The gunners on the remaining half-track had realised their predicament. They opened up with more enthusiasm than accuracy, swinging the stubbers around to blaze away at the Space Marine. Bullets caromed off of his power-armour, and he idly recorded the data. If his armour was penetrated, it was best to record at what velocity and range the penetration occurred, in order to aid the Chapter's armourers in seeing that it didn't happen again.

'First, last, what's the difference? The only good enemy is a dead enemy,' Harper growled.

Jah-Hlley made a note to suggest that Harper's caff-ration be docked. The man was anxious and irritable, both of which could get him, or one of his companions, killed. Neither was acceptable. The dead couldn't learn.

'Yes, but it wasn't the plan,' another voice chimed in. 'Now you've dumped one of the Emperor's Own right in it, you idiot!' That was Arta, Harper's superior in this resistance cell. There were a dozen such cells active in Khost at the moment, thanks to the brutal pogroms initiated by the renegades. The battle-brothers of his own cadre were scattered about the embattled hive, advising and assisting other such groups.

That was the Mentors' method of operation. Though Space Marines were the greatest warriors of the Imperium, they were finite and could not be everywhere at once. Other Chapters threw themselves into war on behalf of the citizens of the Imperium, but the Mentors served by ensuring that the citizens could fight their own battles. Chapter Master Nisk Ran-Thawll had a saying – 'One war, one cadre'.

Arta and her rag-tag group were not as efficient as Mentors, but they fought hard nonetheless, adapting to his suggested stratagems with an enthusiasm he found infectious. They were brave, but fragile. Yet that fragility lent them

cunning. Jah-Hlley found them fascinating and endlessly inventive – indeed, they had taught him much. Each war was its own classroom, with its own unique lessons. Even so, he found it hard not to simply take command of the group, for their own protection. But they were not children to be coddled. While he was assigned to them, they were brothers-in-arms. More than that – they were cadre, *his* cadre, to teach and be taught by.

‘He’s fine! Look at him,’ Harper protested. ‘He’s like a small tank!’

Granted, some of them are harder to think of that way than others, Jah-Hlley noted. ‘Commendations and condemnations can wait, I feel. Now is an opportune moment to apply adaptive stratagems,’ he interjected. ‘I suggest flanking manoeuvre zeta-six.’

‘Right, you heard him,’ Arta barked over the frequency. ‘Up and at ’em, boys and girls!’ Men and women rose up out of the ruins to either side of the road and began firing at the renegades. They were displaying a remarkable restraint, Jah-Hlley noted, with some pride. They were learning. The pride was replaced with chagrin as half a dozen of the resistance fighters charged towards the remaining vehicle, whooping and shouting. Harper was in the lead.

The renegades were terrible shots, but quite effective at close range. They leapt from the half-track and went to meet their attackers with ululations of their own. They were outnumbered, but that did not deter them. Jah-Hlley grunted in annoyance and waded into the struggle in order to prevent Harper’s idiocy from getting any of the others killed. He doled out quick, efficient trip-hammer blows with his fists, palms and fingers, popping nerve clusters and rupturing organs. Unaltered humans had over one hundred vulnerable points, and a Mentor had memorised where each was before they graduated from aspirant to brother, for those occasions when the use of a chainsword or combat knife was inadvisable.

As he drove his palm through the breastbone of a knife-wielding renegade, Jah-Hlley saw Harper fall onto his rear. A renegade raised a bayonet-tipped lasgun over Harper for a downwards thrust. He reached the two even as the bayonet descended, and he grabbed the stock of the weapon. He yanked it from its owner’s hands and hurled it aside.

‘I said manoeuvre zeta-six, not gamma-eight, Harper,’ Jah-Hlley said as he grabbed the back of the renegade’s neck and stabbed his stiffened fingers through the rear of the man’s skull with a nasty sound. ‘If you die, you will never learn.’ Jah-Hlley jerked his hand free and the man flopped to the ground, limbs jerking in his death-throes.

Harper goggled up at the Space Marine.

‘You – you saved me,’ he said.

Jah-Hlley held out his hand. ‘You are cadre. And next time, you will save yourself.’

