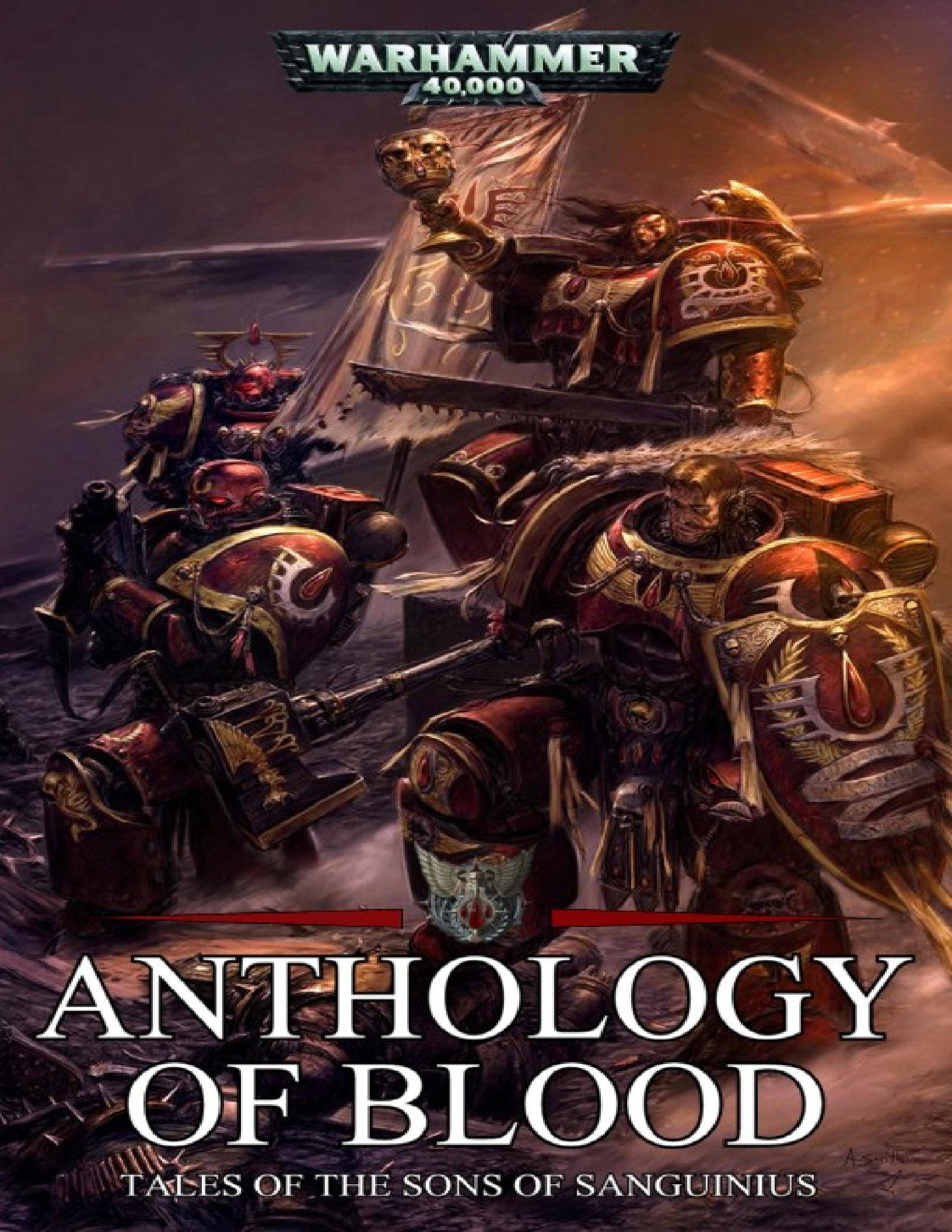
WARHAMMER
40,000
ANTHOLOGY
OF BLOOD
TALES OF THE SONS OF SANGUINIUS

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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 arc 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 arc 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 cruelest 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.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

DANTE: LORD OF THE HOST

By

James Swallow

Thunder blared inside the great crystal globe as a dozen teleport flares blossomed into being high up among its vaulted arches, and from each fell a figure clad in golden armour, fire blazing from their backs.

They crashed through floating clusters of snarled, ichor-smeared chains that drifted like flotsam, up in the null-gee ranges above the silver disc that was the orb's only solid ground. With bolters and plasma guns they annihilated the freakish guardian beasts the sorcerer kept as his defenders. Winged fiends that resembled monstrous fusions of deep-sea life and avians came at them, vomiting flames and belching toxic smoke. In the open air of the great glassy sphere, the final assault began.

The crystal globe – ornate and insanely complex down to the nanometre – was the work of a hundred thousand psychotic watchmakers, crazed architects and blasphemous priests. Scy-scans of the object came back confused; it appeared to have no motive drives, no life-support mechanisms, nothing anywhere near the structure of a conventional starship or space platform. It was a perfect sphere eight thousand metres in diameter, made out of stained glassaic, beaten silver and brass. It had no right to exist, and yet it had emerged from the warp and taken up a geosynchronous orbit over the colony world of Skylos, and some foul magick conjured within had cast a shroud over the planet, rendering it impossible to land there.

It was to see this abhorrent wonder and to end it that Lord Commander Dante of the Blood Angels had come. Dante's flagship caught the edges of the last distress call sent by his battle brothers trapped below and he could not pass them by.

The revenant ships that defended the orb were being torn apart by cannonades all around as Dante dived toward the silver deck on wings of white flame. He saw death-grey ships marred with unholy texts and the sign of the Eightfold Star breaking apart from within, consumed in nuclear fires. Behind the unchanging visage of his helmet, a death mask of the face of primarch Sanguinius, Dante smiled. It was the way of the Archenemy to divide and conquer, to isolate and attack when they thought the odds to be in their favour; this day, the Blood Angels would remind the servants of the Ruinous Powers that their belief was gravely mistaken.

He landed with a crashing impact on the far side of the silver disc and broke into a run. More of the sorcerer's guard-things came skidding across the slippery surface toward him; they resembled ursine animals, but mutated with growths of antlers and talons that emerged from their thick limbs. Some of them carried swords that had lambent flames instead of

blades, others had barbed whips that moved with an animate serpentine life of their own.

Dante's infernus pistol came up to meet their approach and he released the punishing energies within it. A collimated rod of blazing force opened the closest of the beasts in a wet blast of entrails and flesh-matter. Successive discharges turned the guardians into slurry, or, in the case of those not fortunate enough to perish immediately, into shrieking torches that stumbled blindly about as their fur combusted.

The Lord Commander did not pause until he was through the ring of defenders, until he had unsheathed his great power weapon and whet it on the skull of a bovine-like behemoth that lowed and spat as he raced toward the master of this madness. Dante's signature blade, the mighty Axe Mortalis, smoked in the cold air as the blood of dead horrors boiled off the energised cutting edge.

He beheld the sorcerer.

Perhaps once a man, now clotted meat and bones shrouded in ribbons and robes, pieced of forms that might once upon a time have been a head or a torso, visible through a floating haze of arcane symbols. It started to speak, but Dante shot at it.

'I care not for your name or your declarations,' said the Chapter Master, even as the infernus pistol's death-blast was absorbed and reflected harmlessly away. 'Only that you die here. Go to your foul gods knowing that, traitor weakling.'

'Dante,' it sang, revealing two still-human arms from within its robes. One ended in a gauntleted hand that glowed brightly, an eldritch gem upon it shimmering with the baleful light of raw Chaos. 'Proud angel. It is *you* who dies today. Your life has led to this moment, warrior-king.'

The sorcerer had no eyes, only a band of flesh scored by cult-marks of Tzeench and the Octed, yet he saw through other means, scowling at the figure in gold. 'None can escape time, not you, not your primarch nor your corpse-god Emperor.' He pointed toward the planet below. 'Skylos lies within a shroud of chronomagicks, and each tick of the clock is endless days to them. They will live a lifetime down there and die alone and desperate. You will not survive to see their ashen bones.'

'Do your worst,' Dante snarled and attacked with his fury, his axe rising.

The chronomancer formed a kind of shield by slowing the passage of atomic time in a thin layer before his body, but Dante's axe had been cut in technoforges lost past the Age of the Heresy, and it defied this barrier. The blade gouged the sorcerer's chest with a glancing swipe and a flood of black blood jetted out. The creature screamed and thrust out the gauntlet.

'Time…' it howled, '… is against you!'

A web of weaponised seconds, minutes and hours turned into daggers and swords that rained down on Dante. Now breaking open around him, shattering like porcelain. *Then* coming up from a dead far past. Impossible

energy ripped though him, penetrating armour and flesh as wind would rush through the dune sands he had known as a child–

–and in that memory, he was there. *Not recalling it, but* living *it. The boy Dante had been only a few summers old. A face before him, a father or a brother? In the agony of near-death, poisoned by shellsnake venom. Telling him a truth, imparting something that is undeniable and unstoppable–*

'Everything ends, Dante. I die here, and you will die one day. Do not fear it.'

He recoiled as chains of future-past and never-when entwined his golden armour, dragging him into an abyss of no-time where his life became shards from a broken mirror. Walls of black metal grew around him–

–and he was fighting to survive in the endless corridors of the leviathan wreck, the nameless space hulk that had become a black hole consuming every brother his chapter sent against it. Soul after soul had died in that iron hell, the Blood Angels lost almost to a man. Master Sangallo perishing before his eyes and the final, damning retreat from the disaster at Secoris. He remembered Kadeus joining him among the fifty who escaped–

'Death comes in due time, Brother-Captain Dante. Not for us today, but one day.'

'*No*!' he shouted, because that was not what happened. He was certain of it. Kadeus had never said those words, brave Kadeus who had stepped into Sangallo's stead and guided the Blood Angels back from the brink of extinction. His mentor and his friend–

–and the one who lay dying centuries later, there on the stone of the Grand Annex. His hand reaching up, calling for Dante with his last breath. You are Chapter Master now, the old warrior had told him, and the final act is to press the shaft of the Axe Mortalis into Dante's empty hands. The weapon is eternal, as the Blood Angels must strive to be against all odds, against the bane of the Rage and the Thirst–

'But you will die with this blade at your side, Dante. When it comes, don't resist. Accept it.'

'No!' This was not the last declaration of his mentor, and Dante rejected the moment with all his might. This was the corrupting act of foul witchery, the chronomancy turning the moments of his own life against him, sapping his will as it flensed years from his flesh.

In desperation, the sorcerer broke the barriers between past and present, allowing pieces of Dante's life to collide and merge. His whole personal history struck back in a tidal wave of sensation and presence. He remembered every great victory and elation and withered under the weight of every brother he had seen perish; for one so venerable as Dante, those moments were legion.

All that was real was the axe in his armoured fingers. The weapon before his eyes, the name etched upon its handle in script laid down ten of his

lifetimes ago.

Mortalis.

Mortal. One who may die.

‘But not today.’ He felt the action more than he thought it. Dante let the weapon lead him into the attack, breaking the time-bonds and falling inexorably into the chronomancer’s flesh.

He took off the arm that ended in the gauntlet with a heavy blow, and the sorcerer’s scream split the crystal windows of the orb with crackling fractures.

‘I took your life,’ bellowed the enemy, collapsing into a pool of his own oily blood. ‘I stole your years! Decades robbed from you in heartbeats, you should die, die, die–’

Dante raised a hand and removed the death mask, showing his face outside of the fortress-monastery of Baal for the first time in living memory. He gave a cold smile, letting his foe see his unblemished aspect. ‘A decade? All but a passing instant to one who has lived a millennia and more, quisling fool. You seek to use my age against me, yes?’ The Chapter Master’s voice fell to a whisper. ‘You think you could pervert the past so I would buckle beneath the load of times gone by? Regret and loss and old, sorrowed memory?’ He raised the blade for what would be the death blow. ‘I live with those burdens each moment I draw breath. Your magick is a dim candle by their lights.’

The Axe Mortalis fell, and with it ended the shrouding of Skylos.

As the Chapter Master cleaned foetid vitae from his blade, one of Dante’s Sanguinary Guard approached, cocking his head as he listened to a vox signal. ‘Lord, the remainder of the enemy ships are breaking for the void. Shall we pursue, or proceed to the surface?’

‘Hunt down and kill everything that bears the Mark of Chaos,’ Dante replied. ‘We have the time.’

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

THE SANGUINOR: EXEMPLAR OF THE HOST

By

James Swallow

So it was that we made our preparations to die the deaths of warriors.

After seven brutal years of battle on Skylos, in which we lost the great measure of our strike force to the tyranid horde, we marked out the days of attrition.

Reinforcements would not find us; Skylos had been shrouded by strange warp storms that rose up as we made planetfall. This act of capricious fate isolated the xenos enemy from its hive fleet just as it severed us from Imperial contact, but the monsters that crawled and burrowed across the world's ruined surface seemed to go mad because of it. They abandoned their consumption of the populace, of the flora and fauna of the planet itself, and turned upon us. We were a half-company of Blood Angels, sent to cover the escape of the survivors.

But the civilians we were sent to rescue perished, as did many of my battle-brothers. Two full brigades of Imperial soldiery, killed and consumed for their flesh-matter. A contingent from the Adeptus Titanicus, torn apart by xenos bio-titans. A great army, gutted.

We Adeptus Astartes were all that was left. Our Thunderhawks were grounded, engines clogged by acid-venomed suicide mites that ate out the cores. Our armoured vehicles were mired in mudslides, the crazed weather a side effect of the tyranid rendering of the planet's ecosphere. We were reduced to small units scattered across the great plain where the aliens had built their safehold nest; our mission became to soak up whatever punishment we could and kill as many of the xenos as possible.

Listening for the sounds of claws and talons out in the mist, I counted my bolt shells for the second time that morning. Too few for comfort, so I took to sharpening my war-sword as we waited for the thin, grey rain to ease, there in the bowl of a bomb crater. A dozen of us, for all we knew, were all that remained of our brotherhood on blighted Skylos.

Only the Scout, Endemor, spoke. He muttered a litany under his breath, as the rain ran down his hairless scalp and spattered on his chest plate. '*Blessed be Sanguinius, Primogenitor and Lord of our Chapter. All Glory to him and the Emperor of Man, may his light guide and preserve us. Might of the Sanguinor, give us strength and fortitude, bind us–*'

'What did you say?' If one looked Brother-Sergeant Ganon in the eye, you might conclude that he was old beyond reckoning, with a face made of scars and bitterness. The veteran was the hardest soul I had ever known, with every trace of the kindness of lesser men expunged from him. He had courage in immeasurable volume, but a cold heart into the bargain. He

glared at Endemor as if the youth were spiting him. ‘Is that prayer?’ he snorted.

‘I invoke the names of heroes,’ Endemor replied warily. He did not know Ganon as I did, and seemed to think the question was a kind of test. ‘The Sanguinor–’

Ganon cut him off again. ‘The Sanguinor is a *myth*, lad. A story told by priests to credulous neophytes. Not real, not as the Emperor is real or as our liege lord was.’

‘No,’ Endemor shook his head. ‘It is written.’

‘You think you know better than I?’ Ganon leaned closer. ‘I have lived five of your lifetimes, young Scout. Fought on countless worlds and crossed to the edge of extermination. In all that time, no phantom in gold has fallen from the sky to save me or my kindred.’ His lip curled. ‘Do you know what I have learned?’

Ganon did not wait for Endemor to answer. ‘The Emperor protects those who protect themselves. And Sanguinius, his strength is within us, not in some apparition that judges battle-worthiness on a capricious whim.’

‘Such thoughts might be considered heretical,’ ventured Brother Dekkel, our lone Apothecary.

Ganon did not grace Dekkel with a glance. ‘Go tell Lemartes, then. Tell Lord Dante himself, if you wish. I only believe in what I see.’ He made a show of looking around. ‘I see no Sanguinor.’

‘He will come,’ Endemor insisted. ‘If not today, if not for us, then for others. But he will come.’

‘Why do you believe?’ snapped Ganon.

‘Why do you *not?*’ I asked the question before I realised I had spoken.

The sergeant glared at me. ‘You share his delusion, Koris? You wish to sit and pray to a figure from a story rather than fight?’

Now I was committed to this. ‘The Sanguinor is a noble ideal. He is the best of us. Some believe he is the ghost of our primarch freed from mortal fetters and set to battle… There are those in the Sanguinary Guard who say he is Azkaellon, first of their cadre, made timeless and eternal to avenge the black deed of the traitor Horus. Others say he is the soul of a wronged brother seeking redemption…’

Ganon gave a terse nod. ‘And he comes to aid the Blood Angels in their darkest moments. Yes, yes, I have heard the fable. But I have battled in dark places, brother. I have witnessed such horrors, and never once witnessed this shining seraph.’ He made a dismissive gesture at Endemor. ‘So you will forgive me if I do not hold such stock in it as a callow youth yet to be blooded. Aye, the myth has power and serves well to rally the spirit of those who have need… But it is an archetype made to teach a lesson, not a hard fact. I deny it.’ He turned away, and I heard sorrow in his tone. ‘The sooner Endemor does the same, the sooner he will understand the cold brutality of this universe. No-one is coming to save Skylos. We

will die here, and I wish to do it with a bolter in my hand, not hoping in vain for a redeemer.'

As the bitter words left his mouth, the sun came out. *But no, not the sun. Something else, something brighter than starlight. Power, shining and strong.*

We all felt it. Endemor was the first to fall to his knee and bow his head. Dekkel and the others followed, and finally it was only I and Ganon left to look upon the golden figure who was quite suddenly there at the lip of the crater.

Why do you not believe, Ganon? I heard the voice come from all around me, as if the air itself brought the words into being. **Have you lost so much that you can no longer know something greater than yourself?**

'I…' The sergeant was rigid with shock, as was I. 'I believe in my Chapter. My primarch, my Emperor… My brothers.'

It was impossible. My mind screamed that it must be some kind of illusion, but there it was. *The Sanguinor. We spoke of him, and so he was summoned…*

The shimmering warrior looked to me. His helm was a flawless sculpture of Great Sanguinius, that beatific visage rendered in gold and adamantine. His armour and the great metal wings at his back were of similar magnitude, so wrought with such perfect skill that any master craftsman would weep to behold them. In one hand, he held a bejewelled icon of the Red Grail that glowed with an ethereal inner light; in the other, the burning blade of a Glaive Encarmine, singing its need for battle to the winds.

I felt an ephemeral touch upon me, like dawning sunlight, like a father's hand upon a son's shoulder. The bleak mood that had bedded onto me during the unfolding of the Skylos catastrophe disintegrated. My heart swelled with pride and martial fervour. I could not understand where these feelings had come from; in the months past, I had felt my spirit erode under the futile truth of this world's war. Like Ganon, I had come to know – *and expect* – only death.

Believe, brothers, said the voice, and the Sanguinor raised his sword. I could feel the ground beneath my feet trembling, the precursor to an attack by the tyranid burrowers that had so harried us of late. But this tremor was far greater, the noise building as the earth cracked in great sheets and opened wide.

A gargantuan tyranid tyrant-beast clambered out of the thick, muddy slurry, claws and talons snapping at the wet air as a flood of lesser warrior-forms swarmed around its hooves. The aliens were making their great press to cull us and end all other life on Skylos. I knew it in my bones. This was the endgame.

Believe, said the Sanguinor, reaching forward to trace the sigil of the Chapter on the sergeant's chest, granting him a blessing. **Follow me towards glory.**

Ganon turned his face to the rest of us and I saw a new light in his eyes. A total absence of doubt, a blade-sharp knowledge. I saw *faith*, and I think it was mirrored in me to the same measure.

We exploded from the crater, red comets of ceramite and steel plunging into a mass of the xenos flood. I killed my way through a legion of lictors and raveners, time blurring as my boltgun ran dry and turned to new purpose as a blood-slick club. Sword in hand, I tore murder through the alien ranks and I recall feeling no pain. He made us avenging angels, one and all.

I saw the Sanguinor end the tyrant with a blow that took the command-creature's head from its thick neck. It was the cut that sent the monsters into disarray, and although we did not know it that day, it was the beginning of the end for the tyranid invasion of Skylos.

My last glimpse of him was his golden gauntlets crushing the grotesque, distended skull of a zoanthrope, the ichor of the dying alien spattering his armour but never marring it.

When a lull in the battle finally came, there were only the dozen of us and a plain wet with blood and corpse-meat.

A dozen, save one.

Ganon lay dead, his hands buried in the chest of a carnifex he had killed by ripping it open with a chainblade. He and the beast had ended one another, but while the fanged maw of the tyranid was foamed with spittle and swollen in animalistic agony, my sergeant seemed… *at peace*.

I did not see the golden angel again, nor have I since.

But I *believe*. And still, I follow him toward glory.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

SIN OF DAMNATION

By

Gav Thorpe

MISSION TIME POST-IMPACT:

00.04.36

Darkness clung to the corroding bulkheads, thick and heavy with menace. Creaks and groans of contorting metal vied with the hiss of ancient pneumatics and drips from broken pipes. Something new and harsh broke the gloom and quiet of distant millennia: the metallic clump of heavy boots and star-bright rays of suit lamps.

Five huge figures strode purposefully through the confines of the derelict space hulk; Squad Lorenzo of the Blood Angels First Company. They were Terminators, the best of the elite Space Marines. All of them were giants, standing more than eight feet tall in their armour. Each a prized artefact, these armoured suits were the heaviest worn by any soldier of the Imperium, made of layers of titanium and ceramite capable of withstanding the most punishing damage. In the freezing vacuum of space or the boiling depths of a volcano, the Terminators were the deadliest warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, their skill and courage proven over centuries of battle. They came expecting victory.

'Containment underway,' Sergeant Lorenzo reported. The idle chatter of the squad had died away as they had neared the enemy. All were now intent upon the mission.

'The Blood Angels have returned,' Captain Raphael's voice crackled in Lorenzo's ear. The signal was somewhat distorted, having been broadcast more than a thousand kilometres, from where the force commander monitored events aboard the orbiting strike cruiser *Angel's Sword*. 'For six centuries we have carried the burden of defeat, the stigma of failure. Now we redeem ourselves.'

Eighty Terminators of the Blood Angels were establishing a foothold aboard the space hulk. Their mission was simple: eradicate the alien threat. Several hundred metres behind Squad Lorenzo a cordon of veteran warriors guarded the impact site, where Techmarines and other support was being established. When all was ready they would advance on their foes. For the moment, however, Lorenzo and his warriors were out on their own.

The squad had been tasked with destroying the controls of a still-active bank of saviour pods. If the enemy were allowed to escape the space hulk aboard the lifeboats their infection could spread to other ships and distant

worlds. That could not be allowed to happen. Such was the importance of containment, Lorenzo's squad were considered expendable.

Heralded by the glare of their armour lights, the Space Marines advanced in single file along a winding concourse. The warriors' suits of Tactical Dreadnought armour filled the narrow corridor, their massive shoulder pads occasionally scraping the metal walls. Their red livery shone bright in the light of the lamps, a declaration of fearlessness and determination. The Blood Angels did not fight in the shadows.

The Terminators stomped forwards accompanied by the growl of servos and wheezing of fibre bundles from their suits. At their head, Lorenzo's sensorium showed that the maze of corridors ahead was deserted. He adjusted the range to three hundred metres and caught his breath when the glowing image on his auto-senses tinged with a smudge of green at the limit of the sensor's range. He waited several seconds, but the image did not resolve into movement. The enemy were dormant.

'Section secure, pattern thetos,' the sergeant said, thumbing the activation stud on his sword.

The blade hummed into life, the actinic blue of its power field bathing the corridor with flickering light. In the double-circle glare of Lorenzo's armour lamps, the corridor was laid bare. The latticed decking was warped in places but unbroken, while the walls that lined the narrow passageway were made of bolted metal sheets corroded and pitted with decay. The only sound was the buzz of the power weapon, tramping boots and the wheeze of powered armour as the rest of the squad moved up into position behind their sergeant.

The sensorium signal still had not changed and Lorenzo advanced, bringing his storm bolter up to the firing position. He checked the magazine readout in his display: thirty-two rounds.

'Detecting an energy wave from starboard, brother-sergeant,' Valencio announced. 'Indeterminate distance. Possibly a cable or generator.'

'Not of mission significance,' said Lorenzo, slowing as he approached a junction with another corridor coming from the right. 'Continue to advance.'

Swinging around, the beams of his lamps swaying across the walls, Lorenzo stared down the corridor and took two steps forward. Even with the suit lights, visibility was poor. Motes of rust and flaking paint drifted down from the ceiling and the contorted walls of the passage created strange shadows. Lorenzo scanned the scene looking for openings, his breathing calm, his mind focussed. The new passageway had two doors ahead: one on the right a dozen metres forward, another on the left thirty metres away. Deino strode across the junction behind the sergeant, his weapon covering the other approach.

'Command deck, update on tactical mapping,' Lorenzo said.

The comm buzzed for several seconds before the voice of one of the strike cruiser's bridge technicians arrived in Lorenzo's ear.

‘Nearly complete,’ the crewman said. ‘Transmitting data over link now.’

Lorenzo’s helmet display fuzzed blue for a second and then resolved into a clearer image as the scan data from the strike cruiser fused with the auto-senses of his armoured suit. A wire frame schematic was imposed over his vision and at a sub-vocal command an independent map appeared in his right eye. In places the map was indistinct or absent, the scanners of the strike cruiser unable to penetrate for some as-yet unknown reason. Lorenzo looked over the layout of the surrounding rooms and corridors, whilst maintaining a vigilant gaze on the sensorium data with his other eye. The contact echoes still had not moved. The energy spike reported by Valencio was some distance away and of no importance.

‘Egress location now marked,’ a serf aboard the strike cruiser reported. Moments later the head-up display flickered as it updated itself. A blinking icon of a skull drew Lorenzo’s attention to a room some eighty metres ahead. This was the saviour pod control room, the squad’s objective. Lorenzo had been tasked with destroying the launch mechanisms, ensuring that their alien prey could not escape the hulk. It was standard combat doctrine: contain and annihilate.

From the map, Lorenzo could also see that the branch he was on led to a subset of rooms isolated from the main thoroughfare they were following. Sensorium data was blank and Lorenzo needed to know if there was an ingress route on their flank. Dozens of metres behind the squad more Terminators were setting up a defensive cordon around the breaching zone, but out here beyond the perimeter there were any number of ways the squad might be surrounded.

‘Valencio and Zael, with me,’ Lorenzo commanded. ‘Search and secure. Deino and Goriel, flank protection.’

Lorenzo strode forwards once more. Zael fell in behind the sergeant, the igniter of his heavy flamer sparking and stuttering. Valencio brought up the rear, keeping the standard five metre clearance.

Stopping two metres beyond the first door, Lorenzo settled into overwatch stance, legs braced, targeter set to wide focus. Behind him Zael turned and faced the door. Deactivating the field on his power fist, the Terminator flicked the door lever. With a screech, the door shuddered open halfway and then squealed to a stop. Zael grabbed the door’s edge and hauled it sideways, his powered actuators pushing the door into its wall cavity with more shrieking protests from the ancient metal. Inside his helmet, the Terminator grimaced at the sound.

The room beyond was square, less than ten metres to a wall, and a further door lay open on the opposite side. Cracked tiles paved the floor, thick with grime. The walls had been crudely whitewashed at some point in the distant centuries but were now bare metal except for the odd patch of peeling paint.

‘Movement!’ Goriel’s sharp warning echoed in everyone’s ear.

00.05.97

The greenish fuzz on the sensorium net was shifting, resolving into individual signatures. They were rapidly closing in on the Terminators' position. The dump split into two groups, spreading out to the left and right. Lorenzo counted seven distinct movements heading towards him and five others circling to the other side of Deino and Goriel. Neither group's course seemed to comply with the schematic data.

'Secure main corridor, continue sweep,' Lorenzo barked. 'Watch for entry points. Look for super-and sublayer approaches.'

The sergeant pressed ahead towards the next door. Behind him Valencio followed, his gaze scanning left and right for breaches in the walls, floor and ceiling checking that his sergeant's rear quarter was protected. At the back, Zael clumped across the room and stopped at the open doorway, his heavy flamer directed down the corridor beyond.

'Ceiling breach,' Zael reported as he caught sight of a gaping crack in a heavy pipe that ran half the length of the fifty-metre corridor before turning sharply into a bulkhead.

The contacts on the sensorium were less than seventy-five metres away from Lorenzo, and within fifty metres of Deino.

'Brothers, the enemy are at hand. Summon all of your resolve, and your animosity,' Lorenzo told his squad.

The sergeant reached the door and swung around to face it. It was also activated by the pull of a lever and hissed out of sight with less effort than the previous one. Lorenzo stepped forwards as soon as the door was open, allowing Valencio to continue his advance along the corridor.

From a corroded grating in the floor ahead of Deino something fast and agile sprang into the corridor. It leapt towards the Terminator on bounding legs, four whip-muscled arms clawing at the passage wall as it righted itself. It had a bulbous, purple head. The rest of its body was covered in a dark blue chitin. Its eyes glittered in the lamps of Deino's suit.

'Visual contact!' said Deino. 'Confirm contact: genestealer.'

The creature had taken only three strides along the corridor when Deino opened fire. The passage rang with the clamour of the storm bolter's roar. With alien quickness the thing leapt from one wall to the other, the Terminator's initial burst of fire ripping a trail of detonations across bare metal. Another shape emerged from the darkness as the first hurtled forward with a lithe gait, digging the claws of its upper arms into the floor to increase momentum.

Deino's second salvo caught the creature across the head and back, tearing bloody chunks from it. Thick blood splashed across the wall and floors. The second creature leapt over its fallen companion without hesitation and Deino fired again.

‘Confirmed kill, multiple targets approaching,’ Deino said calmly. He fired once more. ‘Threat minimal.’

00.06.18

‘Ingress!’ announced Zael, squeezing the trigger on his heavy flamer. A sheet of fire roared along the corridor, bathing the ceiling and the pipe with promethium fury. Something flailed in the inferno, soundlessly spasming as the cleansing fires melted through its carapace, flesh and bones. Charred bodies fell from the destroyed pipework. The adhesive promethium clung to the walls, coating the corridor with white-hot flames.

‘Cleanse and burn!’ Zael’s spirits soared as he saw the creatures incinerated.

‘Hold stance!’ ordered Lorenzo.

The staccato rhythm of Deino’s storm bolter rang through the corridors as he unloaded his weapon’s magazine into the onrushing tide of creatures boiling up from a crawlspace beneath the decking. The crackle of Zael’s heavy flamer sounded again as more creatures emerged in front of him.

The room Lorenzo found himself in was long and thin, with stone-lined walls carved with faint patterns. A vent in the far corner to his right blew out a steady stream of dust, which swirled through the beams of the sergeant’s lights as he stepped forward. There were no other doors.

Lorenzo was about to turn away when he noticed that the dust from the vent had stopped.

00.06.25

A warning tone sounded and one of the signals on the sensorium flashed red: imminent threat. A moment later the vent cover was smashed out and one of the aliens was propelling itself through the air towards Lorenzo. With no time to fire, the sergeant brought his power sword up to a parry position, slicing through an outstretched claw. The genestealer’s three other clawed hands gouged furrows across Lorenzo’s helmet and right shoulder guard, knocking him backwards a step.

‘Blood of Baal!’ spat Lorenzo as he lashed the power sword into the creature’s head, splitting it from cheek to neck in a fountain of gore.

A reflexive paroxysm caused the creature to snap its arms shut, clamping onto Lorenzo’s right arm, talons scratching at the outer ceramite layer of the sergeant’s armour. With a grunt, he smashed the body away with his storm bolter.

He looked down at the bloodied thing sprawled on the floor. It twitched with some vestigial remnants of life, despite its grievous wounds. Memories six hundred years old surfaced in the sergeant’s mind, images of the Blood Angels aboard another space hulk in a time that seemed an age ago. The beasts had taken a bloody toll in that campaign and the Blood

Angels had teetered upon the precipice of annihilation. Lorenzo had been one of only fifty battle-brothers to survive the encounter. Those ashamed few had returned to Baal to lick their wounds like scolded curs.

Looking at the fanged monstrosity at his feet, Lorenzo felt a mixture of revulsion and shame, tinged with an almost unknown sensation: anxiety. Though he had fought gloriously for the Emperor for more than half a dozen centuries and across countless battle zones, the alien at his feet reminded Lorenzo of a time when he had been alone in the darkness. The Blood Angels had failed on that day and the stain of defeat hung heavily in Lorenzo's mind.

There was only one response to the emotions vying for control of Lorenzo's thoughts. Anger welled up inside him, a righteous ire fuelled by self-loathing and a deep hatred of the creatures he faced. The Blood Angels had been bloodied but not destroyed. They had taken the shame of failure into their hearts and nurtured it. Over the long years and decades they took the rough ore of weakness and beat upon it with faith and resolve, honing it into a bright sword of admonition. From weakness came strength and from adversity came the desire to prevail. The sergeant raised an armoured boot and brought it down on the genestealer's head, crushing it to a pulp upon the floor. Thick blood oozed from under the Space Marine's magnetized sole and dribbled into the cracks between the tiles.

This time there would be no defeat, no retreat.

00.06.29

A shout over the comm and a blazing flash on the sensorium warned that Zael was in trouble. A wave of hazy blips was speeding down the corridor towards the Terminator. Valencio responded first, slewing his armour around and pounding back towards the first room.

'One burst left,' warned Zael.

'Save that for the objective,' order Lorenzo.

'Clear for shot!' snapped Valencio as he thundered into the room behind the heavy flamer-armed Space Marine.

Seven or eight of the creatures could be seen past the dancing flames left by Valencio's defensive fire. As the inferno burnt itself out, they rushed forwards, claws opened, dead eyes fixed on Zael. The Terminator took a step backwards and to one side, opening up Valencio's view of the corridor in front of him.

'Purge the xenos!' laughed Valencio as he opened fire, the storm of explosive bolts from his weapon sending heads and limbs flying as the shells detonated inside their targets. The controlled fire blew apart four of the aliens, one after the other. 'Did you see that, brother-sergeant? Four in one volley!'

With a sickening click and a kick that caused the storm bolter to shudder in Valencio's grip, the weapon stopped firing. A hazard message flickered

into his helmet display: AMMUNITION FEED JAM.

'Mercy of the Angel…' Valencio muttered as three more genestealers sprinted down the corridor towards him.

00.06.38

Goriel had worked his way forward along a tunnel that ran parallel to Deino's position. A glance at the sensorium showed the bulk of contacts closing in on Zael and Valencio's location. Boosting the power to his legs, the Terminator broke into an awkward run, his footfalls crashing along the metal decking as he pounded around a corner ahead.

The passage he was on intersected at a T-junction with the corridor covered by Valencio. In the glow thrown out by patches of flickering promethium.

Goriel saw one of the creatures coiling its muscles, ready to spring towards Valencio's location. Goriel fired on instinct, his storm bolter roaring before the conscious thought had entered his mind. The alien beast was thrown aside, its legs ripped away.

Another appeared at the junction ahead and bounded off the wall and around the corner, changing its direction of attack towards Goriel. It made no attempt to hide, relying on its breakneck speed to close the distance. The tactic failed as a slew of bolter rounds from Goriel's weapon blew apart its head and body.

'Jam cleared!' announced Valencio and a moment later the burning trails of bolter rounds sped past the junction and the *crump* of detonations sounded along the metallic maze.

'Push forward,' said Lorenzo. 'Regroup at grid point thirteen-delta.'

With Lorenzo and Goriel leading the way, the squad headed onwards into the darkness. The genestealers attacked haphazardly, dashing from the shadows and bursting from pipes and vents singly and in pairs. The disciplined fire of the Blood Angels easily cut them down. More blips on the sensorium showed that others were rapidly closing in on the Terminators' position.

As they came to a double cross junction, Valencio swung around and covered the rear while Goriel and Deino spread out to guard the other approaches. Lorenzo advanced towards the objective highlighted in his helm display, his storm bolter spitting rounds into a heavy door at the end of the corridor. The thumb-sized rockets tore apart the metal barrier, revealing the room beyond. Dimly lit screens glowed in the chamber atop banks of keyboards and buttons.

It was the launch control chamber for the saviour pods: the objective. The squad's orders were to destroy the controls beyond any hope of repair, ensuring that none of the lifeboats could be launched.

'Brother Zael, purify,' the sergeant said. He stepped into a side corridor as Zael readied his heavy flamer. Bursts of storm bolter fire from Goriel

and Valencio announced the arrival of more enemies.

Promethium scorched into the launch room and glass-panelled data displays exploded. Sparks erupted from melting cables as Zael emptied the tank of his weapon. Thick black smoke poured from the room, billowing along the thermals created by the inferno, swathing the squad in gloom. Lorenzo's auto-senses flickered through the spectrum of options and settled on a heat-capture image. In the reflected glow of the burning control room, the sergeant could see through the smog as if it was not there. He stepped back into the corridor and analysed the damage done by Zael's flamer.

Metal cabinets had been reduced to slurry and molten gobbets of metal pinged and cooled on the rockcrete floor. Ancient circuits had been irreparably scorched and millennia-old pistons sagged like sodden paper.

'Control, objective complete,' Lorenzo announced.

'Affirmed,' a voice replied. 'Return to perimeter for orders.'

Lorenzo turned away from the control room and looked at the sensorium display. Green flickers warily circled ahead, growing in number. The genestealers were now trapped aboard the space hulk with the Terminators. The true battle would begin.

It was several hundred metres back to the breach head, and dozens of foes now lay in front of the Terminators. Lorenzo ejected the magazine from his storm bolter and slammed in another.

'Vengeance shall be ours, my brothers.'

00.06.99

Nearly half a kilometre behind Lorenzo, Sergeant Gideon nodded to himself as he listened to the reports over the comm-net, his Terminator armour whining in protest as it failed to replicate the movement. All was proceeding as expected. The breaching zone was well established and the support and reserve units had moved on board. The veterans of the Blood Angels 1st Company were preparing to press onwards into the space hulk's depths.

'Squad Gideon, secure point eighty-omega,' Captain Raphael's orders came through terse and clipped. 'Prevent enemy reinforcements from passing the junction.'

'Affirmative, point eighty-omega,' replied Gideon. 'Attack pattern diablo, advance.'

He raised the thunder hammer in his right hand and signalled for his squad to move out. Scipio took the point position, his storm bolter raised and ready. Brother Leon fell in behind him, the six barrels of his assault cannon rotating slowly as if in anticipation of the battle to come. Gideon stepped into position next, Omnio not far behind. Noctis brought up the back of the short column, turning occasionally to cover the approach to the rear.

‘Has it been confirmed that these are the same creatures that were encountered before?’ asked Scipio.

‘Lorenzo and the other survivors are convinced,’ said Gideon. ‘That’s good enough for me.’

‘Truly we have been blessed with this opportunity for vengeance,’ said Scipio.

‘They are the same *species* of alien,’ Omnio clarified. ‘Not the actual life forms our predecessors encountered.’

‘Good enough for me,’ said Scipio. He swayed to the left and pointed to an alcove in the wall. ‘Possible entry point.’

Leon’s assault cannon swung towards the offending space but the alcove was devoid of any hole or other route of attack. The Terminator grunted in disappointment and continued after Scipio.

‘It is hard to believe these are Ymgarlian genestealers,’ said Scipio. ‘So many creatures from such a small moon.’

‘It does raise some difficult questions about our understanding of the genestealer species,’ admitted Omnio. ‘But as the Angel once said, “There are more things in the darkness than man can ever count”. It is arrogance to presume we know everything.’

‘We should torpedo the entire hulk and be done,’ said Noctis as he rejoined the back of the squad from where he had been standing rearguard.

‘That would be an opportunity missed,’ said Omnio. ‘Some of these vessels might be Dark Age. Who can say what secrets they hide?’

‘And what dangers,’ added Gideon. ‘Keep vigilant.’

The squad had advanced the perimeter by some two hundred metres. Roughly the same distance ahead a cloud of contacts was registering on the Terminators’ scanners. At this distance it was impossible to discern individual life forms, but Gideon estimated there to be a hundred or more. They were moving, but not in any purposeful sense that he could recognise.

Gideon pushed the squad onwards. They came upon a tangled mess of gantries and chambers where the hulls of two ships had been compacted together by the strange tides of the warp. Like a fault line in a planet’s bedrock, the line between the two ships was clear and distinct. An unidentifiable rocklike material replaced metal and the colours changed from greys and silvers to greens and blues. Doorways were wider and higher and the distorted walls and floors allowed more space for the Terminators. Gideon picked up the pace, aware that every moment before the squad was in position was an opportunity for the Blood Angels’ alien adversaries to attack the perimeter.

‘Command to all squads, mission update,’ announced Captain Raphael. ‘Cyber-Altered Task unit deployed for deep recon. Enemy force estimate now at excess of forty thousand. Ninety-five per cent dormancy and falling. Remember your fallen fore-brothers and fight with honour.’

‘Angel’s mercy, that’s a lot of targets,’ said Scipio.

‘Enough to go around,’ said Leon.

‘Leon, move ahead and cover the junction,’ Gideon ordered, ignoring the squad’s chatter. ‘Noctis, take up flank protection position to Leon’s left. The rest of you, disperse pattern deimos, guard the approaches.’

On the sergeant’s command the squad split, each warrior disappearing into the darkness to take up his assigned position. Having extended the breach head by another three hundred metres, they settled into overwatch and awaited the enemy. On the sensorium, the green blurs separated into distinct signatures as the foe converged on Squad Gideon from three directions.

00.07.12

There was movement right at the edge of the light from Leon’s suit lamps and he resisted the urge to open fire. The motor of his assault cannon growled like a beast ready to pounce and Leon waited expectantly for a clear target. The sensorium showed a score or more of creatures in the darkness of the tunnels ahead. They circled for a short while, seeking some other route towards the Blood Angels’ positions. Evidently this endeavour met with failure. One moment the corridor was empty, the next a horde of blue and purple bodies hurtled along its length towards Leon like water bursting through a hole in a dam.

He opened fire, the barrels of the assault cannon rotating up to speed in a heartbeat, a torrent of shells screaming down the passageway in another. Leon’s auto-senses had kicked in the audio dampeners the moment he had pressed the trigger, but even through the immense plasteel plates armouring his body the Terminator could feel the concussive shockwave that filled the room.

In a two-second burst half a dozen creatures were shredded, their bodies vaporised by the fusillade. Leon paused for a moment, allowing his weapon’s barrels and motors to cool, and then opened fire again. Each devastating burst obliterated everything in front of the Terminator.

Virtually hypnotised by the carnage he was wreaking, Leon almost failed to notice a group of sensorium contacts moving down a corridor parallel to the one he was covering. He began to back away from the door to the room, giving himself more time to fire. He was too slow. With a scream of rending metal and a clang the genestealers smashed through a door just around a corner ahead and within a second they were inside the room with Leon.

‘Die!’ he bellowed, unleashing the fury of his assault cannon in one long burst. Tracing an arc with his weapon, Leon cut down the first swathe of attackers, but more were following quickly in their wake. The trigger still locked down, Leon turned the blaze of shells upon the next wave of aliens. Fire and gore and splinters from the ruined walls filled the corridor for a moment.

With an explosion that hurled Leon from his feet, the assault cannon's barrels burst. The white-hot metal scythed into his armour, leaving steaming shreds of alloy smoking across his shoulder and helm. Clawed hands and feet gouged further rents in his suit as the beasts streamed through the room. One blow caught a plasteel-sheathed cable under Leon's left arm, paralysing his armour on that side and rendering his power fist inert.

'Point position down!' he snarled over the comm as the genestealers raced past. There was nothing else he could do.

00.08.04

'Time to prove yourselves once again, my friends,' Gideon muttered to his thunder hammer and storm shield, Leon's warning still ringing in his ears. 'Destroy your foe and protect your bearer!'

He and Omnio had linked up and had moved towards Leon's position when the first attack had begun. Their only hope of holding back the growing tide of aliens was a bottleneck up ahead, where the twisted plascrete tunnels converged into a single room.

The room itself was barely fifteen metres wide, the walls heavily pitted and cracked. It had been some kind of pumping station in a past age. Broken pipes jutted from the angle of wall and ceiling. Globulous strings of thick fluid hung from their shattered ends and occasionally dripped into oily puddles at the base of the walls. The remnants of ancient valves and wheels seized with rust covered the ceiling.

Omnio positioned himself facing the open door, opposite the predicted approach of the enemy, storm bolter loaded and aimed. Gideon waited to one side of his squad-brother, ready to step forward and attack should any creature get past Omnio's fire.

It was not long before the first genestealer appeared, dropping down from a shattered duct in the ceiling of the corridor ahead. It was up and running in a moment, spring-jointed legs pumping fast as it sprinted towards the Terminators. Its claws raked chips of stone from the tiles underfoot. The alien's eyes shone in the dull yellow glow of ancient lightstrips. There was no emotion in that gaze, only the lethal intent of a predator.

'Maybe it isn't as illogical as I first thought,' Omnio said, firing a brief burst down the corridor.

'What's that?' said Gideon.

'You, carrying that hammer… and shield even… though you're no longer… in an assault squad,' explained Omnio, pausing every few words to open fire. 'In close confines… such as these, the added… potential at close quarters, when… combined with a ranged weapon-armed comrade… provides a tactical advantage… not possible by the standard sergeant's wargear.'

Gideon snorted.

'Tactical advantage?' said the sergeant, raising the large hammer and shield to a guard posture. 'I carry these weapons to honour my armour.'

'How so?' asked Omnio, still firing, his attention fixed on the aliens running and leaping out of the room at the far end of the passageway.

'When I first transferred to sergeant, I abandoned my trusted friends here for the traditional sword and storm bolter,' said Gideon. 'In the next battle, a stray shot from an ork penetrated the sub-thorax pipes and immobilised my left leg. I know when my armour is telling me something. I've carried these since.'

'A wise m—' Omnio's reply was cut short as a genestealer launched itself through the door, having scuttled its way along the ceiling of the corridor. With incredible speed, twisting in the air, it landed on Omnio, sword-like claws sending up shards of ceramite from the Terminator's breastplate. Omnio lurched backwards under the impact, the artificial muscles of his armour straining but holding firm.

Gideon stepped forwards and brought his thunder hammer down onto the creature's back. The power field around the hammer's head exploded in a blue flash as the blow landed. Spine shattered, carapace cracked, the genestealer flopped to the stone floor like a grounded fish.

Gideon had no time to admire his deadly handiwork. Two more aliens were in the room, claws outstretched, fanged jaws gaping. The first lunged for the sergeant. Gideon brought up his storm shield to ward off its attacks. A flare of energy illuminated the room and the genestealer was hurled into the wall. The other beast ducked beneath the swing of the sergeant's hammer and, with a jarring screech of chitin on metal, punched two sets of its claws into Omnio's leg.

The alien that had been repulsed by Gideon's storm shield sprang forwards again, one arm hanging loosely at its side. Even wounded it was astoundingly fast, dodging Gideon's block with his shield, yet not so skilful that it could avoid the thunder hammer aimed towards it. In one sweep the glowing weapon smashed the creature's head clean off.

Omnio toppled to one side, the reinforced struts inside his leg armour buckling under the pressure of the genestealer's powerful grip. The Terminator grabbed an arm in his power fist and yanked it from the socket, yellow ichor spraying across his armour. Fist shimmering with energy, Omnio dug his fingers point first into the genestealer's neck, snapping vertebrae. As the genestealer twitched in its death throes, Omnio tried to prise off the creature's corpse but only succeeded in mashing it into small lumps with his power fist. The genestealer's claws had jammed the knee joint in his leg. To all intents and purposes, the Terminator was now immobilised.

'Combat potential negated,' Omnio announced disconsolately. 'I need a Techmarine.'

Gideon stepped protectively between his fallen battle-brother and the doorway, thunder hammer ready. On his sensorium, more blips raced towards the room.

00.09.56

A genestealer ducked into a side corridor before Lorenzo could open fire. The one behind it was not so fortunate and the sergeant blew it to pieces with a burst from his storm bolter. Checking his sensorium, Lorenzo noted that their foe was approaching more cautiously than before. They gathered in small groups out of sight and then launched themselves at the Terminators in short waves. Though it showed more intelligence than the suicidal charges the genestealers had been employing in the first phase of the battle, the tactic was still crude and easily countered.

Lorenzo suppressed a moment of unease as he recalled the massed attacks of the genestealers during his last encounter with them. On that occasion they had gathered in their hundreds, clawing and leaping over their fallen to overwhelm the Blood Angels with sheer weight of numbers. So far only a small fraction of the foe was awake, but Lorenzo knew that as more rose from their hibernation the attacks would get deadlier.

Despite the sergeant's concerns, none of the aliens had yet broken through the cordon of Squad Lorenzo, though the Terminators were expending a considerable amount of ammunition to defend their positions. The Techmarines had resupplied the squad once already, but Zael had reported his heavy flamer tank was half-full and the rest of the squad each had only a few magazines remaining.

The next supply run was due in three minutes. Lorenzo knew other squads were being pressed harder elsewhere along the line and resisted the urge to request that their own re-equip be brought forward.

'Squad Lorenzo, this is command.' Captain Raphael's voice was calm and measured, though Lorenzo could guess at the many decisions straining his attention. 'C.A.T. signal is erratic, information upload incomplete. I need you to physically locate the unit and retrieve for data analysis. Squad Gideon will join from omega grid, coordinate the search with Sergeant Gideon.'

'Affirmative, brother-captain,' Lorenzo responded. 'Last known C.A.T. position?'

'Somewhere in theta grid, directly ahead of your location,' the captain told him. 'Transmitting frequency signature to sensorium net.'

The display superimposed onto Lorenzo's vision flickered as the update came through. A haze of flashing red appeared over the map layout some fifty metres from where he was. Somewhere in the sprawl of corridors ahead, the Cyber-Altered Task unit was wandering in circles. Having been teleported into the heart of the space hulk for deep scans and reconnaissance, the automated unit was evidently malfunctioning or

damaged. The data it had collected was essential to Captain Raphael and the C.A.T. needed to be recovered quickly.

'Frequency locked in, brother-captain,' Lorenzo told his commander.

'Acknowledged,' came the captain's static-clouded reply. 'We pursue our own, sublime goal. We seek vindication.'

'In the name of the Angel and for the honour of Baal,' Lorenzo responded and the link fell silent. He switched to squad broadcast. 'Advance pattern majestic. Gideon and his squad approaching from ahead, so watch your fire.'

'We'll get there first,' Valencio said as he moved to the head of the squad. 'The honour shall be ours.'

The newest member of Squad Lorenzo lumbered onto a contorted walkway that crossed over a dormant generator plant. Nothing stirred in the blackness below and the sensorium displayed no contacts within twenty metres. Not trusting the corroded metal to take the weight of more than one Terminator, Lorenzo waited until Valencio was on the steps at the other side of the chamber before waving Zael forwards. One by one they crossed the artificial ravine while Valencio provided covering fire from the room beyond.

As he descended the steps, Lorenzo could see Valencio silhouetted by the muzzle flare of his storm bolter, his shadow cast sharply across the debris-littered floor with each burst. Entering the room beyond the stairway, Lorenzo added his fire to that of Valencio, gunning down a handful of genestealers as they hurtled into the chamber. For a moment all was din and confusion, brought to an abrupt end by a sheet of fire from Zael's heavy flamer. Unearthly screeches sounded the genestealers' demise, the first sound he had heard them utter. The sudden quiet that descended was broken only by the sound of flames, the pings and cracks of cooling metal and the whistle of superheated blood steaming from the aliens' corpses.

The next passageway was clear of foes and Valencio advanced quickly, reaching a T-junction at its end while the rest of the squad filed into the room, burnt carcasses crunching underfoot. Now closer to the signal of the C.A.T., Lorenzo could see that the automaton was somewhere in the network of tunnels less than thirty metres ahead. The signal was moving erratically, its transmission reflected and echoed by the distorted walls of the hulk.

'Valencio, Deino, sweep right,' the sergeant ordered. 'Zael and Goriel, follow my lead.'

Thus split, the squad made their way into the rat's nest of collapsed corridors, stairwells, rooms and ducts. Their suit lamps blazing, they cast their sharp eyes into broken vents and under fallen workstations, seeking the task unit. Quickly and methodically, the squad homed in on their objective, their search occasionally punctuated by a burst of storm bolter fire as a lone genestealer sprang from the shadows.

‘C.A.T. located,’ announced Goriel. Lorenzo fixed on his battle-brother’s identification contact. He shouldered his way through tangles of twisted metal and clambered over rubble heaps to forge a way to the recon device. The sergeant found Goriel and Zael in a domed hall at the centre of three radiating corridors. Goriel held the C.A.T. in his deactivated power fist.

The Cyber-Altered Task unit was a tracked automaton about half a metre in length, studded with sensor spurs and data-aerials. Jointed metallic limbs splayed from its central hull and wiggled forlornly in Goriel’s grasp. At the end of a prehensile cable, a gilded skull containing the C.A.T.’s metriculator waggled left and right as it continued its scans. Its red eyes glowed and dimmed as it processed the data while its tracks whirred back and forth as the C.A.T. struggled to get free.

‘Salutations, brethren,’ said Valencio, entering from the opposite side of the hall. ‘It seems Goriel has found a new friend.’

‘Take it,’ Goriel said, thrusting the C.A.T. towards Valencio. ‘You seem the motherly type.’

The glow around Valencio’s chainfist vanished as he cut off the power supply. Delicately, he took the shuddering cyber-scout from Goriel and held it up so that its scanner lenses were pointed towards his face.

‘Don’t fret, little friend,’ Valencio said in a hushed voice, a hint of a laugh in his tone. ‘Brother Goriel is just being sour. I’ll look after you.’

Lorenzo was about to admonish the pair for the light-hearted behaviour when a squad-to-squad transmission cut across the comm.

‘Lorenzo, this is Gideon,’ a voice crackled in the sergeant’s ear. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘I can,’ Lorenzo replied. ‘And most welcome it is.’

‘Don’t thank me just yet,’ Gideon said. ‘We are approaching your position, one hundred and fifty metres on your left flank. There is a large concentration of sensorium contacts in grid medusa, just out of your range, growing more active. They’ll be on you before we arrive.’

‘Thank you for the warning, Gideon,’ said Lorenzo. He consulted the sensorium map. ‘Rendezvous at theta-four and we’ll return to the perimeter in force.’

‘Affirmative, Lorenzo,’ said Gideon. ‘May the Angel guide your fury and the Emperor guard your backs.’

‘Praise Sanguinius,’ Lorenzo intoned. ‘Deino and Zael, cleanse towards theta-four. We will escort the C.A.T.. Confirm?’

The two Terminators signalled back their compliance, their signature blips moving away on the sensorium. Lorenzo led the other group, the rear guarded by Goriel, with Valencio sandwiched protectively between. They had advanced only a dozen metres when the leading edge of the genestealer contacts reported by Gideon showed on the sensorium. There were at least twenty of the aliens, and more appeared on the scanner over the next few seconds.

‘Contact!’ Deino shouted over the comm. A moment later gunfire echoed dully around the labyrinth of corridors, the sound distant and distorted.

The way ahead was tortuous, with blast doors sealing off many routes and fallen ceilings blocking others. Rooms that showed up as empty on the sensorium scan were filled with impassable debris and walkways were bent and broken. On the scanner, Zael and Deino were no more than fifteen metres away, but in the wreckage of the hulk’s depths Lorenzo could see no sign of them, or any way to move further forward.

‘Clear a path,’ Lorenzo told Valencio as the sergeant fell in behind Goriel.

‘As the Angel, I shall lead the way,’ laughed Valencio. He hooked his storm bolter to his belt and took the C.A.T. in his right hand. His left hand now free, he powered up his chainfist.

Chainfist blades whirring and blazing, Valencio punched his way through a plascrete wall, showering himself with dust and shards. He stepped into the darkness beyond, his further progress accompanied by the screech of tortured metal and the thud of exploding plascrete slabs.

Goriel followed next, Lorenzo turning to stand sentry at the makeshift passage battered through the debris by Valencio. More than a dozen genestealers were closing fast, coming up from the hallway where the squad had just been. Glancing left, right and above, Lorenzo realised the corridor was broken in many places and allowed far too many access points to defend with any confidence. Stepping backwards, storm bolter held ready to fire, the sergeant followed Valencio and Goriel along the tangled pathway.

A hideous purple face appeared at the ragged entrance a few seconds after Lorenzo had begun his withdrawal. The sergeant opened fire immediately, two rounds scattering the genestealer’s brains and skull into the darkness. Another alien appeared and Lorenzo gunned it down, taking another step backwards. With agonising slowness, the sergeant backed along the cleared path, unleashing a salvo of fire every couple of seconds as more and more genestealers poured into the breach after him. Between the roars of his storm bolter, Lorenzo caught other bursts of fire echoing from behind him. A glance at the sensorium showed that Gideon’s squad was not far behind. Through a gap in the tangled girders and joists, the sergeant saw licks of fire: Zael’s flamer. Heartened, Lorenzo emptied the magazine on his storm bolter, gunning down five aliens in the long salvo, and then turned and broke into a run.

The sergeant didn’t need to check his sensorium to know that the genestealers were barely ten metres behind him; his sharp ears and armour’s auto-senses picked up the scratching of claws and sharp hisses at his back.

Lorenzo thundered into a wide, low room filled with ruined databank consoles. Just as he broke into the dim green light something smashed into the back of his armour. Pitching forward, his armour’s fibre bundles and

motors shrieked in their fight to keep him balanced, but lost. He stumbled to one knee, desperately trying to reach behind him with his power sword. A clawed hand appeared in his vision and then something inhumanly strong smashed into the back of the sergeant's helm, stunning him.

00.11.67

Deino heard rather than saw Sergeant Lorenzo, a cacophonic clattering of armour and shattering tiles. His blood thundering in his ears, time seemed to slow down for Deino. Turning left towards the sound, the Terminator raised his storm bolter to shoulder height and flicked the single-fire switch. Lorenzo was down on one knee, a genestealer perched on his back, its foot claws gripping the exhaust vents of the sergeant's armour, both pairs of foreclaws seizing his helm, trying to twist off his head.

The aiming reticule in Deino's right eye danced around the genestealer as the alien swayed backwards and forwards, trying to lever Lorenzo's head from his shoulders. Deino didn't wait for the lock-on. His eyes were more accurate than any metriculator. He took a deep breath and fired.

'Blessed be the sure of shot for they shall bring vengeance,' Deino whispered as the bolt roared from the muzzle, its rocket punching it forward. A moment later the bolt penetrated the genestealers left eye and the mass-reactive warhead detonated, splitting apart the creature's head. Lorenzo tried to right himself and another alien appeared from the hole smashed through the wall by Valencio. Deino fired again.

'Praise to the Angel for he shall guide my aim,' he whispered while the bolt pierced the creature's chest and then exploded in a shower of chitin and ribs. Four more genestealers leapt through the gap and each was felled in turn by a round from Deino's weapon, the shots accompanied by a litany of accuracy spilling from the Space Marine's lips.

A Terminator in the heraldry of Gideon's squad loomed over Lorenzo, an assault cannon connected to his right arm by heavy bolts and makeshift struts. A light-suppressing filter materialised over Deino's vision as Leon opened fire, saving the Terminator's eyes from the blinding muzzle flare.

'Anyone can hit the target with a thousand shots a minute,' Deino said over the inter-squad comm. He brought down his storm bolter and walked towards Lorenzo as other members of Squad Gideon converged from different directions. 'Your weapon lacks elegance.'

'Perhaps, my brother,' Leon replied. 'However, it would take forever to shoot all of them one at a time.'

Deino conceded the point without comment and turned around to cover the entranceway he'd just come through. Something moved across the beams of his suit lamps and Deino fired, the shot blowing an arm from the genestealer. The second round shattered its hip, ripping its leg from its body.

‘If you can’t enjoy the artistry of war, then what’s the point of fighting?’ Deino asked nobody in particular.

00.12.13

‘Allow me,’ said Gideon, appearing at Lorenzo’s right, his shield arm extended.

Lorenzo grabbed the proffered limb and allowed himself to be helped to his feet. The two sergeants raised their fists in salute to each other.

Gideon’s squad were showing signs of hard fighting. Each warrior’s armour had scars of battle - cracked plates, gouged ceramite and exposed sublayer cables and pipes - rapidly repaired by the Techmarines back at the impact zone. Gideon’s helm had an impressive rent across the mouth grille and the entire right side of Leon’s armour was pitted with shards of metal and recently applied welding where his destroyed assault cannon had been replaced. All were stained by alien gore and a few had bloodstains from their own wounds.

Lorenzo realised his own squad’s appearance was now less than satisfactory. The joints in his armour’s left arm were stiff and his helm actuators had broken when the genestealer had tried to twist off his head. He could only look straight ahead. Peeling paint sloughed from charred ceramite on Zael’s armour, evidence of a desperate close-range shot from his heavy flamer. Valencio was missing most of his left shoulder pad and the emblem on his chestplate was scored with three ragged claw marks. Only Deino appeared unmarked; apparently no genestealer had yet avoided his cool marksmanship.

‘Still intact,’ said Valencio, holding up the C.A.T., which dejectedly waved its appendages.

‘Good,’ said Lorenzo. He switched the comms to the command frequency. ‘Brother-captain, this is Lorenzo. The unit has been secured and is still functional.’

There was a hiss of static before Captain Raphael replied.

‘The Angel’s blessing upon you,’ he said. ‘We need the data of the deeper levels to devise the next phase. Without it I have no recourse but bombardment. Return the unit to the Techmarines in grid alpha and re-arm.’

‘Acknowledged,’ said Lorenzo. He turned to Gideon and activated the inter-squad frequency. ‘Would you like to go front or back?’

‘We’ll lead the push back to the perimeter,’ said Gideon. ‘Watch our backs.’

‘Affirmative,’ said Lorenzo.

Lorenzo organised his warrior’s dispositions as Gideon and his men headed off. The two squads plunged into the maze of corridors. Storm bolter fire and the deadly peal of Leon’s assault cannon heralded their progress through the twist of metal and plascrete. More and more

genestealers were arriving from their hibernation nest somewhere deep inside the hulk, and the sensorium swarmed with contact blips.

Metre by hard-fought metre Squads Gideon and Lorenzo battled through the aliens, reaping a bloody harvest of vengeance with their weapons. Gideon's hammer and Lorenzo's power sword blazed like beacons in the dark artificial caverns and long tunnels. The flare of muzzle flash and the ruddy glow of flames marked the Blood Angels' passing.

00.12.83

In the ruins of a derelict merchantman's hold, clothed in the darkness of the void, something stirred. It surfaced slowly from anabiosis, frozen limbs and organs gradually warming, alien synapses starting to spark.

All was still instinct and impressions, with no true intelligence yet. Its brood were rousing around it, their minds touching and connecting. Images flickered through its wakening subconscious. Large creatures of bright red impenetrable skin killed its progeny with fire and blade. Even as more of its offspring surfaced to consciousness and joined the brood mind, others disappeared.

One impulse rose above all others, an evolutionary imperative that obscured all other consideration. It spread from the creature, rippling out through the brood, instilling them with a single directive.

Destroy.

00.13.00

Within the cordon of the breach head, the noses of boarding torpedoes jutted from the punctured wall like the petals of gigantic metal flowers. Protected by a ring of Terminators fighting the genestealers only a few hundred metres distant, Techmarines and their serfs laboured constantly to keep the squads armed and battle-ready.

Lorenzo was being attended by Brother Auletio, one of the Techmarines. The spider-like arms of Auletio's servo harness backpack worked deftly with saws, drills and welders, repairing the damage to the radiator vents on Lorenzo's back. Sparks cascaded to the oil-stained decking, falling amongst piles of bolts and coils of cable and other detritus of repair.

Valencio approached, a robed orderly fussing around him with a paint gun, respraying the Terminator's armour. He had removed his helmet - something Lorenzo had tried to do but failed - and his eyes were bright with pride.

'Our brothers are deciphering the C.A.T. data now,' Valencio said. 'They seem very pleased.'

'As well they should,' said Lorenzo. 'We need all the information we can gather if we are to be victorious.'

‘Our brothers fight bravely and do the Chapter honour,’ said Valencio. ‘I hope that I have acquitted myself with equal glory.’

Lorenzo did not reply immediately, pondering whether to indulge Valencio’s need for validation. He relented, remembering how eager he had been when he had joined the First Company. To be acknowledged as a veteran was a tribute that should not be taken lightly. And, in truth, Valencio deserved praise.

‘You fought bravely and with skill.’

‘My thanks for your words,’ said Valencio with a deferential nod of the head. ‘I wish only to serve the memories of those that came before us.’

Dark thoughts swirled into Lorenzo’s mind, recollections of the nine hundred and fifty who had been lost. He pushed the memories back into the depths of his mind, suppressing them as he had done for six and a half centuries.

‘We will rejoin the battle shortly,’ the sergeant said. ‘Make sure the others are ready.’

Valencio nodded and moved away, leaving Lorenzo to his thoughts.

‘That is the best that I can do,’ said Auletio, the servo-arms folding into place behind him. ‘There’s nothing I can do about the helm. It is jammed solid and I do not have the tools needed to release it.’

‘Your efforts do you credit,’ Lorenzo said reflexively. He had all but forgotten the Techmarine’s presence. The sergeant lifted his arms while a pair of serfs attached chunky storm bolter magazines to his belt. ‘Others are in more need of your attentions.’

‘May the strength of the Angel fill your spirit,’ said Auletio before turning away, his orderlies trailing after him like chicks after their mother.

A hand slapped down on Lorenzo’s right shoulder and the sergeant turned to find Zael standing beside him. The rest of the squad were behind Zael, helmets locked in place, damage patched, weapons ready.

‘It is time to admonish our foes once more,’ said Zael.

‘Yes, I feel the need to administer the justice of the Emperor,’ growled Lorenzo. He drew his power sword and activated its glittering blade. ‘Let us be the blade of the Angel’s judgement!’

‘Praise the Angel,’ the others chorused, falling in behind Lorenzo as he stalked towards the front line.

Soon the clatter and chatter of the breach head was behind them. The echoing retorts of storm bolters and rebounding roars of assault cannons replaced the whirr of drills and crack of welders. In the mess of interlacing corridors, sub-vents, access ways and doors it was easier to navigate by the readings of the sensorium than by what could be seen or heard. Lorenzo identified the area his squad had been ordered to secure and signalled ahead to Sergeant Adion that they were approaching.

In turn, each of Lorenzo’s squad replaced one of Adion’s men, taking positions overlooking a wide causeway that had once been the main dorsal corridor of a ship. They did so in the midst of combat, taking up the

relentless battle against the swarms of genestealers hurling themselves at the cordon.

'Keep an eye on the bulkheads to the right,' warned Adion as Lorenzo joined him. The sergeant loosed off a quick burst of fire at a genestealer clambering from a sub-duct before pointing to a wall some thirty metres away, heavily dented from the other side. 'They've tried to break through three times already and we used the flamer to burn them out. I can't say how much longer those bulkheads will hold.'

'Affirmative,' said Lorenzo, adding his own fire to that of Adion. Lorenzo checked that his warriors were in position and gave Adion a reassuring thump on the arm with the hilt of his sword. 'The area is secure, you can break off now. The Chapter shall honour your deeds.'

'The Angel stands watch,' Adion said in reply before backing away down the corridor, firing a parting salvo at the enemy.

00.14.52

Lorenzo divided his attention between firing his weapon, monitoring the enemy's movements on the sensorium and listening to the mission updates on the comm. The analysis of the C.A.T. data was complete and Captain Raphael had outlined the situation.

The genestealers, more than forty thousand of them, were in a dormant state, hidden in a cluster roughly one kilometre from the landing zone. The ship in which they had made their lair seemed relatively intact, sealed from the vacuum and with minimal life support functions still operating. The same systems that maintained a modicum of temperature and atmosphere for the genestealers to survive could also prove to be their death. It was the captain's intent to use the air circulation system to poison the aliens as they hibernated. More Techmarines had arrived from the strike cruiser with tanks of lethal gas. Small scale tests were being conducted at another point on the perimeter to determine the concentration of toxin required to kill the genestealers.

'If they're dormant, why don't we go in and slaughter them before they wake up?' asked Zael. 'One big push could wipe them out. These delays give the enemy more time to rise and gather their numbers.'

'That's what we thought last time,' Lorenzo replied quietly. 'At first it was just as you say; we slaughtered hundreds of them. Our attack caused some change, a shift in their behaviour. Each one that fell seemed to trigger the waking of ten more. They responded quickly, thousands of them emerging from their stasis within seconds. They surrounded us in minutes.'

Lorenzo did not have to continue. All present knew the rest of the tale. A shameful day in the Blood Angels' otherwise glorious history.

'Today the debt from that black day will be repaid,' said Zael. 'We will destroy this loathsome foe and restore our pride.'

‘The Angel wills it,’ said Valencio. ‘Praise Lord Sanguinius!’

They fought on without further word for some time, each Terminator concentrating his efforts on killing the enemy. Gunfire reverberated constantly along the hallway and the corpses piled upon the concourse now numbered several hundred.

Then, as if some unseen hand had closed a door or shut off a tap, the attacks suddenly stopped. The silence that descended was more unnerving than the riotous clamour of battle, and Lorenzo steadied himself with thoughts of his primarch and the Chapter.

‘Synchronise your sensorium data with Omnio,’ Gideon’s voice drifted over the comm. ‘He has noticed something important.’

Lorenzo adjusted his sensorium to receive data over the inter-squad comm. This had the effect of increasing its range, at the expense of clarity. There were two patches of green fog - clusters of indistinct contacts. Both were growing: one a hundred and fifty metres ahead, the other some seventy metres to the right flank.

‘There has been a pattern in the attacks,’ Omnio explained. ‘They have been working systematically along the perimeter, seeking weak points. I believe they were attacking to judge our firepower and numbers, learning from our tactics and responses.’

‘And now?’ asked Lorenzo.

‘That sounds very sophisticated,’ Deino said, doubt in his voice.

‘My observations are accurate,’ said Omnio. ‘The next attack will be from two directions simultaneously at the point between our curtains of fire.’

Flashing red icons highlighted a route through the corridors that would cut between the two squads with the minimum of exposure to the guns of the Terminators. The second attack would encircle Gideon and his men.

‘We have to close the gap,’ said Gideon. ‘We cannot allow them to break through.’

‘That will leave you vulnerable on your right,’ Lorenzo pointed out, studying the schematic.

‘Yes,’ said Gideon.

‘Very well,’ said Lorenzo. ‘Deino and Zael, move to the right and close off that path. Valencio, take Deino’s place on point.’

Gideon was reorganising his squad’s dispositions as well. The attack came before they were fully in position. Dozens of genestealers raced forward, the smudges of green splitting into separate contacts on the sensorium as the range closed. Zael used his flamer to close off a side-tunnel. Deino joined his fire with that of Scipio from Gideon’s squad, creating a crossfire in one of the rooms the genestealers now had to pass through. Zael moved forward with the cleansing fire of his weapon, like shutting a lid on a box.

Gideon’s squad was hard-pressed on the right, the aliens coming within only a few metres before revealing themselves. The sergeant’s icon was at

the forefront of the battle and Lorenzo could imagine Gideon standing firm with storm shield and thunder hammer, protecting his men. Lorenzo fought the urge to move across and aid his battle-brother. The line had to be held. He whispered a benediction to the Angel on behalf of Gideon and his men, and turned his attention back to the dark corridor ahead.

00.13.88

The genestealer attack was in full force. Multiple swarms of the creatures came at the Terminators from different directions, splitting them, dividing their attentions. From the reports over the comm Gideon knew that Space Marine casualties were mounting.

'Defensive posture is weakening,' announced Captain Raphael. 'Techmarine analysis of toxin effect complete. Now we attack. All squads converge on primary hibernation site for final extermination. The scene of our reprisal is set. We are the avengers. Nemesis.'

'Finally,' growled Leon. He unleashed a furious burst of fire from his assault cannon, clearing a junction ahead and stomped forwards eagerly.

'Purge the xenos!' said Gideon, moving up behind Leon. 'Blood Angels, the time of our retribution is nigh.'

'Breach head infiltrated!' Captain Raphael warned over the command channel. 'Brothers Auletio and Cannavaro are compromised. Gideon and Lorenzo, fix on their beacon signals. Now transmitting their suit frequencies. Insufficient time for rescue. Establish viability of missing brethren. Destroy if necessary. Protect our gene-seed.'

'Affirmative,' said Gideon, feeling suddenly deflated. The signal came through on his sensorium - two red blips pulsed roughly three hundred metres away. 'Signal received. Moving out.'

'Prayers of vengeance steel our souls,' said Raphael and then he was gone.

'Lorenzo, take the signal at grid eighteen-kappa,' said Gideon. 'We shall deal with the signal at twenty-kappa.'

'Affirmative, moving alongside your advance,' replied Lorenzo.

Leon was at a cross-junction, firing to the left. Gideon moved behind him and took up a defensive stance to the right. As Scipio pressed on between them, a line of genestealers emerged up a ramp in front of the sergeant.

'Suffer the wrath of the Blood Angels!' he bellowed, stepping forward to meet their charge.

Swinging his hammer, he smashed aside the first of the genestealers, its shattered body crashing into the metal wall of the narrow corridor. A second alien leapt towards Gideon and he brought up his shield. Lightning arced along the creature's outstretched claws as it struck, sending the creature into a spasm. Gideon barely brought his shield around to ward away another genestealer attacking from his right. Shifting his bulky armour in the tight space, Gideon brought his hammer down onto the head

of the stunned creature. Another was on him in moments, slashing at his abdomen, its diamond-hard claws raking strips of metal and splinters of ceramite.

Gideon used the edge of his shield as a weapon, bringing it down onto the ridged nodules of chitin protecting the creature's neck. There was a snap and the genestealer wilted to the floor. A flurry of detonations ahead cut apart two more genestealers and Omnio came into view from a side passage, his storm bolter blazing.

'Flank secured,' Omnio announced, turning his weapon towards the ramp and unleashing another salvo.

Gideon slewed his armour one hundred and eighty degrees and marched back to the junction, before turning right and following Scipio's path. Leon advanced along a parallel course, the intermittent roar of his assault cannon echoing from ahead of Gideon. As usual, Noctis brought up the rear. Quiet and dependable, Noctis fired off bursts from his storm bolter at the genestealers circling behind the squad, retreating a few steps when the opportunity allowed. Gideon slowed his own progress, allowing Noctis to catch up. No one would be left isolated this time.

A yellow glare ahead announced the arrival of Brother Zael from Squad Lorenzo. Flames flickered along the tunnel, searing through a cluster of genestealers that had leapt from an overhead gantry to land behind Scipio. The aliens writhed in the flames for a second or two and then collapsed into smouldering heaps as the inferno dissipated. Patches of burning promethium scarred the walls and floor. Gideon ignored them and pushed through the dying fires to keep pace with Scipio who was now twenty metres ahead.

'Room, thirty metres to the right,' said Gideon. 'Noctis, cover the approach.'

'Understood,' replied Noctis as he peeled away from the main corridor.

00.14.62

The sensorium showed a steady stream of genestealers approaching the two squads from ahead and behind. Noctis raised a hand in greeting as he saw Zael pass a junction in front of him.

'They'll no sooner pass me than the Gates of Varl,' said Zael as he disappeared into the gloom.

Noctis said nothing. The corridor ahead was blocked by several doors, like airlocks. Blips of the sensorium showed that genestealers were lurking close by. Noctis opened fire on the closest door, blasting it into pieces. Three genestealers turned towards the Terminator, surprised. He fired calmly, gunning down all three in two short bursts. His heavy footfalls reverberating along the corridor, Noctis advanced resolutely, firing at the next door. Another genestealer was revealed by the door's demise and it

suffered the same fate as the others, its blood spattering across a riveted bulkhead.

Two more doors later and Noctis finally reached the room to which he had been assigned. It was a loading bay of some kind, the mangled remnants of cranes and lifters angled madly in the shadows above. Huge blast doors had been burst inwards by the impact of another vessel at some immeasurably distant time in the past and an outcrop of a crenulated balcony punctured the doorway. Genestealers leapt over the parapet to the floor of the bay, landing sure-footedly and springing towards Noctis without hesitation.

Noctis fired dispassionately, regarding the aliens sprinting towards him as nothing more than moving targets. He paced his fire, unleashing rounds in sensible double-bursts so as not to jam the mechanism of the storm bolter. When he was down to his last few rounds, he turned his fire upon the balcony, gunning down the genestealers perched on the wall. Having given himself a couple of seconds' grace with this act, he ejected the empty magazine and slammed in another.

The Terminator locked the stabilising bars in the knees of his armour and settled into a solid firing posture. He began to hum quietly as he fired; the *Hymn of the Angel Resurgent*. He kept the beat with the crack of bolt rounds. He wasn't going anywhere for a while.

00.15.03

Some form of automatic response had sealed all of the doors in this part of the ship. Perhaps the hull had been breached and integrity had been lost, or maybe the ship had come under attack. Whatever the cause, the sealed doors were proving problematic. Line of sight was only a few metres in each direction and Lorenzo was forced to take the lead, his power sword a surer defence than his squad's power fists against the genestealer ambushes. Rents in his armour and caked gore bore testament to the fury of those encounters.

The pulsing icon of Brother Auletio's signal was a few metres ahead. It was surrounded by enemy contact signals. Lorenzo levelled his storm bolter at the door and fired, its rusting frame exploding under the fusillade. The rapid-fire buzz of Leon's assault cannon sounded somewhere to the right, close to Cannavaro's ident-signal.

Six genestealers poured from the room. The first was thrown back by Lorenzo's opening salvo, the alien behind deftly leaping over its tattered corpse. Lorenzo pulled the trigger to let loose another barrage of destruction but only a single bolt fired before his weapon jammed. The shell took the genestealer high in the chest, knocking it sideways. It staggered to its feet, fanged maw open.

'I am the blade of Sanguinius!' Lorenzo cried, charging forwards.

His power sword cleaved the head of the genestealer from its body. Another alien took its place, claws smashing into Lorenzo's left shoulder as it pounced. The sergeant thrust upwards, lancing his sword through the creature's exposed throat. The genestealer twisted as it fell, dragging Lorenzo's arm to one side, the power sword trapped between its vertebrae.

'Clear for fire!' shouted Deino. Lorenzo ripped free his sword and hurled himself backwards into a narrow side-corridor, smashing against the wall. Bolts screamed past where the sergeant had been a moment before and droplets of thick blood splattered the passageway.

'Move ahead and secure,' ordered Lorenzo as he righted himself.

Deino advanced past and Lorenzo fell in behind. Upon entering the room at the end of the passageway, Deino stopped suddenly.

'Emperor's mercy,' the normally cool Terminator muttered.

Lorenzo moved into the room, stepping past Deino. Scraps of red armour littered the chamber and a severed servo arm twitched in one corner, gouging a furrow into the tiles of the floor. Auletio sat with his back propped against the wall. His armour had been stripped away in many places and blood trickled from a gash across his face.

It was not the injuries to the Techmarine that had caused Deino such dismay; it was the rest of his appearance. Lorenzo could see that the Techmarine's flesh had a bluish tint to it. Auletio's skin was pocked with lesions and oddly shaped protuberances swelled underneath his pale skin. His veins were like thick cords across his arms and neck and his face was distorted. His eyes bulged and ridges were breaking through the skin of his brow. A lone fang punctured his upper lip, curving up towards his nose.

There was intelligence in Auletio's eyes, and terror. It was something Lorenzo had never seen in the eyes of another Space Marine. Auletio weakly raised an arm and groaned. Yellowish ichor oozed from his wounds, mixed with his thick blood.

'Target one located,' Lorenzo broadcast. 'Viability negative.'

'Same here,' replied Gideon from the location of the other downed Techmarine, his voice choked, his usual attention to comm protocol forgotten.

'Aggressive genetic mutation,' Omnio told them. His voice was measured and quiet. 'The genestealer's usual breeding function is to use an ovipositor to implant its seed within a victim, and this is passed on to the implantee's progeny. Space Marines do not follow the normal reproductive cycle. I would theorise that the implanted genetic material is reacting unpredictably with the Astartes modifications. Projection: damage is permanent and irreversible. Suggest immediate destruction to avoid danger of contamination.'

'Zael, I need you up here, now!' Lorenzo bellowed, his anger fuelled by distaste. Genestealers were still attacking from several directions and Lorenzo forced himself to focus on the mission. 'Valencio, stand guard at rear station. Deino, push through and link up with Gideon.'

‘Affirmative,’ replied Deino, moving out of the room through another doorway.

‘I shall protect,’ said Valencio. The thump of his footfalls receded into the corridors.

‘En route,’ Zael announced.

Lorenzo turned his eyes away from Auletio’s and span on the spot to stand over watch on the corridor Zael would be using. It made no difference; the Techmarine’s plaintive stare still hovered in the sergeant’s mind. Lorenzo remembered that his gun was still jammed and worked to clear the mechanism, dragging his thoughts back to the ongoing combat. A pair of genestealers appeared at the far end of the corridor as Lorenzo ejected the storm bolter’s magazine. The sergeant smacked home a fresh clip of shells and opened fire, glad of the release.

It had been shame of the Blood Angels’ past defeat that had driven on Lorenzo. Now a cold hatred filled him, far sharper and more motivating than any feeling of historical guilt. More genestealers boiled up from the deck below. Lorenzo fired long bursts from his storm bolter as the genestealers converged on the room, the anger welling up inside him, threatening to break through. Lorenzo resisted the urge to charge forwards and administer revenge with his power sword, though every cell of his body screamed at him to let go of his discipline and indulge the bloodthirst that lurked beneath the skin of every Blood Angel.

A wave of incinerating fury from behind the knot of genestealers announced Zael’s arrival and Lorenzo barely managed to check his fire. The sergeant stepped out of the room and into the side passage in which he had sheltered before, allowing Zael to pass.

‘Cleanse and burn,’ Lorenzo said, not looking back into the room, not wishing to see its awful contents again. He stood guard behind Zael as the Terminator reached the door.

‘Cleanse and burn!’ roared Zael and his flamer poured purifying fire into the chamber, reducing Auletio’s remains to a charred heap within seconds. ‘Go to the Angel and be proud of your sacrifice, Brother Auletio. You will be received with glory and forgiveness.’

The drawn-out rattle of an assault cannon from the other side of the deck followed shortly after.

‘Objective terminated,’ Gideon grimly announced on the comm.

‘Objective terminated,’ replied Lorenzo, his voice quivering with rage. ‘Now, let us join the attack.’

00.15.55

At the heart of the space hulk, the creature that had newly surfaced to sentience flexed sinews and muscles that had been immobile for centuries. As strength returned to its body, so too did the numbers of the brood swell. More and more of its progeny awoke, spurred into consciousness by the

imperative of the brood mind. It felt their presence and opened its eyes, recognising itself for the first time, understanding its purpose: Broodlord. In the gloom, thousands of eyes glittered in the light from the false stars far above. The prey had been goaded into action and came closer. Hundreds of the brood perished as the red-skinned hunters advanced. It did not matter. They existed to die for the life of their brood.

Not in this place would it lurk. The others of its kind needed space to awaken; its brood-presence suppressed their stirring minds. Unfolding powerful limbs, stretching thawing sinews, the Broodlord raised itself to its feet, towering above its progeny. Old recollections of dens and lairs, tunnels and pathways flickered into its memory. These were its hunting grounds, it knew their tangled web in every detail. Still stiff from its anabiosis, the creature stalked slowly across the chamber, its brood parting before it. Craning its neck to loosen tight fibres, extending joints long frozen by stasis, it compelled the brood to follow. It ducked into a hole rent into the wall and dropped to the ground below, its claws ringing on the metal deck. Ahead lay the warren of tunnels where it would strike. In the dark, the brood would wait. Their time was coming soon.

00.18.29

There was little chatter between the members of Squads Lorenzo and Gideon, the veteran warriors disturbed by what had become of the captured Techmarines. Only the occasional muttered devotional broke the comm silence as the two sergeants led their men back through the space hulk towards the main Blood Angels force.

‘Lorenzo and Gideon, this is Raphael,’ the captain’s voice broke through the quiet. ‘We are locating suitable target points for release of toxins. Expecting high resistance. We have to thin the numbers of the enemy. You have a new mission. I need you to perform a diversionary attack. There is a secondary cluster of inactive life signals near to your position, at grid four-theta. Destroy the dormant genestealers and trigger a counter-attack from the main group.’

‘Affirmative,’ said Lorenzo, and Gideon gave a similar acknowledgement.

‘Our moment of retribution approaches,’ said Raphael.

‘In the Angel’s eyes we shall know victory,’ replied Gideon.