FINAL DUTY

David Guymer

Caleb dreamed, and his dreams were dark.

The night was lit by explosions, by the glare of both sides' flares. Shells screamed from the sky. Artillery belched smoke and noise. Muck and shrapnel pattered across the wire-torn hell of no-man's-land. Caleb tried to move, but his arms and legs were snared in razorwire. Grime masked the colour of his fatigues and, though he strained to make out the insignia on his shoulder, it blurred even as he stared at it. A thumping head announced a concussion and he groaned, calling out to the men that ran by. They were unhurried, kitted out in ghostly grey fatigues, and floated from corpse to corpse like harvesters of the dead men's souls. It would be a rich harvest indeed when the trench line buckled. Perhaps it already had.

This was a dream, and Caleb knew that he dreamed.

The figures paid him no mind and for that he was grateful. There was something fearful about these men, the way they walked through the hail of grit with such detachment. The largest amongst them saw him stir, then paused in his ministrations and came for him. In pearl-white armour, he strode through the fog of the dream. Caleb tried to slither free of the wire tangle, but couldn't move his legs. His hands ran through the muck in search of his lasgun, but it wasn't there. Of course, he thought, heart pounding.

This was a dream, and Caleb's dreams were always dark.

Too soon, the colossus of a man was standing over him, examining Caleb's body with a ghoulish interest. He leant in, fingers as hard as bone unpeeling the grime that caked Caleb's collar to exhume his dog tags.

'Lieutenant Caleb, are you with me?'

The voice had a calm authority that Caleb yearned to surrender to. Perhaps it was just a hangover from the dream, but he could not lie still, not yet.

'I can't feel my legs,' Caleb whispered, throat dry and speech painful.

'Never mind them,' the voice soothed.

Caleb blinked, eyes misty. He was lying down, and it sounded like it was raining. The air was dry though, the signature warmth of electrical heaters, and he could hear voices all around. The odour of powerful counterseptics overpowered even the stench of his fatigues.

‘My men,’ said Caleb, recovering a measure of urgency along with the fragments of his memory. He’d been leading a company across no-man’s-land, a last desperate push for the enemy trench across a minefield that hadn’t been on the briefing charts. ‘Holy Terra, my legs.’

‘Never mind them,’ the voice repeated. ‘Drink something.’

A plastek cup appeared at his lips, a force he could not resist tilting back his head until he was helpless but to drink. It smelled like recyc, but it tasted like springwater. He drank a little more before the cup was pulled away and strong, hard hands shaped him into a sitting position. Caleb swallowed a surge of giddiness and blinked to clear the fog that lingered around his eyes.

He was on a bed in what looked like an emergency shelter. Lumen strips dangled and swayed from the corrugated roofing. The prefab rockrete walls were pasted with hygiene edicts and lined with locked cabinets that rattled with distant explosions. Orderlies in blue-grey scrubs walked between the trolley-beds. Upon them lay men in the universal fatigues of blood and grime. They moaned, cried out, wept, and whispered to the figments of a narthecium sleep. Caleb recognized none of them, but theirs were the cries of the dying from his dream. And the patter of muck and shrapnel over no-man’s-land, the sound that he had just mistaken for rain, hardened into the downpour of small arms rounds upon an iron roof. Every thirty seconds or so, something more substantive detonated nearby, causing everything in the shelter to shake, the wheels of Caleb’s trolley-bed skitting from side to side.

The giant gripped the side rail of his bed, holding it effortlessly steady. For the first time, Caleb got a proper look. At once, his heart swelled as if to choke him and he tried to rise, but couldn’t. It wasn’t just his legs failing him this time. It was his arms, his neck, even his chest felt feeble. He couldn’t breathe. He should be standing to attention, or prostrate upon the ground, not lying upon his bed to be tended by one of the godly Adeptus Astartes.

‘Peace, lieutenant,’ said the Space Marine, his pale helm projecting a soothing timbre. ‘In death is the Emperor’s love equally shared.’

‘Do you... Do you mean... Am I...?’

‘You are in pain, brother. Please, drink some more.’ The Space Marine inserted the cup between Caleb’s lips. Helpless as an infant in a god-warrior’s arms,

Caleb complied and drank. When he had accepted what the Space Marine deemed sufficient, the warrior again stood back.

Across a widening gulf of confusion, Caleb tried to pin down anything familiar from the Space Marine's wargear. His power armour was as smooth as ivory and bedecked with purity seals and devotional scrolls. The shoulder pad bore a heraldry that Caleb did not recognise. It was a red cross, but with each arm split down the middle, more like four arrowheads targeting the centre.

'Where am I?' Caleb managed. 'There were Space Marines battling in my sector, but they were pulled out. I've not seen your Chapter before. I don't-' He clutched his temple as a stabbing pain shot through it. He felt sick. Almost immediately afterwards, his arm went slack and his head flopped back to the hard pillow. His thoughts were muddy. 'I... I don't recall.'

'I am Raphel, of the Hospitallers. It is my sworn honour to tend the Emperor's fallen.'

Caleb tried to mumble something, but couldn't. His lips were numb and it was spreading. Deep in his mind there was a fear that demanded to be heard but it found no outlet in him. The sounds from outside had intensified. It sounded like hand-to-hand fighting, but Caleb was aware of it in the dim way of a drowsy child from beneath his bedclothes.

Calmly, the orderlies moved between the wounded. One by one, they powered down life support generators and withdrew IV lines. A low hum that Caleb hadn't even registered faded back until all that was left was the muted rumble of war. The murmurs of the dying fell quiet. There were no more tears.

'Defend the Emperor's pilgrims to the last,' intoned the Hospitaller as the orderlies set aside the trappings of the medicae for the tools of war. One man was handing out lasguns and another power packs. The men slammed the cells into their weapons, dialled the charge to maximum and flicked from full-auto to single-shot as they fanned out through the shelter. Each man took a bed.

Caleb's shout forced a dribble of air between his slack lips. The orderlies took aim at the wounded men and fired, a burning head-shot between the eyes. Caleb gave a moan, experiencing a perversely anaesthetic dread as the Hospitaller drifted from his bedside, drew a bolt pistol, and deposited a plastek cup upon the tray table by his headrest. The remaining liquid had charred the clear sides a smoky grey.

'Dream the Emperor's dream, brother. No man of the Imperium need fall by the heretic's hand. Not where there is a Hospitaller to honour his final duty.'

THE JUDGES, IN THEIR HUNGER

David Annandale

He had thought surrender the better choice. He had hoped to avoid wrath and perhaps, just perhaps, inspire mercy. If not for his people, then at least for himself.

He watched as another of his ministers was brought before the horned monster. The judge in power armour grabbed the man by the throat and lifted him from the ground. ‘Do you have value? You do not have perfection, but can you conceive of that state?’

The minister’s feet danced for purchase in the air. ‘No, lord,’ he gasped. ‘Next to you, what could—’

The judge, who was called Mindarus, interrupted by bringing up his other hand and punching through the man’s skull. ‘Disappointing,’ he said. ‘His underlings are obviously no better, if they have left him in such ignorance. Kill them all.’

At the back of the Hall of Justice, one of the other monsters nodded and left on his mission of extermination.

Lord Nathaniel Bellasun, Imperial Commander of Sendennis, was not a warrior. He would admit to being a coward, but he preferred to think of himself as a realist. He knew his nature, and that of his world, and what both their capacities were. Sendennis delivered its requisite tithes to the Imperial Guard, but its troops were not prized on the field of battle. They were soft from the primary industry of Sendennis: luxury. For the nobles and rogue traders with means and appetites, Sendennis accepted the one and provided for the other. It had done so for centuries. Excess was its indigenous art form. Its isolation in the Eastern Fringe, at the limits of the Imperium’s influence, gave Sendennis considerable license.

But now the monsters had come, and they confronted Bellasun, who fancied himself an epicure of some knowledge, with the perfection of excess. They called themselves the Flawless Host. Their armour was the black of night, the

violet of deep luxury, and, most disturbing of all, a pale pink that recalled both the infants of the privileged and the exposed muscle of the mutilated. They had demanded the capitulation of Sendennis. Bellasun had faith in the Emperor, but felt that His protection was too remote. He had opened all doors to the monsters, and now flawless horror was ravaging Sendennis.