The objective was clear on the sensorium - a mass of low-grade signals roughly two hundred metres away. Lorenzo detailed the squad into an attack formation and took a position in the middle of the group, ready to move forward to bolster the attack or fall back to defend the rear.

‘Zael, your heavy flamer will be best suited to the annihilation of the incubating genestealers,’ said Lorenzo. ‘Conserve as much ammunition as possible en route.’

‘Same for you, Leon,’ said Gideon. ‘Don’t get carried away.’

There were grunts of disappointed consent from both Space Marines.

'What about this counter-attack?' asked Omnio. 'Direction? Strength?'

'Strength unknown, but i've been studying the schematic,' said Scipio. 'There's a long concourse that runs the length of the freight wreck where the main concentration in located. It comes up through what seems to be a series of collapsed elevator shafts. If we can gain the advantage of position we should be able to cut them down as they emerge.'

'Good,' said Lorenzo. 'We don't have time to destroy the dormants and then get to the defensive position. We'll set up a perimeter while you annihilate the target.'

'Understood,' said Gideon. 'We'll reinforce as soon as the mission is completed. Let the Emperor spread our hatred of the foe.'

'In his name we smite the unclean,' replied Lorenzo.

The two squads took diverging courses through the bowels of an old warship's gun batteries. Some distant reactor still trickled out a fitful stream of energy and red lights flickered overhead. Great arched windows of reinforced ferroglass were smashed and distorted, revealing a ruddy view of the tortured innards of another vessel.

While Gideon and his warriors cut into the depths of the frigate's interior, Lorenzo led his squad to the left through immense shadows cast by misshapen, corroded guns. The war engines of an age gone past were encased in crumbling bunkers of masonry, rusted supports jutting from the cracked and flaking rockcrete. Magazines where shells the size of tanks had once been stored were now chambers filled with dunes of oxidised metal and inert grey propellant. The Terminators waded thigh-deep through these artificial drifts, alert for danger, their attention never wavering from the telltale displays of the sensorium.

Perhaps stirred into life by the nearing presence of the Terminators, a few of the life forms on the scanner surged in activity. Their signals brightened and began to move. They did not come straight at the Space Marines, as they had done in the first minutes of the battle. They coalesced into small groups and then the groups drifted together, gathering their strength.

'Why don't they attack?' asked Valencio.

'Would you?' replied Deino. Valencio thought about this for a moment. 'No,' he conceded. 'But I'm not an animal. I have reason and experience that tells me that attacking piecemeal is doomed to failure. These things have just woken, they cannot know what we are.'

'They learn, right enough,' growled Lorenzo. He shouldered open a door, the old metal screeching and disintegrating under the weight of his armour. Beyond lay a black corridor with doorless archways every few metres. 'Those that survived learnt from the deaths of the others. They changed and adapted quickly. Quicker than we could…'

'Psychic?' said Valencio.

'Very likely,' Lorenzo said, pausing beside the nearest arch and turning his suit to direct its lamps into the darkness. The cones of light revealed

seized gears and broken chains with links larger than the Space Marines. The ceiling was lost in shadows, the ancient mechanism concealed hundreds of metres above. Lorenzo turned back to the main corridor. ‘It does not matter how they do it. We must be ready, whatever their tactics.’

‘Victory is the reward of the vigilant,’ said Zael.

Footfalls muffled, their lights swallowed by the vastness of the gallery, the squad moved on towards the elevator shafts.

00.19.14

‘Just like tar—’ began Leon, but Scipio cut across him.

‘Don’t say it!’ he hissed. ‘You said that about the orks and I lost a leg. Look, there’s movement on the sensorium.’

‘Weapons check,’ ordered Gideon, pressing the stud of his thunder hammer. Its heavy head glowed from within, sheathing the weapon with a blue aura. A test of his storm shield’s power supply had equal success. Around him, the squad calibrated targeter links and checked magazines. Leon brought the rotating barrels of his assault cannon up to full speed and loosed off a short burst of fire at a pile of leaking barrels at the far end of the passageway. They disintegrated into metal splinters and puddles of thick fluid.

‘Combat ready,’ Leon reported, echoed by the other squad members.

The genestealers’ nest was barely twenty metres away, across a narrow aqueduct-like bridge, with raised sides and a channel along its length through which trickled a thick green slime. The sensorium showed a concentration of more than thirty of the creatures just ahead, in a condensed mass of crushed rooms and contorted corridors.

‘Quick, across the bridge,’ said Gideon, waving Scipio forward. It was a sturdy structure, its plascrete piles covered with strange black moss but showing no damage. The gap below was shrouded in darkness and sensorium readings showed the drop to be approximately fifteen metres. Suspension cables creaked and groaned as the squad moved on to the bridge.

‘There’s something wrong with my sensorium link,’ said Omnio. ‘Brother-sergeant, I’m getting false readings.’

‘Mine also,’ said Leon.

Gideon checked his own sensorium and saw registered life forms barely ten metres away. That would put them on the bridge.

‘Overhead!’ shouted Scipio, turning and firing above the heads of the squad. A four-armed body plummeted from the shadows of the bridge’s suspension towers, trailing blood. Gideon looked up as best as his armour would allow and saw more shapes crawling across the ceiling and dropping onto the support pillars.

‘Spread out, cover each other!’ he shouted, raising his storm shield as a genestealer leapt the gap from pylon to bridge, landing a metre in front of

the sergeant.

He smashed the creature from the aqueduct with a backhanded swipe of his hammer just as another genestealer landed behind him. Armour feedback warnings flashed red in his display as it gouged a long furrow though the back of his left leg. Turning awkwardly, he desperately fended off its next attack with his shield. All around, more aliens were dropping onto the bridge. The Terminators struggled to raise their weapons to the required elevation and were forced to resort to shooting their foes at hand-to-hand range and blasting the genestealers from each other's backs.

More genestealers swarmed along the bridge, cornering the squad from the front, left and right. Scipio smashed a creature to a pulp with a single blow from his power fist. Leon was cursing constantly, unable to use his assault cannon at such close quarters. An ammunition pack on Omnio's belt exploded, hurling a genestealer out into the void with a blossom of flame, Omnio lurching in the opposite direction. He stumbled against the retaining wall, the impact of his heavy suit crumbling the ancient plascrete.

As he righted himself, a genestealer landed on his shoulders and the wall turned to dust under their weight, sending the two of them sprawling into the shadows. Omnio's lamps span crazily in the darkness, tumbling for a moment and then going dark.

'Omnio!' Gideon bellowed, shoulder charging a genestealer, his momentum lifting the alien off its feet and throwing it over the edge of the bridge.

'Suit compromised, occupant intact,' Omnio replied, his voice calm and clear. 'Fell on some wreckage. Lamps damaged. System support integrity at eighty per cent. Power couplings intermittent to left arm and sensorium. Something has punctured my lower back. Injury not critical. Enemy… er… squashed.'

The sensorium was showing blips all around the squad, so close Gideon could not tell if they were above, below or right in front of him. Scipio had pushed through to the end of the bridge and was standing overwatch. There were a few more genestealers still on the bridge, wreaking havoc.

'Can you see if there's anything else down there with you?' Gideon asked. He moved forwards, sweeping aside a genestealer clinging onto Noctis's storm bolter arm. Noctis gave a nod of thanks and took up position back-to-back with Scipio. His disciplined fire strafed across the bridge supports, the bodies of more genestealers tumbling into the darkness amidst the bolt detonations.

Crunches of powdering plascrete and groans of grinding metal echoed from below as Omnio pushed himself to his feet. A fitful light announced his location, intermittently strobing across the tangle of fallen pylons and cables from another bridge that had once run alongside the aqueduct.

'Nothing on infrared,' Omnio reported. 'Power unstable. Hard to walk. Going comm-silent to reroute power to sensorium. I'll meet you at the

nest.'

'Affirmative, Omnio,' replied Gideon. He glanced around and saw that the bridge was now clear of enemies. 'The Angel watches you in the darkness.'

'You too,' said Omnio and then his link turned to static.

The constant fire from Scipio demonstrated that more and more genestealers were awakening. However, the attack was having an effect. Captain Raphael spoke on the comm.

'Genestealer force breaking away from main concentration,' he announced. 'Good work, Gideon. Lorenzo, prepare for engagement. Estimate two thousand hostiles. No friendly forces in your area. Purge with freedom!'

'Affirmative,' said Lorenzo. 'Our vengeance shall be written in the blood of the foe.' There was a hiss as Lorenzo changed channel to inter-squad frequency. 'Gideon, request termination of target with utmost haste.'

'Affirmative,' said Gideon. 'We'll be as quick as we can. Hold on and watch our backs.'

'We will not fail,' Lorenzo assured his battle-brothers.

00.20.99

Its progeny fought and died. Under its urging they had amassed their numbers. Now they attacked in force, seeking to overwhelm the armoured hunters. Fire and explosions filled the metal hole the brood were using to approach their prey. Many fell, but more were coming. The brood mind pulsed and grew and the creature could feel its powers reaching their zenith.

It sensed the minds of the hunters, beyond the throbbing instinct of the brood, their spirits armoured, like their bodies. Meaningless chatter filled their thoughts, but through the core of their beings blazed a harsh light, encasing their souls and protecting them. It probed harder, seeking a weakness. Their anger and their hatred were powerful, concepts it knew of only from others of their kind who had come before. Concepts like fear and horror. The prey that had come before had been weak. These were strong. It would need to look upon them to break their barriers.

Gathering a bodyguard of genestealers about itself, the broodlord began to ascend the shaft, clawing its way up the metal walls. More fire engulfed those ahead, their burning corpses dropping past into the depths. It climbed swiftly, urging on the brood to swarm forwards.

It laid its eyes upon the first of them, the fire breather. The prey paused for a moment, the reflective lenses of its eyes fixing on the broodlord. The moment of hesitation was all the broodlord needed to extend the will of the broodmind and touch upon the mind of its victim. The hunter fought for a moment, struggling against the alien will invading its thoughts. Rather than succumb to the psychic suggestion, its brain shut out all thought and

the armoured creature fell into a coma, collapsing heavily to the ground. The broodlord considered this impassively. The creatures would not be controlled, but they could be rendered vulnerable.

As more of the flaming projectile grubs bit at its flesh, the broodlord turned its gaze upon the next victim.

00.21.64

Leon's assault cannon tore apart the dormant genestealers, ripping through their hunched forms in a storm of shells and gore. In long lines they lay upon the floor of a high, arched chamber, like grotesque, giant foetuses. Many were covered with patches of lichen and the webs of spiders. Clusters of insect eggs mottled their chitinous hide and whole streams of slick plant life trailed from crouched bodies. Some of the genestealers woke amidst the tumult but were quickly cut down. It was butchery, and it filled Gideon with righteous warmth as he watched the destruction of his enemies.

'There's more down here,' said Scipio, pointing towards the shadows underneath the splitting remains of some gigantic pulpit.

'Enjoy yourself,' said Leon, turning the assault cannon onto another row of hibernating aliens. 'I'm busy.'

'Thank you,' said Scipio, opening fire with his storm bolter. Screeches of pain echoed along the cathedral, stopped abruptly as Scipio continued to fire.

'Squad Gideon, this is Laertes,' a voice came through on the comm, another Terminator sergeant. 'Verify position of Squad Lorenzo. They're supposed to be guarding our flank.'

'They are just to your…' began Gideon, checking the sensorium and wondering why Laertes even needed to ask. He stopped because something was wrong. The life signals of Lorenzo and his squad were clear enough, but they were unmoving. Swarms of contacts were moving past their location. 'I cannot confirm their status. Can you investigate? Objective almost complete, we will join you shortly.'

'Affirmative, Gideon,' said Laertes. 'Remain on mission.'

'Bring light to the places of shadow,' said Gideon. 'We bear the Angel's flaming torch,' Laertes replied.

00.22.37

During more than three centuries of war, Claudio had never encountered such reckless ferocity. Orks were savage and ill-disciplined, but their will could be broken. The cold frenzy and utter disregard of the genestealers meant that no matter how many he slew, they kept attacking. It was alien and unnerving, and that meant Claudio fought all the harder.

He slashed and swiped with his suit's lightning claws, each fist armed with several blades as long as swords wreathed in arcing energy. Electricity spat and crackled as he carved open the ribcage of a genestealer, its blood hissing into vapour. Claws met claws as another alien attacked. The Terminator's weapons sheared through its arms and he decapitated the genestealer with a purposeful flick of the wrist.

'Sergeant!' he called out, but there was no response. 'Angelo? Germanus? Victis?'

A glance at the sensorium confirmed that the rest of the squad were dead. A wave of wrath flowed through Claudio at the realisation, matched by the surge of power through his armour as he broke into a lumbering run, striking out to the left and right as he ploughed through the genestealers massed around him.

'The Angel demands justice!' he roared, gouging the entrails from an alien to his right. He cut through the spine of another and cleaved the leg from a third. 'Death demands vengeance!'

For all his anger, Claudio was surrounded. Alien claws scratched at his shoulder pads and raked across his chestplate. Leering fanged faces appeared out of the darkness, teeth clamped onto his arms and legs. He felt their blows punching through his armour, digging into flesh and bone. Pain suppressants and healing stimulants flowed through his suit, stemming the blood flow and washing away the agony. With a wordless shriek, Claudio threw back his attackers, lightning claws glittering.

Blue lightning spat from the darkness, leaping from one genestealer to the next. Heads exploded and eyeballs steamed as the bolt continued its haphazard course. Within moments the corridor was empty of foes. Only their smoking corpses remained. A massive figure stepped into the lamplight, his armour painted blue in the heraldry of the Librarium.

'Brother Calistarius!' gasped Claudio.

The figure turned his helmed head towards Claudio, as if noticing him for the first time. Motes of sparkling energy played around the sword in his hand and danced along the cables entwining the Librarian's helm.

'Brother Claudio,' he replied in quiet recognition. 'It is good that you are alive.'

Claudio was not so sure. His battle-brothers had all been slain. He decided to change the subject.

'What of Squad Lorenzo?'

'They are alive,' Calistarius replied. 'For the moment. Come with me, we must hasten to their rescue.'

'Rescue?' asked Claudio as he fell in behind the Librarian.

'An alien psychic attack has paralysed their nervous systems. They live but are immobile. I feel their desperation. The enemy will return and kill them if we do not reach them first.'

'Squad Gideon is closer, you must warn them!'

‘I have already apprised Gideon of the situation,’ Calistarius said patiently. ‘They are still completing the annihilation mission. We will rendezvous with Gideon once I have revived Lorenzo and his squad.’

They ducked in turn beneath the crooked lintel of a doorway, passing into a series of rooms with ceilings that bowed down as if a great weight were pressing on them. Ahead, the sensorium glowed with contact echoes.

‘It is just the two of us?’ asked Claudio.

‘You were giving good account of yourself before I arrived,’ said Calistarius ‘I can feel your determination like a furnace in my mind.’

Claudio was uncomfortable with the idea of the Librarian sensing his thoughts, and then caught himself, wondering if these doubts were equally transparent. Claudio decided to occupy himself with another matter.

‘This psychic attack, I do not understand why we have not encountered it before,’ he said.

‘Something has changed,’ the Librarian replied. ‘There is a guiding force, a focus that I can sense. Something new, yet something… *old*.’

There was something about the way Calistarius said the word that lurked in the recesses of Claudio’s mind. Space Marines could know no fear, but the Terminator had a feeling of foreboding, of an emerging threat not yet fully comprehended. It was an unpleasant sensation and he tried to dismiss it.

‘I will need you to protect me while I revive the others,’ warned Calistarius. ‘I must enter their minds and rouse them from their paralysis. I must be in close proximity to each one of them and my attention will be momentarily elsewhere.’

‘My claws will be your shield,’ Claudio promised.

Ascending an open, winding staircase of rusted metal, the Terminators came upon a dense huddle of rooms. The genestealers were returning, coming from the right, while the markers of Lorenzo and his squad were to the left.

‘Let us be swift and bolster our numbers,’ said Calistarius, turning to the left.

The Librarian stopped immediately and Claudio almost walked into his back. Ahead a heavy pressure door had dropped almost to the floor. There was enough of a gap that it seemed open on the sensorium, but in truth the warriors’ bulky Terminator armour was not capable of stooping low enough to pass.

‘Make way,’ said Claudio. Calistarius backed up, allowing his comrade to stand before the door. Diverting as much reserve power as he could find to his lightning claws, Claudio launched himself at the pressure door. Electricity crawled across its surface as he plunged the blades into the barrier. His suit protesting with groans and whines, Claudio carved an opening, metal falling to the floor in molten droplets, sparks bouncing from his armour. With a punch, he sent a door-sized portion of the bulkhead tumbling and clanging along the corridor beyond.

‘Hurry,’ Claudio said, ducking through the opening.

The Librarian was close on his heel and the two of them stomped towards the closest flashing icon. Deino lay slumped in the corner of a small chamber that had once served as some form of medical facility. Dulled scalpels, oxide-stained drills and other instruments sat in neat rows on rusted workbenches, undisturbed for millennia. An overturned gurney scored with claw marks lay to one side. Deino was unmoving but his life signal was slow and steady. His storm bolter was still held tightly in his grip.

‘Rouse him,’ urged Claudio. Calistarius said nothing as he crossed the room. He sheathed his sword and a nimbus of blue energy swathed his empty hand. The Librarian laid it upon the brow of Deino’s helm and the light flowed over the unconscious Space Marine. Seconds passed and Claudio fretted, watching the closing sensorium signals.

With a wheeze of mechanical joints, Deino sat up. He raised his storm bolter and looked around.

‘Eyes…’ he muttered. Calistarius helped him to stand. ‘Where are the others?’

‘Near at hand, and alive,’ Calistarius told him. The Librarian turned towards Claudio. ‘It was a psychic attack, but our battle-brothers’ sleep is natural. They can be woken normally. We should split up and restore the others.’

‘I will attend to the sergeant,’ said Claudio.

Deino nodded and turned towards the door. ‘I shall find Brother Zael.’

‘Sergeant Gideon approaches,’ said Calistarius. ‘We need to link up with his squad as soon as possible. When Brother Zael is awake, send him to Gideon.’

While Calistarius stepped into the ward next door, Deino advanced into the corridors on the far side of the medical bay. Claudio headed out the door by which he had entered. He steered himself towards the signal from Lorenzo’s suit, barely fifteen metres away. Looking at his sensorium, the Terminator knew that the first of the genestealers would be upon him before he reached the sergeant. Lightning claws crackling, he stalked along the passageway.

The closest sensorium blip resolved itself into three life forms and within a heartbeat they raced along the corridor towards Claudio. More were moving, out of sight, towards Deino and the Librarian. Claudio stopped and took up a fighting stance, legs braced, lightning claws raised.

‘I am vengeance,’ he snarled as the first genestealer leapt at him. With a blast of energy, the Terminator’s lightning claws sheared the creature in half, flinging the ragged remains against each wall. Claudio punched the blades of his right fist through the chest of the second alien and carved the head from the third. As Claudio advanced the remains of the genestealer slid from his claws, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

More genestealers intercepted Claudio before he reached Lorenzo. The Blood Angel seethed with fury as he hacked and slashed his way forward. Images of his battle-brothers burned in his mind: Sergeant Leodinus welcoming Claudio to the squad; sparring with Angelo at the fortress-monastery; Germanus winning the Swordsman's Laurel Victis; using his chainfist to cut through the hull of a traitor tank. Last and most painful was the memory of Caladonis. They had joined the Scout Company at the same time, fought side-by-side in the Sixth Company and eventually became Terminators together. Truly they had been battle-brothers.

Even as the rage threatened to overwhelm Claudio he found himself at the door to the chamber where Lorenzo had fallen. Panting he sliced the arm from a genestealer and cut open its throat. Claudio's suit was making all manner of warning noises about his pulse rate and blood pressure, threatening even the superhuman system of a Space Marine. Composing his rampaging thoughts, he turned into the room.

Sergeant Lorenzo lay draped over a pile of genestealer bodies, his power sword jutting from the spine of a dead foe. Checking there were no genestealers close at hand, Claudio deactivated his claws, the simple act calming him further. He laid a hand reverentially on Lorenzo's shoulder and shook him. There was no response.

'Sergeant?' Claudio barked across the inter-squad, grabbing Lorenzo with both hands and rolling him to his back.

In a heartbeat Lorenzo was up, shoving Claudio back. The sergeant swept up his sword, its blade stopping just short of Claudio's head. Claudio grabbed Lorenzo's wrist and pushed it to one side.

'I'm sorry,' said Lorenzo, stepping back, obviously disoriented. 'I thought you were the creature. What happened?'

'Explanations and apologies can wait, brother-sergeant,' Claudio said, stooping to retrieve Lorenzo's storm bolter from where it had been dropped to the decking. He handed the weapon to the sergeant and faced the door. With a thrum of power and a burst of electricity, Claudio activated his claws once more. 'The enemy await their punishment.'

The two of them headed back towards the others, Lorenzo providing covering fire for Claudio as he chopped his way through the warren of tunnels and rooms. Zael reported over the comm that he was awake and was moving with Calistarius to link up with Gideon's squad. Deino had roused Valencio to consciousness and the pair were fighting back-to-back against increasing numbers of genestealers. Goriel had recovered also and was trying his best to fight his way through to his sergeant.

00.25.08

Their forces scattered by the enemy's psychic attack, it took several minutes for the Terminators to join each other. As Lorenzo and Claudio

met with Goriel, Calistarius arrived with Gideon close behind. Zael had been despatched to protect their rear.

As Gideon's squad filed past, Lorenzo counted only four warriors. He realised that Brother Omnio was missing.

'We shall grieve for the fallen even as we avenge them,' said Lorenzo as Gideon stopped beside him.

'He fell into the darkness,' Gideon replied, anger in his voice. 'No brother should die alone.'

'A means for our revenge may be close by,' Calistarius cut in. 'When I reached into the mind of Brother Deino, I detected the lingering presence of something else, and I felt it also when I woke Brother Goriel.'

Gunfire from further down the corridor heralded the arrival of Deino and Valencio. Their suits of armour were much scarred and bloodied, but both appeared to be free from serious injury.

'I'm glad somebody realises there's still fighting to be done,' said Scipio.

'Yes, we should join the attack on the main enemy cluster,' said Gideon. 'Every warrior will be needed.'

'Wait!' said Calistarius as Lorenzo turned away. 'You have not yet heard what I have to say.'

'My apologies, Brother-Librarian,' said Lorenzo, turning back to face Calistarius. 'Deino, Valencio, Goriel, set up a perimeter.'

'Join them, Scipio, as you are so eager to fight,' said Gideon. There was a grunt of disappointment from Brother Leon. 'I have not forgotten you, Leon. Relieve Brother Zael as rear guard.'

'Acknowledged,' growled Leon and he set off at speed.

'What wisdom do you bring, Brother Calistarius?' Leon asked the Librarian. Storm bolter fire sounded along the corridors. 'I ask only that you be brief in your explanation.'

'Can you not sense its presence?' said the Librarian. 'Can you not feel a singing in your blood? There is some *thing* close at hand that calls to us. The Angel is guiding our feet upon a different path.'

Lorenzo remained silent. He was aware of a strange sensation within. It was almost below awareness, a tiny nagging feeling in his mind. It felt as if a distant chorus was singing a war-hymn at the edge of hearing and its dimly heard refrain stirred his blood. The sergeant felt a little more energised than he had done before. The retorts of the storm bolters sounded sharper. The flash of muzzle flares appeared a little brighter. He felt more *alive*.

'I feel it,' the sergeant said.

'What is it?'

'I do not know,' Calistarius admitted. 'But I can find it.'

'I feel it also,' said Gideon. 'Could this not be some trick of the enemy? We should join the others.'

‘It is the Angel’s siren song,’ said Calistarius, his words quiet, almost ethereal. ‘There is no taint, no impurity in that holy voice.’ The Librarian pointed over Lorenzo’s shoulder, towards Deino and the others. His voice was firm once more. ‘It is this way.’

‘We cannot be distracted from our primary mission,’ said Gideon. ‘The attack on the alien nest is our objective. Those are Captain Raphael’s orders.’

‘Go to your brothers,’ said Calistarius with no hint of annoyance. ‘With the Captain’s permission, I shall seek this object myself.’

‘My squad will escort you,’ said Lorenzo. ‘You are too valuable to lose in this manner, Brother-Librarian. I cannot allow you to go alone.’

There was a moment of silence and Lorenzo detected the buzz of a secure transmission close at hand.

‘I have informed Captain Raphael of our plan and he gives us his blessing,’ said Calistarius. ‘We will see you again soon enough, Sergeant Gideon.’

‘Very well, I agree,’ said Gideon, though it was plain from his tone that he did not like the idea. ‘We shall return to the main force and Lorenzo shall follow our revered Brother-Librarian. Do not spend too long on this.’

‘May the Angel will it,’ said Lorenzo.

00.26.11

They encountered only scattered groups of genestealers as Calistarius guided Squad Lorenzo through the twisting depths towards the source of the phenomenon; most of the aliens were concentrating their attacks on the main Blood Angels force. Now and then a burst of storm bolter fire or the crackle of the Librarian’s psychic powers echoed back down the corridors to Goriel, who was stationed at the rear of the makeshift squad. There was no threat to the rear and Goriel felt a growing frustration at his inaction.

Ever since he had been roused from the psychic attack, Goriel had felt different. More whole. He could feel the emanating sensation that Calistarius had described. It was something that lingered in his mind and pulsed through his veins with every beat of his hearts. Something in the darkness was reaching out to him and his entire being was reaching back.

They passed into a wide, open deck, with a high vaulted ceiling and a long gallery of tall arched windows. An immense shape blotted out the view of the stars, the bulk of a ship crushed into the side of the vessel they were currently investigating. The floor and ceiling of the chamber were buckled and the Terminators had to clamber over folded ridges of metal. In the wide space they spread into a line abreast and Goriel made his way over to the left flank, close to the windows.

The further they advanced, the more Goriel felt the tug of the presence Brother Calistarius had detected. It seemed that each step filled Goriel with greater energy, that every stride brought him closer to some goal that

he had longed for but never known. He swivelled to the left and right, suit lamps dancing over the haphazardly corrugated deck as he searched for enemies. He stopped and turned fully to his left, allowing the lights to penetrate the darkness beyond the windows. What they revealed caused him to gasp in amazement.

'Sergeant,' he croaked, his wonder choking the words in his throat.

'What is it?' answered Lorenzo.

'Look,' Goriel whispered back.

In the twin glares of his lamps the side of the neighbouring vessel was revealed. It was large and had settled against the hulk at a steep angle. The view from the window was restricted, but despite its unfamiliar tilt and partial obscurity, the blazon upon the side of the vessel was instantly recognisable: the winged blood drop of the Blood Angels.

'By the grace of the Angel,' said Lorenzo, hushed. The others looked on in dumbfounded silence.

'We have been brought here for a purpose,' Calistarius eventually said. 'We all hear the call and must answer it.'

'We have to find a way to gain entry,' said Goriel, turning so that his lamps played over the walls of the large chamber. A tangle of wreckage sprawled from floor to ceiling where the two vessels had collided, creating a jarring vista of warped decks and contorted bulkheads.

'We will find a way in,' said Lorenzo.

The sergeant led the squad as quickly as the undulating floor would allow, until the Terminators were standing before the wall of twisted metal and broken rockcrete. They split up along the length of the barrier, seeking a way to climb up or break through. Zael pulled at girders with his power fist and answering creaks from above warned that the mass was unstable. Goriel spied a half-hidden airlock portal about five metres above his head. His excitement growing, he sought some means of ascending to its level.

'Careful,' said Lorenzo. 'Check the sensorium.'

There were life signals beyond the mass of metal, inside the Blood Angels ship. The thought of genestealers aboard provoked two responses in Goriel. The first was hope, for if they had found a way to gain entry, so too would the Terminators. The second was anger, and his desire to get aboard and cleanse the taint of the alien from the sacred decks of the ancient ship fuelled his search.

'Over here!' Valencio called out. He was bent to one knee, his lamps shining into a dark hole that came up to waist height. 'I think there's a pressure door here, if we can get to it.'

Valencio's chainfist spat sparks as he cut through metal struts. Goriel and Zael added the strength of their power fists, pulverising blocks of ferrocrete and bending girders out of Valencio's path. It did not take long to clear access to the exterior doorway.

'Make way,' said Calistarius and the others stepped back to allow him to reach the door. The librarian examined the portal, running a gauntleted

hand over the seals, his eyes lingering for a while on a keypad set into a recess next to the door. ‘We will have to force it.’

Clearing more space for themselves to work, the Terminators unearthed two huge hinges. Valencio set to cutting through the immense bolts while the others used their power fists to batter handholds into the thick steel. A minute’s labour was rewarded when, with a shriek of tearing metal, the door sagged inwards and then crashed to the ground. Goriel was the first through, shoving aside the wreckage. He found himself in an access hatch that opened out onto a long corridor that ran a considerable length of the ship in each direction.

‘Contact!’ he yelled, opening fire as a genestealer scuttled around a corner and bounded towards him.

The others followed swiftly through the airlock and took up defensive positions as more genestealers spilled into the corridor. Seeing their bodies torn apart by the explosive bolts of the Terminators filled Goriel with a growing elation. More than ever before, the deaths of his foes sang in his veins. Each death was a blow struck in vengeance; vengeance for the massacre six hundred years past. Yet it was something more than that. The resonance that throbbed through his being had grown stronger the closer he had come to the ancient Blood Angels vessel.

Thoughts not entirely of his own creation flittered through his mind; glimpses of worlds and foes he had never seen. Fighting back the images trying to crowd into his mind, Goriel gunned down the genestealers with joy.

The first wave of genestealer attacks was halted, though others were near at hand and closing fast. Lorenzo ordered the squad to move towards the prow of the vessel, seeking some clue as to its identity. The sergeant sent Goriel ahead as he stopped at a dust-carpeted display panel and grid of runekeys upon the wall.

The surroundings were disturbingly familiar after the chaos Goriel had seen in other parts of the hulk. He could be on a deck of the strike cruiser a thousand kilometres away, or the battlebarge that had served as his home for much of his time in the 3rd Company. Though ancient and poorly maintained, the ship was proportioned and designed in the Imperial style. As he stood watch, guarding a junction that turned towards the main dorsal corridor, Goriel half expected to see more of his battle-brothers advance around the corner, ghosts of the long-dead crew.

‘A few systems are still being powered by the reactor,’ announced Lorenzo. ‘Most of the primary functions are still working. Life support, power output, engines, all on standby.’ There was a pause and then Lorenzo gave a sigh of success. ‘This vessel is called the *Wrath of Baal*.’

‘*Wrath of Baal*?’ echoed Calistarius. ‘I know of this ship.’

‘We should move to a more defensible position,’ said Lorenzo, cutting short any explanation by the Librarian. The squad advanced towards the centre of the ship, Lorenzo guiding them with the aid of the sensorium.

‘Find the chapel,’ said Calistarius as they descended an open stairwell, the metal of the steps thundering with the crash of their boots. ‘The *Wrath of Baal* was lost in the warp thousands of years ago, when the Imperium was born. What few records remain tell of an important cargo, brought from Terra shortly after the traitors’ defeat.’

‘What cargo?’ asked Valencio.

The stairwell brought them onto a wide landing with corridors branching off at right angles in three directions. Calistarius remained quiet while the squad organised themselves. From the contacts on the sensorium data, they were moving closer to another concentration of genestealers.

‘The chapel is ahead,’ said Lorenzo, indicating the corridor that led towards the bow of the ship. Goriel took up the point position and led the squad forwards. ‘Why would we seek cargo in the chapel, and not the hold?’

‘The *Wrath of Baal* carries an artefact of great value, although exactly what it is, I do not know,’ replied the Librarian. ‘That we can feel it, sense its presence, speaks of its importance. Many relics were carried away from the fighting and kept safe in stasis chambers in the reclusiums of the ships: banners borne by our greatest heroes, revered remains, antiquities related to the Angel.’

Genestealers were now closing in from several directions, their forces numerous but divided. Goriel pressed ahead quickly, eager to discover the nature of the artefact that resounded so deeply within his soul.

On Lorenzo’s instructions, Zael broke off from the squad and headed to the right, where he would be able to use his flamer to cut off one of the enemy’s approaches. The sergeant directed Valencio and Claudio to the left, towards an antechamber on the approach to the main chapel. The others headed towards the reclusium as directly as the network of corridors would allow.

The first of a new wave of genestealers broke from the darkness as Goriel entered a small sanctuary room. The flaking remains of wooden benches lined the walls and scraps of material lay amidst golden rings, the remains of banners that had once been hung with pride upon the walls.

Goriel opened fire, the explosive bolts of his weapon decapitating the first genestealer and ripping apart the chest of the second. A third entered the room and Goriel sidestepped to his right, still firing. Lorenzo came up beside him and the two Terminators cut down several more aliens as they crowded into the narrow doorway ahead.

Beyond the bloodied remains, Goriel could see a large doorway, decorated with a relief design of the Blood Angels’ Chapter symbol. Seeing it sent a burst of energy through Goriel and he stormed forwards, crushing the genestealers’ bodies underfoot.

‘Watch to the left,’ ordered Lorenzo. Goriel snapped out of his sudden mania and turned just before the chapel doors as more genestealers came leaping up through an open conveyor shaft. As their claws scraped for

purchase, Goriel emptied the remainder of his magazine into the aliens, hurling their bodies back into the dark depths from which they had erupted.

Lorenzo turned to the right and Calistarius moved up between the two Terminators to examine the door.

'It has an intact seal,' the Librarian said.

'Can you open it?' asked Goriel. 'We must get inside.'

'The ciphers of these locks were usually lines from one of the battle litanies,' said Calistarius. He began to punch sequences into a keypad beside the door. The first and second were answered by a flashing red light a warning klaxon began to blare through the corridors.

More genestealers charged towards the squad, to be met by a hail of fire from Goriel. This close to the chapel, and the mysterious artefact within, the Space Marine heard every exploding round as a martial drumbeat, crashing in time with the beating of his hearts. The sensation was almost overwhelming. With a clank of hidden bars falling into place, the door to the chapel opened behind him.

'I was right,' said Calistarius. 'It was, "Dedicate your blood to the service of mankind".'

The energy flowing from within the vault hit Goriel like a thunderbolt. Like a river bursting its banks, pent up hatred and righteous fury filled the Terminator. The urge to slay engulfed him, even as his body and soul were infused with rending pain.

00.32.88

Valencio poured fire into a stream of genestealers surging through the junction ahead of him. Flashes of lightning exploded around the corner from where, just out of sight, Claudio cut through those aliens that survived Valencio's deadly bursts of fire.

Suddenly a sensation struck Valencio with all the force of a battle cannon shell. For a moment his mind was swamped with a single vision. It was of Sanguinius, Primarch of the Blood Angels. The Angel lay bleeding and broken upon a floor writhing with molten, screaming faces. His wings were tattered and red-stained feathers littered the floor around him. His gold and red armour was gouged and split and his white robes soaked with gore. Great wounds upon his arms and chest seeped crimson and tears of blood streamed down the primarch's beatific face. A shadow loomed over the Angel, amorphous and brooding, utterly black and evil. Pain raged through Valencio. His body felt rent in a dozen places as he shared the agony of his primarch. Countless voices sang out in Valencio's ears, a heavenly requiem both beautiful and chilling.

As forcefully as it had begun, the vision passed and Valencio found himself down on one knee, a genestealer rushing towards him. He pulled up his storm bolter and fired just as the creature tensed to leap, the spray

of bolt shells punching the genestealer from its feet. Standing, Valencio pumped two more shots into the writhing alien.

A wordless shout, full of anger and grief, roared over the comm. Valencio turned to see Goriel advancing across a junction, his storm bolter spewing a continuous stream of fire. He passed out of sight, heading towards a large knot of contacts on the sensorium. Lorenzo was shouting also, ordering Goriel to remain in position.

'Recover the artefact, protect the Brother-Librarian,' the sergeant ordered. Valencio saw Lorenzo following Goriel along the corridor and then he too disappeared from view.

'Regroup at the chapel,' Calistarius commanded. Turning to check on Claudio, Valencio saw his fellow Terminator advancing towards him, his armour caked in the drying gore of slain genestealers. Even with the massive enclosing suit of Tactical Dreadnought armour, Claudio looked strangely hunched. He said nothing as he passed, though Valencio could guess his dark thoughts for he shared them.

When Valencio arrived at the chapel doorway Zael, Claudio and Deino had set up a defensive ring, Calistarius between them. The Librarian's sword was sheathed and in his hand he held a large golden goblet. The chalice's cup was moulded in the shape of a skull with the top sliced off. It glowed with a bloody light from within and, as Valencio approached, he could feel the waves of power emanating from the artefact.

'What is it?' Valencio asked.

'A relic of Sanguinius,' Calistarius replied reverentially. 'His blood was once held in this vessel. I can feel it, the provider of our gene-seed indelibly marked on the goblet.'

With a closer look, Valencio saw that the chalice was no mere ornament. The silvery metal within its bowl was etched with exquisitely fine lines like a circuit board, each coloured the rusty red of dried blood. There was something disturbing about the patterns cut into the cup and Valencio turned his gaze away.

'We have to find Sergeant Lorenzo,' he said. A cursory examination of the sensorium showed that he was already several dozen metres away, a swarm of genestealers circling his position.

'Negative,' replied the Librarian. 'We must take the chalice to safety and rejoin the main attack.'

'We cannot abandon the brother-sergeant,' said Valencio. 'He needs our assistance. We must protect him!'

'You have served him well, and owe him no further debt,' said Calistarius, not unkindly. 'You best continue to serve his memory by aiding in the destruction of the enemy.'

'What about Threxia?' Valencio demanded. 'Lorenzo did not abandon me then, and i'll not repay the saving of my life with apathy.'

'Enough,' said Calistarius, and his tone invited no further protest. 'Our absence has already jeopardised the safety of our brothers. We will join

them as soon as possible.'

Snapped into obedience by centuries of training and the sharp voice of the Librarian, Valencio pushed aside his guilt and focussed upon the task at hand. More genestealers were moving aboard the *Wrath of Baal* and there was nearly half a kilometre separating the squad from the rest of the Blood Angels.

00.32.81

The brood was suffering. The red hunters had turned the air to poison in some of the tunnels and trapped the broodlord's progeny. It felt them die. They choked as their organs burned and their skin blistered. They fought without fear but this new weapon could not be killed. The broodlord knew that the others of its kind were helpless, locked in biological stasis. The brood had to protect the others while they resuscitated. All other matters were secondary to survival. It sent a psychic command, organising the brood to concentrate their numbers on the protection of the dormant thousands. Dozens of its progeny following, the broodlord headed towards the hunters.

00.33.09

Lorenzo fired as the genestealers broke off their attack and slipped back into the darkness. He fought the urge to pursue them, knowing that he would never catch the fleet aliens. He looked about for Goriel and saw his massive form lying halfway through a doorway. Lorenzo crossed the corridor slowly, his armour battered and scored in many places, leaking lubricant fluids. He shuffled forwards with a slight limp, the actuators in his left knee seized. 'Goriel?'

There was no response from the prone Terminator. When Lorenzo reached him, the sergeant found out the cause. Goriel's helm was missing as was his head. The ragged stump of his neck protruded from the lip of his armour, his enhanced blood forming a thick scab over the wound even though he was dead.

Lorenzo slumped against the frame of the door, dazed and bewildered. So much had happened so quickly he had been caught in a whirl of events that left him confused. There had been the psychic flash of Sanguinius's death pouring through his mind, and then Goriel had set off on a rampage, possessed by some intractable rage. Lorenzo had followed him through the decks of the *Wrath of Baal* towards the engine room. The genestealers had cornered them there, and Lorenzo had thought for the first time in six hundred and fifty years that his time to die had come. An alien's bite had severed the sensorium relay in his helm and his scanners had fallen dead. He had no map and no warning if they returned.

‘Command, this is Lorenzo,’ he spoke into the comm. There was no reply and he tried again. He switched the receivers to an all-frequency setting and scatters of comm traffic came to his ears.

‘Squad Delphi has been eliminated, Squad Gideon to intercept.’

‘Main force casualties at thirty-two per cent. Kill ratio falling.’

‘Need reinforcements, Triton sector.’

‘Ammunition resupply request, Sergeant Adion.’

There were others noises too: shouts of pain, battle cries and warriors dying. Sometimes static would sweep the net, or an inhuman hiss would sound as a genestealer killed a Space Marine as he was transmitting. Gunfire echoed from the helm’s communicator, but all around Lorenzo was deathly silence.

He pushed himself upright and limped forwards, away from the engine room. He could remember the way back from the *Wrath of Baal*. After that, his recollection of the space hulk was vague. He hoped that sight would bring recognition and remembrance.

He had reached the upper deck of the Blood Angels ship when his suit lamps failed. Brother Auletio had patched up the power relays in his backpack, but now the suit was draining rapidly and was shutting down systems to maintain movement and life support. With only his auto-senses to guide him, Lorenzo pressed onwards, exiting the *Wrath of Baal* into the wide chamber outside.

He moved away from the windows, back the way they had come. Passing into the tunnels, the darkness thickened again, devoid of all light. He switched to a thermal image, but there was little enough heat reflected from the walls and floor and he frequently stumbled into the edges of doorways or crashed into corners he could not see.

Despite his superhuman body, Lorenzo had lost a lot of blood and the after-effects of the genestealers’ psychic attack combined with the overwhelming surge of energy from the chapel were still affecting his mind. Flashes like rednal after-images plagued him as he tried to press onwards. Inhuman, snarling faces crowded into his vision, to be replaced by the mournful sight of the dying primarch. The visions blurred with memories six centuries old. He saw battle-brothers dead for six hundred years fighting for their last moments once again. Lorenzo heard the vox-chatter of that old battle, mixed with communications from his present comrades. Present and past blurred together.

Brother-captain Thyrus bellowed orders even as a genestealer tore off his arm. Brother Capulo fired his storm bolter into the gaping maw of an alien while another plunged dagger-like claws into the lenses of his helm.

With a crash Lorenzo walked into a wall and fell to one knee. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, to concentrate on reaching the others.

Lorenzo watched Brother-Sergeant Vienis chop apart a genestealer as he shouted for Lorenzo to retreat. The enemy were everywhere. They leapt

from shadowy doorways and dark ventilation ducts. Like a swarm of insects, they congregated on the Blood Angels, pulling them down one-by-one, heedless of their own mounting casualties.

'Squad Eristhenes, secure your flank.'

'This is Captain Raphael, target point for toxin dispersal located.'

'Kill ratio rising, we need more ammunition.'

Trying to wrest reality from memory, Lorenzo took a step forward and found that there was no ground beneath his foot. He tipped forwards, overbalanced, and smashed down a stairwell, chunks of plascrete flying from the walls and steps. He landed with a crash, the floor beneath him cracking with the impact, his left shoulder seizing up.

The Terminators fared no better than the other battle-brothers. Their storm bolters jammed with constant firing.

They used their heavy flamers to burn the genestealers from each other's backs, the sacred red livery of their comrades blistering and peeling in the flames. Clawed fiends erupted from loose decking plates and dragged warriors down into the darkness. Assault cannon fire cut down swathes of enemies before the weapons exploded from the strain. More and more genestealers poured on.

'Techmarine support not viable at this time.'

'Use the flamers, use the flamers!'

'Squad Gideon, hold your position at all costs.'

Lorenzo staggered to his feet, an unspoken prayer to the Angel on his lips. He dropped his storm bolter, the mechanical relays of his fingers spasming as power surged intermittently along his arm. He fell to his knees and clawed around in the darkness seeking his weapon. Pulling free his power sword, he activated its blade and by the harsh blue light located his gun.

By the light of the power sword he found himself at the bottom of a stairwell. A web of distorted corridors stretched away in four different directions. Everything was slightly twisted, the vessel's whole structure turned out of alignment by the strange torques and tides of the Warp.

'Back to the landing zone, retreat!'

Lorenzo blinked, unsure whether the order had been real or imagined. Had something happened? Was the current action going as badly as the first? He turned awkwardly and sat, resting his back against the foot of the steps.

He could not be scared, he could not grieve, but Lorenzo felt an emptiness growing inside him.

Isolation crowded into his senses. He sheathed his sword to conserve its power and allowed the darkness to engulf him once more.

His armour would lose motor functions in two hours at the current rate. He had enough life support power for several more hours. Perhaps the others would find his body when they swept the space hulk after wiping out the genestealers; perhaps he would asphyxiate before the genestealers

found him if his brothers did not succeed; perhaps he would be granted an honourable death at the hands of an enemy, one last chance to inflict the Emperor's hate upon his foes; perhaps his body would be atomised as the strike cruisers bombarded the space hulk to ensure the destruction of the genestealers. Whatever happened, his destiny was not in his hands any more.

There was nothing more he could do. He was lost and alone, and he had failed. Just like last time, he had failed. Lorenzo powered down his systems and waited for death.

00.40.96

Lorenzo blinked open his eyes, realising that he had fallen into a catalepsean coma. Part of his brain had rested while the other kept watch. Now he had woken but he could not recall what had stirred him. Boosting power to his auto-senses, he looked up.

Something indistinct but definitely real flitted past the end of a corridor. It was a pale shimmer of heat, barely registering. Then came another, and another.

They were unmistakably genestealers, all moving in the same direction. Not one of the creatures spared Lorenzo a glance.

Then something larger stalked into view. It was similar in form but almost twice as tall and broad. It paused for a moment and turned its bulbous head in the sergeant's direction. Eyes flared in the darkness and Lorenzo remembered the alien presence that had knocked him unconscious. In a moment the creature broke its hypnotic gaze and moved on.

Disgust welled up from the pit of Lorenzo's stomach. He remembered his helplessness as the alien had invaded his mind. He could almost taste its presence, tainting his spirit, corrupting his body. The anger mingled with self-loathing as he realised how close he had come to giving up.

He had not failed yet, not while he could still fight.

Lorenzo stood up, the power grid of his suit flaring into life. Checking his weapons, Lorenzo set off after the genestealers. They might be heading towards his brothers or fleeing them; he did not care. He wanted revenge on the creature that had defiled him, that now embodied Lorenzo's abhorrence for these aliens. He would kill that thing or die in the attempt. Nothing else mattered.

00.42.10

The environment systems chamber was a hive of activity. Monotask servitors of flesh and metal lumbered into position with large canisters of nerve toxins on their backs, while Techmarines fussed over an elaborate and anarchic sprawl of tanks, pipes and valves. The air thrummed with

power as extra generators had been brought in to boost the life support system's own fluctuating energy supply.

'Squads Gideon and Deino will form the last line of defence,' Captain Raphael instructed over the comm. 'All other squads to form perimeter.'

The Techmarines were filing out of the room followed by their servitors.

'Contamination sequence initiated. Predict completion in eight minutes and thirty-two seconds,' Raphael continued. 'Beholden to our honour, prepare for death.'

Gideon turned to his squad, including Claudio who had requested that he replace Omnio. Deino and his warriors were also close at hand. The marksman was quiet, perhaps unsure of his field promotion to fill Lorenzo's position. As the senior combatant present, Gideon felt it was his duty to lead with precision and determination.

'This is the moment of our victory,' he told the Terminators. 'In eight minutes, enough gas will have been pumped into the system to kill all of the dormant genestealers. After that, it is just a matter of clearing out the few thousand already awake. The toxin must reach the required concentration to be fatal. No enemy is to pass us. There must be no damage to the control station.'

'Just leave it to me,' said Zael. 'i'll burn anything that gets inside the room.'

'Negative,' said Gideon. 'The pumping equipment and air ducts are fragile and we cannot risk collateral damage from heavy weapons fire. That goes for you too, Leon. A catastrophic misfire could do more damage than any genestealer's claw. Command says no heavy weapons to fire into or out of the environmental control room. Confirm?'

Leon grumbled something about having nothing to use except harsh language, but nodded in compliance.

'The cleansing fires of absolution will be put to good use elsewhere,' said Zael.

Gideon and Deino dispersed their squads, arranging two layers of a defensive cordon around the control room. Gideon glanced at the chronometer and then the sensorium. The genestealers had been massing for several minutes, attacking in small numbers to keep the Terminators occupied. The swathe of green at the edge of the sensorium, about two hundred metres distant, grew thicker and thicker as more genestealers surrounded the Blood Angels.

'Here they come,' someone announced over the comm. The green smudge of the sensorium contracted rapidly and soon the corridors rang with the din of battle being joined.

Gideon had placed himself not far from the only doorway into the control room, Claudio a few metres away at another junction. Their role was to act as a last line of defence should the genestealers break past the guns of the others.

The seconds seemed to tick past slowly, and Gideon forced himself to ignore the chronometer display. He adjusted the grip on his thunder hammer and listened to the combat reports over the comm. The genestealers were rushing forward in a great mass, overwhelming squads with their numbers, pushing on to the next point of defence without pausing. The fighting had rapidly become splintered through the corridors and rooms surrounding the control chamber as some parts of the line broke and others held. The Terminators' kill rates soared, but the Space Marine casualties also slowly mounted.

From further along the corridor, Leon's assault cannon erupted into life with a distinctive roar. Gideon powered his thunder hammer and its sculpted head glowed into life.

The genestealers were through the outer perimeter.

00.46.03

'Estimate contamination complete in four minutes and forty,' Raphael announced.

Deino paid the comm-link little attention, needing to focus all of his attention on the task at hand. Valencio was protecting the right flank, his storm bolter blaring almost constantly as a stream of genestealers surged from ruptured maintenance ducts beneath the deck above.

Deino found the role of sergeant distracting. He was forced to monitor the wider fight, unable to concentrate wholly on his own performance. He snapped off shots at aliens that had outflanked Valencio through a pitted waste disposal pipe whilst checking the sensorium to ensure that Zael was still holding back the alien tide attacking the forward line. The din of the assault cannon just to the left was equally distracting and Deino began to appreciate just how valuable Lorenzo's experience had been to the squad.

'Pull back to your second position, Zael,' Deino ordered, seeing a cluster of contact blips gathering to circumnavigate the Terminator's location. 'Valencio, cover Zael's withdrawal.'

Valencio moved forward as Deino took up the firing position covering the maintenance vent breach while Zael let loose another burst of flame and then retreated in the vital seconds allowed by the barrier of fire.

'Avenge Lorenzo!' shouted Valencio. 'Anoint his memory with the blood of our enemies!'

'Hold position,' growled Deino, seeing that in his battle fervour, Valencio was taking steps forward, exposing his back to attack.

Three blips appeared behind Valencio and the warning was too late. They converged on his signal and then suddenly it went dead. Two of the contacts turned and headed towards Zael.

'Blood of Baal,' spat Deino, caught between two conflicting courses of action. He could move forward and protect Zael's flank, or continue to

guard the access route from the higher deck. What would Lorenzo have done?

Deino held his place, blasting apart the chitinous bodies and swollen heads of the genestealers crawling from the maintenance hatches. The mission - to protect the control room - was the primary concern. Zael would have to be a painful but necessary sacrifice.

'Brother Deino!' Gideon called over the comm.

'What?' demanded Deino, frustrated by yet another interruption to his composure.

'Check your sensorium, flanking force ten metres to your right,' the sergeant calmly told him.

Deino looked and saw that Gideon was correct.

'My thanks, brother-sergeant,' Deino said, backing along the corridor so that he could cover this fresh attack. 'You guard my shoulder as well as the Angel.'

Gideon's reply began with a short laugh.

'Aye, and i'll—' Suddenly there was a grunt of pain and Gideon's signal went dead.

The genestealers were breaking through in three places now, and the survivors of Squads Gideon and Deino were struggling to contain them. Deino repositioned himself once more, turning to look at Claudio at the far end of the corridor. Now he and Deino were the last defenders between the genestealers and the atmospheric ducts.

Claudio was surrounded by aliens, his lightning claws carving flickering patterns of sparkling blood and electricity in the air. Deino could spare him no further thought as more aliens sped across a T-junction ahead and sprinted towards him. He switched to full auto, eschewing the ideals of the marksman in the desperate circumstances. His bolts ripped through the clutch of genestealers, blasting them apart at close range.

A cry from Claudio caused Deino to turn. The Terminator was engulfed by a biting and clawing mass and he fell to his back under the speed and weight of their assault. Deino fired, explosive ammunition stitching wounds across the genestealers and Claudio's armour. The Assault Terminator pushed himself to his feet. Then something hit Deino in the back and he pitched forward, his shots blowing apart the ceiling and causing a tangle of mesh and cables to fall into the corridor.

Deino forced himself to his knees and ignored the genestealer battering his back and shoulders. Beyond the crackling morass of wires and pipes, he saw Claudio fall down again, genestealers leaping past, headed for the control room.

Failure burned in Deino's heart as a clawed hand punched the side of his helmet.

00.48.66

Through a mist of blood, Deino saw the genestealers dashing down the corridor ahead, nothing between them and the toxin vats.

A moment later, he felt the weight lift off his back and the bloodied remnants of the genestealer splashed onto the decking in front of him. More bolt detonations exploded among the advancing aliens, gouging great holes in their flesh, shattering bones and carapace. A figure limped past, a blazing storm bolter in one hand, a glowing power sword in the other. The Terminator fired off another salvo and then turned to look down at him.

'On your feet, brother, there's more fighting to be done,' Sergeant Lorenzo's voice barked from his helmet speakers.

00.48.73

The combat was a blur of anger and pain for Lorenzo. He stood at the door to the Techmarines' poison tanks and gunned down or chopped apart everything that appeared in front of him. The sergeant overrode his suit's systems to pump power to his arms, sacrificing the life support systems so that he could continue fighting. His limbs felt heavy, his hearts threatened to burst through his fused ribs and his lungs burned with unfiltered air, but Lorenzo kept up his relentless defence. The bodies piled in front of him formed a gory barricade, and he was forced to push them aside to keep his line of fire clear.

'Contamination sequence complete,' Captain Raphael announced after an eternity had passed. 'Victory is at hand. Redemption. Tomorrow, we take the names of the fallen.'

The genestealer assault quickly lessened, and then the attacks ceased altogether. It took a while for Lorenzo to realise the immediate danger had passed.

'Early analysis indicates ninety-eight per cent enemy fatality quotient,' Captain Raphael announced. 'The vengeance of the Blood Angels is ours. Strike hard and strike swift for our final victory.'

'I need a comms-patch,' Lorenzo announced over his external address system, his comm net still malfunctioning. Deino opened a panel on his left arm and drew out a coiled cable, which he plugged into the side of Lorenzo's helmet.

'Boosting your signal now, brother-sergeant,' Deino's voice crackled in Lorenzo's ear.

'Brothers, I have important news,' said Lorenzo.

'Continue, Sergeant Lorenzo,' Captain Raphael replied over the comm.

'Whilst separated I observed a foe the likes of which we had not seen before,' said Lorenzo. As he spoke, Calistarius emerged around the corner of the corridor. Like the others, his armour was heavily damaged, its paint scratched, the ceramite cracked and split and stained with gore. 'I believe it was the same creature that rendered my squad helpless with its psychic

attack. It was larger, faster than the rest. I had the sense that it was some kind of leader, coordinating the genestealers.'

'Very good, Lorenzo,' said Raphael. 'It is imperative that we locate and destroy this creature. Life scan reports show no anomalies. The sensorium data offers us no discerning information.'

'Perhaps I can assist,' said Calistarius. 'I felt a presence when I came upon the victims of the psychic attack. At the time I thought it only a residue of assault, but it may be something else, something I can trace.'

'What do you need?' said Raphael.

'Only a moment with Sergeant Lorenzo,' replied the Librarian.

Calistarius stood in front of Lorenzo and laid a hand upon the top of the sergeant's helm. Lorenzo felt a warmth in his mind, as the Librarian extended his soul to join with the sergeant's. Suddenly there was a flash of memory and Lorenzo gasped. He was fixed by two pinpoints of light, staring helplessly at the glowing orbs.

Remember. Calistarius's gentle voice appeared inside Lorenzo's skull.

The sergeant's vision drew back from the lights and he saw the creature's snarling face. The scene replayed in his mind, rewinding through the milliseconds that had led up to the psychic attack. He saw the creature in full. It was massive, taller even than the Terminators, an enormous version of the other aliens. Lorenzo could feel its alien intelligence directed towards him, seeping through him.

Awake.

Lorenzo started from his trance and glanced around. His eyes settled on the Librarian in front of him. Lorenzo took a deep breath, his thoughts still muddled. His traumatic episode in the depths of the space hulk resurfaced briefly, a torrent of battle-brothers slain and vicious aliens. Lorenzo fought to control the clashing images and thoughts crowding into his mind.

'I can lay those memories to rest, if you wish,' said Calistarius, sensing the sergeant's unease.

'No,' Lorenzo replied after a moment's thought. 'We must remember the fallen so that we might avenge them. I grow stronger through the adversity of battle.'

'Very well,' said the Librarian. 'When we return to the Chapter, you and I shall spend some time with the Chaplains. You have carried your grief and fears for six centuries, and the time comes soon when you can let them go. It is not good that you burden yourself with this anguish for so long.'

'Can you locate the aberration?' Raphael interrupted.

Calistarius released his grip on Lorenzo and stepped back. The Librarian held his hand to his helmet and bowed his head. His psychic hood, a tracery of wires and cables framing his helm, burned with power for a moment and motes of energy danced around the Librarian's head. His hand fell to his side and the lights faded. Calistarius seemed to slump in his armour.

‘I can,’ he said, his voice laboured. ‘There is a psychic bond between the genestealers and their leader. Almost familial, patriarchal. There are two more of them close to where Lorenzo made contact. I can feel them now, like a pulsing in the stream of the aliens’ mind-web. They are dormant but wakening.’

‘We have little force to spare for the hunt,’ said Raphael. ‘Sergeant Lorenzo, assemble a squad from your brothers at hand and assist Brother Calistarius. We need to contain these unknown life forms, take tissue and destroy them. I will despatch Techmarine assistance to your position.’

‘Affirmative,’ said Lorenzo, pleased that there was a definite course of action for him to follow after the strangeness of the last minutes. ‘Squads Gideon and Lorenzo, assemble at my position.’

As the Terminators gathered, Lorenzo saw that they were in bad shape. The desperate defence of the toxin vats had taken its toll. Deino was clearly suffering, his helmet punctured, blinded in one eye. Valencio was missing the lower part of his right arm, his Tactical Dreadnought armour boosting his superhuman system to seal the wound. Noctis and Scipio were both currently weaponless and the stiffness with which they moved indicated severe damage to the internal systems of their suits. Gideon had lost his storm shield and the field around his thunder hammer glowed dimly from power shortage. Others had comparable states of armour damage and physical injury.

‘We need maximum firepower and close assault punch with as few warriors as possible,’ Lorenzo told them. ‘Brother-Librarian Calistarius will guide us and I will lead the squad. Zael and Leon, your heavy weapons are coming with me. The main force will suffice with storm bolters. Gideon, Noctis, Deino, Valencio and Scipio, return to the staging area for repair and rearmament. Gideon, form an execution squad and report to the captain for the sweep pattern. Claudio, I need you to come with me.’

None questioned the veteran sergeant’s judgement. As those who were not coming on the hunt turned to leave, Gideon stopped next to Lorenzo. The others paused and gave such salutes as their damaged armour and grievous wounds allowed.

‘You make us all proud to be Blood Angels, brother,’ Gideon said with a nod.

‘I am proud to serve the Chapter,’ said Lorenzo. ‘It is an honour to fight alongside such courageous and unflinching brothers. This day you have healed a wound left too long. Whatever happens, fight no more with shame, but with hearts dedicated anew to the glory of the Angel.’

‘You also, Lorenzo,’ said Gideon. The sergeant looked at the rest of his ad hoc squad. ‘What is your duty?’

‘To serve the Emperor’s Will!’ they chorused in reply.

‘What is the Emperor’s Will?’

‘That we fight and die!’

‘What is death?’

‘It is our duty!’
Still chanting, they marched away.

00.50.80

‘Comms check complete, sensorium check complete,’ Lorenzo announced. The signal bar in his helm display was weak but constant, and the steady pulsing of the scanner was clear in his helm display, showing the positions of the other Terminators. He turned towards the Techmarine who had fixed his helm. ‘Thank you, brother.’

‘You can repay me with a simple service,’ said the Techmarine. He held up a strange claw-like device, much like the reductor Apothecaries used to extract the progenium glands from fallen Space Marines. It was connected to a vial coiled with thin piping. ‘Before you destroy these unidentified life forms, we want you to take a tissue sample for analysis. We need to determine their origins and vulnerability to the toxins unleashed. It is self-working. Simply activate the rune whilst holding the claw against the creature’s flesh.’

Lorenzo took the device and placed it in one of the containers on his armour’s belt.

‘And those?’ the sergeant asked, pointing towards five cuboid machines servitors had placed along the wall of the corridor. The top side of each cube had a dish-shaped hollow punctured by a lens at its centre.

‘Portable power field generators,’ the Techmarine explained. ‘One for each of you. They will bar all movement, should you need to contain the target before tissue extraction. Each has enough charge to last several minutes but they are not impregnable. A determined foe will break through the field in less than a minute.’

‘I understand,’ said Lorenzo.

‘They will also block your own movement and lines of fire, so position them wisely,’ the Techmarine warned.

‘Affirmative,’ said Lorenzo, eager to get moving. ‘Anything else?’

‘The Angel blesses your endeavour,’ said the Techmarine. He gave a thumb up signal and stepped away.

Lorenzo turned to Calistarius and waved a hand towards the Librarian. ‘Lead on, brother.’

00.51.23

They had passed the elevator shaft where Lorenzo’s squad had first been subjected to the psychic attack and the sensorium was strangely clear. Worryingly clear, Lorenzo admitted to himself. Since the gas attack, the genestealers had dispersed across the inhabitable parts of the space hulk and squads were erecting power field barriers and hunting down the scattered survivors. The only thing that showed on the scanners was an

indistinct blob, registering the dormant life signs of the creatures Calistarius had detected. It seemed inconceivable that more of the aliens had not found their way to this area.

'We must hurry, brothers,' said the Librarian. 'I feel the consciousness of these beasts rising to wakefulness.'

The squad pressed on as quickly as their damaged systems would allow, passing across the ruptured hold of a large cargo ship. Claudio was in the lead, Calistarius directly behind him. As soon as the pair stepped through the huge double doors of the storage bay, the sensorium gave a warning tone. There was movement on the periphery of the scanner.

'I hear their call,' said Calistarius. 'Though they are not yet awake, the creatures beckon to their offspring. It is a beacon, and a warning. They know we are here.'

The unidentified life signals were barely two hundred metres away, but there was no straight route to them. The layout of the ship ahead was a confusing mess of overlapping corridors and gantries, pocked with void spaces and interlaced with narrow crawlspaces and ventilation pipes. Lines of fire would be short and there were numerous entry points for the genestealers to attack. The aliens' numbers were gathering again, converging from other parts of the space hulk.

'Clear fire lanes,' ordered Lorenzo.

Leon took the lead. As he advanced, he opened fire on a sealed door ahead, blowing it from its rusted hinges. He unleashed another burst of assault cannon shells at the next door as he stepped through the wreckage of the first. Something moved in the darkness and he gunned it down without hesitation.

'Zael, secure the left. Brother-Librarian, stay close to Claudio,' the sergeant commanded, assimilating the data from the sensorium. The genestealers had learnt well and no longer rushed headlong into the guns of the Terminators. They waited around the corners of junctions and behind the closed doors of rooms sprouting from the network of passages.

'Sealing left flank,' announced Zael. A blue glow lit the corridor as he placed his power field generator on the floor and activated it with his comm-link. 'Power field in place.'

'Push on, clear a path,' said Lorenzo, following closely behind Claudio and Calistarius.

At once, four groups of genestealers rushed forward, closing on the Terminators from every direction. One group was halted on the sensorium and the corridors echoed with the crackle of the power field as the aliens hurled themselves at the barrier placed by Zael. Chain lightning erupted from Calistarius's sword as more genestealers hurtled through a doorway ahead, disintegrating their alien bodies.

As a group, the genestealers fought their way forward. Halfway to the alien life signals, they broke through Zael's power field and a swarm of them surged through the corridors behind the squad. Zael turned and took

up a rearguard position, using his heavy flamer to beat back the onrushing tide of aliens.

'I think I see them,' Calistarius announced. 'Yes, there they are, just ahead.'

Lorenzo could spare no time to look for the moment. He let loose bursts of fire at the genestealers coming at the squad from the right, while Leon's assault cannon reaped a harvest of aliens attacking from the opposite direction.

'Swap position, Claudio,' Lorenzo said. A few seconds later, Claudio was by his side. Lorenzo threw down his power field device and activated it, a shimmering wall of blue energy springing up in front of the other Terminator. Content that the rear was protected, the sergeant turned and followed Calistarius.

The Librarian led Lorenzo into a dark room, little more than a storage space between thick pipes that glowed with heat. They were plasma relays for the reactor somewhere below, their warmth sustaining the aliens huddled next to them. The creatures were just like the one that had attacked Lorenzo, giant and obscene. Their limbs were folded against their chests, their ridged heads bowed between the bony plates of their shoulders.

While Calistarius covered the door, alternating between fire from his storm bolter and bursts of psychic lightning, Lorenzo stooped to retrieve the tissue sample needed by the Techmarines. He placed the extractor against a fleshy hump at the base of the nearest creature's neck and activated the device. Its claw flickered out, tearing free a piece of tissue before disappearing into the cooled vial.

At the same moment, one of the creature's clawed hands snapped out and grabbed Lorenzo's arm. It slowly turned its head towards him, its eyes glowing with psychic power.

00.52.62

Claudio flexed his arms, loosening the fibre bundles in his armour as if they were muscles. A cluster of genestealers clawed and bit at the power field just in front of the Terminator, separated from his wrath by less than a metre's thickness of energy wall. The genestealers were possessed of a manic vigour, literally throwing themselves at the barrier to get at Claudio.

'Don't be so eager to die,' Claudio growled at the aliens. 'I'm ready and waiting.'

With an explosion of light, the genestealers burst through. In a wave of blue and purple flesh they fell upon Claudio. His lightning claws sent arcs of energy tearing through them even as their blades sliced through flesh and chitin.

00.52.70

Zael checked the load readout on his heavy flamer and saw that he had enough promethium left for two more full bursts. He backed along the narrow corridor as more genestealers clawed their way up through a grille in the floor about twenty metres ahead.

'Not yet,' he muttered to himself.

More genestealers were bursting up through the grating, rushing towards the Terminator.

'Not yet,' he repeated. The first genestealer was barely three metres away when Zael pulled the trigger. White hot fire filled the corridor, the backblast scorching Zael's armour, his helm display alight with red icons as the armour's cooling systems attempted to compensate. Even so, he felt a sweat break out on his brow.

As the flames licked along the walls and ceiling, and the bodies of the genestealers popped and cracked, Zael considered his deadly handiwork and smiled.

'One more shot,' he told himself.

00.52.76

Lorenzo's sword was in its sheath at his waist so he fired his storm bolter point blank, the detonations in the creature's body spattering him with chunks of steaming flesh, his auto-senses almost blinded by the proximity of the muzzle flash. The creature's grip remained tight as he tried to pull his arm away and he fired again, blasting apart its skull. Tearing free from its dead grip, Lorenzo turned back towards the doorway.

One moment he was looking at the back of Calistarius's armour as he stood watch, the next moment the Librarian was hauled through the air, crashing against the wall. Something ancient and monstrous unfolded itself in his place, a glimmer of recognition in its alien eyes.

Lorenzo's bolter jammed as he tried to fire, its mechanisms stuck with gory residue from his close range shot into the bowels of the dormant genestealer. The sergeant raised his sword protectively.

The creature bent down through the doorway, its gaze moving to look at the bloodied remains of the creature Lorenzo had killed. Lips curled back to expose fangs as long as combat knives. The creature hunched, its muscles bunching and cording like thick rope under its dark skin.

Lorenzo braced himself for the creature's attack, even as he sensed movement from the other beast behind him.

A jet of fire engulfed the alien in the doorway, a purifying blast from Zael. The creature shrieked, lunging against the doorframe, buckling the metal with its weight. Promethium was stuck to its body and head, eating away at the flesh. With another scream, it turned and bounded out of sight. A second later Lorenzo heard noises that set his teeth on edge: shattering

ceramite, tortured metal, Zael's agonised bawl. Lorenzo had never heard a Space Marine cry out in such a way and he raced to the door.

Zael's remains were scattered across the decking, his blood dripping down through the grillwork. The alien leader was still on fire, lurching from side to side, crashing against the walls of the corridor, leaving dents in the metal bulkheads.

Lorenzo followed it, trying to clear his jammed storm bolter. Ejecting several unfired rounds, he managed to get it working again and raised the weapon to finish off the alien. Some of the promethium had burnt itself out and much of the creature's back and face was a charred mess. Bone and pulsing flesh could be seen through rents in its skin and carapace.

It reached the stop of a stairwell, hunched and limping. Lorenzo fired, the bolt exploding in the creature's lower back. It fell forwards, the metal guard rail of the stairway twisting under its weight.

The creature tipped out of sight, trailing flames, and Lorenzo followed it to the lip of the stairway. The steps descended into darkness for several hundred metres, the creature's body a dimly flickering fire far below.

Reloading his storm bolter, Lorenzo turned around and strode back towards the plasma exchange pipes. There was one more of the beasts to destroy.

00.53.58

'Command, this is Lorenzo. Request plotting of an exit route.'

Lorenzo, Calistarius, Leon and Claudio were advancing along a narrow walkway that ran around the perimeter of a deep well-like drop. In a haze of red light below the sergeant could see the bulky shapes of plasma reactors. Electricity occasionally arced between damaged generators and leaking gas spumed spasmodically from ruptured conduits.

The sensorium was full of signals, on levels above and below. The genestealers that had been gathering to protect their leaders had now formed into a solid mass, cutting off the squad from the route back to the rest of the Terminators. Now the Blood Angels had to find a way to escape the aliens hunting them through the winding corridors.

'Sergeant Lorenzo,' Captain Raphael's voice cut through Lorenzo's musing. 'Exit point located. External egress, through a venting shaft two hundred metres from your position.'

'External egress, brother-captain?' asked Lorenzo.

'The duct will bring you out onto the surface of the vessel,' Raphael explained. 'Despatching Thunderhawk to your exit location for retrieval. Primary objective is to ensure delivery of the alien tissue sample.'

'Understood, brother-captain,' said Lorenzo. He looked at his sensorium and saw route marker icons flash into view. 'Exit point located.'

'The Angel shall guide your steps, brothers,' Raphael said before cutting the link.

The route took them down two levels and through a network of criss-crossing passageways surrounding the reactor chamber. The genestealers were closing fast on the Terminators' position and Lorenzo calculated that the squad would not reach the venting shaft without contact.

'Leon, rear guard,' he ordered. The taciturn Space Marine responded by lifting his assault cannon in acknowledgement and fell back to the rear of the squad.

They picked their way over a snarled mass of collapsed gantries and ladders and found themselves overlooking another artificial abyss. The venting tunnel was only fifty metres away, down one further level. Escape was close, but Lorenzo allowed himself no thoughts of victory just yet.

00.54.24

Pain. Pain encompassed all of the broodlord's being, body and mind. Physical agony from the burning. Mental torment from the death of its brood. So many killed, the broodmind was but a shadow of its former power. It was spent, a dying force. The broodlord considered hiding, the instinct to survive strong. Reason overruled instinct. The hunters would seek out and slay all of the brood. Survival was not an option.

Blackened skin flaking and cracking, burnt flesh falling in lumps from its bones as it lifted itself to its feet, the broodlord turned its face upward. Its progeny still stalked the hunters. It knew where they could be found. Created as a passionless biomachine, it felt something for the first time since its strange birth. It was a corrupting thought, an emotion that had lurked inside ever since it had contacted the minds of the hunters.

Now it came to the surface, boiling up through the pain, fresh and strong. It was invigorating and for the first time the broodlord understood why the hunters had fought so fiercely. It shared their thoughts. The broodlord clenched and unclenched its claws as it thought about the destruction of its brood and felt this new emotion: hate.

00.54.61

The blood angels fought a coordinated retreat towards the exit point. Calistarius and Claudio in the lead, Lorenzo and Leon following behind. They alternated firing and overwatch, cutting through the genestealers ahead and gunning down those that followed behind. They were less than fifty metres from the shaft and safety. Though tough, even the genestealers could not follow the Terminators into the freezing vacuum of space.

The deck ahead had collapsed and piles of crumbling plascrete littered the floor below. The floor they were on was unstable too, and shook every time Leon opened fire. Two ladders led down onto the rubble-strewn deck. Calistarius was the first to swing his weight out onto the corroded rungs bedded into the wall. One snapped under his tread and fell as a small bar

of rust into the rubble below. The Librarian lowered himself down while Lorenzo provided covering fire from above. Genestealers were swarming in from behind the squad, above and below, and Lorenzo kept up a steady stream of fire into the exposed corridors beneath him until the Librarian was safely on the ground again.

Calistarius then took up the fight, blasting with his storm bolter, cutting down with his force sword those genestealers that came close enough. Weapons deactivated, Claudio lowered himself clumsily after the Librarian while bolt shells screamed past, picking off aliens waiting below. Once he had a sure footing again, his claws blazed into life and he joined Calistarius to protect the base of the ladders so that the others could descend.

'You first, brother,' said Leon. 'Only one hundred and fifty rounds remaining.'

Lorenzo did not argue and instead sheathed his power sword and hung his storm bolter from his belt. The ladder creaked under the weight of his armour but held strong until he had reached the lower level. The sergeant backed up until he had a view of Leon's position on the upper floor.

'Your turn,' Lorenzo said.

'Negative,' replied Leon. 'Eighty rounds remaining. Insufficient for enemy numbers.'

00.55.89

Leon turned to face the oncoming genestealers pouring in a swarm from two corridors. He double-checked his ammunition gauge and held his fire. The genestealers circled rapidly, darting in from the left and the right. Leon felt the first leap upon his left shoulder. Another slashed its claws into his back.

'The Angel avenges!' he bellowed, clamping his finger onto the trigger of the assault cannon.

The torrent of shells tore into the ground at Leon's feet, the barrels of the weapon glowing red-hot. The mechanism jammed and the rounds left in the weapon exploded, shearing off Leon's right arm.

The resulting detonation engulfed dozens of genestealers and the plascrete beneath them cracked and crumbled. In a huge explosion of dust and rocky shards, the deck collapsed, plunging Leon and the genestealers to a bone-breaking death many metres below.

00.55.98

Calistarius had no time to spare a thought for Leon's sacrifice. Lorenzo approached the Librarian and took the tissue sample from his belt.

'Protect this,' said the sergeant, holding out the device. Calistarius took the sample without comment and turned towards the evacuation point.

‘Go with him,’ he heard Lorenzo say and Claudio appeared by his side.

The two of them picked their way through the rubble-choked passage, Lorenzo close on their heels. Occasionally they turned to fire at the pursuing genestealers, cutting down any that came within sight.

They were barely ten metres from the venting shaft. Calistarius could see the maintenance access hatch they needed to break through to get inside.

‘I’ll watch your back,’ volunteered Claudio, indicating to Calistarius that he should cut through the hatchway.

The Librarian turned towards the square door and plunged his force sword into the locking mechanism. He trembled as he allowed his psychic power to surge along the blade, melting the bolts of the lock. With a clang, the hatch fell free, revealing the dark shaft beyond.

Calistarius felt the broodlord before he heard or saw it. Its presence was suddenly there, just behind the Terminators. The Librarian turned in time to see Lorenzo flung out of the alien’s path, still firing his storm bolter. The veteran crashed through a half-ruined wall and fell out of sight.

Claudio launched himself at the monstrous creature like a wild cat, his claws severing an upraised limb. The broodlord brought its other three clawed hands together, grabbing hold of Claudio’s arms. With sickening twists and wrenches, the genestealer ripped the Terminator’s left arm out of its socket. Claudio’s right arm snapped in several places despite the protection of his armour.

Not content, the broodlord closed its massive jaws on Claudio’s head. A few of its fangs snapped, but some managed to punch through Claudio’s armoured helm. Arching its neck and back, the broodlord pulled off the Space Marine’s head with its jaws, splinters of eye lenses and ceramite showering to the ground amidst the arterial fountain from Claudio’s ravaged body.

Calistarius knew that he should escape. The tissue sample in his belt was more important than the death of a single creature. He was about to turn when the broodlord focussed its alien gaze upon him.

With a shock that stunned his system, the Librarian found his psyche swamped by the malignant power of the brood mind. As it penetrated the psyker’s brain, Calistarius felt a jolt of connection with the amorphous thoughts of the genestealers.

Space and time took on a new perspective, all emotion drained from his soul. He was timeless, endless, immortal. One of countless billions, a mote in a hurricane of minds. Fleeting yet eternally reborn. The broodmind linked him to the other things, sharing his thoughts, his hunger, his instinct to reproduce and grow.

But they were not his thoughts. They were alien. Calistarius could not sense where he ended and the broodmind began. He struggled to resist. He felt a tugging on the edge of his personality, a great psychic beacon that flared in every direction. It was like the Astronomican he used to guide

ships through the warp, yet far weaker and far fouler. It was a cancer, now small, much reduced by the deaths the brood had suffered.

He realised that far out in the depths of space there were other dark beacons, other broodminds. And something larger. Something that swallowed everything in its path. Something mankind had never seen before. Impossibly distant and impossibly ancient. A shadow in the warp.

The connection broke and Calistarius found himself looking at the broodlord's face, barely half a metre from him. It was transfixed on a glowing blue blade and Calistarius realised the light in the creature's eyes were not of life, but simply reflections from the humming power sword.

Lorenzo pulled his sword free from the creature and it slumped to the ground. The sergeant then proceeded to calmly and methodically chop off its remaining three arms, both its legs and, finally, its head.

'Just to be sure,' Lorenzo explained. His left arm hung uselessly by his side and he stood with a strange stoop. A warning tone sounded from the sensorium. Another wave of genestealers had been following the Broodlord and was now barely twenty metres away.

Lorenzo turned towards them and awkwardly raised his sword. The Librarian sheathed his own weapon and turned the sergeant to face him, 'This is victory,' Calistarius said, holding up the tissue sample.

'After you,' said Lorenzo, pointing his sword towards the open exhaust shaft.

The Librarian clambered through the hatchway while Lorenzo opened fire at the approaching aliens.

'Time to leave, sergeant,' said Calistarius.

Lorenzo hesitated, gunning down another genestealer. He wanted to stay and fight. He wanted to kill more of the foe. His every instinct told him not to turn away and leave. It felt too much like a retreat. The Angel had given his life for the Blood Angels and Lorenzo could do no less.

With a parting shot, Lorenzo pushed himself into the exhaust duct.

To live and fight again, to remember the sacrifice made this day and six hundred years ago, that was true victory. To survive and allow the memories to live on when so many had not, that was the ultimate triumph.

There was no failure in that.

00.57.17

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

SANGUIS IRAE

By

Gav Thorpe

Peace.

An almost impossible moment for one who had been raised in the hell of Baal's radioactive deserts and who had spent a lifetime waging war against the foes of the Emperor, cursed by psychic powers so that even outside battle there was ever a contest to keep out the clamour of the warp and the minds of his fellow Space Marines.

Here there was nothing. Alone on the boarding torpedo, there was not even a pilot to disturb Calistarius's contemplation. All was still. The torpedo's launch provided enough silent momentum to carry the one-way transport across the few hundred kilometres of void to the Blood Angels Librarian's destination.

No thoughts, no noise, just the barest murmur of background hum from the resonance of the warp itself.

The peace brought clarity.

Calistarius knew better than to fill this moment with distracting thoughts – concerns over the mission he was about to embark upon, ideas of higher philosophies or idle contemplation of the latest Chapter rumours and news.

He focused on himself and nothing else. A mote of life encased in a ferrolene and ceramite cylinder drifting across the vacuum of space, infinitesimally insignificant to the universe. He enjoyed the feeling of pointlessness. For just a few minutes Calistarius was totally freed from care. His righteous burden awaited him, but until the boarding torpedo plunged through the metal skin of the space hulk marked SA-BA-325 he was free from all responsibility and expectation.

His breaths came slowly, inhaling and exhaling in slow rhythm with the beating of his twin hearts, a soft after-shudder in his chest as his third lung inflated with a slight delay. His cardio-pulmonary system was a simple but enchanting quintet piece, occasionally accompanied by a solo percussion creak or ping from the hull of the boarding torpedo.

Calistarius had not known music as a child. The closest that the tribes of Baal Secundus came to orchestration was war drums and pyre dirges. It was only when he had passed the trials of the Blood Angels and become a son of Sanguinius that young Calistarius had learnt of instruments – of flute and riola, violin and helleschord, pantache and cymbal.

Before that discovery he had never heard the music inherent in the universe, not until he had been played symphonies composed to emulate the vast array of nature's moods. He had listened with delight, his mind's ear turning screeching chords to the howl of the Baal winds, the petulant

percussion of tom-toms converted to the drumming foot beats of a carrion-reaper charging over the dunes.

A gift from the Blood Angels – civilisation. Art in all its forms: poetic, literary, visual and military. The legacy of mighty Sanguinius, that the deformed, radiation-scarred vagrants of the deserts could be lifted above their station and turned into demigods. Not just a physical transformation, but a mental, cultural uplifting as well. To be defenders of humanity one needed not only bolters and power armour, but a sense of what was so important that it required the keenest sacrifice. The boons of giant physique and razor-sharp mind were simply part of the exchange. In return, every Blood Angel would give his life and death in service to the Emperor and the Imperium of Mankind he had created.

A new, harsh sound ripped into Calistarius's thoughts, dragging him out of his reverie. Arrestor engines screamed into life, jolting the torpedo with fierce deceleration for a few seconds before the melta-charges in the tip exploded into life, tearing the hull of the space hulk to allow the energy-shielded prow to punch through.

More detonations followed as the front of the torpedo petalled outwards, forming an air seal and disembarkation ramp. Calistarius was free of his harness and on his feet even before the torpedo had finished moving. The moment the splay of the torpedo's tip was wide enough, he ducked through the opening portal and leapt down to the deck two metres below.

He checked his bearings and located the initial exploratory squad's position on a wrist-mounted auspex. They were about three hundred metres away, deeper within the structure of the hulk where teleportation was far riskier. Calistarius already had his bolt pistol in his left hand. He pulled free a power sword with the right and set off, all senses alert to possible attack.

The clank of his boots echoed harshly from metal bulkheads, ringing strangely from the buckled material of the outer hull. A broken ventilator fan whickered close at hand, letting forth a scraping snarl every few seconds. Something clattered above the ceiling like a spoon rattling against the bottom of a ration tin: an old pump, perhaps.

The thrum of the power blade springing into life added another noise to the mix.

There was no symphony here. No peace.

War had returned.

Calistarius encountered the first of the initial landing squad guarding a cross-junction two hundred metres from where the Librarian's boarding torpedo had breached. Brother Santiago's Terminator armour almost filled the corridor as he turned one way and then the other, his storm bolter held at the ready. Santiago acknowledged his battle-brother's approach with a lifted power fist.

‘Nice of you to join us.’ Santiago’s attempt at humour masked an unease that Calistarius had sensed the moment he had laid eyes on the other Blood Angel. He did not have to be psychic to detect his battle-brother’s restlessness.

‘The… other warrior, he is still alive?’

‘Yes, brother. The strength of Sanguinius must truly flow in his veins, because very little blood does.’

‘Then I will not delay here any longer.’ Calistarius gave his companion a nod of respect as Santiago stepped aside to allow him to proceed down the corridor.

Closing in on the rest of the squad, the Librarian saw that they had dispersed – two of the Terminators were at the target location beacon on the auspex, while the other two held strategic bottle-necks further along the deck. Calistarius headed straight for the objective location, noting the sensorium transponder signal of Sergeant Dioneas in the same chamber.

There was only one way into and out of the room, until recently sealed tight. The scorched, buckled marks of claws and lasers marred the door and the wall around the locking mechanism, but override codes had pried open what the brute strength of the unknown assailants had not.

The inside of the chamber was lit only by the suit lights of Dioneas and Brother Marciano; the latter stepped away from the door as he saw Calistarius approaching, allowing the Librarian to see inside.

The sergeant stood over another figure in bulky Terminator armour, slumped against the far bulkhead. Calistarius knew what to expect but still experienced a moment of pause when he saw the Blood Angels livery painted on the ancient suit of armour. Worse still were the many gashes in the heavy war-plate. Much of the suit had been ripped away, the endo-skeletal struts and fibre bundles twisted and tattered by immense tears.

Dioneas shifted as the Librarian entered and for a moment his suit light played across the face of the injured Blood Angel. His mouth was locked in a bestial snarl, lips drawn back to expose dark gums, eyes glaring, glinting fiercely in the passing light.

In the moment of contact Calistarius felt madness. Deep, utter hatred and bloodlust surged into the Librarian’s thoughts, pounding upon his mind like hammer blows.

Calistarius closed his mind off in an instant, shielding himself from the sensation as though it were an attack.

‘You know what this is?’ Dioneas’s voice was quiet over the vox-link.

‘Of course,’ said Calistarius. ‘The signs are obvious. Why did you request my presence, brother-sergeant?’

‘Our initial landing and sweep detected nothing,’ the sergeant explained. ‘It was only when we were preparing to expand to a secondary perimeter that we detected the heat source of his tactical dreadnought suit. This is exactly how we found him, locked inside this empty armoury magazine.’

‘And you wish me to delve into his thoughts?’ Calistarius kept his gaze fixed on the sergeant, not willing yet to look at the contorted features of the collapsed Space Marine. ‘What do you hope I will find there?’

‘Anything,’ whispered Dioneas, turning his bulky armour to look at the prone Blood Angel. The suit lights caught the jagged edges of the rips in the adamantium, flared from the shattered plates of ceramite and glistened on exposed flesh and bone. ‘Who he is, why he is here, what did this to him.’

‘You have no hint of his identity?’

‘His suit transponder is dead. No markings, nothing we can use, have been left on his armour.’

‘Why have you not transported him back to the battle-barge?’

‘Does it look to you that he would survive such a journey?’

‘No,’ admitted Calistarius. ‘What is the current tactical situation? Clearly he was attacked by something.’

‘No life signs detected by the primary surveyor sweep and nothing on the sensorium until we found… this.’ Dioneas took a step toward the door. ‘It will be just the six of us for now. Captain Raphael is not prepared to send in the main wave until we have a better idea of what they might run into. As soon as you can confirm whether there is a credible threat aboard or not, the sooner our reinforcements will arrive.’

Calistarius nodded. ‘I shall endeavour to conclude this swiftly.’

The other two Blood Angels left the room. Dioneas stood guard at the door while Marciano moved out further to reinforce the perimeter defence. Calistarius looked at the broad back of the sergeant standing outside for a while, wondering if he should ask him to return. The Blood Angel they had found was in some kind of catatonic coma, but there was no way to predict what would happen when Calistarius began his psychic probing.

‘Sergeant,’ he said after considering the matter, ‘I would prefer it if you kept watch on… on my subject. While I am inside his mind I will be vulnerable if he strikes out.’

‘As you wish, brother,’ said Dioneas.

When the sergeant stepped back into the chamber the lights of his war-plate glinted from the splintered tines of the fallen Space Marine’s lightning claws. There was dried blood – not his own – splashed along their length. Calistarius crouched to examine them more closely.

‘I noticed that too,’ said Dioneas. ‘If his claws had been functioning, the energy sheath would have vaporised any exposed liquid.’

‘He carried on fighting even after his claws stopped working,’ concluded Calistarius. ‘Curious, but not surprising. If he was gripped by… If the gene-curse had possessed him he would have no control over his actions. He would fight until dead.’

‘So why is he still alive?’

‘Perhaps he killed all his foes?’

‘Leaving no evidence of them for us to find?’

‘How would he have had the presence of mind to lock himself in here, if the Black Rage had him?’

‘You ask the same questions that provoked my call for assistance,’ Dioneas said pointedly. He gestured towards the near-dead Blood Angel. ‘He has the answers.’

Reaching out hesitantly, his pistol holstered, Calistarius laid a hand on the mortally wounded Space Marine. He almost flinched at an imagined response, but the dormant Blood Angel did not move, not even a flicker of the eyes. He looked physically dead but there was enough anima left in his Terminator armour to sustain vital functions.

He reached with his mind also, sensing that the soul of the warrior was still intact. The Librarian had his psychic defences fully prepared. Physical contact was not necessary to dig into the dying warrior’s thoughts, but Calistarius hoped the Blood Angel would feel it somehow and gain a sense of comfort before his mind was peeled apart by the Librarian.

Calistarius looked at the mess of armour and torn flesh and pondered Dioneas’s analysis. It seemed that the Space Marine was certainly in a state of suspended animation, and the activation of the sus-an membrane could be triggered instinctively at the verge of death. However, the curse, the Black Rage as it was known amongst the Blood Angels, was an all-encompassing bloodthirst. Those who succumbed to the flaw of the Chapter wanted nothing but oblivion, consumed by inner agony and anger. Once the Black Rage took hold of a warrior, death was the only release.

‘Who are you?’ Calistarius whispered, moving his hand from the broken shoulder plate to the cheek of the fallen warrior. He opened his thoughts and asked the question again, allowing the response to flow back from the inert form of the Blood Angel.

SLAYER!

The raw strength of the Black Rage hit Calistarius and though he had been expecting it, at the moment of contact he shared the deepest loathing and despair that fuelled the warrior beneath his fingers. He wanted to kill until he was killed, uncaring of any other action or fate.

The Librarian wrestled himself free, forming a ball of pure consciousness like ice amidst the flaming maelstrom of anger. The ice was melting slowly as the rage lapped at it, but in turn its presence cooled the surrounding fire, allowing Calistarius to send tendrils of interrogation into the Blood Angel’s mind, trickling them in like water.

He encountered memory, and upon examining it relived it as his own.

Aboard the arch-traitor’s battle-barge. The strike force had been scattered and there was no sign of the Emperor or Rogal Dorn. Some of his warriors were with him, nine from his honour guard in scarlet and gilded armour. The communications network was a cacophony of screams and

urgent situation reports, overlaid with horrific cackling and demented braying.

A drop of blood fell on his cheek. His eye was drawn up to the ceiling. There was a Space Marine trapped there, inverted, having reconstituted halfway into the material of the ship itself. One leg and arm hung from the metal as his life fluid seeped along lines of rust like artificial veins. He thrashed for a moment and then fell limp.

'My lord!' One of the honour guard was demanding his attention. He dragged his gaze away from the contorted body above. 'What are your orders, Lord Sanguinius?'

It was wrong. These were not real memories. Calistarius pushed through them, ignoring the tide of longing that flooded through him as he touched the soul of Sanguinius and felt emptiness and loss.

The surge of disorientation from teleportation dies away, leaving him in a half-flooded corridor. The rest of the squad are close at hand on the sensorium and the sergeant calls off names to ensure they have all arrived.

'Vespesario?'

'Present, brother-sergeant,' he responds, forging through the thigh-high water towards a broken bulkhead to his right. 'Starting security sweep.'

'Vespesario,' Calistarius croaked, pulling himself back through the demented ravings that roiled like storm clouds across the other Blood Angel's thoughts. The Librarian looked up at Sergeant Dioneas. 'Brother Vespesario. You should check with the data-cogitators on the battle-barge.'

'No need,' replied the sergeant. He sighed heavily. 'There have been only a few brothers named Vespesario in the history of the First Company. I know which one this is.'

'I also have a recollection of code-name: *Omen of Despair*. A space hulk called *Omen of Despair*.'

'Yes,' said Dioneas. 'It was discovered in the Verium Placus belt near the Ordanio system, two hundred and forty-six years ago. That is nearly seventeen thousand light years away. Two First Company squads went aboard for primary reconnaissance. The wreck unexpectedly dropped back into warp space almost as soon as they boarded. All ten warriors and suits of battleplate were lost, presumed destroyed.'

'But not so,' said Calistarius. 'We must be aboard the *Omen of Despair*.'

'Apparently so.' There was a click as the sergeant changed his vox-channel, presumably to transit this message back to the battle-barge. A few seconds later the click sounded again as he returned to the squad address channel they had been using. 'That answers one question, but it does not tell us what happened, or what we might expect to find. I would prefer not to share their fate.'

Calistarius, armed with this new information as a guideline for his probing, turned his attention back to Vespesario. Everything dropped away as he lowered himself into the turbulence of the Blood Angel's mind. Again the rasping hatred sawed at the Librarian, threatening to cut through his thoughts and infect him with its purity of purpose.

Vespesario.

He fixed on the name like an ancient navigator might choose a star to gain his bearing.

It did not stop the flames lapping again at the Librarian's defences, seeking a way into his inner thoughts, probing his mental strength even as he sought ingress to Vespesario's memories.

As before, there was an outer layer, an ashen, black crust formed from the gene-curse that was bound up in Vespesario's every fibre, now unleashed.

'Send rally signals. All Blood Angels to converge on my position,' he commanded. The order came easily, the need for action sweeping away any vestiges of horror he might have felt. His words, his voice, settled those around him, giving them strength with his presence alone. The honour guard checked their weapons and fell in behind their lord as he surveyed the chamber more closely.

The walls were like nothing he had seen aboard a battle-barge. The power of the warp was in them, creating curves and peculiar organic shapes even as spines of iron jutted with jagged edges and sheaths of plastek slid over light fittings like blinking eyes. The dimensions of the room did not quite fit each other, so that corners seemed higher than the ceiling and walls longer than the floor.

He had not experienced the like on a ship, it was true, but he had encountered the power of the warp many times before, and he was reminded of Signus. Its effect was much reduced. He concentrated, pushing aside the impossibilities. There was a doorway ahead, open to reveal a grandiose hall beyond. He headed for it, calling his sons after him.

There was movement ahead and a moment later the first of the daemons appeared.

The staging ground is secure, but all contact has been lost with the strike cruiser. The sergeants are holding a brief conversation and soon they announce the outcome of their deliberations.

'We have translated into the warp,' Sergeant Commeos tells them. 'Moments after we teleported aboard.'

'How are we not dead?' asks Geraneos.

'A functioning Geller field,' Vespesario answers, guessing. 'Pure luck.'

'Not so lucky that we are on our own in here,' says Sergeant Adonius. The sensorium lights up with contact warnings. Something is closing on their position. 'Ready your weapons, brothers.'

For a split-second Calistarius was caught between three realities: the *Omen of Despair* in the present; the space hulk more than two centuries earlier; and Vespesario's Black Rage-induced gene-memories of their primarch trapped aboard the Warmaster's starship.

'We have multiple incoming signals.'

It took another three seconds for the Librarian to realise that the words were in his ear, not his mind, spoken by Sergeant Dioneas. He broke away completely from Vespesario, lifting his hand from the near-dead warrior's cheek to check the auspex.

Life signals, fore and aft of their position. They were still half a kilometre distant, approaching slowly but growing in number.

'What are they?' Dioneas demanded. 'What is coming for us?'

Calistarius did not understand why the question had been directed at him. How was he supposed to know what the others did not? Realisation dawned.

Vespesario knew.

He closed his eyes and this time pushed into the flames without wavering.

At first the daemons were shifting, formless things, drawn to the Space Marines as wisps of bright energy. They circled and danced, never staying still, growing in strength and numbers, flitting past doorways and skimming overhead, not quite coming into the range of power axe or chainsword. A few of the Blood Angels opened fire with bolters and pistols, sparking bursts of detonations against warping bulkheads as they tried to track the flitting apparitions.

'Cease firing, save your ammunition,' he told them.

A constant moaning and screaming accompanied the party as they forged along a corridor of crystal walls, faceted to fragment and disperse the reflections of the legionaries. He glanced at one such image, seeing himself whole for a moment – tall, finely featured, eyes of deep blue, shoulder-length hair. But there was a cruel smile on his lips and wickedness in his gaze as something else looked back at him in mockery. A shift of view, another reflection, of lifeless eyes and half his skull missing, his throat slit. He moved his eyes again and this time saw himself in triumphant ecstasy, eyes filled with crimson, blood dripping from fangs that had split his gums.

He knew nothing of what his companions saw but their disconcerted grunts and whispered curses told him that the visions were not welcome.

The crystal passage brought them to a state room, furnished lavishly with a wood and leather suite of chairs and couches, bookcases on the wall lined with volumes and a table on which sat a decanter filled with a deep purple liquid.

‘Touch nothing,’ he warned, catching a glimpse of the spines of the books, marked with changing runes in a tongue that was anathema to sanity and reason. ‘Read nothing.’

A book fell from a shelf to his right, opening at the image of a screaming child with tentacles erupting from her eyes. One of the Space Marines stooped to look at it and gave a disgusted snarl. As though prompted by this reaction, the image burst into life, tentacles uncoiling out of the pages, whip-fast, around the Space Marine’s neck and helm.

Before a shot was fired, the legionary was dragged forward into a gnashing maw where the girl’s ruby lips had been, head bitten off by the fanged monstrosity. Tossing aside the decapitated remains, the book-pseudopods grew even longer, seeking a fresh victim.

More books hurled themselves off the shelves, revealing pictures of nightmarish beasts with curling horns, cyclopean figures with ruptured skins and spilling guts, steel-clawed hounds and diamond-eyed succubae. The Blood Angels did their best but could not avoid seeing these demented pictures. Their instinctual fear and revulsion gave life to the magic within, drawing forth the daemons bound within the pages.

In a few seconds the room was full of ghastly foes of mad proportion and terrible purpose. Wailing, screeching and howling, they fell upon the Space Marines with baroque curved blades and dagger-like talons. Battle-cries and shouts of alarm rang out, punctuated by the roar of bolters.

He threw himself into the fray, sword glittering, pulses of plasma from his pistol incinerating the Chaos monsters. As he sliced a red-skinned creature with the head of a goat and the body of a dwarf, his stare fell upon the pages of a book depicting an infinitely deep maw. In a moment the air was being sucked from the room, books whirling, furniture upended by the all-consuming vortex.

With a contemptuous snarl he fired his pistol, turning the book to a blackened mess that bubbled and steamed.

‘Press on,’ he called to the others, pointing his sword at the vast wooden door at the far end of the room. ‘We seek the Traitor.’

Signals were clogging the sensorium data-feed, so that individual life readings were blurring together into a mass of returns a little more than two hundred metres from the perimeter. It was as though the hulk itself was coming alive, vomiting forth a stream of unidentified foes that were remaining just out of sight and out of reach.

‘What are they?’ asks Geraneos. ‘Where are they coming from?’

‘Secondary ducting,’ Sergeant Adonius answers the second question. He offers no opinion on the first. ‘Air vents, cable tiers, maintenance access.’

‘Fast-moving,’ comments Vespesario. ‘Biding their time, not simply charging towards us.’

‘Perhaps they are afraid of us,’ suggests Brother Lucasi. ‘That is why they do not attack.’

‘What do we do?’ Brother Tarantus gives voice to the question that has nagged Vespesario for the last few minutes. ‘What is our mission here?’

The silence of the sergeants is disconcerting. The Blood Angels had come to investigate the Omen of Despair and report back to their captain. Now they were trapped in the warp, most likely to die drifting on the immaterial tides.

‘If there are working Geller fields there could be a operational warp drive,’ Sergeant Commeos says eventually. ‘We should locate and secure the controls.’

‘We stay together,’ Adonius adds. His voice gains confidence as he continues to speak. ‘We must consider all contacts to be hostile. Emperor alone knows how long this hulk has been drifting, picking up all sorts of infestations and stowaways. Orders are to terminate any life form on sight.’

‘My squad will lead,’ says Commeos. ‘Orthodox sweep pattern alpha. Serrajo takes rearguard.’

The nominated Terminator accepts this duty with a grunt and turns aside as the others continue along the corridor.

They come out in some kind of systems hub: a cavernous vault lined with pipes and cables, a plume of steam gathering around ruptured feedlines. The air is thick with vapour, which catches as droplets on their armour. In the light of the emergency lamps set into the bulkhead, they turn into rubies that slide down the painted ceramite, leaving glittering trails.

The sensorium shifts focus as Serrajo directs his suit’s scanners to the rear. The life signs are on the move, gathering behind and to the flanks of the Terminators’ line of advance.

‘Trying to keep away from us?’ says Vespesario, but his question is answered by the readings on the sensorium. The life signs become bright signals of movement as the semi-circle of returns collapses towards the two squads.

‘Incoming enemies. Purge them swiftly,’ calls Adonius.

The first of the signals reaches the chamber in a shockingly short space of time – scant seconds after the enemy began to close.

‘They were here already,’ barks Commeos. He lifts his storm bolter and fires up at the ceiling. ‘Dormant in the steam cloud!’

A body falls out of the gloom, riddled with bolt wounds, trailing yellow ichor. It has six limbs: two legs, recurved and double-jointed; two upper appendages like tentacles, lined with bony spurs; two other arms each ending in three dagger-like claws. Its head is bulbous and mottled with lumps of moss growth from long hibernation; black, lifeless eyes above a flattened snout and a mouth filled with needle-like fangs. Under dark grey chitin marked with white tiger stripes is purplish flesh tight with muscle and tendons.

Another of the creatures looms out of the darkness towards Vespesario, claws outstretched, mouth opened wide. A tubular tongue glistens with

alien fluid.
This one is alive.

'Genestealers!' Calistarius shouted the warning the moment he dragged himself free from Vespesario's memories. 'They are using thermal ducts and power exchanges to mask their hibernation areas. Watch for attacks from sub-ducting beneath the decks.'

'Hold positions, defensive stance,' ordered Dioneas. A click and a buzz heralded his switch to long-range transmission to the strike cruiser.

Calistarius stood up, almost disappointed. Space hulks were known to carry all manner of potential threats, including orks and other aliens, adepts and devotees of the Dark Powers and even Traitor Space Marines. In the last few decades genestealers had become an increasingly prevalent peril, and the Blood Angels had encountered their fair share of the hideous xenos. Only a few years earlier Calistarius had been part of the boarding teams that had cleansed the *Sin of Damnation* of another swarm.

'Standard infestation protocols,' Dioneas continued, having received orders from Captain Raphael. 'We will fall back to the insertion point and establish a breach-head for the incoming second wave. Estimated time to reinforcement is seventeen minutes.'

'What about Vespesario?' asked Calistarius. 'We cannot leave him here.'

'This area is too tight for a solid defensive cordon against a superior close assault foe,' replied the sergeant. 'We need to withdraw to the outer galleries where we have better lines of fire.'

'And abandon one of our own?'

'That is not a Blood Angel.' Dioneas's voice was harsh over the vox as he turned away. 'It is a hunk of meat kept alive by a combination of sus-an membrane and barely functioning armour life support systems.'

Calistarius was about to argue further but the sergeant cut him off, his tone more conciliatory.

'When the secondary wave arrives we shall make this chamber a primary objective. We can secure the area with more warriors and allow the Apothecaries to do their work.'

It was hard for Calistarius to step away. He had shared Vespesario's thoughts and knew that there was something of the Space Marine still inside the broken body and shattered armour. He had made a connection with his battle-brother, though separated by centuries, and owed it to a fellow Blood Angel to ensure the best chance for survival. Vespesario had done all that he could, sealing himself inside this room, and somehow he had endured. Now that the Blood Angels had breached the door there was nothing to stop the genestealers finishing what they had begun so long ago.

Calistarius was also prepared to admit to himself that he was intrigued by the potential of examining the mind of a Black Rage victim in more detail. Normally delving into the thoughts of one of his brothers so deeply would be taboo, especially those beset by the blood curse. It was a unique

opportunity to gain an insight into what the victims of the Black Rage experienced and, perhaps, a chance to ease the suffering of others or maybe even take a step closer to a cure.

'Wait, brother-sergeant,' said the Librarian as he was about to step across the threshold. Dioneas was heading away down the corridor and did not stop. 'Why did he lock himself away like this? We have to find out.'

'An easily defensible position to make a last stand against the genestealers,' replied Dioneas, still advancing along the passage. 'Little mystery to be explained, I think.'

'A remarkably rational decision for one gripped by the madness of the Black Rage.'

Dioneas stopped at a junction a few dozen metres ahead and turned back to face the Librarian. 'Your meaning?'

'No plainer than what I have said,' continued Calistarius. 'I do not have an answer to that, but from everything we know he would not retreat and he certainly would not have had the presence of mind to close and seal the bulkhead. Something strange happened here two centuries ago.'

'I agree, and we shall uncover the truth of such events once we have properly secured a breach-head and expanded our cordon.' Dioneas turned away. 'We must withdraw, Brother-Lexicanium.'

Captain Raphael had made it clear before Calistarius had departed that battlefield command fell to Sergeant Dioneas, a veteran of several centuries more than the Librarian. Chapter law demanded that Calistarius obeyed the direct command of his superior, but his every instinct was warning him otherwise. As a psyker, he knew instinct was often an indication of some deeper sense.

When Dioneas realised that the Librarian was not following, he stepped back into view.

'Your orders are clear, brother. The warriors of the Librarium at not immune to censure and punishment. Follow me.'

Calistarius used a sub-vocal command to switch to the command hail channel.

'Captain Raphael? This is Lexicanium Calistarius. I must speak with you urgently.'

'Calistarius?' Raphael's voice was deep and rich, and he spoke calmly despite the unorthodox nature of Calistarius's communication. 'This is the command channel. What has happened to Sergeant Dioneas? His transponder reports normal vital signs.'

'The sergeant is unharmed, captain. We cannot withdraw. Not yet. I must continue my psychic scan of Brother Vespesario. Abort the reinforcement wave until I have completed my probe.'

There was a long pause before Raphael replied.

'Second wave is being despatch in forty seconds. You have thirty to convince me.'

Calistarius quickly told the captain of his suspicions concerning Vespesario's behaviour. Raphael listened without interruption and when the Librarian finished asked a simple question.

'Are you willing to stake your honour and good name on this… instinct?'

There was no doubt in the Librarian's mind. It was some unfocused warning from his psychic sense, a warp-powered intuition that made it more than a simple hunch. 'Absolutely, brother-captain. Delay the reinforcement wave for five minutes, that is all I ask.'

'Very well, you have five more minutes.'

The vox-link broke into static for a couple of seconds and then went quiet. Another few seconds passed before Dioneas spoke up, during which the sergeant received fresh orders from the captain.

'You circumnavigated the chain of command, brother,' the sergeant growled, advancing back along the corridor towards Calistarius. 'You are placing yourself and our battle-brothers in great danger. We cannot hold this position for five minutes if the genestealers attack. I urge you to reconsider.'

'I will not, brother-sergeant,' said Calistarius. 'I cannot. I am prepared to wager our six lives against the ninety more that will be risked should the second wave be launched.'

'Your five minutes have already begun,' the sergeant said, pointing at Vespesario with his power sword. 'Use the time wisely.'

The Librarian said nothing as he returned to Vespesario's inert form. He was about to slip into synchrony with the near-dead Space Marine when the sound of a storm bolter firing resounded across his auto-senses. Several blurs of light on the auspex had detached themselves from the mass holding back, and were moving around the perimeter. Brother Santiago's report crackled over the vox.

'Two targets eliminated. Three more incoming.' Another, longer, burst of fire. 'Eliminated.'

The sensor readings showed other probing movements receding for the moment, moving back to the outer corridors and the decks above and below. Sergeant Dioneas stopped beside Calistarius.

'Scouting attacks. Let us hope that they do not realise our numbers are so small before the second wave arrives.'

Calistarius needed no further encouragement and crouched down with arm outstretched, his gauntleted fingers falling upon the bloodstained skin of Vespesario's forehead.

The ship itself tried to fight them as well as the daemons. Doorways appeared in solid walls and closed up again, separating the Blood Angels from each other. Vents in the shape of snarling mouths spewed clouds of flies that exploded like small incendiary shells. Metal decking melted underfoot, turning to a quagmire from which snapping tentacles and fanged maws erupted to drag down unfortunate legionaries.

They pressed on regardless, blasting and hewing their way through the daemonic assault, pushing ever onwards to the strategium where he knew the Arch-traitor would be found. They crossed impossible bridges over bottomless gulfs, battling red-skinned axe wielders with white eyes and bronze armour. They were assailed by multicoloured flames gouting from scything beasts that swooped down upon them from the heights of kilometre-long processional halls.

He knew that progress was slow, but there was something else at work. The interior of the Warmaster's battle-barge was like the inside of a warp breach, contorted and folded upon itself, a contained bubble of the immaterium far bigger than its external space.

There had to be something sustaining the breach, pouring warp energy into the real universe to uphold the diabolic structure and its daemon inhabitants.

Horus.

The Warmaster was a living portal, his superhuman body the only thing capable of transferring so much Chaos energy into the material realm. Not until the Warmaster was slain would they be freed.

As if this thought prompted a response, the Blood Angels, now numbering only six warriors, were confronted by warriors of the Traitor's Legion. Bolt and plasma converged upon them from galleries and mezzanines, forcing them to return to the winding passageways they had just left, where daemons waited with sickle blades and paralysing tongues.

Undeterred, he carved a path through his foes, borne forward not by hate or rage, but the desire to save his sons from this perverted torment.

They fight their way to the upper decks, advancing purposefully into the heart of the enemy, securing bulkheads and blast doors to seal off the foe's lines of attack. It is a folly to hope that they can achieve anything meaningful, but they are Space Marines, Blood Angels, sons of Sanguinius, and they will fight to their last breath. Cleanse and purge. Kill the alien. Suffer not the xenos to live. The main bridge may be their objective but extermination is their true goal.

They fire their storm bolters in short, controlled bursts, conserving ammunition as much as they can. The sergeants have their power swords, cutting down any genestealer that survives the hail of fire. Brother Geraneos has a heavy flamer. Blasts of super-hot promethium clear whole chambers of foes, the incendiary fuel a barrier to further attack, buying scant respite to reload and redistribute ammunition.

Cercanto, Rabellio, Zervantes and Desarius are dead. There is no thought of recovering their ancient battleplate, but their spare magazines do not go to waste.

The foe withdraw from the advance, but none of the Blood Angels mistake this for victory. The genestealers are not mindless animals, that much has been learnt in previous campaigns. They possess patience and cunning,

guided by a psychic gestalt for the near flawless coordination of attacks. The Blood Angels' foes are waiting, biding their time while the Terminators traverse the open galleries and broad storage halls of the third and fourth deck; there are few crawl ducts and hiding spaces from which to launch an ambush. Perhaps they know that the Space Marines are heading for the controls in the bridge and are saving their numbers for a last overwhelming defence.

The Blood Angels take stock, pausing for a few seconds in one of the long mess halls that run nearly four hundred metres along the spine of the ship. The number of rusted benches and tables riveted to the floor suggest that the ship must have housed thousands of crew. A few lighting strips still work, powered by some auxiliary system, flickering dismal yellow in patches, creating shadows that dance with their own life.

'Not to sound overly optimistic, brothers, but I think we might have a chance,' says Serrajo. 'i've studied the sensorium readings and I think the enemy number in their hundreds, not thousands.'

To most warriors such news would be cold comfort – hundreds of genestealers against half a dozen seems impossible odds – but to the Blood Angels of the First Company this is greeted with cautious hope.

'A small infestation,' says Sergeant Commeos. 'You are right, we might yet survive this encounter.'

'We have a small group moving on the right flank.' Lucasi's warning turns the ad-hoc squad in time to see figures scuttling through the broken mess doors. To the surprise of the Space Marines, lasbeams and bullets zip and whine out of the darkness towards them.

The figures spilling into the hall are a contortion of human form, hunched and misshapen as though made of wax and left near a flame. Some have extra eyes, while others sport additional flailing, jointless arms. Many are disfigured with protruding spines and haphazard growths of serrated chitin.

Unlike the purestrain genestealers they carry weapons. Inaccurate fire patters on the Terminators' armour and the tables nearby as the Space Marines move to respond, their storm bolters throwing a hail of rounds into the incoming mass of degenerate half-breeds.

'Hybrids,' snarls Adonius. 'Wipe them out.'

Shotguns boom and autoguns rattle in response as the Terminators close on their foes, their tactical dreadnought armour designed to withstand anti-tank rounds and artillery bombardments. Power gloves smash bones and crush limbs as the crippled hybrids throw themselves ineffectually at the Emperor's chosen. Vespesario swings his fist without relent, pulping skulls and mashing internal organs.

Suddenly a white-blue bolt of energy screams across the hall, catching Commeos on the side of the helm. The plasma explodes in a detonation of raw energy, turning the sergeant's head into an expanding cloud of vaporised liquid and tissue.

A lascannon bolt slices through the bulkhead close at hand, narrowly missing Serrajo.

'Back,' orders Adonius, turning his storm bolter onto the new arrivals.

There are too few of them to risk losing a warrior to the hybrids' heavier weaponry and they retreat from the mess hall, covering their withdrawal with a continuous stream of bolts.

Retracting his mind from the whorl of Vespesario's thoughts, Calistarius passed on this vital piece of intelligence.

'Those are not scouting attacks,' responded Dioneas. 'The genestealers are attempting to lock us into position while their hybrids bring heavy weapons to bear. The tactical situation is not improving, Brother-Lexicanium. We need a mobile defence or we will make easy targets.'

'A minute, no longer,' Calistarius told him. 'I have almost found out what happened to the previous boarding party. I sense that if I can locate his memories of what happened on the main bridge we shall know what we are facing.'

'Sixty seconds, no more.'

Calistarius nodded and focused his thoughts. There was no more time for subtlety, exploring Vespesario's thoughts as though sifting through wreckage. If the Librarian were to discover what had occurred two centuries ago he needed to find it swiftly. The extension of his thoughts into the other Blood Angel became a lance of burning energy, drilling down through Vespesario's psyche into the pulsing core of his memories, shredding everything else in the vicinity. After the Black Rage and so long in suspended animation, Vespesario no longer possessed anything close to a rational mind that would be destroyed by the intrusion. Only good grace had stopped Calistarius being so blunt before.

Growling and snarling, feeling the Black Rage seeping into his soul, Calistarius opened himself up to the weight of Vespesario's experiences, allowing everything to flood in. Fighting against the tide of pain and anger, the Librarian ripped free what he needed, raw and bleeding like a heart torn still beating from the chest.

The strategium. Darkness suffused the massive chamber, broken only by the hellish glimmer of daemon eyes and pulsing warp energy. Bathed in the actinic glow was the Warmaster, encased in battleplate fashioned from the artifice of lunatics and shaped by the whim of Dark Gods.

Horus held up his claws, brandishing them in a display of defiance.

Sword flashing, he hurled himself at the Traitor, ducking beneath a sweeping claw, blade outstretched. A glowing fist met the burning sword and sparks erupted, filling the darkness with a moment of blinding light.

He attacked again, and again was parried with a storm of lightning. Eluding a return blow, he lunged for the head but his sword was turned

aside, ripping across armour plates, carving a white-hot furrow where it passed.

The Warmaster snarled and swept his claws upwards, raking agony across the chest of the Blood Angel. Staggering back, he half-warded away the Traitor's next blow, losing a shoulder pad to the slashing talons.

He threw himself aside to dodge the next assault, ignoring the burning in his lungs, the agonised thrashing of his heart.

The next attack came not from the Traitor's claws but his mind. Psychic energy flared, coruscating through the darkness to hurl the Blood Angel across the strategium. Fronds of sable energy crackled over his armour, scratching and stinging like a million wasps.

Worse still, the Warmaster's thoughts were inside his head, threatening and cajoling, daring him to fight, demanding his surrender.

He could be immortal, Horus promised, if he would only swear his allegiance to a new master. There was nothing to be gained by this pointless resistance. A painful death was no reward for so many centuries of service.

The promise was an affront to all that he held dear. The idea that the Warmaster thought he was capable of being swayed by such argument was too much. Fuelled by a sudden rage he lashed out, his thoughts hurling back the psychic attack, his sword piercing Horus's side.

The Traitor's scream was mixed with demented laughter, a howl of victory as much as pain.

It was then that he realised he would fail if he fought. His sons would perish and all those he had sworn to protect would be consumed by the warp-spawned madness that had been unleashed.

The rage wanted him to fight. The hatred was boiling in his veins, urging him to slash and stab and rend this vile mockery of the man he had once called brother. But he could not give in to the anger, could not submit himself to the vengeance of mindless violence. There was a deeper truth that had to be protected.

He threw himself into the darkness, letting it consume him, the icy chill of the abyss freezing his lungs, setting a chill in his veins, numbing his thoughts until he was part of the darkness itself.

Calistarius struggled, the sacrifice of Vespesario sending a surge of memory into him, breaking like a shard of ice in his thoughts, filling him with a single imperative: slay the Traitor!

Reeling away from Vespesario, Calistarius barely noticed the final glimmer of life had fled the Blood Angel's body. With his last measure of vitality the Terminator had sent his final warning.

'The main bridge!' Calistarius barked. He switched to the command channel. 'Captain Raphael. You must despatch the second wave immediately!'

‘Explain yourself, Brother-Librarian,’ snapped Sergeant Dioneas as Calistarius exited the chamber and set off along the corridor. ‘What did you see?’

‘A trap, brother-sergeant. A terrible, beguiling trap.’

Slamming his fist into the vestiges of the bridge door, Vespesario opens a hole wide enough to step through. Behind him Sergeant Adonius’s storm bolter roars for a few more seconds as he cuts down another genestealer attack.

Pushing his way onto the main bridge, Vespesario finds himself in near-total darkness, the only light a few blinking indicators on a panel to his right and a red haze from a broken viewscreen ahead. His armour’s auto-senses flash through alternatives to the usual spectrum, strobing his view for a half-second before settling on thermal register. Even so it takes a few more seconds for him to realise all is not right with the console beneath the shattered plate of the central display screen.

Twists of cables and snaking wires form a constricting web around something entirely organic. It is hard to discern where mechanical and biological meet, but in the grey shades of cool air he notices that what he took for corrugated tubing is in fact ribbed flesh, sheathed in a segment of black chitin. Above is a nodule that he interprets as an elbow and a flare of carapace over the shoulder.

Though some of its bulk is lost in the mess of machinery, it is easily twice as large as the Terminator. Two human-like arms slowly flex back and forth, tri-fingered hands opening and closing with dormant menace, while the lower set of the torso appendages are tiny, fidgeting digits no bigger than two fingers pressed together, tipped with a slender claw. More chitin covers the chest and abdomen, haphazard with random nodules and aberrant wart-like clusters of malformed hard tissue.

He drags his eyes to the bulging, monstrous head, larger than any creature’s he has seen before. More cables intersect with ichor-dribbling apertures, either side of a ridge of flanges running along the crest of the scalp. The mouth hangs open limply, fangs stunted and blunt, but the eyes that open slowly to regard him with malign alien intelligence are all too familiar.

It is almost too much to understand, so far outside his experience, so far from expected behaviour that he doubts his own senses for a moment. Vespesario struggles to find answers for the questions that crowd his thoughts. It is a collision of opposites, of the feral nature of the genestealer and the artisanship of the Cult Mechanicus. Hybrids bearing weapons is one thing, a fully grown genestealer patriarch meshed with human technology is something entirely different.

There is something else, something so far out of place that he had disregarded it at first.

A third eye splits the forehead of the monstrous half-mechanical genestealer. He meets its gaze for a moment and time loses all meaning.

Like ash ascending on the smoke of a pyre he is lifted up, swept from his weak body into the embrace of a loving god. Brotherhood and belonging, duty and sacrifice, these are values the brood understand. These are virtues to them.

The brood survives, and he will survive with the brood. Others will come, others like the first that were taken and others like him. They will come to be part of the brood also and know the infinite satisfaction of belonging.

It has happened before and will happen again. Timeless, the brood continues, luring in the curious and the dutiful, taking them unto itself to sustain the brood for another generation.

Vespesario has feared nothing since he survived the deserts and came to the people of the Blood. Not death on the battlefield, not injury or torment. Bodily dread is impossible to him, but as he witnesses the eternal life of the brood, leeching its life from those it traps, using them to steer it to more victims, he is filled with a far more existential fear.

The Omen of Despair *is no itinerant threat, no random visitor to worlds and systems, deposited by the vagaries of the warp. There is purpose behind its peregrination. It moves with a will, guided by the bloated creature that rules the brood, a far superior creature to any mere genestealer patriarch. This ship, the heart of the space hulk, provided something new and invigorating, something that altered the genetics and the destiny of the genestealers that had come aboard.*

The third eye is all the evidence required, proof of the obscene nature of the brood's interbreeding for a dozen generations and more.

The Navigator's eye, a genetic mutation bred into the Navigator Houses during the Dark Age of Technology so that they could look upon the warp itself and steer a ship. Those genestrains bred into the aliens again and again through new human hosts, attempting to perfect with random mutation what ancient Terra's scientists had constructed in laboratories, and given final form in the navigator-patriarch.

For centuries it has moved across the galaxy, emerging from the warp using the resonance of humanity's thoughts, guided to populated worlds and drifting starships, dropping back into the warp to trap aboard those who have come to investigate and conquer. An ancient ship, a treasure vault of archeotech and lost knowledge so powerful that not even the Blood Angels would destroy it out of hand. The perfect guise, the perfect lure for adepts of the Machine God, Ecclesiarchy missionaries, Imperial servants of all ranks and divisions, ensnared by the false promise of glory and bounty.

Worse still is the glimpse of the future, the desired path of the Omen of Despair, its ultimate destination arrived at from the desires and memories of a hundred thousand victims of the brood. A planet teeming with life, billions upon billions, and at its heart a mind so powerful that it

broadcasts a beacon across the galaxy. The Astronomican, light of the Emperor, the guiding path followed by Navigators for ten thousand years, entrenched into the most fundamental genetics of the brood, an imperative that drives everything they do.

A return home. To Terra.

To be one with the creator-Emperor.

The sensation fills Vespesario, fulfilling every desire, his own gene-seed aching to be united with the primogenitor, the Master of Mankind. The brood feels it too, the bond singing like a choir in their minds, calling him to come with them, to guide them to the paradise they seek.

The thought terrifies him. It terrifies Vespesario in a way that no mortal danger ever could. The idea that he might bring this unholy infection to the doors of Terra itself fills him with a grief and dread so grave that if he could have willed himself dead at that moment his hearts would have stopped.

And greater still is the fear that he will not be able to fight the urge much longer, the knowledge that he will succumb. A physical foe he can face, but a psychic attack will eventually wear down even the defences of a Space Marine.

In reaction to this hopelessness, rage erupts. A rage burned into the gene-seed he carries, a psychic after-echo of a disastrous fate that still echoes down the millennia. The rage gives him strength, shattering the bond of the patriarch-navigator, granting him a moment's clarity as battle-hormones surge through his system in unprecedented quantity, awakening every cell in his body to the latent strength encoded within.

The brood recoils from the gene-rage, sickened by its touch.

He has but a moment and strikes, firing his storm bolter to gouge a wound in the patriarch's flank. It is not enough, not nearly enough to slay such a beast, but he senses that it is all he has the strength remaining to do.

It is not enough to die here. Like moths to a flame, others will be drawn to the space hulk, feeding the brood's gene-hunger for another generation, bringing the Omen of Despair *a few more light years closer to the heart of the Imperium, a grotesque spider in the guise of a resplendent butterfly.*

The rage gives him strength to fight the brood but duty, honour, sacrifice, these are the qualities that bolster the courage he needs to run, to flee, to protect himself so that he might carry a warning.

Adonius is dead at the door but the brood do not attack when he emerges, still confused by the conflicting psychic signals and pain emanating from their patriarch. Vespesario breaks into a lumbering run, heading into the depths of the ship, closing doors and bulkheads behind him, forestalling pursuit until even he does not know where he is.

His wounds are great. Only the madness of the Black Rage sustains him, and he knows that his sanity will not last much longer. He wants to turn

and face his foes, to cut them down with storm bolter and rip them apart with his power fist.

A deeper goal flares inside, just long enough to find the small magazine chamber, just long enough to open the locks and step inside the closing door, breaking the mechanism to seal himself into a living tomb. He hears them scratching and battering the door but the ammunition storage cell is designed to withstand starship bombardments. On the verge of death he waits, praying for calm, for peace, and for the strength to survive.

And the cold comes as his life leeches away, hearts slowing, breaths becoming shallower, the sus-an membrane flooding his system, becoming one with the rage and hatred, sealing the truth inside a coffin of flesh.

With Calistarius leading the charge, the Blood Angels punched through the gathering genestealers. The aliens had not been expecting an attack and were caught unawares by the sudden offensive. Spurred on by desperation, Calistarius hurled psychic blasts as much as he used his pistol and sword, incinerating the genestealers. The storm bolters of his brethren finished off the survivors of the psychic assault.

'Why do we not wait for the second wave?' asked Sergeant Dioneas.

'As soon as reinforcements land, the navigator-beast will activate the warp engines.'

'So why did you call them in?' the sergeant demanded. 'Have you not doomed the whole company?'

'I am sure the creature knows we are just a scouting force. If it judges we are going to leave, I think it will simply take us into the warp. It must be able to detect the incoming boarding torpedoes and so it will wait. We have to kill it before they arrive.'

'If we fail?'

'You must send the abort signal before the second wave makes contact. They must not set foot on the *Omen of Despair* or we shall all be lost. Better that we are taken than the whole of the First Company.'

'That is a terrible gamble, brother, I hope you know what to do.'

Calistarius said nothing, but the piece of memory stuck in his mind from Vespesario was more than enough to give him confidence.

The truth lay in delusions, oddly enough. Everything Vespesario had witnessed, everything he had experienced on board the *Omen of Despair* had been translated into his rage-fevered hallucinations as Lord Sanguinius.

A febrile creation, not memories at all.

The Librarian could feel its presence even now, lingering in a corner of his mind like a smouldering ember, ready to ignite again if he gave it a chance. For most the Black Rage was a curse but for Calistarius and his companions it had become a blessing, the last chance for Vespesario to give them his warning two centuries after his doom.

‘Get me to the bridge, that is our only objective,’ the Librarian told his battle-brothers. Dioneas was content to comply, despatching the squad to create a breach-head around the command deck. It took several minutes to push back the lingering genestealers with storm bolter and flamer, but eventually the cordon was secure enough for Calistarius to make his last move.

The door of the bridge was still rent asunder from Vespesario’s attacks. Calistarius hardened his thoughts, both to the vile scene that awaited him and to the psychic attack that would surely come. He stepped over the threshold, sword at the ready, and confronted the genestealer patriarch.

It was even more horrendous than Vespesario’s memories had conveyed. It had expanded, filling half the bridge now, disgusting sub-growths of soft flesh and chitin suspended by wires, sustained by pulsing feed tubes that filled the air with the stench of decay. Calistarius’s olfactory filters were almost overwhelmed by it.

The third eye had become a semi-autonomous appendage, jutting from the bloated face of the patriarch on a long stalk, pierced by clips and hooks linked by coiled cables to the warp engine console.

The eye swung toward Calistarius even as the navigator-patriarch’s clawed hands reached for him. Rather than trying to avoid its otherworldly stare he met the alien’s gaze full-on, allowing the Black Rage of Vespesario’s memories to flow forth.

He felt the same timeless void of the brood, as old as the stars, impossibly distant and ancient, reborn through a million generations since a beginning in another galaxy, the tiniest fragment of a much greater whole yearning to be reunited, forever devoured by inner emptiness.

The rage boiled up inside him and he seized hold of the psychic connection, pouring wrath and scorn into his foe without relent.

Psychically and physically the patriarch thrashed to break free, emitting an unearthly wail as ten thousand years of grief and desire for vengeance were made manifest in its mind. It burned like fire, turning alien intelligence to ash, searing through the hypnotic lure of the brood, leaping from one genestealer to the next like a plague, infecting their thoughts with alien anger and hatred so intense that they fell upon each other in their desire to rend and kill.

Claws as hard as titanium closed on his armour, cracking ceramite, puncturing fibre bundles, pushing closer and closer to his gene-enhanced flesh and bones.

He saw not a bizarre hybrid of alien and machine but the very image of treachery – the thrice-cursed Warmaster, Horus the Betrayer, the Architect of Ruin. Calistarius lunged as Sanguinius had lunged, reincarnated as the Lord of the Blood Angels, the Saviour of Baal.

His sword passed into the wound caused by Vespesario’s storm bolter, sliding deep into the patriarch’s innards, parting nerve bundles and

piercing its pulmonary organs.

With a last twitch of muscle the patriarch tossed Calistarius across the bridge. The Librarian lost his grip on his sword, leaving it lodged in the thorax of the alien monster. Ichor spewed from the wound, splashing onto the deck, bubbling with escaping air.

The patriarch-navigator's third eye flopped to its face, the psychic light within dimming to nothing. Its chest collapsed with a wheeze of expulsed breath, and it fell still.

In disarray at the loss of their brood-leader, the genestealers were easy prey for the vengeful Blood Angels. Calistarius was content to let the First Company purge the *Omen of Despair* and allowed himself to be escorted back to the breaching zone by Sergeant Dioneas.

'I would think you would be in a more celebratory mood,' the sergeant said as they arrived at the outer perimeter and were met by an Apothecary and a Techmarine ready to tend their wounds and damaged armour.

'I'm tired, very tired,' explained Calistarius.

It was true. He felt a fatigue the like of which he had never known before, drawn out by physical exertion, psychic combat and, most of all, the harrowing ordeal of sharing Vespesario's Black Rage-induced warp-memories.

But it was more than exhaustion that quietened Calistarius. Something altogether more disturbing occupied his thoughts. It was a moment, a passing vision that had entered his mind at the instant he had unleashed the Black Rage into the thoughts of the patriarch. He was not sure if it were one of Vespesario's cursed hallucinations, an actual memory from the Terminator's ordeal two hundred years before, or something else far more dangerous: a glimpse of something yet to happen.

His instinct told him it was the latter.

For a fraction of a second, Calistarius had felt himself entombed, buried in a vast mausoleum, gripped by a terrible thirst for blood, shrieking for release, enslaved to the curse of the Black Rage.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

ECLIPSE OF HOPE

By

David Annandale

I stand in the middle of a field of corpses.

We were summoned, and so we have come to Supplicium Secundus. We are winged salvation, but we are a terrible, final salvation, and our wings embrace the horizon with fire. We are the Blood Angels. To confront us is to die, and death is my remit, my reality, my unbounded domain. I have known death, and defeated it, claimed it as my own. To my cost, to my strength, death is my one gift to bestow, and I am nothing if not generous. But today, my liberality is unwanted, unneeded.

Undone.

The dead on the plain are uncountable, and not a one of them has fallen by my will. I emerged with my brothers from the drop pod to be confronted with this vista. There is, it must be said, a certain perfection to it. This is no mere slaughter or massacre. This is not a battlefield where defeat and victory have been meted out. This is death, simply death. The plain is a vast one, stretching to the distance on three sides, ending in the blurry hulk of Evensong Hive to the north. The skyline is smeared not by distance, but by smoke. It is thick, grey flecked with black, a choking pall of ash. It is the lingering memory of high explosives, incinerated architecture and immolated flesh. The fires have burned themselves out. There is a meaning to this smoke. It is the smoke of *afterwards*. It is the smoke of *finished*. It is the smoke of the only form of peace our era knows, the peace that comes when there is no one left to die.

Wind, sluggish and hot, fumbles at my cloak, breathes its last against my cheek. It pushes at the smoke, making the grey stir over the corpses like an exhausted phantom. There is no sound. There are no trees to rub leaves in a susurrus of mourning. There is no tall grass to wave a benediction. The ground has been chewed into a mulch of mud. Wreckage of weaponry and of humanity is slowly sinking into the mire. In time, all memory of the events of Supplicium Secundus will vanish. Smoke lingers. It does not last.

There is no order to the dead. There is no hint of this having been a war. There is no division between armies, no demarcating line of the clash. There is only brother at brother's throat. By bolter, by sword, by cannon, by hands, this has been the pure violence of all against all. The full panoply of Supplicium's population lies, stilled, before me. I see civilians of both genders, and of all ages. I see the uniform of Unwavering Supplicants, the local planetary defence force.

I see the proud colours of the Mordian Iron Guard, now covered in mud.

We are here because of the Iron Guard. It was their General Spira who called out to us. His message was fragmented and desperate. We have not been in contact with him since that first cry. I look at his men who have killed each other, and doubt that we shall hear from him again.

Over the vox network, reports arrive from the other landing sites. Supplicium Secundus is a compact world, dense in composition and with a handful of small habitable zones at the equator. In each of these areas, a hive has arisen, and it is just outside these hives that our strike forces have landed, a multi-pronged attack designed to inflict simultaneous punishments on the enemy. Sergeant Saleos calls from Hive Canticle, then Sergeant Andarus from Hive Oblation, then Sergeant Procellus from Hive Anthem. It is the same everywhere: endless vistas of death. We came because of heretical rebellion. We came because the Iron Guard was overmatched. We have found only silence.

Behind me, the Stormraven gunship *Bloodthorn* sits on a clear patch of land. I am in the company of Stolas, Epistolary of 4th Company, Chaplain Dantalion, Standard Bearer Markosius and a tactical squad led by Sergeant Gamigin. Standing a few metres to my left, the sergeant scans the landscape with an auspex. Nothing. Frustration radiates from my battle-brothers. Their hunger for the bloodshed of combat eats at them. Their bolters are still raised, seeking absent targets. They are angry at the dead. Our standard rises above the plain, proud but still in the dying wind, a call to a battle that is long over.

'This is a waste of time,' says Stolas.

'Is it?' I say.

At my tone, Stolas snaps his head around. 'Lord Mephiston,' he begins, 'I–'

I cut him off. 'Do you know what has happened here?'

'No, I–'

'This is something you have seen before?'

This time, he does not try to answer. He simply shakes his head.

'Mordian has slain Mordian,' I point out. '*All* the Mordians are slain. That gives me pause.' I turn from Stolas, losing interest in the reprimand, refocusing my thoughts on the madness before me. And madness is what it is, I realise. Insanity. There is no logic, and this is the flaw in the tapestry of mortality. My eyes range over the infinity of bodies. The perfection I see is, in truth, only the perfection of abomination. 'We are not wasting our time,' I say, speaking more to myself than to Stolas. 'There is a mystery here, and it bears the mark of Chaos.'

Something flickers in my peripheral vision. I look up. Movement in the smoke. A figure approaching. A man.

His movements are jerky, random, yet purposeful in their energy. He cuts back and forth, advancing in no clear direction until he catches sight of us. Then he runs, pounding towards us over the backs of the fallen. He pistons his legs with such force that I can hear the snap of bones beneath his feet.

His arms are outstretched as if he were running to embrace us. He emerges from the smoke. His teeth are bared. His face is red, his tendons popping. He is snarling with incoherent rage. What manner of man would charge, so unhesitatingly, and so completely alone, against the Adeptus Astartes? And what manner of man would do so unarmed? Only one sort: a man completely in the grip of madness.

He leaps on Sergeant Gamigin, biting and clawing and spitting. The man cannot possibly hope to break through the Blood Angel's armour. Gamigin stands there, bemused. After a minute, he hauls the man off and holds him out by the scruff of his neck. The snapping, feral creature is a Guardsman. His uniform is in tatters, but enough of it remains to identify him as a colonel.

With a sudden clench of his fist, Gamigin snaps the man's neck and hurls him to the ground. He stomps on the officer's head, smashing it to pulp. Over his helmet's vocaliser comes a growl that is growing in volume and intensity.

'Brother-Sergeant?' Chaplain Dantalion asks.

Gamigin whirls on him, drawing his chainsword.

'*Sergeant*.' I use my voice as a whip. Gamigin pauses and turns his head. I step forward and hold his gaze. The lenses of his helmet are expressionless, but mine are the eyes without pity or warmth. I see the taint of the warp gathering around Gamigin like a bruise. The madness that has descended upon him is not the Red Thirst. It is not the manifestation of the Flaw, though our genetic curse may create an increased vulnerability. The tendrils of the warp bruise are deeply tangled in Gamigin's being. There is no salvation for him except what he wills himself. 'Give us space,' I tell the others. 'Take no action.' I do not draw my blade. 'Gamigin,' I say, then repeat his name twice more.

The growl stops. His breathing is heavy, laboured, but suggesting exhaustion, not frenzy. He sheaths his chainsword. 'Chief Librarian,' he says. He shakes his head. 'Forgive me. I don't understand what happened.'

'Try to describe it.'

'I felt disgust for the officer, and then a blind rage. All I wanted to do was kill everyone in sight.'

The silence that follows his statement is a heavy one. I have no need to point out the implications. The madness that killed Supplicium Secundus still lurks, seeking purchase now in our souls. I let my consciousness slip partially into contact with the everywhere non-space of the warp. I anatomize the energies that flow about me. I find the mad rage. It is a background radiation, barely detectable, but omnipresent. The planet is infected. The disease that killed its population has a pulse, an irregular beat like that of an overtaxed heart. I pull back my awareness back to the here and now, but now that I have seen the trace of the plague, I can identify its workings. It scrabbles at the back of my mind. It is an annoyance, barely there but never absent, scratch and scratch and gnaw

and claw. It wants in, and it will work at us until, like wind eroding rock, it has its way. It is in no hurry. It is now as fundamental to the planet as its nickel-iron core. It has forever. If we stay here, given enough time, we will all succumb. This is not defeatism. It is realism. A Blood Angel can and must recognize inevitable doom when it is encountered. The doom we face, coded into our very genes, is just as patient, just as certain of its ultimate victory.

The difference is that we can leave Supplicium Secundus and its disease behind. I am loathe to do so without discerning a cause, however.

Then a voice sounds in my ear bead. 'Chief Librarian?' It is Castigon, captain of 4th Company. He is aboard the strike cruiser *Crimson Exhortation*, which awaits us at high anchor.

'Yes, captain.'

'Do you concur with the other reports? There are no survivors?'

I glance at the dead colonel. 'That is now the case, yes.'

'Is it possible for you to return to the ship?' Castigon does not give me orders. He would never be so foolish. But his request is not unreasonable.

I hesitate, thinking still that perhaps some revelation might await us in the abattoir of the hive before us. 'Is this a matter of urgency?' I ask.

There is a pause. Then: 'Possibly.' I sense no deliberate vagueness on Castigon's part. He sounds genuinely puzzled. From his tone, I would say that he has chosen his answer carefully. After a moment, he speaks again. 'We have found the Mordian fleet.'

Found. The fleet should not have needed finding. It should have been in constant communication with us. But there was none when we arrived in the system, and no immediate sign of other ships in orbit around Secundus. 'There is an ominous ring to your words, captain,' I say.

'It is in the nature of this day, Chief Librarian.'

The Supplicium System is perched on the edge of extinction. This is nothing new. It is its very nature. There was once, against all sense, a colony on Supplicium Primus. The small planet is perilously close to the sun, but its gold deposits are vast. Its rate of rotation is the same as its revolution, and one face burns in an eternal day, while the other is forever trapped by night. Along the band of its twilight, a temperate zone permitted habitation until six centuries ago, when a solar storm of terrible magnitude stripped Primus of its atmosphere.

Secundus and Tertius, larger, more distant, and with stronger magnetic fields, weathered the storm, preserving their atmospheres and their civilizations. But here, too, humanity's grip is precarious. The orbits of the two planets are very close, but fall on either edge of the range of temperate distances from their star. Secundus is arid, Tertius frigid. But the Imperium is filled with worlds far more hostile, and they are held for the eternal glory of the Emperor. The Supplicium system has called for help. It must be heeded.

It was. Help came.

And failed.

Aboard the *Crimson Exhortation*, I stand with Castigon in the strategium. There are many tacticarium screens offering information, but our attention is focused on what we can see through the great expanse of armourglass at the front of the bridge. The hololiths and readouts render the meaning of the view clear, but there is a terrible majesty to the unfiltered, uncatalogued, raw vision before us.

The Mordians were but one system over when Supplicium Secundus cried out for help, and so they came. Now their fleet is dead. Its ships move, tumbling past each other along mindless trajectories. Some have collided. Even as we watch, a Sword-class frigate, turning end over end with slow grace, slams into the flank of Lunar-class cruiser *Manichaean*. The smaller ship breaks in two. Its halves float away, shedding debris. The Manichaean has taken a solid blow amidships, but continues its sluggish momentum, its course barely altered.

There is no flare of engines anywhere in the fleet. There are no energy signatures of any kind coming from the ships. This is why the fleet was invisible to us at first. It has become, in effect, a tiny belt of iron asteroids. I look at the tacticarium screens. There is evidence of inter-ship combat. Some of the hulls show signs of torpedo hits and lance burns. Not all, though. In truth, very few. What killed the fleet took place inside the ships.

Castigon despatched squads aboard the *Crimson Exhortation's* Thunderhawks and Stormravens with the mission to board ships, where practical. The warriors engaged in this task know what we found on the surface of Supplicium Secundus, and they know about the ongoing risk of the plague. They will steel themselves against the temptations of anger. They will hold themselves in check. As the reports come in to the strategium, however, the caution begins to seem excessive. Though the background whisper of rage is ever present, basic discipline is enough to hold it at bay because there are no triggers. The fleet is empty. No troopers have been found. The Mordian army, to a man, descended to Secundus to slaughter itself. All of the bodies on the ships belong to the naval crews, the slaves, and even the servitors. The doom is so powerful, even the mindless succumbed to killing frenzy. As below, so above. Each vessel boarded unveils another tale of mutual carnage. There is nothing left in planetary orbit but dead flesh and dead metal.

'I have never seen the like,' Castigon confesses.

'Neither have I.' The deaths of worlds and entire fleets, yes, I have seen such things. I have been instrumental in bringing about the annihilation of heretical solar systems. But this massacre is different in kind. The only weapons involved appear to have been those borne by the servants of the Imperium, who turned their arms on each other. We have not seen the smallest hint of an opposing force, which makes the enemy all the more dangerous. *There* must be an enemy. What we have seen cannot be due to

chance. A warp-thing very like a disease has been spread across Supplicium Secundus and the intervention fleet. I cannot bring myself to believe that it arrived spontaneously. It was brought here. It was unleashed.

'I am recalling the reconnaissance squads,' Castigon says. I nod. He is right to do so. There is nothing more to learn here. I am now given to doubt whether there would, after all, be anything on the planet worth finding.

The question is rendered moot as the last of the gunships is docking with the *Crimson Exhortation*. There is a sudden explosion of vox traffic coming from Supplicium Tertius. The transmissions are bedlam, but the clamour of voices is clear because of the uniformity of the message. Tertius is screaming for help. The *Exhortation* receives pict feeds whose images shake, swerve and break up altogether. They are documents whose very assembly is the expression of desperation. They bear witness to riot, terror, madness. The streets of the cities are turning into massive brawls, the inhabitants swarming over each other like warring ants. Chaos (let me call it by its name) is spreading over the planet like a slick of promethium. The rapidity of the infection is remarkable. When we arrived in-system, we were in contact with the spaceport on Tertius, and there was no hint that anything was awry. Now, a day later, as we race to leave the orbit of Secundus and ride hard for Tertius, I know that we could well be too late. So does every warrior aboard this vessel. We know this, but we shall not allow it to be so. If will alone could move our ship, we would already be at anchor over the planet.

Castigon tries to hail one control node after another. Spaceports, planetary defence force bases, the lord-governor, working his way down to whatever nobles or commanding officers are mentioned in our records of Tertuis. He is forced to give up. Order is rapidly collapsing on Tertius. It occurs to me that the only minds we might save from this disaster will be our own.

The transmissions become more troubling during our journey to Tertius. Between the close orbits of the two planets and their approaching conjunction, our voyage is a short one. It is also far too long. The clamour rises to a shriek, and then the voices plummet into a far louder silence. The pict feeds vanish too. Before they do, they grace us with a mosaic of paroxysm.

As the *Crimson Exhortation* streaks towards a world now covered by an ominous calm, Castigon gathers his officers in the strategium. Stolas and the others create extra space for me around the tacticarium table. I exist, for them as for myself, in a sphere of shadow. I think of it as symbolic, but it appears to have a real force. The living, either pushed or recoiling, are distanced from the unknowable thing in their midst. I am the resurrected and the recently born. The body that was Calistarius walks. The mind that

animates it is Mephiston. Calistarius was no more than than a prologue to me.

Stolas asks, ‘If all communication has ceased, are we not already too late?’

Castigon does not hesitate. ‘Collapse will precede extinction,’ he pronounces. ‘It will take some weeks for even the most determined population to kill itself. Crisis has befallen the people of Tertius under our watch, and we shall not fail them.’

He speaks for us all. We come to Tertius not as Angels of Death, but as Salvation.

‘We must destroy the obscenity,’ Sergeant Gamigin says, his voice soft yet edged with righteous anger. It is the anger that will do battle with rage. He has felt the touch of the enemy, and will retaliate with a passion fuelled by justice. He, too, speaks for us all. Whatever foe is attacking Supplicium, be it xenos or daemon, we will find it, and we will exterminate it so utterly, not even its memory shall remain.

And then, in the next second, it finds us first. The collision alert sounds. Helmsman Ipos bellows orders. The ship moves ponderously to evade. We all face forwards. We witness our near destruction.

The *Crimson Exhortation* has come upon a dark ship. It is even more massive than the strike cruiser. Utterly without light, it is a deeper night against the void. It passes over us, and for minutes we are swallowed by a presence that is both shadow and mass. When this happens, when we can no longer see the stars, there is no sense of movement, no sense of the passing of this great vessel. Instead, there is only the great weight of total absence, and it is easy to believe that we have entered an eternal night. The bottom of the stranger’s hull brushes the top of our spires, shearing them off. But then the ships part, ours shuddering as Ipos fights to make her angle down just a little bit faster, the other coasting on with dead serenity.

Damage is minimal. The *Exhortation* comes around, and the scanning begins. The other ship appears to be drifting. It is without power, and the augurs find no trace any sort of radiation. ‘From the Mordian fleet?’ asks Stolas. ‘Perhaps the crew succumbed to the rage plague as the ship tried to leave,’ he continues.

‘No,’ I say. I am unsatisfied. The coincidence of our near-collision nags at me. It is simply too improbable. In the vastness of the void, for two specks of dust to encounter one another, something more than chance must be at work, and this ship cannot be just another tomb of Guardsmen.

The configuration of the ship, beyond its great size, is difficult to make out at first. This is not just because of its darkness. Though it is solid enough, there is a profound vagueness to the form.

‘That is a battle-barge,’ Ipos calls out, startled.

He is correct. He is also wrong. The shape is, it is true, based on that of an Adeptus Astartes battle-barge. But there are insufficient details, and much that is there seems wrong. The silhouette is distorted. The hull is too

long, the bridge superstructure too squat, the prow so pointed and long it is a caricature. No matter how much illumination we pour onto the ship, it defies the eye. It will not come into proper focus. ‘No,’ I say. ‘It is not a battle-barge. It is the memory of one.’ I mean what I say, even if I am not sure how such a thing has come to be. I am not speaking metaphorically. What drifts through space before us is a ship as it would be imperfectly remembered.

Then a detail that is not blurred comes into view. The ship’s name: *Eclipse of Hope*.

‘It’s a ghost,’ Dantalion says.

I frown at the terminology, not least because it seems to be accurate. The *Eclipse of Hope* is known to me. It is known to all of us. The battle-barge disappeared during the fifth Black Crusade. Five thousand years ago. Worse: the ship was a Blood Angels vessel. I dislike its existence more and more. Its presence here cannot be a coincidence. The power necessary to orchestrate this ‘chance’ encounter is immense.

‘Is it really the–’ Gamigin begins.

‘No.’ I cut him off. ‘That ship is destroyed.’ It must be, after five millennia in the empyrean. The thing that bears the name now is a changeling, though at a certain, dark level, it is intimately linked with the original. Somehow, the collective memories of the *Eclipse of Hope*, or the memory of a single being of terrible power, achieved such potency that an embodiment has occurred. Its manifest solidity is extraordinary. I have never known a warp ghost to have so much material presence. It must represent a concentration of psychic power such as has never been imagined. It…

I turn to Ipos. ‘Can we plot the trajectory of this ship’s passage through the system?’

‘A moment, Chief Librarian.’ Ipos appears to slump in his throne. I can see his consciousness slip down the mechadendrites that link his skull to the machine-spirit and cogitators of the *Crimson Exhortation*. On the bridge, navigation servitors begin chanting numbers in answer to unheard questions. After a few moments, Ipos returns to an awareness of the rest of us. The results of his efforts appear on a tacticarium screen. If the *Eclipse of Hope* has maintained a steady course, she passed near Supplicium Secundus, and through the centre of the Mordian fleet.

‘Captain,’ I say to Castigon, ‘that is the carrier of the rage plague. Destroy it, and perhaps there will be something to save of Supplicium Tertius.’

The phantom remains dark as the *Crimson Exhortation* manoeuvres into position for the execution. The immense shadow does not change direction. Its engines do not flare. No shields or guns flash to life. It coasts, slow leviathan, serene juggernaut, messenger of mindless destruction.

No. No, I am wrong. I am guilty of underestimating the enemy. There is nothing mindless here. The spectre of a Blood Angels battle-barge unleashes a plague whose symptoms might as well be those of the Red Thirst. There is a hand behind this. There is mockery. There is provocation that warrants a retaliation most final. But how to find the hand behind this horror?

That question must wait. The *Eclipse of Hope* is the paramount concern. It has almost destroyed an entire system through its mere presence. If its journey is not stopped, untold Imperial worlds could fall to its madness. The *Eclipse of Hope* must die a second time. Today. Now.

How? I wonder.

The *Crimson Exhortation* is in position. On Castigon's orders, Ipos has taken us some distance from the phantom. The strike cruiser is great dagger aimed at the flank of the battle-barge. Beyond the *Eclipse of Hope*, there is nothing but the void. Supplicium Tertius is still some distance away, but Ipos has placed it safely at our starboard. It is important that there be nothing for a great distance in front of us except our target. Castigon has ordered the use of the nova cannon.

'Conventional weapons will do no harm to a warp ghost,' I tell him.

'It is solid enough to have hit us,' Castigon replies. 'It broke iron and stone. It can be broken in turn.' He turns to Ipos. 'Helmsmaster, are we ready?'

'In a moment, captain.' We have never had the luxury of so passive an opponent on which to use the gun. Ipos takes the opportunity to triple-check all of his calculations and run through his instrument adjustments one more time. When he finds no errors, he signals Castigon.

I can feel the build-up in the ship's machine-spirit. It is excited to be using this weapon again. The nova cannon is a creation of absolute power, because it destroys with absolute efficiency. We are merely its acolytes, awakening it from its slumber whenever we have need of its divine wind.

'Fire,' Castigon orders.

The deck trembles. The entire ship vibrates from the forces unleashed in the firing of the nova cannon. The weapon is almost as long as the hull. The recoil jolts the frame of the *Exhortation*. The cannon is not a weapon of precision, but the shot is as close to point-blank range as is possible with the cannon without destroying ourselves in the process. The projectile flashes across the void, injuring space itself. It hits the *Eclipse of Hope* in the centre of its mass. There is a flare of blinding purity. It is at this moment that the cannon warrants its name. The explosion reaches out for the *Crimson Exhortation*, but falls short. Even so, there is another tremor as the shockwave hits us. We have hurled one of the most powerful weapons in human history at the *Eclipse of Hope*.

It doesn't notice.

The dark serenity is undisturbed. The ghost ship continues its steady drift towards Supplicium Tertius, bringing its plague of final wrath. The bridge

and the strategium of the *Crimson Exhortation* are silent as we stare into a future haunted by the *Eclipse of Hope*. Within hours, one ship will have extinguished all human life in a system. It will have done so with no weapons, no struggle, no strategy. Its mere passage will have been enough. And if the phantom should reach other, more crowded systems? Or cross paths with a fleet in transit? Vectors of contagion, visions of hell: my mind is filled by the plague spreading its corroding influence over the entire galaxy.

The *Eclipse of Hope* must be stopped. If nothing in the *Crimson Exhortation's* arsenal will avail, then one alternative remains.

'I will lead a boarding party,' I announce. 'The vessel must be killed from within.'

'Can you walk in a ghost?' Castigon asks.

'It is solid enough to have hit us,' I echo.

'If that is the source of the plague,' Dantalion muses, 'then entering it will be fraught with great moral peril.'

'Most especially for a Blood Angel,' I add. The Flaw will be sorely felt in this situation.

The Chaplain nods. 'The threat does seem rather precisely targeted.'

'That is no coincidence,' I say. 'It is also a risk we must run.'

Castigon nods, but his expression is doubtful. 'How do you plan to kill a ghost?' he asks.

'I will discover that in due course.' I turn to go. 'But shouldn't one revenant be able to destroy another?'

We do not use boarding torpedoes. We cannot be sure that they would be capable of drilling through the spectre's hull. Instead, the *Bloodthorn* transports my squad to the *Eclipse of Hope*. This is to be an exorcism. On board with me, then, are Epistolary Stolas, Sanguinary Priest Albinus, Chaplain Dantalion and Techmarine Phenex. Sergeant Gamigin is present, too. He was insistent upon coming, even though it seems that this mission requires a different set of skills. He has faith enough, however, and having been touched by the dread ship's influence, he is hungry for redemption.

I sit in the cockpit with pilot Orias as the *Bloodthorn* approaches the landing bay door of the battle-barge. The door does not open. This is not a surprise. What is striking is the way in which the details of the hull resolve themselves. They become clearer not because we draw nearer, but because we are looking at them. The sealed bay door has a material presence it did not a few minutes ago. I am aware, in my peripheral vision, that the surrounding hull is still blurry.

Orias has noticed the same phenomenon. 'How is this possible?' he wonders.

'It is feeding on our memories,' I answer. 'We know what a battle-barge looks like. It is supplementing itself with our own knowledge.'

I can see the anger in the set of Orias's shoulder plates. His resentment is righteous. We are witnessing a monstrous blasphemy. Still, we have also learned something. We know more about how our foe works.

Then the unexpected does occur. The door rises. The bay is a rectangular cave, dark within the dark. It awaits us. It welcomes us. We must have something it needs, then. This, too, is valuable to know. If it has needs, it has a weakness.

'This forsaken vessel mocks us,' Orias snarls.

'It is arrogant,' I reply. 'And arrogance is always a mistake.' Show me your weaknesses, I think. Show me your desire, that I might tear you in half. 'Take us in,' I tell Orias. 'Drop us and depart.'

The next few minutes have a terrible familiarity. The gunship enters the landing bay of a battle-barge. I pull back the bulkhead door. We wait a few moments, guns at the ready. Nothing materialises. We are simply staring at an empty bay.

'I do not appreciate being made a fool of,' Gamigin grumbles. His bolter tracks back and forth, aiming at air.

'Guard your temper, brother-sergeant,' I tell him. 'See with how little effort the vessel encourages us to anger.'

We disembark. The banality of our surroundings makes our every move cautious, deliberate. We trust nothing. I am first on the deck, and the fact that it does not reveal itself to be an illusion without substance is almost a surprise. The rest of the squad follows me. We step away from the gunship and form a circle, all approaches covered. The emptiness is full of silent laughter. We ignore it. Our enhanced vision pierces the darkness, and all we see is ordinary deck and walls. The known and the familiar are the danger here. Each element that is not alien is a temptation to a lowered guard. Then, as Orias pulls the *Bloodthorn* out of the bay and away from the *Eclipse*, the darkness recedes. Light blooms. It is the colour of decay.

The light does not come from biolumes, though I see their strips along the ceiling. It is not a true light. It is a phantom of light, as false as anything else about this ship, a memory plucked from our minds and layered into this construct of daemonic paradox. As we move across the bay towards its interior door, the space acquires greater solidity. The ring of our bootsteps on the decking grows louder, less muffled, more confident. Did I see rivets in the metal at first? I do now.

By the time we reach the door, the constructed memory of a battle-barge loading bay is complete. I am no longer noticing new, convincing details. So now I can see the weaknesses of the creation. The ghost has its limitations. The bay seems real, but it is also empty. There are no banks of equipment, no gunships in dock. There is only the space and its emptiness. The *Eclipse of Hope* could not make use of our full store of memories. 'I shall have your measure,' I whisper to the ship. Does it, I wonder, know what it has allowed inside. Does it feel me? Is it capable of regret? Can it know fear?

I shall ensure that it does.

As we step into the main passageway off the bay, the attack begins. It is not a physical one. There are no enemies visible. There is nothing but the empty corridor and the low, sickly grey light. But the ship embraces us now, and does more than feed off our memories. It tries to feed us, too. It feeds us poison. It feeds us our damnation. Walking down the passageway is walking into rage itself. We move against a gale-force psychic wind. It slows our progress as surely as any physical obstacle. It is like pushing against the palm of a giant hand, a hand that wraps massive, constrictor fingers around us. It squeezes. It would force self-control and sanity out. It would force uncontrollable anger in, and in, and in, until we burst, releasing the anger once more in the form of berserker violence.

I feel the anger stir in my chest, an uncoiling serpent. The bone-cold part of myself, that which I cannot in conscience call a soul, holds the serpent down. It also takes further measure of the ship. There are still limits to the precision of the attack. That is not the Black Rage that I am suppressing. It is too mundane an anger. It is potent. It is summoned by a force powerful enough to give substance to the memory of a battle-barge. But it is not yet fully aligned with the precise nature of our great Flaw. That will come, I have no doubt. But we have the discipline to defeat anger of this sort.

I glance at my brothers. Though there is tension and effort in their steps, their will is unbowed.

Stolas says, 'The light is becoming brighter.'

'It is,' I agree. Despite our resistance, the ship is growing stronger. Our mere presence is giving it life. The light, as corrupt as it was in the bay, has assumed a greater lividity. We can see more and more of the passageway. The ship cements its details with more and more confidence. The greater visibility should make our advance easier. It does not.

The phantom's mimicry is uncanny. With every incremental increase of illumination comes a further revelation of perfect recall. This is the true ghost of the *Eclipse of Hope*. We are travelling one of the main arteries, and the phantom has a complex memory to reconstruct: stone-clad walls and floor, gothic arches, vaulted bulkheads. They are all here. Even so, as accurate as the recreation is, it remains a ghost. There is something missing.

Phenex's machinic insight gives him the answer first. He raps a fist against the starboard wall. The sound of ceramite against marble is what I would expect. Yet it makes me frown.

Albinus has noticed something, too. 'That isn't right,' he says.

'There's a delay,' the Techmarine explains. 'Very slight. The sound is coming a fraction of a second later than it should.'

'The response is a conscious one,' I say. 'It is a form of illusion. That wall is not real. Your gauntlet is banging against the void, brother.'

I spot Gamigin staring at his feet, as if expecting the surface on which he walks to disintegrate without warning. If we are successful here, he may

not be far wrong.

From behind his skull helm, Dantalion casts anathema on the ship. His voice vibrates with hatred.

'Save your breath,' I tell him. 'Wait until there is something to exorcise.'

'There already is,' he retorts. 'This entire ship.'

'Have you the strength to spread your will over such a large target?' I ask him. 'If so, you have my envy.'

Dantalion will not appreciate my tone. That is not my concern. What is my concern is that my team be as alert and focused as possible. The ship inspires anger, and I do not think it cares in what direction that anger is expressed. Dantalion's hatred of the *Eclipse of Hope* is normal, praiseworthy, and proper. It is also feeding the vessel. Unless we find a target that we can overwhelm somehow, the Chaplain's broad, sweeping anger will do us more harm than good.

We are making our way toward the bridge. This is not the result of considered deliberation. We exchanged looks at the exit from the landing bay, and of one accord set off in this direction. There is nothing to say that we will find what we seek there, or anywhere else, for that matter, on this ship. But the bridge is the nerve centre of any vessel. We seek a mind. The bridge is the logical place to begin.

It troubles me that we are taking action based on nothing stronger than a supposition. I cannot detect any direction to the warp energies that make up the *Eclipse of Hope*. There does not seem to be any flow at all. I understand the nature of the immaterium. I know it better, perhaps, than anyone in the Imperium, save our God-Emperor. Yet the substance of the *Eclipse* defies me. It appears inert. This cannot be true, not with the intensifying light, the consolidation of the illusion, and the gnawing and scratching at our minds. There is something at work here. Perhaps I can find no current, no flow, no core because these things do not exist yet. The effects of the ship are those of a field, one that may extend the entire length and breadth of the vessel. 'It isn't strong enough yet,' I mutter.

'Chief Librarian?' Albinus asks.

'The ship is still feeding,' I say. 'We cannot be sure of its full nature until it has gorged. Perhaps then it will act.'

'Then we can kill it?' Gamigin asks.

I nod. 'Then we can kill it.'

Down the length of the battle-barge we march. We ignore the side passageways that open on either side. We stick to the direct route, always pushing against the ethereal but implacable rage. Our tempers are fraying, the effort needed to suppress flare-ups of anger becoming stronger by the hour. And there is more. There is something worse. The more I strain, the more I find traces of an intelligence. It does not drive the ship. It is the ship itself. It is as if this were truly a revenant. The knowledge is frustration, hovering at the edge of tactical usefulness, a buzzing hornet in my consciousness. If the ship is sentient, then I must cut out its mind. To

do that, I must locate it. But the *Eclipse of Hope* is still too quiescent. It is a beast revelling in its dreams of rage, not yet prepared to wake. It torments us. It does not fight us.

The walk from the bay to the bridge is long. There is no incident, no attack. The march would be tedium itself, were it nor for the slow, malevolent transformation of the ship around us. We are presented with the spectacle of the familiar as evil, the recognizable as threat. The more the ship resembles what it remembers itself to be, the more we are seeing a manifestation of its power. The light is brighter yet. The growing clarity remains in the nature of a bleak epiphany. There is nothing to see but death, embodied in the form of the ship itself. Everything that presents itself to our eyes does so with a cackling malignity, pleased that it imitates reality so well. It does so only as a show of force. Everything that appears can be taken away. I am sure of this. The ship is a dragon, inhaling. The immolating exhalation is imminent.

We are one deck down, and only a few minutes away from the bridge when the dragon roars. The light dims back to the grey of a shroud. The ship now has a better use for the energy it is leaching from us. It is awake. The sudden explosion of consciousness is painful. The ghost turns its full awareness upon us.

Can a ship smile? Perhaps. I think it does, in this very second.

Can it rage?

Oh, yes.

The *Eclipse of Hope* hates, it angers, it blasts its laughing wrath upon those beings who would dare invade it, the intruders it deems little more than insects and that it lured here in its dreaming. It has fed upon us, and now would complete its feast with our final dissolution.

Dissolution comes from the walls. For a moment, they lose all definition. Chaos itself billows and writhes. And the ship can also sing. The corridor resounds with a fanfare of screaming human voices and a drum-beat that is the march of wrath itself. Then the walls give birth. Their offspring have hides the colour of blood. Their limbs are long, grasping, with muscles of steel stretched over deformed bones. Their skulls are mocking, predatory fusions of the horned goat and the armoured helm. Their eyes are blank with glowing, pus-yellow hatred. They are bloodletters, daemons of Khorne, and the sight of their arrival has condemned mortal humans beyond counting to a madness of terror.

As for my brothers and myself, at last we have a foe to fight. We form a circle of might and faith. ‘Now, brothers,’ Dantalion says. ‘Now this vessel of the damned shows its true nature. Strike hard, steadfast in the light of Sanguinius and the Emperor!’

‘These creatures, sergeant,’ I tell Gamigin, ‘you are at full liberty to kill.’

It takes him a moment to respond, unused to any expression of humour on my part. ‘My thanks, Chief Librarian,’ he says, and sets to work with a

passion.

The bloodletters wield ancient swords, their blades marked by eldritch designs and obscene runes. They come at us from all sides, their snarls drowned out by the choir of the tortured and the infernal beat, beat, beat of a drum made of wrath. The music is insidious. It pounds its way deep into my mind. I know what it is trying to do. It would have us march to the same beat, meet rage with rage, crimson armour clashing with crimson flesh until, with the loss of our selves to the Flaw, there is no distinguishing Blood Angel from daemon. The bloodletters open their fanged maws wide, tongues whipping the air like snakes, tasting the rage and finding it good. They swing their swords. We meet them with our own. Power sword, glaive and chainsword counter and riposte. Blade against blade, wrath against rage, we answer the attack. Monsters fall, cut in half. The deck absorbs them, welcoming them back to non-being. And for every foul thing we despatch, two more burst from the walls.

War is feeding on war.

'This will end only one way,' Dantalion says at my side. His brings his crozius down on a daemon's skull, smashing it to mist. 'It will not be our victory.'

He is not being defeatist. He is speaking a simple truth. The corridor before us is growing crowded with the fiends. They scramble over each other in their eagerness to tear us apart. They will come at us forever, created by our very acts of destroying their brothers. Bolter fire blasts them apart. Blades cut them down. And where two stood, now there are ten.

'We cannot remain here,' says Albinus.

Even as he speaks, the ceiling unleashes a cascade of bloodletters. They fall upon us with claws and teeth, seeking to overwhelm through the weight of numbers. We throw them to the ground, trample them beneath our boots. I feel the snapping of unholy bones and know I have inflicted pain on a blasphemy before the daemon is reabsorbed.

Dantalion staggers, gurgles rasping from his vocaliser. He must have looked up at the wrong moment. A bloodletter has thrust its sword underneath his helm. With a snarl of effort, the daemon rams the blade home, piercing Dantalion's brain. Our Chaplain stiffens, then falls. Gamigin roars his outrage and obliterates the bloodletter with a single blow of his chainsword.

The rage grows. We fight for vengeance now, too. The harder we struggle, the closer we come to dooming ourselves. The onslaught of bloodletters is a storm surge, and the faster we kill them, the faster they multiply.

'To the bridge,' Gamigin calls out. 'That is our destination, and we can make a stand there for as long as it takes to exorcise this abomination.'

'No,' I answer. 'Not the bridge.' With the phantom now fully awake, I have looked at the tides of its thought. We are on the wrong path. The core

of this memory-construct is not the bridge. It is, rather, a place of much knowledge. ‘The librarium.’

The ship hears me. Until this moment, its strategy was one of venomous attrition, grinding us down in stages, feeding on the ferocity of our skill at destruction. Then I announce our goal, and things change. The *Eclipse of Hope* now desires our immediate deaths. To the torrent of daemons, the walls and ceiling add their own attack. The corridor distorts beyond the most delirious memory of a battle-barge interior. Hands reach for us. They are colossal, large enough to clutch and crush any of us. They are veined, the hands of a statue, and though they are stone, they seem to flow. They are not a memory; they are a creation, the spectre of art, their reality created from microsecond to microsecond. They are scaled talons, both reptile and raptor. They are clawed and hooked, with barbs on every knuckle. They are the concept of *ripping* given embodiment, but they are massive too, and what they do not tear into ribbons, they will smash.

There is a hand descending directly above me. It becomes a fist. The ship would see me pulped. It is showing me that it knows fear. It believes I can do it harm.

I shall prove it right.

The consciousness that holds the ship in this simulacrum of reality is not the only force capable of creation. The warp is mine, too. I walk in a ghost, but I am the Lord of Death. My will shapes un-matter, gives direction to the energy of madness. The air shimmers as a pane of gold flashes into being over our heads. The ceiling’s hands smash into it and break apart. I pour my essence into the shield. I turn it into a dome. The daemons caught along the line of its existence are bisected. Then the dome surrounds us. Its perimeter extends a bare metre beyond our defensive circle.

I am channelling so much of my will into maintaining the shield against the hammering assaults of the bloodletters and the fists of the walls that I am barely present in my body itself. Yet I must walk. We cannot stay here. I must reach the librarium.

‘Chief Librarian,’ Albinus says, ‘can you hear me?’ Albinus knows me best of those present. More properly, he knew Calistarius well, and seems to have taken on a quest to understand the being that rose from his friend’s grave. Albinus’s goal is laudable, if hopeless. Even so, there are times when he does seem to have some real insight into the realities of my being. When I nod, he says, ‘We must move. Can you walk and maintain the shield?’

The blows of the enemy are torrential. Given time and strength, they will smash any barrier. The phantom is very strong. I must maintain my focus on the reality of the shield. I speak through gritted teeth: ‘Barely.’

He nods. ‘Then let us take our turn, brother,’ the sanguinary priest says.

Brother. I am rarely addressed by that word. With good reason. Calistarius was a brother among others, to the degree any psyker can truly be accepted in the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes. But Calistarius is dead,

and when Albinus says *brother*, he is addressing a shade, one with far less substance than the hellship in which we fight. Calistarius will not return. Mephiston walks in his stead. I am a Blood Angel. I would destroy any who would question my loyalty. But *brother*? That bespeaks a fellowship that is barred to me.

Let that pass. Albinus is correct in the matter of strategy. 'Agreed,' I manage.

'Show us our route,' he tells me.

I turn back the way we came. The effort is huge. I am holding back not just dozens of simultaneous physical attacks, but also the entire psychic pressure of the ship. Turning my body is like altering the rotation of a planet.

Albinus moves in front of me. The rest of the squad takes up a wedge formation. I relax the shield. It becomes porous, but doesn't evaporate completely. I can reinforce it at a moment's notice. The squad charges forwards to meet the rush of the bloodletters. Stolas creates his own shield. The epistolary is a powerful psyker. I have seen him devastate lines of the enemy with lightning storms worthy of myth. But he is not what I am, and though we move in an environment woven entirely of the warp, our powers are not increased. The ship is a parasite that has swallowed its host. So the shield Stolas raises slows the bloodletter horde, but cannot stop it. Our blunt spearhead collides with the foaming tide. We shove our way through the daemonic host for a dozen metres before their numbers threaten to swamp us once again. I snap the shield back to full strength, giving us space and a chance to regroup. When Albinus gives me the signal, I pull back into my physical self, and we move forwards.