Mindarus gestured, and Bellasun walked towards him. His mind raced. To survive, he must offer something sublime. He let his imagination run riot with atrocities. It was with even a bit of pride that he began to speak before he had even reached the judge of his fate. 'My lord,' he began, and bowed low. 'If I may, I can propose the most exquisite of martyrdoms.'

The rear of the hall exploded. The doors flew into splinters, and a large chunk of the wall disintegrated. The Chaos Space Marine who had left a moment before was sent arcing through the air, his limbs severed, his head dangling from his torso. A squad of giants charged in, so close on the heels of the explosion it was as if their mere presence had shattered the wall. They were clad in ancient grey power armour, studded and already splashed with the blood of their foes. Their pauldrons were emblazoned with a coiled shark. They moved down the central aisle of the hall, heading directly for Mindarus.

Bellasun felt the world give way beneath him. He had been on the verge, he thought, of coming to an understanding with the invaders. They embodied the principles of Sendennis taken to the final degree, so surely there was room for an understanding. But now terrifying myths had arrived. Bellasun did not know the name of these warriors. He knew of them only through the tales of their actions, tales that the people of Sendennis told each other to exorcise the fear that these unforgiving beings might be real. They were predators in the night of the void. They were the coldness of the universe that Bellasun's world existed to deny. And now the feral truth had arrived.

The Flawless Host, scattered around the hall, opened fire. The thousands of prisoners panicked. They stampeded, and took many of the shells intended for the loyalist Space Marines. Soft mortals exploded. Blood was rain and spray and mist, and it filled the air. The loyalists answered the traitors in kind. They aimed higher. Civilians who stayed low were unharmed. But others, beyond reason, tried to escape the crush by climbing over the marble benches. Some of them fell back, their bodies shredded, coating their fellow prisoners with vitae.

The loyalists' fire was limited, intended to do no more than hamper and enrage. It worked. As the squad closed with the traitor captain, the rest of the Flawless Host rushed forward.

Bellasun dropped to the ground. He scabbled to the nearest pew and tried to tuck himself underneath. He had grown too wide, and so curled against the stone, whimpering as the two forces came together around him.

He had believed himself a connoisseur of sensation. He had been a fool. Before him now was sensation in absolute form. The Flawless Host fought with perverse grace. They revelled in each telling blow. The loyalists killed with brutal frenzy. They smashed their foes to the ground with power fists and gutted them with chainswords. There was no art to their war, only a carnivore's savaging of prey. There was very little left of each traitor that fell. The floor of the hall was awash with death.

The monsters of excess tore each other apart. The hunger for perfection wrestled with the hunger for the kill. The greater rage of the grey predators triumphed. They reduced the traitors to ruined armour and shards of bone. When the last of the chain-blade growls faded, the air was humid with slaughter.

The terrified citizens quieted, awaiting the new determination of their fate.

Bellasun made himself stand. He straightened his stained robes of office as best he could. The Space Marine captain turned to look at him. He was not wearing his helmet. His lined, blood-splashed face was the pale grey of old death. His eyes were a uniform, glistening, inhuman black.

Bellasun looked away and bowed. 'Welcome, lord...?'

There was no answer.

Bellasun tried to recover. 'As Imperial Commander, permit me to welcome you to Sendennis, and to thank you for saving—'

'You were bowing.' When he spoke, the giant revealed rows of jagged, triangular teeth.

Fear choked any response in Bellasun's throat.

'You were abasing yourself before the traitor,' the Space Marine said.

Bellasun sank to his knees. Despite his terror, he gazed up into that terrible face.

The pitiless face of the true judge of Sendennis.

MISSION: ANNIHILATE

Gav Thorpe

‘And you didn’t think it was worth checking the signal before starting the countdown, brother-captain?’ Haryk Thunderfang’s bass rumble was tinged with disappointment rather than anger. The Space Wolf looked around the chamber, the glow from his eye lenses reflecting off cobalt-like stone, glittering along silvery circuitry inlays that covered every surface.