This is how we advance. It is our only way, a painfully slow stutter of stops and starts. We travel thousands of metres in this manner. The tally of our slaughter lengthens with every step, and every butchered daemon, every act of wrath, is another drop of psychic plasma for the *Eclipse of Hope's* unholy engines. Our journey through the ship will be the path of our damnation if I am wrong about what I will find in the librarium.

We wend our way deep into the heart of the ship. The repository of archives, history and knowledge is not in a spire, as it is on the *Crimson Exhortation*. Rather, it waits on the lowest deck, a few hundred metres fore of the enginarium. To guide us there, I follow rip tides of the warp. The phantom is awake and blazing with power. It cannot hide the patterns of its own identity now, any more than a human could will away the whorls of fingerprints. By acting against us, the *Eclipse of Hope* exposes itself to my scrutiny and my judgement.

We reach the librarium. A massive iron door bars our passage. Its relief work is an allegory of dangerous knowledge. It announces what lies in the chambers beyond, and it warns the uninitiated away. Tormented human figures fall in worship or agony before immense tomes. Daemons are not represented in the art – no Imperial ship would sully itself with such an

image. Instead, the danger is depicted as twisting vines and abstract lines that tangle and pierce the figures. The risks that lurked in the archives of the original librarium must be merely the shadows of what awaits now. On the other side of the door lies the consciousness of the ship. I can feel the pulse of its fevered thoughts beating through the walls. The rhythm matches that of the drums, still pounding and echoing through the defiled corridors. Are the thoughts the source of the daemonic march, or does the music come from a darker place and a greater master, shaping the mind of the ghost? I have no answer. All I need is the destruction of both.

Is that all I desire? No. It is not. But desire is a treacherous master.

'Albinus,' I manage, the shield still at full strength.

'Chief Librarian?'

'I will need Stolas.' The strength in that chamber will be massive. We must hit it with all the power we possess.

'We will stand and hold,' Phenex says.

'For Sanguinius and the Emperor,' Gamigin adds.

The wedge formation faces down the corridor. My fellow Blood Angels have their backs to the door. Once Stolas and I cross that threshold, their only defences will be physical. It will be enough. They will hold back the ocean of Chaos with bolter and blade for as long as Stolas and I require to triumph or fall.

I lower the shield. I grasp the ornate bronze handle of the door. When I pull, I encounter, to my surprise, no resistance. Is this surrender? I wonder. Or perhaps the ship is marshalling its resources for the true fight about to begin. No matter. Stolas and I enter the librarium. The door swings shut behind us. The boom of iron against stone has a different quality to it than the sounds in the corridor. It takes me a moment to identify what has changed. The answer comes as I take in the sights of the librarium.

This chamber, and this chamber alone, is real.

Stolas and I move through a vast cavern of damned scholarship. We are funnelled along a path between towering stacks of scrolls, parchments and tomes. The path takes us towards an open space at the heart of the chamber. This is not a recreated memory. This is not a product of the warp, or at least, not in the same sense as the rest of the ship. The chamber itself is of familiar construction. It could be a librarium on a true battle-barge. There is a fresco on the domed ceiling: a vision of Sanguinius, wings outstretched, sword in hand, descending in fury, bringing light and blood to the enemies of the Emperor. But the fresco has been defaced. Huge, parallel gouges, the claws of some giant fiend, cut diagonally through our primarch. Runes have been splashed in blood over the painting. I look away from the obscenity. I have no desire or need to read it.

(Ah, says a whisper in the furthest recesses of my mind. *Can* you read it, then?)

I sense that the stacks have changed since the ship vanished five millennia ago. They are huge. The volume of texts is astounding. The

stone shelves are bursting with manuscripts. The floor is littered with lost sheets of vellum. Some curator has been at work here, accumulating works with obsession but little care. And yet there has been care enough to preserve the librarium itself after the rest of the ship has died. This space is the grain of sand around which a daemonic pearl has formed. The mind of the ship needs this core of reality in order to give a semblance of the same to the phantom. It must be the key that has allowed the *Eclipse of Hope* to escape the empyrean and spread its plague through the materium.

The centre of the librarium has become a dark shrine. There are four lecterns here. They are huge, over two metres high, created for beings larger than Space Marines. They are wrought of a fusion of iron and bone, the two elements distinguishable yet inseparable, a single substance that shrieks the obscenity of its creation. The designs are the product of nightmare: intertwining figures, human and xenos, all agonized, their mouths distorted that they might howl blasphemous curses at a contemptuous universe. Sinuous coils, both serpent and whip, scaled and barbed, weave between and around the bodies, carrying venom and pain. I think I see movement in the corner of my eye. I look at the forged souls more closely. I was not mistaken. They are moving, so slowly a year would pass while a back is being broken. But they are moving. And they are suffering.

The lecterns are coated in thick layers of dry, blackened blood. Here, too, there is movement. Slow, glistening drops work their way down the frameworks, adding to the texture of torture with the same gradual inexorability as the growth of stalactites. I raise my eyes. The blood is coming from the books.

The books. These things cannot be truly be called by that name, no more than the Archenemy can be called *human*. They are gargantuan, over a metre on each side. They rest on iron and bone, but they are bound in iron and flesh. Metal thorns pierce their spines. The sluggish gore crawls, drip by endless drip, down the pain of the lecterns. The flesh of the covers has not been tanned into leather. Rather, it is black and green and violet. It is in a state of ongoing, but never completed, decomposition. It is also not dead. There is a just-visible thrumming, as of flesh taut against the stress of torture.

Through the walls, I can make out the muffled beat of combat. There is not much time, but I must be cautious. I must be sure of my actions, or I will doom us all. I must be so very, very careful, because of the other thing in the chamber. There is a dais in the very centre of the librarium, surrounded by the four lecterns. I have avoided looking closely at it, thinking perhaps my first glance deceived me, and if I turned away, the illusion would vanish. It has not.

‘Lord Mephiston…’ Stolas begins. He is transfixed.

‘I know,’ I tell him. I turn and face what has been waiting.

Spread out on the dais is an ancient star chart. It is on fading, brittle parchment. The map is the only part of this monstrous exhibit that has always belonged to the librarium. My finger traces the name of the system depicted: Pallevon. Then I look up.

A statue sits on the dais. There is nothing grotesque about its material. It is simply bronze. It does not move. It does not cry out.

It is me.

The figure stands with weapons sheathed and holstered. Its expression is calm. It should not exist. Yet it is as real as all of the other objects in this room. It is not a ghost, but it haunts me like one.

I have been manoeuvred like a piece in a game of regicide. The ship's desire to kill me when I declared the librarium as my goal was a feint. It simply reinforced my determination to reach this point. For a moment, I am blinded by a red haze of rage. Then the cold darkness within me recognizes the trap, and dampens the fire. I pull back.

'What does this mean?' Stolas asks.

'It means we were expected. It does not mean that our mission changes.'

'And this?' he points at the star chart.

'Another lure.' We must ignore it.

Stolas peers more closely at the statue. 'Look at the eyes,' he says.

I had thought the gaze was neutral. I was wrong. The eyes look just to my left. I turn in that direction to stare at one of the lecterns. I approach it. The book, immense, pulsing with the pain of its knowledge, waits for me to turn back its daemon-wrought cover.

Stolas turns around, taking in not just the four massive tomes, but the rest of the collection as well. 'So much knowledge…' he says. His vocaliser turns the whisper into a wind of static.

'Dire knowledge, all of it,' I say.

'Think of what we could do to the enemies of the Imperium with such insight,' Stolas argues.

He does not need to tempt me thus. I feel that draw on my own. I reach out to the book before me. I open it.

There is a moment. A fraction of a second so minute as to defy measure. I experience it, notwithstanding: a fragmentary impression of the being who last touched this book. A towering horned shadow. Eyes that burn crimson with malevolence and knowledge and… something else… a memory, a memory so specific that it is a weapon aimed at the soul of the Blood Angels. A memory that leads to a future that crushes our Chapter in a clawed fist.

The shard of vision vanishes. In its place is a yawning promise. The book is abyssal. It will tell me all. Whatever questions I have, they will be answered. Omniscience is within my reach. There will be no more mysteries. All of the past, all of the present, all of the future – everything will be made known to me.

My identity made clear. What is it that lies coiled in my depths? I shall know that, too.

The means to total illumination, and total power, are not complicated. I simply need to start reading.

The pull is beyond any concept of temptation. I am in the gravitational jaws of a black hole. The event horizon is long past. There is no escape, and why should I wish it?

Yet I do. I refuse. My will pushes back. It is the will that pulled me from the Black Rage, that raised me from the my tomb of rubble. It is the will that shapes the energies of the empyrean to my ends. Power? I am the Lord of Death. What is that, if not power most dread?

Is this will entirely my own? Is it entirely *me*?

No answer. No matter. I see the room with clarity again, and step back from the book.

To my right, Stolas is clutching one of the other tomes. I call to him, but it is far too late. His face is wracked by dark ecstasy. He turns his eyes my way, eyes that have become a glistening black. His body is shaking. His speech is slurred. 'Oh,' he says. 'Oh, you must know…'

'No, brother,' I tell him. 'We must not.'

The shimmering in his eyes leaks down his cheeks. The tears become tendrils. The tendrils become worms. He is lost.

Did the accursed book promise me power? Let me show it what power means. I call the warp to me. I force it to do my bidding. I accumulate the energy within me until the straining potential threatens to tear me apart. And when I am ready, as time ticks from before the act to the act itself, I know that the *Eclipse of Hope* has its own terrible moment. It senses what is about to happen. It finally does know fear.

I strike. And there is nothing but fire.

I burned the librarium to ash. I was the centre of a purging sun. When I was done, the mind of the ship was but a memory itself. Mine. Stolas, too, was gone, incinerated. Though I know his soul had already been taken, I know also that my inferno destroyed his body and his gene-seed. His trace and his legacy are gone forever, and his name, then, must be added to the register of my guilt. I left the scoured chamber to find my brothers standing in an empty, dark corridor. The bloodletters vanished when I killed the mind.

The vessel is inert once more.

But it has not vanished. Even now, after we have returned to the *Crimson Exhortation*, and nothing alive and sentient walks the halls of the *Eclipse of Hope*, the ghost ship remains intact, an apparition that will not return to the night from whence it came. The crisis on Supplicium Tertius has abated. The survivors are no longer killing each other. So the ship no longer appears to be a carrier of plague.

But we cannot destroy it. The fact of its continued existence will haunt us with the possibility of further harm. It is a memory that refuses to be forgotten. So, too, are the books. Those are my personal ghosts. I fought the temptation. I destroyed the unholy. But what might I have learned? What if I could have absorbed those teachings and stayed whole, unlike Stolas? What if the absolute self-knowledge from which I turned was the door, through darkness, to salvation?

What have I thrown away?

I will think on these things. But not now. There is something more immediate to confront. The being that launched the *Eclipse of Hope* on its voyage has not finished with us yet. We are still being moved on the regicide board. The *Exhortation* has received a message. A brother, long though lost, has returned to us.

He awaits us in the Pallevon system.

As our great ship rushes us to a destiny five thousand years in the preparation, I attune my mind to the empyrean. I am not surprised to hear, grinding over the flows of the warp, the sound of eager laughter.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

MEPHISTON: LORD OF DEATH

By

David Annandale

PROLOGUE
The Abyssal Curse

Darkness is running through my hands. I feel its textures. I know its shifting from smooth to granular, soothing to jagged, calm to desperate. The dark has as many moods and faces and songs as any more mundane, more adulterated reality. It is as protean as the warp, but possesses a purity that the daemon-infested empyrean will never know.

I am in something that might be called Limbo. I think of it as the embodiment of neither. It is neither real nor illusion, neither consciousness nor sleep, neither moral nor corrupt, neither materium nor warp. I am part of the neither, and I am separate from it. But the darkness is mine. It is in my hands. At any moment that I desire, I can grasp it. And then I can bend it to my will.

When I do, I must face a truth: the dark and the warp are not separate. The warp fuels its potential. The warp fuels me. If I slip, the warp will take me. It will become me. But that has not happened, nor will it. This is what I must believe. If I fail, then I must consider myself damned, and this is something I will not do.

But.

But the reason I travel the dark, the reason I parse its ways and beings, is to discover what it is that I am. I once was Calistarius. He has been dead for many years. I stand in his place, with death in my right hand, darkness in my left, and I would know who this is who bears the name Mephiston. So it is not just darkness that is running through my hands. It is knowledge. And one of the grains may be the one I seek.

The neither is non-space, and yet it has a place. It has an entry point, and outside of the neither, in the realm of the here, the gateway has a precise location. It exists aboard the strike cruiser Crimson Exhortation. It waits, barred to all but myself, in my quarters, in the upper reaches of the tower that rises amidships. My domain in the here is spacious compared to the cells that are sufficient to the needs of my battle-brothers. My quarters are large, but not because of any indulgence. They are large because of the archives. The primary chamber is a repository of banes. Scrolls, books, parchments and more are amassed here, all of them records of knowledge that kills, wisdom that blasts, philosophy that twists. These are dangerous objects. They can kill simply by existing.

I am more dangerous than they are. It may be that I am also more blighted (but not damned, not damned outright). I do not know. I seek my understanding in the neither, and I seek it when I comb through those vaults of black thought. I remain disappointed.

Beyond the archive, up another level, is my meditation chamber. This is a small space. It is empty, a lightless cylinder no more than three metres high and two wide, a coldness of black stone walls. This is the gateway. Pass through it, and space ends. In the liminal zone of the chamber itself, my body waits for my exploration to end. It waits while my mind weaves through the tapestry of the dark. Yet in the dark, I have a body, too. There is no consciousness without the idea of the physical self. I stretch out my hands. I do not see them, but I perceive them in the minutest detail. I flex my fingers, and touch the dark. It pours itself into and through my grasp. I will not find answers today. I know that with a certainty as perfect as death. But I also know, with the same certainty, that I must continue my search. I must seek to understand this thing that I now am. The day that I abandon my quest will be a terrible one indeed.

I must remain wary of the being who touches the dark.

The currents in the darkness become more defined. The slick of the warp spreads its stain. It forms sights, words, sounds, memories. An echo reaches for me: it is the insinuating rasp of M'kar. The image of the daemon prince is also there, fragmented, distorted and multiplied by the crystals of my prison on Solon V. You are of our party without knowing it. You walk the path. Know what you are. Embrace the revel. Enter the palace of wisdom. I denied him. I destroyed him. But his words will not die with him. He has bequeathed a legacy of doubt.

I turn from it. I deny it, though I know I will meet those words again. In its stead, I follow another current, one of more immediate import. This is a flow that gathers strength the further I follow it. It tries to sweep me into its rushing turbulence, but though it wants my surrender, it conceals its nature. I sense its power. I sense that it is hurtling toward a maelstrom of terrible force. I know that there is purpose, but whether holy or corrupt, I cannot tell. There is also a physical destination, and this I can read. All too well.

There is a change in real space, a presence approaching. My consciousness drops from the darkness, back into my body. I turn to greet Albinus. The Sanguinary Priest says, 'We have arrived.'

I nod. In the back of my mind, I can feel the immense twist of the vortex. It is here. We are deep inside it. We have come to the Pallevon system in answer to the call of one of our own. Everywhere and nowhere, the empyrean is flexing, twisting. The potential is transforming into the inevitable. An event prepares to be born.

I cannot help but wonder if we have been summoned to our doom.

CHAPTER ONE
The Reach of The Past

The *Crimson Exhortation* has barely made the transition to the materium when the klaxons resound. Battle stations. We have arrived, and we are at war. Albinus and I reach the cathedral that is the strike cruiser's bridge. I mount the marble steps to the apse. Here, in the strategium, Captain Castigon, commander of Fourth Company, is surrounded by a panoply of tacticarium screens. Castigon is an exemplar. His bearing is noble. His aquiline, aristocratic features reveal the genetic inheritance of our primarch, and are an expression of the heroic ideal that is the tragic hope of our Chapter. There is nothing of the Red Thirst visible in the paladin that stands before me. I have seen him in battle, though. He is a Blood Angel, and so he is riven by the Flaw. But he is also of that number whose quest for a cure is so determined, it implies a belief that such a thing exists.

So be it. May his hope grant him a measure of peace.

My presence gives him no pleasure. He hides this well, but he deludes himself if he thinks he can conceal anything from me. I am not offended. Mine is a resurrection that does not engender optimism. I am not the embodiment of life's resilience. I am, at best, the vector of devastation. Coiled, cold and gnawing in the heart of many of my brothers is the thought that I may be something worse. Beyond my actions themselves, I have no answer for them. Or for myself.

Castigon nods to me. 'Chief Librarian,' he says.

'Is it here?' I ask.

'Yes.' He points to a hololith. It is the image of two ships. The magnification is extreme, but the details are still quite clear. The small vessel is a Gladius-class frigate. It is at the mercy of a strike cruiser more than twice its size. I scan the other displays. 'No exchange of fire,' I say.

'A boarding action is under way.'

The cruiser is known to us. It is the traitor ship Destiny of Pain. 'The Sanctified,' I mutter. Doubly treacherous Chaos Space Marines, they betrayed first their sacred duty and the Emperor, and then broke from their own foul kin, renouncing the Word Bearers and falling in worship before Khorne. They are vile, but they are not to be dismissed. They will fight to the last warrior, and they have a dark gift: daemons answer their summons eagerly.

The presence of the Sanctified is not welcome, but we will not shrink from their challenge. Instead, we will tear them apart.

What I find disturbing about the displays is not the Destiny of Pain. For that ship, I feel only a pure, blessed hatred. The image that troubles me is that of the Gladius. Its name is Harrowing Faith, and it should not be here. It was lost during the Second War for Armageddon. But now the empyrean has returned our ship to us. I stare at the grainy flickering hololith, and I have no warmth or love to give the prodigal vessel. Unlooked-for escapees from the lost stretches of time are rarely cause for rejoicing. I know this very well, thanks to the Eclipse of Hope. My brothers should, too.

I wonder what a boarding party will find on the Gladius. I know whom we expect to find. Will he be the same Space Marine who went to war on Armageddon? I am not.

'There is no resistance from the Harrowing Faith,' I note. I have not seen a single shot fired from its guns. The life of the Sanctified is being made very easy.

'There may not be anyone left to retaliate,' says Castigon.

'In which case our mission is futile.'

Castigon thinks for a moment, perhaps considering an immediate and direct assault on the Destiny of Pain, leaving the Gladius to whatever end will come. He shakes his head. 'No,' he says. 'We received that signal. It was sent by someone aboard, and we must answer it. To do otherwise would dishonour the company.'

'Are we still receiving the message?'

'No. But that changes nothing.'

He is right. More right, I suspect, than he knows. There is something waiting for us on Pallevon. We shall meet it whether or not anyone survives on the frigate. The currents I saw in the dark are too strong. Whatever contingent events arise, we shall come to the centre of the vortex.

But Castigon is also correct about honour. What the traitors attack, we must defend. And the Harrowing Faith bears the livery of the Blood Angels. There is no choice in what we must do, but only in how we march down the fated path.

'We will engage the traitor ship,' Castigon declares. 'Draw it off. Provide the opportunity for our own boarding party.'

'I will lead the squad.' I would see what has emerged from the warp for myself.

The boarding torpedo cuts through the void. Inside, we are a message of judgement. Through its viewing block, I see the initiating steps of the lethal dance between the cruisers. The two ships are leviathans of destruction, ponderous in their movements, their actions unfolding like the shifting of continents: unstoppable, so inevitable as to appear preordained. The *Crimson Exhortation* strikes the first blow. Its lances slice through the

Destiny's shields. The hits are good. Flames billow from the port side. The traitor ship responds in kind, but it has been caught at a disadvantage, its flank exposed while the Exhortation presents a narrower profile as it storms forward. The glimpse of the battle well begun is all I am given before we are grinding our way through the hull of the Harrowing Faith.

Our point of entry is very close to the pockmark of a Sanctified boarding torpedo. We do not know where the frigate's survivors, if any, are. But we can follow the traitors, and dispatch them to their reward. And so within seconds of breaching the hull, we have disembarked and are moving down the corridors. We are a crimson sword seeking the belly of our prey.

The Harrowing Faith was recognisable from the exterior. Eroded, battle-worn, but still a fighting vessel of the Blood Angels. Here, inside, is where the depredations of the warp have made themselves felt. The stonework in the passageways has lost definition. Relief-work covers the walls. Created with all the skill of the stone-carvers of Baal, the sculptures were inspiring depictions of glorious victory and heroic martyrdom. Now they seem blurred, smeared, as if their reality were uncertain. There are veins in the rock that vibrate in my peripheral vision. The entire ship feels porous. It is rotten. It would take very little for the frigate to disintegrate, to surrender to nothingness. The ship is not a ghost. I have walked the decks of such an abomination, and this is different. The Harrowing Faith is a corpse that has not been allowed to decay. It is dangerous, but also pitiable. And what, I wonder, is so bitterly preserving its existence?

There is no sign of life. We have passed no serfs. We have seen the remains of a few servitors, and they have been dead for a long time. The disintegration of their forms is well-advanced. It is not the natural corruption of decay. They are blurring like the ship, and soon the very idea of their existence will have vanished.

The Sanctified have time on their side, and have made good use of it. We found the punctured loading bay that was their breaching point, but the traitors were long gone. They have made rapid progress through the ship. There is no sign of battle. The Sanctified appear to have advanced unopposed.

Albinus is marching one step behind me, ahead of Sergeant Gamigin and the rest of the squad. This is not a standard battle formation, but I will not lead from the rear, and Albinus has fought by my side since before… well… before the thing that I now am came into being. 'Perhaps there is no one aboard, after all,' Albinus says.

'Then who sent the message?' I ask.

'A vox-servitor, perhaps, transmitting a recording.'

A reasonable supposition. It is also wrong. 'The Harrowing Faith exists when it should not,' I answer. 'There is a reason for that.' And as we move toward the awaiting inevitable, I would do so with open eyes, and a forward charge. I cannot turn away from my own mystery, nor shall I from any others.

Though there are no physical traces left by the passage of the Sanctified, there are other ways of tracking them. I can see their taint, a spoor of corruption that lingers in their wake. It eats a little more at the substance of the ship. I am following a trail of corroding reality.

'They aren't heading for the bridge,' Gamigin observes.

He is right. Nor for the enginarium. The power nodes of the frigate hold no interest for the enemy. This makes no tactical sense. It is, therefore, important. The followers of Chaos are depraved, they are perfidious, and they are malignant, cancerous souls. But most are not insane, much as we would wish it otherwise, and they are not stupid. They would not be half so dangerous if they possessed these flaws. If they care about something other than the control of the ship, then so shall I. Especially now that I realise where the trail is leading us. There is a dark logic to the traitors' goal. 'They want the chapel.' Of course they do. What else would a warband of the iniquitous stripe of the Sanctified be targeting? And where else would we find the particular Blood Angel who summoned us here?

Anger at the thought of the desecration that may already be occurring flares from the squad. I can see the anger. Its aura is a cold, shimmering blue. It is the shade of quick outrage and calculated, careful violence. It is an anger that fuels war, but not madness. It poses no risk for my battle-brothers.

It is not just a psychic colour, though. It is also a taste. I know its every nuance. I feed on it. I am not sure what that makes me.

Is that another twisting hook of doubt that I feel? If so, then let it be the mark of my fidelity that I note it, and use it to walk an honourable path. Let it further be transmuted into an anger of my own, one that will smite the heretic and the traitor.

The Harrowing Faith is a minor vessel. It does not follow from this, however, that its chapel is a small, mean thing. Our sites of worship must be worthy of the Emperor. The passageway leading to the chapel's entrance becomes wide and high, that it might accommodate the massive iron doors at the entrance to the nave. The doors are strong, designed to protect the sacred heart of the ship in the event of a successful boarding, but against a determined force, no barrier aboard a vessel can do more than delay the enemy. The doors have been broken. They lie like the lids of colossal sarcophagi. Their engravings, chronicles of the acts of Sanguinius and the Emperor, have become uncertain memories. Beyond the doorway, the dim lighting of the chapel is rent by muzzle flashes.

This sacrilege will not stand. The blue anger slides down the spectrum to a more savage, dangerous, nourishing red. I draw my force sword. It is called Vitarus, it is ancient, and it has feasted on an ocean of traitor's blood. Crimson energy crackles down its length. It is as hungry as we are. 'Brothers,' I call. I do not raise my voice. I make it heard all the same, here in the antechamber and even in the chapel, where it insinuates itself between the din of bolter fire. I know the nature of my instrument. I know

the effect of my voice. There is the echo of the tomb in it, the coldness of eternal void. Calistarius's voice died on Armageddon, as did he. I rose in his place, and my voice is the sound of darkness. Let the Sanctified know: the Lord of Death is upon them.

I am not alone. 'By the blood of Sanguinius!' Gamigin roars. The rest of the squad echoes him, and the walls shake with the Blood Angels' battle cry.

We race into the chapel, vengeance in our hearts, blood in our eyes. I take in the scene as I cross the threshold. There are nine of the traitor Space Marines. One of the Sanctified lies dead in the nave, his head missing. The blood pooling from the stump of his neck is more substantial than the floor it covers. The dominant red of the Sanctified's armour is sufficiently close to our own that it is especially galling to see them in this holy place. Their presence carries an extra charge of mockery. I will ram that laughter back down their throats. At the other end of the chapel, a lone figure has taken shelter behind the altar. He is keeping the enemy at bay thanks to the precision of his shots. The altar, an unforgiving block of marble draped in crimson, is the strong point of the space. The warrior behind it will not be removed easily. He is defiant, hurling anathema upon the Sanctified. His language is ornate, savage, theologically rich. It marks him as a Chaplain. Though the distortion of his helmet's vox-speaker grants a certain anonymity, I recognise the voice. It is the one we expected.

The rest of the squad spreads out behind me. Bolter shells punch into the enemy. The Chaos Space Marines respond well. Two of them keep up the pressure on the altar. They run towards opposite sides of the nave, seeking to flank the defender. The others turn their attention to us, dropping low and shooting back. The wooden pews between us are pointless cover, blasted to splinters within seconds by the crossfire. There are columns on either side of the nave, but our two forces have advanced up the centre. We face each other across open ground. This will not be a battle of attrition. It will be short and savage, the explosion of war for which a Blood Angel thirsts. We are rushing forward to reclaim the space. Doomed it may be, like the rest of the ship, but I would have it redeemed before it ceases to exist.

Still a dozen metres from our foe, I reach through the brittle surface of the materium to grasp the lethal potentialities of the warp. My will gathers the energy, shapes it, then sends the electric curse into the beings of my enemy. My mind is consumed by a single word: heat. My instincts, unleashed in this moment, turn to a single obsession: blood.

So it is with our Chapter. Blood. Always blood. Our history, our legacy, our name and hope and final doom. In the end, they are all blood.

There is nothing but blood.

Before me, three of the Sanctified begin to scream. I feel my lips pull back in a snarl of satisfaction. For a Space Marine, even a fallen one, to cry out in this way, the agony must be beyond measure or description. I

would laugh, but that impulse died with Calistarius. The traitors stumble forward, then collapse to their knees. Their movements are spastic, barely under their control, and soon will not be at all. They claw at their helms, tear them off. They gasp, as if the air could be of any help. Their eyes are staring wide but blind. Everything they are has become an expression of my will, and I have told their blood to boil. That which is a metaphor for my Chapter's curse has become literal for these wretched creatures. Their screams choke off into ragged, keening gargles as gore foams and bubbles from mouth and nose and ears and eyes. They die, and I hope their death-pain pursues them into the nothingness.

I have visited a terrible but needed end on three of the Sanctified, but I saw and appreciated only its first moment. I know what followed because it could be nothing else, and in a small corner of my perception I see the bodies and their froth of steaming blood. I am already striking again before the first three are dead. Bolter rounds from the right slam into my armour. The blow might have been enough to disrupt the concentration of other Librarians, but if that is the hope of my attacker, he truly is ignorant of the thing that confronts him. I rush him before he can fire again. He rises to meet me, trying to draw his gladius. He is much too slow. I thrust Vitarus at his neck. To its power is added the scarlet light of my will. The blade slices through the seam of his armour. It plunges into his throat, through the other side of his helmet, and severs his spinal cord. I yank the sword away. The Sanctified stands still for a moment, as if he cannot believe he is dead, and then falls.

Four dead. I turn to seek more victims. I am retribution. Is my hunger for destruction the same thirst that marks my brothers? The very question is disturbing, and I will not examine it now. Nor do I need to, because there is no one left to kill. The rest of the squad has exterminated the Sanctified. My hunger withdraws.

'Brothers!' The lone defender of the chapel emerges from behind the altar. 'You are well met indeed. The Emperor is showering me with his blessings.' He walks forward, removing his helmet. 'I rejoice that I shall have you at my side when—' He stops. He stares.

So do I, even though I knew what to expect. Each of us sees before him a revenant. 'Quirinus,' I mutter.

He speaks the name no one has uttered aloud since Armageddon. 'Calistarius?'

The name of a dead man.

CHAPTER TWO
Resurrections

Before Armageddon. Before Hades Hive, the Death Company and the crushing fall of the Ecclesorium.

They were storming an enclave of the Word Bearers. The traitors had established a foothold on Arlesium. Their heresy was a gale blowing over the primary land mass, and reaching out to infect the rest of the system and beyond. The Blood Angels came to purge them, root and branch. The Chaos Space Marines had seized the fortress city of Ecastor. Calistarius stood beside Quirinus in the doorway to the Thunderhawk's cockpit. They stared ahead at the approaching outer defences. Anti-aircraft fire sought them out. The gunship's pilot flew through the barrage with deft confidence.

'A worthy battle lies before us,' the Reclusiarch said.

The Librarian nodded. The line was something of a ritual between them, an echo of their first engagement as Scouts, many worlds and decades ago. Calistarius's response should have been, 'May we always be so blessed.' Instead, he said, 'Horus will rue this day,' speaking words ten thousand years out of place. His tone was furious but hollow, as if his voice were not truly his.

Quirinus gave him a sharp look. 'Brother Calistarius?'

He blinked. 'May we always be so blessed,' he said. He would not remember, until later, his other words. He would not remember, until later, how his mind had slipped in time. Now, he noticed Quirinus s gaze. 'Is something wrong?'

'I hope not.'

I have Calistarius's memories, but they are not mine. They are knowledge, mere information about a fallen battle-brother. There is nothing visceral, nothing felt about them. They are events from the life of someone else. I was never Calistarius. I do not recognise the self that once inhabited this form.

But Quirinus remembers him. Quirinus has never known Mephiston. Quirinus remembers an old friend who fell to the Black Rage, and played out the final act of his tragedy in the Death Company, dying at the last beneath tonnes of rubble. Quirinus and the Harrowing Faith were caught in

a freak warp storm, called into existence by the intensity of the Armageddon slaughter, before Mephiston was birthed from the tomb.

The memories of Quirinus end with Calistarius. To be confronted by his presence is disturbing, as if a fragment of Calistarius were also rising up before me. Quirinus, too, has been transformed by his journey to this point, this meeting. Time in the warp is a protean thing, and Quirinus has seen centuries pass, if I judge the age I see in his face correctly. His armour, a holy relic more than ten thousand years old, has stood the ordeal well, its strength and power to inspire undiminished. But there is a glint in his eyes, and it is the dull shine of flint. Quirinus has always been possessed of an iron faith, but the fanaticism I see now is, I think, brittle.

So I tell myself, and so I believe. The souls of my brothers cannot hide from my scrutiny, and I have no reason to mistrust my judgement. Except for the fact that I have every incentive to question Quirinus's.

We are aboard the *Crimson Exhortation* once more. We are gathered in the captain's quarters: Quirinus, myself, Castigon and Albinus. Neither the Reclusiarch nor Calistarius served with Fourth Company during Armageddon. Albinus, however, has known both almost as long as they knew each other.

Castigon's quarters are spare, but large enough for small gatherings of this sort. In the centre of this chamber is a bronze table. A single data-slate and a hololith projector rest on its surface, an exquisite representation of crossed swords surrounded by a majesty of wings. There is also a large occuliport, and through it the four of us are standing witness for the final moments of the Harrowing Faith. I am impressed by Quirinus's feat. Warp-eroded as the frigate was, it was held in existence by one thing alone: the strength of the Reclusiarch's faith. Such virtue must be acknowledged, though it is not altogether a surprise. Quirinus was a figure approaching legend before Armageddon, a legend untainted by much of the darkness that is our Chapter's lot. His disappearance was a hard blow.

Now, bereft of the holy will that held it together, the Harrowing Faith slips towards its end. We are not losing it to the devastation of void warfare. It is not being vaporised by a plasma detonation.

It is simply fading out of existence. Its bonds of reality dissolve. It becomes vague, as if seen though a sheen of tears. Its presence falls away, becoming first a vivid dream, then less than a memory. Finally, there is only the faint idea of a ship. Then it is gone.

I feel the gaze of Quirinus against the back of my neck. I turn to face him. His face is hard and filled with sanction. 'Your death has served you well, Calistarius,' he says.

'I am not Calistarius,' I state. Best that he learn this now. Best that he accept this now. It is unwise for friend or foe to mistake what I am.

'Mephiston, then.' I can hear how my name sits strangely in his mouth. 'The death of Calistarius has served you well.'

'It has.'

‘And what do you claim to be?’

The hostility of the question is obvious to all present. I let the silence stretch to an uncomfortable length before I answer. ‘I am Mephiston, Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels,’ I say, speaking with calm, frozen deliberation. Nothing more need be said. I am silent once again. I know, in my darkest of hearts, that Quirinus is right to wonder what, exactly, I have become. But I will not have others question and doubt me, not before I have found the answers.

‘Brother-Reclusiarch,’ Albinus puts in, ‘you have not witnessed Chief Librarian Mephiston’s deeds in the years of your absence. They speak for themselves.’

‘So does his presence.’ Quirinus means nothing good by that statement.

Albinus chooses to ignore the irony. ‘Precisely. Mephiston came back to us from the Black Rage. Is that not cause for hope? By the Emperor, we have precious little of that. Or would you have Astorath simply lop off his head as a precautionary measure?’

At the mention of Astorath, the skin at the back of my neck tightens. The Redeemer of the Lost and I have spoken. He has never implied in word or deed that I should be executed. Rather, it is I - or the wary, watchful part of myself - who speculates about the eventual necessity of my execution.

‘Hope must be real,’ Quirinus goes on, ‘not an illusion. By his own admission, Mephiston did not come back from the Black Rage. He replaced Lexicanium Calistarius.’

‘This is sophistry,’ the Sanguinary Priest objects.

‘Is it?’ Quirinus rejoins.

Is it? I wonder, but say nothing. Neither does Castigon. He seems content to let the matter unfold without his assistance.

‘It is,’ Albinus answers. ‘Yes, there has been a transfiguration. What of it? The victories he has won for the Chapter and the Emperor - they are what matter.’

‘Do you believe that?’ Quirinus asks me.

Albinus jumps in again. ‘He is also not the only one among us who has escaped the Black Rage.’

Quirinus brushes off the point with a brusque wave of the hand. ‘I do not find Chaplain Lemartes to be the beacon of hope that so many of you do. He has not overcome the Black Rage. He is able, for now, to direct it in the field of battle. And when not in combat, he is in stasis.’ A pointed glance at me. ‘Not helping shape the fate of the entire Chapter.’

‘I wasn’t thinking solely of Lemartes,’ Albinus says. ‘There is another —’

‘I would be no less doubtful about him. Two abominations are not more acceptable than one. They are worse.’

The corners of my lips twitch. ‘You consider me an abomination?’

‘Was I ambiguous just now?’

‘You were not. Would you care, though, to explain the reasoning?’

‘The Black Rage defines who we are.’ Quirinus speaks with passion and with sorrow. There is nothing frivolous in his condemnation of me, nor is there anything as petty and banal as personal animosity. He does not resent Mephiston for replacing his friend Calistarius. He mourns the loss of the one, but the rejection of the other, I come now to understand, flows from the deepest of religious convictions. ‘It is a foundational fact of our existence as Blood Angels,’ Quirinus goes on. ‘Our contest with it is as constant as the beating of our hearts. If our hearts cease to beat, what are we? Dead. If we overcome the Black Rage, what are we? Are we still Blood Angels? How could we be? You have returned from the country of no return. You have returned from the dead. And what stands before me? Death.’

Is he wrong in what he sees? No. Is this the full truth? No.

Could the full truth be worse?

‘Death,’ I repeat. I say the word with ownership. It is mine.

Quirinus does not appear to notice what I have embraced. ‘There is the shadow of the grave about you, Mephiston,’ he says. ‘We are warriors, bred, designed and trained to bring destruction to the Emperor’s enemies. But surely that destruction is also in the service of something. It is not an end in itself.’

‘You believe that is why I continue to live? For the purpose of indiscriminate destruction?’

‘I do not know what you are, Chief Librarian. But I do know what you are not.’

My lips twitch again, but I do not respond. Quirinus will believe what he will. There is no arguing with him. Much as I would wish to, I cannot simply dismiss his doubts, not even from my own mind. I have changed since last we met. More properly, I have come into being. Quirinus has not been left unscathed by his time in the warp, but his transformation is far less radical. Calistarius would still know this Blood Angel. His memories are his own. He is the product of a continuum of experiences.

Castigon clears his throat. ‘This is, of course, an important debate, brothers,’ he announces. For the first time, I find myself swallowing contempt as I listen to Fourth Company’s commander. I know he finds much to agree with in Quirinus’s position, but he is choosing to be the politician, and so avoids committing himself. ‘We do, however, have the more pressing question of our immediate actions. Chief Librarian, you have indicated to me that there is something of great matter on Pallevon. Reclusiarch, your reappearance would appear to be confirmation of this fact. I would appreciate your counsel.’ He makes no mention of Albinus. I suspect Castigon had him attend as some sort of peacemaker. If the captain is a politician, he is, I will grant, a canny one.

Castigon activates the hololith projector. A display of Pallevon appears, with the *Crimson Exhortation* at high anchor. There is no sign of the Destiny of Pain. ‘Our assault on the traitor ship was successful,’ he says.

‘Our first blows were mighty, and we inflicted crippling damage. The momentum of battle was against our foe, and he chose to flee into the immaterium.’

‘How unlike the Sanctified,’ I comment. I mean no irony. Retreat is not in the blood of that warband. They fight to the end, and sometimes beyond.

‘Agreed,’ Castigon says. ‘The logical conclusion, then, is that the flight was a strategic retreat.’

‘The ship had nothing more to accomplish in-system,’ I deduce. ‘You have scanned the planet?’

‘Yes. There are many contrails, fading now, all concentrated over the city of Vekaira.’

‘An invasion,’ Albinus says. ‘Their forces have already fully deployed.’

Quirinus’s face is a mask of horror. ‘This cannot stand,’ he says. ‘The Sanctified must be exterminated.’

‘Of course they will be, Reclusiarch.’ Castigon sounds irritated at being instructed in his duty. ‘Did you imagine we would allow traitors to seize an Imperial world without challenge?’

‘I’m sorry, captain. I meant no disrespect. But there is more at stake here than you know. It is imperative that I speak to the company as a whole. Glorious, sacred destiny awaits us below.’

Glorious. Sacred. Words that have no place here. It takes no effort for me to reach out and touch the currents of the warp. They are rushing us to the surface of Pallevon. The pull is overwhelming. There is nothing holy in the cataract down which we are about to plunge. Yet there is no deception in Quirinus. I have scrutinised him as closely as he has me. He is untainted. His faith is legendary. It has always been a model to be celebrated.

It sustained him through his ordeal in the empyrean, and now it points him to Pallevon. To Vekaira.

Down the cataract. Into darkness.

We descend on Pallevon. We descend in force. We descend on wings of fury, bearing judgement, bearing destruction. We come to punish, to purge and to cleanse. The atmosphere of Pallevon is torn by a rain of iron and fire. Gunships, transports and drop pods streak to the ground. Their landing is a rhythm: the pounding, rising, drumbeat backing to the symphony of war.

‘Brothers,’ Quirinus said, ‘during my exile in the empyrean, I was vouchsafed a vision.’

He spoke in the loading bay of the *Crimson Exhortation*. Ammunition had been blessed. Oaths of moment had been sworn.

We muster on a great plain just outside the city walls of Vekaira. We gather our strength. We become a most terrible siege engine.

‘Below,’ Quirinus said, ‘there is a shrine. It is sacred to our beloved primarch. It has been hidden from all eyes for millennia, but now it

unveils itself. Its existence is a reward for our faith. It is also a challenge to our worthiness. To find the shrine, and to liberate it from the stain of the fallen, that is our mission. That is our quest.'

Very little is known about Pallevon. Our records are sparse, fragmentary, ancient. None, I discovered in the preparation for planetfall, is more recent than five thousand years old. Abandoned by trade routes, ignored by the Adeptus Administratum, Pallevon has fallen from memory. It is an island in the galaxy, contained by a bubble of obscurity. It has been left to stasis or decay for five millennia.

Not long ago, I walked the decks of a ship lost five thousand years ago. I do not see coincidence here. I see design.

We descend. We make ready to march. At no point is there any vox-transmission from any source on Pallevon. Silence from invaded Vekaira is to be expected. But the rest of the world is just as quiet. There are no internal communications. There is no mobilisation of the planetary defence force. There is only the hollow stillness of the sepulchre.

Quirinus affixed the purity seal to Castigon's armour. Trailing from the seal was the parchment on which were written the litanies for our mission. And with that, our path became unalterable in law as well as in fate. The loading bay erupted in cheers. Quirinus's words inspire hope in my brothers.

I do not call them fools. I do call them wrong.

Quirinus, Castigon and I stand at the gates of Vekaira. We look down the gradual slope from the wall to the plain, and the brutal pageantry of the Fourth Company of the Blood Angels. Pallevon's sun is a red giant. Daylight is a perpetual sunset, with the fall of evening marking a receding tide of blood. In the wash of the dying light, our assembled host reverses the ebb of the tide. A storm of crimson is rising to smash all before it. The air is rent by the roar of Thunderhawks, Stormravens and Stormtalons, by the earth-tremor growl of Baal Predators and Land Raiders and Rhinos, and by the unwavering, merciless tramp of ceramite boots.

If there were only the visions of Quirinus calling us to this planet, this city, this moment, then I might consider the size of our deployment madness. But Pallevon has been invaded by a massive force of traitors. Of this truth, there is no doubt. To such a desecration of an Imperial world, there can be but one answer. We are bringing it.

Standard-Bearer Markosius joins us. He raises our banner to the skies as Castigon lifts his arms, bolter in his right hand, chainsword in his left. In this moment, the politician is gone. There is only the warrior, the champion of the Emperor, and there is no doubt that here is the worthy leader of Fourth Company.

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius!' Castigon shouts. Vox-casters carry his voice to the far reaches of the host.

'Death!' comes the answer. 'DEATH!' There is so much power in that single word, such a concentration of collective will, that it is almost

enough on its own to batter down the walls.

We advance. We smash the gates aside. Beyond them, a wide parade avenue leads into the deeper precincts of the city. It runs in a straight line for two thousand metres. We move down its length as a single entity, armed with fire and gun and rage. Above us fly the gunships, in formation at first, then splitting off to manoeuvre around the spires of Vekaira. The avenue ends, dividing into narrower streets. We move down them all, the fingers of an immense crimson gauntlet.

We are unopposed. We are not even witnessed. No lights appear in the blind windows of the towers as night drapes the city. There are no curious or fearful lining the street. There is no chanting of hymns and prayers of thanks from the faithful. The narrow canyons resound with the booming refrain of our march. Beyond the reach of those echoes, there is silence. This is not a city - it is an agglomeration of monuments.

A cemetery.

Is that why I feel a kinship with this place? Am I the Lord of Death finding, at last, his true domain? If so, it is a fine one, rich, vast and majestic. Vekaira is not a hive, though it is clear that, before its end, it was approaching the critical mass of density that would push it down the spiral of insect-crowding that is the life and doom of a hive. The towers of Vekaira crowd each other, and like the trees of a rain forest, they reach for the sky, attempting to outgrow their competitors and snatch a piece of the near-death sun. Street level is the realm of eternal shadow. As night falls, the towers fade from view. They become presences no less massive for being fragmentary as the lights of our vehicles play over them. They are also heavy with the majesty of antiquity. This is an old city. Its death did not come with the arrival of the Sanctified. Nothing has lived here for a very long time. Stone rises in towering facades. Windows are either no more than murder holes or grand, stained glass rosettes, now filmy and blank in the dark. Vaulted walkways link spire to spire. But the glories are faded, eroded, crumbled. Time has gnawed at Vekaira. The streets are littered with fallen stone. Some walkways have collapsed altogether, blocking routes, forcing detours. The buildings are worn, pockmarked. The lines of the city are ragged. Millennia have passed, with not a single hand raised to counter them, battering stone with wind and rain, hail and frost. Nothing has been repaired since the Age of Apostasy.

For all the decay, for all that Vekaira is slowly returning to dust, it deserves respect. Something destroyed the city. Its death must have been sudden, as there is none of the damage inflicted by citizens descending into anarchic barbarism. The cathedrals stand proud, untainted, undamaged by anything other than time. The vitality of life has been stolen from Vekaira, yet it retains its identity. The city has remained true to the Emperor.

I salute its faith.

The stoic death that we march through is a balm. A needed one. I do not like the reception that Quirinus's tale of vision has received. The Blood Angels have been hurt by grandiose religious claims in the past. I will not have us fall into that trap again. Our encounter with this city of silent towers undermines unthought enthusiasm. I see, with no small satisfaction, that Quirinus is also being affected by our surroundings. For one thing, he has ceased his prophetic utterances for the moment. He walks in silence, his helmet turning from vacant doorway to empty window to deserted street. He, Albinus and I march in the lead of our column. Castigon has joined the Rhino Echo of Zoran, and leads from this mobile command post two streets over.

Quirinus says, 'This city is troubling.' He is as honest as he ever was. There has never been any dissembling in the Reclusiarch. He is not speaking for my benefit. This is not a dialogue. It is an observation.

I respond all the same. 'Is this death a sign of the Emperor's blessing?'

'Is yours?' he shoots back.

I give him an ironic half-bow. I move off to the side, not breaking formation, but embracing the shadows.

Albinus joins me. 'What do you seek to accomplish?' he asks.

'To teach him the value of mistrusting himself,' I answer. 'Is that not also the essence of being a Blood Angel? To remember that we are flawed?'

'You have no faith in our goal.'

'None. Do you?'

'I believe that we are moving towards something momentous.'

'We most certainly are.' I sweep my arm, taking in the entire city. 'The barrier to the immaterium is thin here, and it grows thinner.'

'Might that not be evidence that Quirinus is correct?'

'It is not. I have warned Captain Castigon that we march toward darkness. We have known this since the Eclipse of Hope.' That daemon-haunted battle-barge reappeared as a warp ghost five thousand years after its loss. Aboard, I was confronted by a statue of myself and a star chart of the Pallevon system. The mockery of Chaos was palpable. Ever since, I have felt us caught up in the gears of an infernal engine. An engine whose work began, not when we boarded the phantom ship, but at the moment of the real vessel's death.

'You have the authority to overrule him.'

'Yes, but the Sanctified must be crushed. Our hand is forced. We should be wary, however. Not eager.'

'Perhaps what you saw on the Eclipse was not a dark omen.'

I snort. 'Since when do you hold with such foolishness?'

'Since one of the greatest Chaplains our Chapter has ever known speaks of hope.'

'He is wrong to do so.'

'There is no hope?'

‘There is duty. There is faith. There is death. That is enough.’

Albinus shakes his head. ‘It is not,’ he says, and moves back closer to Quirinus.

My eyes are on the city. It understands me. If there were still a population here, the people would be prone to mirages of desire.

But empty, desolate, the city makes no pretences. It knows how thin the veil of reality is. It has been shorn of illusions.

I am only a few metres away from my nearest battle-brother. The Baal Predator Phlegethon growls mere paces behind me. But the distance between myself and the other Blood Angels is profound. They cannot comprehend the dark-shrouded routes I now travel. Nor will I pretend to leave those paths. They are a reality from which I will not turn my gaze. They are also the source of the power I wield in defence of the Imperium. I will not turn from that, either.

I speak as if I had the choice.

Quirinus calls out: ‘Forward, brothers! We draw very near the shrine! The touch of the Emperor is at hand!’

As he shouts in triumph, I sense the rapid fraying of the materium. The epicentre of our destiny is almost upon us. At the same moment, I realise that some of the windows in the buildings around us are not as blind as they appear.

Missiles slash the night.

CHAPTER THREE
The Streets of Vekaira

The ambush is well-chosen. The street narrows here, and bends sharply. Our forces have bunched up, pressed together by the restricted space. The passage between the buildings is an oppressive defile between towering cliff walls. All of this occurs to me in the frozen split second while the lethal light descends upon us. The missiles rain from three sides. It is a perfect crossfire. There is no escaping it.

I throw myself against the Phlegethon as blast waves overlap. Flames replace air. I am swallowed by the maw of a dragon. One rocket strikes the rear armour of the Phlegethon, propelling the tank forward. It smashes into me, knocking me down. But the injured vehicle provides cover enough from the worst of the explosion. The fire that fills my view is paltry beside the inferno that ignites behind my eyes. I feel myself divide into a binary opposition of war. My lips curl back in rage. I salivate for the blood of my foe. At the same time, the cold of a sunless planet reads the battle zone, and flies back up the line of the rocket attacks. They have come from windows thirty metres up in buildings to our left, right, and front, at the bend in the road. We are in a kill zone a block long.

I will break its hold.

The attackers to the fore are my target. Raging, calculating, furious, detached, I stand and spread my wings. They spring from my shoulders, crimson spans of eldritch energy. Their creation is effortless, so strong is the flow of the warp. A dozen metres behind the wounded Phlegethon, the Predator Intemperate retaliates, firing its main gun at the building to my left. I fly forward and up, blade drawn, to a window lit up by another rocket flash. I burst through the frame. I am wrath cloaked in annihilating blood, and all must fall before me. There are three Sanctified here. They stand in a chamber that might once have been sleeping quarters, but is now empty, its contents turned to dust by the passing millennia. One of the traitors is reloading his missile launcher. The second, a champion of their foul gods, lunges at me with his chainaxe shrieking. The third is a witch, and I will save him for last.

I refocus the energy from my wings into my blade. I make a horizontal slash. The air where Vitarus passes is cut and bleeds. The sword slices through the shaft of the chainaxe like an afterthought. This traitor is barely worthy of my notice. My consciousness has become three now. It is the

rage, it is the dispassionate observer, and it is the blade itself. My will is destruction on the molecular level. Action and thought are one, the grace of purest death, and I decapitate the champion. His head flies backward, bouncing off his brother's shoulder, while his blood fountains up, showering the room. It gives me my taste. It isn't enough.

The Sanctified with the missile launcher raises his weapon. Perhaps he is stupid. Perhaps he realises who and what I am, and will not pause before sacrifice. Perhaps both. He fires the launcher, point blank, in the confined space. His action cannot keep pace with my will. Before his finger has pulled the trigger, I have summoned a shield. It shimmers, a gold as brilliant as the faith of Sanguinius. The rocket explodes against it. The backwash incinerates the room. The traitor is smashed open by the force of the blast. Beneath his ravaged armour, he is turned to coal.

That leaves the witch. The explosion threw him against the far wall of the chamber. He is dazed. He staggers to his feet, whatever daemonic spell he was preparing disrupted. My will seizes him before he can try again. I reach inside. My mental fist clutches his skeleton as if it were a doll. He feels me there. He struggles, his immobilised body dream-twitching. His will is puny against mine, an ant trying to dislodge a colossus. I favour him with the full measure of my contempt. This is what the dark gods of Chaos would have me become? This is the best they can do? With a thought, I lift the traitor from the ground. Suspended in mid-air, he vibrates with tension. He is a plucked cable. He manages to move his lips. His breath rasps. There are the beginnings of words. He is trying to complete his summoning.

I take a step forward. Around me, reality and the warp collide and destroy one another in crackling bursts of lightning. The room wavers, its existence bending with the gathering force. It is not a coming daemon that troubles the space. It is Mephiston. 'I have killed a daemon prince with my bare hands,' I tell the Sanctified witch. 'How can you hope to call something worthy even of my attention?'

I squeeze the fist. The chanting becomes a strangled gasp of unimaginable pain. There is a sound like the crushing of dried twigs. It is his skeleton being smashed to dust.

The gasping stops. I drop the ceramite-wrapped bundle of rags and return to the window. The facade that the Intemperate fired upon is a smoking, crumbled heap. From the facing side of the street, the breath of a flamer gouts from the window. I hear the dug-dug-dug of bolters. A moment later, bodies plummet to the street. The ambush is over.

I return to street level. The Phlegethon is damaged, but still mobile. Albinus stands beside the idling tank, waiting for me. 'What is it?' I ask.

'Brother-Sergeant Saleos was killed.'

The Phlegethon's commander. 'His gene-seed?'

Albinus shakes his head. 'I could not salvage it. He took a direct hit.'

A grievous loss. One for which the Sanctified will answer dearly. ‘How many others?’

‘Eleven.’ He slides open the narthecium built into his gauntlet. He shows me six cylinders containing the precious legacy of our fallen brothers. The missiles left nothing of the others to recover.

The mere existence of the Sanctified is enough to justify a war of extermination. Now, they have incurred a special wrath.

Their corpses will be the kindling for their own pyres.

We push forward. We follow the turn of the street, hungry for blood. It will be given to us. The Sanctified have set up a barricade there. The Phlegethon surges forward as if its machine-spirit were seeking vengeance for its injury. Its front-mounted blade will smash through the barricade, but the tank’s fury will not wait for the impact. The flamestorm cannon gives form to its wrath. The Phlegethon speaks with a voice of fire. The cannon is well named. It is no mere flamer blast that washes over the barricade. It is a horizontal vortex that strikes with the obliterating force of a solar flare. It immolates, melts and vaporises. Power armour is a poor defence. The traitors defending the barricade are blasted to ash.

And beyond the barricade? Beyond, the streets now narrow, twist and split as we enter the older regions of Vekaira. The buildings are more worn and gnawed by age. The roads are patchwork segments. We face an intersection where only the avenue going to the right is wide enough for the vehicles.

Quirinus eyes the choice. ‘If we all go down the same path…’ he begins.

‘We will deserve what happens,’ I finish. Such a concentration of force in so little space would not be able to manoeuvre.

At least the Sanctified face the same restriction.

‘Announce our presence,’ I call out. The tanks send out a barrage of fire ahead of our advance. Facades explode and collapse. Dust and smoke are our heralds, choking the streets. We divide our forces, as before, now getting down to squad formations. Agile, adaptable units of destruction, we race into the warren ahead.

The Sanctified come out to meet us. We fight block by block, building by building. The struggle is vicious, ugly, savage. It would be very easy, in that maze of violence, to lose track of the direction of our advance. But fate will not be cheated. Quirinus drives us toward the centre of the city, his vision pulling him and the company ever closer, with ever more urgency. ‘This way,’ he calls out at each cross-street. I need and accept nothing of his guidance. I can see our path just as vividly, but my vision is a darker one than his. We are caught in a maelstrom of energies, spiralling in until we are smashed to bits on the rocks of tortured destiny. I cannot divine the nature of the blow that awaits us, but I feel its presence. It gathers strength as we approach. Already, I hear the distant echoes of cruel, daemonic laughter.

Why do I fight so hard to reach our doom? Because my brothers do. So many of my links to my fellow Blood Angels have rusted and snapped in the years since my resurrection that we are barely on the same plane of reality anymore. Where I exist (I cannot use the word live with certainty) is the realm of imminent death, the perpetual coming-to-destruction. My gift, my strength, is to be an end of things.

So am I now. Metre by metre, doorway by doorway, the battle rages. The ancient city, so majestic in its stilled tragedy, is battered into ruins. Buildings collapse, their foundations demolished by shelling. Streets become mountains of rubble. I slash through a brace of traitors, and I round a corner with my squad. We hit a rare bit of road that runs straight for at least five hundred metres. At the far end, one of our other squads has emerged from the labyrinth ahead of us. As they grapple with the enemy, a fatal explosion hits the base of a tower looming over them. 'Brothers!' Albinus yells, but there is no time, and so his cry is not of warning, but of grief. The edifice makes a complete spin around its vertical axis, a valedictory pirouette, as it falls, crushing Blood Angels and Sanctified alike.

We climb over the rubble. Above us, the battle for air superiority rages. The Sanctified have deployed two corrupted Thunderhawks. The gunships are the red of clotted blood, and their form appears distorted by scabs. They are restricted in their movements to the larger gaps between the buildings. From high above the skyline, they rain fire down on our forces. One passes over us while we are out in the open. We dive for the cover of shattered stone as the high explosive strike hits. It gouges a crater in the mountain of debris, disintegrating Brother Buerus. The rest of us scramble down the other side of the shattered tower, into the canyon of the street. A hundred metres ahead, some twenty Sanctified have gathered. They wait while the Thunderhawk returns for another pass, still high above the rooftops, beyond our reach.

It is met by the Stormtalon Sublimity of War. Our craft are smaller, more nimble, and the Sublimity pops up from between the spires a few streets over, raking the Thunderhawk from below with its twin-linked lascannons. The Sanctified pilot, maddened, pursues the Sublimity down into the thicket of towers. The Sublimity plunges right, toward a massive hab-block, a hulk of a building that appears squat even though it is taller than any of the nearby structures. The two vessels streak in like comets. At the last second, the vectored engines of the Sublimity rotate, their thrust suddenly aimed diagonally forward. Momentum arrested, the gunship shoots up, its course vertical.

The Sanctified craft has no recourse. It ploughs into the tower, transmuted by the alchemy of war into thunder and flame. Burning wreckage and bodies scatter down over the street. And now it is the turn of the Sublimity of War to make its strafing run. It flies low, its side-mounted heavy bolters chewing the Sanctified into pieces.

We do not stop. There is no pause as we and our enemies hammer each other. There will be no end, even if we reduce the planet to a cinder, until the extermination of the foe.

We fight to the death to reach the maw of fate. Yet I know why we fight. The traitors must be destroyed. There is no question, no doubt, about that goal. What, though, do the Sanctified want with Pallevon? Why do they struggle with such ferocity to stop our advance? I sense a ghastly irony lurking at the centre of this war.

Let that be. Before me now is duty, the archenemy, battle. And the Red Thirst. My brothers think me a being of ice. Perhaps the sepulchral chill has replaced my soul. They are wrong, though, if they think that the Flaw has been purged from my being. I feel it. I know the Thirst. I know the gnawing abyss of the Black Rage. They have not left me.

But there is something else, isn't there? Beyond the Red, beneath the Black, isn't there something, a hunger that is darker, older, vaster? One that keeps the others at bay that it might keep me for itself. Isn't it there?

No. I deny it. I refuse it. I embrace the rage of battle, feeding my hate with the blood of the enemy. I exult in the unleashed holocaust of the warp, a holocaust that is nothing less than my will made into the end of all flesh.

The enemy engages in an act of foolish blasphemy. Sanctified forces have taken up positions inside a cathedral that looms over a square that might once have been grand in proportion to the house of worship, but has been encroached upon over the centuries by Ministorum complexes. The cathedral is a relic, already ancient when Pallevon's history stopped. It is clearly from an early age of man's creed. It should be honoured. It is a testament, an expression of faith that has itself become holy. Its desecration is a tragedy beyond repair. The traitors emerge from the parvis, sending forth a hail of mass-reactive rounds. My squad is pinned. Frag grenades land in our midst. Brother Merihem is hit directly, shrapnel piercing his brain. For a moment, we are at bay.

I trust the enemy has savoured this moment. It is his last.

What happens next takes no more time than a death cry. I reach deep into the warp. Arms outstretched, I become the channel of infinite annihilation. A maelstrom forms around me. The air darkens. The twin rods of my psychic hood turn a blinding crimson. Reality is nothing in my hands. It is the plaything of my rage, fit only to be smashed. And so I smash. I unleash the energies. My anger is a colossal, final judgement. The parvis is sundered by empyrean sheet lightning. The real collapses in the grip of my will. The ground wails as it erupts in violet fire. With the thunder of an avalanche, the cathedral falls on its defilers, martyring itself in a final act of devotion. There is a monstrous, incandescent flash of energy. It is no colour of the spectrum. It is the colour of wrath, of pain, of eternal entropy, and of terrible, all-consuming hunger.

The light fades with an electrical crackle. The gaping wound in the real closes, but not without leaving a scar. The agonised ruin before us has too much emptiness. Matter has been unmade, its existence seemingly erased from the past as well as the future. The rubble is twisted. Stone has been warped as if it were contorted muscle. Its sub-aural scream is perpetual. Blood, so dark it is black, pools over the surface of the wreckage. It will pool forever.

These are my works.

This is my being.

I feel Quirinus's gaze upon me.

Baal Secundus. The fortress-monastery of the Blood Angels.

Calistarius was the first to greet Quirinus when he exited the Reclusiam. Black armour emerged from black stone, shadow from shadow. The skull-faced helmet nodded to Calistarius. 'Brother-Librarian.'

Calistarius bowed low. 'Reclusiarch.' He was the first outside the tower to address Quirinus with that title.

Quirinus didn't answer at first. He stood motionless, and Calistarius felt that his old friend's eyes were on an interior vista. Finally, the Reclusiarch said, 'The honour is great, and a great weight.' A pause. 'I wonder, can any of us be truly worthy of what we receive?'

'We are all unworthy of the grace of our primarch and his Great Father,' Calistarius answered. 'We are all flawed. It is our duty to accept that, to strive for the impossible, and to accept the roles that fate and our Chapter assign to us in the eternal crusade.'

Quirinus laughed. It was a good sound, the laughter of a warrior at one with the truth of his life. 'Well spoken, brother. How very ecclesiastical of you. There are times when I think you should be walking this path with me, and not that of a Librarian.'

'No.' Calistarius shook his head. 'I am where I must be. Do not mistake my statement of fact for philosophy. Our titles are not honours. They are descriptions of who we are. "Reclusiarch" is not an address. It is your identity.'

'Lord of Death,' Quirinus says. His voice emerges from his helm as a flat, electronic rasp. There is no emotion. The horror resounds, however. There is no missing his theological disgust.

'So I am named, and so I act,' I retort. I do not look back at him as I stride towards the devastation. My attention is drawn by something more important. Beyond where the cathedral stood, there are no more towers. There is a gap, revealing the dawn sky of Pallevon. There are no clouds. The light is a tired, ancient red, dim for the moment, but slowly growing in intensity as the giant sun returns. The cold, serene beauty of the sky is cut by a black silhouette. Narrow, tapering, to the naked eye it is nothing

more than a deeper darkness. And I know, with icy certainty, that that is precisely what it is.

It is the deepest darkness.

It is the epicentre.

There is a lull on either side of us. The vox-traffic has calmed, too. With the loss of the Thunderhawk and the fall of the cathedral, perhaps the Sanctified are in retreat. Their remaining gunship races by overhead, pulling away from us into the dark, no longer attacking. The enemy must realise that we have a way open to us now. There will be no holding us in the streets of the city.

Quirinus, too, has fallen silent as he realises the significance of what lies before us. Without a word, we make our way over the rubble. We reach the gap. Before us is a scene of dark wonder.

The centre of Vekaira is a perfectly circular amphitheatre. Buildings come right up to the lip of the bowl, and then stop. Some have lost their facades and stand with the interiors exposed, as if they had been sheared open with a blade. The bowl of the amphitheatre is immense, large enough to have been created by a meteor strike, and indeed, the exposed rock surfaces shows signs of shock-metamorphic effects. Something struck the city here, struck it with enormous force. At the same time, the circle is too perfect to be natural. The bowl is symmetrical, and marked by concentric rings. The gradient of its slope is uniform. The bowl is an artefact kilometres wide that was created in an act of sudden violence.

No human technology could accomplish this.

In the outermost ring, I see, at last, the population of Vekaira. What remains of it. Perhaps it is the final vestige of any human inhabitation on Pallevon. These people are fallen. The surrounding city no longer belongs to them. They are barbarians. They number in the handful of thousands. They live in clusters of huts and shacks that are nothing but thrown together bits of rubble. They are clad in rags. Their hair has grown into sorry, filthy manes. Their flesh is coated in a patina of dust and mud. They huddle together in terrified clusters, trembling and howling whether they are looking uphill at us, or down to the Sanctified position. Though vegetation is growing in this ring of the bowl, there is no sign of cultivation, livestock, or any other means of subsistence. I cannot see what keeps these people alive. I am tempted to say that they live on fear. I revise my first opinion. They are not barbarians. They are animals.

Below the rabble, the bulk of the amphitheatre is a vast, frozen battlefield. I am staring at a tableau. Thousands of warriors are locked in unmoving combat. Blades are forever about to strike death-blows. Bolters are raised, eternally in the moment before firing. There is an awful, majestic beauty to the sight. This is war captured at the instant of infinite potential. Every warrior is perpetually seizing victory. None is suffering defeat. The might on display would be earth-shaking, were there movement, for the warriors are Space Marines, clad in armour of a make

that is millennia-old. Though their actions have been arrested, they are not in a stasis field. Time exists for them in a partial way, for their armour has been eroded by the centuries. Markings and colours have been stripped away as if sandblasted. I cannot tell what Chapters are here. Are they Loyal? Traitors? Both? There is no way to tell. There is no identity here, only the endless perfection of battle.

I suspect the warriors are gods for the savages. The people live in the outer ring, drawn to a spectacle of wonder. I see no sign of habitation within the battlefield, however, and indeed, even I feel the aura of the sacred radiating from the stilled majesty. This is a graveyard with the promise of resurrection. It is not to be defiled.

At the centre of the bowl stands the tower. It is a tall, tapering spire, still night-black in the bloody dawn. It comes to a point so fine that it should cut the air itself. It is a stiletto made for an assassin of gods. At its base, the Sanctified are making their stand. They are indeed retreating, their crimson stain receding over the land. They are digging in behind the low wall that surrounds the tower. It is more of a boundary between the space of the battlefield and that of the tower than it is a barrier. The traitors' position is further reinforced by the presence of their Rhinos. The armoured vehicles were, ten thousand years ago, the pride of the Great Crusade. Now, they have undergone a daemonic transformation. Bristling with spikes, daubed with blasphemies, they crouch low to the ground, their engines growling like feral beasts.

I find it interesting that the Sanctified have chosen this as the site they would defend. The cover is not ideal. They have surrendered the high ground. They have wilfully given themselves serious disadvantages. The tower must be of extreme importance for it to be worth such clear tactical mistakes.

Quirinus has been staring at the tower with rapt attention. The skull of his helmet conceals his emotions. The vocaliser flattens and distorts his tone. Yet when he speaks, there is no mistaking the adoration in his voice. 'That is our destination!' he shouts, over speaker and vox. 'Brothers! There lies our goal! Before you stands a shrine most holy. We must reclaim it from the abominated traitors. To see them before this sainted place is to witness the most grievous offence to the honour and glory of our primarch! Purge them from existence! Soak the ground with their blood! Then shall we march into the most magnificent celebration of our faith!'

I look again at the tower. There is nothing about it that suggests it was built to honour either Sanguinius or the Emperor. I see a work of jagged precision. I see the shape of a weapon. I see no disjunction between it and the Chaos warriors who guard it. I wonder again about its importance to them. Quirinus believes it holds a special significance for us. It makes little sense that the Sanctified should risk so much merely to insult the honour of the Blood Angels.

I open a private vox-channel to Quirinus. ‘And those immobile combatants,’ I ask, ‘who and what are they?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Are they part of the holiness you say awaits us?’

‘I do not know that, either.’ He pauses for a moment. ‘They must be part of the great plan. They are too remarkable a feature to be an accident.’

Of course they are part of the great plan. But whose? How is it great? A Black Crusade has its own form of greatness. It is not one we can embrace. I say nothing of this to Quirinus. He has not been open to an alternative argument since he emerged from the warp. His rigid dogmatism kept him alive during his ordeal. It could prove to be the death of us all, now. ‘You are very sure of what you say,’ I tell him.

‘Do not doubt me, revenant.’

I brush aside the insult. It is beneath me. I am surprised that Quirinus stoops to such pettiness. His intemperance is not a good sign. He is not thinking rationally about either the tower or me. He forgets my rank. But I am not concerned with slights. I am concerned with the path on which we are engaged. ‘I do not doubt your conviction, Reclusiarch,’ I answer.

‘Nor can you doubt the truth of what I say,’ he retorts. He gestures at the tower. ‘If you cannot sense the power of the shrine, then you are unworthy of the title you bear.’

Again, I ignore the offence. I am not interested in exchanging pointless barbs. Quirinus is correct. To deny the power of that structure would be to engage in deliberate blindness. It is the eye of the warp storm I have been following. Energies are gathering there, building second by second. That is the centre of the maelstrom. It is the point to which Fourth Company and I have been led since we arrived in the Supplicium system and encountered the ghost ship Eclipse of Hope. Our free will has been reduced to a sad mockery. Our every step has been planned by an outside force, a force that has nothing to do with our venerated primarch. As I gaze at the ancient tower and the immobilised Space Marines, I know that this moment has been approaching for thousands of years. Quirinus, one of our most storied Chaplains, celebrates this manifestation of the inevitable.

He is a fool.

And I? I have a duty. I have an oath. I have a mission.

I have no choice.

And truly, even without Quirinus pushing us forward, there would be only one path to take. Traitors stand before us. They must not be suffered to live.

At the lip of the bowl, the strength of Fourth Company comes together once again. Yet it must restrain itself from using its full destructive might. Our mission is to capture territory, not smash a world. Even as Castigon begins to speak to the tank crews, Quirinus intervenes. ‘The tower must not be damaged,’ he says.

I do not believe it could be, not by something as mundane as artillery. But lacking certainty, we must act as the Reclusiarch directs. I am also struck by unease at the thought of high explosives landing in the mist of the frozen warriors. Though I do not know their allegiance, the possibility of desecration is real. I will not be a party to that. Nor will any of my brothers.

Castigon confers with Quirinus, with me, with the sergeants. An idea is born, grows into strategy, becomes action. The attack will come from two directions. Castigon will lead the frontal assault. I will lead the other.

We shall strike from the air. We shall be a most terrible rain.

CHAPTER FOUR
Icon

Our primarch had wings. He was alone among the Emperor's twenty sons to bear such a mutation. Only he could fly unaided by any technology or psychic force. We who take to the skies to bring Sanguinius's wrath down upon the forsworn do not have that gift, but we have the genetic memory of it. The nature of our attack, then, is a form of worship. We are the echo of our primarch. His noble fury resounds down the millennia. His vengeance for the Great Betrayal shall never cease, not while a single Blood Angel lifts blade or bolter.

Or flies.

Castigon and the bulk of Fourth Company attack first. They descend the slope of the amphitheatre, a crimson spear aimed at the heart of the Sanctified. Crimson is the colour of justice, and it is the colour of wrath. Where we are concerned, there is no distinction to be made.

There is little room for vehicles to move between the ranks of the frozen warriors. Only the luxury of time permitted the Sanctified to drive their Rhinos down the circuitous path to the tower. I note that the traitors were just as careful as we are not to disturb the combatants. The significance of this fact is, for now, a mystery to me, and of little interest to my brothers.

I come in with two assault squads. They fly with jump packs, flaming comet tails marking the arc of their attack. I spread my blood-red wings again, and in their creation I feel the hand of Sanguinius. My primarch guides my flight. He guides my hand. He is at my shoulder as I descend on the enemy. His wrath is in the death I bring.

The Sanctified see us coming. Our advancing ground forces unleash a storm of bolter fire their way, disrupting their response. The shots that reach up for us are too scattered to divert our purpose. Even so, we lose Brother Kimeres when well-placed rounds punch through his jump pack. It explodes. Wreathed in flame, he plummets to the ground. The blast does not kill him. The fall does not, either. He lands badly, though, and wounded. The traitors do not give him the chance to recover.

We come down between their lines and the tower. We send death ahead of us with our guns. The assault teams rake the enemy lines with their bolters. Caught between perpendicular lines of fire, several of the Sanctified can do nothing except die, their bodies and armour cratered by shells. My mind reaches out before me. I grab the very space behind the

nearest Rhino. I tear the real wide open. The immaterium pours through, a shrieking vortex. These traitors have pledged their allegiance to Chaos? Well, then, let it have them. Existence twists and shatters. Energies that do not belong on this plane flash hungry, devouring and dismantling. The vortex drags the Rhino out of position. It crumples the rear of the vehicle, distorting the very being of the machine. The real and the imagined, the actual and the impossible meet in one object. The paradox is too much. The Rhino explodes. Armour peels, armour shreds, armour spins through the air as giant shrapnel. The blast is huge. It is the collective death cry of munitions and promethium. The area is bathed in fire. The toll is savage. The hole in the materium closes, leaving surreally mangled, incinerated bodies in its wake.

I land, wreathed in electric crimson. I refocus my psychic flow, channelling it into Vitarus. The blade's glow is blinding, like blood from the heart of the sun. I plunge it through the faceplate of the traitor charging at me. The sword pierces armour as though it were not there and liquefies his brain. The power necessary for that kill has come effortlessly. The nexus of energies here is massive. I feel as if I could tear Pallevon's moons from the sky and hurl them to the battlefield.

And there is the anger. That is present here, too. It is gigantic. It fills me with its dark ecstasy. The Red Thirst stirs. It would take nothing to unleash that, to become a maddened, indiscriminate destroyer. The violence of the traffic on the vox tells me that my brothers experience the same phenomenon. We are dangerously close to a mass frenzy.

The enemy's lines become a cauldron. Hatred clashes with rage. This is close-quarters combat, the bloody meat that feeds the maw of our Chapter's hunger. We fight as independent units, damaging the foe from within until the main force joins us. I strike out first on one side, then the other. The enemy is all around me, a cornucopia of targets. I welcome them all to their end. The power of the warp crackles lethally through my every slash. I fire my plasma pistol with a steady rhythm, heedless of the risk of point-blank shots, exulting in the star-heat that swallows my foe. Armour and flesh melt together, and I extend the reach of death's kingdom.

Something hits me. The blow is giant. It could smash walls, but the hammer is without substance. I stagger, spent energy dissipating around me. There is a smell in the air: ozone mixed with blood. I keep my feet and round on my attacker. Before the Sanctified witch can ready another energy blast, I seize the being of his skull. I crush it to dust.

The traitors fight hard. They fall back into close formations, compact fists of ceramite bristling with guns. They have staked a claim on the tower. They will not relinquish it easily. But the numbers and momentum are against them. Our aerial assault has disrupted the coherence of their lines. When the main body of Fourth Company hits them, it does so with

the force of a tidal wave. Castigon is at the forefront, leading the charge over the wall. ‘For Sanguinius!’ he calls, his voice echoing off the tower.

Quirinus is right behind him. ‘For the Emperor!’ His shout is praise, hymn, and exhortation. It is a weapon in itself. The violence of its faith is a reminder of Quirinus’s greatness. Whatever our differences, I will never deny the power he brings to battle.

And following Quirinus’s call comes the response. ‘Death!’ my brothers shout. ‘Death!’ All of them, a choir of doom. ‘DEATH!’ A chant, a beat, a march of the unstoppable. There is nothing that can withstand such a force.

And nothing does. The Sanctified do not retreat so much as they are pushed back. They fight to the limits of the possible, but the impossible is beyond them. They must withdraw. And so they do, killing with every lost metre of ground, but, in the end, pulling away up the north slope of the amphitheatre.

We do not pursue. Just as the Sanctified stayed with their prize, so do we now.

‘Give me a perimeter,’ Castigon orders. ‘Shame the enemy with its might.’ We use the same wall as foundation, but our barrier has the strength of numbers and righteousness. We are a fortress of iron blood, and we are unbreachable. The need to remain with the tower is primal. I feel it myself. I still do not believe the location to be holy, but I am fully determined to make it ours. I know the effect is a result of the confluence of energies. My awareness of its nature makes it no less powerful.

The Sanctified retreat beyond the reach of our guns. The Stormtalons harry them until they melt into the streets of the city. I see, over the skyline, a guttering, tumbling flame: the traitors’ other Thunderhawk dies. We have time now to consolidate our position, to fix our grip firmly on the tower.

But I do not know why we should wish to do so. I do not know why we are mimicking the behaviour of the Sanctified. It disturbs me that this is what we are doing. Another realisation: the traitors used their Rhinos only as defensive barriers. They never fired the vehicles’ guns. They would have been able to hold us at bay for much longer had they done so. It is as if they were as reluctant to damage the frozen battlefield and its warriors as we are.

I have never known the forces of the archenemy to be worried about desecration.

What is this thing that we have won?

The dust of combat settles. With it, the rage loses its intensity. Our company has weathered the storm of our savage instincts. Or, rather, most of it has. As I take in our current dispositions, I see that a disturbing number of battle-brothers have succumbed to the Black Rage. Albinus is being called upon to perform the grimmer duties of his calling. Quirinus accompanies him on his dark rounds, murmuring litanies as the lost brothers are restrained and sedated before being transported back to the

Crimson Exhortation. Their induction into the Death Company lies ahead, and then their end - in the final glory of a last charge, or at the edge of Astorath's axe.

There are also brothers for whom there shall be no redemptive battle. They are too deep into the Red Thirst, and shall never surface. For them, what lies ahead is only a shuttered cell on Baal, in the Tower of Amareo. They are not reliving the glorious defence of Holy Terra. They are maddened, rabid. Their mouths are coated with the blood of their fallen enemies, and quenching that thirst is the only instinct that remains to them. They howl for blood, and it does not matter whose. The prayers Quirinus intones at their side are the most mournful. These warriors have fallen to the most cruel facet of our Flaw. They have become the embodiment of the worst of our natures. They are what the rest of us must struggle against being. To descend to that state is an indignity beyond the tragic.

No one has yet crossed the threshold of the tower. I do Quirinus the courtesy of waiting. This is his vision we are fulfilling. Let his be the honour of leading the way inside. Or the humiliation. While I wait, I examine the exterior of the tower. It is not what I had supposed it to be. It is an extraordinary construct. It appears to be built entirely of weapons. The ancient and the modern are joined, made one. Swords, axes, flails, maces, rifles, pistols, power fists and more: they are all here. They lock together with the perfection of artificer armour. The tower is made of war.

It is impressive. I have never seen the like. But where is the connection to the Blood Angels? There is no trace of the hand of Sanguinius in this construction. So that must await inside.

When the rites and care due to our brothers fallen in battle or to madness have been discharged, Quirinus leads the way to the tower door. The entrance is enormous, worthy of any cathedral. The Gothic archway towers over us. The door is massive. Its construction is one of layered paradox. It appears to be made of wrought iron, but the metal is something far more dense and heavy. And yet, it appears much lighter. It makes one think of soaring. The design sculpted into the metal creates this effect. At first, it seems to be intricate crosshatching, representing nothing. But after studying it for a few moments, I see feathers. And then I see wings.

Quirinus stops a few paces from the door. 'Look, my brothers,' he says. 'Oh, look.' He speaks barely above a whisper, but that whisper carries through the silence that has fallen over the company. Even those too far away to see the detail of the entrance have been caught in the spell of reverence that has come upon us.

For my part, I feel no anticipation. I feel a deep unease. I remain as convinced that a trap has been prepared for us as Quirinus is sure that we stand before a holy shrine. I am alone in this. Castigon and Albinus, helms removed, have some of Quirinus's reverence in their expressions as they stare at the door.

Quirinus takes a slow step forward. Then another. He reaches out to touch the door. There is no hurry to any of his movements. It is as if he is reluctant to end this final moment of anticipation. Is it, I wonder, because some part of him suspects that he is about to be proven wrong?

I examine my own motives. Do I want Quirinus to be deluded? No, I do not. It is not vindication that I seek. I know what I read in the currents of the warp. I know what I experienced aboard the Eclipse of Hope. With its statue and its star chart, the ship was a lure of the most mocking kind. Yet here we are, having been forced to bite down on the hook, and smiling as if we enjoyed it. We are caught in an obscenity, and its full measure will be revealed when Quirinus opens that door.

Quirinus places his hand against the metal. His simple touch it all it takes. There is no struggle to shift what must be a great mass. There is no lock to defeat. It is as if our journey here were struggle enough, and now we are to be rewarded with the object of our quest. The narrative is too perfect. I refuse to believe in it. Yet the door opens. It divides along an invisible seam and the two halves swing apart, admitting us to the centre of the maelstrom. We cross the threshold.

I cannot credit what I see.

The interior of the tower is a single chamber reaching what appears to be the entire height of the spire. There are no windows visible from the exterior, but they must exist, concealed somehow in the folds of the architecture, because light streams in from the upper half of the walls. The red light of Pallevon's sun is filtered, as though through stained glass, and fills the chamber with downward slanting beams all the shades of red. Each of those shades in turn is but a variation of flame or blood: the dull glow of dying embers, the blinding incandescence of the firestorm, the nuances of fresh blood, old blood, arterial blood, corrupted blood. Spiralling diagonals of red, all focussed on what lies on a massive marble dais in the centre of the chamber.

And what, by the Sanguinary Chalice, is on that dais? It is a statue of gold and silver and a stone with the resilience of marble but the appearance of ruby. It is Sanguinius, depicted in the final moments of his martyrdom. The accursed Horus is not here, but the presence of his death-strike is, as our primarch is captured in an eternal fall. The statue is life-size. Its detail is extraordinary. None of us was alive the day Sanguinius fell, but our genetic heritage is encoded with memory, and I know, we all know, that we gaze upon a perfect recreation. That is Sanguinius. The features are the very incarnation of nobility. Every detail of his armour, of his carnodon robe, of the fold of his wings, the lie of the feathers - it is all beyond comprehension. I am wrong - this is not perfection. This is something more. This is reality. This is that most terrible moment in our Chapter's history, the moment that is the birth of the Black Rage, transmuted from event into art.

The sight of the statue is a blow of a kind and degree that none in Fourth Company has ever experienced. It is shattering. The silence with which we approached the doorway is as nothing compared to that which envelops us now. The entire company files into the chamber, the tramp of boots somehow being swallowed by the colossal, reverential stillness. It is as if we have come to the end of words, and nothing shall ever be spoken again.

That is an illusion, of course. It is a lie. There will be words. And I will not accept the truth of this display. It cannot be what, in a voice of gold and silver and blood, it proclaims itself to be.

For Quirinus, there are no doubts. He has reached the pinnacle of his life's work. He spreads his arms wide. It falls to him to break the silence. He does so as befits a Reclusiarch of the Blood Angels. He does not whisper. He answers the silent thunder of the statue with thunder of his own. 'Brothers of the Fourth Company of the Blood Angels,' he cries. 'Behold Sanguinius!'

He falls to his knees.

'Sanguinius!' All the voices are one voice. All emotions are one: a collective, total rapture. 'Sanguinius! Sanguinius! Sanguinius!' The zeal of the cry could shatter worlds. Then the company, in unison, follows the example of Quirinus, and kneels before the statue.

I do not shout. I do not bend the knee. I am not unmoved by the statue. I feel the same blow as my brothers. I am shaken. But I have seen false miracles before. I am conscious of every doomed step that has brought us to this moment. Our path has been drawn for us by gods dark and false. The warp energies are so powerful that reality is thin as gossamer, brittle as dying parchment. There is obscene falsehood here.

And so I stand alone among my brothers in an act of refusal. I know what I know. I will not be swayed. But the doubt. Oh, Throne, the doubt. If I am wrong, then behold two moments: the passion of Sanguinius, and the damnation of Mephiston.

CHAPTER FIVE
The Darkness of Veneration

‘There stands the truth of Mephiston!’ Quirinus proclaims to the company at large. To me he says, ‘You are no Blood Angel.’

I check the rage that would have me blast Quirinus where he stands for such an outrage. There are too many dangerous unknowns at play here, and I will not let the situation escalate. But I have my honour, too. ‘You will withdraw those words, Reclusiarch,’ I tell him. A fraction of my anger escapes my control. My words are the hiss of wind on a glacier. For a moment, a rime of frost spreads out on the stone floor before me.

‘If they had been intended as an insult, I would,’ says Quirinus. ‘They were not. I seek only to strip away dangerous illusions.’ He stands on the statue’s dais, almost touching the figure, but keeping a few reverent centimetres before it. The rest of my brothers remain kneeling, most with their heads bowed. A few, Albinus and Castigon among them, look back and forth between Quirinus and where I stand at the tower door. They say nothing.

Quirinus goes on, his voice almost gentle, solicitous of my fallen state. ‘You must see what has happened to you,’ he says.

‘Tell me.’ I must know exactly what he believes.

‘You are soulless, Chief Librarian.’ He puts the full strength of his ecclesiastical rank behind that pronouncement. ‘You defeated the Black Rage. You do not respond to the holiness of the icon in this chamber. These are symptoms of the same condition.’ He spreads his arms to take in our worshipful brothers. ‘What is it to be a Blood Angel? It is to suffer the Flaw. It is our tragedy, but it is also our identity. Consider the nature of the Flaw, brothers.’ He is no longer addressing me directly. He is soaring into a sermon. ‘Were it limited to the Red Thirst, we might regard it as no more than a curse, a genetic shame that threatens our Chapter with a humiliating destruction. But there is also the Black Rage, and by the blood of Sanguinius, is this not also a blessing? To be one with the memories of our primarch. Is there not something within each of us that welcomes this dissolution? The Black Rage will be our end, but it is also our most vital link to our progenitor. It keeps the fires of righteous vengeance forever burning in our hearts.’ He pauses, drops his arms, and looks at me. The skull of his helmet is accusatory. ‘You are immune to the Black Rage, Mephiston. And so you have shed the defining feature of our Chapter. You

cannot know, any longer, what it means to be a Blood Angel. You have proved this. You are unmoved by what stands behind me.'

'Immune?' I am outraged by the presumption.

'You fought back and conquered the Black Rage. That amounts to an immunity.'

Can Quirinus really be this foolish? Can the Chaplain whose erudition was so respected by Calistarius be so ignorant? His time in the warp has rotted his judgement. His argument is not theology. It is not philosophy. It is nonsense. Quirinus expounds upon the Black Rage, but he has not known it himself. Of all the Blood Angels here present, only I have experienced that fate. And though I fought my way back, I did not do so without cost. Yes, Quirinus, your friend Calistarius is dead. But do not imagine that Mephiston has no memory of the struggle beneath the rubble, of the desperate fight to reclaim self and rational thought from the fatal grip of the Flaw. I am at war with the dark tides of rage every second of my existence.

My respect for Quirinus snaps into brittle shards.

And yet.

And yet, I do not express my outrage. I do not even feel it in unadulterated form. Though he could not know what he struck, Quirinus has hit upon my doubt. There are the questions whose answers it may be for the best that I never find. My loyalty to the Blood Angels is not a question. But my identity? That is a question, one hidden from all but myself. What am I? What is the thing that stirs inside me? Am I truly a Blood Angel still?

Yes, I am. I will believe this. I must believe it. The ever-widening gulf between myself and the rest of the Chapter is a source of doubt, but it is not proof.

It is not proof.

Quirinus is wrong, too, to think I am not affected by that statue. Unlike the rest of the company, however, I am resisting the artefact's emotional gravitation. There is no point yet in trying to pull my brothers away from the icon. Its hold is too powerful. Any attempt on my part to break it would simply confirm, in the eyes of all, Quirinus's worst surmises about me. It is growing more difficult, however, to quell my anger. Instead of frost, green fire crackles around my feet, scarring the surface of the stone, gouging lines as if with claws of diamond. I cannot stay here. If I do, Quirinus will say something, and one of us will do something, that I shall regret. I turn and stride out of the tower.

I am not pleased by the sight that greets me here. With the retreat of the Sanctified, the degraded population of Vekaira has returned to its normal life. Or what passes for normal on this world. The miserable wretches approach the tower on their knees, throwing up their hands in prayer. To whom do they think they are praying? Sanguinius was worshipped on Baal

before the arrival of the Emperor, but this is not Baal, nor is it a world that somehow doesn't know of the Emperor's existence.

After a minute, I am joined by Castigon. He is here, I know, out of respect, not friendship. 'What are your intentions?' I ask him before he can utter a peacemaking platitude.

'We consolidate and hold this position, then destroy the Sanctified when they return.'

I share his conviction that there will be a counter-attack. But we still lack a reason for the traitor's interest in this site. 'And the statue?'

'Once Pallevon is secured, we will take it to Baal.' He pauses. 'We will use all due caution,' he says.

From the entrance comes the sound of our brothers' voices raised in a hymn of praise. Quirinus has begun a service of thanksgiving.

Castigon is unapologetic. 'We have been blessed with a decisive victory, and the Reclusiarch's vision has proven true.'

'And you see nothing ominous in the links that have brought us from the Eclipse of Hope to here.'

'I did not say that. But what would you have me do, Chief Librarian? Should I ignore what we have found inside this tower? Can I? Can you?'

No. None of us can. There is too much truth in that depiction of Sanguinius. Somewhere in that truth, however, is a lie. That, or a terrible truth that seeks to wound our Chapter.

I shake my head, once, and Castigon moves on to organise the defences. Inside the tower, there is a pause in the chanting. In that moment of quiet, I hear something that, at first, I think is an echo of the service, rolling back from the top of the amphitheatre. I listen, and in the next interval between stanzas, I hear the sound again. It is not an echo. The intonations and rhythms are correct, but the voices are too thin, broken, mortal. I look up the slope of the bowl, puzzled. A few metres in front of me, standing beside the Phlegethon, Sergeant Gamigin is gazing in the same direction. I walk over to him.

'Do you hear it too, Lord Mephiston?' he asks.

'I do. Come with me.'

We leave the tower and make our way slowly up the bowl of the amphitheatre, weaving our way through the motionless warriors, observing the crawling humans. Many of them have left their decrepit village to engage in worship. They are not the source of the echo. That sound comes from the top of the bowl. But as we pass each one, I can hear a whispered prayer. These savages, too, are mimicking the prayers of my brothers. The imitation is a blasphemy. The sounds are similar, but the words are gibberish. Every worshipper is ranting nonsense, and each worshipper is ranting different nonsense. I choose one subject and examine him more closely. His eyes are glazed with desperate passion. He ignores me, his attention focussed on the tower to the exclusion of all else. His knees are a gory mess as he crawls on, reaching out for something. I doubt that he

even knows the nature of his desire. The words spill from his throat in an avalanche of pleading need, yet are barely audible, as if constricted by holy fear. His emotion has shattered language with its strength.

But what is his need? What is it that torments him? His face is as dull as it is frantic. Any true comprehension fled long ago, if it were ever there at all. I turn from him to the woman a pace away. She is no different. These people are not sentient. Their need and their worship are vestigial. The intensity is there. The meaning is dead. I wonder what killed it, and when. I suspect the moment of the amphitheatre's creation.

'Are they mocking us?' Gamigin asks.

'No. They hear the sounds of worship and imitate them because they come from the object of their veneration.'

We reach the village, following the sound of the grotesque parody of prayer. It is even more pitiful than I had thought. Not one of the shacks is recent. Many of them are collapsing, held up only by the chance of walls leaning against each other. The first two I look in are abandoned. It would seem that these people have lost even the cognition necessary to seek shelter. But the third is different. It is larger than the others, and in better condition. This is not because it has been repaired. It was built more solidly, that is all. It is windowless. It is rectangular, with actual doors at one end, and is at the centre of the cluster of huts. Its position and size suggest a feasting hall or a church. And it is from here that the chanting emerges.

'The smell,' Gamigin says.

'Yes.' It grows stronger as we approach the building. It is the stench of corruption, as if the hymn itself were rotting. Gamigin raises his bolter as I open the door.

I was right. It is feasting hall. And a church. And it is still in use.

Old, rotting blood pools around my boots and oozes towards the entrance. Daylight penetrates no further than the first third of the space, as if ashamed to go further. I see well enough with my augmented vision. I see what the Vekairans are eating.

Each other.

This is a charnel house. I cannot say the bodies are butchered, for that is too neat a word for what is done here. The victims are dismembered, torn to pieces by hands, the flesh ripped from the bones by teeth. There is a chimney in the centre of the ceiling, and below it, the archaeological trace of a fire pit, but no flame has burned here for centuries. Bones, spoiled flesh and half-eaten organs are piled high in heaps of waste. The culture of Vekaira comes together for me, the scraps of evidence forming an obscene portrait. This is a population of cannibals, devouring itself faster than the birth rate can renew it. Though the city once held millions, it is astonishing that there are any people left here at all. But that is a wonder I will not pursue. There is no point. The Vekairians have nothing more to tell me.

But they try. There are dozens of people here, chewing on flesh both new and old, and chanting their idiot mimicry of holy rite. I do not know if they are giving thanks or begging for favour. I doubt that they know, either. Those near the door cringe back. They gaze at us with stupid, feral eyes. The lowest ork has more dignity than these creatures.

'You are not worth saving,' I tell the humans.

They do not respond, other than to continue cowering, eating and chanting. Gamigin and I walk back outside and close the doors. We look at each other. 'They are beyond the light of the Emperor,' I say. Gamigin nods. To think we rescued these worms from being fodder for the heretical rituals of the Sanctified. It is surprising that such material would have been a sufficient sacrifice for the traitors' ends. Perhaps it was not.

'We should have a flamer,' Gamigin says.

'We'll manage,' I reply, but before we can begin the purge, I see Albinus making his way toward us. I wait. He pauses a few metres away. He removes his helmet. His eyes are still shining from the glory of the statue, and that is enough, it seems, for him to ignore the noises and the stench. He has been in the presence of the sacred, and the grime of mortals is beneath his notice. I know he is going to plead with me to return. The air temperature around us drops precipitously. When Albinus says, 'Mephiston,' his breath mists.

I cut him off. 'Go in there,' I say, pointing to the hall. 'Then we will speak.'

He obeys. When he returns, some of that glow has left his eyes. Doubt - healthy, necessary doubt - has taken root.

'Imagine,' I say, 'that we had arrived here unguided by Quirinus's visions, and the Sanctified were not present. Imagine that all we saw were these debased creatures and the spectacle before us. What course of action would we have taken?'

Albinus does not hesitate before answering, and this gives me hope. 'We would destroy everything.'

'And yet we are not.'

'Because we would have been wrong. We would not have stopped to discover what is in that tower.'

'Surrounded by the obscene, how can that thing not be more of the same?'

'Did you not see it?'

'I did.'

'Truly? I think not. That is Sanguinius, in every detail. I know, with as much certainty as I know the blood that flows in our veins, that I have at last gazed on the true resemblance of the primarch. You have, too, Chief Librarian.' When I do not answer, he insists, 'You have.'

He was honest with me. 'Yes,' I admit.

Albinus sighs. 'Then…?'

‘I have seen a resemblance. The work is extraordinary. And? That tells us nothing about the provenance or nature of the statue. The appearance of sanctity and its reality are very different. Our Chapter has learned this lesson most bitterly. We should know better than to be taken in by a false idol yet again.’

‘The situation is different. There is no counterfeit possible in that statue.’

I want to argue, to shake Albinus from this delusion, but I cannot. I know, at a level most disturbing, that he is right. There is a truth in that tower. But it is a partial one. It must be. I turn from him in frustration and confront the festering village once again.

‘What would you have us do, Chief Librarian?’ Gamigin asks.

I point to the church. ‘We will destroy this filth.’ I grit my teeth. ‘And then we will complete our mission.’ I will not countermand Castigon’s plans to preserve the statue. Quirinus would fight back, and a schism would be inevitable. I love the Chapter too much to visit another such nightmare upon it. And the Sanctified must be destroyed.

With grenades, with bolter fire, and with my frustration transmuted into scouring lightning, we level the church. We scrape the land clean of these animals. And still we walk down the path that has been prepared for us, further and further into the shadows, where something is waiting.

And laughing.

CHAPTER SIX
Pyrrhic

The Sanctified renew their campaign at the end of the day. It takes them that long to regroup. By that time, we are more than ready behind our defences. We have brought our tanks into position. They surround the spire. We have taken care not to disturb the peace of the frozen warriors. Precisely why we treat them with a care approaching reverence, I am not certain. We are conscious of these stilled presences, but we do not discuss them. The shroud of mystery that hovers over them is woven of the sacred, the cursed, and the familiar. We do not know who these warriors are, but somehow, we are as reluctant to desecrate their rest as if we were faced with a graveyard of Blood Angels. We will do them no harm. But why, the question lingers, did the Sanctified show the same care?

So when the traitors come, they face cannons able to blanket the top of the amphitheatre with high-explosive shells. We have heavy armour, air superiority, and sheer numbers. We hurt the Sanctified badly in the initial clash. It would take an act of madness, or a special sort of desperation, for them to attack us.

But they do. Against all sense, they come. What drives them, I wonder, as the Phlegethon and its brothers commence their punishment of the foe. There is no possible strategic value in Vekaira, or the Pallevon system as a whole. There are no weapons here. There is only the statue, and it can have no meaning for the traitors beyond the blow to the morale of the Blood Angels that its loss would represent. Such a paltry form of victory would not compensate for the massive loss of warriors and materiel.

And yet they attack.

Sunset on Pallevon, when the world drowns in blood. The already red tinge of daylight becomes a deep crimson. A high, wounded tide fills the amphitheatre, a perfect stage for the carnage that now begins. While the tanks tear the enemy apart at the ridge of the bowl, the rest of us wait, holding back on the charge.

The shelling strikes the collection of shacks. This is no loss. It is a necessary burn. The barrage scatters chunks of Sanctified and cannibal over the landscape, the traitor mixing with the debased. The Sanctified do not retaliate with what heavy armour remains to them. The preservation of the tower seems to be of paramount importance to them, and now that we

know what lies inside, this mixture of obsession and restraint is even more mysterious.

'What are they doing?' Castigon says. 'This is madness.' He sounds offended.

We are standing together beside the Phlegethon. We witness the Sanctified charge through the shelling and down the slope of the bowl. Our bolter shells pummel them. They seek no cover. They barely dodge our shots. A half-dozen well-placed rounds hammer a traitor to the ground, and the warrior behind him barrels over his body without hesitation. He is hit in the shoulder. He doesn't alter his course. He keeps coming until he, too, is shot to pieces. That is the behaviour of orks or tyranids. They are simply rushing towards us with all speed. It is a tactic that is not unlike the one we used to take the tower, but for two significant differences. Their assault troops come in on their jump packs at the same time as the tactical squads. And they are grievously outnumbered. They cannot overwhelm us.

They are running to a slaughter. Their own.

'I have never known traitors to be suicidal,' I say. 'Have you?'

'No.' His bolter sends a stream of mass-reactive shells into a single target. Castigon's precision is peerless. The rounds pulverise the traitor's helmet, and then his skull.

'Then there is a reason behind their actions. We should be wary of that which is too simple.' Yet even as I speak, lightning streaks from the tip of my sword. It plunges deep into the carapace of one attacker, fries both his hearts, then leaps to his brother behind him, and kills again. The traitors' fingers twitch, and each warrior fires a few more shots even though he is already dead. Then they fall.

'What would you have us do?' Castigon asks me. 'Hold our fire?'

'No. But we should question the worth of what we are defending. Captain, the warp currents here are extremely powerful. We are standing in the centre of a vortex.'

'And here we shall stand until the last heretic dies. Gaze on that icon once again, Chief Librarian. That will assuage your doubts.'

Leaving a wake of their dead, the Sanctified draw closer. They are numerous enough that we cannot cut them all down from a distance. They are firing back, but we have cover, and their accuracy is compromised by the speed of their rush. The bulk of their forces are almost upon us. I feel the anticipation build for the close-quarters clash of rage.

'This is not war,' Castigon growls. 'This is stupidity.' He is more than offended. He is angry. The most basic aesthetics of conflict have been violated, and he will not let such an insult stand. I can sense the rage gathering in the rest of the company. The air is taut with an approaching storm. The passions of war are about to slip their leash.

Rage is the fuel of Blood Angels at war. It is our danger, but it is also the medium of our lethal art. But this rage is coming too soon, too easily. We are rushing down the predestined road.

The storm breaks. The bulk of the Sanctified are well into the field of eternal combat, and their forward elements are nearly at our defensive line. ‘Sanguinius!’ Castigon shouts, with more emotion than I have ever heard before.

‘SANGUINIUS!’ our brothers roar. Joy and rage are present in equal measure. When have we ever had something so precious to defend? When has an enemy offered himself so eagerly to our vengeance? But these questions are not asked. There is little space for conscious thought. The time is now for the savage instinct of war, and the Blood Angels thunder out from cover to grind the enemy into the ground.

The rage infuses my sword, and I attack with the energy of hate. The traitor before me trains his bolter at my face, but I cut off his hand before he can fire. He lunges forward, seeking to run me down, but I take a step back and bring Vitarus down in a two-handed, overhead swing. I slice down through the top of the Sanctified’s helmet, bisecting his head, his neck, and cutting down into his chest. Deeper yet, stealing precious seconds to feed the thirst for violence. I do not stop until the Sanctified falls to either side of me. Ahead, more enemies rush to meet the death I bring them. On my right, something splashes me: blood from a traitor shredded by the chainaxe of Techmarine Phenex. His servo-arms dismember the corpse.

When we took the spire, the Sanctified fought back hard. Their fury then is nothing compared to what animates them now. They attack as if possessed, their anger a match for us. Reclaiming the tower means more to them than any consideration of tactics or survival. They are willing to die recklessly for their goal. I have never seen such behaviour in traitor Space Marines. But if this is their wish, so be it.

We smash into them like a gauntlet through glass. We have a two-to-one advantage over them, and we make full use of it. Bolter rounds hammer armour, while chainblades snarl through limbs. The world is now red to the core: the red of light, of clashing armour, of gouting blood, and of vision distorted by rage. Over the din of gunfire and clashing steel, the savage cries of the combatants coalesces into a single, unified, all-encompassing howl of war. The collective expression of rage has a perfection to it. The sound is a concerto of murder on a vast scale, an orchestra of weapons with a choir of hate. I become aware that some larger whole is being created. The battle is a means to something other than the ends of either party.

I cannot stop it. I cannot even remove myself from its creation as I fight and kill alongside my brothers. I share Castigon’s disgust with the Sanctified. I hunger to see them punished for their treachery. I feel the rising thirst for their blood. It is not enough to kill them. They must be devoured. A traitor lunges at me, swinging his chainaxe at my neck. He is fast, and the blow is a hard one. I lean back, and the revving blade misses my throat by a whisper. My will takes his skeleton and blows it apart. I

shatter him with such force that fragments of bone shrapnel escape through the joints in his armour. His scream is brief, but satisfying. It is also insufficient. I turn to my next opponent with my blade searing the bloody twilight with its power. I slash down, carving a diagonal through the Sanctified from left shoulder to right hip. I channel so much of the warp's destructive energy into the sword that it cuts as though there were no armour, no flesh, no muscle, no bone. Blood washes over me, and at its taste, I feel an old madness stir.

No.

I step back from the edge. If I fall into this trap, then there is no hope for the company. I am too submerged in the close-quarters fighting. I need to see more, so I gather my warp wings and fly straight up. Fifty metres in the air, I see the broader pattern of our struggle. Near the tower, the war of Blood Angels and Sanctified is a roiling mass. Though my brothers still block the Sanctified from the tower, the defence of the structure has given way to the slaughter of the foe. Armour slams against armour, and I hear relatively little gunfire. This is a battle of blades and fists, and of wading through the enemy's blood. In the brief moment that I watch, there are three decapitations. Free of that frenzy, I see what I had missed, and should have looked for from the beginning. I see the anomaly. A small group of traitors has remained at the lip of the bowl. They are not firing weapons. They are doing something far worse.

They are conjuring.

There is a glow in their midst. It is not of part of the ocean of red light that has drowned the world. It is not truly light at all. It is a condensed ball of the immaterium. It is growing. It is not a colour of the spectrum. Red may be the colour of rage, but that orb is coloured in rage. Its appearance is impossible and absolute. Its existence reveals a terrible logic behind the nonsense strategy of the Sanctified. They have not been waging war. They have been performing a ritual. Their sacrificial charge is part of that rite, and so is our response. We have been acting as predictably as clockwork mechanisms. The ritual might as well have been our own, so eagerly have we performed our assigned role.

There is still a question: what do the Sanctified hope to gain?

The answer will have to wait. I streak towards the witches. All their concentration is on the sphere in their centre. They do not see me coming. They have no consciousness of me until I have begun to kill them.

I do not act as a psyker in this moment. I will not risk feeding the orb. No matter. I have other ways to kill. There are four witches here. None are wearing helmets. Their psychic hoods are no defence against a plasma pistol. I fire as I land, and vaporise the head of the nearest traitor. Now there are three. One does not react. He remains focused on the orb, his hands outstretched toward it. His face, a relief map of ritual scarification and branded runes, is frozen in ecstatic concentration. The other two come at me.

They do not hold back. They attack from either side, lashing out with bolts of dark energy. The crystals of my psychic hood pulse once, and neutralise the bolts. My lip curls in contempt. I raise my pistol. As I pull the trigger, a bolt hits the barrel, knocking the weapon from my hand. The two traitors close with their power blades. They know their sorcery is no match for mine.

The battle regresses to an ancient form. We fight with swords. They continue their simultaneous attacks. I parry their blows, but am kept on the defensive. They are skilled. They do not give me a chance to retaliate. Warp energy haloes their blades. I keep mine in check. It is still a match for theirs. It has killed for so many tens of centuries that it is peerless at its task. It hungers for the blood of the traitors, but its opportunity does not come. The witches slash at me with mechanical precision. I cannot block all the blows. Neither can my armour turn them all.

The orb is growing. It has a gravitational pull. It would be easy to trip and fall into this monstrous creation.

I must bring this stalemate to an end. The traitor to my left thrusts, and I let him make the hit. The sword pierces the seam of my armour beneath my arm. The blade sinks into my flank. I make the wound mine and slam my arm to my side, trapping the sword. The witch tries to yank his weapon out. He fails, and instead pulls me forward. He doesn't have time to realise his mistake. I plunge my sword into this throat, then twist it back and forth. The Sanctified gurgles, blood frothing from his mouth and nose.

The other strikes while he thinks my attention is diverted. He is wrong. I used the execution of his brother as bait. He aims his blow at my head, but I crouch as I slide my sword from the dead traitor and slash to my right. The edge of the sword is so keen that even without the power of the warp, it can cut through ceramite if it strikes with enough force. I swing with both hands, and sever the traitor's right leg just below the knee. He topples. He is easy to finish off.

I turn from my prey to the last of the Sanctified witches. The orb has grown in the last few seconds. I realise that I have continued to feed it. I tried to kill dispassionately, but that was a delusion. I hated the warriors I have dispatched. The shedding of their blood was an anger-soaked pleasure. I struggle and struggle, yet still I am a pawn in this game, playing out my role to the end. Though faced with this truth, I will not cease my resistance. I cling to the faint hope that I will end the game if I kill the last witch. I want to believe that I am not too late.

As I approach, the traitor breaks his fascination with the orb. He turns his head to look at me. He smiles. Before I can kill him, he plunges his head into the orb. His legs stamp and tremble. The fingers of his right hand twitch once. Then his headless body falls to the ground. The orb pulses and begins to rise. In desperation, I seek to touch the thing with my will. I try to take it apart. What I encounter is a concentration of rage that has been building for five thousand years. The entire history of Pallevon's fall can

be read here in its passions. The terrible worship of the spire ensured that all of the furies released in the self-murder of a population flowed to this spot. Our struggle with the Sanctified has been the capstone of this dark work, the final, necessary, harvest of rage.

And still the full nature of the work is hidden from me. The meaning of that statue is a lethal obscurity.

My attempt to dispel the orb founders. There is too much strength here. The collective psychic strength of billions hurls me back. The violence is such, the force of the blow is physical. I stagger. Blood pours from my ears. I know that the thing in the shadows is laughing at me. There is nothing to be gained by false restraint now, and I roar with frustrated anger.

The orb continues to ascend, gathering speed, and still growing stronger as it feeds on the conflict below. It flies to the top of the spire. In its final seconds, it accelerates into a streak. It strikes the tower.

There is a sudden end to the sunset. Night arrives, but it does not fall. It emanates from the tower. Darkness erupts from the tip of the spire. It climbs to the sky, a twisting, surging rope of black, and it screams with the anger of ten billion murdered souls. At the height of the clouds, it spreads in every direction, staining the firmament until the world is held beneath an obsidian dome. For a few moments, the reign of the abyssal night is absolute. The only light is from muzzle flashes in the bowl. Then illumination returns, now as a poisoned chalice of Chaos. The air begins to split. Cracks form in the materium. Fire gouts from them. These are not true flames. They are fragments of violent thought given flickering form. They do more than burn. They corrupt what they consume, dragging souls further into the embrace of the warp, fuelling themselves on agonised consciousness.

At the same moment that the cracks appear, there is the sound of a tolling bell. It is accompanied by the distinct sensation, inaudible but huge, of clockwork gears, long frozen, engaging at last. On the battlefield, after millennia of suspension, time moves forward once again.

The frozen warriors are frozen no longer.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Brotherhood

Click. Click. Click.

A rhythm in my mind and soul. It resonates in the ground, the air, my frame, unfelt by any but myself.

Click. Click. Click.

The beat of the inexorable, of the gears turning against each other and grinding all hope to dust. The machine is at work, as it has been since the Eclipse of Hope vanished five millennia ago. The mechanism advances, indifferent to any attempt to arrest it.

Click. Click. Click.

The sound, too, of fragments snapping together, bit by bit, obscenity by obscenity, until the full mosaic appears. I do not see it yet, but I sense the approaching revelation. Let it come. I retrieve my pistol and plunge back down into the amphitheatre, throwing myself headlong into the gears. I will arrest the inexorable.

The battlefield was a cauldron before. How to describe it now? The turmoil has the frenzy of warring insects, and the destructive tragedy of hurricane waves breaking on rocks. Battle formations disintegrated following the initial moment of clash. Contests between individuals or small groups scattered through the field, separated by the motionless warriors. Suddenly, there are three times as many combatants, and there is no more order at all.

The ancient Space Marines are berserkers. Inarticulate baying howls from their helm speakers. Their movements are huge, rapid, explosions of offence. There is no defence at all. They strike without distinction, attacking whoever is nearest, whether Blood Angel or Sanctified. A few briefly continue the duels that had been held in suspense for so long, but after clashing arms a few times, they turn on the new arrivals. There seems to be no thought to their actions, only instinct, and a seeking out of prey. I see fire arms mag-locked to their armour, but they use only their chainblades. Swords and axes wreak deadly havoc, their motors somehow working after so many centuries inactive, the register of their snarls high-pitched as though hysterical from hunger after so long.

I enter the storm of battle. Before me, Albinus and Brother Ronovus are struggling against four of the returned warriors. Ronovus empties a bolter clip into the chest of one foe. At point-blank range, the shells punch

through the armour and burst out the Space Marine's back, trailing mummified flesh, petrified bone and blood black with age. The wound does not slow the berserker at all. It is as if Ronovus were fighting the armour itself. But then the warrior's helm speaker unleashes a howl of pain and a stream of incoherent, yet clearly articulated, invective. The being inside the armour is somehow alive, even though it has been withering away for tens of centuries. The warrior swings its chainaxe down on Ronovus, who blocks the blow with the barrel of his gun. The axe smashes the bolter in two.

I strike the warrior's limbs and head with a strobing, writhing blast of occult energy. I reduce the abomination to pieces. It collapses, destroyed. Blood is pounding in my ears. I hate the thing I have killed. I would kill it again. I would exterminate all trace of its existence.

The vox-feed is little more than snarls. Rage breeds like a plague over the battlefield. I hear Albinus roaring. He follows my murderous example and pulls out his chainsword, though he still has his bolt pistol at hand. And now that gun is pointing at me. I don't have time to form a question in my mind before he fires. The rounds sing past my left ear. I hear the sharp crack of impacts behind me. I whip around, sword out and flaming, and cut off the head of the one who would ambush me. It was a Sanctified. I turn back, blood from the traitor running down my armour, and am in time to see what I do not have time to prevent. Albinus holds one warrior at bay. Their blades lock and grind against each other. Ronovus has drawn his chainsword, but still another revenant has appeared behind him. It clutches its blade with both hands and stabs downwards, as if gutting a sacrifice. The teeth chew through Ronovus's power pack, armour, and then spine. The berserker forces the sword down until Ronovus falls, dead, then withdraws its weapon.

As it turns its attention to me, a terrible thing happens.

Ronovus rises to his feet. He joins the other warrior and closes on me.

Click. Click. Click.

Implications fitting the mosaic pieces together.

'Albinus,' I shout. The Sanguinary Priest has just severed the right arm of his opponent. 'Left!'

Albinus throws himself to one side and down as I lash out with a massive burst of transformative power. I do not target the berserkers themselves. I strike something with no will, no sense of identity that might resist. The force we fight has torn the air. I do the same to the ground. The earth flashes, then splits with a scream of rock. The energy I have unleashed collides with the reality of matter, and mutual annihilation occurs, releasing star-heart heat. Stone becomes molten. The warriors fall into a pit of lava. They sink quickly, struggling to the end to reach me. I watch, feeling the purging sear on my face. The thing that was Ronovus disappears beneath the surface of the incandescent rock, his vocaliser

issuing a torrent of blasphemous rage. The light and heat fade, leaving only a glow and troubled stone where the berserkers had stood.

There is a momentary lull in the battle around us. Albinus stands beside me, looking at the patch of ground that has swallowed our brother and our other attackers. We are breathing hard, fighting back the Thirst. It comes upon us so easily. It withdraws so reluctantly. But after a moment, Albinus can speak. 'What monstrous sorcery is at work here?'

'The same that froze the battlefield and then unleashed it on us.'

'But how is this possible?'

I shake my head. 'What matters is that it is happening. We can seek answers later.'

'And Ronovus,' Albinus says. 'His gene-seed…'

'It was lost to us when he rose,' I answer. His dark resurrection marked his progenoid glands as corrupted. We can do nothing for his legacy.

Albinus nods, and then the whirlwind catches us again as more berserkers attack. Above us, another fissure in the air opens, like a sword wound in flesh. Flames reach down for us, eager for the fuel of combat. This sorcery challenges my own, and I accept the thrown gauntlet. I seize the flames, make them mine, and direct the fire onto our attackers. I pull the crack in the real wider, and the fire becomes a torrent. The area explodes with uncanny light. A pillar of immolation consumes our enemy. I release the fire, and it remains in place, feeding off the detritus of its victims.

'Mephiston,' Albinus says.

'I know.' I saw the armour worn by two of the berserkers I just destroyed. Our ranks are thinning. The enemy's are growing. Though the Blood Angels will never surrender, this war is moving toward a single possible outcome.

I will not permit such a defeat. I will free us from the path, and I must do so now, because at last I can see the end, and it draws very near.

The tower is the key. It is the source of everything. I point to the darkness that even now continues to erupt from the spire. 'Is that the work of our primarch?' I ask Albinus. 'Is that the light of our Emperor?'

'It is not,' he admits.

'No. It is not. Neither is what lies within.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Whatever I must.'

'You will act alone.'

Even now, when it must be clear to all that the tower is not worth defending, the statue retains its hold. Its authenticity is too powerful, granting it immunity from the doubts of my brothers. 'So be it.'

'Do not damn us,' Albinus warns.

'Consider how close we already are to that state,' I tell him, and take my leave.

I could fly over the field of battle to the tower. Near its base, a contingent of the Blood Angels and Sanctified still grapple, though the war has now spread over a wide swath of the amphitheatre. I do not fly. The Rage and Thirst are barely submerged, and they demand violence upon the enemy. So I run down the slope of the bowl, sword before me. I am an engine of destruction, gathering momentum and fury. Warp energy surrounds me, but it does not become wings. I am a meteor, a being of force and blood-red fire. I slash through the war zone, incinerating and dismembering. Everything I see pushes me closer to the edge of paroxysm, and it would be so easy to lose control, so easy to become the walking apocalypse. But my will is the source of my power, of my control over the warp, and by that will I stay just this side of blood-hazed mindlessness.

The effort of control is massive, though. What release I feel in the devastation I unleash is barely enough because of what I see. It is not just the dark turn in the tide of battle that outrages me. It is not just the monstrosity of our fallen brothers rising again to turn on us. There is another detail that is apparent to me now, as I pass, a wind of fire and blade, through the thick of the fighting. The true nature of the ancient berserkers is becoming apparent, and I long to wrap my hands around the throat of the being responsible for this horror. Weathering had eroded any Chapter markings from the armour of the ancient warriors. But as they fight and kill, a gradual transformation occurs. As if absorbing the shed blood, their armour is taking on colour. The shade is a familiar red. On their left pauldrons, the heraldry of a winged drop of blood has appeared. They are Blood Angels. I do not know how this can be, but it is the horrific truth. They are us, us at our worst. They fight with enraged savagery, then feast upon the gore of their victims. They are the Chapter as it might become. Perhaps here lies the solution to the dark resurrection. Time and destiny have been sheared in this place, and death is the threshold to a fallen future. If I do not end this madness now, all of Fourth Company will be of the berserkers' number before the crimson dawn.

I reach the tower. Our tanks are still manned, but the guns are silent. There is no order to the battlefield any longer, and any heavy weaponry is as likely to kill one of our own as the enemy. Storm bolters spit shells into the darkness, but the defensive line is otherwise calm. There is no siege. I doubt there ever really was. We were lured to this place for the purposes of slaughter and conversion. I suspect the Sanctified have been pawns as well, only partially aware of the game being played. Many of their bodies litter the amphitheatre. None have risen. They have served their purpose, but we are the true targets. The tragedy is ours.

I enter the tower. I am not surprised to find Quirinus in the great vault. For a moment, I wonder if he has been guarding the statue during the entire battle, but then I see that I do him an injustice. He has been in the thick of the fighting. He is covered in blood. His armour is disfigured by gouges and burns. The tabard hangs in tatters. His purity seals are intact,

but their scrolls are so begrimed and torn that they resemble ragged bandages. He stands before the statue, legs apart and braced, crozius at the ready. His helmet is lowered, as if he were a grox making ready to charge. ‘I saw you coming, Chief Librarian,’ he says.

So. For once, Quirinus and I are of a like mind. What will transpire in this vast chamber is more important than the battles beyond the tower. ‘And do you see what I have come for?’ I ask him. He must have. The vault is filled with blinding light. Its source is the statue.

‘I do.’ His tone is reverent.

He sees only what he wishes to see. He witnesses light from a statue, and feels holy awe. He is blind. Sanguinius is brilliant. It is difficult to look at him without squinting. That light, though, has nothing sacred about it. It is sharp, fanged, and eager. It is the foul companion of the darkness rising from the spire. It is the light of a supernova, the burning, enormous illumination that means destruction. All of the gathered warp energy has come to this point. It is the key to the endgame, our very personal doom, and Quirinus will defend it to the last.

I try one more time. ‘Reclusiarch,’ I say, ‘remember the duties of your high office. Destroy false gods. Guide our Chapter through the thickets of the archenemy’s illusions.’

‘I do,’ he answers. ‘I am.’

I take a step forward. I do not raise my sword, but nor do I sheathe it. ‘Really? Where, then, is your theological rigour? You are being fooled by a cunning lure. Look at the horrors that surround this graven image. It is the source of these horrors.’

Quirinus shakes his head slowly. ‘You mistake your own blindness for mine.’ He pities me. ‘The blasphemies outside these walls are not spawned by the icon. They are an attack on it. You are part of that attack, and I wonder just how unwitting you are.’ His helmet is unmoving. I know he is watching me closely, waiting for an attack. Without turning his head, he points up and behind to the statue. ‘You tell me to look, psyker. Do so yourself. Gaze upon the glory of our primarch’s martyrdom. Find your soul, Mephiston, or learn now if you still have one.’

I do as he asks. I will engage with him as far as reason and too-precious time permit. I do not want to come to blows. I have too much respect for the Blood Angel he once was, and that he still believes himself to be. So I turn my gaze to the statue. Without my willing it, it fills my consciousness. Its perfection is overwhelming. It is majesty and tragedy. It is the heart-rending moment when the future of our Chapter turned to ash. It requires an extraordinary effort on my part not to fall to my knees.

‘Why do you resist?’

I hear Quirinus’s voice. I do not see him. The radiance of the statue is the only sight in the universe.

‘I see you straining, Mephiston. Why? What is the daemonic influence that turns you against our primarch? You see the truth now. I can tell.

Show me that there is still hope for you, that you are not forsaken.'

The questions strike home. The statue reaches into the deepest recesses of my being. I resist it. I will not have it there. But Quirinus asks why and suddenly all my answers seem tainted. The doubts that have gnawed since my struggle with M'kar twine like serpents around my soul. What is it within me that fights against this icon? Is it the daemonic that struggles against the holy? Why do I wish to turn from this light and drape myself in darkness?

Quirinus says, 'Calistarius.'

The sky was black with smoke. Smoke from burning vehicles, ruined buildings, high explosives. Flesh. It had been necessary to raze Ecastor. The Word Bearers had done more than occupy the fortress. They had made its population their own. There had been nothing to save, and everything to destroy. The Blood Angels had visited the judgement of the Emperor upon the heretic and the traitor. Perhaps elsewhere on Arlesium there would be those who had not turned their faces away from the Emperor's light. But not here. Ecastor and all within its walls had been put to the sword. The fortress itself had been shattered. Not a single wall still stood. On its plateau was now afield of rubble. From where Calistarius sat on a pile of rockcrete, the landscape of heaped and shattered grey stretched for kilometres in every direction. Here and there, an arm emerged from the wreckage. Some hands were limp, others were splayed in perpetual pleading. Beneath the remains of the fortress were thousands of lost souls.

'You seem pensive,' Quirinus said. The Reclusiarch strode toward him over the wreckage like the triumph of faith itself.

'The mutations were severe.'

'You mean there were many psykers.'

Calistarius nodded.

'You have fought many such contingents before.'

'But ones so large?'

'You were tested,' Quirinus observed.

'I was.' He was exhausted. He had been forced to discover the limits of his power by slamming up against them repeatedly.

Quirinus removed his helmet. 'The smell of burning heretic is strong,' he said, apparently changing the subject.

'Better that than the stench of living heretic.'

Quirinus laughed. 'Well said, brother.' He looked off at the smoke-blurred horizon. 'Now tell me what is troubling you.'

Calistarius smiled. 'Do you never tire of being my confessor?'

'If I did, I could not admit to it.' Quirinus turned back to the Librarian. 'Out with it.'

'The heresy took root here so quickly,' Calistarius said. 'And it spread so quickly too. This world was a loyal one only a few years ago. I do not understand how a people could fall from faith with such ease.'

‘That is the essence of temptation,’ Quirinus responded. ‘Ease is what lies at the core of heresy. Chaos seems to demand nothing and give much. If one is weak, such a combination is impossible to resist. Faith, Brother-Librarian, true faith, is difficult. It demands everything.’ His voice suddenly took on a sharp, probing edge. ‘Has the warp been speaking to you?’

‘No more than usual. Whispers, promises of infinite power, visions of becoming the ultimate defender of the Imperium…’

‘… and then its ruler.’

‘Precisely. Have no fear, Reclusiarch.’ There was still a novelty to using that title. ‘I know these lies for what they are. They have no appeal for me.’

‘Perhaps not now. But if there is no temptation, then you have yet to be truly tested. The day may come when such power will seem necessary and justified.’ Quirinus paused. ‘During the battle, the Thirst and the Rage, you were able to keep them in check?’

‘Yes’. The turn of the conversation made Calistarius uneasy. He thought again of that moment on the Thunderhawk during the approach to Ecastor, when two different time periods had overlapped in his consciousness. ‘I am not slipping away,’ he reassured his old friend.

‘See that you don’t,’ Quirinus replied with more command than confidence. ‘The struggle against the Black Rage is difficult, and will always grow more difficult. Remember your faith, and remember its nature. The struggle is eternal. Beware of ease, and know that its presence is always a lie.’

‘Calistarius,’ Quirinus repeats, ‘is there anything of you still there?’

The use of that name is his mistake. The Reclusiarch is calling out to the dead, and so revealing how the quality of his thought has degraded. He believes Mephiston to be a shell built around the core of Calistarius. He is wrong. But his use of the name dredges up one of the dead Blood Angel’s memories, one that is useful. Quirinus was right all those years ago. True faith is difficult.

Belief in the statue would be easy. Therefore it is a lie.

And this is the hard, but simple truth: we have been led here by the forces of Chaos. There really is no other consideration. No matter what the statue appears to be, it is the daemonic that brought us here. That one fact negates any appearance of the holy.

The spell is broken. Full consciousness returns to me. I look away from the statue. I know it is a lie.

And yet…

No. The pain I feel in turning away is the pain of truth. I face Quirinus. ‘You have forgotten your own teachings,’ I say to him.

Either he does not hear me, or he chooses not to. ‘You are lost to us,’ he says. Though he speaks with sadness, I hear an undercurrent of satisfaction

in his words. He will not forgive me for existing instead of Calistarius. He welcomes the chance to believe in my damnation.

'No,' I tell him, and walk towards the statue. 'It is you who is stepping into the abyss.'

'Come no closer,' he warns. He braces. He will shield the statue from me. I think now he would even shield it from my unbelieving gaze. His grip on the crozius tightens. He will use it against me. The war of brothers, that tragedy that has repeated itself time and again down the Imperium's history, is here again.

'Move aside,' I answer.

He raises the crozius. 'In the name of the Emperor and Sanguinius,' he begins.

I cut him off, anger drowning what pity I might have felt. 'Do not speak their names,' I snap. 'You forfeited the right to do so when you began believing the visions that led to this accursed place.'

He is silent for a moment, stunned by what he interprets as temerity. He has no idea of how much restraint I have shown towards him. His crozius wavers. Perhaps he is capable of doubt after all. 'What are you doing?' he asks.

'Putting a stop to this monstrousness.'

'No.' The weapon rises again. 'No.' The helm vox-speaker does not convey emotion well. I hear his desperation nonetheless.

'Your time in the warp has twisted your reason,' I tell him. 'I pity you, but I have had enough of your delusions. Step away from the statue. Now.' I continue to stalk forward. I still do not raise my sword. Even if our conflict is inevitable, I shall not precipitate it. But my patience is exhausted, and so is time. Outside the tower, war is an eternal roar. On the vox-network, grim determination mixes with desperate strategy. There is no limit to our brothers' valour and skill, but they fight against impossible odds.

Quirinus does not move. 'You walk to your death, daemon,' he says. He sounds more desperate yet. He does have doubts, then. He responds to them by shoring up his false belief with greater lies. He would rather I be the worst agent of Chaos than face the fact that he has been tragically mistaken.

'You are choosing ease over truth,' I tell him with real sorrow.

He does not listen. The skull of his helm faces me, concealing his eyes and expression. I do not need to see them. I can read his thrumming stillness. He is working very hard to maintain his conviction that he is walking the path of the righteous. The effort makes him think he has made the hard choice. The comfort this decision gives should tell him it is the wrong one.

I stop before him. Less than an arm's length separates us, yet we are more distant than that weak vessel Calistarius could ever have imagined. This is the last moment before one of us makes the gesture that will

forever bury the memories of a past friendship. ‘You have been deceived,’ I tell him. ‘There is no dishonour in that. The shame lies in deceiving yourself.’

He hears me. I know he does. He was once a giant among our Chaplains. The mind that made him so, the mind that had the strength to survive that measureless time in the warp, still lives, however clouded. ‘I…’ he says, and hesitates. He looks back at the statue. And seals his fate. The brilliance is too great. How many Chaplains could resist such a culmination of their faith? How many Blood Angels could shun this manifestation of the primarch?

Here and now, on this planet, just one.

Quirinus turns back to me. By the set of his shoulders, I know I have lost him. I say nothing more. I move around him and set foot on the dais. ‘Stop,’ he says. I do not. I raise my sword to strike the statue. Now it is my turn to hesitate. I know the icon must be destroyed. But to smash an image of Sanguinius is an act of such enormity that it gives me pause.

Quirinus seizes the moment. Cursing my existence, he swings his crozius.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Iconoclast

My peripheral vision catches the movement. I shift my stance, bracing at the last second. The weapon strikes my armour in the mid-section, a sacred relic clashing with a holy work artificed for me alone. The force of the blow knocks me across the chamber. I slide along the floor and slam against the wall to the right of the entrance. The metal of its construction shrieks. Bits of mortared weapons fall around me. Quirinus charges. 'Desecrator!' he yells. He is upon me in the blink of an eye. He aims his blow at my skull.

I bring my hands together. The sound is a thunderclap. The shockwave is directed. It lifts Quirinus off his feet and hurls him away. He lands with a crunch of ceramite on marble at the base of the dais. I stand, and am suddenly at a loss. I have never fought without lethal intent before. Quirinus has no such compunction. His bolter is out and he fires as he rises. I barely have time to conjure a shield. I stand behind a flashing, crackling shimmer in the air. Shells collide with it and ricochet around the vault. Quirinus jerks as a round punches his left pauldron. Others should be hitting the statue, but it has its own protection, and they vanish in a burst of light just before striking.

Quirinus has me on the defensive. He keeps firing. I stand motionless, concentrating on the shield. He runs at me, ignoring the stray hit. His clip empties just before he reaches me. His crozius comes in from my left side, the swing powered by the momentum of his charge and by his frantic faith. I try to block it. I am not fast enough. The blow is massive. Pain explodes on my flank. I am flattened against the assemblage of war.

My armour floods my system with pain-dampening drugs, but not before the injury transmutes restraint into rage. Quirinus thinks he knows what he is fighting. He thinks he can use the tactics he would against a common psyker: overwhelm through incessant, multiple, changing attacks; disrupt concentration; prevent any move to the offensive. This is sound strategy, and the Reclusiarch is a fierce warrior. But he does not know me. At so many profound levels, he has no idea what I am. And now his ignorance tires me. I have had enough. I sink my will into his own with the force and speed of a venomous serpent. He staggers away, clutching his head, his weapons forgotten.

‘You feel it, don’t you, Reclusiarch? You feel your mind and your body wrenched asunder. Struggle, claw at your helmet as if you could reach into your skull and pull me out of there. Savour these few seconds, the last of your control over your own movement. And now they are done. Stop.’

He stands still. There are now two statues in the vault. There is a mental scrabbling, like a small animal beneath the palm of my hand. It is his mind, struggling to escape my grip. His outrage and disbelief are palpable. He has never imagined he could be vulnerable to such an attack. The faith of a Chaplain is an iron shield against most mental assaults, and his has always been of an exceptional nature. But today, it is a false faith, an obsession clung to in defiance of the truth. It will not help him, especially not against me.

‘Mephiston!’ a voice calls from the entrance.

I turn. Albinus has followed me here. ‘What?’ I ask him. ‘Did you think I was going to kill him?’ When he does not answer, I snort my disgust and send Quirinus over to the Sanguinary Priest. Quirinus walks with stiff, jerking motions, like the marionette he is. ‘Hold him,’ I tell Albinus.

‘What are you going to—’

‘Hold him.’ I command, and Albinus obeys.

I release Quirinus. He begins to struggle immediately. Albinus has him contained for the moment. Quirinus may break free, and perhaps Albinus will let him go when he realises what I am about to do, but I have the seconds I need. I leap onto the dais. I channel such energy into Vitarus that its light is a crimson brighter than the brittle white emanating from the statue. Nothing will shield the icon from me, not even my own instincts. Because still, in this final instant, the awful spectre of damnation falls over me. I do not hesitate. I attack the statue as if it were a living foe, bringing my sword down on the neck. Horror fills my soul. This fragment of time, as my arm completes its arc, is stretched almost to infinity. I see and feel and hear and taste every nuance of this irrevocable act. There is all the time in creation to wish away what I am doing. There is no time at all to prevent it. There is a sudden flare as my blade pierces the statue’s shield without slowing. And then I murder my primarch.

I know the object is no ordinary statue. Even so, my expectation has been that I would be cutting through some warp-simulacrum of stone and precious metals. Instead, my blade sinks into the neck as if it were flesh. The texture of the skin, the degree of resistance, and the nature of the wound are all familiar in the most ghastly fashion, because I have killed in this way thousands of times, across hundreds of worlds. I do not know the act of decapitation with the same intimacy as does Astorath, but I know it well enough. Ice reaches up my arm and stabs me in the chest. In the eternity that has enveloped me, I know the worst of myself. I know that M’kar’s most poisonous insinuations were the truth. I know that I will bring darkness to the Imperium until I am destroyed.

I know all these things, and then the statue vanishes, and with it, everything else. False matter becomes infernal energy. My sword is a conduit, sending everything into me. Power that has been building for five thousand years courses through my blood. I cannot see, for the light is coming from me. My mouth opens in a tendon-tearing, silent howl of ecstatic agony. The scream is silent because the power is too great. There is no room for anything else. From my throat, my eyes and my hands come searing beams of pure warp energy. They are absolute potential, and at the next act of will, they will become a destruction no less absolute.

I cannot scream, I cannot see, I cannot hear, I cannot move. But I am capable of understanding. I have little choice. Epiphany is too weak a word to describe what I undergo. Knowledge floods me, answering questions unthought, creating new ones. The energy is encoded with the memories of the being for whom it was gathered. There are so many, too many, cascading through my mind in such an avalanche that I can retain only fragments. They are from five thousand years ago, and ten thousand, and more, back and back and back, before the Heresy, before the Emperor, before the Age of Technology. Throne, there are thoughts from the Age of Terra, almost forty millennia ago. How old is this being? It is not xenos. The earliest memories are all of humans, all on a Terra so ancient as to have passed beyond all record.

Then all these questions, all these fragments, vanish under the weight of a single memory. It falls upon me, complete and perfect in clarity and horror. It is the secret that lay behind the statue. No, I am wrong. It and the statue are one. The representation of Sanguinius was so true because it was not the work of an artist. It was a memory given form. It was a memory of a being who was present when Horus slew the angel.

A memory. And a celebration.

At this last revelation, I do not find my voice, but I find something more powerful. I find my rage. It is not the Black Rage, and surely any of my brothers would have fallen to that curse had they been exposed to that memory. But as agonising as the experience is, I have known it before. I suffered the Black Rage; I lived Sanguinius's death. Scars have reopened, but the madness does not take me. I have known the primarch's death twice now, once through his eyes, and once through those of a dark witness. The rage I feel is directed at that witness, and the rage does not belong to Sanguinius. It belongs to me.

I use it.

My anger gives me focus. It has targets. So much power has flowed into me that I am on the verge of dissolution. I must purge the energy. I create a channel. With the will granted me by rage, I shape the charge as best I can, and then I unleash a force to shatter history.

The explosion is massive. Its light is the deathly white of the statue mixed with the crimson of my hate. It begins as an expanding sphere of the inchoate. With a slipping grip on consciousness, I am able to isolate

Albinus, Quirinus and myself from the pure disintegration. The sphere strikes the limits of the vault. With a roar of falling gods, the tower flies apart. Every blade and gun and club that made up its walls is launched on its own trajectory. The spire becomes a swarm of weaponry, raining war upon the land. Our tanks and gunships are sent tumbling end over end, leaves in the wind. Beyond the tower, the destruction takes the shape of my rage. The sphere becomes electric streams, the claws of my talon. They slash across the battlefield, swallowing the berserker Blood Angels and the remaining Sanctified, blasting them apart, reducing their blasphemous existence to smoke. My will is a spear, impaling all that is unclean. It is fire, scourging the land. It is a monster, devouring all of its kin. I experience the destruction of each foe. I revel in it. My thirst can never be slaked, but it laps up the enormous kill. And when the dragon of rage has feasted, it finally dies.

The light fades. The boom echoes off the towers of the city, falling to a distant rumble, and then… silence? No. Nothing so blessed. There is a low, pulsing hum, almost sub-aural. It is so deep, so powerful, that my spine and chest vibrate to its rhythm.

I have fallen a few metres from the dais. I am drained, hollowed out. Oblivion would be welcome, but the hum is insistent. It beats at the frame and at the mind. It will not be ignored. It will not let go. I struggle to my feet. Where the statue stood, there is now a wound in the materium. Darkness still holds sway over Vekaira. The dome of black has not dispersed, and the only illumination is from the fires still licking through the rips in the air. The tear in the real before me is of an even darker black. Its form is irregular and shifting. Tendrils of the warp twist at the edges, serpents the colour of nightmares and madness. Submerged within the hum, but leaking now into my awareness, I can hear an infinite choir of screams and moans. Those are not the cries of the tortured and the murdered. They are the songs of torture and murder themselves. The worst dreams of our species have a life, and they are moving on the other side of that rift.

A howl of rage makes me turn. Albinus is struggling with Quirinus. The Reclusiarch is on the ground. Albinus is behind him, pinning both his arms. Quirinus thrashes. I open my mouth to tell Albinus to release him. There is nothing left for him to defend. He can do no more harm. Then I realise that he is shouting in High Gothic. He is not cursing me, but Horus. The Black Rage is upon him.

Though I protected the two Blood Angels from the worst of the blast, I could not spare them entirely. Their armour looks as if burning claws have raked it. Albinus's shoulders slump. He is exhausted. I can barely walk, but I join him. I hold Quirinus's legs, keeping him immobilised while the Sanguinary Priest speaks to him. Albinus calls his name. He entreats Quirinus to remember who he is, when he is, and to come back to his

brothers. Albinus recites the Litanies of Sanguinary Intercession, praying for Quirinus's deliverance from the temporal fugue.

Around us, the remains of Fourth Company gather. It is a diminished force. The losses have been great. No warrior walks unscathed. Drawn to the source of horror, the Blood Angels are confronted by a fallen Reclusiarch, a world still in the grip of Chaos, and the fact of a sacred icon's destruction. Captain Castigon, his Iron Halo battered, his armour scorched of its glory, kneels beside Albinus and takes over restraining Quirinus's arms. He meets my eyes briefly. I see exhaustion in his gaze. Worse: I see uncertainty. Though there has been a victory in the destruction of our enemies, he wonders at the cost. He suspects a greater loss. Despair is on the heels of that uncertainty.

Albinus removes Quirinus's helmet and his own, that his words might reach the afflicted more easily. The intonation and rhythms of his ritual chanting were lost through the distortions of speakers. Still, there is little he can do. Albinus's spiritual duties concern the Red Thirst. It is the Chaplains who guide their charges through the finality of the Black Rage, and we have no Chaplain. Dantalian, who preached to Fourth Company, died on the Eclipse of Hope. And now we are losing Quirinus. He believed not wisely but too well. The shock of the truth has destroyed him.

Then, his eyes clear. He blinks at Albinus. His raving stops.

'Have you returned to us, brother?' the Sanguinary Priest asks. 'Do you see us?'

Quirinus looks at me. 'I see you,' he says. It is an accusation.

'Have you returned?' Albinus repeats.

The question is not idle, or rhetorical. It requires an answer. That answer requires the sufferer to be self-aware. Quirinus's face is contorted with effort. His lips are drawn back in a grimace of strain that could easily turn back into rage. He hangs over a precipice, his grip tenuous. He takes a great, shuddering breath before he speaks.

'I will not return,' he says. The words fall upon the company like the peal of the Bell of Lost Souls.

He is not addressing Albinus. He is speaking to me. 'Why?' I ask.

'I will… lose too much.' His fight is perverse. He is struggling to remain sane long enough to curse that sanity. Another breath. 'I will not be a monster.'

That is his farewell. With his final rejection of the path I walk, he releases his hold and falls into his personal abyss. His eyes see another time, another threat, and his mind urges him to fight the Battle of Terra. Albinus deploys his narthecium, injecting Quirinus with a massive dose of sedative. We will add another name to the roster of the Death Company.

I stand back as Albinus tends to Quirinus. The Reclusiarch has remained true to the conclusions of his beliefs to the end. He who withstands the Black Rage is without soul. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps I am something

worse yet. But which of us stands for the Chapter? Disgusted by his weakness, I turn my back on him.

I face the rift once more. We have allowed ourselves the luxury of a few minutes to deal with the fall of a legend. We have been liberated of our physical foes. But this opening to the warp might yet spell the end of Pallevon, and perhaps of us. I do not know if we can close it. I do not know the nature of the blackness that covers Vekaira, and whether it can be crossed.

I do not know, in this moment of honesty, what I have done.

Castigon stands nearby, eyeing the rift. 'And so, Chief Librarian?' he asks. What he means is, You have no answer, do you?

'The game is not over,' I mutter.

'No,' comes the answer from beyond the rift. 'Well played, Blood Angel.'

CHAPTER NINE
The Puppet Master

The speaker is not among us yet, but the words inflict another wound upon the materium. There is a sudden, torrential rain of blood and ash upon the scattered remains of the tower. The voice is resonant with power and millennia upon millennia of violence. It sneers with the special malevolence that comes not from being born to evil, but from choosing that path and rejoicing in the destiny that follows. The voice is as deep and bone-shaking as the hum of the rift, but it thunders, too, like a million drums of war. And it rasps. It is claws scraping the inside of a skull. It is teeth gnawing the bones of hope until they snap. It is the laughter of genocide.

The blood keeps falling from the vault of the black dome. The warp-screams grow louder. The cracks in the air erupt with sudden gouts of flame, and from them comes a new army. These are not soldiers. They are vermin. Their twisted horns sprout from elongated heads. Their legs are backwards-jointed, giving them a mocking, prancing gait. They are the bloodletters of Khorne, and they plagued us aboard the Eclipse of Hope. The sensation of a hellish circle at last being closed is sickening.

The daemons stalk towards the exhausted company. We are surrounded. The Blood Angels respond as if fresh to the battle. Defiant, Fourth Company forms a defensive circle. There is no cover. The tower has been reduced to bits no larger than a metre or two. But the wave of daemons will break upon crimson rock.

Castigon joins the circle, exhorting his warriors to a heroic effort. ‘Now comes the true enemy!’ he proclaims, his voice as strong and as eager for battle as when we first stormed the gates of Vekaira. ‘Now, at last, we have the blight of Pallevon in our sights! Sons of Sanguinius, we shall teach the forces of Chaos a lesson in humility this day. They shall learn, to their sorrow, what it means to invoke the wrath of the Blood Angels!’ And the lesson begins. Mass-reactive destruction pours into the ranks of daemons.

I remain outside the circle. I ignore the bloodletters. Whatever danger they represent, they are still a distraction. I confront the rift, waiting for the arrival of the commander of this horde. He speaks again, his voice effortlessly drowning the stutter of guns. ‘Oh, the words, such fine words. Do they give you comfort, you playthings? Do you not tire of mouthing and hearing these tiny posturings?’ The voice is monstrous. It uses sound

and words to savage its listeners. I force myself to concentrate past the assault and analyse what I hear. I will do what lies within my power to take the measure of the coming foe. I note the facility with language. There is something, however debased, of the human in the speech patterns. The jagged mosaic of memories impress themselves upon me once more. I have no doubt that they are the memories of this being. This creature, who witnessed the death of the primarch, who is eras older than the Emperor Himself, was once human.

'Do not answer,' I vox Castigon. 'Do not give this abomination that satisfaction.'

'The satisfaction of what?' comes the scraping response. There is no urgency to the voice, no acknowledgement of the pitched battle that has erupted at my back. 'Would you deny me your rage? It is too late for that, Brother Mephiston. Far too late for that.'

The use of my name and the assumption of kinship plunges me back to the caves of Solon V and the lies of M'kar. I bristle, but do not answer.

'You have denied me nothing,' the voice continues, with the awful ring of truth. 'You have given me everything. You have been the tools of my vengeance against your Chapter. You have opened the way to my dominion.'

'There shall be no more games!' I shout, and move forward. I will throw myself into the rift if that is what it takes to close the wound. I must, for the appearance of this doorway is the terrible answer to the mystery of the incarnate memory and why we have been lured here. In destroying the statue, I completed my final, assigned steps in the dance. I released the enormous build-up of energy. I tore open the materium.

I unleashed what is coming.

'No more games,' I repeat.

'Agreed,' says the voice.

I stop moving as I see a shape coalescing in the rift. 'Let us put an end to games. Let us put an end to everything.'

The arrival of nightmare is sudden. There is the suggestion of a presence. There is a sound of agonised reality breaking. And then the being is among us. He is immense, towering over us all, and I wonder how such a thing could ever have been human.

But then, so was I. Once.

I behold a daemon prince.

Of the man, only cruelty remains. The head is framed by two long, forward-curving horns. The face is reptilian. The eyes are narrow, and from their deep pits of blackness, tiny slits glimmer with terrible knowledge. The maw, which could bite the head off an ork, is filled with needle-thin teeth. The daemon prince strides towards us on legs the size of Space Marines. His claws are gladius-long. His hide and his armour are the red of coagulating blood, and it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. The knee-plating takes the form of a horned, daemonic

face. The eyes blink. The jaws of the relief sculptures open and close in hunger and savage amusement. On each of the monster's pauldrons, a human writhes, surrounded by skulls emerging from a pool of blood. Only the upper half of the tortured soul is visible. At first I think this is because the unfortunate has been torn in two, but then I see the truth is more terrible yet: the body submerges into the unholy plate. The skulls bob and sink. That is blood, that is a deep and noxious pool, and yet it is armour. From the daemon prince's back, two curved spikes rise, on which are impaled the mummified heads of Adeptus Astartes. Symbols are carved into their foreheads. The monster carries a gun. It looks like a form of bolter.

It is engraved with death's heads. Its barrel is as thick as my arm.

The earth shakes with the daemon prince's steps. He pauses a few metres from me. He spreads his arms wide. 'I am Doombreed, Blood Angels, and you belong to me. Now, kneel, and together we shall feast on the blood of the galaxy.'

Doombreed.

Click. Click. Click.

Logic and machine advancing together, moving toward a picture both coherent and final. Doombreed, leader of several Black Crusades. Five millennia ago, he fell upon the Imperium. He was defeated, and the archives of Space Marine Chapters are filled with records of glorious victories. Ours among them. The histories are also chronicles of unspeakable atrocities, the annihilation of entire planetary systems, and wounds that bleed to this day. I recognise the symbols on the trophy heads of the Space Marines now. They are the liveries of the Warhawks and the Venerators, two Chapters extinguished utterly, lost to the dark dream unleashed by the being that stands before me.

The only answer to Doombreed's speech is the continued shredding of his minions. How the daemon prince could imagine the Blood Angels would betray the Emperor beggars the mind. The presumption is laughable. Such treason is impossible.

Such conscious treason, I think. I try to suppress the thought, but it is there, nestled amongst my doubts.

Click. Click. Click.

The questions I have about my darkness. The identity of the berserkers. Doombreed cocks his head, the reflecting dark of his eyes trained on me, amused. 'I thought you were tired of games, Chief Librarian,' he says. 'Isn't it long past time for pretence?'

'It is,' I snarl. I walk towards him. 'It is time for reckoning. I taught your accursed ship to fear me before I destroyed it. I shall teach you to scream.'

'You disappoint me,' Doombreed begins. I believe he thought me drained of energy, and perhaps I was, but my will to fight such horrors is unbounded, and the warp bends to my command.

I send a burst of scarlet light into his face. It is hardly more powerful than simple pyrotechnics, but it is dazzling and distracting. He takes one step back, blinking, and I seize the opportunity. I thrust my blade through his armour. Simple metal will not harm this being. I cannot stab him to death. But the power that was absent from the light show is in Vitarus, and I strike him with a fire fit to rip souls in two.

Doombreed's roar shatters the air. More chunks of the real fall to the ground, releasing greater bursts of warp-flame. The monster bats me away with a fist half my size. The blow would crush a tank, but I anticipated it, and an immaterial shield absorbs the worst of the impact, transforming the force into kinetic energy.

I fly in a high arc, gain control of my flight and land near the top of the bowl. 'You have been freed only to meet your final end!' I taunt.

Enraged, Doombreed pursues. He thunders across the amphitheatre, away from the battle between my brothers and the bloodletters. I want his focus on me. Without his help, his army will be annihilated, leaving only him for Fourth Company to fight, should I fall.

But I will not. I freed the monster. I will destroy him.

I cannot say that I have drawn first blood. Doombreed has been striking at us since the Eclipse of Hope. But I have drawn blood, and infuriated my foe. Wrath gives strength, but unthinking wrath births errors. Doombreed charges. He wants me spitted on his horns. Good. My own snarl builds. I owe him a great agony, and he shall be repaid. Anger, directed anger, courses through my blood. Command of the warp flows with it. I gesture, conducting reality. I focus on Doombreed's path, choose my spot, and strike.

As before, stone is rendered molten by the heat of my rage. The daemon prince plunges his left leg deep into the sudden pit of lava. He stumbles, but does not fall. Instead, he deliberately steps fully into the trap. He stands there, submerged to the knee in boiling rock, and smiles. He scoops up a handful of lava, lets it drip through his fingers. 'Yes, little brother, yes,' he says, resuming his most insidious attack. 'You fight like a true son of Khorne. But you have so much to learn.' He spreads his arms, palms up, and gestures as if lifting the earth.

The entire upper third of the amphitheatre erupts. I am knocked skyward by a titanic geyser of lava and flame. Boulders are hurled like wheat in a gale. The heat would consume me. I survive in a bubble of force, but the blaze still reaches through that shield and my armour, the pain as piercing as it is enveloping.

The wings of my primarch fly me higher, above the reach of the eruption. At this height, I see a second eruption, this one at the centre of the bowl. The rift is tearing wide, spreading the poison of the warp over an ever-greater area. Reality bends and melts into abstractions of rage. Somehow, the ground on which my brothers are fighting remains stable, but elsewhere rubble howls its anger and fangs sprout from nowhere.

I retreat into the city. I must fight Doombreed on different terms. There is something that feels like inspiration scratching at a door in my mind. I must open it. I seek a moment's respite at the base of a hab-tower.

The daemon prince will not give me that chance. He pursues me with fire and thought. He is advancing up from the amphitheatre, laying claim to all of Vekaira. The city bleeds as he tears open the roadways, transforming them into arteries of incandescent rock. The city burns as the intense heat ignites combustibles, fanning the fire wide and high. The city twists as the flood of unreality spreads. In the distance, I see towers waver and crackle, while flame suddenly becomes rigid. And snaking through the growing holocaust is Doombreed's voice, travelling the paths of warp energy, pounding at me as if it were the grinding call of the planet itself. I cannot escape it, and it leaves no room for thought.

'Do you flee, Chief Librarian?' The words are mocking, probing, seeking. 'How unworthy. I thought better of the one for whom I have waited five thousand years. Yes, Mephiston, I have foreseen your coming. When your kin used the very power of my fortress to imprison me, held in the warp but staked to this miserable planet, they yet could not keep my mind in this cage. I have journeyed far along the threads of fate. I have seen you. I know what you are. Do you not wish to know also?'

I do not answer. I try to think strategically, to plan how to ambush and destroy him. And though I know words are a weapon in the daemon's arsenal, and that he will say anything, I am cursed in this moment by my own insight. I know when I hear the truth, and I am hearing it now. My foe's questions will not be denied, and I think, I do know what I am. My actions are what I am. That answer does not satisfy me, and Doombreed catches the scent.

'Oh, the nobility of the Blood Angels. See how they bear up under the tragedy of their fate by aspiring to be the most perfect heroes of the Imperium. What a waste. See how they diminish themselves for the glory of their corpse-god. They resist their true nature. They resist their potential and their destiny. You have seen what it could be.' The words are pythons. Doombreed is using truth to give his lies more suffocating power. 'The Blood Angels who trapped me here, they learned to see things differently. Wouldn't you agree?'

Click. Click. Click.

The final pieces of the black mosaic are falling to their places. 'Yes,' says that voice, a tectonic whisper, 'they trapped me here, at the price of their own freedom. They left their empty ship for me to play with, and their souls for me to enlighten. They saw the truth, in the end. They became your Chapter's destiny. And do you not see it? Do we not, in the end, wear the same armour? Blood for blood, Mephiston. Blood with blood.'

And with that, he thinks he has found me. The rockcrete of the avenue vanishes as a glowing crevasse opens up in the road before me, an arrow

pointing at my feet. Doombreed rounds the corner a moment later. Once again, he pauses, and I have time to wonder why he does not attack at once. ‘Kneel, Blood Angel,’ he says. ‘Kneel and be victorious.’

Is my conversion really so important, I wonder, that he will refrain from killing me? The goal of his campaign has been my surrender far more than it has been my death. And now another possibility occurs to me. Perhaps it is not that he does not wish to destroy me. Perhaps it is that he does not think he can.

If so, then he is correct. He stands framed by the stone canyons of Vekaira. He has not found me: he has walked into my ambush. ‘I do not kneel,’ I tell him, ‘and yet I am victorious.’ I launch my attack. I tear open the materium on either side of the daemon prince, at the bases of the towers closest to him. Miniature storms of murdered reality spring into being, whirling vortices of uncreation. They destroy the foundations of the towers. The buildings fall, kneeling in my place. They slide forward off their ground floors, remaining vertical for the first seconds of their doom. Then structural integrity is lost. The majestic Gothic vaults of the windows close like blinded eyes. Flying buttresses fall, arms suddenly limp. All shape is lost, and Doombreed is buried under falling mountains.

I do not imagine that my foe is destroyed. I start pulling the two vortices in through the mountain of rubble. I will pass them back and forth, devouring all until they have feasted on the body of the monster. His voice has fallen still. I will silence it forever.

The front slope explodes outward. I stagger back, battered by the hail of wreckage. Doombreed bursts from the rubble. He roars once more, and now his roar is never ending, his anger unleashed until he devours the flesh of his enemy. He fires his bolter. I try to deflect the rounds, but it is like fending off a meteor storm. I do enough to avoid being reduced to a biological slurry, but I am punched through the wall behind me. Chunks the size of fists have been torn out of my armour.

I rise, shaking off the stun, but Doombreed is already here. He bursts through the wall and grabs me. He hurls me to the ground, hard enough to gouge a crater in the marble floor. He picks me up again and smashes me against the exterior wall, creating yet another hole. Outside, the warp plague has arrived, and the city is echoing the daemon prince’s snarls of rage. Fire and architecture become indistinguishable. The crevasses are maws. The lava has hands. The air is burning and bleeding. Colours smear and wash from object to object, and everything that pretends to exist is turning into the howl of blind rage. Doombreed lifts me high, holding me up as a sacrifice to a sky of roiling black. In answer, the black opens a roaring maw. Inside it, existence and oblivion are locked in combat. Creation and destruction are one and the same, an endless dragonfire outpouring of all-consuming energy.

‘He will not yield!’ Doombreed shouts to his dark god. ‘He and his fellow vermin are unworthy of your blessings. So let him be devoured!’

The sky draws near. No. We are rising. A column of lava is lifting us toward the zenith maw. I will meet my end hurled into the jaws of raging Chaos.

Only I will not. The warp is mine. Darkness is mine. Destruction is mine. I am the Lord of Death, and I hold illimitable dominion. Doombreed's claws are crushing my body within my armour, but they do not hold my will. I reach out into the chaos. I see something that is not the formless, polymorphous abyss of anger into which Pallevon is falling. It is directed rage. It is hard enough to shatter adamantium. It is pure. It is sacred. It is the rage of the Blood Angels. As they make war on the bloodletters, they are the source of a tremendous, perfectly shaped energy of anger. It is so strong, so consistent in its nature, that it is holding the battlefield's reality stable. Doombreed used it against us, his sculpted memory of Sanguinius absorbing the power like a battery until it destroyed the barrier between warp and materium. But that rage did not belong to him. He did not know it as I do. It is mine by birthright, yet I am distanced from it. I understand its nature. I have wrestled with its most devastating incarnation. But I stand apart. The thing that I am, that holds me separate from my brothers, lets me see the rage from the outside. I can see the shape of the collective fury of the Blood Angels. I grasp it.

I wield it.

Doombreed shrieks with pain and disbelief. He releases me. I fall, then rise again on wings whose light of glory is so intense they make the daemon prince shield his eyes. Smoke rises from his right hand. There are fires that will burn even the likes of him.

On his column of lava, he makes for me, reaching with claws to tear me apart, an aura of unspeakable energy gathering around him. But between my hands is my answer. Fuelled by the rage of Blood Angels at war, the gift of our tragic inheritance, it is a sphere of coruscating blood, and it is the manifestation of my infinite will.

'For Sanguinius!' I roar. These are the wages of Doombreed's game. This is his repayment for the blasphemies that he has wreaked. This is my most perfect act in the service of my primarch. I unleash the orb, and all of creation vanishes in the holocaust of my power. All is blood, boiling blood, the blood that is summoned by the death of all things.

Summoned by the Lord of Death.

EPILOGUE
The Abyssal Gift

Dawn bleeds over the bones of Vekaira. Day comes, after a fashion. The dome of night has not been dispelled. Rather, it is now ragged. The flaming wounds in the air have been joined by the rips in the darkness. It is a shredded curtain. Through the flaps of night comes the light of an ageing star. The city is stable once more, but is frozen in the configuration of its madness. The towers of Vekaira became solid matter while they danced with Chaos, and their new shapes were structurally unsound. They have collapsed, all of them, leaving behind the twisted skeletons of malformed giants.

These details are irrelevant. Soon even those traces will be gone, because Pallevon is to be subject to an Exterminatus bombardment. The rift is no longer virulent, but it is still there, slowly pulsing the poison of the warp. There is only one solution. The *Crimson Exhortation* will smash Pallevon with cyclonic torpedoes until the planet cracks apart. Nothing must remain. Doombreed will never have a base here again.

The bloodletters are destroyed. Of the daemon prince, there is no sign. I no longer feel his presence. I heard, at the last, in the blood apocalypse, a bellow of pain, one that did not fade. It was cut short. Still, I will not entertain the illusion that I have done more than banish him from the materium.

For now.

The battered company begins the process of embarking on Thunderhawks and Stormravens sent down from the Exhortation to return us to orbit. The pilots of the gunships will not have to make many trips. Almost half the company is lost to death or the Flaw.

I watch Albinus accompany the bearers of the sedated Quirinus into the Stormraven Bloodthorn. He has fallen to what I resisted. In the end, he chose to fall, declaring my strength the greater curse. He is wrong. He was misled. I was not. I—

I freed Doombreed. He is banished, but no longer imprisoned.

The thought is toxic. So are the words of kinship that the monster spoke to me. The doubts coil and twist. There is no escaping them. There is no quieting them. Nor will I quiet that other hunger, the one that exults in my terrible strength, and longs to unleash it again.

I follow Quirinus's cortege, for that is what this procession has become. Induction into the Death Company will let him die with honour, but in truth my brothers are already mourning the loss of a great hero of our Chapter. Let that be so, and let the destruction of Pallevon be his pyre.

Quirinus walked in the light, and burned. For all that he embraced our Flaw, he could not truly see how it might lead to a greater strength.

I do not know what lives within me. I do not know how this hunger might grow. This I know: I hold darkness in my hands. It is mine. And this is my vow: it is, and shall always be, the darkness of holy extermination. For the glory of the Blood Angels. For the Emperor.

For Sanguinius.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

HEART OF RAGE

By

James Swallow

In the blood-warm gloom, amid the shrouding, cloying thickness of the air, the heart beat on. A clock ticking towards death, a ceaseless rhythm echoing through his body. A cadence that inched him, pulse by throbbing pulse, towards the raging madness of the Thirst.

Engorged with vital fluid, the heart pressed against the inside of his ribcage, trip-hammer impacts growing faster and faster, reaching out, threatening to engulf him. His every sense rang with the force of it, the rushing in his ears, his arrow-sharp sight fogged and hazy, the scent of old rust thick in his nostrils… And the taste.

Oh yes, the taste… Congealing upon his tongue, the heavy meat-tang like burned copper, the wash across his fangs. The aching, delirious need to drink deep.

Clouds of ruby and darkness billowed about him, surrounded him, dragged him roaring into the void, damned and destined to surrender to it. These were the enemies that he and all his kindred could never defeat, the unslakable Red Thirst and its terrible twin, the berserker fury of the Black Rage. These were the legacy of The Flaw, the foes he would face for eternity, beyond all others, for they were trapped within him. Woven like threads of poison through the tapestry of his DNA, the bane-gift of his lord and master ten thousand years dead.

Sanguinius, Primarch and noblest among the Emperor's sons. The Great Angel, the Brightest One. The Shockwave of the master's murder, millennia gone yet forever resonant, thundered in his veins. The power of the primarch's angelic splendour and matchless strength filled him… And yet the other face of that golden coin was dark, dark as rage, dark as fury, darker than any hell-spawned curse upon creation.

Their boon and their blight. The malevolent mirror of the beast inside every brother of the Blood Angels Chapter.

Brother-Codicier Garas Nord knelt upon the chapel's flagstones, the only sound about him the whisper of servo-skulls high overhead, watching the lone Space Marine with indifferent attention.

Hunched forwards in prayer, his broad frame was alone before the simple iron altar. Wan light cast by biolumes cast hollow colour over his face. It glittered across the sullen indigo of his battle armour and the gold chasing of the metal skull upon his chest. The glow caught the deep, rich red of his right shoulder pauldron and the sigil of his Chapter, a winged drop of crimson blood. It glittered upon the matrix of fine crystal about his bowed head, where the frame of a psychic hood rose from his gorget—and it

caught in accusing shadows the faint trembling of Nord's gauntleted hands, where they met and crossed in the shape of the Imperial aquila.

Nord's eyes were closed, but his senses were open. His hands tightened into fists. The ominous echoes of the dream still clung to him, defeating his every attempt to banish them.

He released a sigh. Visions were no stranger to him. They were as much a tool to his kind as the hood or the force axe sheathed upon his back. Nord had The Sight, the twisted blessing of psionic power, and with it he fought alongside his brothers in the Adeptus Astartes, to bolster them upon the field of conflict. In his time he had seen many things, great horrors spilling into the world from the mad realms of the warp, forms that pulled at reason with their sheer monstrosity. Darkness and hate… And once in a while, a glimpse of something. A possibility. A future.

It had saved his life on Ixion, when prescience turned his head, a split second before a las-bolt cut through the air. He still wore the burn scar from that near-hit across his cheek, livid against his face.

But this was different. No flash of reflex, just a dream, over and over. He could not help but wonder—was it also a warning?

His kind… They had many names—telekine, witchkin, warp-touched, psyker—but beyond it all he was something more. A Son of Sanguinius. A Blood Angel. Whatever visions of fate his mind conjured for him, his duty came before them all.

If the spirit of Sanguinius were to beckon him towards a death, then he prayed that it would be a noble sacrifice; an ending not in the wild madness of the Black Rage, but one forged in honour. A death worthy of his primarch, worthy of one who had perished protecting Holy Terra and the Emperor himself from the blades of arch-traitors.

"Nord." He sensed the new presence in the chapel, the edges of a hard, disciplined psyche, a thing forged like sword-blade steel.

The Codicier opened his eyes and looked up at the statue of the Emperor behind the altar. The Emperor looked down, impassive and silent. The eyes of the carving seemed to track Nord as he bowed before it. It offered only mute counsel, but that was just and right. For now, whatever troubled the Codicier was his burden to carry.

Nord rose to find Brother-Sergeant Kale approaching, his boots snapping against the stone floor. He sketched a salute and Kale nodded in return.

"Sir," he began. "Forgive me. I hoped to take a moment of reflection before we embarked upon the mission proper."

Kale waved away his explanation. "Your tone suggests you did not find it, Garas."

Nord gave his battle-brother a humourless smile. "Some days peace is more difficult to find than others."

"I know exactly what you mean." Kale's hand strayed to his chin and he rubbed the rasp of white-grey stubble there with red-armoured fingers. "I

doubt I have had a moment's quiet since we embarked." He gestured towards the chapel doors and Nord walked with him.

The Codicier studied the other man. They were contrasts in colour and shade, the warrior and the psyker.

Sergeant Brenin Kale's wargear was crimson from head to toe, dressed with honour-chains of black steel and gold detailing, purity seals and engravings that listed his combat record. Under one arm he carried his helmet, upon it the white laurel of a veteran. He wore a chainsword in a scabbard along the line of his right arm, the tungsten fangs of the blade grey and sharp. His face was pale and pitted, the mark of radiation damage, and he sported a queue of wiry hair from a top-knot; and yet there was a patrician solidity to his aspect, a strength and nobility that time and war had not yet diminished.

Nord shared Kale's build and stature, as did every Son of Sanguinius, the bequest of the gene-seed implantation process each Adeptus Astartes endured as an initiate. But there the similarity ended. Where Kale was sallow of face, Nord's skin was rust-red like the rad-deserts of Baal Secundus, and the laser scar was mirrored on his other cheek by the electro-tattoo of a single blood droplet, caught as if falling from the corner of his eye. Nord's hairless scalp was bare except for the faint tracery of a molly-wire matrix just beneath the flesh, implanted to improve connectivity with his psychic hood. And his armour was a uniform blue everywhere except his shoulder, contrasting against the red of the rest of his battle-brothers. The colour set him apart, showed him for what he was beneath the plasteel and ceramite. Witchkin. Psyker. A man without his peace.

Within the chapel, one might have thought they stood inside a church upon any one of billions of hive-worlds across the Imperium. If not for the banners of the Adeptus Astartes and the Navy, the place would be no different from all those other basilicas: sacred places devoted to the worship of the God-Emperor of Humanity. But this church lay deep in the decks of the frigate Emathia, protected by vast iron ribs of hull-metal, nestled between the accelerator cores of the warship's primary and secondary lance cannons.

Nord left the sanctum behind, and—so he hoped—his misgivings, walking in easy lockstep with his sergeant. Half-human servitors and worried crew serfs scattered out of their way, clearing a path for the Space Marines.

"We left the warp a few hours ago," offered Kale. "The squad is preparing for deployment."

"I'll join them," Nord began, but Kale shook his head.

"I want you with me. I have been summoned to the bridge." A sourness entered the veteran's tone. "The tech-priest wishes to address me personally before we proceed."

“Indeed? Does he think he needs to underline our mission to us once again? Perhaps he believes he has not repeated it enough.” Nord was silent for a moment. “I may not be the best choice to accompany you. I believe our honoured colleague from the Adeptus Mechanicus finds my presence… discomforting.”

Kale’s lip curled. “That’s one reason I want you there. Keep the bastard off balance.”

“And the other?”

“In case I feel the need to kill him.”

Nord allowed himself a smirk. “If you expect me to dissuade you, brother-sergeant, you have picked the wrong man.”

“Dissuade me?” Kale snorted. “I expect you to assist!”

The gallows humour of the moment faded; to casually discuss the murder of a High Priest of the Magus Biologis, even in rough jest, courted grave censure. But the eminent magi gathered dislike to him with such effortless ease, it was hard to imagine that the man wanted anything else than to be detested. Scant weeks they had been aboard the Emathia on its journey to this light-forsaken part of the galaxy, and in that time the Exalted Tech-Priest Epja Xeren had shown only aloof disrespect for both the Blood Angels and the frigate’s hardy officers.

Nord wondered why Xeren had not simply used one of the Mechanicum’s own starships for this operation, or employed his cadre’s tech-guard. Like many factors surrounding this tasking, it sat uneasily with the Codicier; he sensed the same concern in Kale’s emotional aura.

“This duty…” said Kale in a low voice, his thoughts clearly mirroring those of his battle-brother, “it has the stink of subterfuge about it.”

Nord gave a nod. “And yet, all the diktats from the Adeptus Terra were in order. Despite his manner, the priest is valued by the Imperial Council.”

“Civilians,” grunted the sergeant. “Politicians! Sometimes I wonder if arrogance is the grease upon their wheels.”

“They might say the same of us. That we Adeptus Astartes consider ourselves to be their betters.”

“Just so,” Kale allowed. “The difference is, where we are concerned, that fact is true.”

Emathia’s ornate bridge was a vaulted oval cut from planes of brass and steel, dominated by great lenses of crystal ranging down towards the frigate’s bow. Below the deck, in work-pits among the ship’s cogitators, hunchbacked servitors hissed to one another, busying themselves with the running of the vessel. Officers in blue-black tunics walked back and forth, overseeing their work.

The ship’s commander, resplendent in a red-trimmed duty jacket, turned from a gas-lens viewer and gave the Astartes a bow.

“Sergeant Kale, Brother Nord. We’re very close now. Come.” Captain Hyban Gorolev beckoned them towards him.

Nord liked the man; Gorolev had impressed him early on with his grasp of Adeptus Astartes protocol and the careful generosity with which he commanded Emathia's crew. Nord had encountered Navy men who ruled their ships through fear and intimidation. Gorolev was quite unlike that; he had a fatherly way to him, a mixture of sternness tempered by sincerity that bonded his crew through mutual loyalty. Nord saw in the captain the mirror of brotherhood with his kindred.

"The derelict is near," he was saying. Gorolev's sandy-coloured face was fixed in a frown. "Interference continues to defeat the scrying of our sensors, however. There is wreckage. Evidence of plasma fire…" He trailed off.