‘The mission is more important than our survival, Haryk,’ replied Artemis, brother-captain of the Deathwatch, leader of the kill-team. ‘The necron tomb complex’s destruction is our only concern.’

‘I find it more problematic that we were capable of teleporting in with the cyclotronic detonator, but are now incapable of getting out. How could we be blocked from teleporting one way?’ The question came from Lavestus, seconded to the Deathwatch from the White Consuls.

‘I don’t think we were a threat until we teleported in,’ said Sekor. The youngest, he was often left behind to pilot the Thunderhawk gunship, but on this occasion they had teleported directly from their ship, *Fatal Redress*.

‘Another explanation is that this part of the tomb complex is shielded from teleporting, which is why we landed half a kilometre from our target coordinates. We head back to the landing point.’ Artemis strode back towards the trapezoid doorway through which they had entered, the door turned to steaming slag by a melta bomb a few minutes earlier.

‘Let’s get going then,’ said Haryk, hefting his plasma reaper.

Ahead of the Space Wolf, Artemis took a step into the passageway and then stopped. A scratching sound echoed down the triangular corridor. Something glittered in the distance just as a noise like a rusty blade being pulled down a metal plate assaulted the ears of the Space Marines.

‘Scarabs!’ Artemis had only time to bark the warning before a tide of small, multi-limbed metal beetles, each the size of his hand, poured towards him, scuttling along floor and walls with equal ease.

Opening fire with metal storm rounds, the kill-team blew away the first swathe of necron constructs, but more followed, their metallic mandibles clicking open and closed, compound-lensed eyes glowing green with alien energy. They advanced into the swarm, weapons spitting destruction.

‘We’re going to run out of time,’ said Sekor. The chrono-display had counted down below three minutes.

‘Attack! Cut through them!’ Artemis combined command with action, drawing his power sword to slash through a handful of constructs. He stepped into the gap he had cleaved, firing his bolt pistol to destroy more scarabs.

Haryk joined the brother-captain and opened fire with the plasma reaper. A storm of blasts streamed along the passageway, each tiny star miniscule compared to the bolt of a normal plasma gun, but still enough to punch through the armoured carapace of a scarab with ease. The whine of energy cells recharging replaced the skittering of metal claws.

‘Quickly, they will return soon enough,’ said Artemis, breaking into a run along the empty corridor.

The walls started to shine, a sickly yellow glow streaming along what Artemis had thought to be veins in the rock. By this dim light he could see mechanoid skeletons entombed within the material itself, rictus-faced skulls grinning at him from the depths.

‘We were wrong,’ said Sekor. ‘This pyramid complex isn’t guarding a subterranean tomb. It is the tomb!’

‘Even better that it will soon be nothing more than a cloud of ash and particles, Emperor be praised,’ replied Lavestus.

They burst into the octagonal hall where they had first teleported into the tomb. It was nearly a hundred metres across and fifty high. One wall was dissolving. The blue stone slewed away to reveal shaft after shaft filled with scarabs. Awakening artificial eyes bathed the black armour of the Deathwatch warriors with a jade glow.

Artemis tried to lock on to the teleport signal again, but his attempt was met by a dull growl from the teleport homer and a smear of nonsense across the display affixed to his right wrist. He took a moment to gauge what was happening as the others opened fire on the swarm of constructs pouring out of the wall towards them. Past the flicker of plasma charges and metal storm bolts, Artemis noticed something was amiss. The scarabs were not trying to attach themselves to the Deathwatch members. From past records, he knew that scarabs often clung to their victims and detonated themselves, destroying both. Why were they not

doing the same?

‘Does this seem at all familiar?’ said Haryk, blasting apart half a dozen scarabs with a burst of plasma. ‘I mean, a countdown that is going to destroy us all, fighting against an alien terror waking up around us?’

‘Shut up, Haryk,’ said Artemis, trying to concentrate.

He noticed that many of the constructs were not attacking, but were slipping past the Space Marines to disappear down one of the other corridors. A few were heading towards the cyclotronic device.