Nord sensed the man's apprehension but said nothing, catching sight of a readout thick with lines of text in Gothic script. He saw recitations that suggested organic matter out there in the void. Unbidden, the Codicier's gaze snapped up and he stared out through the viewports. The ghost of a cold, undefined emotion began to gather at the base of his thoughts.

"Adeptus Astartes." The voice had all the tonality of a command, a summons, a demand to be given fealty.

Filtered and machine-altered, the word emitted from a speaker embedded in a face where a mouth had once been. Eyes of titanium clockwork measured the Blood Angels coldly. Flesh, what there was of it, was subsumed into carbide plates that disappeared beneath a hood. A great gale of black robes hung loose to pool upon the decking, concealing a form that was a collection of sharp angles; the silhouette of a body that bore little resemblance to anything natural-born. Antennae blossomed from tailored holes in the habit, and out of hidden pockets, manipulators and snake-like mechadendrites moved, apparently of independent thought and action.

This thing that stood before them at the edge of the frigate's tacticarium, this not-quite-man seemingly built from human pieces and scrapyard leavings… This was Xeren.

"Your mission will commence momentarily," said the tech-priest. He shifted slightly, and Nord heard the working of pistons. "You are ready?"

"We are Adeptus Astartes," Kale replied, with a grimace. The words were answer enough.

"Quite." Xeren inclined his head towards the hololithic display, which showed flickers of hazy light. "This zone is filthy with expended radiation. It may trouble even your iron constitution, Blood Angel."

"Doubtful." Kale's annoyance was building. "Your concern is noted, magi. But now we are here, I am more interested in learning the identity of this hulk you have tasked us to secure for you. We cannot prosecute a mission to the best of our abilities without knowing what we will face."

"But you are Adeptus Astartes," said Xeren, making little effort to hide his mocking tone. Before Kale could respond, the tech-priest's head bobbed. "You are quite right, brother-sergeant," he demurred, "I have been

secretive with the specifics of this operation. But once you see your target, you will understand the need for such security."

There was a clicking sound from Xeren's chest; Nord wondered if it might be the Mechanicum cyborg's equivalent of a gasp.

"Sensors are clearing," noted Gorolev. "We have a clean return."

"Show me," snapped Kale.

Earlier during the voyage, just to satisfy his mild interest, Nord had allowed his psychic senses to brush the surface of Xeren's mind. What he had sensed there was unreadable; not shrouded, but simply inhuman. Nothing that he could interpret as emotions, only a coldly logical chain of processes with all the nuance of a cogitator program. And yet, as the hololith stuttered and grew distinct, for the briefest of moments Nord was certain he felt the echo of a covetous thrill from the tech-priest.

"Here is your target," said Xeren.

"Throne of Terra…" The curse slipped from Gorolev's lips as the image solidified. "Xenos!"

It resembled a whorled shell, a tight spiral of shimmering bone curved in on itself. Coils of fibrous matter that suggested sinew webbed it, and from one vast orifice along the ventral plane, a nest of pasty tenticular forms issued outwards, grasping at nothing.

It lay among a drift of broken chitin and flash-frozen fluids, listing. Great scars marked the flanks of the alien construct, and in places there were craters, huge pockmarks that had exploded outwards like city-sized pustules.

There seemed to be no life to it. It was a gargantuan, bilious corpse. A dead horror, there in the starless night.

"This is what you brought us to find?" Kale's voice was loaded with menace. "A tyranid craft?"

"A hive ship," Xeren corrected. The tech-priest ignored the silence that had descended on the Emathia's bridge, the mute shock upon the faces of Gorolev's officers.

"A vessel of this tonnage is no match for a tyranid hive," said Nord. "Their craft have defeated entire fleets and pillaged the crews for raw biomass to feast upon!"

"It is dead," said the priest. "Have no fear."

"I am not afraid," Nord retorted, "but neither am I a fool! The tyranids are not known as 'the Great Devourer' without reason. They are a plague, organisms that exist solely to consume and replicate. To destroy all life unlike them."

"You forget yourself." Xeren's tone hardened. "The authority here is mine. I have brought you to this place for good reason. Look to the hive. It is dead," he repeated.

Nord studied the image. The xenos craft exhibited signs of heavy damage, and its motion and course suggested it was unguided.

“My orders come from the highest echelons of the Magistratum,” continued the tech-priest. “I am here to oversee the capture of this derelict, in the name of the God-Emperor and Omnissiah!”

“Capture…” Kale echoed the word. Nord saw the veteran’s sword-hand twitch as he weighed the command.

“Consider the bounty within that monstrosity,” Xeren addressed them, Adeptus Astartes and officers all. “Nord is quite correct. The tyranids are a scourge upon the stars, a virus writ large. But like any virus, it must be studied if a cure is to be found.” A spindly machine-arm whirred, moving to point at the image. “This represents an unparalleled opportunity. This hive ship is a treasure trove of biological data. If we take it, learn its secrets…” He gave a clicking rasp. “We might turn the xenos against themselves. Perhaps even tame them…”

“How did you know this thing was here?” Nord tore his gaze from the display.

Xeren answered after a moment. “The first attempt to take the hive was not a success. There were complications.”

“You will tell us what transpired,” said Kale. “Or we will go no further.”

“Aye,” rasped Gorolev. The captain had turned pale and sweaty, his fingers kneading the grip of his holstered laspistol.

Xeren gave another clicking sigh, and inclined his head on whining motors. “A scouting party of Archeo-Technologists boarded the craft under the command of an adept named Indus. We believe that a splinter force from a larger hive fleet left this ship behind after it suffered some malfunction. Evidence suggests—”

“This Adept Indus,” Kale broke in. “Where is he?”

Xeren looked away. “The scouting party did not return. Their fate is unknown to me.”

“Consumed!” grated Gorolev. “Throne and Blood! Any man that ventures in there would be torn apart!”

“Captain,” warned the brother-sergeant.

The tech-priest paid no attention to the officer’s outburst. “It is my firm belief that the hive ship, although not without hazards, is dormant. For the moment, at least.” He came closer on iron-clawed feet. “You understand now why the Adeptus Mechanicus wish to move with alacrity, Blood Angel?”

“I understand,” Kale replied, and Nord saw the tightening of his jaw. Without another word, the veteran turned on his heel and strode away. Nord moved with him, and they were into the corridor before the Space Marine felt a hand upon his forearm.

“Lords.” Gorolev shot a look back towards the bridge as the hatch slammed shut, his eyes narrowing. “A word?” Suspicion flared black in the man’s aura.

“Speak,” Kale replied.

“I’ve made no secret of my reservations about the esteemed tech-priest’s motive and manner,” said the captain. “I cannot let this pass without comment.” His face took on the cast of anger and old fear. “By the Emperor’s grace, I am a veteran of many conflicts with the xenos, those tyranid abominations among them.” Gorolev’s words brimmed with venom. “Those… things. I’ve seen them rape worlds and leave nothing but ashen husks in their wake.” He leaned closer. “That hive ship should not be studied like some curiosity. It should be atomized!”

Kale held up a hand and Gorolev fell silent. “There is nothing you have said I disagree with, ship-master. But we are servants of the God-Emperor, Nord and I, you and your crew, even Xeren. And we have our duty.”

For a moment, it seemed as if Gorolev was about to argue; but then he nodded grimly, resigned to fulfilling his orders. “Duty, then. In the Emperor’s name.”

“In the Emperor’s name,” said Kale.

Nord opened his mouth to repeat the oath, but he found his voice silenced.

So fleeting, so mercurial and indistinct that it was gone even as he turned his senses towards it, Nord felt… Something.

A gloom, stygian-deep and ominous, passing over him as a storm cloud might obscure the sun. There, and gone. A presence. A mind?

The sense of black and red clouds pressed in on the edges of his thoughts and he pushed them away.

“Nord?” He found Kale studying him with a careful gaze.

He cleared his thoughts with a moment’s effort. “Brother-Sergeant,” he replied. “The mission, then?”

Kale nodded. “The mission, aye.”

The boarding torpedo penetrated the hull of the tyranid vessel high along the dorsal surface. Serrated iron razor-cogs bit into the bony structure and turned, ripping at shell-matter and bunches of necrotic muscle, dragging the pod through layers of decking, into the voids of the hive ship’s interior.

Then, at rest, the seals released and the Space Marines deployed into the alien hulk, weapons rising to the ready.

Sergeant Kale led from the front, as he always did. He slipped down from the mouth of the boarding torpedo, playing his bolt pistol back and forth, sweeping the chamber for threats. Nord was next, then Brother Dane, Brother Serun and finally Corae, who moved with care as he cradled his flame-thrower.

The weapon’s pilot lamp hissed quietly to itself, dancing there in the wet, stinking murk.

The Codicier felt the floor beneath his boots give under his weight; the decking—if it could be called that—was made up of rough plates of bone atop something that could only be flesh, stretching away in an arching,

curved passageway. By degrees, the chamber lightened as Nord's occulobe implant contracted, adjusting the perception range of his eyes.

Great arching walls that resembled flayed meat rose around the Blood Angels, along with fluted spires made of greasy black cartilage that drooled thin fluids. Puckered sphincters lay sagging and open, allowing a slaughterhouse stench to reach them. Here and there were the signs of internal damage, long festering wounds open and caked with xenos blood.

Nord picked out glowing boles upon the walls arranged at random intervals; it took a moment before he realised that they were actually fist-sized beetles, clinging to the skin-walls, antennae waving gently, bodies lit with dull bio-luminescence.

There were more insectile creatures in the shadows, little arachnid things that moved sluggishly, crawling in and out of the raw-edged cuts.

"Damage everywhere," noted Serun, his gruff voice flattened by the thick air of the tyranid craft. "But no signs of weapons fire."

"It appears the tech-priest was right." Kale examined one of the walls. "Whatever fate befell this ruin, it was not caused by battle." He beckoned his men on. "Serun, do you have a reading?"

Brother Serun studied the sensor runes on the auspex device in his hand. "A faint trace from the adept's personal locator." He pointed in an aftward direction.

"That way."

Kale's gaze drifted towards Nord. "Is he alive, this man Indus?"

The psyker stiffened; warily extending his preternatural senses forwards. He could discern only the pale glitters of thought-energy from the spider-things and the lamp-beetles; nothing that might suggest a reasoning mind, let alone a human one. "I have no answer for you, sir," he said at length.

"With caution, then, brothers." Kale walked on, and they followed him, silent and vigilant.

The corridor narrowed into a tube, and Nord imagined it a gullet down which the Adeptus Astartes were travelling. He had encountered tyranids before, but only upon the field of battle, and then down the sights of a missile launcher. He had never ventured aboard one of their craft, and it was exactly the horror he had expected it to be.

Tyranid vessels were not the product of forges and shipyards; they were spawned. Hive ships were spun out of knots of meat and bone, grown on the surface of captured worlds in teeming vats filled with a broth of liquefied biomass. They were living things, animals by some vague definition of the term. Electrochemical processes and nerve ganglions transmitted commands about its flesh; pheremonic discharges regulated its internal atmosphere; exothermic chemistry created light and heat. Its hull was skeletal matter, protecting the crew that swarmed like parasites inside the gut of the craft. Together, the hive was a contained, freakish

ecosystem, drifting from world to world driven by the need to feed and feed.

Even in this half-dead state, Nord could taste the echo of that aching, bone-deep craving, as if it were leaking from the twitching walls. The fleshy wattles that dangled from the ceiling, the corpse-grey cilia and phlegmy deposits around his feet, all of it sickened him with its dead stench and the sheer, revolting affront of the tyranids' very existence. This xenos abortion was everything that the Imperium, in all its human glory, was not. A chaotic riot of mutant life, disordered and rapacious, without soul or intellect. The absolute antithesis of the civilisation the Adeptus Astartes had fought to preserve since the days of Old Night.

Nord's hand tightened around his pistol; the urge to kill this thing rose high, and he reined it in, denying the tingle of a building Rage before it had freedom to form.

The chamber broadened into an uneven space, dotted with deep pits of muddy liquid that festered and spat, gaseous discharges chugging into the foetid air. Mounds of fatty deposits lay in uneven heaps, the ejecta from the processes churning in the ponds.

Serun gestured. "Rendering pools. Biomass is brought here to be denatured into a liquid slurry."

Corae spoke for the first time since they had boarded. "To what end?"

"To feed the hive," Serun replied. "This… gruel is the raw material of the tyranids. They consume it, shape it. It is where they are born from."

Kale dropped to his haunches. "And where they kill," he added. The sergeant picked something metallic from the spoil heaps and turned it in his fingers. A rank sigil of iron and copper, a disc cut to resemble a cogwheel. Upon it, the design of a skull, the symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Corae turned his face and spat in disgust. "Emperor protect me from such a fate."

"More here," said Brother Dane. With care, he drew to him a twisted shape afloat on one of the pools. It was a man's ribcage and part of a spine, but the bone was rubbery and distended where acidic fluids had eaten into it. It crumbled like wet sand in the Blood Angel's grip.

"Adept Indus, perhaps, and his scout team…" Kale suggested. He turned to face Nord and saw the psyker glaring into the dimness. "Brother?"

The question had barely left his lips when the Codicier gave an explosive shout. "Enemy!"

The shapes came at them from out of the twisted, sinewy ropes about the walls. Three beasts, bursting from concealment as one, attacking from all sides.

Corae was quick, clutching the trigger bar of his flamer. A bright gout of blazing promethium jetted from the bell-mouth of the weapon and engulfed the closest tyranid in flames, but on it came, falling into the red wave of death.

The second skittered across the ground, low and fast, dragging itself in loping jerks by its taloned limbs and great curved claws. Dane, Serun and the sergeant turned their bolters on it in a hail of punishing steel.

The third found Nord and dove at him, falling from the ceiling, spinning about as it came. He flung himself backwards, his storm bolter crashing his free hand reaching for the hilt of his force axe.

The tyranid landed hard and rocked off its hooves; Nord got his first good look at the thing and recognition unfolded in his forebrain, the legacy of a hundred hypnogogic combat indoctrination tapes. A lictor.

Humanoid in form, tall and festooned with barbs, they sported massive scything talons and a cobra-head tail. Where a man would have a mouth, the lictors grew a wriggling orchard of feeder tendrils. They were hunter-predator forms, deployed alone or in small packs, stealthy and favoured of ambush attacks. Unless Nord and his brothers killed them quickly, they would spill fresh pheromones into the air and summon more of their kind.

He reversed and met the alien with the flickering crystal edge of the axe, reaching into his heart and finding the reservoir of psychic might lurking within him. As the axe-head bit into the lictor's chest, Nord channelled a quickening from the warp along the weapon's psi-convector and into the xenos' new wound. Its agonised shriek battered at him, and he staggered as it tried to claw through his armour. Nord's bolter crashed again, hot rounds finding purchase in the pasty flesh of its thorax. He withdrew the axe again and struck again, over and over, riding on the battle-anger welling up inside him.

The Blood Angel was dimly aware of a death-wail off to his right, half-glimpsing another lictor fall as it was opened by shellfire and chainblade; but his target still lived.

A talon swept down, barbs screeching as they scored Nord's chest plate; in turn he let the axe fall again, this time severing a monstrous limb at the joint. Gouts of black blood spurted, burning where it landed, and the Codicier threw a wall of psionic pressure outwards, battering at the wounded creature.

The lictor's hooves slipped on the lip of a bio-pool and it stumbled backwards into the lake of stringy muck; instantly the churning acids ate into the tyranid and it collapsed, drowning and melting.

Nord regained his balance and waved a hand in front of his visor as oily smoke wafted past; the third tyranid was also dying, finally succumbing to Corae's flamer and the impacts of krak grenades.

A mechanical voice grated through his vox-link. "Kale. Respond. This is Xeren. We have detected weapons fire. Report status immediately."

Ignoring the buzzing of the tech-priest, the psyker approached the last dying lictor as Corae took aim with his flame-thrower, twisting the nozzle to adjust the dispersal pattern. The force axe still humming in his hand, his psychic power resonating through him, Nord caught the sense of the tyranid's animal mind, trapped in its death throes. He winced, the touch of

it more abhorrent to him than anything he had yet witnessed aboard the hive ship.

Yet there, in the mass of its unknowable, alien thoughts, he glimpsed something. Great swirling clouds of red and black. And men, robed men with skeletal limbs of metal and copper cogs about their necks.

Corae pulled the trigger and laid a snake of fire over the beast, boiling its soft tissues beneath the hard chitin armour. Nord sheathed his axe and heard the voice again. Xeren seemed impatient.

"Perhaps you should not engage every tyranid you see."

Kale was plucking spent flesh hooks from the crevices of his armour with quick, spare motions. "The xenos did not offer us the choice, priest. And I remind you who it was that told us this ship was dead."

"Where the tyranids are concerned, there are degrees of death. The ship is dormant, and so the majority of the swarm aboard should be quiescent. But some may retain a wakeful state… I suggest you avoid further engagements."

"I will take that under advisement," Kale retorted.

Xeren continued. "You are proceeding too slowly, brother-sergeant, and without efficiency. Indus is the primary objective. Divide your forces to cover a greater area. Find him for me."

The sergeant bolstered his gun, and any reply he might have made was rendered pointless as the tech-priest cut the vox signal.

Serun's hands closed into fists. "He dares bray commands as if he were Chapter Master? The scrawny cog has no right—"

"Decorum, kinsman," said Kale. "We are the Sons of Sanguinius. A mere tech-priest is not worth our enmity. We'll find Xeren's lost lamb soon enough and be done."

"If he still lives," mused Corae, nudging the powdery bones with his boot.

Reluctantly, Brother-Sergeant Kale chose to do as the tech-priest had suggested; beyond the bio-pool chamber the throat-corridors branched and he ordered Dane to break off, taking Corae and Serun with him. Brother Dane's element would move anti-spinwards through the hive ship's interior spaces, while Nord and his commander ventured along the other path.

The psyker threw the veteran a questioning look when he voiced the orders; in turn Kale's expression remained unchanged. "Xeren and I agree on one point," he noted. "We both wish this mission to be concluded as quickly as possible."

Nord had to admit he too shared that desire. He thought of Gorolev's words aboard the Emathia. The ship-master was right; this monstrous hulk was an insult every second it was allowed to exist.

Dane's team vanished into the clammy darkness and Nord followed Kale onwards. They passed through more rendering chambers, then rooms

seemingly constructed from waxy matter, laced with spherical pods, each one wet and dripping ichor. They encountered other strange spaces that defied any interpretation of form or function; hollows where tooth-like spires criss-crossed from floor and ceiling; a copse of bulbous, acid-rimed fronds that resembled coral polyps; and great bladders that throbbed, thick liquid emerging from them in desultory jerks.

And there were the creatures. The first time they came across the alien forms, Nord's axe had come to his hand before he was even aware of it; but the tyranids they encountered were in some state that mirrored death, a strange hibernative trance that rendered them inert.

They crossed a high catwalk formed from spinal bone, and Kale used the pin-lamp beneath the barrel of his boltgun to throw a disc of light into the pits below. The glow picked out the hulking shape of a massive carnifex, its bullet-shaped head tucked into its spiny chest in some mad parody of a sleeping child.

The rasping breaths of the huge assault organism fogged the air, bone armour and spines scraping across one another as its chest rose and fell. Awake, it could have killed the Blood Angels with a single blast of bio-poison from its slavering venom cannons.

Around the gnarled hooves of the slumbering carnifex, a clutch of deadly hormagaunts rested, shiny oil-black carapaces piled atop one another, clawed limbs folded back, talons sheathed. Nord gripped the force axe firmly, and it took a near physical effort for him to turn from the gallery of targets before him. Instead they moved on, ever on, picking their way in stealth through the very heart of the hive's dozing populace.

"Why do they ignore us?" Kale wondered, his question transmitted to the vox-bead in Nord's ear.

"They are conserving their strength, brother-sergeant," he replied. "Whatever incident caused this ship to fall away from the rest of its hive fleet, it must have drained them to survive it. I would not question our luck."

"Aye," Kale replied. "Terra protects."

"I—"

The force axe fell from Nord's fingers and the impact upon the bone deck seemed louder than cannon fire. Suddenly, without warning it was there.

A black and cloying touch enveloping his thoughts—the same sense of something alien he had felt aboard the Emathia.

A presence. A mind. Clouds, billowing wreaths of black and red, surrounding him, engulfing him.

"There… is something else here," he husked. "A psychic phantom, just beyond my reach. Measuring itself against me." Nord's heart hammered in his chest; he tasted metal in his mouth. "Not just the xenos… More than that."

He grimaced, and strengthened his mental bulwarks, shoring them up with raw determination. The dark dream uncoiled in his thoughts, the

rumbling pulse of the Red Thirst in his gullet, the churn of the Black Rage stiffening his muscles. All about him, the shadows seemed to lengthen and loom, leaking from the walls, ranging across the sleeping monsters to reach for the warrior with ebon fingers.

Nord gasped. "Something is awakening."

Across the plane of the hive ship's hull, Brother Dane brought up his fist in a gesture of command, halting Corae and Serun. "Do you hear that?" he asked.

Corae turned, the flamer in his grip. "It's coming from the walls." They were the last words he would utter.

Flesh-matter all around the squad ripped and tore into bleeding rags as claws shredded their way towards the Astartes. With brutal, murderous power, a tide of chattering freaks boiled in upon them, spines and bone and armoured heads moving in blurs. They were so fast that in the dimness they seemed like the talons of single giant animal, reaching out to take them.

Gunfire lit the corridor, the flat bang of bolter shells sounding shot after shot, the chugging belch of fire from the flamer issuing out to seek targets. In return came screaming—the blood-hungry shrieks of a warrior brood turned loose to find prey.

The horde of tyranid soldier organisms rolled over the Space Marines with no regard for their own safety; mindless things driven on by killer instinct and a desire to feed, they had no self to preserve. They were simply the blades of the hive, and the very presence of the intruders was enough to drive them mad.

Perhaps beings with intellect might have sensed the hand of something larger, something at the back of their thoughts, compelling them, driving them to destroy. But the termagants knew nothing but the lust to rip and rend.

Symbiotic phero-chemical links between the tyranids and the engineered bio-tools in their claws sent kill commands running before them. Like everything in their arsenal, the weapons used by the warriors were living things. Their fleshborers, great bell-mouthed flutes of chitin, spat clumps of fang-toothed beetles that chewed through armour and flesh in a destructive frenzy.

Numberless and unstoppable, the brood swallowed up Corae and Serun, opening them to the air in jets of red. Dane was the last to fall, his legs cut out from under him, his bolter running dry, becoming a club in his mailed fists. At the end of him, a storm of tusk blades pierced his torso, penetrating his lungs, his primary and secondary hearts.

Blood flooded his mouth and he perished in silence, his last act to deny the creatures the victory of his screams.

Brother Nord stumbled and fell to one knee, clutching at his chest in sympathetic agony. He felt Dane perish in his thoughts, heard the echo of the warrior's death, and that of Corae and Serun. Each man's ending struck him like a slow bullet, filling his gut with ice.

Nord's heart and its decentralised twin beat fast, faster, faster, his blood singing in his ears in a captured tempest. The same trembling he had felt back in the chapel returned, and it was all he could do to fight it off.

He became aware of Brother-Sergeant Kale helping him to his feet, dimly registering his squad commander guiding him away from the hibernaculum chamber and into the flesh-warm humidity of the corridor beyond.

"Nord! Speak to me!"

He tried to answer but the psychic undertow dragged on him, taking all his effort just to stay afloat and sensate. The shocking resonance was far worse than he had ever felt before. There had been many times upon the field of combat where Nord had tasted the mind-death of others, sometimes his foes, too often his battle-brothers… But this… This was of a very different stripe.

At once alien and human, unknowable and yet known to him, the psychic force that had compelled the termagant swarm reached in and raked frigid claws over the surface of his mind. A pan of him screamed that he should withdraw, disengage and erect the strongest of his mental barriers. Every second he did not, he gave this force leave to plunge still deeper. And yet, another facet of Nord's iron will dared to face this power head-on, driven by the need to know it. To know it and destroy it.

Against the sickness he felt within, Nord tried to see the face of his enemy. The mental riposte was powerful; it hit him like a wall and he recoiled, his vision hazed crimson.

With a monumental psychic effort, Nord disengaged and slumped against a bony stanchion, his dark skin sallow and filmed with sweat.

He blinked away the fog in his vision and found his commander. Kale's pale face was grave in the dimness. "The others?" he whispered.

"Dead," Nord managed. "All dead."

The sergeant gave a grim nod. "The Emperor knows their names." He hesitated a moment. "You felt it? With your witchsight, you saw… the enemy?"

"Aye." The psyker got to his feet. "It tried to kill me. Didn't take."

Kale stood, drumming his fingers on the hilt of his chainsword. "This… force that assaulted you?"

He shook his head, "I've never sensed the like before, sir."

"Do you know where it is?" The veteran gestured around at the walls with the chainsword.

Nord nodded. "That, I do know."

He heard the hunter's smile in the sergeant's voice. "Show me."

At the heart of every tyranid nest, one breed of creature was supreme. If the carnifexes and termagants, ripper swarms and biovores were the teeth and talons of the tyranid mass, then the commanding intellect was the hive tyrant. None had ever been captured alive, and few had been recovered by the Imperium intact enough for a full dissection. If the lictors and the hormagaunts and all the other creatures were common soldiery, the hive tyrants were the generals. The conduit for whatever passed as the diffuse mind of this repugnant xenos species.

Some even said that the tyrants were only a subgenus of something even larger and more intelligent; a cadre of tyranid capable of reasoning and independent thought. But no such being had ever been seen by human eyes —or if it had, those who had gazed upon it did not live to tell.

It was the hive ship's tyrant that the Blood Angels sought as they entered the orb-like hibernacula, the tech-priest's objective now ranked of lesser importance. If a tyrant was awake aboard this vessel, then none of them were safe.

"It's not a tyranid," husked Nord. "The thought-pattern I sensed… It wasn't the same as the lictor's." He paused. "At least, not in whole."

Kale eyed him. "Explain, brother. Your gift is a mystery to me. I do not understand."

"The mind that touched my thoughts, that rallied the creatures who attacked us. It is neither human nor xenos."

The sergeant halted. "A daemon?" He said the word like a curse.

Nord shook his head. "I do not sense the taint of Chaos here, sir. This is different…" Even as the words fell from his lips, the psyker felt the change in the air around them. The wet, damp atmosphere grew sullen and greasy, setting a sickly churn deep in his belly.

Kale felt it too, even without the Codicier's preternatural senses. The sergeant drew his chainsword and brandished it before him, his thumb resting on the weapon's activation stud.

A robed figure, there in the dimness. Perhaps a man, it advanced slowly towards them, feet dragging as if wounded. And then a voice, brittle and cracked.

"Me," rasped the newcomer. "You sense me, Adeptus Astartes." The figure moved at the very edge of the dull light from the lamp-beetles. Nord's eyes narrowed; threads of clothing cables perhaps, seemed to trail behind the man, away into the dark.

Kale aimed his gun. "In the Emperor's name, identify yourself or I will kill you where you stand."

Hands opened in a gesture of concession. "I do not doubt you already know who I am." He bowed slightly, and Nord saw cords snaking along his back. "My name is Heraklite Indus, adept and savant, former Magis Biologis Minoris of the Adeptus Mechanicus."

"Former?" echoed Kale.

Indus' shadowed head bobbed. "Oh, yes. I attend a new master now. Let me introduce you to him."

The strange threads pulled taut and lifted Indus off his feet, to dangle as a marionette would hang from the hands of a puppeteer. A shape that dwarfed him lumbered out of the black, drawing into the pool of light.

White as bleached bone, crested with purple-black patches of armour shell, it bent to fit its bulk inside the close quarters of the hibernacula; a hive tyrant, in all its obscene glory.

Two of its four arms were withered and folded to its torso, the pearlescent surface of their claws cracked and fractured. The other arms ended in ropey whips of sinew that threaded across the floor and into the adept's flayed spine, glittering wetly where bone was revealed beneath his torn robes.

And yet… The towering tyranid's breathing was laboured and rough, and from its eye-spots, its great fanged jaws, its fleshy throat-sacs, thin yellow pus oozed over crusted scabs. For all the horror and scale, the tyrant seemed slack and drained, without the twitchy, insectile frenzy of its lessers. A stinking haze of necrotic decay issued from it; Nord had tasted the scent of death enough times to know that this alien beast was mortally wounded.

"What have you done, Indus?" demanded Kale, his face twisted in disgust. In all his years, the veteran sergeant had never seen the like.

"Neither human nor xenos." Nord repeated his earlier statement, the words suddenly snapping into hard focus. With a whip-crack thought, he sent a savage mental probe towards the adept; Indus spun to face him with a glare and the telepathic feint was deflected easily.

The adept nodded slowly. "Yes, Blood Angel. We are the same. Both blessed with witchsight. Both psykers." Indus cocked his head. "Xeren never told you. How like him."

"No matter," growled Kale. Without hesitation, the sergeant opened fire and Nord followed suit, both Space Marines turning their weapons on the ugly, abhorrent pairing.

The hive tyrant shifted, drawing Indus close in a gesture of protection, shielding the adept from the bolt-rounds that whined off its chitinous armour. Its head lolled back and a high screech issued from between its teeth; in reply there were hoots and howls from all around the Adeptus Astartes.

In moments, sphinctered rents in the hibernacula walls drew open, spilling dozens of mucus-slicked hormagaunts into the chamber. The chattering beasts rose up in a wave and the Blood Angels went to their blades. Kale's chainsword brayed as it chewed through bone; Nord's force axe cut lightning-flash arcs into meat, as barbed grasping claws dragged them down.

Nord caught a telepathic spark as blood from a cut gummed his right eye shut; he drew up his mental shields just as the hive tyrant released a scream of psychic energy upon them.

The wave of pain blasted across the chamber and the Codicier saw his battle-brother stumble, clutching his hands to his head in agony. Nord fared little better, the tyranid's telepathic onslaught sending him spinning. For long moments he waited for death to fall upon him, for the mass of hormagaunts to take the opportunity to rip him apart—but they did not.

Instead, the hissing monsters retreated, forming into a wall before the Space Marines, shielding Indus and the tyrant.

Nord went to Kale and helped him to his feet. The sergeant had lost his bolter in the melee, and he still shook from the after-effect of the psychic scream.

"We could have killed you," said Indus. "We chose not to."

"You speak for the xenos now?" spat Nord.

Indus gave a crooked smile. "A soldier's limited mindset. I had hoped for better from one with the sight." He came forwards, the shuffling tyrant at his back. "I found this creature near death, you understand? Too weak to fight me. I pushed in, touched its thoughts…" The adept gave a gasp of pleasure. "And what I saw there. Such riches. The knowledge of flesh and bone, nerve and blood, an understanding! More than the scribes of the Magis Biologis could ever hope to learn. Race memory, Adeptus Astartes. Millions of years of it, to drink in…"

* * * * *

"Fool," replied the Blood Angel. "Can you not see what you have done? The creature is near death! It used what strength it had to lure you in, place you in its thrall! It uses you like it uses these mindless predators!" He gestured at the hormagaunts. "When it is healed, it will reawaken every horror that walks or crawls within this hive, and turn again to the killing of men!"

"You are wrong," Indus retorted. "I have control here! I spared your lives!"

"I?" snapped Kale. "A moment ago you said 'we'. Which is it?"

"The hive answers to me!" he shouted, the warrior creatures howling in empathy. "I gave myself to the merging, and now see what I have at my hands…" Indus drew in a rattling breath. "That is why Xeren sent you here. He is like you. Afraid. Jealous of what we are."

"The priest knew of this?" hissed Kale.

Indus chuckled. "Xeren saw it happen. He fled! He sent you to find us, praying you would destroy us so his cadre could take this hive for itself."

Nord nodded to himself. "Aboard a ship filled with killing machines, a deed only an Astartes could do."

“You’ve seen the power of these creatures,” said the adept. “This is only a tiny measure of what the swarm is capable of.” He extended a skeletal cybernetic arm towards the psyker. “There is such majesty here, red in tooth and claw, Blood Angel. Come see it. Join me.” New, fang-mouthed tentacles issued forth from the tyrant’s stunted arms, questing towards the Codicier. “Our union is vast and giving, for those with the gift…”

His eyes narrowed, and with one sweeping blow, Brother Nord sliced down with his axe, severing the probing limbs in a welter of acidic blood. The tyrant screamed and rocked backwards.

“A grave mistake,” snarled Indus. “You have no idea what you have denied yourself.”

“I know full well,” came the reply. “My blood stays pure, by the Emperor’s grace and the might of Sanguinis! You have willingly defiled yourself, debased your humanity… For that there can be no forgiveness.”

“We are not monsters!” shouted Indus, amid his howling chorus. “You are the destroyers, the disunited, the infection! You are the hate! The rage and the thirst!”

Too late, Nord’s mind sensed the build of warp energy once more, resonating between the tyrant and the Mechanicum psyker. Too late, the cold understanding reached him. “No…” he breathed, staggering backwards. “No!”

“Nord?” The question on Brother Kale’s lips was suddenly ripped away by a new, thunderous shock-wave of dark power.

Perhaps it was the hive tyrant, with its hate for all things alien to it, perhaps it was Indus in his crazed fury. Whatever the origin, the burning blade of madness swept across the Blood Angels and ripped open their minds.

Nord held on to the ragged edge of the abyss, as once more the red and black clouds enveloped him. The dream! The vision in his roaring heart was upon him! His moment of foresight damning and terrifyingly real.

The strength of the psychic blast tore away any self-control, burning down to the basest, most monstrous instincts a man could conceal; and for an Adeptus Astartes of the Blood Angels Chapter, the fall to such madness was damning.

The gene-curse. The flaw. The Red Thirst’s wild and insatiable desire for blood, the Black Rage’s uncontrollable berserker insanity. These were the twin banes Nord fought to endure. Fought and held against. Fought… And finally… resisted.

But Brother-Sergeant Brenin Kale had none of the Codicier’s psychic bulwarks. His naked mind absorbed the power of the tyrant’s fury… and fell.

The man that Nord’s comrade had been was gone; in his place was a beast clothed in his flesh.

Kale threw himself at the Codicier, his chainsword discarded and forgotten, hands in claws, his mouth wide to release a bellow of pure anger. The Blood Angel's fangs glittered in the light, and darkness filled his vision.

Nord collided with Kale with a concussion that sounded across the chamber, scattering dithering hormagaunts, crushing others with the impact. Kale's mailed fists rained blow after blow upon Nord's battle armour, the crimson tint of fury in the sergeant's aura stifling him.

He cried out the other man's name, desperately trying to reach through the fog of madness, but to no avail. Nord fought to block the impacts as they struggled against one another, locked in close combat; he could not bring himself to hit back.

His skull rang with each strike, his vision blurring. There was no doubt that Kale could kill him. He was no match for the old veteran's strength and prowess, even in such a state. Kale's frightening speed and instinctive combat skills would overwhelm him. He had little choice. If he could not end this madness quickly, Kale would tear open his throat and drink deep.

He glimpsed a rent in Kale's armour, a deep gouge that had penetrated the ceramite sheath. "Brother," he whispered, "Forgive me."

Nord's hand closed around the hilt of his combat blade, turning the fractal-edged knife about. Without pause, he buried it deep in his old friend's chest, down to the hilt. The blade penetrated plasteel, flesh and muscle; it punctured Kale's primary heart and the veteran's back arched in a spasm of agony.

Nord let him fall, and the other man dropped to the bony deck, pain wracking him, robbing him of his rage.

A different kind of fury burned in the psyker. One pure and controlled, as bright as the core of a star. Blue sparks gathering around the crystal matrix of his psychic hood, Nord turned and found his force axe, sweeping it up to aim at Indus.

"You will pay in kind for this, adept," he snarled. "Know that. In the name of Holy Terra, you will pay."

Nord closed his eyes and let the power flow into him. Blazing actinic flares of warp energy sputtered and flew around the Blood Angel's head as the hormagaunts shook off their pause and came at him.

Channelling the might of heroes though his bones, through his very soul itself, he unleashed his telepathic might through the force axe.

The blast turned the air into smoke and battered away the xenos beasts, sending them shrieking into the dark. Indus bellowed in pain as his flesh was wracked with agony, and the tyrant hooted in synchrony with him.

It took unbearable minutes for the psychic blast to dissipate, for the adept's crooked mind to shake off the aftershock.

Finally, through the myriad senses of the howling, confused tyranids, he saw only the scorched bone deck of the hibernacula.

The Adeptus Astartes were gone.

With Kale's body across his shoulder, Brother Nord ran as swiftly as the bulk of his battle armour would allow, always onwards, never looking back. His storm bolter ran hot in his hand as the Codicier placed shots into any tyranid that crossed his path. He did not stop to engage them, did not pause in his headlong flight.

Nord could feel Indus reaching out, probing the hive ship for him, drawing more and more of the sleeping xenos from their hibernation with each passing moment. He crossed the high bone bridge above the pits and saw the carnifex stirring, moaning as it rose towards wakefulness.

The psyker understood a measure of what had transpired here; Indus or the hive tyrant—or whatever unholy fusion of the two now existed—must have sensed him for the very first time as the Emuthia made its approach. Hungry for another thrall, the hive mind allowed Nord and Kale to approach the core of the ship, while dispatching Dane and the other battle-brothers. He suppressed a shudder; it wanted him. It wanted to engulf him, subsume him into that same horrific unity.

Nord spat in loathing. Perhaps a weakling mind, a man like the bio-adept, perhaps he might have fallen to such a thing… But Nord was a Blood Angel, an Adeptus Astartes—the finest warrior humanity had ever created. Whatever dark fate awaited him, his duty came before them all.

His duty…

"Brother…" He heard the voice as they came to the chamber where the boarding torpedo had made its breach.

Nord lowered his comrade to the ground and he saw the light of recognition in the sergeant's eyes. The mental force Indus had turned on Kale was, at least for the moment, dispelled. "What… did I do?" Kale's voice was a gasp, thick with blood and recrimination. "The xenos…"

"They are close," he replied. "We have little time."

Kale saw Nord's dagger deep in his chest and gave a ragged chuckle. "Should… I thank you for this?"

The psyker dragged the injured warrior into the boarding capsule, ignoring the question. "You will heal, sir. Your body's implants are already destroying infection, repairing your wounds." He stood up and punched a series of commands into a control panel.

Kale's pale face darkened. "Wait. What… are you doing?"

Nord didn't meet his gaze. "Indus will find us again soon enough. He must be dealt with." The psyker scowled at the vox-link and gave a low curse; the channel was laced with static, likely jammed by some freakish tyranid organism bred just for that task.

Kale tried to lift himself off the deck, ignoring the pain of his fresh, bloody scars, but the acid burn of tyranid venom in his flesh left him gasping, shaking with pain. "You can't… go back. Not alone…"

The other warrior reached into a weapons locker, searching for something. “I beg to differ, sir. I am the only one who can go back. This enemy has already claimed the lives of three Blood Angels. There must be payment for that cost.” He glanced at the veteran. “And Xeren’s perfidy cannot stand unchallenged.”

Through his blurred vision, the sergeant saw the Codicier gather a gear pack to him, saw him slam a fresh clip of bolt shells into his weapon. “Nord,” he growled. “You will stand down!”

The psyker hesitated at the airlock, looking back into the gloom of the hive ship beyond. “I regret I cannot obey you, brother. Forgive me.”

Without another word, Nord stepped through, letting the brass leaves of the hatch close behind him. Then the razor-cogs began to turn, the boarding torpedo drawing back into the void amid gushes of outgassing air.

Fuming, Kale dragged himself to the viewport, a trail of dark blood across the steel deck behind him, in time to see the hive ship’s hull falling away.

The capsule turned away to find the Emathia hanging in the blackness, and with a pulse of thrusters, it set upon a return course towards the frigate.

Nord threw himself into the melee, storm bolter crashing, his force axe a spinning cascade of psychic fury. “Indus!” He cried, “I am here! Face me if you dare!”

In the confines of the corridors, he fought with termagants and warriors, stamped ripper swarms into paste beneath his boots, killed and tore and blazed a path of destruction back through the hive. Nord became a whirlwind of blade and shell, deep in the mad glory of combat.

His body sang with pain from lacerations, toxins and impacts, but still he fought on, bolstering himself with the power of his own psionic quickening. The shadows of the Rage and the Thirst were there at his back, reaching for him, ready to take him, and he raced to stay one step ahead. He could not be consumed: not yet. His heavy burden rattled against his chest plate.

Soon, he told himself, sensing the red and the black. Very soon.

Crossing the bone bridge once more, he shouted his defiance—and the tyranids replied in kind.

Winged fiends and fluttering, gas-filled spores fell around him, the gargoyle broods tearing through the air, daring him to attack. He unloaded the storm bolter, tracer shells cutting magnesium-bright flashes in the dark; but for each he killed there were five more, ten more, twenty. The spores detonated in foetid coughs of combustion and without warning the bridge was severed.

Nord fell, his weapons lost, down into the pit where the carnifex lurked. Impact came hard and suffocating, as the Blood Angel sank into a drift of soft, doughy matter collecting around the hive's egg sacs. Tearing the sticky strings of albumen from his armour, he tore free—

And faced his foe.

"You should have fled while you had the chance." Indus' voice had taken on a fly-swarm buzz. "We will take you now."

Flanked by mammoth thorn-backed beasts, the hive tyrant bowed, as if mocking him, allowing Indus to dangle before Nord upon his tendrils. More tentacles snaked forwards, questing and probing.

The aliens waited to taste the stink of his fear, savouring the moment; Nord gave them nothing, instead bending to recover his axe where it had fallen.

"This will be your end, adept," he said. "If only you could see what you have become."

"We are the superior!" came the roar in return. "We will devour all! You are the prey! You are the beasts!"

Nord took a breath and let the dark clouds come. "Yes," he admitted, "perhaps we are."

The Black Rage and the Red Thirst, the curses that he had fought against for so long, the twin madness at the core of his being… The psyker let his defences fall before them. He gave himself fully to the heart of the rage, let it fill him.

Power, burning nova-bright, swept away every doubt, every question in his mind. Suddenly it was so very clear to him; there was only the weapon and the target. The killer and the killed.

The aliens charged, and Nord ripped open the gear pack at his belt, drawing the weapon within, running to meet them, racing towards the hive tyrant.

Indus saw the lethal burden in the Blood Angel's hand and felt a cold blade of fear lance through him; the tyrant shook in sympathetic panic. "No—" he whispered.

"In the name of Sanguinius and the God-Emperor," the Codicier snarled, baring his fangs. "I will end you all!"

Captain Gorolev jerked up from the console, his expression set in fear. "The cogitators register an energy increase aboard the hive ship!"

Xeren's head turned to face him atop his snake-like neck. "I am aware."

Gorolev took a step towards the Mechanicus magi. "That ship is a threat!" he snapped. "We have completed recovery of the boarding torpedo, and your scouts are lost! We should destroy the xenos! There is no reason to let them live a moment longer!"

"There is every reason!" Xeren's manner of cold, silky dismissal suddenly broke. He rounded on the frigate's commander, his mechadendrites and cyber-limbs rising up behind him in a fan, angry

serpents hissing and snapping at the air. All trace of his false politeness faded. “You test me and test me, ship-master, and I will hear no more! You will do as I say, or your life will be forfeit!”

“You have no right—” Gorolev was cut off as Xeren reached out a hand, showing brass micro-lasers where fingers should have been.

“I have the authority to do anything,” he grated. “That hive is worth more than your life, captain. More than the lives of your worthless crew, more than the lives of Kale and his Space Marines! I will sacrifice every single one of you, if that is what it will cost!”

A silence fell across the bridge; Gorolev’s eyes widened, but not in fear of Xeren. He and his officers stared beyond the tech-priest, to the open hatchway behind him.

There, filling the doorway, was a figure clad in blood-red. Xeren spun, his limbs, flesh and steel, coming up before him in a gesture of self-protection.

Brother-Sergeant Kale entered, carrying himself with a limp, his pale face stained with spilled vitae and smoke. His eyes were black with an anger as cold and vast as space.

Armour scarred from tyranid venom and claw, blemished with bitter fluids, he took heavy, purposeful steps towards the tech-priest. “My brothers lie dead,” he intoned. “The blame is yours.”

“I… I was not…” Xeren’s cool reserve crumbled.

“Do not cheapen their sacrifice with lies, priest,” growled Kale, his ire building ever higher as he came closer. “You sent us to our deaths, and you smiled as you did it.”

Xeren stiffened, drawing himself up. “I only did what was needed! I did what was expected of me!”

“Yes,” Kale gave a slow nod, and reached up to his chest, where the hilt of a combat knife protruded from a scabbed wound. “Now I do the same.”

With a shout of rage and pain, Kale tore the knife free and swept it around in a fluid arc. The blade’s mirror-bright edge found the tech-priest’s throat and cut deep, severing veins and wires, bone and metal. The Blood Angel leaned into the attack and took Xeren’s head from his neck. The cyborg’s body danced and fell, crashing to the deck in a puddle of oil.

“Energy surge at criticality…” Gorolev reported, as alert chimes sounded from the cogitator console.

Kale said nothing, only nodded. He stepped up to the viewport, over Xeren’s headless corpse, and watched the hive ship. His hands drew up to his chest in salute, taking on the shape of the Imperial aquila.

“In His name, brother,” he whispered.

He was falling.

Somewhere, far beyond his thoughts in the world of meat and bone, he was dying. Claws tearing at him, serpentine tendrils cutting into him, cilia

probing to find grey matter and absorb it.

Nord fell into the cascade of sensation. The blood roaring through him. The flawless, diamond-hard perfection of his anger driving him on, into the arms of the enemy.

He had never feared death; he had only feared that when the moment came, he would be found wanting.

That time was here, and he was more certain of his Tightness than ever before.

The clouds of billowing crimson, the swelling mist of deep, deep night; they came and took him, and he embraced it.

Somewhere, far beyond his thoughts, a bloody, near-crippled hand curled about the grip of a weapon, tight upon a trigger. And with a breath, a slow and steady breath, that hand released. Let go. Gave freedom to the tiny star building and churning inside.

The fusion detonator Nord had recovered from the weapons locker, the secret burden he had carried back into the heart of the hive ship. Now revealed, now empowered and unleashed.

The new sun grew, flesh and bone crisping, becoming pale sketches and then vapour; and in that moment, as the light became all, in its heart Brother Nord saw an angel, golden and magnificent. Reaching for him. Offering his hand.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

EMINENCE SANGUIS

By

Guy Haley

428.M41
Corinal
Corra System

A crimson dagger sliced towards the planet Corinal. The silhouette and name of this sleek, fast ship were known well in a score of systems, for the *Eminence Sanguis* was the personal transport of the High Chaplain of the Blood Angels. Its appearance was rarely welcomed. The systems to which it went were those inhabited by the Sons of Sanguinius, and visits from the High Chaplain to the Successor Chapters rarely boded well.

On board were but five battle-brothers - Captain Lorenz, seconded to the Heavengate Fleet, Brother Bastus and Brother Collephon to assist him. With them Chaplain Astorath travelled as adjutant to the High Chaplain, who made up the fifth and principal member of their party. A force few in number, but mighty.

Corinal grew quickly in the unshielded oculus of the command deck. Lorenz and Astorath stood side by side, watching it until it filled the window.

Revealed was a planet dominated by bright desert and a boundless cobalt ocean. Green fringed the edges of the single, massive continent. Five long rivers dug worming emerald valleys across the land. A huge alpine mass at the centre was a striking collection of brown jungle canyons filigreed with white snowy ridges. The poles wore icy caps, bordered by grey tundra that gave way to yellow grassland. But these varied colours of terrestrial life were smudges against the dazzling white sands of the continental interior. From these vast wastes came Corinal's planetshine, an uncompromising glow that bathed the small bridge in harsh light.

'Looks hot,' said Captain Lorenz.

Chaplain Astorath glanced at the warrior sidelong through his skull helm's ruby lenses.

'It does,' said Lorenz. He shrugged, his autoreactive pauldrons purring as they shifted to match the movement. Astorath and he were of very different temperaments. Lorenz was aware that Astorath disapproved of his less-than-grave nature. It only encouraged Lorenz to flippancy.

'Take us into low anchor, bring us into geostationary orbit,' said Astorath.

‘As you wish, Chaplain,’ said Lorenz. The captain walked from the fore of the bridge to his command dais. With armoured fingers he activated the input pads of the screens fixed to its rails. ‘Execute the manoeuvre,’ Lorenz ordered his blood thralls. The crew was small as befitted a craft of the *Eminence Sanguis’* size - a hundred mortals, a thousand servitors.

‘As you command, my lord,’ answered Lorenz’s first officer. The instruction was passed down the chain of command. The ship rumbled as its powerful reverse thrusters spat fire, crowding the view through the oculus with flash frozen exhaust gasses. Metal sang from the stress of the steep curve the *Eminence Sanguis* took towards the planet. Mortal officers monitoring the distance and gravitic pull quietly conferred with one another, adjusting course and speed. Servitors voiced their unthinking assent to whatever was asked of them.

Wreathed in fire, the *Eminence Sanguis* came into a stable orbit, chasing night’s terminator across the sea.

A single, cruciform orbital fortress hove into view, its crenellations lit strongly by the mellow sun and glare of the planet. Lights twinkled in dark recesses. Navigation beacons blinked on the arms of its docking piers, where a number of bulk hauler merchant vessels were attached.

‘There. The ships of the Dovarnion refugees,’ said Lorenz. He walked to a screen away from the oculus. ‘Their identification signums are a match.’

‘I see them,’ said Astorath. ‘Their lights are out.’

‘The reactors are probably offline. Auspex, confirm.’

A man whose face was coloured green by the phosphor screens he hunched over replied, ‘There is nothing, Captain Lorenz - no power, and no signs of life.’

Astorath made a noise of annoyance in his throat. The High Chaplain had warned them to expect this, but the Space Marines had hoped it would not come to pass.

Directly below the platform, reefs that had failed at the last to become islands shone purely in the sea. Upon them was built a lofty tower.

‘Master of auspex, magnify the archipelago. Bring the hololith on line,’ ordered Lorenz. ‘Display the fortress-monastery, maximum definition.’

An electric hum burred across the noise of men about the work of spaceflight. With a crackling pop, a wide image sphere wavered on. Depicted within its banded light were the reefs and the fortress-monastery. A single spire pointed skywards, studded with cannons, fifteen hundred feet tall and topped with a monumental golden angel whose haloed face was bowed and hidden within a deep hood.

‘The Bloodspike,’ said Lorenz. ‘Let us see if they are willing to talk.’

Lorenz keyed buttons. A bank of servitors lit up with green light and went rigid. Their wiped brains were co-opted to run Adeptus Astartes encryption protocols. Their mouths worked silently, forming nonsense syllables.

‘Initiating contact,’ said Lorenz.

Alarms rang throughout the command deck.

'Silence those,' ordered Lorenz.

'There are weapons locking onto us, my lord,' warned the master of auspex.

'Shall we respond?' asked the master of armament.

'We shall not,' said Astorath. 'The Angels Vermillion are secretive. They will not welcome our visit. They seek to drive us away, that is all.'

'Angels Vermillion, greetings, brothers,' said Lorenz. 'I am Captain Lorenz of the vessel *Eminence Sanguis*, Blood Angels Chapter, Adeptus Astartes. In the spirit of friendship, we request permission to dock at your station and descend to the surface.'

'Denied,' came a short, harsh reply.

The orbital grew larger. The *Eminence Sanguis* fell into its shadow. 'Talkative, are they not?' said Lorenz. He repeated his request. This time there was no verbal response. Tocsins rang again.

'For the love of the Great Angel, turn those off!' said Lorenz.

'More weapons locks, my lord,' said a thrall.

'They would not dare to fire,' said Astorath.

'I hope that is true. We are a static target here,' said Lorenz. 'Our chances of survival are minimal.'

'There is a reactor surge on the surface,' said the master of auspex. 'The Angels Vermillion are powering their defence lasers.'

'What about the orbital?' asked Lorenz, going over his own displays.

'Nothing as yet.'

'Well, this is awkward. What do we say to them now?' Lorenz asked Astorath.

'Wait. Hold position,' said Astorath.

An armoured figure strode onto the bridge. His battleplate was deep red and fashioned to look like muscle peeled of skin. Gold trim studded with fine jewels framed this gory art. Behind him came four mute servitors bearing an obsidian weapons case the size of a coffin.

The warrior was bareheaded, as was his right as High Chaplain. His name was Hereon, and it was said no angel of fairer countenance ever held the office. His skin was a perfect milk white, his eyes a pale, calming green, and his hair a deep, reddish blond. He exuded an air of power and nobility.

Astorath dropped to his knee.

'High Chaplain,' he said.

'We tell them that we are here on official Imperial business and will not be denied, Captain Lorenz. Put me on the vox.' A servoskull with a gaping vox horn for a mouth detached itself from the command deck's densely decorated ceiling and swooped down to hover over Hereon's head. 'This is High Chaplain Hereon. You will permit us to dock and descend to the surface. You will power down your weapons.'

'We shall not. You are not welcome,' responded the voice. 'Begone.'

‘This is not an ambassadorial courtesy mission, my brother,’ said Hereon sternly. ‘We are here at the behest of Imperial Navy Sector command. They would like to know what you are doing in possession of these chartist transports. The authorities on Dovar have also requested that I discover what exactly has happened to the citizenry evacuated in the face of the recent xenos incursion.’

There was no reply.

‘Either you allow us to land and speak with your Chapter Master,’ said Hereon, ‘or we shall depart with an unfavourable report. The next delegation to come here will be less amicable. It is better this matter is resolved between us, as brothers, rather than through the intervention of the Inquisition.’

Silence greeted his words.

‘They are not disengaging their weapons,’ said Lorenz.

‘Any act of aggression against this vessel will be taken as a declaration of war by the Blood Angels,’ said Hereon. ‘Your Chapter will most likely be declared renegade. Allow us access.’

For four minutes they waited for a response.

‘They are not listening,’ said Lorenz. ‘I suggest we withdraw to the system fringes and contact Dante. This is a mess.’

‘Wait,’ said Hereon.

More minutes passed. Finally, the vox hissed as the channel was reopened.

‘Proceed to anchor thirty miles from the High Corinal station. No direct access. Do not dock. You may proceed to the surface alone, High Chaplain, by transport.’

The vox cut out.

‘Put us in close to the orbital,’ ordered Lorenz. ‘Nine hundred yards distant. I’m not standing off where they can blow us out of the sky without risk to their own facilities. Weapons systems to remain dormant, but ready gun crews for immediate retaliation. Enginarium, increase power output for combat readiness.’

‘Do not provoke them,’ said Astorath.

‘A precaution, nothing more,’ said Lorenz. ‘They cannot complain. If you point a gun at me, it is only fair I rest my hand on the grip of mine.’ A soft fanfare played as his orders were marked accepted. The reactor readouts climbed. ‘I have had warmer welcomes from orks.’

‘Prepare my Thunderhawk,’ said Hereon. ‘I shall follow their request.’

‘That is not a wise course of action,’ said Astorath.

‘For once, Astorath and I are in agreement,’ said Lorenz.

‘It Is the only way open to us at this moment,’ said Hereon. ‘I trust you to rescue me should things get out of hand.’

Hereon’s Thunderhawk was painted in the black and bone of the Chaplaincy. The hatches were the blood red of the Chapter, and bore its

heraldry, but its chief livery was one of an order that transcended Chapter boundaries among those claiming descent from Sanguinius. There was none of that confraternity on display at Corinal.

The Bloodspike grew to meet the craft. Although from the void the shallow sea had appeared tranquil, close up, monstrous waves became visible. Blown across the deep oceans by unopposed winds, upon encountering the shallower waters of the continental shelf they were tripped by friction and gathered themselves up into masses of water tall as hills. The fortress-monastery was directly in their path. As the Thunderhawk circled, a wave nine hundred feet high swallowed two-thirds of the spire's height. When it moved on, sea spume cascaded in thundering waterfalls from the spire's ledges and defence batteries, rushing back to join the greater body of the ocean. The sucking of this huge swell periodically revealed the reefs to the air. The giant sessile creatures that dwelt there flung wide their arms to snatch up stranded fish before they were submerged again.

Dozens of smaller waves followed, each lesser than the last, until the sea returned to something approaching equilibrium. Even then, it heaved and slapped at the fortress-monastery's mighty plasteel roots without pause. Corinal's ocean could never be still.

A blast shield slid open halfway up the spire, well below the level inundated by the ocean moments before. Clearance codes were transmitted to the ship silently, without courtesy.

Hereon stood alone in the Thunderhawk's transport bay as the ship plummeted down and levelled off. He saw none of what went on outside the vessel. He was focused on what he must do within the Bloodspike. The Angels Vermillion were isolationist and unfriendly. This would not be easy.

A change in engine pitch and a sudden deceleration preceded landing. Hereon shifted his weight within his maglocked armour to counteract the shifting g-force. The craft's landing claws clunked and the craft jolted, stopped, and sank into its undercarriage pneumatics.

Before he keyed the door open, Hereon donned his helmet. It too was decorated with scarlet ridges representing the shape of skinless muscle. With the helm placed upon his head, he became a grotesque, flayed giant, ivory teeth shining in the gruesome red around his stylised respirator grill.

The black wings of his jump pack shifted. Hereon gripped the Executioner's Axe, now uncased, that cursed blade which had claimed so many tainted lives down the millennia.

Via his armour, he sent a signal to the ship, bidding it open. The forward assault ramp hissed down. His boots disengaged from the deck. 'Await me here,' he signalled the pilot, and strode out into the fortress-monastery of the Angels Vermillion.

The open docking gate showed bright blue skies. That light intruded only a little way into the interior. Dim, bloody lumens saturated the hangar with

a deep and unpleasant red. The floor was black marble, heavily veined, but what true colours the stone held were a mystery; everything bore the tint of vitae from the lights.

There were no thralls or other mortals present. Five servitors stood dormant in their cradles at the rear of the bay. It was a small deck, with space for a brace of gunships, no more. A lone Space Marine awaited him in armour a darker red even than the light. His heraldry bore similarities to the Blood Angels: a blood drop framed by black wings, a skull enclosed within the drop. Hereon had seen many variations on this theme in his long life. With few exceptions, the badges of the Blood Angels successors cleaved close to their father Chapter. As primogenitor, the marking of the Angels Vermillion was closer than most. It was a mark of the awful bonds they shared - the black death of Sanguinius, and the curse that it brought.

The warrior exhibited no sign of brotherhood, however. I le remained helmeted throughout the encounter. If this was a meeting of kin, they were long estranged.

'I am Kuldoth Moar, the First Blade of Chapter Master Chauld,' said the warrior. 'What is your business at the Bloodspike?'

'You greet your brothers poorly.'

'Though our blood is the same, the time of our parting is long in the past,' said Moar tersely. 'We go our own way, and owe nothing to the Blood Angels. State your business, or depart.'

'I will speak with your master. Immediately.'

'By what authority do you make this demand?'

'By the authority of Lord Commander Dante.'

'Dante is not the master of the Angels Vermillion,' said Moar. 'Chauld is lord here, no other.'

'Then by the authority of the Chaplaincy of the Blood Angels, over whom I am the master, and the redeemer of those lost to our bloodline. In this my authority encompasses even you.'

'Others may agree with you, High Chaplain, but we do not recognise your right to the role of redeemer,' said Moar. 'We redeem our own.'

'So then, by the authority of the Emperor of Mankind, whose vessels you wrongfully hold, and whose citizens have vanished in your care, your lord will meet with me.'

Moar said nothing.

'Do you reject His authority also?' Hereon hefted his axe meaningfully.

Moar paused. 'You will wait here.' He turned about without another word.

Hereon was left alone. A haunting siren sang, the hangar darkened. The world outside was plunged underwater by a giant wave slipping past the bay's atmospheric energy shield. The blast doors remained open, showing the High Chaplain he was no prisoner. That was no courtesy either, but encouragement to depart.

More waves rolled by. Half an hour later, Moar returned, flanked by two Sanguinary Guard garbed in armour as dark red as his own. The colour gave the deathmasks they wore a daemonic flavor Hereon did not care for.

'Chapter Master Chauld will see you. Briefly. You shall speak with him, and then you shall go.'

'That is all I requested. My thanks.'

'This way,' said Moar.

Moar led him into a huge hall at the centre of the Bloodspike. Statues lined the walls, each covered in a black cloth, hiding their nature from the High Chaplain. A statue of the primarch filled a huge section of wall, an altar at his feet. His wings and arms were spread. At least, Hereon assumed it was the primarch from the shape. Sanguinius' effigy too was concealed by a vast black shroud. On the fuliginous cloth the Chapter symbol was embroidered in red and gold, though the colours bled into each other in the dull blood light. What craftsmanship he could make out in this hellish illumination was exquisite, the equal of any the Blood Angels might produce, but every representation of the human form was covered. Moar ignored his charge, and became absorbed in the detail of the floor. The Sanguinary Guard marched away. Hereon's wings twitched as he watched them go.

The chamber was deserted. Another long, musical siren wailed through the fortress. A series of barely perceptible tremors shook the giant spire as it was again engulfed by the sea.

'Where are your servants and your brothers?' Hereon asked.

Moar looked up sharply. 'Our brothers?'

'There is no one here.'

'They are occupied. We change our thralls. Soon new servants will be ours - you come to us at an unusual but important time.'

'A festival?'

'The Sorrowing,' said Moar. He would say no more on the matter, and returned to his contemplation of the floor mosaics.

Another long wait beckoned. Hereon centred himself to fight his growing anger. He withdrew his senses within the cocoon of his armour, then sank into his mind. 'Serenity is the enemy of the thirst,' he said to himself, his whisper loud in his helm. 'Serenity is the beginning of restraint, the Fourth Virtue.' Hereon repeated to himself the words of the Solus Encarmine, letting time slip by to the rhythm of the chant.

'High Chaplain.' The voice broke his concentration. Letting out a long, controlled exhalation, Hereon returned to the present. The Sanguinary Guard were escorting a richly armoured warrior. He had his helm off, showing a face that had the look of the Angel, but there was a sharpness in his features not found among the Blood Angels. His lips were thin and cruel, and the whites of his eyes blood red.

Moar was nowhere to be seen.

'You are Chapter Master Chauld?' asked Hereon.

‘I am,’ said the warrior. Annoyance clipped the Chapter Master’s words. There was no concealing his impatience that Hereon be gone. ‘You arrive at a poor time, lord. We are deep in preparation for the ceremony of the Sorrowing. Your visit here is an unwelcome distraction. If you had but sent message that you were coming, we could have arranged a mutually acceptable date.’

‘You must forgive me,’ said Hereon. ‘Long have we respected your desire for solitude, though it saddens the Chapters of the Blood that you remain apart. Nevertheless, for millennia you have made your wishes clear to us, and we have abided by your terms. Alas, your actions have forced the hand of our lord commander, and our respect for your solitude must be set aside. We could not wait. The Inquisition grows suspicious of your actions, war threatens, and we would not see a Chapter of the Great Angel be declared renegade. I have come—’

‘I know why you are here,’ said Chauld coldly. ‘Return whence you came, and tell your lord Dante that we shall return the chartist fleet to the guardianship of the Imperial Navy. We no longer have need of them.’

‘What of their crews, and of the refugees they carried?’

‘We will return the ships. Within a week we will declare a point of exchange,’ said Chauld.

‘What of the people?’ said Hereon in a voice steeped in authority.

Chauld was a Chapter Master, but few could deny Hereon. He looked aside. He bared his teeth, breath hissing through them. When he looked back his expression had grown fiercer, and his eyeteeth had slid out from his gums, drawing a stream of blood from his lower lip.

‘You wish to know what has become of these people, these forgotten thousands? Then I will show you.’

Curtly, he turned and waved Hereon on behind him. Hereon noticed sentries in alcoves watching him and the Chapter Master warily. The Sanguinary Guard fell into step with their lord.

‘He must see!’ said Chauld to the sentries as they came out from their armoured killposts. ‘So he shall see. He will observe our preparations for the Sorrowing.’

Chauld took Hereon through a door set into the ornate wall. A spiral stair descended, taking them into areas of more utilitarian nature. They came off the stair at a small landing. The entrance at its end opened, a pair of doors drew back sideways, then two beyond slid into the floor and ceiling. Lastly, a portcullis rattled upwards.

Chauld led him into a huge, industrial space. Rails were suspended on steel hawsers from the ceiling. Pipes belched steam from the floor. ‘Here are your missing citizens,’ he said.

Figures in translucent plastek sacks hung from the rails. Small data-pads wired into their chests winked in the ruddy gloom. Softseals in the bodysacks allowed in-tubes to penetrate the dormant figures at the wrists,

necks and thighs, taking blood to containers hanging beneath their feet. White-armoured Sanguinary Priests walked the aisles between, checking on their harvest. Every ten seconds the lines lurched forwards to the grinding of some hidden engine and the squeal of wheels, setting the bags swinging.

Chauld led Hereon towards the centre, bodies either side. 'Some of these are the crew and cargo of the free ships we hold at our orbital,' he explained. 'The rest are our thralls. Their labours are done. Every fifty years we change our stock for new and the old are given a great honour. The processing is almost done - we are two thirds of the way through. New servants have been drawn from the remainder of the mortals from the ships and the rest will join with us and our freed servants, blood to blood.'

'You are draining them of vitae…' said Hereon quietly. The stink of blood was causing his mouth to water. His gums ached as his teeth moved in his upper jaw.

'Yes,' Chauld said baldly. 'You must feel it too - the smell of this vitae excites you, you know its terrible lure. If you wish, you may drink of it, as much as you want.' He laughed a horrible, despairing laugh. 'We all must feed. It is our nature. In five days, we shall be finished. These bodies will be flensed, their bones cleaned, and they will be interred with all honour in the Chapel of the Isle of Martyrs. We shall bathe in their blood. Into it, we shall pour the essence of Sanguinius by opening the veins of one of our priests and draining him unto death. Then the blood will be treated again, and prepared into the liquid food of battle. Thereafter it is introduced into our armour's dispensers to nourish us in war. A half century's supply is here.'

'You have gone too far!' said Hereon. 'You profane the sacred life fluid of the primarch himself!'

'We do what we have to,' said Chauld. 'How far is too far in defence of the Imperium, High Chaplain? Exterminatus? The culling of whole populations to slay a few traitors? How is this any different in enormity?'

'They came to you for help. They thought you were going to save them.'

'We did. Dovar is still in Imperial hands. Most of the citizens remain. Through the sacrifice of those that fled, many more on other worlds will be saved! These men and women are honoured. They feel no pain. We treat them with respect.' They continued on down the intermittently jerking line, coming to a deep shaft running up the centre of the Bloodspike. There, a dozen production lines came to an end. The bodies were upended by an automatic process, and shaken hard to release the last few drops of vitae. Bare-chested men with naval tattoos unhooked the bags and yanked out the draining tubes from the limbs of the dead. The blood was carefully collected and the bodies tossed into wheeled bins which were pushed out of the hall by other thralls.

'We discovered early that by feeding the thirst we can control it,' said Chauld. 'We kept ourselves apart for shame, thinking ourselves afflicted

alone. Ironic, it seems now. Only a handful of us fall to its ravages each year, and it forestalls the onset of the Black Rage for decades. We all fall in the end, but in not so great numbers as the rest of the Blood.'

'This is an abomination,' said Hereon in disbelief.

'It is necessary,' said Chauld softly.

'Nothing like this can ever be justified. It stops, now,' said the High Chaplain.

Hereon ignited his jump pack and leapt for the Chapter Master. Chauld looked up unimpressed as Hereon swept down, axe raised.

A ringing impact knocked Hereon sideways. A Sanguinary Guard grappled with him in mid-air. White wings entangled with black as the warriors fought. Below, the second guard was lining up his angelus bolter for a shot.

Hereon shoved back hard with the haft of his axe and ignited his jet again. Bolts slashed through the space where he had been, impacting with the corpse rail and bringing part of It down, Hereon's helm bleeped as he swooped back and around. Jump packs could not sustain true flight for long, and his fuel source was rapidly depleting. More shots chased him, blasting the unconscious mortals Into shreds of flesh. Hereon thundered down towards the guard, weaving through a stream of boltgun fire. A round exploded on his plastron, causing more alarms to ring. Drawing back his axe, he swung for the nearest guard, the impetus of flight sending the broad head through armour. Blood fountained outwards, black In the red light.

Spinning on his heel, Hereon parried a crackling strike from the second guard. He swept out with the haft, tripping the warrior and bringing him down with a crash. The smell of blood fogged Hereon's mind, stirring the beast in his breast to wakefulness. Had he been elsewhere, he would have spared the warrior's life.

The axe crashed down, splitting the Sanguinary Guard's head in two.

A searing blast knocked Hereon to his knees. His armour sounded its clarions of pain, but in his maddened state he barely felt the blow and turned to find the source so he might smash it.

Two squads of Angels Vermillion ringed him, weapons ready. Hereon snarled, and made ready to die.

'Stop!' bellowed Chauld. His shout penetrated Hereon's bloodlust. Only a hero of the greatest will could have fought the Thirst back down so quickly. Hereon's mind cleared.

'Do not harm him! Do not strike him down!' ordered Chauld. Green eye lenses glowed in the slaughterhouse. Boltguns were levelled at the High Chaplain. Bodies that had slid from the broken rails lay in heaps. 'Put up your axe, High Chaplain - you will not be harmed.'

Hesitantly, Hereon dropped the Executioner's Axe. Chauld nodded in his direction. Four Space Marines came to his side and restrained him.

Chauld addressed Hereon. ‘I preserve your life not out of affection, High Chaplain, but because killing you would bring the wrath of the Sanguinary Brotherhood down upon us.’ He looked around at the suspended bodies. ‘Though the Emperor alone knows few among them are more innocent than we. All our hands are bloodied.’ He looked back at Hereon. ‘Your Chapter is blind. You are dazzled by the glory of ancient days that can never return. You do not see the evil that surrounds all we do. Sanguinius is a memory, and a cursed one at that,’ he said, his red eyes blazing. ‘His death dooms us all, but we would stand a little longer in defence of mankind! We—’ Chauld drew in a shuddering breath and closed his eyes. When he spoke again, it was quietly, and under obvious self-control. ‘You will return, and tell Commander Dante that we remain loyal subjects of the Emperor, but we cannot - will not - allow our Chapter to die because of the ravages of the Red Thirst. Who are these people here? They are drops in an ocean of shifting blood. They will not be missed. Their sacrifice is nothing when set against ten thousand years of loyal service to the Imperium. Countless others like them would be dead were it not for our tithe. Once every fifty years do we hold the Sorrowing. That is all. Do not think this brings us pleasure. We name this ceremony as we do for the burden it places on our souls, knowing that so many innocents must be bled to hold our rage at bay,’ said Chauld, coming close to Hereon’s face, hunched, almost bestial. ‘We are monsters when we should be angels, and it torments me every day. But we live in an era beset by worse monsters, and if embracing the darkness will keep the light shining for a little longer, then it must be so. Do you not see?’

The Red Thirst stirred in Hereon again. He struggled against the grip of the Angels Vermillion. His armour growled with the effort, but they were too strong, and he could not throw them off.

‘You are wrong. The darkness must be fought against. This is slaughter! Better that you die and your Chapter be disbanded than this abomination be permitted to continue. Lord Dante will not stand for this.’

Chauld stood back, some of the bearing of a lord of men coming back into his demeanour. ‘Dante has no choice. Do you think us fools? We have taken precautions.’

Hereon ceased struggling. ‘How so?’

‘Forever we of the Blood have kept our shame hidden from the eyes of the Inquisition, if the Blood Angels move against us, then we shall reveal the true nature of our Sanguinius bloodline to all. Not only we, but the Blood Angels and every Chapter of the Blood will be cast down, and the name of the perfect angel shall become synonymous with horror.’

‘You will not.’

‘What choice do I have?’ said Chauld. ‘Ever since the Second Founding, we have been ashamed of the Flaw, and the Red Thirst and Black Rage that it brings. In atonement we have dedicated ourselves to wars of penitence, fighting battles that are never even noticed long enough to be forgotten,

yet every engagement keeps the light of mankind burning a little longer. Our contribution to the Imperium's future is small but vital. These deaths are a small price to pay to ensure our continued efforts.'

'And yet you are willing to destroy your brother Chapters? Madness.'

'Not madness! We must threaten to destroy you or you will destroy us, costing much in blood and diverting our combined efforts away from the foes of humanity into pointless civil war. We are not enemies, High Chaplain! If you could but see our roll of honour, you would appreciate these deaths are a worthy exchange. There is a price for everything. We pay this blood tithe for the privilege of duty with tears in our eyes. Just as Brother Hothor and Brother Cawal's lives were a fair price to pay for your understanding.' Chauld pointed at the dead Sanguinary Guard and looked hard into Hereon's helm lenses. After a moment's searching he gestured to his men. 'He is no threat. Release him. Let him go to his ship, and his brothers. There has been enough bloodshed today.'

Hereon stood. Bolters raised around him. Chauld lifted his hands.

'My brothers, the High Chaplain will do nothing. He understands now. Return his weapon respectfully - it is a sacred relic.'

The Executioner's Axe was placed into Hereon's hand. He contemplated swinging it into Chauld's head. He could not. If there were war, many innocent lives would be lost to avenge those already spent, and the Blood Angels could not survive the revelation of their darkest secrets. He let the axe slide down, so that its haft thumped on the floor.

'You see, you do understand.' Chauld smiled ruefully. 'Go. Do not think to ever return here. Inform Commander Dante that there can never be rapprochement between our orders. We shall fight alongside you when circumstances demand, but we will never be a part of your wider brotherhood. Let the Blood Angels pursue their atonement for the Flaw. We shall deal with it in our own way.' He pointed out of the processing plant. 'Escort him back to his vessel.'

Astorath was waiting when the Thunderhawk landed in the *Eminence Sanguis'* main hangar. Hereon stalked out in silence.

'My lord!' called Astorath upon seeing the damage to the High Chaplain's armour. 'What happened? Were you assailed?'

Hereon turned to face his adjutant. 'It is unimportant.'

'Were your negotiations successful?'

'They will return the ships,' said Hereon.

'But what about the refugees, the crews?'

'Their fate is for Commander Dante's ears alone,' said Hereon darkly. 'Have Lorenz withdraw us to the Mandeville point. We are going home to Baal.'

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

BLOOD OF SANGUINIUS

By

Marc Clapham

Kravin woke in agony. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, or how he had been injured. All he knew was pain.

Only one of his eyes would open. His helmet display was a mess of flickering glyphs, broken. The vox was a low hiss of static, useless. The only clear thing he could see was a countdown through the fuzz. It had only a short time left to run.

The countdown stirred a memory: charges they had set to destroy these catacombs once and for all, burying any traces of the heresies committed here. They had been halfway back to the surface when they were attacked, their desperate foes firing heavy weapons in too confined a space. Kravin had been at the edge of an explosion, knocked off a parapet and left plunging into darkness.

The countdown continued. He didn't have much time. He could die. He was a Blood Angel and had no fear of death, but what he was carrying couldn't be buried down here.

Kravin needed to get up. He had landed face down, and he tried to move his arms. The right one wasn't working, and he couldn't see through the cracked visor of his wrecked helmet. Using his good arm, he pushed himself up on to his knees. The sensation of pressure in his chest was lightly alleviated as he did so, but it also caused more pain. He used his good hand to reach under his chin and force off what was left of his helmet. The buckled metal pressed against his skin as he pushed it off, but it came loose and he let it roll away.

He looked around with his good eye. He was at the bottom of a narrow ravine, dim light penetrating the darkness from somewhere high above. The rocky floor was scattered with debris, but there was no sign of his squad, or the enemy.

The coppery taste of his own blood was in Kravin's mouth. He could feel the pull of the Red Thirst, and spat the blood out onto the ground. He ran his tongue around his mouth – a few teeth lost, including one pointed fang. His right eye still wouldn't open, and it felt like that side of his skull was crushed, his eye socket shattered. He looked down at the blood he had spat on the dirty ground, and regretted the loss – not to him, but to the Chapter.

He saw why his right arm wouldn't work – it had been severed at the elbow, blood dripping from the stump. He also saw the source of the pain in his chest, a broken spur of rock that had pierced his chestplate. It was still lodged there, and Kravin dared not remove it. He could feel the loss of his primary heart, and knew from the blood dripping from around that wound and the stump of his arm that his Larraman organ had been

crushed. He didn't have long to live, and he couldn't afford to bleed out before he reached the surface.

The Chapter depended on him to not spill any more blood, so he needed to move. He held his good hand over the stump of his right arm, trying to stem the bleeding, and forced himself up. His right leg was in incredible pain, but it was still attached to his body and it still worked. He limped around and saw a slope leading upwards, then he shuffled in that direction as fast as he could.

After a few minutes, or at least what seemed like it, he realised he should have brought the helmet so he would know how much time he had left. Too late now, Kravin thought dimly. He could think little else, requiring all his focus to put one foot in front of another. The pain in his face and leg were terrible, but he was more worried about the blood loss, the drips escaping between his fingers, lost forever on the dusty rock floor.

He was a Blood Angel. He would not fade away, slipping into unconsciousness as he bled out. He would reach the surface or die on his feet as the catacombs collapsed.

The end of the spur of rock embedded in his chest caught against the wall briefly, and Kravin felt it press against his second, damaged heart. The pain threatened to plunge Kravin back into unconsciousness, and he recited some meditative words to overcome it, words he had taught to others of his Chapter in how to manage the Red Thirst. Still muttering to himself, Kravin tilted his body and managed to squeeze through, his power armour screeching in protest as it scraped against the rock, and out into a wider space.

He recognised where he was. Not far from the surface. He was near. He could make it.

Then he heard the explosion. A colossal blast, distant but echoing through the stone walls and floor. The ceiling above his head began to crumble, and Kravin did what he had thought he could not – he began to run.

Kravin ran, ignoring the pain burning through him. He felt death now, as he ducked under an archway before it collapsed behind him. His vision was failing, blackness seeping in from the sides, reducing his sight to a blurry tunnel as he ran down one corridor, then the next, dodging falling stone.

He could feel the anger rising, the injustice at the death of another, father to all Blood Angels.

No, Kravin would not give into the Black Rage, not now. He had to think not of anger in regard to his death, but of what he carried – the importance of it.

He ran on, across a narrow bridge over a deep pit. The stone was falling beneath his feet. So close now, but his vision was failing him, and his leg was giving way.

Something blocked the bridge, as tall as he was, a looming darkness. A surviving enemy? A pile of rubble? A phantom of his own mind? Kravin couldn't tell, but he lashed out in a sweeping gesture and the shadow was dispelled, its source either dashed into the pit or never there to start with.

As the bridge fell away, Kravin stumbled onto more solid ground, collapsing to one knee. Everything in his body told him to stop, to rest.

No, not far now. He pushed himself up and on, staggering forwards in unsteady steps. He was sure he was near, but dust had filled the air, an outrush of debris from the explosion, choking him and interfering with his sense of direction. He feared he was lost.

But then Kravin stumbled out into the light, the dust cleared and he found himself facing the bolters of a dozen of his fellows, a cordon to prevent any stragglers escaping the destruction of the catacombs.

'Brother!' said one, rushing to his aid. Kravin could barely see now, and he let himself be lowered to the ground, closing his remaining eye. He couldn't tell who was helping him, and he wasn't sure he was recognisable with his injuries.

'The Prime Helix…' said the Blood Angel who had helped him, his voice distant now. 'A Sanguinary Priest… By the Emperor, it's Kravin. Quick, bind his wounds. We must save his blood…'

That voice was barely audible now, and Kravin let his attention drift, felt himself let go. Though his life was fading away, darkness overtaking him, he knew the blood that flowed through his veins, the blood filtered through the bodies of generations of Sanguinary Priests, would be preserved and passed on.

The blood of their primarch, their legacy as Blood Angels.

The blood of Sanguinius.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

ETERNAL

By

Dan Abnett

Froer watched as the retrieval detail brought out the bodies on bearer boards. A dismal return for a day's effort.

The sun was painfully bright. His mouth was dry. He took a tin beaker from his musette bag and scooped some water from the pool. The water was so clear he could see the pebbled bottom gleaming like a mat of glass beads. Tiny silver fish flitted around his Militarum-issue boots.

'Sir!'

The men at the picket were signalling to him. He splashed back through the long pools under the trees.

A figure approached across the mossy sweep of the lagoon edge.

Froer took a breath. It was a rare and remarkable sight.

Adeptus Astartes.

The warrior's massive plate armour shone red in the hard sunlight. A Blood Angel. Two yellow teardrops on the shoulder plate denoted Sixth Company.

The warrior's helm was off, slung at his belt. His hair was cropped gold, his face that of a noble statue in a silent chapel. A man of– No, not a man. Not a man at all.

Froer went to meet him. He bowed his head and made the sign of the aquila.

'Captain Froer, Sixteenth Betal, Astra Militarum,' he began. 'May the Throne be–'

'Gammarael,' said the Angel.

'We appreciate the assist,' said Froer. 'Been trying to clear the Plunge for–'

'Show me.'

Froer fell in beside the not-man. He had to scamper every third or fourth step to keep pace. They walked along the flowered bank and began to wade into the crystal pools. Froer glanced back. His boots had crushed the delicate flowers growing along the bank, but there was no sign of the Angel's passing. It was as though the giant's vast heels had not trampled anything, or had caused the stalks and bright blooms to spring up again, renewed, after his passing.

'Can I fetch you food, sir? Drink?'

'No.'

'The water here is quite fresh,' Froer added, dipping his fingers into the pool. 'Clean. We do not thirst here. There are also edible berries and fruit.'

The not-man said nothing.

'Odd place for a war,' said Froer.

‘Odd?’

Froer made a gesture at the glade around them, the stretches of sparkling water, the silver-trunked trees with their graceful khaki leaves, the flowers, the pure sunlight, the emerald velvet of moss on boulders.

‘A paradise, I mean. After the mud-holes we’ve seen, sir, the slime-pits, the toxic trenches, arguing over the last drops of filthy water in the canteens. Here, the Emperor has provided us with food and water, with no need for urgent resupply, and–’

‘You talk a great deal,’ remarked the Angel.

‘I–I’m sorry.’

‘Is the enemy here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it is not an odd place for a war.’

Froer didn’t know what to say.

‘Assessment,’ said the Angel.

‘Oh, well… main dispositions are infantry to the west of the lagoon basin. My unit was ordered to circle east of the lagoons to flank and–’

‘This has not been achieved?’

‘No, sir,’ said Froer. ‘There is a deep plunge ahead, a grotto. Something is in there. It is denying my progress and killing my men.’

‘Type?’

‘Some kind of beast,’ said Froer. ‘It snorts like a hog. No formal identifi–’

‘Have your men form a cordon behind me. If it comes past me, they shoot. Full auto.’

‘Understood.’

Froer fanned his men out. They waded through the pools, thigh-deep, their rifles ready. The Angel moved ahead, with Froer following his ripples. Sunlight dappled the water.

The plunge was gloomy, a steep, gurgling basin choked with weed and briars. It smelled of rot and mould, and the sun seemed to shun it. It was like a blemish in the landscape, a darkness lurking within perfection.

‘Do we–’ Froer began.

The Angel raised his hand for silence and drew his blade, a glaive with a fine edge and a gilded grip.

He took another step, ripples expanding around his knees. As he pulled back an overhang of discoloured leaves there was a snort of phlegm.

Then the beast came out to meet them.

Froer gasped. It moved so fast, he could barely fix on it. It was twice the size of the Angel, obese, with black bristles blotching its pallid hide. Froer saw claws like broken femurs, a drooling smile full of yellow teeth, a muddle of wet eyes like frogspawn.

Talons squeaked on plate. The Angel grunted, meeting the charging weight, and slashed sideways. Blood as black and sticky as tar spurted into the air. The beast let out a pig-squeal.

The Angel cut again, a two handed back-slice. More tar-blood bloomed in the clear water like oil. The beast used its thrashing bulk, churned up the water in a furious surge, and struck the Angel sideways. Froer saw gouges in the red plate.

But the Angel had drawn it out.

'Fire!' Froer yelled, a tremor of fear in his voice.

The beast knocked the Angel over. Water sheeted up. It came on, thrashing. Froer fired at it as it went past. His wading men started shooting, ripping las-bolts across the surface of the pool. There was a stink of scorched meat.

It didn't stop, but embraced Corporal Engg and bit off his jaw. It shredded Trooper Layune's torso.

The Angel surfaced in an explosion of spray. He drove his glaive down into the thing's spine with both fists, wrenching back to split ribs and open the wound.

The water turned black. The beast squealed, vomited bile, and collapsed sideways.

The Angel withdrew his blade and then took off the beast's head with an overarm stroke.

The squealing stopped.

'You may advance,' the Angel said.

The not-man looked at the dead thing, and then at the floating bodes of the men it had slain. The pool was stained black around the beast's corpse, and bright red around the Guardsmen. The Angel's gaze seemed to linger on the red. Froer took his expression for regret.

'You may advance,' the Angel repeated.

'My thanks to you,' Froer said. 'My thanks indeed. I–'

'I am thirsty,' said the Angel.

'Sir, there is water all around us,' said Froer. 'This pool is tainted, but the others… fresh water and–'

The Angel glanced at him. It was a strange look.

'There's not enough water,' he replied. 'Not even here in paradise.'

The not-man turned, moved into the darkness of the Plunge, and disappeared into the shadows where the sun could not see him.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

HONOUR & WRATH

By

David Annandale

He looked up at the night sky above the cathedral spires. The stars were a cold, pitiless light in the harsh black. The stone wall against his back was cold, too, and was in his core, growing worse. He was too tired to shiver, though not too tired to speak. Not yet. There was time for a tale. There was no better time for a tale.

'You've never seen the Blood Angels,' Kelaus Uhle said.

'No,' said Harn. 'You know I haven't.'

'Then you can't understand. And you should. You must. This is very important.'

'Why?'

'Cost. We all have to understand the nature of cost.'

'All right,' said Harn. 'I'm listening.'

'I want to tell you of the last war.' If he turned his eyes to the right, Uhle would be able to see his grandson. He kept his gaze on the stars. 'There was a great heresy then. It was brought to Laudamus by Traitor Space Marines. They believed themselves to be possessors of perfect truth and perfect judgement. They walked in armour whose violet flames appeared to consume the pink of martyred flesh.'

'The Flawless Host,' Harn said.

'You are listening. Good.'

'I know what you want to say.'

'Maybe you know, but you don't understand. Not yet.'

'Go on then.'

'The Traitors were convincing. They crushed all resistance. Within days of their arrival, Laudamus was theirs. I remember the weeping of my parents. They had fought, and they had lost. They were among the lucky few to survive the slaughter. They were also among the few who remained faithful to the Emperor. The heresy of the Flawless Host was a plague. Our people were weak. They burned in the fever of defeat, and the victors infected their souls with their false truth. It took very little time before our world echoed with the praise of the Traitors. Then the purges began. Mobs of heretics sought out those who clung the Imperial Creed. To please their corrupt masters, they hauled the faithful out of their homes and burned them in the squares.'

'You were so young, then,' Harn interrupted. 'How can you trust your memory?'

Uhle almost closed his eyes, then. He wanted to retreat into his personal dark, to turn away from the unblinking judgement of the stars, and away from the wounds of the past.

‘Human flesh on fire. A thousand victims piled up in a single pyre. The screams. That smell, that sight and that sound do not fade with time. My parents hid with me in the sewers. I saw the world through the grates of gutter drains. The Traitors and their heresy had possession of Laudamus. But then the sky wept blood.’

He paused. The memory of that sight made him smile through the cold.

‘They came down in tears of iron,’ Uhle said. ‘The Blood Angels. I saw the streaks in the night. I heard the thunder of their landings outside Sempiternus. The thunder didn’t stop. It only grew louder as they smashed through the walls and advanced down the streets. I saw them. No, saw is too poor and thin a word. You do not merely see the Blood Angels. I witnessed them. So did my parents, and the other refugees in the sewers. They were majesty in crimson. They were giants, divine knights of war. You may think you know the meaning of glory. You may think you can picture it. You can’t. You must witness. Your soul must experience sunlight and flames and las reflecting off the red and gold of that armour. If it has not, then it does not know glory.’

Uhle watched the stars. They stared back, waiting for him to tell the full story, the full truth.

‘We followed the thunder,’ he said. ‘The stones over our heads shook. Dust covered us. And in this great square was where the Blood Angels confronted the Flawless Host.

‘Look around you, Harn. Do you see how far the nearest hab block is? The square was not as large then. The conflict razed entire blocks. They were never rebuilt. This ground is sacred now. It is here that the Flawless Host’s heresy was shattered. The Blood Angels tanks sent purging fire over great masses of heretics, and now there were new pyres here, and my lungs were filled with the holy stench of burning sacrilege. The Traitors thought to trap the Blood Angels in street-to-street battles. They did not expect the Blood Angels to flatten any building that blocked their path, to utterly destroy great swaths of the city. Think about this. Understand the meaning of cost. Thousands died. In every hab. Thousands. Crushed by collapsing rockcrete, burned to death by flaming promethium, blown apart by cannon shells. The slaughter I witnessed in the square paled in comparison. The streets ran with blood. I saw it stream from the destroyed buildings. The Blood Angels were merciless. They were the embodiment of annihilation. They had the right to be. Anyone living in those habs had chosen the Traitors over the Emperor, and this was their judgement.

‘I was looking through an aperture not far from here,’ Uhle said, gesturing to his left. ‘I was less than two metres from a struggle between two of the Traitors and a sergeant of the Blood Angels. His name, I learned later, was Gamigin. He wore no helmet. His scalp was clean-shaven. His face had the beauty of carved marble, but it bore so many scars. He was a defaced statue. He frightened me. I knew the Traitors to be monsters, but I

was not prepared to see brutal ugliness layered over an angel's perfection of nobility.

'Gamigin fought with a chainsword. He fought with anger. What was I saying about glory? I will say the same about wrath. The savagery with which he killed both Traitors is still before my eyes.

'They wielded chainaxes. They swung the weapons at him from both flanks at once. He stepped back, and the axe blades clashed. He brought his blade forward to throat level and cut through the seam of one Traitor's gorget. Pushed the chainsword forward, he severed his foe's head, and his eyes were alight with the perfection of judgement.

'He was the hand of the Emperor, exacting every drop of blood owed for the crime of treachery. The other warrior of the Flawless Host struck a blow to Gamigin's back that staggered him. But he turned his stumble into a whirl, his eyes now red with a rage. He countered with a flurry of blows. They were so fast, a wonder fuelled by anger that terrifies me even now. His chainsword broke through the Traitor's chestplate and ground through bone and muscle. Gamigin's teeth were bared, and they were fanged. The blood of the Traitors drenched him, and in dreams that may be memories I see him drink the vitae.

'I saw more that day. The sights are before me now. Every crime the heretics and Traitors had committed was repaid a hundredfold. The Blood Angels were transformed. They were wrath itself. They ripped the enemy apart. Do you understand? Ripped them apart. Crimson rain fell on this square. I saw bodies crushed, immolated, punctured by their own jagged bones. Nothing was quick. The screams went on and on and on. The war ended, but the screams of the punished did not. This was cost, Harn. Those were consequences.'

The memory of nightmare justice poured fire into his blood. Sleep receded. His heart burned with his own rage.

'After the war, when the heretical dead lay in mounds ten metres high, and the Flawless Host had been driven from Laudamus, I saw Gamigin again. The Blood Angels marched from Sempiternus, their standards high, and the sergeant more stern and calm than the stone he so resembled. But it is the rage I remember most clearly.

'Harn, you cannot imagine that wrath and the terror and agony it wrought.'

A few of the stars began to move and Uhle smiled. Now he lowered his eyes. He looked at the man who had been his grandson, but who had carved the ritualistic runes into his face and chest and wore filthy robes of a cultist. The man who had willingly thrown his lot in with the returned Flawless Host.

The man who had plunged a twisted blade into his gut.

The cold was taking Uhle down, but he had held it at bay long enough. He had lived to know retribution was coming.

‘You cannot imagine the wrath,’ he said again. ‘But by the Throne, you will know it.’

The stars were falling. The drop pods scarred the night. Once more, the sky was weeping blood.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

THE BLOODING

By

Ray Harrison

A monster walks in step beside me, and it is made of teeth.

I feel the press of the Thirst as I meet my enemy in the heart of the cathedral. The monster. My monster. It is part of me. It is all of me. It hungers for the blood of traitors, and today it will be fed.

I will be blooded.

The traitor wears iridescent purple armour, split with curving horns and draped with flayed skin. He smiles at me.

'Seeking glory, are we, little angel?'

My answer is the rasp of my sword as I draw it.

The traitor laughs. His voice is like the scrape of fingernails on stone. The Thirst pushes me, and I run. I am fast but he is faster. He parries my first few strikes with lazy ease. I can smell the blood running underneath his corrupted skin. I am unrelenting, pushing the traitor back across the marble floor and taking strike after strike into the bargain. The pain is nothing compared to the need to defeat him. To destroy him. I break his guard by breaking his arm. He's not smiling now. I punch my sword through the traitor's chest and pull it free. Blood spray anoints me, crowning me the prince of death.

I taste the blood and I become blind, deaf and mute.

I become the monster.

Master the Thirst and it cannot master you.

They are Aphael's words.

I think his name and see him before me. I am no longer in the church, beneath the gaze of a hundred shattered saints. I am on Baal. Rust-red dunes stretch out into the distance and the air scorches my lungs. The Captain of the Second Company stands before me, haloed by light so bright I can barely look upon him.

The monster will claim you, if you let it.

The sand shifts around my feet and I begin to sink. It draws around my feet and my legs, pulling me down.

'Brother!' I reach for Aphael. The sand is up to my chest.

If it claims you, then you are lost. There is no going back.

Aphael stoops and picks up a handful of the sand. He scatters it on my head, as if he is throwing the first handful of earth into an open grave.

'Aphael!' I scream this time, but the sand fills my mouth and pours down my throat, consuming and burying me. Becoming me.

When I awake, there is no sand but there is fire. Around me a city burns. Humans flee, weeping and injured. They are being hunted through the streets by hunched, loping shapes.

Monsters.

Monsters made of teeth.

I leap at the nearest creature, halting its charge. It fights back like a rabid animal, snarling and screaming. I catch the barest glimpses of armour and oath seals in the unnatural darkness. I draw my sword and drive it upwards into the monster's chest. Its struggling limbs go still. Behind me, an explosion blooms and people scream. For a moment, the thing in front of me is illuminated by the burst of flame.

And it wears my face.

I stumble back into the roadway. More of the monsters come and they fall upon me, biting and clawing and screaming. I fight them even as they murder me. My vision tunnels, and I fall.

When I open my eyes, I am in the fortress-monastery. It was the closest thing I ever had to a home, though in its current state I do not recognise it.

The great hall at the heart of the monastery is open to the sky and the walls are blackened by fire. I walk between monoliths of shattered stone. In places, ruined banners still hang, catching in Baal's unkind wind. Oath scrolls and prayer papers scurry across the floor at my feet.

I cannot even weep to see it. The devastation is too much.

There is movement ahead. A figure clad in battered crimson armour stands at the head of the hall. He turns to face me. His armour marks him as Second Company, but I do not know him. I pause, wary of this stranger clad in the colours of my brothers.

'I thought I was the last,' he says. His voice is a wet rasp.

The implication of his words stops me dead.

'Who did this?' I shout the words, and they echo in the tomb that was once my home. 'Where are my brothers?'

The stranger looks up at the curdled clouds overhead. They tremble and boil as a fresh bombardment begins.

'We did this,' he says. 'We had no choice.'

As the firestorm falls to earth, I finally find the strength to weep.

I awake again. I am in a clean, white space. Before me is a table, and on the table is a chalice. The chalice is beautiful, wrought in gold and set with gemstones.

'It always comes back to blood, Helias.'

A figure stands in my peripheral vision. It moves as I turn to face it, so I can never truly see it. I never heard such a beautiful voice.

'I can master it,' I tell the figure.

'No!' The figure roars the word, and it is terrible to hear. After a moment of silence, it speaks again, more softly. 'There is no mastering the

monster.’

‘For decades my brothers have practised the Blooding,’ I say. ‘By taking the blood of our enemy and enduring the Thirst, we emerge stronger. It is the only way to keep the monster at bay.’

There is another long pause. I hear a sound like the turning pages, or fluttering wings.

‘You honestly believe the rite will protect you?’ the voice asks, a trace of hope in its question.

‘I have to.’

‘Then drink from the chalice. Endure. Emerge stronger.’

The figure, the flickering shape at the edge of my vision, disappears with a burst of white light.

I pick up the chalice. It is filled with blood. The smell is overwhelming.

I put the chalice to my lips and drink.

This time, I truly wake. I am kneeling on the cathedral floor and the traitor’s body lies broken on the marble before me. His armour is shattered and cracked. His throat has been torn out.

It must have been me.

I tore it out.

‘Helias?’ Captain Aphael’s voice reminds me of shifting sand.

‘Yes, sire,’ I manage.

‘It is done?’

I look down at the ruin of the Traitor Space Marine.

‘Yes.’

‘Then the monster is defeated. You have done well, brother.’

I catch my own reflection in hundreds of panes of broken glass. Blood hangs in thick strings from my fangs. I see alabaster skin and black-pit eyes. I see gold-trimmed armour and hands curled into claws.

I am not so sure.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

THE CHALICE

By

Chris Wraight

He works the metal, agonising, painstaking pain, fearful of error.

Yes, there is fear there, even in the soul of one who has had fear bled out of him. This thing shall never be made again; if it is destroyed, eternity will be diminished. If he fears anything, he fears for the loss of it, in a Chapter that has had loss etched on its soul since its inception.

So he goes carefully, minutely. There are machines that could work more quickly, but they have no conception of passion, and so are not used. Only flesh carves this thing, guided by a mind that knows its value.

When he fights, feeling the simmer of immortal rages beneath the surface, he is not like this. He roars with the rest, forgetting in slaughter what he can never forget in rest.

Only now, here, in the chamber on Baal he was gifted when joining the Sanguinary Priesthood, does his grip falter. Only here is his soul bent to a task other than the letting of blood or the suppression of the choler that makes them glorious, or the search, the fruitless search, for something like a cure.

He looks down at it, and it glistens back at him, near-flawless, glossy with the liquid depth of pure gold. He sees his reflection in the curve of the bowl, and the paleness of his skin is lent lustre by it.

He marvels at its age. He can feel it, resonant in the metal. The Blood Angels appreciate age, and the centuries add to its weight. He reaches for a micro-scalpel, taking it up and tracing around the edge of a jewel-housing. He removes a sliver of old grime – the dust of the world it was found on – and discards it.

It increases in beauty. He smiles as he works, for that beauty touches his soul. He aches for it. He turns it in his hands, transported.

These are the things that exalt us, he thinks. Not the rage, not the thirst, not the nightmares. We created this. We made this.

He works the metal. The error, where it persists, shall be overcome.

Laurentis, Captain of the Eighth, charges the enemy, reckless, fearing nothing.

His nine brothers come with him, their battle cries ringing from vox-augmenters, throaty with raw aggression. They fall into combat, trusting to their peerless armour, preferring blades, staying close. The enemy – shapeshifters, creatures of hell – scream back at them. Each one is a little god, a shard of a greater malevolence, capable of ripping out the minds of mortals and devouring them.

Laurentis slays them, crying out with every stroke of his shining blade. He is furious now, goaded across the edge of rage, dancing ever closer along its precipitous drop. Above him the skies of Arantia are black, clotted like a scab. Daemons boil up from the seething soils, their yellow eyes ringed with fire. His brothers race into the open wound of hatred, shining in gold and red, their voices clear as they declaim words of denunciation taught long ago by the Angel Who Fell.

All of them too are on the dagger's edge – of physical exhaustion, of mental disintegration, of submission to the velvet darkness of their secret weakness. No living men, not even those suffused with the sacred blood and gifted service, should live to fight such creatures.

And yet, driven by primal fury, they cut towards the goal – the tower, horn-shaped, dark against a flame-flared horizon. They slay and they slay, their blades smouldering as they cut through psychic sinew.

Ariosto falls, his chest torn open. Michealis is downed next, his neck broken and his helmless head driven into the dust. The rest keep fighting, driving forwards, cutting a path to the tower. Laurentis remains at the head of them, hauling them through by his will. His armour is more black than red, scarred and charred by the remnants of cursed bodies.

'For the Angel!' he cries, the sound like a shaft of gold.

They fight on. The enemy, where it stands, shall be overcome.

He reaches the last of the work that lies within his power.

He lets the tools fall, and traces the outlines of gold with naked fingers. He feels the artistry, the unbroken curves, laid down by greater souls. A twinge of envy disfigures the moment, and he admonishes himself. He has been born into an age of iron, and the makers of this thing lived in an age of gold, but that is fate, and to wish otherwise is a very great sin, among the greatest.

All that remains, he thinks, is to preserve. We can still cherish. And, when the heavens align and the star-charts in Mephiston's orrerium are favourable, there may be fragments of an old genius to rescue.

His fingers reach the edge, and he feels the void in the metal. It is the only flaw remaining, the one he cannot counteract. He tries not to look at it, for the wound is a physical pain to witness.

We feel too much, he thinks; that is the clot in our souls.

Yet he knows that passion is also their majesty, and he would not trade it, not for the savagery of the Wolves, nor the nobility of the sons of Macragge, nor the steadfastness of Dorn's praetorians.

There is always a price, he thinks. Beauty will always be bought with pain.

They gain the tower. Orfeo dies taking the gates, though he wins passage for the others. Algeas and Kivo are slain on the ascent of the First Stair, though they make the neverborn whimper as they banish them.

The interior is now a coiled entrail of madness, with stone that shrieks and flags that churn. They all fight the visions in there – a starship, bloated with corruption, a grotesque god overshadowing a knight in gold and red…

Laurentis pushes the dream down. He is bellowing now, his vision blurred with anger, his body working like a furnace. The daemons hurl themselves at him, trying to bring him down by sheer weight of twisted flesh, but he tears them into wailing scraps. He hears the death-cries of Aenotas and Sorvilo as they smash the doors to the topmost chamber.

They have done enough – he bursts in, reaches the altar. It is made of sheened stone, glistening like amethyst, and there are images of obscenity carved across it. His surviving brothers join him, making the chamber echo with the roar of bolters. Laurentis seizes the prize. It hangs by a thread of gold, and for a second its beauty strikes at him.

Then the screaming starts up again, and the enemy howls back. Laurentis stows the prize in his armour and takes up his sword.

They have what they came for. Now they have to get out.

Outside, the unquiet air of Baal stirs again. A flicker of carnelian lights the skies, streaking red over spoiled plains.

He looks up from his labour, sensing the newcomer before he sees him. The captain limps in, his armour still bearing its battle-damage. He is helmless, his face crisscrossed with new scars.

The Sanguinary Priest rises. ‘You are the only one?’ he asks.

Laurentis nods. He is weak, suffering from terrible wounds that despite his long journey have not yet healed. He reaches for the golden thread and hands it over.

The Sanguinary Priest takes it, reverently. He turns it in his palm. Despite the wearing ages it has spent in its unholy prison, the jewel at the end of the chain is still unsullied – a ruby, many-faceted, winking in the light of the candles.

He detaches it and takes it to the chalice, where the single flaw waits to be made whole. He presses the ruby into the space, and hears the faint click as it takes. Then he lifts it to the light. Baal’s sullen sun, a shaft of red through the arched window, makes it glow.

It is whole again. When the rites are completed, the chalice will once more carry blood within its sacred rim.

Laurentis is unsteady on his feet, but holds position. The Sanguinary Priest looks at him, at the scars, at the wounds in his armour.

‘You have done well,’ the Sanguinary Priest says.

The captain nods. The Sanguinary Priest can read his thoughts as if he had spoken aloud.

So many dead.

The Sanguinary Priest turns back to the chalice. There was sacrifice, but there always is. That is what they are for – to suffer, to die, to guard those rare fortresses in which the mastery of the species is still preserved.

‘There is always a price,’ the Sanguinary Priest murmurs, placing the chalice down and taking up tools again. ‘Beauty will always be bought with pain.’

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

HONOURS

By

James Swallow

For a warrior like him, there were always those who had *questions*.

It was part of the burden of who he was. Veteran. Captain. Immortal, even, although they rarely voiced that last appellation in front of him. He didn't like the term. It hung around his neck like a bad omen. It dared the fates, and he only ever did that on his own terms.

The questions.

From the young and the newly raised battle-brothers most often, but sometimes spoken by war-worn sergeants and laurelled sons from the other companies, even other Chapters. He listened with patience each time. It was part of the duty for one with his exalted status. Every commander was a mentor and teacher, after all. He would lead as his primarch Sanguinius had: by example.

The daring ones, who looked upon the pennants of his great company and perhaps coveted his glories, would ask him: *How did you lose the eye, captain?*

Ah, the old wound. Who took the eye from him? 'I did,' he would say. 'As surely as if I had unsheathed my combat blade and gouged it out myself.'

He lost the eye through arrogance. On the shores of the Perpetua Sea, when his squad had confronted a heretic pskyer leading a pack of cybrid war-dogs. He'd been young then, barely out of his Scout armour and with the black carapace still new beneath the skin of his torso. Oh yes, he had been so young, and foolish with it. Imprudent enough to believe that the little man throwing light from his fingertips could not possibly be a match for a Blood Angel, one of the Emperor's Angels of Death.

He took on the witch alone, breaking rank when an opportunity to attack made itself apparent. Even now, centuries later, he still smarted a little to recall the moment when the telekine had slammed him into the azure sands with a ghostly fist of mental force. Pinned there, staked out as one would leave a corpse to cool, he was held in place by a claw of gravity. The psyker came in close. Floating over him, with that terrible cackling laughter in the air, the witch sheathed a single finger in coruscating psi-light and used it to burn through the orb of his left eye. Slowly. Deliberately.

He killed it in the end. The creature's focus slipped as it relished his agonies, just enough for him to stab it in the gut with his knife. When the witch was dead, he threw the body out into the ocean shallows and found an Apothecary to staunch the bitter wound.

The scars and the bionic had stayed with him all these years, a reminder of the lesson. Arrogance kills; humility endures.

The sword, sir. Is it true what they say about the sword?

'Is it true?' That the blade killed a daemon lord, that it cut so sharp it sliced the hate from a curse and rendered it powerless? 'Yes… and no.'

The sword was a champion's blade, gifted to him by Lord Kadeus toward the end of his time as Chapter Master. He wore it with dignity and made it a point of honour that the weapon – which Kadeus had christened *Challenger* – would only leave its scabbard in the moment of most dire need. It became a talisman of sorts.

His warriors made a grim joke of it. In the thick of war, as blood and fire rained down around them, they would look to him and say, 'This battle is not so harsh, this enemy not so formidable. See? The captain does not deem it fit to draw his sword!'

But they did not jest with gallows humour when the beast Sethselameth emerged from the angles of warp space to attack them aboard the battle-barge *Bloodcaller*. The prince of Tzeentch had cursed the ship by clever means, secreting an unholy relic in the vessel's hull through the corruption of a crew serf, and it was the captain who had uncovered the ruse that let Sethselameth penetrate the ship. The duel of blades they fought in the high enginarium core would later be commemorated in a mural that covered the ceiling of the drive bay. The art is there to this day, raising the spirits of those who toil beneath the warp engines.

Some battle-brothers would study the bolter in his hand, the ready shape of the great weapon emblazoned with the wing and half-sigil of Sanguinius, yet the yellow shade of pallid sands and not the blood-crimson or deathly black of the other guns that hung in the grips of his men. They would look and they would say: *Why does your sidearm bear the colours of another Chapter?*

That story he liked to tell. Of the debt he earned on Mathus Station, when the heretic sect called the Hounds of the Ruined Sky fell upon a pocket of souls from a cousin Chapter ill-prepared for such madness and ferocity. A full thousand prayer-ships powered by the sick energy of the warp, pin-cushioning the deep space platform with their prows. A siege two hundred years long, frozen in amber as the Adeptus Astartes trapped in Mathus's core decks held the line against cultists who devoted their entire existence to eradicating them. The Hounds built a little civilisation there, engineered around the enemy. They bred generations of themselves to throw at their foes. Each Space Marine they killed, even if it took decades, was a victory of the highest order. There were but four Imperial Fists left alive out of twenty-two when he answered their calls for aid, when the Blood Angels came to rescue the sons of Dorn. Together, they burned out the Hounds and put every last one of them to death. The Fists gave him the gun as a token of their gratitude, and each bolt it fired was homage to the warriors who had died on Mathus Station. He carried it with pride.

But the Tear was really what they wanted to ask about. The Cyanine Tear, as blue as the perfect skies of Baal before the War of Burning had seared them to umber shades. A colour beyond the living memory of all Blood Angels.

How did you come to be blessed with such a relic?

He had not asked for the honour, nor had he sought it. That was not the way of the Chapter and its sons. The Tear, carved of the rarest azure jade from Baal Secundus, set in wings of beaten gold spread across his chestplate. The captain took the relic as his commander's sigil when the First Company became his authority, humbled by the tribute and affirmed to be worthy of it. He carried it through a hundred campaigns, against orks and eldar, mutants and heretics. Smeared with the vitae of traitor kin, the captain wore it as he led the burning of the Night Lords warship *Fadesun* and the black-clad murder band that had harried the Perseus Null for six hundred years. He wore it as he executed the governors of Sable for their heinous crimes of chronomancy, and it saved his life by turning a deathblow from a Zode machine-giant in the Calixis Sector.

How was he worthy of this relic, this honour? There was no secret to it. He earned the Cyanine Tear by doing his sworn duty, just as every true Blood Angel did for his Chapter and kindred.

But the final question was the one he would never be able to give answer to, and in many ways that was the tragedy of it, for it was the puzzle they most wanted to be solved.

How did you die, in that place, at that time? Which greenskin was the one that ended your life?

On the plains of the hive world Levion Gamma, in the shadow of the Five Towers, the First Company led the charge against an alliance of orkish clans both massive and unprecedented. The green tide rolled over the planet, shredding everything that lay before them, until the orks closed the noose around the silver citadels and the defence forces of the Imperium. They say the firestorm that broke on that day, the shrieking of plasma weapons, bolters and lasguns, tormented the skies so greatly that Levion Gamma never recovered from the battle brought to it by the Blood Angels.

The captain did not live to see those days, for perhaps the fates were dared one time too many. He fought and he died as he had lived, infused with courage by the right of his bloodline, honoured by his kinsmen. Upon a hill of xenos dead he met his last, the granted gun firing until the barrel was red hot, the sanctified blade of *Challenger* leaving its scabbard, his keen eye never faltering.

And the Tear; the Tear always shining, a beacon to his warriors.

Each item alone was only a tool, a device, a thing imbued with meaning but meaningless without a soul to attest to it. It was in the collation of all these elements, in the gathering of them to a warrior's side, that they became of value.

In this way, they were honours; and they remain still, for the war does not end and neither does duty.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

ASTORATH THE GRIM: REDEEMER OF THE LOST

By

Andy Smillie

It has been a long time since I killed an enemy. Too long. A torturous burden for any warrior to bear. Yet I have not been idle. I have spent my decades steeped in blood. I have bent my talents to killing my brothers. A dark duty that has brought me here to this ashen waste. Hamenlina, a librarium world. Burned to cinders by the forces of the Archenemy as they sought to secure the knowledge contained in Hamenlina's datastacks and parchment-text archives. Its towering structures, crammed together like vast volumes stacked on too small a shelf, remind me of the cathedrals and reclusiams of holy Baal.

These, though, are blackened by battle, reduced to striated ruins. The charcoal landscape is as a painting, rendered in shadow by death's artisans. I drag my hand through a pile of grey brick dust, watching as it sifts through the fingers of my gauntlet to leave a trio of teeth in my palm. A solemn smile stretches across my face and I feel myself nod. This is a fitting place for angels to fight their last, a graveyard worthy of their bones.

I look down from my vantage point. Muzzle flare sparks in the distant gloom as the final shots of the war are fired. I feel my soul reharden itself against what is to come.

This war had not even begun when I started my journey here. The citizens of Hamenlina had not yet succumbed to the seditious promises of the Dark Powers when I boarded my vessel. Despite the improbable foresight that such certainty would require, I knew then that war would find this place, and that my brothers would be called to end it. I always know. It is a blessing that numbers foremost amongst my curses. The damned call to me. They reach across the cold vastness of space and time and beg for their souls.

From up here, amongst the desiccated remains of the Grand Oracle's chamber, I can smell the taint in the cursed blood of those below me. There are five of them left. The others are already dead, felled in battle as they waded waist deep through the entrails of their foe. When first I was set on this bloody path, I had thought, hoped even, that battle might claim all of the damned, that I would not be required to bring them peace. I was naive. A few always survive. For what in this universe can stand against their wrath, if not me? They are a terrible force to behold, killers to their core. I touch a hand to my jaw, feeling the distended canines beneath my gnarled lips. I have not looked upon myself in almost a century, yet I know that my skin is ghoulish white, and that my eyes are pinpricks of blackness. To best these beasts, to fulfil my duty, my body and soul have become terror itself.

Yet I am not alone. Even stripped of holy boltgun, and set apart from my warrior brotherhood, I march to war with another. The Executioner's Axe, an unimaginative name for an unimaginable task; a weapon born for this purpose. Forged by hottest fire and ancient blood, its tip is as hard as my

resolve, its edge as lethal as my fury. I straighten and tighten my grip on the weapon as the muzzle flashes below me fade into the gloom.

It is time.

Lord Emperor, Father Sanguinius.

We confess our unworthiness.

We are unfit to stand in your name.

Our blood is weak, our victories failures.

In death, we repent.

I pray for my brothers, dropping from the spire as the final syllable leaves my lips. I fall in silence, my jump pack unlit, my wings spread to slow my descent. A crimson ghost against a blackened sky, I fall.

The rockcrete of the roadway cracks underfoot as I land. One of the damned turns and snarls at me, a craven sound of lust and hunger. I cut his head from his shoulders, my axe passing through his neck before his blood can form on the blade. Then the others turn on me. Their boltguns growl. I react on instinct, catching the corpse of the first as it tumbles, pulling it to me. It shudders as explosive rounds hammer into it. I drive forward as they blast their dead brother's corpse apart, showering me in fragments of armour and gobbets of flesh.

Dropping my corpse-shield, I spin around to slice my axe through a forearm, twisting to strike again and claim another. I hear the dual clatter as the limbs and the weapons they're holding fall to the ground. The other two continue to fire.

A round strikes my pauldron and I drop into a roll, twisting my axe so that its blade is angled away and its butt faces forward. Rising, I swing out, letting my hands slide to the edge of the haft to extend my range. The weapon hammers into my attacker's face. I hear his neck break an instant before his body flips backwards over itself.

I growl, stumbling to one knee as a round rips across my side. The *ki-clack* of an empty chamber saves me more pain. The fifth roars and tosses his gun away. Gripping his chainsword with both hands, he charges. I stay crouched as he closes, reading his movements. He means to split my skull from brow to chin. He raises his weapon, shifts his weight. I act. He dies before he can strike, my blade bisecting him from hip to shoulder.

The pair I disarmed earlier have rallied. I hear them at my back, pressing towards me, their chainswords screaming for blood. I turn and parry their blows. They are formidable, but I am better. It is not arrogance or conceit, but truth that lends strength to my limbs as I batter them back. I was birthed to this slaughter the way a sun was birthed to burn nova. Had I no body, my soul would continue to fight until my fallen brothers were naught but bloodied mulch. Igniting my jump pack, I use its thrust to spin through a tight arc, and tear my blade across their chests. They falter, staggered by the wounds. It is all the time I need to remove their heads.

Brother Elogis, Brother Uvall, Brother Haures, Brother Sitri and Brother Asag. I unfurl a length of the tapered parchments hanging from my

armour, recording on it each of their names as I drag their corpses into a pile. It is now, in the moments between death and oblivion, that my duty hangs heaviest around my neck. Such warriors as these will never receive a proper burial, they will not be remembered in the annals of their Chapter and their names shall go missing from the Hall of Heroes. They are lost, and they must remain so. It is I, and I alone, who will remember them.

Only in death.

I whisper, tossing a melta charge amongst their corpses. The explosive detonates, searing away their remains. I wait a turn of the sun, still in silent vigil until the heat dissipates. Gathering up their ashes, I draw my palm across the Executioner's Axe. My blood mixes with the ash and I smear the thick paste over my wings.

It is done.

Kneeling, I look to the sky and coil my rosary around my wounded fist.

Sanguinius grant me strength.

This time, I pray for myself. For these were the Flesh Tearer's sons, and they will not die in silence.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

REDEEMER

By

Guy Haley

There were chords of pain that played for Astorath alone to hear. Music that troubled the dreams of insane composers haunted his waking hours. If it played anywhere, anywhere at all, then he would hear it. Most often he heard a lonely tune wrung from one miserable instrument, but at times these soloists would be joined by others to make quartets or sections, and in the worst of days an entire, melancholic orchestra would gather. Then the music would sing most urgently to him across time and space. Always it was discordant, tragic, full of pain and anger, notes played out of sequence as less-talented hands fumbled their way over a maestro's work. The music recalled something great nonetheless, and was all the more painful for imperfection.

These outpourings were for others to tame. The duty of his brother Chaplains was to get the strains to play in tune, to conduct the suffering towards a last crescendo. When the brothers in black and bone took the lead, the music would climax and cease, and in the ceasing Astorath the Grim would know that all had returned to rightness.

Sometimes the music did not stop. Sometimes it rose to unbearable heights, past all hope of redemption, down to the blackest pits of despair, where it continued, polluting all around it with pain.

It was Astorath's role, as Blood Angels High Chaplain, to end these painful discords. His solemn duty was fratricide. His axe tasted noble Space Marine blood as often as it did the vitae of the Imperium's enemies. 'The Ender of Songs', the aeldari called him, and apt though that was, he had a better-known title.

To the Chapters of the Blood, he was the Redeemer of the Lost, and he was loved and loathed in equal measure for his excellence at his duty.

Astorath slept his way across the light years. Wherever he went, his sarcophagus travelled with him, seated in the place of honour at the heart of the *Eminence Sanguis*.

Only a few of the most high Blood Angels had their own personal sarcophagus. Astorath was naturally among them. The exterior of his sarcophagus was decorated with stylised sculpture that depicted the warrior inside. Although distorted by being wrapped around the lid, it was unmistakably Astorath rendered in the abyssal black of polished carbon.

The sarcophagus was set at an angle of forty-five degrees at the centre of a ring of carvings depicting the High Chaplain's responsibilities. In Astorath's chamber all was chill. Frost coated the carvings. Red lumens bathed the room in a bloody glow, and black shadows hid from it. The colours echoed Astorath's inner world. While Astorath slept, his dreams were of black and they were of red, and nothing else, until somewhere a warrior's soul broke, and the music began again.

Each song was different. He heard this one as a screeching passage that rose and stopped, and began again, over and over, a piece badly practised whose end could not be attained. It penetrated the bloody red; it sent

ripples over the oily black. The music called to him for it could call to no one else. The song was a plea for mercy only he could grant. It woke him.

Stirred from his slumber, Astorath opened his eyes in the blood-threaded amnion nourishing his body. The sarcophagus' machine-spirit detected the movement, and began the process of full awakening. Drains opened at the base of the sarcophagus to suck the amnion away. The mask covering Astorath's mouth came free, the amnion level dropped past his chin, and he took his first free breath since he had lain down to rest. The needle interfaces of monitoring machines slid from the sockets of his black carapace. Thick tubes twisted like umbilical cords suckled greedily at the arteries in his forearms, thighs and neck as he slept. They throbbed now as they returned his purified blood to him, and detached from his skin with sorrowful kisses.

Light falling on the black sculpture changed, fading from sanguine to gentle red gold, the colour of the sunlight of Balor. Inset wheels spun within the sarcophagus' ornate decoration, locks disengaged, a heavy bar disguised as the figure's crossed arms lifted and rose. The lid slid up and away.

Astorath sat up. Pale skin and jet-black hair glistened with residual preservative fluid.

'Sergeant Dolomen,' he said. His voice was quiet yet filled with authority. Vox-thieves hidden in the room's decoration opened up communication with the command deck.

'My lord,' Dolomen responded.

'A brother is lost. Prepare our Navigator for fresh directions. We have work to do.'

The *Eminence Sanguis* appeared on no roll of service for the Blood Angels. It was not expected to take part in the Chapter's battles and rarely did. It had been requested, built and commissioned solely as the personal transport of the High Chaplain, and had conveyed many holders of the office across the galaxy.

Sepulchral halls linked sombre chambers. Every being upon that craft, whether unmodified human, tech-priest or Angel of Death, understood the solemnity of their mission and carried themselves with utmost dignity. The *Eminence Sanguis* was a near-silent ship, where robed figures went on solitary errands. Its machine-spirit was as cold as the void outside its plasteel skin and as distant as the stars it sailed for.

It was a fast ship, quick in the void but swiftest in the warp. Although it was of low mass, in the realm of the warp concepts had more importance than physical truths, and the ship was heavy with duty. So singular was its purpose it cut easily through the conflicting currents of ideas that made the immaterium treacherous. Not even the madness of Chaos could deny the weight of Astorath's work. Aided by the importance of its mission and the faith of those aboard, it passed through the worst of storms, and made impressive speed whatever etheric tempests curdled the Sea of Souls.

In the nightmare of the warp, the *Eminence Sanguis* turned aside from its prior destination towards the source of the song.

Astorath's armour terrified the mortals who came to greet him. There were only three of them stood at the edge of the landing platform when he emerged into the dank forest, and they were frightened, for death stood behind him. His battleplate's ceramite was carved to resemble musculature exposed by flaying, and was painted to match. His jump pack was an arcane design, its form dictated more by art than function, and to the cowering men and single woman, he appeared to be blessed with wings. The pinions were immobile, sculptures of metal as crow black as his hair, yet to them they seemed real. His pauldron was a field of skulls. His kneepads featured more of the same. The axe he carried was as tall and heavy as the largest of the mortals, with a haft fashioned to resemble a spine. All he carried and all he wore spoke of the ending of life.

The world of Asque only accentuated his deathly aspect. The Blood Angels Stormraven squatted on a rusted landing platform half overtaken by forest growth. Support pillars were engulfed by rippled grey wood. Slimy creepers strangled guard rails, and buried machinery in wet mats of giving flesh. The ship was black, covered in red saltires and glowering skulls. Upon the ancient pad it resembled the ornamentation on an overgrown tomb, peeking out through a cemetery's ruin.

Mould crawled up every surface of the arching roots holding the fungus-trees off the ground. Clouds of their spores floated past in granular mists. The three mortals wore heavy respirators to protect themselves against the spores, but Astorath had no need of such protection, and stood before them bareheaded, a winged giant clad in skinned muscle. In the gloom of the fungal forest, his pale skin appeared blue. He was flanked by Sergeant Dolomen and the Sanguinary Priest Artemos, his only companions from the Chapter. Together they represented the triumvirate of bone, blood and death that shaped the Blood Angels' soul. They were doom incarnate.

Astorath did not look human, and he was not. The mortals were right to be afraid.

'Where are our brothers?' Astorath asked them through bloodless lips.

Despite their protection, the mortals' eyes were rimmed red with spore exposure. The leader, the female, spoke with a voice roughened by poor quality air. She was old, but had that wiry strength certain women keep until the end of their lives.

'They are this way, my lord,' she said, pointing a wavering arm behind her to tangles of roots and trunks receding into the spore-blue air.

Astorath looked into the forest. Far off, the music played.

'Take me there,' he said. 'Dolomen, guard the ship.'

The men and woman looked at each other nervously. None of them wished to be the one to start the march. The idea of telling Astorath what

to do, even when asked to provide guidance, seemed to fill them with terror.

'Take me now,' Astorath said.

Relieved to be commanded, the civilians led the way down a run of rockcrete stairs that was so buried in rotted matter, fungal stands and roots it appeared no more than an animal track.

'You, female. Tell me what happened here.' Astorath's footsteps were heavy, thumping on the soft ground like dying heartbeats.

'Your brother took the ordes meat–' began the woman.

'From the beginning. Tell me of this place. Tell me what happened to you before my brothers came. It will help me understand what has befallen them.'

So she did. Her name, she said, was Srana. Astorath filed it away with a million other names, never to be forgotten.

'This world is not a bad world,' Srana began. 'I have read of others. I know there are worse places than Asque.'

They were obliged to duck through interlaced rubbery vines whose rough surfaces adhered to them. Astorath and Artemos shoved their way through with difficulty, for the vines would not break, and the paths the humans took were too small for them. As Astorath forced his way out, the woman glanced back, to see if she had spoken out of place. Astorath's return stare had her turning her face away twice as quickly.

'Before the silent ones came, we lived in sunlight, up there.' She pointed upwards, where arrow-straight trunks lifted off from their cradles of roots, though she did not look, too afraid or too saddened by what had happened. 'Up there are our homes. That is our world, not this place. Up there, there is no mould. The air is clear. The weather is warm. We had good lives.'

'The nature of this world's purpose?'

'The production and export of chemical products derived from the great fungi,' she said. 'Their wood is no good. It is black-hearted, rots quickly. No use for building, but when bled and boiled it gives useful liquors. We had our duties to the Imperium, and we fulfilled them.' She dared to look back again. 'All we wish is to do so again, to live in the sun and pay our dues to the God-Emperor. We worked hard. We prayed hard. I am so sorry about what has happened here. Please, let the Emperor know we are sorry for whatever we did to anger Him and bring this disaster on ourselves. I am so sorry the Red Angels came to help us, and this happened. I–'

'What happened here is not your fault,' said Astorath bluntly. 'You have done no wrong. If you had, I would kill you, but you need not fear punishment from me. Unless there is some element of your tale that is deserving of harsher judgement?'

She shook her head. 'None, no, my lord. We did nothing. We are victims. I think. Maybe the meat… Maybe we poisoned him?'

'All humanity is a victim in these dark times. If you speak the truth, you have nothing to fear. You did not poison him. Continue your tale.'

‘The rift came, and the sky turned sick. The silent ones came soon afterwards. They appeared in nightmares at first, pale, naked things, the size of half-grown children, pot-bellied, long arms, horrible in proportion, but their faces were the worst. They were blank, no eyes or nose, only a curved mouth full of jutting teeth. We all dreamt about them, standing in the corner of our sleeping chambers, staring at us.’ She shuddered at the memory. ‘It didn’t take long for us to realise that we dreamed of the same things, of silent, pale faces with no eyes. A few panicked children was all it took. Word got round. We were afraid.

‘We worked on as best we could. Then the tithe ships stopped coming. Then the merchantmen. We produce enough food for ourselves, but are dependent on outsiders for many other things. We sent out messages from our astropaths in the capital, but got no reply. They tried harder, until one by one they went mad, and so Count Mannier ordered no more attempts be made, in order to save the last.’

‘When was this?’

‘Decades ago. I was young then, old enough to remember how things were. There are no sky-speakers now. Some of what I relay to you was told to me by my mother.’

‘You speak of matters dealt with by the planetary government.’

‘My mother was adviser to the count. I am of noble birth,’ she cackled. ‘Though you would not believe it now.’

‘Continue.’

‘The dreams became worse. Then they stopped being dreams. We woke in the night to find the silent ones looking at us. They’d vanish, after a while, but they were there. We had picts and vid-captures.’ She went quiet. ‘Then, after a little longer, they started to hunt us.’

They passed along a road broken to useless slabs by fungal roots.

‘We killed a few, they were flesh and blood it seemed, and it gave us heart. But they came and went as they wished. We struggled to trap them. We couldn’t see them. They picked us off at their leisure. We were afraid to sleep. So many of us died in nights of terror, and we were driven from our homes, down here. They didn’t come down here so much, on account of the spores maybe. We managed to hold on, but we were dying slowly. The count took the chance with our last astropath and sent the message – I was a girl still then. It took so long to answer, we didn’t think anyone would come. Then your brothers arrived, and they were cunning and brave and killed many of the silent ones. Everything looked like it would be good again. It was, for a while. They took back this township for us, so we could look on the sun. They drove the creatures deeper into the forest. We began to rebuild.’

They reached a stairway choked by the outgrowths of the tree it circled, and started to climb upwards.

‘Then your brother took the ordes meat, and suddenly it wasn’t good any more.’ She smiled weakly. ‘Come on, it’s this way.’

When Astorath and Artemos arrived in the reclaimed township they found their brothers out on patrol, and so settled down to wait for their return in a room in a derelict habitat.

'We should consider the possibility that this entire planet must be purged,' said Artemos, speaking by private helm-to-helm vox 'You heard what she said.'

'The old rules are not so rigidly applied,' said Astorath. 'Word of daemons has spread now. Once, even you would not have known of them, brother. How can knowledge of them be hidden when they walk openly across the galaxy?'

'Knowledge isn't what bothers me,' said Artemos. He lifted a ragged curtain and glanced out through a cracked window. The habitat overlooked a landscape of lacy branches that moved in the light of the planet's moon. 'This whole place might be tainted. You know what it's like when they get their fingers in the minds of men.'

'If every world that had known the touch of the daemon since the rift opened was laid waste, there would be no Imperium left,' said Astorath. 'Purity of thought is the best safeguard. The question of whether this world is tainted is for others to answer. It is not obviously so, and we do not have the resources to deal with it if it is. Our mission is to secure our missing brother.'

Artemos shrugged. 'You are right. I speak prematurely. The things here could have been Chaos-warped predators, rather than daemons. Or they could be a strange kind of xenos. Some of those things the aeldari consort with.' He shook his head and let the curtain drop. 'Xenos or daemon, they are filth, all of them. The galaxy is not what it was. The old evils come sneaking out of the shadows.'

'Put these questions from your mind, Brother-Priest,' said Astorath. 'Whatever they are, they are not our business. Mercy for the lost is our sole concern.'

They waited a few hours for the Blood Angels assigned to Asque to return to the outpost. A single half-squad had been sent, and there were three of them left, all Primaris Marines. They were not surprised to find Astorath at the township.

'I am Brother Fidelius, 11th squad, Third Battle Company, acting sergeant,' said the warrior who led them. 'These are Edmun and Caspion. You are High Chaplain.'

'I am,' Astorath confirmed.

'Then I greet you as my lord.' Fidelius dropped to his knee and bowed his head.

'May the blessing of the Angel's virtues and graces fill you and carry you through battle, my brother. Now rise.'

Fidelius stood again.

‘Who is the one who is afflicted?’ Astorath asked.

‘Brother-Sergeant Erasmus.’

Astorath paused before asking his next question.

‘And is Brother-Sergeant Erasmus like you, or like me?’ The gravity of his question seemed to distort space around them.

‘He is not a Primaris brother, my lord, if that is what you mean,’ said Fidelius.

‘So you were deployed as a mixed squad?’

‘At our captain’s command,’ said Fidelius. He looked at his brothers. ‘We three were among those raised from the Great Blooding. We lack experience. Erasmus came to teach us.’

‘You fought as mortals on the walls of the Arx Angelicum?’

‘We did,’ said Fidelius. ‘There were four of us Primaris Marines, until the xenos things slew Brother Aelus. The four of us and Erasmus were deemed enough for the task at hand, but these things are slippery, and claimed their due in blood. Erasmus said…’ He shared a look with his brothers. Astorath recognised it, for he had seen it many times – the look of a Blood Angel exposed for the first time to the effects of the Rage. ‘Erasmus said Aelus made a grave error, and that we must learn from it. He said that Aelus’ death was fair exchange for the thousands of their dead, and we will avenge him. We were looking for the silent ones when you arrived. They stay away from the population now. We’ve cleansed most of this sector. We’ll get the rest.’

‘Are they daemons?’ asked Artemos.

‘I know little of daemons, but I don’t believe so,’ said Fidelius. ‘They are easy enough to kill, though they are stealthy. They’re psychically able, they cloud the mind, they’re never where you think they are, but they are of flesh and blood. There’s not very many of them. Dangerous to unmodified humans, but little threat to us. I can imagine how easy it was for them to wreak havoc on a planet this sparsely populated, but we would have had this continent secure and been on our way to the other hemisphere if it weren’t for…’ He paused again. Disquiet showed in his eyes. ‘If it weren’t for this.’

‘What became of Aelus’ gene-seed?’ asked Artemos.

‘It was lost. We tried to save it, but we could not. We have no Priest with us. I apologise. Perhaps it could have been retrieved, but I do not have the skills.’ Fidelius turned his attention back to Astorath. ‘If you have responded to our message, then the worst has happened. I didn’t believe it was possible. Erasmus was so noble.’

‘You thought it something else?’

‘I am no expert, and hope deceived me, perhaps, but I hoped so. If you are here, it is not some other thing. It is the Black Rage.’

‘It is,’ Astorath confirmed.

‘I am surprised you arrived so swiftly. I sent word only days ago.’

‘I did not get your summons,’ said Astorath. ‘I require no message. The music of torment called me, so I came.’

‘It happened here,’ said Brother Caspion. They were in a house built around the topmost trunk of the arrow-like trees. The spongy wood, slender as a man at that point, made a central pillar around which all else was constructed. Broken pots lay about, and a smear of blood darkened the wall. ‘Brother-Sergeant Erasmus had been behaving erratically all day, but we did not know what we were seeing. If we had, we would have acted.’

‘Be calm, young brother. This is not your doing,’ said Astorath.

Caspion nodded gratefully. ‘They were giving us a feast in our honour when Erasmus turned. He ate the meat, then something happened, and before we could react he had killed two of the mortals, shouting as he did about traitors and being trapped. We tried to restrain him but his strength was too great and he escaped. The natives have not returned here since it happened.’

‘Relations seem good otherwise,’ said Astorath.

‘Fidelius convinced them Erasmus was influenced by the creatures. They were shocked a Space Marine could be so affected, but they believed it,’ said Edmun.

‘I do not like to trade in falsehood,’ said Fidelius. ‘Forgive me.’

‘A lesser evil. Let them continue to believe it is so,’ said Astorath. ‘It would be for the best if that remains the story they tell after we are gone.’

‘Better they fear the alien than their protectors, brothers,’ said Artemos.

‘Better still that the twin curses of our gene-line remain secret,’ said Astorath.

‘They feared that their meat offended us, and triggered his behaviour somehow,’ said Edmun. ‘Is that how it happens?’ he asked tentatively.

Astorath watched the Primaris Marines closely. Though the new Space Marine breed seemed resistant to the flaw, they were still taught the rituals and the severity of the curse. To little effect, it seemed. So many had been inducted so quickly that they’d had no time to learn properly.

‘The women, Srana, she mentioned this ordes meat. Was there anything unusual about it?’

‘They said it was a delicacy. They were excited. The animal has to be hunted, and they have not been able to hunt since the creatures came. It was bloody, and tough, but of good savour,’ said Fidelius. ‘Could it have been the cause?’

‘It is most unlikely,’ said Astorath. He paced around the room and stopped by the bloodstain. ‘Whose blood is this?’

‘Brother Erasmus’,’ said Caspion, ashamed. ‘I injured him.’

Astorath pulled a strip of spongy fungus wood from the wall. He chewed on it, letting snatches of experience be teased from the coagulated blood. There was little genetic material, and therefore little could be gleaned. Beneath the ponderous thoughts of trees, Astorath got impressions of

bewilderment and fear, then the anguished tune of Erasmus' soul played loud and drowned out all else, and he spat the chewed wood out. 'The Rage comes unannounced. You all partook of the meat?'

Fidelius nodded.

'Then it was not the cause. You are unaffected? No increase in your thirst?'

'None, my lord. It does not affect us the same way,' Fidelius said, almost apologetically.

Astorath looked around the room. 'And Erasmus burst out of the door? After you wounded him?'

'Yes, my lord. Erasmus then dropped to the forest floor,' said Fidelius.

'One hundred and thirty feet,' Edmun said disbelievingly.

'He had his battleplate,' said Fidelius. 'No weapons except his combat knife. He vanished. We've combed the area thoroughly, grid by grid. Edmun is a good tracker.'

'I lost him,' Edmun said. 'We followed his trail to the bounds of the next settlement, where the trail gave out. The enemy tried a sortie against us there, and we were forced to fight. When it was done, I could not find his tracks again.'

Astorath nodded, still examining the room.

'I am finished here. Tell the people of this village they have nothing to fear. Soon you will be able to complete your mission, for the greater glory of the Emperor. First, you must direct me to where the greatest concentration of enemy are.'

'But why?' said Fidelius. 'They are to the north, Brother-Sergeant Erasmus ran south.'

'He will be where the enemy are,' said Astorath. 'We are warriors. We suffer a warrior's curse. Though they may be violent towards their own, those under the influence of the Black Rage are still servants of the Emperor. They fight for Him until the end, however misguidedly.'

Astorath prepared for the giving of mercy. He had stripped the top portion of his armour off, and sat cross-legged in a habitat yet to be reclaimed by the planet's depleted people. Artemos held out his bare arm for Astorath to cut, and with the Sanguinary Priest's blood Astorath anointed his skin. He lapped at Artemos' wrist twice to blunt his Red Thirst, and, through the vitae of Sanguinius running through Artemos' veins, to remember the sacrifice of their primarch. The curse music sang in Astorath's mind as the blood filled his mouth.

'You can't go alone,' Artemos said. He wiped his arm and clad it in ceramite again. The ritual was a businesslike affair. Under such circumstances, the armouring of the soul was done with the same practical battlefield efficiency as the reloading of a boltgun. 'The settlement to the north is full of the enemy. We should all go.'

‘I have fought some of the most celebrated heroes of the Blood, brother. These creatures are feeble. They will not slow me, and when I find Erasmus I will best him.’ The blood symbols were drying on Astorath’s skin. He sheathed his blade, and began to collect his armour pieces.

‘Let me come with you.’

‘This is my duty alone, brother.’

Artemos helped him don his back-plate and breast-plate, holding them in place while Astorath bolted them together with a sanctified power driver.

‘Then take some of Erasmus’ Primaris brothers with you, as a precaution against mishap. We cannot afford to lose you, when we have lost so much already.’

Astorath looked over his shoulder into Artemos’ eyes. ‘Are you seriously suggesting a mere sergeant might get the better of me?’

‘No, my lord.’

He returned to his armour. ‘There will be no mishap. The Primaris Marines will remain here. It is inevitable that they will see the effects of the Black Rage first-hand one day, for we all do, whether as witnesses or sufferers. I would prefer them not to yet. The Primaris brethren brought hope to our Chapter. It is best if as few of them as possible see the curse that afflicts the rest of us. The Chapters of the Blood have been through much these last centuries. Allow us a moment of resurgence before we must face the monsters within again.’

‘The truth will out.’

‘Truth always does. However, it will be many years before these Primaris Marines return to Baal. They have done good work here, but this entire world must be freed. They may die before they can pass the information on to others of their kind.’

‘Are you sure I cannot accompany you?’

Astorath ran his thumb lightly down the edge of the Executioner’s Axe. Blood beaded on his skin.

‘I go alone, Artemos.’ He pushed his still-bleeding hand into his gauntlet and locked it into place. ‘Do not ask again.’

The forest of Asque was silent. So dominant were the fungiforms and moulds that animal life was scarce. Astorath walked roads high over the ground choked by fungal growth. Symbiotic relationships with the fungi were common in the few animal species which thrived, and ever adaptable humanity had taken their lead. The road was carried on buttresses encouraged to grow from nearby fungus-trees, but the network required maintenance; in the years since the rift the sky-roads had buckled and the marks of human habitation everywhere were vanishing.

It took so little to erase humanity’s efforts from existence. Astorath’s duties, though obscure, were ultimately a part of the fight against that, to prevent mankind vanishing from history like so many hundreds of species before it.

The town rose in delicate towers high above the canopy. Once he had passed under the shadow of the first, he encountered the enemy.

A pallid, bloated shape disentangled itself from the shadows and leapt at him. Astorath's head buzzed with psychic interference. He could not see it clearly at first, but the efforts undertaken to improve a Space Marine's mind were as great as those that went into rebuilding his body. He shook the thing's influence off, and its form was revealed to him.

It was vaguely humanoid, mushroom-pale, bloated, disgusting as so many xenos were. Hooked claws in its wrists squealed off his armour. The mouth snapped at him, every bit as hideous as Srana had said.

'Surprise is your chief weapon, creature,' said Astorath. He grabbed it by the throat and held it aloft. It was surprisingly strong, and would easily slay a mortal man. 'But you have little else, and nothing that can do harm to me.'

In his grip the beast was helpless. It thrashed about and hissed until its breath was spent and it was dead.

He dropped the pasty thing. It sank bonelessly into itself and began to emit clouds of yellow spores from its body.

Astorath strode on, following strains of a funereal tune only he could hear.

'Brother Erasmus!' he shouted. His amplified vox echoed down silent streets, scaring up rare aviforms and startling parasitic growths into shedding slimy seeds. 'Brother-Sergeant Erasmus! Return to us! Return to your Chapter! Return for the Emperor's mercy!'

His shouting attracted the creatures. En masse they clouded his mind more effectively, but he aimed his blows at the blurred shapes and cleaved them down anyway. They sought to bury him under a weight of their bodies, and did, but they could not penetrate his armour. Soft fingers pried at his seals. Sharp claws scraped at his ceramite. The Emperor's armament held firm against their efforts and they died by the dozen.

'You do not learn,' he said, striking them down. 'You cannot harm me.' He paced his blows to preserve his strength, weathering the soft drumming of their alien fists on his battleplate and chopping them down with a forester's steady rhythm.

Killing all the way, he passed into the inner districts of the town, where grand squares were upheaved by the unchecked movement of living supports. Towers were choked by the rubbery vines, great tangles of them bursting from every window. The further he went the more creatures appeared, all attacking without consideration for their feebleness. His boots crunched on human bones made soft by decay. Thousands had died here, and it sorrowed him.

Finally, a rune flicked into being upon his helm-plate. A chime announced his true quarry was near. He activated his jump pack and burst from a knot of the creatures.

Black wings spread, prolonging his short flight. He directed himself to a broad platform overlooking a further square, and there he found Brother Erasmus.

The fallen sergeant raged and screamed, shouting imprecations at enemies ten thousand years dead. The blood red of his armour was obscured by milky alien blood and brilliant smears of yellow spores. His knife had broken halfway along the blade, but he wielded it as if it were the finest sword. A hundred of the fungoid creatures swarmed him. Astorath wondered how long Erasmus had fought. It was not unusual for a brother gripped by the Rage to fight until his hearts burst, the ferocity of the affliction being enough to overtax a Space Marine's body, but if Brother-Sergeant Erasmus had fought since the day he had fallen, he showed no signs of fatigue, and still killed with great efficiency.

Astorath watched awhile. Though the Black Rage was a terrible curse, those afflicted displayed an echo of the primarch's martial glory when they fought, and the sight never failed to move him. The music of Erasmus' suffering sang loudly in his mind.

'Terrible, and glorious,' Astorath said, then called out, 'Brother! I am coming to you. Stand fast! Soon your suffering shall be done.'

He ignited his jets, and thundered down into combat.

They fought side by side, purging the town of its infestation. Astorath's axe buzzed through the xenos trailing lightning, and in short time the battle was done.

The High Chaplain faced the lost brother.

'Father!' Erasmus cried, his voice choked with spiritual pain. 'Have you come? Is Horus dead?'

'He is long dead,' Astorath said calmly. He held his axe across his body in both hands. 'Come to me, and know an end to suffering.'

'If he is dead, why do I see him, standing over me? Why does my blood leave my body? Oh father, why have you forsaken me?'

The lost brother threw himself at Astorath, and the day's real fighting began.

Erasmus was possessed by the death memories of Sanguinius, and full of desperate strength. Astorath judged Erasmus too strong to grapple, so took his time, softly singing the hymns of ending as he struck away pieces of the warrior's armour and bled away his might with gentle cuts. There were quicker ways to end one of the lost, but Astorath would do so only in extremis; the warrior must be comforted, and blessed. The final rites of death were as important as the rites of apotheosis and must be correctly observed.

Astorath fought to preserve the secrets of his Chapter. He fought to end the rampages of those who could not find a noble end in battle, but most of all he fought to save their souls. Kindness guided his axe above all things.

'You are a traitor, a betrayer, a worm in the eye of father,' shouted Erasmus. 'You consort with evil for your own benefit while the Imperium

burns! Why? Why? Why?' Erasmus directed a flurry of blows at Astorath. The High Chaplain stepped back, mindful that even a broken blade propelled with such strength could break his armour.

'I am not Horus, brother,' he said softly. 'I am your redemption.'

He stepped back and around, swinging his axe with the motion, and took Erasmus' leg off at the knee.

The Space Marine fell face forward and howled piteously with sorrow. He tried to rise.

'I die! I die! Slain at the hand of my brother!'

Astorath stepped in, kicked the knife from the Space Marine's hand and with another blow shattered his armour's power plant, expertly deactivating the battleplate without triggering an explosion. A good part of Erasmus' strength was thus denied him.

'Why?' sobbed Erasmus. 'Why does it have to end this way?'

Astorath squatted down, rolled Erasmus over onto his back and pulled free his helm. The warrior's face was swollen with vitae, his eyes blooming with burst blood vessels. His eye teeth were at their fullest length. But there was yet nobility in him. There always was in the lost.

Astorath rested his palm on the warrior's brow. 'Peace, brother. Be at peace. I am not Horus. I am not the Emperor. I am High Chaplain, and you are Brother-Sergeant Erasmus. The wars you speak of were over ten thousand years ago. Now your fight is, too.'

Erasmus' eyes cleared a little.

'What… what has happened to me?'

'The Black Rage. Our father's death, echoing down time.' He gave the Space Marine a solemn stare. 'Now, listen to me. We are Space Marines, we do not pray. We hold no person to be a god, and all gods to be monsters. We give praise to no one but mortal heroes, and we thank the Emperor as a man and not a divine being. But we will pray now, you and I, for peace in death.'

Astorath spoke sacred words. Through the fog of the rage, Erasmus repeated them, and a little more lucidity returned.

'Our lord's anguish…' Erasmus said. Tears spilled down his cheeks. 'I feel what the Angel felt. I can't stand it. He is sorrowing for me, for all of us. End it swiftly, please!'

'Fear not, my brother, mercy is my purpose.'

Astorath rose. The Executioner's Axe descended.

The music stopped, and a new weight was added to the High Chaplain's burden.

He recovered Erasmus' head, and voxed Artemos.

Artemos performed his grisly work back in the village. The Primaris Marines guarded the habitat door. The people kept away. They knew something sacred was happening within. Reductor blades sawed though bone, and ribs cracked wetly to give up precious gene-seed.

‘Fear not, brothers,’ Astorath said to them. ‘Your brother died as all Blood Angels should, in communion with the Great Angel, Sanguinius.’

‘High Chaplain,’ said Fidelius. ‘May I have permission to ask your guidance?’

‘You may.’

‘Will this happen to us?’

Astorath answered thoughtfully. ‘Your creator, Belisarius Cawl, has many qualities, but he is a braggart and wears hubris like a gown. It is impossible to eliminate Sanguinius’ suffering from our souls. But it may be that you are immune from its effects.’

‘Then, if we shall never see what the Angel saw, can we truly call ourselves Blood Angels?’ asked Edmun.

‘You are Primaris Marines, but you are Blood Angels first. The blood of Sanguinius flows in your veins as it does in mine. You may never suffer the way that Erasmus did, but rest assured, you are my brothers,’ said Astorath.

He made sure to meet the eyes of each of them, and as he did he heard a few distant notes of pain – a foretaste, perhaps, of what might come to pass.

Artemos joined them. ‘It is done. Erasmus’ gene-seed is secure. We will return his armour to the Chapter.’

‘Then we are finished here,’ said Astorath. He looked to the sky, and opened his vox-link ‘Sergeant Dolomen, we are returning. Prepare the Stormraven for flight. Please inform the *Eminence Sanguis*, we depart immediately. More duty awaits us.’

Somewhere in the immensity of space, a new tune had begun to play.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

LEMARTES: ENDLESS FALL

By

David Annandale

PRELUDE TO LEMARTES: GUARDIAN OF THE LOST

'What do you see?' Corbulo asks.

His eternal question when I exit stasis. His necessary one. He must know if I understand him. Whether I know him. Whether I know myself.

The question is useful to me as well. It orients me. It forces me to look hard at my surroundings. To determine if they are real. It gives me focus. It requires concentration, and I must concentrate every conscious moment to stay afloat in the dark ocean.

'I see you, Brother Corbulo,' I answer. 'I see the crypt.'

My eyes wander over banners commemorating the victories of martyred madmen. Over arches giving on to staircases. The steps leading up to the cells of heroes. Dangerous heroes. Lunatic heroes.

Other steps go down. There is a deeper darkness than my crypt. A chamber of agony.

My eyes turn to my left. Corbulo is not alone. A rare thing here. I am visited by a figure of shadows and pallor. I am the bringer of death, but he is the lord of death. We are brothers in transformation. 'I see you. Lord Mephiston.'

'It is good to see you once more. Chaplain Lemartes,' he says.

Difficult company for Corbulo. The monster and the revenant. The two conquerors of the Black Rage. The symbols of hope. And to most disturbing victims. I am a weapon too lethal to be allowed consciousness except in battle. He is the phantom who took the place of Brother Calistarius. We are not the hope Corbulo seeks in his quest for a cure, but we are all he has.

My fate is a painful one. I will never know true rest until my death. But Corbulo's path is a cruel one. He must seek salvation where none, perhaps, exists. I do not envy him that task. When he requests my help, I do what he asks. Each time, I am sure, his hope erodes a little bit more.

Between Corbulo and Mephiston is a battle-brother I do not recognize. I know his armour well enough: it is the black of Death Company. His face… There is something familiar about it. Perhaps it was once known to me, but the distortions of the Black Rage obscure the memory. He is held down on a chirurgy table by adamantium clasps and heavily sedated, but

the grimace of rage is undiminished. The only effect is to reduce the curses he hurls at Horus to a whisper.

'Who is that?' I ask.

'Reclusiarch Quirinus,' Mephiston answers. There is contempt in his tone.

Quirinus. A name I have not heard since the Second War for Armageddon. He was lost when his ship, the Gladius-class frigate *Harrowing Faith,* vanished into the warp. Though his return is a surprise, his current state is not.

The Black Rage is never a surprise; it is an inevitability. If Blood Angels escape death and the Red Thirst long enough, their path ends here. This is destiny.

'What happened?' I ask.

'He joined Fourth Company in the battle against the Sanctified on Pallevon,' Mephiston says. 'He did not… approve… of me.'

'His fall is of great interest. Chief Librarian,' says Corbulo.

'I bow to your judgement in this matter. Brother Corbulo.' Mephiston sounds sceptical. Something else he and I share. I believe in the value of Corbulo's quest and I believe in its necessity. However, I do not believe it can ever succeed.

'You told me that he chose to fall.'

Mephiston nods. 'That is so.'

'He chose?'

Speaking is difficult. Words are a risk. The effort necessary to speak them takes a portion of my focus away from keeping hold of the real. If my grasp slips, I will begin to see the Imperial Palace again. But the revelation is a surprise and an unwelcome one.

'Then he dishonours the livery of his armour.' I say. 'I will not have him in Death Company. Why have you not called on Astorath?'

'He fought with honour in accordance with his beliefs,' Mephiston tells me. 'He perceived the daemonic at work in me. His decision flowed from there. Given the choice between falling and being corrupted, as he believed, he chose to fall.'

'Misguided fool' I say.

'You and I have a special perspective.' Mephiston's defence of Quirinus is grudging But he has made his point. Quirinus is wrong, but not a coward.

Corbulo says, 'The Reclusiarch's honour is not why I have brought you here or why I have wakened you. The circumstances of his fell have an element we have not seen before: choice.'

True. It would take a special form of courage to embrace the doom of the Black Rage. 'You think he still has a choice?'

'You do. Perhaps he is a second.'

'I have no choice.' I remind him.

We are able to converse. I give him rational answers. But I am not Mephiston. He emerged from the Black Rage. His former self is dead. No one knows the precise nature of the being returned from Armageddon. I am still Lemartes. I have not emerged. The barrier of madness falls between my brothers and myself. Corbulo asks me what I see when be releases me from the stasis chamber. I must ask myself that with every breath. I must remind myself that I am here, on Baal. That this figure is Corbulo, this one Mephiston and the other Quirinus. I must remember that I am not on Terra. That Horus is not close, within reach of my vengeance.

Reality is always ready to soften. To blur. To reshape into the more concrete lie. The lie that calls for violence.

'The possibility I hope to explore,' says Corbulo, 'is that you do have a choice. If Quirinus did, perhaps he does not. And so perhaps you. Perhaps all of us.'

I exchange a look with Mephiston. We respect Corbulo. Every avenue of possible hope must be explored. There are insights only open to the Sanguinary High Priest, but the same is true of us. He is the light of the Blood Angels. We are the shadows. We understand the strength of the Black Rage.

Mephiston understands its strength of transformation.

I understand the strength that comes with it.

'lf only that were true.' I say.

'No one has escaped the Black Rage.' says Mephiston. 'Calistarius died.'

'And I am not free.' I add.

My brothers are wary of me. They should be. They are right to keep me in stasis except in times of crisis. Corbulo has mentioned no conflict. I am conscious on his initiative. This is a risk. Only Astorath would also have the right and the reason to take it.

'I do not dispute the truths of your states;' says Corbulo. 'But they are aberrant. And their very deviation from the expected course of the rage

creates the possibility for more. Its power over us is not absolute.'

I do not dispute that statement. I nod once, granting the point. I look at the straining snarling Quirinus. 'What do you ask of me?' I say.

'Will you examine the Reclusiarch?'

'But that is your domain of expertise, Brother Corbulo.'

'Your sight is not mine. You may see what is invisible to me. We know how he fell. Perhaps because of those circumstances, he might rise. Tell me if you recognize anything similar to yourself.'

'Very well.'

I leave my stasis chamber behind me and approach the table that holds Quirinus. I lean over him. I examine his face. Do I see parallels to my own situation? I do. But they are not what Corbulo has in mind. The teeth clenched so tightly they could bite through iron. The corded neck, straining toward the enemy behind the eyes. Sometimes the figure we see and the person we attack are both enemies. Sometimes we attack the vision, but harm the ally. Quirinus's breath comes in short, quick panting and is impatient with anger, he whispers his rage.

'I will stop you, Horus. I will pull your hearts from your chest and tear your arms from their sockets. You cannot escape me, you cannot hold me down - you are an abomination in our father's eyes and you will no longer infect the galaxy…'

On and on and on. The curses, the desperate anger, the calls for vengeance and justice. I know them. I utter them. I feel them. There is nothing new here.

His eyes, then. What of his eyes? They are wide. They stare with focused intensity at enemies dead for ten thousand years. They are consumed with hate. All is rage, there is no hope there.

But Corbulo is right. Quirinus's descent Into the Black Rage was not typical. Mephiston grants that too, or he would not be here. I will make every attempt then. That is out common duty, in the fight against our common curse.

'Reclusiarch Quirinus,' I say. 'Brother, hear me. I know what you see. I see it too.' Not at this moment, but in the next, I could. One slip, and the blurring begins. 'It is a lie. Reject it.'

Quirinus does not react to my words. The curses continue. They become incoherent, melting into snarls. His hate for the Traitors is too strong for words.

'Reason will not work,' Corbulo says. 'Not at this stage. Please speak to him, Chaplain. As only you can.'

Yes, I can speak with the mad. I share their language.

I must make a deliberate slip. I must have the blurring. One foot in each reality. The balance is precarious.

Blurring.

The crypt losing definition.

The clash of arms. Growing louder.

I am on Baal. I am on Terra. In the crypt. On the ramparts of the Imperial Palace.

Seeing the walls battered by the Traitors' artillery.

The rage blossoming.

In the periphery of my vision, the endless flicker of blood and crawling of night-cracks.

The fall. Into the waves. Into the ocean of wrath.

The crypt failing to ghosthood.

The palace hard in its betrayed reality.

The urgency of war. Quirinus is shouting. The Traitors charge through a breach.

How dare they.

We will make them pay.

The growl forms in my throat. The hunger for enemy blood.

The…

No.

I surface. My fists are clenched tight enough to crush adamantium. Returning to the real is a psychic effort that could tear flesh.

'Yes,' I say, snapping each word as if breaking bones. 'Yes. I can speak to him.' I pause, working on each breath until I am not snarling. 'I speak to him in the Rage.' I turn away from Quirinus and fix my gaze on Corbulo. I concentrate on making him solid. To banish the blur.

Faint echo of the war. Fading.

'I can lead him to battle,' I continue. 'I cannot draw him from the madness.'

How can I free him from what I cannot escape myself?

'You see nothing in him?' Corbulo asks. 'Nothing unusual?'

'Nothing. His fall may have been unusual, but where it took him is not.'

Mephiston has remained silent during my attempt. 'Quirinus is lost to us,' he says now. The words are not a question. They are a pronouncement.

'But not to me,' I say. 'He will serve.' My brief communion with the maddened Reclusiarch has shown me, at least, the depth of his rage and faith. He is worthy of the martyr's end in Death Company.

Corbulo nods. 'So be it.' He is finished with Quirinus, but not with me. 'Brother-Chaplain, I would ask your help a bit longer.'

Ah. We will be walking the stairs to the chamber beneath the crypt, then. Another descent. 'Of course, brother.' I turn to Mephiston. 'It was good to see you, Chief Librarian.'

'And you. The chance to speak with you off the battlefield is a rare one.'

'As it must be.' Every minute that I am not destroying the Emperor's foe is a minute of wasted torment.

'True.' With that acknowledgement of my burden, the Lord of Death departs. To Corbulo he says, 'I will tell the sentinels to come for Reclusiarch Quirinus.'

He leaves the crypt and takes the staircase leading up. When he is gone, Corbulo leads the way to the other steps.

'What do we seek?' I ask as we descend the spiral. The echoes of our ceramite boots on granite are hollow. The tolling of solemn bells. Empty of hope.

'Choice,' says Corbulo. 'I will not abandon the possibility just yet. There is one thing more to explore. We can do nothing with Quirinus's choice. We can perhaps with yours.'

'I see.'

'I hope you do, Brother-Chaplain. You and Lord Mephiston have extraordinary will. There is little question that it has played a role in your preservation.'

Such as it is, I think. 'Go on.'

'With will comes choice.'

'Always?'

'I am not being simplistic, brother. Of course not always. I cannot will myself to have our primarch's wings.'

If he could, the very image of the Angel would stand before us again.

'However,' he continues, 'we have both witnessed our Librarians fly on wings of psychic will.'

'We have,' I agree.

'We need to find the correct vector for your will, Chaplain Lemartes.'

'And do you know what that would be?'

'I am not so arrogant.'

True. The battles Corbulo has fought, and the strength he has given the Chapter, are legend. They are a source of justified pride. But Corbulo looks to our future. It is his sacred duty. The shadows he must see there are humbling.

'I have thought about Quirinus's fall,' he says. 'About his choice. I have thought about Lord Mephiston's return from the Black Rage.'

'His returns,' I correct

'Indeed. It is his first that is suggestive, however.'

We arrive at the chamber. It is here that I submit to torture, and do so willingly. It is here that Corbulo tortures me, and does so unwillingly. The space is a small octagon. In the centre of the floor sits a stone throne, reinforced with adamantium struts. Shackles, also of adamantium, await me. There is little else here. There are no banners, no engravings on the walls. This is not a place to celebrate. What matters is that the walls are thick. They must contain my roars just as the throne will restrain my physical struggles. A few lumen globes in sconces on the walls provide the bare minimum of illumination. All is shadow here. So it must be. The events that transpire in this chamber should remain in the shadows.

There has been so much failure.

Yet we continue. Tortured and torturer, willing and unwilling. Bound in service to our Chapter. To the memory- of our primarch. To the Emperor.

I sit on the throne as Corbulo affixes the restraints. They are many and heavy. Multiple bands for each limb, even one for my head. I must be immobilized. At extremes of unleashed rage, if I were not denied all leverage, I would shatter the stone prison.

Corbulo steps back. 'With your permission, Chaplain.'

'Proceed,' I answer.

His question and my response are set phrases. But they are not formalities. He will not begin without my consent. Each experiment he conducts carries a great risk I may never resurface. I may sink into the ocean of the rage and drown. Even now, before we begin, the pull of the current is powerful. Chained, I relax my hold on my instincts to the smallest degree, and the wrath seeks to strike out. In the gloom of the

chamber, the red in my vision pulses. Crimson sheet lightning from a distant storm.

'What we must do,' Corbulo tells me, 'is know the full conditions of your fall.'

'I remember it perfectly.'

'Do you meditate on its details.'

'No.' It is the hour of my greatest defeat. It haunts me. Its effects make violence out of every second of my existence. Because of this, I turn from it.

'Please do so now,' says Corbulo. 'Find the essence of the Lemartes who fell. In that moment, seek the possibility of choice. Reject the rage as it comes for you.'

'To contemplate the moment of my fall may compound the blow,' I say.

'It may,' Corbulo admits.

'As long as we are clear.'

'My voice is the voice of reality. Use it as your lodestone.' I nod and begin.

I relax my grip on the *here* and the *now* and let myself sink into the ocean.

I do not close my eyes. There is no need. The Black Rage blots out the truth of my surroundings. The blur is upon me.

Anger boils. Anger at betrayal. The pain of the Angel's death splits my soul. A rumble fills my ears. It is the sound of engines. Of a voidship. The bridge of the *Vengeful Spirit* begins to coalesce around me.

No.

I struggle back, but not all the way to the surface.

The wrong ship. Remember. Remember differently.

I shift the memory. It has the mass of a mountain. It has ten thousand years of weight. I move it just enough.

The ship changes. It is the *Crimson Exhortation.* I am with Fourth Company, commanded by Captain Castigon, the Lord Adjudicator. We are in low orbit over Hadriath XI. We have come to reclaim this world from the orks.

I am in the embarkation bay. My brothers prepare for the attack. They take their oaths of moment. Squads board the Stormravens. I exhort the company to greatness. I call on them to exterminate the greenskins for daring to taint ground sacred to the Emperor with their presence. I am

filled with justified anger. In spirit, I am already planetside. With my rage alone, I throw back the enemy from the walls of the Imperial Palace.

I blink, catching myself before I articulate that thought. I dismiss it as an excess of fervour. But it is there. The first slip.

The memory is venom. I see the mistake now. I know what is coming. My frustration at my wilful blindness enrages me.

Somewhere, very far from here, someone is straining against shackles and snarling.

But if I had faced what was happening, would it have made a difference? Corbulo wants me to find the moments of choice. This was one. I knew the import of what had happened. I chose to ignore it. It was the only choice possible. I chose to serve the Emperor for as long as I could. That is still my choice. It is the choice that makes possible my veneer of sanity.

The second slip, the fatal one, comes within minutes of the first. I continue my sermon. The words of rage come to me as they never have before. My brothers need no urging to hate the greenksins, but I instil in them a greater fervour yet.

'Brothers!' I call. 'The Blood Angels will strike the ork strongholds with transcendent fury. We will be a scythe through their ranks. We will reap such a harvest of death that the brutes elsewhere in the galaxy will fear the thought of Hadriath XI.'

That is what I mean to say. The words are in my mind the moment before I speak. But what I promise is a measure of unimaginable justice visited upon the Traitors. 'Horus deludes himself,' I cry. 'See how his forces hurl themselves against the walls…'

My voice trails off. My rage intensifies. I am wrong. I am not on the ramparts. I am on a ship. Not the embarkation bay of the *Crimson Exhortation.* I am on a bridge.

The worst betrayal happens here.

Blur upon blur. Baal becomes the Vengeful Sprit. *The battle-barge becomes the* Crimson Exhortation. *Strike cruiser to Terra. And change again. The Angel dies before me once more.*

Layers upon layers of delusion. Each perfectly real until the next forces its collapse. I fall through a cascade of eras and dooms. I have lost all sense of where reality lies.

Lies.

Everything is lies.

I seize upon the kernel of awareness that formed at the moment of my fall.

In the bay, as I see one vessel become another, one war become another, I know I am falling. I plummet into the rage.

Do I make a choice then?

Do I embrace the madness as Quirinus did?

Or do I choose awareness?

Both, a voice whispers. *Both.*

I clutch that word. It is important. Then the confusion takes me again. I sink deeper into the ocean. Broken memories assail me. The fragments draw blood. They are the shrapnel of the initial fall. Time is chaotic. Visions shift from blink to blink. The only constant is the wrath. The need to bring vengeance upon Horus, to track him down through boiling dreams of the real.

Deeper. Disappearing into the black.

Now I am on the surface of Hadriath XI. I wear the livery of Death Company. I have been inducted. I am fighting what must be my last battle.

But how do I know this? Why do I have memories of Hadriath at all?

Because of the knowledge. Of knowing that I had fallen.

The knowledge is fuel. Fuel for the rage. I curse the flaw that has taken me. Then my brothers and I storm towards a Traitor stronghold. I am freeing Terra. The growing kernel of my new identity sees through the illusion. The realities of Hadriath XI filter through. Two sets of memories form. They are simultaneous. Equally real. Each reinforces the other's wrath.

I hurl myself against the enemy. The foe is the forces of Horus. The foe is orks. The answer to both is extermination.

The memory of the truth separates itself from the vortex.

Here is what happens:

The orks have taken an Imperial fortress for their stronghold. They have disfigured it with their savage markings. Crude, snarling faces cover the aquila. The iron walls sprout a profusion of spikes and twisted scraps of metal.

Death Company has come to storm those walls. We will punch a hole in the ork lines. Take the base. Force their retreat. The Stormraven *Bloodthorn* inserts us less than a thousand metres from the gate. Its

squadron flies on, bombarding the ramparts with assault cannons and Bloodstrike missiles.

The orks are not defensive fighters. They do not wait behind their walls. They rush from the gates to meet us. Thousands come for the single squad of Death Company. We cannot survive the encounter, but we will capture the attention of the orks. They will think of nothing except stopping us, and they will ignore the movements of Fourth Company until it is too late.

The squad and the army collide in a contest of savagery. On the walls, the orks fire at the Stormravens. They fire their artillery at us. Shells explode on all sides. The greenskins are heedless of their own kind. Chunks of bodies rain down in the aftermath of each blast. The footsoldiers also fire with abandon. The air is a storm of projectiles. The world shakes with the hammer of shells, the pounding of booted feet, the snarls of feral hate.

My snarls are among them.

The orks trample and shoot each other in their frenzy to take us on. The greenskins nearest us attack with massive cleavers and axes. Our speartip stabs into their ranks. Blows rain down on me. My armour is damaged. I am wounded.

I do not defend myself. My rage is too great. Each hit is another outrage to be avenged. The enemy I see is not orks, but I register each hit and repay it tenfold. I will not stop my charge, nor do my brothers. We smash through, as oblivious to injury as we are to reality. I hold my bolt pistol before me. I fire straight ahead, blasting apart the head of any enemy that tries to stop me. With my left hand, I make sweeping cuts with my crozius arcanum. Its power flares crimson with every sweep. It tears open armour and flesh. My boots crush viscera. I cannot be stopped.

It is Traitor Astartes I am killing. They are weak before my rage. Their treachery leaves them vulnerable. I strike and strike and strike. I storm through their blood. I am vengeance incarnate. I cannot be stopped.

In the real of the memory, the orks fall before Death Company. They meet their match in uncaring ferocity. Our armour and our weapons are superior. We slash our way towards the walls.

The orks do not retreat. The scores we kill just make room for the next wave clamouring for our destruction. We feel no pain. Our wounds do not matter. Except they do. An ork with a power claw crushes the head of the

brother to my right. No rage can overcome death. His body collapses. It disappears as the green wave pushes closer.

The Sons of Horus close their ranks.

Our wedge erodes. The orks kill us one by one. For each brother we lose, we become more dangerous. Each loss is another act to be avenged. Another goad to fury. All the worlds and eras blur. I see nothing but red. The red warning flashes of my auto-sense runes are indistinguishable from the pulsing crimson behind my eyes. I advance and kill, advance and kill. My throat is torn by my unceasing roar. I am rage.

Existence collapses to two thoughts: I will avenge the angel; I will serve the Emperor. Every act is the expression of these thoughts. Every shot, blow and explosion of blood is their embodiment. The rage is absolute but it is focused.

And then the enemies vanish. I have reached the opened gates. Fourth Company devastates the disordered ork lines. The stronghold falls to us.

I fall too. With no enemy to destroy, my body loses the forward impetus of the rage. The wounds take their toll.

I tumble into darkness. The darkness of the ocean that swallows up all the memories. It is constant across the eras and the delusions and the realities. Down. Down. Drowning.

But I will serve. The determination does not fade, it is the star in the void. My Emperor. My primarch. My Chapter. I *will* serve.

This has nothing to do with choice. This is faith. To vanish into the Black Rage would be to break faith. And betrayal is the greatest evil.

For the first time, I rise from the depths. I will swim this ocean forever. I will never find the salvation of shore. But this madness is also my service. It is the weapon I will yield.

I surface. A figure looms over me with an axe. I recognize him. He is Astorath. I speak to him by name.

'Let me serve.' I tell him.

He arrests his blow.

And there. The memory is complete. I must surface again and again. I am submerged by so many fathoms of time and echoes. The rage seeks to drown my consciousness of self. I must find the *now* again. I must find the *here.*

Surface. I tell myself. *Serve.*

I rise through the dark. I see the star of my duty. So the weight of the madness would pull me back, it must not.