‘Keep them away from the detonator, I have a theory,’ Artemis told his companions, setting off after the errant scarabs. The small constructs ignored him as he pounded past, crushing them underfoot.

Less than a hundred metres long, the passage opened up into another tomb chamber. The scarabs hurled themselves at a wall, blowing themselves up to shatter the azure blocks. Amongst them was something a lot larger, several times the mass of Artemis. It floated just above the ground, six bulky legs curled up beneath it, two more limbs extended towards the far wall where green energy beams sliced through the stone-like substance.

Looking past, Artemis saw something within the structure of the tomb, taller and wider than the necron warriors they had passed earlier. Through the diminishing layers of protective cobalt, his gaze met a trio of glowing eyes. He felt a strange moment of connection to the ancient buried thing; they despised each other in equal measure.

Checking his teleport homer, Artemis realised that the jamming signal was emanating from the spider-like construct, which was continuing to ignore him in its efforts to cut free the necron commander. He ejected his bolt pistol’s magazine and slammed in kraken penetrator rounds. Lining up his shots, he fired six times, every bolt punching into the mechanical arachnid between head and body. Sparks flew as it fell to the ground, smaller eruptions jerking its body from within.

‘The signal!’ crowed Sekor. ‘It’s back.’

‘*Fatal Redress*, evac teleport, now!’ barked Artemis.

With shards of stone crashing to the floor around it, the necron lord erupted from its sarcophagus. Artemis fired his pistol. The bolt clanged from the forehead of the necron commander, leaving a bright scar in the living metal.

‘Stay dead this time,’ he growled. A moment later, a soul-wrenching sickness churned in his stomach and the world disappeared.

As Artemis was deposited on the strike vessel above Norantis XIX, the tomb

complex was engulfed by a sphere of plasma and nuclear fire.

OBSIDIAN

Graham McNeill

Sunset fell over the peaks, drawing its light back over the mountains as the Thunderhawks dropped onto the platforms hidden by cunningly wrought spurs of rock. They had come down fast and hard from orbit, but warily, like scavenger beasts approaching feast-prey that should be dead, but might yet have life within it.

Captain Daegan straightened his cloak as vortices of turbulent air threatened to tear it from the midnight curves of his battleplate. Behind him, two squads of Sable Swords formed up as he strode down the assault ramp to the landing platform. He kept his helmet hooked at his belt, one hand resting on its freshly-forged smoothness, the other on the textured grip of the bolter he had yet to fire in anger.

'No one here to greet us,' said Kaas, the youthful Apothecary with a disappointed grunt.

"Would you welcome those who are to replace you?" asked Carden, Daegan's equerry and personal champion.

'Enough,' said Daegan. This is a solemn business we are on. Do not sully it.'

Both warriors nodded, understanding they had overstepped their bounds.

Daegan stepped from the shadow of the Thunderhawk's fog of exhaust fumes and atmospheric venting. The platform was deserted, as he had suspected it would be, but he knew that those who called this place home were watching them even now.

Before him, a towering portal of timber and bronze stood unbarred, like the gate of an abandoned fortress that has long since been sacked. This was no war-way, but a ceremonial entrance, a route within the mountain that reached nowhere of strategic value. Its appearance was decorative only, a means of inspiring awe in the easily impressed.

Daegan set off towards the portal, Kaas and Carden neatly falling into position at his sides, and the squads of black-armoured warriors marching in perfect

lockstep behind him. Carden bore a shield of black in one hand, emblazoned with twin crossed swords in ivory, while his other rested on ; the pommel of a dark sabre belted at his waist. Kaas bore a dipped banner with the same heraldic device, a badge of honour that was yet new and felt ancient at the same time.

They were not the first to bear this device, but they would do it honour.

They are here,' said Leuthar.

'I know,' replied the vox-amped tones of Brother Thade. 'I could have killed them a dozen times as they dropped from orbit.'

'They are brash and untested,' said Leuthar. 'Young, as you once were.'

A bark of augmented laughter was Thade's reply. 'I was never young.'

'There are none of us young any more,' sighed Leuthar, settling his sword at his hip and hoping he would not have to draw it.

'No,' agreed Leuthar. 'Death ages us all.'

The exterior of the mountain reeked of abandonment, and the interior no less so. Beyond the portal, a chamber with its vaulted roof lost in shadows echoed to the sound of their footfalls, where it ought to ring with the clamour of warriors preparing to sally forth on war-making. Dust hung heavy on the hooded statues and only the flickering glow of trimmed lumen- flames illuminated the once grand vestibule.

A floating skull encased in electrum hovered in the centre of the chamber, its eyes unblinking blue orbs. An oil-burning lantern hung from the skull's jaws, and it flitted away with a hum of a miniature repulsor field as they approached. Daegan and his warriors set off after the skull as it floated just ahead of them, leading them ever onwards, through cavernous hallways and empty processional.

The bobbing skull plunged deeper and farther into the mountain. Shadows retreated from its lantern, and the sightless eyes of the statues followed them as they descended grand stairways and triumphal avenues that no longer resounded to the battle chants of departing warriors and returning heroes.

A thousand warriors once lived and trained here, and the void of their presence clung to the interior of the mountain like an unwelcome blight. Daegan felt the aching sense of loss that bled from every stone of the mountain.

'Death shrouds this place,' said Kaas, echoing Daegan's thoughts. 'We should not plant our flag in so ill-favoured a place.'

'Much honour was won by the warriors who dwelled here,' pointed out

Daegan.

Kaas shook his head. 'New beginnings should not start with death, no matter how nobly won it was.'

Daegan wanted to disagree, but his orders were without ambiguity.

At length, the skull brought Daegan to a grand assembly hall, its gleaming walls painted with the colours of a dozen stained glass windows illuminated by an ingenious system of reflector wells that brought light into the heart of the mountain.

Thirty warriors armoured in silver stood ranked on a stepped rostrum at the far end of the chamber, bathed in the ruddy embers of the dying sun. A Dreadnought towered over them, a proud Chapter banner fluttering in an unseen wind that filled the chamber like a sigh of regret.

'I am Brother Thade,' said the Dreadnought. 'Master of the Astral Knights and lord of Obsidian.'

'Brother Captain Daegan of the Sable Swords, First Company.'

'You come to claim stewardship of our fortress-monastery and all its chattels?'

'I do,' said Daegan. 'As decreed by the Emperor and the High Lords of Terra.'

The Dreadnought stepped down from the rostrum and said, 'An ignoble end to a litany of honour few can equal. This mountain has been home to the warriors of the Astral Knights for a hundred lifetimes and it has seen the Imperium's greatest heroes march to war through its gates. Tell me why I should yield such a place to you.'

'Your numbers are too few to bear the burden of rebuilding your Chapter,' said Daegan, marching to stand before the Dreadnought. 'Your Chapter Master is dead. As are all your knights.'

'You tell me what I already know, whelp,' snapped Thade, and Daegan felt his warriors tense. This had always been the most likely outcome, that the decimated Chapter's survivors would not accept their fate.

'Our brothers gave their lives so that billions would be spared the horror of the World Engine, and this is our reward?' roared the Dreadnought. 'To be stricken from the records and our holdings given to warriors with no history, whose blades are yet unblooded?'

Daegan shook his head. The Sable Swords may yet be young and untested, but we are not without honour and not without reverence for those who have gone before us.'

'Just words,' said Thade, looming over Daegan, his fists thrumming with power. 'What deeds do you offer to match them?'

The Dreadnought could crush him in the blink of an eye, but Daegan met its steely gaze and said, 'I offer you the chance to continue the proud tradition of your order. Take ship from here and ply the stars as the Astral Knights once did, before they set down roots in stone and iron. Fight on in the Emperor's name until you can fight no more.'

The Sable Swords stepped aside, leaving a path to the chamber's exit.

'And when that day comes,' said Daegan, 'know that in death your duty has ended.'

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Annandale wrote the Space Marine Battles novel *The Death of Antagonis* and the novella *Yarrick: Chains of Golgotha*. He is currently working on more tales of Commissar Yarrick.

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