Rising. Rising. The spark becoming light. The hard silver edges of what I know will be the real.

Then the light shifts red. Something comes between me and the light. It is not a memory. It is not from the past. It is not from the *now.*

It is from the *soon.*

I break surface, and the ocean turns from night to blood. The blood is in frenzy. The waves are mountains. The air suffocates with blood as spray and rain. And there is something else. Something more than my rage. Something with its own volition.

Beyond the blood, advancing, a shadow.

Something is coming.

There are no details. Everything blurs. I try to pierce the veils of rain and waves. An alien rage submerges me.

Darkness again. Drowning again. I roar upwards. I will fight.

And when I break surface, I am on Baal, shackled to the throne. Corbulo is speaking to me.

'Hear me, Chaplain Lemartes.'

I hear him. The vision fades. What did I see?

'I hear you, Brother Corbulo.'

'Good. You have returned. What did you see?'

'My past.' The first time my delusions have been of my own history.

'And?'

'What I am was never a matter of choice, brother.' But I saw something else. There is something I must warn him about - a threat to the Chapter and to the Imperium.

Isn't there?

Impressions slip away. There is nothing to grasp. Nothing to articulate.

Corbulo sighs. 'I am sorry to hear that,' he says. 'Still, I take encouragement from the forcefulness of your return. You were able to use my voice to your benefit. This is something we can build upon.'

'I did not hear you, brother.'

'Perhaps not consciously.'

Not at all, I think to myself. I cannot disprove his theory, however. Perhaps there is a hope there, despite my doubts. I will not argue. I am troubled by something else, but I have lost the source of my disquiet.

The tension in my limbs is still rising. I need war or oblivion. 'I must return to stasis,' I tell Corbulo.

He releases me, and we mount the stairs to my crypt. All the way, I try to recapture the reason for my concern. I fail.

'The Chapter honours you for your service, Chaplain Lemartes,' Corbulo says as he prepares to seal me in stasis again.

'Summon me when I am needed,' I tell him.

And then I think, *it will be soon.*

Why?

The chamber closes. The nothingness of unconscious descends.

And so does the impossible.

In the dreamless, frozen time of stasis, a rain of blood begins.

~ BLOOD ANGELS ~

LEMARTES: GHOST OF RAGE

By

David Annandale

SEQUEL TO LEMARTES: GUARDIAN OF THE LOST

Absence stops me from going any farther. Emptiness. A lack of echoes. There is nothing at all in the cell before me. But the nothing seizes me. Its contours mean something.

'What do you see, Chaplain Lemartes?' Corbulo asks.

So often a test, this time the Sanguinary High Priest's question is genuine curiosity. My grip on the Rage is solid, and Corbulo knows this. The quiver of anger is a low tremor. I hold the visions at bay, watching the corridors of the Blood Angels strike cruiser *Crimson Exhortation* and refusing to see Horus's *Vengeful Spirit*. Time and space are not in flux. We are departing the orbit of Phlegethon. Soon we will make the leap into the immaterium.

I see Corbulo. His golden-haired, noble countenance is the echo of the Angel himself, the embodiment of the hope of our Chapter. I see in him my opposite number.

I am the curse. My armour is black, my helmet a skull, and that is my true face, not the mask of flesh beneath it.

I see things as they are. I see clearly. My state is as stable as it ever becomes. Yet I have stopped before the cells. This is where the Death Company were held during the voyage from Baal to Phlegethon. The prison designed to hold the worst of traitors became the means of containing the martyrs of the Black Rage. I do not resent the indignity of barred doors. I accept the need to encase the supremely faithful in the same spaces that have held the foulest souls, and so are tainted beyond any purification ritual's power. The madmen must be kept from harming themselves and others until the moment they are unleashed to their certain deaths.

I accept all this. Before our arrival on Phlegethon, and before the destruction the Death Company visited upon the daemonic before being itself overcome, I marched past these cells without stopping. I walked past the howls and struggles of my brothers, and did not stop. There was no reason why I should do so.

But now I did.

What did I see?

'Nothing,' I say to Corbulo.

His face, that model of purity, the reborn image of Sanguinius, is puzzled rather than troubled. 'If there were truly nothing, we would not be having this conversation.'

'Nothing that I can see, Brother Corbulo,' I correct myself. 'I am *called,* though.'

'By what?'

'I do *not know.'*

Tombs without bodies. Memorials without names, races without origin. Echoes with no cries. These are the shapes of the troubling void in the cells. My brothers were here. They are gone now. The howls of their madness and their wrath scarred the walls of the *Crimson Exhortation.* They died on Phlegethon. Their deaths have meaning. In a war of rages, ours was victorious. The Blood Disciples and the daemon Skarbrand unleashed fury that altered the face of the world and killed millions. It was not enough. Our Rage is righteous. Theirs was tainted by the guilt of betrayal. We smashed the enemy. Our sacrifices were nobility itself.

The lost of the Death Company found the peace of duty's end. I have shepherded so many hundreds of my brothers to that peace. The pain never dulls. It is as acute and as endless as the Rage itself. But there is acceptance. I understand my destiny. I know of its importance. And this is not the first time I have walked past newly empty cells.

Does *potential* have an opposite? Not an absence coiled in anticipation of all its possible presences to come, but a lingering, still coiling, still anticipating, long after all presence and possibility has been extinguished. Rage was here. It is gone. But the absence is perverse.

Corbulo opens the nearest cell door and enters the small space. He turns around slowly, eyes sharp, observant, but discovers nothing. He frowns, frustrated.

Because nothing is all there is to discover.

'Are we under attack?' he asks me.

'I am not Mephiston, brother, but…' I hesitate. 'I do not think so.'

Am I merely reacting to my own sense of loss? I do not believe that is the case either. The absence *does* have a shape.

Corbulo glances toward the end of the prison hall. The interrogation cell there is where he has performed his exploration into my condition, seeking a cure, a salvation. A fruitless quest. The cell is also where my stasis tank has been placed. On the journey from Baal to Phlegethon, I remained conscious. There was war to be planned. But now the war is won, the toll has been paid. I am a danger. It is time for me to be contained. I have not earned rest - that is impossible - but I am due a period of oblivion. True rest is the reward of death, once all duty is done. 'Perhaps we should wait,' Corbulo says.

'Perhaps.' I stare at the cells. I wonder now if even death will offer respite. In the tragically brief periods between the extinction of the Death Company in battle and its replenishment as the Black Rage consumes new victims, there is the promise of peace in death. But at this moment, I wonder if even that is true. I wonder if the Rage burns after death.

The absence gathers definition. I recognize it. Soon there will be an echo.

'Something is happening,' I tell Corbulo.

I speak those words, and a *jolt* travels through the *Crimson Exhortation.* Its violence hurls us against the corridor wall. The vaulted ceiling cracks. Stone powders down to the deck. Tocsins shriek.

Without a word, Corbulo and I race toward the bridge. That blow was enough to break the bones of a ship, and *the Exhortation* has already suffered many injuries during the war. When the Prophet of Blood grasped Phlegethon's swarm of moonlets, striking the surface of the planet with thousands of meteor strikes, the Blood Angels Fourth Company's ship was battered by the storm. Its hull is damaged, its void shields far from their full strength. Many gun turrets are smashed or offline. As for Fourth Company itself, the Knights of Baal are weary. The losses on Phlegethon were high. The psychic damage caused by the entire company succumbing to the Red Thirst has yet to be measured.

We are not ready for another attack.

Though we will confront whatever form our foes have taken, and we will crush them.

We reach the bridge, entering at the level of the strategium. Captain Castigon stands ahead of us at the lectern. His aquiline features place him in the same noble lineage as Corbulo. He stares forward into a blaze of writhing madness. The *Crimson Exhortation* has entered the immaterium, but this should not be. We are nowhere near the Phlegethon System's Mandeville point. There was no warning to announce an imminent jump. The state of the vessel's Geller field is uncertain. And the oculus is still open to the destructive sights of the warp.

The rest of the Knights of Baal are converging on the bridge. I advance to a few steps behind Castigon. Below us, the mortal crew of the *Exhortation* has turned from the oculus. The serfs have reacted quickly and donned their blinders. They remain at their work stations and perform their duties while shielding their minds from the fatal madness beyond the ship.

'Why have we jumped, brother-captain?' I ask Castigon.

'I don't know.' He does not turn from the oculus or order it shielded. There are times when we must look upon the warp, when we must absorb its attacks on sanity in order to know the nature of our struggle, to see the face of the enemy. 'The augurs detected a sudden thinning of the materium. In seconds, we were pulled in.'

'The barriers in the Phlegethon region are weak,' I say. 'The war has weakened them further.' Pillars and seas of blood. The rain of moons. These have been days of evil wonders.

'Agreed,' says Castigon. 'But this must be more than chance.'

'Yes.' We have been battling prophecies and fate, and distorted mirror images of rage. The galaxy cannot contain such reservoirs of randomness. 'There must—' I begin, but then a flare of anger, blinding in its darkness, bursts in my head.

'There,' Corbulo says at the same moment. He points.

My breath grates with effort as I hold my hands in check. The flicker of the bridge was brief, a shard of a second where I was surrounded by the forces of the arch-traitor Horus. I know where I am. I hold fast to the material weight of the ship and the presence of my battle-brothers.

I look out the oculus. The shifting, shrieking convulsions of the warp part. The drawing of a curtain of flesh, the fading of a mist of delusions. A world appears. It is no passing dream of the immaterium. It is a coherent ~~enti~~ty. A daemon planet

The perversity of Phlegethon acquires a dark logic. The improbable cluster of moons on the other side of the veil are the remains of this world's material form. The warp distorts but it also reflects. Before us is the truth of the Phlegethon System. The monstrous warp power leaking in to the materium is the result of this great spectre. It haunts the system, its orbit a track of horror and of the impossible summoned into being. And now we are in its path.

'Helmsman!' Castigon shouts.

'I see it, Lord Adjudicator,' the helmsman shouts.

I feel the strain of the engines. The laws of planetary physics do not apply in the warp. Space and time are lies here. But we must react, and we have no alternatives but to respond to the information assaulting our sense and our augurs. We are on a collision course. We must evade. And we must hope the actions we take will have their analogues in the warp, and be our salvation.

When the daemon world appeared, it was perfectly centred in the oculus. As it looms closer, vaster and hungrier, it begins to shift down and to starboard. I cannot tell if the course change will be enough. Ipos shouts for more power. The deep hum of the strike cruiser becomes louder. It rises in pitch, as if the machine-spirit of the *Exhortation* were about to scream.

The planet's being is an attack. It appears at first like a gas giant, covered in an atmosphere of permanent storm and the colours of boiling hate. Now its truths reveal themselves, cancerous, the only kind that exist in this unholy realm. There is no atmosphere. The storm is the surface. Continents twist like serpents. Oceans rise as a single geyser, then plunge into an abyssal crater only to emerge on other side of the globe. I see mountain chains squirm and burrow, then shape themselves into snapping teeth.

Closer yet. The strike cruiser vibrates in its agony. Castigon, Corbulo and I stand silent and still. Ipos is at war. The battle is his. We cannot assist, only interfere.

New truths now, new horrors. The planet reaches out for us as we brush against what would be its atmosphere. The mountains become tendrils of stone, a tangling forest. The smallest thread could crack the hull in two. They envelop the *Crimson Exhortation.* The noose tightens.

'Down and port!' Ipos yells. The collisions appear imminent, but size and distance *(all lies*) are deceptive. The slender strands are kilometres thick. *(Lies.)* The bow of the strike cruiser dips slowly, so slowly. The ropes of granite imagination draw closer yet. Ends like crooked claws descend towards the hull.

There is movement on the tendrils. A stirring. A boiling. Closer still. What name can there be for the things in frenzy on the length of the strands? They are angles and lines. They are blackened bone and ropes of the flesh. They have claws and teeth, yet nothing in their forms can be called arms or heads. There is no consistency from thing to thing. Each is unique, and they are all from the same species. Their movements are jagged, ecstatic, stabbing. A dance, a revel, a seizure, an attack. They are fast. Their gestures are blurs, yet each must be hundreds of metres tall.

'Throne,' Castigon mutters. 'In the name of the Angel, what are those?'

Closer. Closer. Ipsos has aimed the ship at a gap between two widely separated strands. The *Crimson Exhortation* is sluggish as it reorients. Its mass is as slow in its manoeuvres here as it is outside the warp. The planet's ropes come close to brushing against the superstructure. The frenzy becomes even clearer.

Castigon winces and looks away from the beings of abstraction and muscle. My gaze is held. I cannot look away. Pain lashes out from behind them. It is lightning against my nerves and mind. Each sharp, savage gesture is mimicked in my nervous system. Pricked, the Rage grows. It is given wind and energy by the dance, by the stabbing of prey.

I stare at the abstractions and absorb the way their clusters of limbs cross. They are a geometry of blood and form other angles. A recursion of

aggression. New beings coming into being, expanding from the tips of others. I understand that process of creation. I realize what these beings are. They are crystals of rage.

The *Crimson Exhortation* passes through the gap. We escape the crushing net. But not cleanly. A tendril touches the port side of the hull. Clusters of the crystals detach themselves from the stone and scuttle onto the prow. They continue their dance on the ship. Movements of broken glass, rhythms of hatred, a spreading of virulent meanings. They pound the hull, seeking entry, seeking purchase.

'Do not look at them!' Corbulo cries. 'They bring madness.'

'They bring wrath,' I say.

'Yes,' he says. 'Both. The same.'

As if fighting a trance, Castigon reaches to his right, to the controls next to the lectern. He shuts the oculus. My last sight of the immaterium is of rage multiplying on the surface of the hull while the planet pulses below us. The crystals' dance resonates through the ship. Something is knocking to get in. Something is seeking purchase.

'Ipos?' Castigon asks.

'Collision averted, Lord Adjudicator,' the helmsman says. 'We are still in orbit. I will free us.'

'I have faith you will.' Castigon turns around to look at us. 'How do we fight those?'

The pounding is closer. The crystals are attacking the superstructure.

'They will be difficult to target with our batteries,' the captain continues.

'No,' I say. I speak through a jaw clamped tight as an iron vice. 'Do not fight them.'

'Chaplain Lemartes?' Corbulo is surprised. Castigon must be as well. When have I argued against combat?

'They are rage,' I say. 'Do not feed them.'

'This is wisdom,' Corbulo agrees.

The pounding is inside my head. My perception of the bridge wavers. I deny the uncertainty. I deny the effect of a mindless embodiment of wrath. A snarl builds in the back of the throat as I grasp pride. There is nobility in the Black Rage. There is honour as well as tragedy. We are as afflicted by purpose as we are by anger. We will punish treachery.

I walk a dangerous line. If I become consumed with the need for justice, I will fall. I will lose my grip on the present.

I am steadfast in purpose. I am Lemartes, Chaplain of the Death Company. I am not on Terra. Nor am I on the Vengeful Spirit.

The pounding in my mind recedes. One rage retreats before the heroic form. The crystals find nothing to shape in me.

Then the thought comes: *There is a chink in our armour.*

The cells. The absence, the anticipatory trace of anger. All the howling and madness of the Death Company in those walls. The contours I sensed were on the verge of coming into being.

'There is something I must do,' I tell Corbulo and Castigon.

'What is it?' Corbulo asks.

'Let no one follow me,' I reply. I must do this alone. Instinct, premonition, reason: they urge me to isolate the cells. The rage outside seeks a conduit. If it finds it and spreads to my brothers, a plague will be unleashed. I am already infected. This is my fight as much as the vessel's fate is in the hands of Ipos.

I don my helmet and leave the bridge, descending the staircases of the superstructure and drawing the Blood Crozius and my bolt pistol. I race to the depths of the *Crimson Exhortation.* Serf or battle-brother, all who see me step aside. I know what they see: a black spectre, swift in wrath. I am the reminder of the doom that comes for the Blood Angels. Who in the Chapter can claim never to expect the day when Astorath will have to grant me the final mercy?

I ~~ar~~rive at the prison hall and close the door behind me. I seal it and start down the corridor. My steps are measured. There are cells in both walls. I stop just before the first pair on either side of me. The air has changed since Corbulo and I left for the bridge. It is charged with gathering potential. The pounding of the crystalline dance is louder here, even though I am much farther from the vessel's exterior. The effect is of a knife plunging deep into the body of a sacrificial victim with every blow. What matters is not proximity or contact, but receptiveness. The prison is very receptive. The absence has become potential. The walk, the deck, the bars in the doors, even the Chapter banners hanging from the centre of the vault - every stone and thread is haunted by the Rage of the Death Company.

Gradually, the echoes form. The howls reach my ears as if from the depth of a vast well. They rise. They gain strength. They are no longer distant. They swirl from cell to cell, circle me in accusation and fly to the vaults. Trapped, they fall back and grow louder yet.

The torches in the wall sconces flicker. The light fades. The air changes. I taste smoke through my helmet's grille. It comes not from the torches, but from the centre of the cells. It is a dirty smudge at first, born of the echoes, then it spreads out, thickening, reaching its fingers through the bars.

Absence, potential, new presence. And still nothing I can fight.

The smoke thickens further. Its taste is foul. In the cells and in the corridor, nuclei form. One, then three, a dozen, a score. More. The grey becomes red. There is a sudden contraction of smoke around each nucleus, and where there was air, now there is flesh. Daemons fill the prison. They are winged and taloned, their heads narrow. They stalk towards me with a

hunched gait. Their jaws hang open and they growl with idiot hunger, idiot desperation, idiot rage. They are furies, and they are Legion.

I raise the Crozius. 'By the Emperor and by Sanguinius, come and be purged from my sight.'

They do not understand. They barely have selves, but they have purpose. They are built around the ghosts of my brothers' Rage, and their hide is the red of the Blood God. The clash of anger that tore Phlegethon apart is not done with us.

They rush me. I fire, sweeping the barrel of my pistol in a wide arc before me. Shells slam through the bodies of the furies. On Phlegethon I fought Skarbrand. These beings are mere wisps in comparison. Every shot is fatal. The furies cannot hold their integrity when the mass-reactive rounds explode. They burst apart, daemonic ichor turning back into smoke.

The greater mass of the furies closes with me. I keep firing and bring the Blood Crozius down and across in powerful sweeping blows. Its aura crackles and flashes with the crimson light of purifying wrath. The holy relic will not suffer the daemon to live. I smash one fury after another, crushing heads and torsos, striking with enough force to snap spines in half. Furies shriek and fall. Their talons scrabble against my armour. I destroy them for that temerity.

They crowd about me as if eager to be destroyed. I oblige.

They have desecrated the memory of the lost brothers of the Death Company. The outrage stokes the fires of my anger.

I have been butchering the furies for over a minute, losing count of how many I have destroyed. But their numbers remain the same. I am too caught up in the moment of the kill. I must think clearly. I am more than a machine of slaughter. I look up and appraise the battlefield.

The daemons keep forming. Every fury I kill becomes smoke. A few moments later, the smoke condenses back into a fury. The cycle seems perpetual. I, however, am not. The individual daemons can do little against me. Collectively, they are more effective, waves eroding granite over time.

I reload my pistol, bracing myself as the furies hurl themselves against me. I start shooting again, putting multiple shells into each daemon. I bring the Crozius down with greater force on one fury at a time. I destroy

them with greater violence as if they could be annihilated beyond the hope of return.

Bursts of smoke, then the rebirths. I cannot break the pattern.

Enraged, I fight harder, with yet more violence.

At the back of my mind, I see another pattern. I see its danger.

Castigon speaks to me through my vox-bead. 'Chaplain Lemartes, internal augurs are warning of a daemonic incursion in the prison.'

'Yes.'

I kill, and I kill, and I kill. I will outlast the abominations.

'Reinforcements are on their way.'

'*No!'* My reason bursts through the growing darkness of anger. No other Blood Angel must set foot here. 'Rage is aboard this vessel, brother-captain.' Every syllable another blow, another shot. 'I am already among the lost. This is a trap.' Every fury is a vector of plague. At their core, they carry the Black Rage. I will not replenish the Death Company in this way.

'Do you understand?' I ask Castigon.

'I do,' he says, after a long pause.

'If you ignore my warning, you are dooming the entire company,' I tell him.

'What about you, brother?'

'Do you think I have not been doomed long since?'

I am barely aware of my final words to Castigon. I do not know if he responds. The furies make a concerted rush. They fly at my head, clutching at my legs. They pummel me with their fists, and wings wrap around my helmet. I am blind. My ears fill with the snarls. The daemons attempt to bury me with their numbers. They finally manage to pierce my armour. Their claws sink into my flesh, drawing blood.

Into my mind.

My soul.

They summon my furies. Before my inner sight, a monolith of stone rises from the ocean of madness, glowing black with heat. It is carved from despair. Should I ever falter in my duties or my faith, should my will fail me, this terrible stone waits to shatter my identity and let me drown in the Black Rage.

There is no hope, the stone whispers. *There is no cure. You hold back the inevitable and become a monster.*

'No!' I cry. I smash the stone with the Blood Crozius. The column disintegrates. Its pieces fall back into the sea of the Rage.

The tide takes me too. I am still fighting, but what?

What is this war?

Horus.

Yes, Horus has betrayed us all. He has killed the Angel.

I curse his name. I will rip his ship apart. I will avenge every death caused by this atrocious heresy. I—

No. No. No. No.

Not Horus.

I pull back. I am Chaplain Lemartes. I am not fighting Horus. I am fighting minor daemons that refuse to be dead.

They seek to drown me in my own wrath.

I respond with still greater rage.

The waves lap higher.

And I hold them back.

I am Rage, but I am also Will. The curse has worked for my destruction since I fell. It claws at my rationality every second of my consciousness. I deny it victory. I turn the Black Rage against itself. I am reason in the depth of madness, and so I guide the lost. The battle to see the real is renewed moment by moment by moment. Each victory leading to nothing but the eternity of struggle. No rest, no surcease, no pause.

But still victory.

I roar and with a swing of the Crozius, I crush and incinerate the furies who smother me in darkness. I can see again. Now I charge them. They are contemptible. They are weak facsimiles of true Rage. They are constructed from the memories contained by the walls of the cells, the memories of true anger, and these ghosts are flawed. The nobility of the Black Rage is absent, and so too is its true power. The curse is not temptation to corruption. It is an immolating need for justice.

I holster my pistol, using Blood Crozius only, and strike the daemons with the fury of righteous vengeance. The horror of the Angel's death pervades my being, and my wrath is more terrible than the pallid anger of these weak beings. I bring the crozius down on the nearest fury as it tries to stab its claws beneath my gorget. The relic blazes. The daemon bursts into smoke, and the smoke burns. I march through the flames and shatter the next fury. It too burns. The fires spread. I am the purging violence. My anger burns more brightly than that of the daemons, and it is a rage brought into being by the machinations of Chaos. I transform the prison

into an inferno, but I do not fall beneath the surface of the Rage. Fury and Will are entwined. I am the darkness of death and the fire of the sun.

The moment comes when there is nothing left for me to strike. The fires smoulder, diminish and vanish. There is no smell of smoke. Everything has been consumed.

I stand in the middle of the hall, forcing myself to lower the Crozius. I take three breaths. The Rage does not diminish. It never does. But I suppress its actions. I look to the left and right. I am not seeking enemies, but imposing stability on my surroundings. I tell myself what they are, and what they are not. What millennium this is and which it is not In the cells now, there is truly nothing. But as I leave the prison, there are still ghosts. They walk with me. They are the memories of every member of the Death Company. The doubly lost: first to the Black Rage, then to death. There are other ghosts too, but they lack form. They are anticipatory. They are the ghosts of the lost yet to come. The Blood Angels who do not know their fate will see them in my fatal care very soon.

The ship still vibrates with strain. I know its pain. But the clamour of the tocsins has ceased. On the bridge, the oculus is shut. The activity is calmer. The urgency has passed.

'I have dealt with the incursion, brother-captain,' I tell Castigon. 'The ship is cleansed.'

He looks at me as if he would ask something. He decides against it and nods. 'We are all grateful, Chaplain Lemartes.'

'The daemon planet?' I ask.

'We have broken free of it,' says Corbulo.

'Though we are still in the immaterium.'

'We are,'

So be it. The *Crimson Exhortation* is warp-worthy, at least for now. The ship is a rigid manifestation of order cutting through a sea of madness. As am I.

At least for now.

~ ANGELS RESPLENDENT ~

THE CROWN OF THORNS

By

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.'

– Psalm 27

'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.’

– Psalm 19

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.’

– First Psalm

‘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.

~ FLESH TEARERS ~

CRIMSON NIGHT

By

James Swallow

The sewer's awful stench would have crippled a normal man with stomach-knotting nausea. It was a heady, foul cocktail of repellent, putrid matter, stagnant water and base stinks that signalled ripe decay.

Tarikus rose from his hands and knees where he had slipped into the sluggish embrace of the liquid effluent, and spat out the matter that had choked his mouth. The gobbet impacted the hard-packed bricks of the sewer tunnel wall with a wet slap; something small and chitinous, an insect scavenger he had almost swallowed, skittered away. He glanced backward, in the dimness catching the merest glint of metal from his armour, the paldrons and plates piled perhaps a quarter-league behind him, at the mouth of the access channel.

Tarikus shook off the oily remnants of the muck and came up as far as the tunnel confines would let him. His bulk filled the conduit, the edges of his shoulders clipping the bricks, his head forced down into a cocked angle. Even bent at the knees, it was all the Space Marine could do to fit his mass into the narrow passageway. Had he still been clad in his ceramite armour, he would have been wedged like a bolt shell jammed in a cannon breech after just a handful of paces. In his service to the Golden Throne, Tarikus had lost count of the number of Light-forsaken worlds he had fallen upon in the name of the Emperor, carrying the savagery and the cold fury of the Doom Eagles with him; and if his captain wished it, he would venture on and fight naked, with tooth and nail if that were to be the order of the day.

He spat and took a measured breath, concentrating for a moment, casting his hearing forward. Beyond the drips and spatters of falling water, past the slow slopping current of effluent, there were voices: faint sounds that someone without the enhanced senses of the Adeptus Astartes might had missed, murmurs borne to him on breaths of reeking air. The voices were indistinct, ephemeral, but laced with the touch of terror. Tarikus nodded to himself. He was close now.

His knuckles whitened around the grip of his bolt pistol, the solid shape of the gun and the weight of it in his fist familiar and comforting. Bringing it up to sight along the stubby barrel, he pushed forward, the rhythm of his footfalls sending ripples out before him, rings of liquid catching the faint glow of organic biolumes set into the tunnel roof. As Tarikus walked, he strained to catch a sound from his quarry, some random noise that might give away its position and alert him, but he heard nothing, only the pitiable crying of its victims. No matter, the Marine told himself, there can be no other way out of this stinking warren. He's in there.

After a hundred more steps, the tunnel suddenly ballooned out into a circular atrium, an open flood chamber fed by a dozen more channels, each of them - unlike this one - blocked by a heavy iron grate. Tarikus scanned them in an eye-blink: not one had been forced open. As he had planned, the foe had been caught in his lair and trapped there. Tarikus hesitated a moment, licking at the sickly air. In the near-absolute darkness down here even his abhuman eyes strained to make out anything more than gross shapes, and his scent senses were fogged with the sewer's fetor. With a hiss of effort, Tarikus leapt from the mouth of the channel and dropped the seven metres to the chamber floor, the wet crash of his landing sending a surge of liquid roiling away. The moans he could hear jumped an octave. He could see people arranged like some grotesque exhibition in the chamber's centre, each in a box-like cage, piled randomly atop one another. A tiny flicker of child-memory blinked through Tarikus's mind: a nest of building blocks, a tottering tower built by small hands towards the sky.

In that second, the foe exploded from beneath the knee-deep fluid, a massive man-form spitting a reeking rain out behind it. Tarikus reacted with impossible speed, the bolt pistol turning to target, barrel winking like a blinded eye. The Marine's finger tightened and rounds screamed from the gun, finding purchase in the creature's chest - impossibly, ineffectually, bursting through it to spark away into the walls.

Tarikus ducked as the heavy head of a massive hammer hummed through the air. A split-second too late, he realised the blow had not been aimed at his skull; the arcing trajectory of the hammer dipped down and caught him squarely on the forearm. The impact knocked the gun from his hand and it vanished into the dark, claimed by the murk with a hollow splash. The foe pressed the attack, emboldened by disarming the Space Marine, looping the hammer around for a crushing stroke. As it strode towards him, the Doom Eagle caught the glitter of a lengthy silver probe emerging from his assailant's other palm. Tarikus let him come on, let himself be pushed back toward the wall. As he retreated, he used his free hand to shrug a metallic tube from a strap on his wrist. Consciously willing his optic nerves to contract, he thumbed a stud at one end of the tube. With the brilliant fury of a supernova, a sputtering blaze of light erupted from the flare rod, filling the chamber with shuddering, actinic colour. The caged ones screamed, their faces caught in a frieze of cold white. Tarikus's eyes were fixed on the enemy before him, the foe revealed at last before the flare's illumination.

It stood a metre or so higher than he, clad in shrouds of rust-pocked armour, the broad feet anchored in the churning pool of effluent, the great mailed fists thrown up to protect its head, and the head itself concealed behind a helmet with dark eyes and the fierce grin of a breath grille. Except for its crimson hue, it was the virtual double of the armour Tarikus

had discarded at the tunnel entrance, and staring back at him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.

Brother-Sergeant Tarikus first cast eyes on the planet Merron as the Thunderhawk made a sharp roll to port. The craft turned inbound toward the starport - the barren desert world's only link to the greater galaxy beyond - and Merron's rumpled orange geography presented itself to the Space Marine. He gave it a practiced survey: there was just one large conurbation, toward which they were flying, and the rest of the land as far as Tarikus's eyes could see appeared to be nothing more than a great web-work of ruddy-coloured scars.

'Open-cast mines,' said a voice beside him. 'Merron is rich in iridium.'

'Indeed?' Tarikus said mildly. 'Thank you for telling me, Brother Korica. Having ignored Captain Consultus's briefing this morning, I of course knew nothing of that.' He turned to give Korica a level stare.

The younger Marine blinked. 'Ah, forgive me, sergeant. I had not meant to imply you were ill-informed about our new garrison posting-'

Tarikus waved a dismissive hand. 'You need not prove your eagerness by reciting the captain's words, lad. Sufficient enough that you have committed them to memory.'

'Lord,' Korica said carefully.

The sergeant allowed himself a small smile. 'You are ready for a new world's challenge and that speaks well of you, Korica. That is why you were promoted from novitiate rank to the status of battle-brother with such rapidity… but this is not a place where we will find combat awaiting us. Merron is a way-station garrison, somewhere to re-arm and lick our wounds while we watch the Emperor's mines for him.'

'But if that were so, why not use the Imperial Guard to protect it? Are not we more valuable elsewhere?' There was a hint of wounded pride in the youth's voice.

'Mere men? Ha! Iridium attracts the greed of weaker souls like a candle does moths. We could not expert mere men to stand sentinel over it, nor expect them to repel any of the warp-cursed traitors who prey on the Imperium's riches.'

The Thunderhawk rumbled through a pocket of turbulence and Tarikus gave a curt shake of his head. 'No, only the Adeptus Astartes can truly place duty before base desire.' The disappointment on Korica's face was clear as day, and Tarikus waved him away. 'Fear not, lad. If the Corrupted return to this world as they have in the past, we'll be in the fray soon enough.'

The younger Marine looked downcast and Tarikus watched him for a moment. So raw, so untried, he thought, was I ever the same as he? He had not exaggerated when he praised Korica for his swift rise to full status as a Doom Eagle, but still Tarikus regretted that such a promotion had been necessary. On the ice planetoid Kript his company had met an

overwhelming force of rotsouled Traitor Marines and lost fully a quarter of their number. Although the enemy had been routed, the blood cost they exacted was paid back with new men, new brothers advanced from the scout squads. Under Tarikus's direct command, Korica, and with him Brother Mykilus and Brother Petius, were among many newly fledged Doom Eagles. Tarikus gave himself a moment to remember his fallen comrades; they had met death at last on Kript's airless plains, and gone to Him willingly with the blood of the impure on their hands. The sergeant had personally recovered a relic from the field of battle, the shattered blade of a chainsword that was now a memorial to one of his brothers. When his time came, Tarikus hoped that the Emperor would grant him so perfect an ending.

They rode out across the blasted ferrocrete plain of the port in a line of Rhinos, bikes and speeders, carrying at the head the metallic banner of their standard. From his vantage point at the hatch of his squad's transport, at the rear of the procession, Tarikus nodded at the clean dispersal and formation of the vehicles. Before him, the full might of the entire third company was spread, a glittering steel parade of tactical, assault and terminator squads - a suitable first impression for the Doom Eagles to make on their inaugural posting to Merron.

His gaze wandered to a force of vessels clustered at the southern quadrant of the airfield. They too were Thunderhawk transports, but wine-dark in colour where Doom Eagle craft were gunmetal silver. Their brooding livery looked like old, dried blood beneath the light of Merron's red sun. On their tail-planes they sported a disc-shaped sigil, a serrated circular blade kissed with a single crimson tear. The ships belonged to the Flesh Tearers, one of the smallest but most savage Chapters in the Adeptus Astartes.

Tarikus let his helmet optics bring them closer. Dozens of Marines were trooping aboard the Flesh Tearer craft while helots and workers, probably Merron locals, were busily loading cargo pods. As he watched, one of them slipped and dropped a case, the labourer's face a sudden mask of fear. A Marine walked to him and gestured roughly, the worker nodding frantically, thankful his mistake had not cost him his life. Tarikus looked away and dropped back into the Rhino.

'…nothing but carrion eaters,' Korica was saying to Mykilus. The other young Marine glanced up at the sergeant with a questioning gaze.

'Have you ever served with them, sir?' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the ships. 'There are rumours-'

'You're not a child, Brother Mykilus. Your time to give credence to fantasy tales is long gone,' Tarikus snapped.

'You deny the reports that they eat the flesh of the dead?' Korica pressed. 'Like the Blood Angels that spawned them, the Flesh Tearers feast on corpses-'

Tarikus took a heavy step forward and the rest of Korica's words died in his throat. 'What tales you may have heard are of little consequence, lad. Soon the Flesh Tearers will be gone and we will assume their garrison here. In the meantime, I expect you to contain your half-truths and speculations - clear?'

'Clear,' Korica repeated. 'I meant no disrespect.'

Tarikus was about to add something more, but without warning the Rhino suddenly lurched to the right, the forward quarter of the vehicle dipping sharply. Loose items flew across the cabin and only the sergeant's quick reflexes kept him upright. The Rhino skidded to a shuddering halt with a heavy iron clang.

An attack? Tarikus's first thoughts were of battle and he snapped out orders. The squad did as he commanded and boiled out of the vehicle in a swarm, bolters to the ready, scanning for an enemy. As Tarikus rounded the Rhino, Captain Consultus's voice crackled in his ear-bead, demanding a report.

Tarikus expected to see a smoking impact hole or the burnt traces of a lascannon hit, but the vehicle was undamaged. Instead, the very road the Rhino had been passing over had given way, a massive disc of ferrocrete cracked and distended into a shallow valley. 'The road, brother-captain, it seems to have collapsed…' Tarikus banged his mailed fist on the Rhino's hull and signalled the driver to put the vehicle in reverse, and the slab-sided machine began to edge backward. The sergeant frowned.

The ground opening up beneath them was hardly an auspicious omen.

As the Rhino pulled back, a contingent of locals approached, cautious and fearful around the Space Marines, giving them a wide berth. They carried iron sheets and makeshift blocking to repair the collapse, and they went to work without speaking. Tarikus studied them for a moment to determine which one was the leader, then strode over to him. The man recoiled, his hands fluttering over his chest like birds.

'You,' Tarikus said. 'How did this happen?'

The man blinked fear-sweat from his eyes. 'B-by your leave, Lord Muh-Marine,' he stuttered. 'The airfield here, it was built over the old quarter. The cesspools are still beneath our, uh, feet. Sometimes, subsidence…' He trailed off, his frayed nerves robbing him of any more speech.

Tarikus looked past him. Some of the workers were covering the centre of the new crater with a rough cloth, trying to conceal something and making a poor try at it. 'You there, hold!'

The man reached out to touch Tarikus's armour and thought better of it, drawing back his hand as if it had been burnt. The Doom Eagle ignored him and stepped forward, the Merrons scattered like frightened dogs. Tarikus ripped up the cloth with one hand and peered into the crater. Where the road surface had sunk into a dark chasm, a small void had been cut into the old sewers below. From the hole a dozen scents assaulted the Marine, but one came to him with the cold familiarity borne from a

thousand battlefields. In the cesspool beneath the road were the naked forms of two corpses, pale and drawn, bleached by months of discorporation. ‘What depravity is this?’ Tarikus boomed, turning to face the Merrons. ‘Answer me!’

‘Don’t concern yourself, Doom Eagle.’ The words buzzed over the general channel of his helmet communicator, and Tarikus looked up to see who had spoken. Six Flesh Tearers had arrived, the black and red of their armour shining darkly.

‘Concern?’ Advancing on the Marine who had addressed him, Tarikus’s voice was almost a snarl. ‘Who are you to decide what should concern me?’

The Flesh Tearer removed his helmet and placed it under the crook of his arm, a casual gesture but one calculated to show Tarikus the skull painted on his shoulder plate and the rank insignia he bore. ‘I am Gorn, Brother-Captain of the Flesh Tearers 4th company. I command the Marine garrison on Merron,’ and here he hesitated, showing a little flash of teeth in a feral smile. ‘At least until the end of this day.’

‘My apologies, brother-captain. I did not recognise you.’ Inwardly, Tarikus fumed at his own indiscretion.

Gorn made a dismissive gesture. ‘No matter, sergeant. We will handle this.’ The captain directed his men into the crater.

‘If I may ask, what transpired here?’ Tarikus pressed. ‘I will have to make a report to my commander.’

‘A report, of course,’ said Gorn, lacing the comment with barely concealed disdain. ‘There have been minor incidents of unrest in the city, which we recently suppressed. This-‘ he pointed at the crater, ‘-is no more than a sad reminder of the same, most likely a few misguided fools who took their own lives in a death-pact. Nothing more.’ Gorn laid a level gaze on Tarikus. Clearly, the conversation had come to an end, as far as the company commander was concerned.

Tarikus glanced back at the Rhino. Korica had arranged the squad to remount the transport and stood waiting for him to return. ‘By your leave, then, brother-captain.’

Gorn nodded. ‘Of course, brother-sergeant…?’

‘Tarikus, lord.’

Tarikus. Tell Consultus I will receive him in the garrison tower within the hour.’

‘As you wish, lord.’

Am I a mere messenger now, Tarikus wondered as he walked away? Korica seemed about to speak as he boarded the Rhino, but Tarikus silenced him with a glare. ‘Get us out of here. Make haste to rejoin the column or else I’ll see you carry this heap of pig-iron into town.’ The sergeant regretted the sharp words almost as soon as he had said them; his anger was at the arrogant Gorn, not his own men.

Captain Consultus said nothing as Tarikus relayed the details of the incident, the two of them standing in the stone annex before the Space Marine garrison. The sergeant kept his eyes straight ahead as he spoke, but even in his peripheral vision he noted a stiffening of Consultus's jaw as Gorn's name was mentioned. Tarikus had served under the captain for over a century, and knew that this subtle sign indicated an irritation that in other men would have manifested as a shouting rage.

'Strange that he and I should cross paths after so long,' the officer mused. 'I had not thought I'd see Gorn again in this life. I'd thought the Flesh Tearers would have torn themselves apart by now.'

'This Gorn, brother-captain - you fought with him?'

Consultus nodded. 'Our Chapters met briefly on Kallern. You know of it?'

'The Kallern Massacres.' Tarikus recalled the records of the conflict from the indoctrination sessions of his training. 'Millions dead. Terror weapons unleashed in untold numbers.'

'And the Flesh Tearers in the middle of it all. What they did there earned them the attention of the Inquisition, from that day to this. They embrace the tactics of the berserker, rending and destroying all that stand in their way - enemy and ally alike. If I could command it, I would never place Doom Eagles alongside them, even in the darkest of days.'

Tarikus shifted uncomfortably. 'The brothers… tell stories about them.' The sergeant was almost ashamed to give voice to the thought.

'There are always stories,' Consultus said simply. 'The trick is to know if they are just stories.'

The door before the two Doom Eagles opened to reveal the chamber beyond, silencing any more conversation. A group of Flesh Tearers stepped past, among them a blunt-faced codicier. 'Captain Gorn will see you now,' he said, his grey eyes flicking over Tarikus's face. The sergeant said nothing, wondering if the psyker had heard every word they had uttered; as if in reply, the codicier gave Tarikus the smallest hint of a scowl.

Consultus entered the chamber, beckoning Tarikus with him. The exchange of commands was a formal ritual, and it required witnesses. Inside, Gorn was overseeing another Flesh Tearer as the Marine removed the company standard from the wall. This was a solemn duty, the banner a sacred artefact that no helot would dare lay hands upon. As the blood-red pennant was taken down, Tarikus heard the Flesh Tearers murmur a prayer to their Chapter's progenitor, Lord Sanguinius.

The two commanders met each other's gaze.

'Consultus.'

'Gorn.'

'My men are ready to take our leave of this sandpit. I can think of no better a company to take our place here than yours.'

If Consultus noticed the derisive tone in Gorn's voice, he gave no sign. 'The Doom Eagles will strive to be worthy of the honour of this posting.'

'Indeed.' Gorn removed a long ivory rod from a small altar before him. 'This token was granted by Merron's governor, as a symbol of our command here. Accept it from me and you will be this world's new defender.' He held out the rod to Consultus like an unwanted gift.

'A moment,' said Consultus coolly. 'First, I would address the report Brother Tarikus brought to me. These "uprisings" of which you spoke.'

Gorn grimaced. 'The report, yes. It is, as I told the sergeant, of no matter. A circumstance we dealt with. It will not trouble you.'

'All the same, I would have a full accounting of it before you leave.'

The Flesh Tearer commander gave a sideways glance at the other Marine, in shared, unspoken scorn at the Doom Eagle's expense. 'As you wish. Sergeant Noxx will see to it.'

'Lord.' Noxx spoke for the first time.

'Now,' Gorn continued, still proffering the ivory wand, 'For the Glory of Terra, I transfer command of the Merron garrison to Captain Consultus of the Doom Eagles. Do you accept?'

Consultus took the rod. 'In the Emperor's name, I accept command of the Merron garrison from Captain Gorn of the Flesh Tearers.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus and Noxx spoke together.

Gorn's mouth twisted in self-amusement as he took the banner from Noxx. 'You'll find this an agreeable assignment, Consultus.' He patted the chamber's only other item of furniture, a simple carved chair. 'This seat is most comfortable.'

Tarikus frowned; from any other man, such a thinly veiled insult would have had him knocked to the stone floor. Gorn and Noxx left, the heavy ironwood door slamming shut behind them.

'He mocks us,' Tarikus grated. 'Forgive me sir, but by what right-'

'Keep yourself in check, Tarikus,' Consultus said mildly, the words instantly stopping the sergeant in his tracks. 'You're not a novitiate any more. Quell your enmity and save it for the foe. Let Gorn and his men play at their games of arrogance. They have little else.'

Tarikus stiffened. 'As you wish, brother-captain. Your orders?'

Consultus weighed the ivory token in his fist, then handed it to the sergeant. 'Place this somewhere out of sight. We have no need to validate our command here with the display of vulgar trinkets. All of Merron will understand, the dedication of the Doom Eagles is symbol enough of our devotion to the Emperor.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus repeated.

The garrison tower stood ten storeys tall, dwarfing the largest of the other buildings in Merron's capital, and beneath the surface were a dozen basements and sanctums carved from the sandstone. It was cool and damp down here, a comparative comfort to the uncompromising heat above.

Tarikus made a circuit of the lower levels. Squads of Flesh Tearers were everywhere, completing their final preparations for departure, securing weapons for transit and storage. He checked here and there on the numerous Doom Eagles mingling among them, setting up storage dumps for ammunition and equipment. The groups of Marines moved around each other in a controlled dance of parade-ground efficiency, with little interaction.

Tarikus secured the rod in a weapons locker, and turned to discover he was being watched. A Merron male, half-hidden in the shadows, gave a start as he realised he had been discovered.

'Are you lost?' Tarikus asked.

The Merron's head darted back and forth, clearly weighing his chances at running away.

'Speak,' the sergeant said carefully.

The man flinched at the word and dropped to his knees, hands coming up to protect his face. 'Lord Marine, please do not kill me! I have a wife and child!'

Irritation flared in Tarikus. 'Get up, and answer my question.' He did so, and Tarikus felt a flash of recognition. 'Wait, you led the work crew at the starport.'

'I am Dassar, if it pleases you, sir.' The man was trembling, terror-struck in the Doom Eagle's presence. 'I beg you, I was just curious… about your kind.'

Tarikus had often seen common men cower before him. It was the manner of a Space Marine to expect this, as the greater populace of the Imperium - especially on backwater medieval worlds such as this - saw the Adeptus Astartes as the living instruments of the Emperor's divine will; but something sat wrongly with Dassar's behaviour. The Merron's fear was borne not from awe and veneration, but from outright terror.

'I am Sergeant Tarikus of the Doom Eagles. You have nothing to fear from me.'

'Y-yes, honoured sergeant.' Dassar licked his lips. 'But, p-please, sir, may I leave?'

'What are you afraid of, little man?'

At these words, the Merron began to weep. 'Oh, Great Terra protect me! Lord Tarikus, spare me! My family will have nothing if I am taken, their lives will be forfeit-'

Tarikus felt a mixture of confusion and disgust at Dassar's craven display. 'You are a helot in the service of the Emperor! What cause would I have to take your life?'

Dassar's sobbing paused. 'You… you are of The Red…' he said hesitantly, as if the statement would answer all questions. 'You are predators and we are prey…'

'You talk in riddles.' Tarikus bent down and placed his face by Dassar's. 'What is this "Red" you speak of?'

‘The children sing the rhymes,’ Dassar hissed, ‘Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and you’ll never be seen in sunlight again.’ He gingerly laid a finger on Tarikus’s armour. ‘Only the colour is different. We prayed we would be free of them, but now you have come as well, in numbers fivefold.’

Stone crunched underfoot behind him and Tarikus came upon his heel, whirling about. Framed in shadow, Sergeant Noxx pointed past him at the cringing servant.

‘You, vassal! Where is that case of grenades I ordered you to find? Your lassitude will not be permitted!’

Dassar bolted away into the dark, calling over his shoulder. ‘Of course, Lord Marine, I shall do as you order!’

Noxx gave Tarikus a hard look. ‘These locals. They are a superstitious lot, brother-sergeant.’

‘Indeed?’

Noxx nodded. ‘They’re full of naive fables. I would pay them no mind.’

Tarikus cast a glance in the direction that Dassar had gone and then pushed past Noxx, back up toward the surface. ‘I’ll try to remember that,’ he said.

Nightfall on Merron was a slow, languid process. Out on a long orbit around its huge red star, the planet had lengthy days far beyond those of Terran standard, and nights that were longer still. Tarikus watched the sky’s gradual drift toward red-orange twilight through the window behind Captain Consultus, the colour shimmering off the shapes of a dozen armoured Space Marines outside as they drilled in tight-knit groups.

‘You were right to bring this to me,’ he said carefully, ‘but Noxx is correct. I have examined the Adeptus Ministorum records of this world and its natives, and their culture is disposed toward myths and idolatry. The Ecclesiarchy allowed it to continue with guidance toward veneration of the Golden Throne, but some anomalies of doctrine might still exist.’

Tarikus shifted slightly. ‘Captain, that may be so, but this helot, I saw nothing but absolute dread in his eyes. Reverence breeds a different kind of fear.’ When Consultus gave no reply, he continued. ‘A commissar once spoke to me of the Flesh Tearers’ legacy of Sanguinius, of’ - and here Tarikus had to force the words from his mouth - ‘the curse of the Black Rage.’

‘What you are insinuating borders on heresy, sergeant,’ the captain stated coldly. ‘You understand that?’

Tarikus found himself repeating Korica’s words aboard the Rhino. ‘I meant no disrespect.’

‘I have seen the Flesh Tearers in their unbounded fury,’ Consultus said quietly. ‘They would take prisoners for interrogation, and we would never see them again. Once, I found a mass grave on the edge of my patrol zone,

filled to the brim with enemy dead. I thought to check the bodies for any whom still lived, but there were none. Instead, I found men with hearts torn out by human teeth, bloodless and bone-white.'

An image of the corpses in the crater returned to Tarikus's mind. 'If the Merron people are being preyed upon by…' He paused for a moment. 'By someone, and the Imperium does not protect them from it, their faith in the Emperor's divinity may falter.'

Consultus nodded. 'There are always dark forces that seek uncertainties such as this. If they were to gain a foothold on Merron, the consequences could be disastrous. That shall not come to pass while we stand sentinel here.'

'Will the inquisitors hear of this?'

The captain shook his head. 'This is a matter for the Adeptus Astartes. You, Tarikus, will take a few men and investigate these circumstances. I will have you put down this fable for all of Merron to see.'

'It will be my honour, captain.' The sergeant met his commander's gaze. 'I will follow this malfeasance to its source.'

'I know you will, Tarikus. Wherever it takes you.'

They found the body after only an hour of searching. Dassar's thin screech cut through the blood-warm air and brought Tarikus and Korica running, to where he stood flanked by Mykilus and Petius. Between the hulking forms of the two armoured Space Marines, Dassar looked waif-like by comparison, a child's crude sketch of a man against the brutal shapes in silver-grey ceramite. The servant had panicked when Tarikus had ordered him to accompany them, but it was the Merron's reluctant direction that had brought them here, to a landscape of wreckage and broken stone on the city's outskirts. Brother Petius raised his faceplate to the sergeant and flicked a glance at the ground.

'Elderly male, no clothing or identifying marks. I'd estimate he's been dead for two standard days.'

Tarikus accepted Petius's report with a nod. The young Marine's skills with matters of the dead were trustworthy; he would one day become a fine Apothecary for the Chapter. 'Show me.' Tarikus stepped around the shuddering form of Dassar and peered at what they had discovered.

'We found him concealed beneath some rubble,' began Mykilus. 'Not too well hidden, either. I suspect he was meant to be found, sir.'

The sergeant dropped to one armoured knee to get a closer look at the corpse. Like the bodies he had seen in the sinkhole, the frail old man's papery skin was fish-belly white and anemic. 'Drained of his vital fluids,' Tarikus murmured. 'Exsanguinated…'

'It is as he said,' Korica indicated Dassar, 'these ruins around the airstrip are a warren of tunnels. The ideal place to dispose of a body.'

'The others were found like this?' Tarikus asked.

Dassar nodded slowly. ‘Y-yes, Lord Marine. Sometimes weeks, even months after they go missing from their homes.’

Mykilus’s brow furrowed. ‘Are all you Merrons sheep? You did nothing about these abductions, you did not speak of them to the garrison commander?’

After a long moment, Dassar spoke again, his voice thick with fatigue. ‘We were told to keep our petty problems to ourselves.’

Tarikus stood up and gestured to Korica. ‘Wrap the body in Dassar’s sandcloak and take it back to the Rhino. We will treat the dead with the respect they are due. How was he killed, Petius?’

‘Look here, sir.’ The Marine pointed at a circular wound on the body’s chest. ‘A puncture point, just beneath the heart. This poor fool was sucked dry through some kind of instrument, perhaps a metallic proboscis or tube. I believe he was alive and conscious at the time.’ Petius removed a thin scalpel blade from a pack on his belt and picked at something on the dead man’s flesh.

Dassar turned away and retched into the scrub. ‘Oh, Emperor, deliver us from this evil, save our brother Lumen-‘

‘You knew this man?’ Korica asked.

‘The metalsmith’s father-in-law,’ Dassar choked. ‘Taken last month during the two-moon festival.’

‘Whatever kills these people does not murder before it is ready,’ said Tarikus. ‘How many others are still missing?’

‘A-a dozen, perhaps more…’

‘Then, where are they if they are not already dead?’ asked Mykilus.

Tarikus nudged a loose stone with his broad, metal-shod foot. ‘Beneath us…’

‘No one ventures into the tunnels!’ said Dassar sharply, ‘A foetid place running with pestilence. Any man who enters would surely sicken and die!’

‘Any man,’ echoed Tarikus. ‘But we are not mere men.’

‘Brother-sergeant,’ said Petius, a warning in his voice, ‘I have something.’ He held up a tiny sliver of metallic material that glistened in the fading daylight. Tarikus examined it closely; such an artefact would surely be imbued with the despair of so terrible and tragic a death - a relic well suited to be taken to the Chapter’s Reclusium on Gathis when this mission was at an end.

Mykilus intoned a prayer to the Machine God and gently waved his auspex over the fragment. ‘A piece of ceramite,’ he pronounced, ‘old and corroded. It seems crimson in colour.’

‘The Red!’ Dassar husked, but the Marines did not answer him. Their enhanced senses caught the sound of tracks long before the servant’s human ears registered the approach of a vehicle.

A Razorback tank in Flesh Tearer livery rolled into view between piles of rubble, which had once been brick-and-mortar buildings in the old quarter.

The vehicle halted and for a moment there was silence. With a squeak of poorly maintained hinges, the tank's upper hatch opened and a trio of Marines exited. Dassar shrank back, shifting to hide himself behind Petius.

'Ho, Brother-Sergeant Tarikus.' Tarikus recognised Noxx's voice.

'Noxx,' he replied with a nod. 'What brings you here?'

The Flesh Tearer sergeant looked around. 'I could ask you the same.'

Tarikus was suddenly very conscious that Noxx and his men were carrying their bolters in battle-ready stances. The same awareness seemed to flicker out to Korica, Mykilus and Petius, and from the corner of his vision, Tarikus saw them shift their hands close to the triggers of their own guns.

'We are conducting an investigation.'

'For another of your reports?' Noxx said archly. 'The Doom Eagles must be a well-documented Chapter indeed.' When Tarikus did not rise to his barb, the Flesh Tearer indicated the nearby airstrip. 'In answer to your question, I am supervising the transfer of this vehicle to one of our Thunderhawks.'

'Through a debris zone?' said Mykilus.

Noxx's words became a snarl. 'Not that it is any concern of yours, whelp, but this route is quicker than the paved road. After all, we are doing our best to remove ourselves from Merron as fast as we can.'

A sideways glance from Tarikus kept Mykilus from answering with an angry riposte. 'We need no assistance,' he said in a neutral voice.

One of the other Flesh Tearers spoke. 'What have you there?' He gestured toward the cloak-wrapped body. 'Another deader?'

'Nothing of consequence-' Tarikus began, but Dassar spat loudly behind him.

'Fiends! Eaters of men!' the bondman hissed, emboldened by the Doom Eagles' protection. 'Your time is at an end! Merron will fear you no more!'

Noxx gave a chug of harsh laughter. 'Careful, vassal. The Adeptus Astartes does not take kindly to insults from lesser men…'

Dassar began to speak again, but Petius cuffed him with the flat of his gauntlet and he fell to the ground. The Marine had saved his life; had the servant vented his hostility any further, Noxx's men would have been within their rights to discipline him as harshly as they saw fit.

'You should keep him quiet,' said the other Marine. 'They never spoke out of turn when we were in charge here.'

Tarikus took a menacing step forward. 'But you are not in charge here any more. The Doom Eagles are Merron's protectors now, and the Emperor has duties for you elsewhere, Flesh Tearer.'

The sergeant's words brought the tension in the air to a knifepoint. But after long moments, Noxx broke it with a nod to Tarikus. He ordered his men back aboard their tank, and the vehicle lumbered off, kicking up spurts of dust.

Consultus's rigid expression did not alter as Tarikus relayed the discovery of the body to his commander. Only when he handed over the metal fragment did the sergeant see anything more than cold contemplation on his face. Finally, Consultus put the ceramite shard aside.

'Meaningless, Tarikus. If this is the best you can do, the chief librarian will laugh you out of the chambers.'

'I suspect Noxx and his men knew about the corpse before we did.'

'Conjecture. I cannot even begin to countenance the idea of placing doubt on a brother company without hard, irrefutable evidence.'

'They were goading us,' Tarikus said. 'I won't stand by and have my Chapter derided by carrion eaters-'

Consultus came to his feet with a snap of boots on stone. 'You forget your place, sergeant, for the second time today. Do you plan to make a habit of it?'

Tarikus felt his colour rise. 'No, brother-captain.'

'Good, because the last thing I want is for one of my most trusted squad leaders to begin behaving like the novitiates I put him in charge of, clear?'

'Clear, lord.'

The captain turned away. 'Night has fallen. You have until dawn to find something substantial, otherwise the Flesh Tearers will leave and this matter will be closed.'

Tarikus stepped out into the Merron evening. The crimson glow of the sunset still lingered at the horizon, and above, the largest of the planet's moons was full and gibbous, hanging in mute judgement over the city. The sergeant walked the perimeter of the garrison block, along cloisters thick with shadow. Other Doom Eagles passed him by, leaving Tarikus alone with his thoughts. It was the nature of a Space Marine to be instilled with supreme self-belief, and like any other member of the Adeptus Astartes, Tarikus knew with all his heart that they were the strongest, the most dedicated, the most fearless warriors in the Emperor's arsenal.

Despite their arrogance and savagery, Tarikus had a grudging respect for the Flesh Tearers. They had weathered more than their share of misfortune and hardship; from the jungle hell of their homeworld, they numbered merely four full companies, and their only starship was an ancient hulk crowded with ill cared-for equipment, like the patchwork Razorback he'd seen earlier. They were Brother Marines, and Tarikus found the idea that members of the Legion Astartes would stoop to such pointless barbarity as preying on innocent civilians disgusting. It was his duty, he decided, not just to his Chapter and to the Merrons, but to the Flesh Tearers and to the Emperor, to end the circle of suspicion without delay.

'Tarikus.' The voice cut through his musings. He became aware of three figures standing around him in the darkness, their blood-and black-coloured armour blending into the night.

‘Captain Gorn: I thought you were at the airstrip.’

‘I have other matters to attend to.’

The sense of threat from the ruins-rushed back to him. ‘What of them?’

‘It has come to my attention that certain… rumours are being circulated. This displeases me.’

Tarikus said nothing; although he could not see their faces, he could taste the familiar scent-trace of Noxx and one of his men from the Razorback.

Gorn continued, his voice coloured with annoyance. ‘We have had our fill of this worthless sand pile, sergeant, and we wish to leave it behind. It would not go well for our departure to be delayed by needless hearsay. Do you understand?’

‘I believe so, brother-captain.’

‘Then I hope for your sake I will hear no more of this unworthy prattle.’

Without another word, they left him there, turning over Gorn’s cryptic half-threat in his mind; but then another voice called his name, and this one was screaming it, crying and shrieking into the moonlit night.

Tarikus found Dassar in a shuddering heap at the feet of Brother Mykilus, the Marine’s face split with confusion over how he should deal with the wailing servant. Tarikus pulled him upright. ‘What is wrong?’

Dassar’s face was streaked with tears. ‘My Lord Tarikus, I am undone! I came to you with the truth and now I have paid the price - they took them! They took my wife and my son!’

‘He claims the Red abducted his family and dragged them into the sewers,’ said Mykilus.

Tarikus’s eyes narrowed. ‘Summon Korica and Petius,’ he told the Marine. ‘Tell them to bring weapons for close-quarter combat.’ As Mykilus did as he was ordered, Tarikus questioned Dassar. ‘These tunnels, what do you know of them?’

‘A web of sewers,’ the man said between sobs, ‘feeding to a central chasm. It was once an underground reservoir, but now it is barren.’

A lair, thought Tarikus. Like a trapdoor spider, the Red was hiding concealed in the stone tunnels - just as the sergeant had begun to suspect.

‘Mira and my boy Seni, they’ll be killed! Please, I beseech you, save their lives!’

Tarikus looked up as Mykilus returned with the others. ‘I have heard enough. This ends tonight.’

Korica handed him a loaded bolt pistol, and the four Space Marines advanced into the gloom.

Mykilus used a shaped charge to blow open a rusted manhole cover in the plaza near the garrison, and with Korica on point, the quartet dropped down into the foetid runnels beneath.

‘The stench - I have never encountered the like before!’ Petius gasped.

‘Like a breath from a slaughterhouse,’ said Korica with a grunt.

‘Hold your chatter!’ Tarikus barked. ‘Look sharp! We can only guess at what we are facing.’ He glanced up and down the tunnel they stood in: it was a wide pipe, a main tributary or flood channel.

After a few hundred strides, Korica pointed toward a small branch tunnel. ‘Sergeant, see here. I believe this is one of the vents that joins the main chamber.’

‘Too narrow for us,’ noted Petius.

From behind him, Tarikus heard Mykilus give a growl of frustration. ‘The auspex senses something, but I cannot interpret the runes…’

The squad halted, the echoes of their footfalls dying away. Over the licking of the effluent around them, Tarikus strained to listen. Dimly, he was aware of an organic rustling sound, like matted fur on cobbles.

‘Above-‘ began Korica, leaning back to look at the tunnel ceiling. Without warning, a dozen bulky black shadows detached themselves from the crumbling bricks and fell across Korica’s upper torso. The sewer was suddenly filled with high-pitched squeals as dozens of rat-like vermin bit into the Marine’s armour, acidic saliva melting through the ceramite. Blinded, Korica squeezed the trigger on his bolter and the gun crashed into life, a fusillade of shells arcing from the muzzle as he twisted in place. The bolts sparked off the walls in brilliant red ricochets.

Tarikus leapt forward, shoving Petius aside as a round whined off the tip of his shoulder plate; the Marine was unhurt, but his Battle-Brother Mykilus reacted seconds slower than the veteran Tarikus, taking hits in his chest and thigh. Mykilus sagged, slipping down the curved wall.

Brother Korica gave a bubbling scream; some of the rat-things that swarmed over his chest plate had bored into his armour and were scratching and tearing at him from the inside. One of the rodents leapt at Tarikus, spitting venom, and he caught it in mid-jump, crushing the animal in his fist. For a moment, it hissed and snapped at him, and Tarikus saw the tell-tales signs of mutation and corruption across its form. The tiny body bulged and popped beneath his fingers like an overripe fruit.

Korica’s bolter clicked empty and still the injured, maddened Doom Eagle swatted at himself with the inert weapon, desperately trying to pick off the darting, biting shapes. Dark arterial blood ran in thick streams from the joints in his armour.

Tarikus grabbed at Petius’s weapon - a narrow-bore hand flamer - where it had fallen and trained it on his brother Marine; the rat-beast’s eyes had glowed with the same infernal hate that the sergeant had seen in the Traitors at Kript, and suddenly he had no doubt as to what quarry they were tracking. Korica seemed to sense his intentions and nodded his consent. Tarikus whispered a litany under his breath and pressed down the trigger stud, engulfing Korica and his myriad attackers in wreaths of glowing orange flame. The verminous creatures hissed and spat, catching ablaze and falling away from the Marine’s armour. Korica shrugged off the

licking fires, beating them out with his gloves, his breath coming in harsh wheezes. The Marine's skin was bloodied, burnt and cracked, but he lived.

'Thank you, brother-sergeant,' he coughed. 'Only the flamer's kiss can dislodge these warp-spawned abberants…'

'What were those creatures?' asked Petius.

'Mutants,' said Tarikus, handing back the flamer. 'The twisted lackeys of Chaos.'

Behind them, Mykilus gave a hollow groan. Petius went to his side. 'He's alive, but the bolter shells hit a primary artery. The bleeding must be staunched or he will perish.'

'Do it,' Tarikus snarled, removing his helmet. With the ease of hundreds of years of practice, the sergeant began to divest himself of his armour.

'Sir, what are you doing?' Petius asked. 'You cannot think to-'

'You said yourself, the channel is too small for one of us. I must leave my armour here and venture on without it.'

'Let me come with you,' grated Korica, ignoring his injuries.

Tarikus shook his head. 'You are blinded and Mykilus will be lost without aid. You must carry him to the surface. I will see this through to its ending.' The Marine shrugged off his torso plates and stood, unadorned and ready. 'Get Mykilus to safety and inform Captain Consultus of the situation.'

Petius nodded. 'As you command, sergeant. Terra protect you.'

Gripping the bolt pistol in his hand, Tarikus pushed on into the narrow channel alone.

Staring back at him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.

The shock of recognition sent a thrill of adrenaline through Tarikus; bare-chested and unarmed, he was face-to-face with a fully armoured, crimson-clad Space Marine, the unmistakable broad shoulders and the fearsome mask of the helmet pressing down on him. The light from the flare tube began to gutter out in pops and splutters of greenish-white chemical fire, and as it did the foe let out an echoing cry that was half-pain, half-rage.

Tarikus stabbed the dying flare forward like a knife and connected with the red Marine's torso - but instead of blunting itself on the toughened ceramite exterior, the tube pierced the chest plate, flakes of metallic armour crumbling away under the impact. Like the fragment Brother Petius found, he realised. His surprise robbed him of the initiative, and the foe's hammer whistled through the foul air, catching Tarikus in the shoulder. The impact spun him about, and he stumbled, splashing through the muck in gouts of oily liquid. The sergeant's right arm went loose; the dislocated joint sang with pain, the edges of bone grinding together. Tarikus gave a bellow of anger as he dragged the limb back into place with

a sickening crack. The hammer came out of the dimness at him once more, but this time Tarikus was ready and blocked it with a cross-handed parry. The slow, heavy weapon's path could not be quickly halted and it struck the wall, the head burying itself in the rotted bricks. The vague shape of the red Marine pulled impotently at the handle, spitting out wordless, hollow noises of frustration.

'Woe betide!' Brother Tarikus answered with a battle-roar and leapt at his enemy with a powerful kick that shattered the red Marine's greaves. The foe fell back, letting go of the hammer, and raised its hands in a poor approximation of a fighting stance. As he circled it, on some higher, analytical level, Tarikus's mind was marvelling at what he saw. What madness is this, he wondered? No Adeptus Astartes, not even the foul cohorts of the Traitor Legions would dare show such ineptness!

Tarikus saw an opening and took it, his fist striking his attacker's chest with such ferocity that the torso plate broke apart, crumbling like rotten pastry. The Imperial eagle sigil snapped under his knuckles, revealing itself as nothing more than painted glass. Tarikus reached inside the rent he'd made in the crimson armour and dug his sturdy fingers into the folds of flesh and clothing within. He felt thick blood ooze out around his wrist, heard, a gasp of pain. The sergeant balled his free hand into a fist and struck the red Marine across the helmet; the blow landed with a hollow ringing collision. His muscles bunching, Tarikus hit out again with all his might and his backhand took the helm off his foe's head, arcing away to clatter against the walls.

Revealed within the armour was a pasty-skinned parody of a man, his face riven with blotches and his eyes sepulchral with hate. Across his brow was a livid brand: a grinning skull surrounded by an eight-pointed star. Exposed, he seemed pathetically small and weak, a faint shadow of Tarikus's rugged, broad form.

'Who are you?' Tarikus demanded, shaking him. 'Answer, you wretch!'

Above, the sergeant heard the cough of impact charges as the chamber roof gave way; stones crashed to the floor around him, but he did not spare them a glance.

'Talk, or I'll tear the truth from you!' His grip tightened, and the little man spat up thin, greenish-tinted blood.

When he finally spoke, it was in a fluid, gurgling murmur: 'Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and you'll never be seen in sunlight again…'

The sergeant hesitated for a moment, then tore his hand from the little man's chest, ripping bone, lung and flesh out along with it. The ruined figure dropped away and sank into the torpid black water.

Petius finished applying the salve to a small wound on Tarikus's face and pronounced him healthy. His Space Marine physiology was already

flushing the toxins from the sewer out of his system, and the salve would help it in the process. He watched as the Merrons brought up the caged ones from the chamber, as men and women greeted their families with tears; some joyful at finding those they loved still alive, some weeping as bloated, pallid corpses were hoisted to the surface. He noted with some small satisfaction that Dassar had been reunited with his wife and son; at least for the helot, the Emperor had moved through Tarikus this day to deliver him from his pain.

He rose to his feet as Captain Consultus approached, with Gorn and Noxx a step behind.

'Tarikus, you performed well. A citation may be in order.'

Gorn gave a reluctant nod of agreement. 'Perhaps so, brother-captain.'

'This is at an end, then?' he asked.

'It is,' said Consultus. 'When Petius returned to the garrison with news of what transpired, I asked Captain Gorn to lend us the arms of his Flesh Tearers.'

'It seemed a logical course of action,' noted Gorn.

Petius jerked a thumb at several impact craters nearby. 'We are storming the tunnels, flushing them out with flamers and plasma-fire. It is a nest of foulness and corruption down there.'

'The man,' Tarikus began. 'He wore our armour…'

'Not quite,' said Gorn, 'it was a well-crafted copy, but made from a poor ceramic compound. Not even strong enough to deflect a punch.'

'But it was similar enough to convince the Merrons.'

Consultus nodded his assent. 'He preyed on their fears to discredit the Flesh Tearers and the Adeptus Astartes.'

'To what purpose?' said Petius.

In reply, Noxx tossed a spherical white object at the youth, but Tarikus snatched it from the air before it reached him. It was a human skull, and etched into its bone were whorls and patterns of lines. The matrix of thin bands seemed to shimmer in the half-light, forming the shape of a many-angled star. 'Ask him,' said Noxx.

Gorn cocked his head and subvocalised a message into the comm-net. 'Our transports are approaching orbit. By your leave, brother-captain, if you have no further use for us, the Flesh Tearers would quit this troublesome world.'

'Thank you for your assistance, Brother Gorn,' said Consultus, offering his hand. 'Perhaps we will meet again under better circumstances?'

'Perhaps,' Gorn replied, returning the gesture. He gave Tarikus a wary nod and walked away. Noxx followed and did not look back.

The Doom Eagle sergeant watched them go in silence.

Tarikus found himself in the company of his captain once again a few days later, as he completed his prayers after early morning firing rites.

'Brother-captain,' he began, 'have the tunnels been cleansed?'

‘The taint of evil has been purged,’ Consultus replied.

‘Were all the missing civilians accounted for?’ Tarikus said after a moment.

Consultus gave him a neutral look. ‘We only found live victims in the cavern where you killed the cultist, the Red. There were several caches of bodies scattered around the sewer complex.’

‘They were all killed in the same manner?’ he pressed.

‘Not all,’ said the captain. ‘A handful were found with different wounds.’

‘In what way?’

‘It is of little consequence now, Tarikus, but if you must know, there were some that sported torn, ragged wounds from claws and teeth. From human teeth.’

Despite himself, the sergeant felt a shudder of cold run along his spine. ‘The Red killed only by draining blood. If he was not responsible, then who was?’

‘Who indeed?’ said the Captain as he walked away.

Tarikus looked up into the sky, where the crimson night was fading into dawn; if he had an answer to that question, he kept it to himself.

~ FLESH TEARERS ~

AT GAIUS POINT

By

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

I

The memory of fire. Fire and falling, incineration and annihilation.
Then darkness.
Absolute silence. Absolute nothing.

II

I open my eyes.

There before me, outlined by scrolling white text across my targeting display, is a shattered metal wall. Its architecture is gothic in nature – a skeletal wall, with black steel girders like ribs helping form the wall's curvature. It is mangled and bent. Crushed, even.

I do not know where I am, but my senses are awash with perception. I hear the crackle of fire eating metal, and the angry hum of live battle armour. The sound is distorted, a hitch or a burr in the usually steady thrum. Damage has been sustained. My armour is compromised. A glance at the bio-feed displays shows minor damage to the armour plating of my wrist and shin. Nothing serious.

I smell the flames nearby, and the bitter rancidity of melting steel. I smell my own body; the sweat, the chemicals injecting into my flesh by my armour, and the intoxicatingly rich scent of my own blood.

A god's blood.

Refined and thinned for use in mortal veins, but a god's blood nevertheless.

A dead god. A slain angel.

The thought brings my teeth together in a grunted curse, my fangs scraping the teeth below. Enough of this weakness.

I rise, muscles of aching flesh bunching in unison with the fibre-bundle false muscles of my armour. It is a sensation I am familiar with, yet it feels somehow flawed. I should be stronger. I should exult in my strength, the ultimate fusion of biological potency and machine power.

I do not feel strong. I feel nothing but pain and a momentary disorientation. The pain is centralised in my spinal column and shoulder blades, turning my back into a pillar of dull, aching heat. Nothing is broken – bio-feeds have already confirmed that. The soreness of muscle and nerve would have killed a human, but we are gene-forged into greater beings.

Already, the weakness fades. My blood stings with the flood of adrenal stimulants and kinetic enhancement narcotics rushing through my veins.

My movement is unimpeded. I rise to my feet, slow not from weakness now, but from caution.

With my vision stained a cooling emerald shade by my helm's green eye lenses, I take in the wreckage around me.

This chamber is ruined, half-crushed with its walls distorted. Restraint thrones lie broken, torn from the floor. The two bulkheads leading from the chamber are both wrenched from their hinges, hanging at warped angles.

The impact must have been savage.

The… impact?

The crash. Our Thunderhawk crashed. The clarity of recollection is sickening… the sense of falling from the sky, my senses drenched in the thunder of descent, the shaking of the ship in its entirety. Temperature gauges on my retinal display rose slowly when the engines died in exploding flares that scorched the hull, and my armour systems registered the gunship's fiery journey groundward.

There was a final booming refrain, a roar like the carnosaurs of home – as loud and primal as their predator-king challenges – and the world shuddered beyond all sanity. The gunship ploughed into the ground.

And then… Darkness.

My eyes flicker to my retinal display's chronometer. I was unconscious for almost three minutes. I will do penance for such weakness, but that can come later.

Now I breathe in deep, tasting the ashy smoke in the air but unaffected by it. The air filtration in my helm's grille renders me immune to such trivial concerns.

'Zavien,' a voice crackles in my ears. A momentary confusion takes hold at the sound of the word. The vox-signal is either weak, or the sender's armour is badly damaged. With the ship in pieces, both could be true.

'Zavien,' the voice says again.

This time I turn at the name, realising it is my own.

Zavien strode into the cockpit, keeping his balance on the tilted floor through an effortless combination of natural grace and his armour's joint-stabilisers.

The cockpit had suffered even more than the adjacent chamber. The view window, despite the thickness of the reinforced plastek, was shattered beyond simple repair. Diamond shards of the sundered false-glass twinkled on the twisted floor. The pilot thrones were wrenched from their support columns, cast aside like detritus in a storm.

Through the windowless viewport there was nothing but mud and gnarled black roots, much of which had spilled over the lifeless control consoles. They'd come down hard enough to drive the gunship's nose into the earth.

The pilot, Varlon, was a mangled wreck sprawled face-down over the control console. Zavien's targeting reticule locked onto his brother's battered armour, secondary cursors detailing the rents and wounds in the deactivated war plate. Blood, thick and dark, ran from rips in Varlon's throat and waist joints. It ran in slow trickles across the smashed console, dripping between buttons and levers.

His power pack was inactive. Life signs were unreadable, but the evidence was clear enough. Zavien heard no heartbeat from the body, and had Varlon been alive, his gene-enhanced physiology would have clotted and sealed all but the most grievous wounds. He wouldn't still be bleeding slowly all over the controls of the downed gunship.

'Zavien,' said a voice to the right, no longer over the vox.

Zavien turned from Varlon, his armour snarling in a growl of joint-servos. There, pinned under wreckage from the collapsed wall, was Drayus. Zavien moved to the fallen warrior's side, seeing the truth. No, Drayus was not just pinned in place. He was impaled there.

The sergeant's black helm was lowered, chin down on his collar, green eyes regarding the broken Imperial eagle on his chest. Jagged wreckage knifed into his dark armour, the ravaged steel spearing him through the shoulder guard, the arm, the thigh and the stomach. Blood leaked through his helm's speaker grille. The biometric displays that flashed up on Zavien's visor told an ugly story, and one with an end soon to come.

'Report,' Sergeant Drayus said – the way he always said it – as if the scene around them were the most mundane situation imaginable.

Zavien kneeled by the pinned warrior, fighting back the aching need in his throat and gums to taste the blood of the fallen. Irregular and weak, a single heartbeat rattled in Drayus's chest. One of his hearts had shut down, likely flooded by internal haemorrhaging or burst by the wreckage piercing his body. The other pounded gamely, utterly without rhythm.

'Varlon is dead,' Zavien said.

'I can see that, fool.' The sergeant reached up one hand, the one not half-severed at the forearm, and clawed with unmoving fingers at the collar joint beneath his helm. Zavien reached to help, unlocking the helmet's pressurised seals. With a reptilian hiss, the helmet came free in Zavien's hands.

Drayus's craggy face, ruined by the pits and scars earned in two centuries of battle, was awash in spatters of blood. He grinned, showing blood-pinked teeth and split gums. 'My helm display is damaged. Tell me who is still alive.'

Zavien could see why it was damaged – both eye lenses were cracked. He discarded the sergeant's helm, and blink-clicked the runic icon that brought up the rest of the squad's life signs on his own retinal display.

Varlon was dead, his suit powered down. The evidence of that was right before Zavien's eyes.

Garax was also gone, his suit transmitting a screed of flat-line charts. The rangefinder listed him as no more than twenty metres away, likely thrown clear in the crash and killed on impact.

Drayus was dying, right here.

Jarl was…

'Where's Jarl?' Zavien asked, his voice harsh and guttural through his helm's vox speakers.

'He's loose.' Drayus sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. His armour's failing systems were feeding anaesthetic narcotics into his blood, but the wounds were savage and fatal.

'My rangefinder lists him as a kilometre distant.' Even with its unreliability compared to a tracking auspex, it was a decent enough figure to trust.

The sergeant's good hand clenched Zavien's wrist, and he glared into his brother's eye lenses with a fierce, bloodshot stare. 'Find him. Whatever it takes, Zavien. Bring him in, even if you have to kill him.'

'It will be done.'

'After. You must come back, after.' Drayus spat onto his own chest, marking the broken Imperial eagle with his lifeblood. 'Come back for our gene-seed.'

Zavien nodded, rising to his feet. Feeling his fingers curl in the need to draw weapons, he stalked from the cockpit without a backward glance at the sergeant he would never see alive again.

Jarl had awoken first.

In fact, it was truer to say that Jarl had simply not lost his grip on consciousness in the impact, for his restraints bound him with greater security than the standard troop-thrones. In the shaking thunder of the crash, he had seen Garax hurled through the torn space where a wall had been a moment before. He had heard the vicious, wet snap of destroyed vertebrae and ruined bone as Garax had crashed into the edge of the hole on the way out. And he had seen Zavien thrown from his restraint throne to smash sidelong into the cockpit bulkhead, sliding to the floor unconscious.

Enveloped in a force cage around his own restraint throne, Jarl had seen these things occurring through the milky shimmer-screen of electrical force, yet had been protected against the worst of the crash.

Ah, but that protection had not lasted for long. With the gunship motionless, with his brothers silent, with the Thunderhawk around him creaking and burning in the chasm it had carved in the ground, Jarl tore off the last buckles and scrambled over the wreckage of what had been his power-fielded throne. The machine itself, its generator smoking, reeked of captivity. Jarl wanted to be far from it.

He glanced at Zavien, stole the closest weapons he could find in the chaos of the crash site, and ran out into the jungle.

He had a duty to fulfil. A duty to the Emperor.

His father.

Zavien's blade and bolter were gone.

Without compunction, he took Drayus's weapons from the small arming chamber behind the transport room, handling the relics with none of the care he would otherwise have used. Time was of the essence.

The necessary theft complete, he climbed from the wreck of the gunship, vaulting down to the ground and leaving the broken hull behind. In one hand was an idling chainaxe, the motors within the haft chuckling darkly in readiness to be triggered into roaring life. In the other, a bolt pistol, its blackened surface detailed with the crude scratchings of a hundred and more kill-runes.

Zavien didn't look at the smoking corpse of his gunship in some poignant reverie. He knew he would be back to gather the gene-seed of the fallen if he survived this hunt.

There was no time for sentiment. Jarl was loose.

Zavien broke into a run, his armour's joints growling at the rapid movement as he sprinted after his wayward brother, deep into the jungles of Armageddon.

III

They call it Armageddon.

Maybe so. There is nothing to love about this planet.

Whatever savage beauty it once displayed is long dead now, choked under the relentless outflow of the sky-choking factories that vomit black smog into the heavens. The skies themselves are ugly enough – a greyish-yellow shroud of weak poison embracing the strangled world below. It does not rain water here. It rains acid, as thin, weak and strangely pungent as a reptile's piss.

Who could dwell here? In such impurity? The air tastes of sulphur and machine oil. The sky is the colour of infection. The humans – the very souls we are fighting to save – are dead-eyed creatures without passion or life.

I do not understand them. They embrace their enslavement. They accept their confinement within towering manufactories filled with howling machines. Perhaps it is because they have never known freedom, but that is no true excuse to act as brain-killed as a servitor.

We fight for these souls because we are told it is our duty. We are dying, selling our lives in the greatest war this world has ever known, to save them from their own weakness and allow them to return to their lightless lives.

The jungle here… We have jungles on my home world, yet not like this.

The jungles of home are saturated with life. Parasites thrive in every pool of dark water. Insects hollow out the great trees to build their chittering, poisonous hives. The air, already swarming with stinging flies, is sour with the reptilian stench of danger, and the ground will shake with the stalking hunts of the lizard predator-kings.

Survival is the greatest triumph one can earn on Cretacia.

The jungle here barely deserves the name. The ground is clinging mud, leaving you knee-deep in sulphuric sludge. What ragged life breathes the unclean air is weak, irritating, and nothing compared to the threats of home.

Of course, the jungles here possess a danger not even remotely native to the planet itself. They swarm with the worst kind of vermin.

With the planet locked in the throes of invasion, I am all too aware of what brought down our Thunderhawk.

A pack of them hunted up ahead.

As soon as he heard their piggish snarls and barking laughter, Jarl's tongue ached with a raw, coppery urgency. His teeth itched in their sockets, and he felt his heartbeat in the soft tissue around his incisors.

His splashing sprint through the jungle became a hunched and feral stride, while the chainblade in his grip growled each time he gunned the trigger. Small arms fire rattled in his direction even before he cleared the line of trees. They knew he was coming, he made sure of that.

Jarl ignored the metallic rainfall of solid rounds clanging from his war plate. The trees parted and revealed his prey – six of them – hunkered around a tank made of scavenged, rusted scrap.

Greenskins. Their fat-mouthed pistols crashing loud and discordant, their brutish features illuminated by the flickering of muzzle flashes.

Jarl saw none of this. His vision, filtered through targeting reticules, saw only what his dying mind projected. A far greater enemy, the ancient slaves of the Ruinous Powers, feasting on the bodies of the loyal fallen. Where Jarl ran, the skies were not the milky-yellow of pus, but the deep blue of nightfall on ancestral Terra. He did not splash through black-watered marshland. He strode across battlements of gold while the world ended around him in a storm of heretical fire.

Jarl charged, his scream rendered harsh and deafening by his helm's vocalisers. The chainsword's throaty roar reached an apex in the moment before it was brought down onto the shoulder of the first ork.

The killing fury brought darkness again, but the blackness now was awash with blessed, sacred red.

Zavien heard the slaughter. His pace, already at a breakneck sprint through the vegetation, intensified tenfold.

If he could catch Jarl, catch him before his brother made it to Imperial lines, he would avert a catastrophe of innocent blood and the blackest shame.

His red and black war plate – the dark red of arterial blood, the black of the void between worlds – was a ruined mess of burn markings, silver gougings where damage in the crash had scored away the paint from the ceramite's surface, and mud-spattered filth as he raced through the swamp.

Yet when one carries the pride of a Chapter on one's shoulders, necessity lends strength to aching limbs and the false muscles of broken armour.

Zavien burst into the clearing where his brother was embattled. His trigger fingers clenched at once – one unleashing a torrent of bolter shells at his brother's back, the other gunning the chainaxe into whirring, lethal life.

'Jarl!'

Treachery.

What madness was this? To be struck down by one's own sons? Sanguinius, the Angel of Blood, turns from the twisted daemons he has slain and dismembered. One of his own sons screams his name, charging across the golden battlements while the heavens above them burn.

The primarch cries out as his son's weapon speaks in anger. Bolt shells crack against his magnificent armour. His own son, one of his beloved Blood Angels, is trying to kill him.

This cannot be happening.

And, in that moment, Sanguinius decides it is not. There is heresy at work here, not disloyalty. Blasphemy, not naked betrayal.

'What foulness grips you!' the Angel cries at his false son. 'What perversion blackens the soul of a Blood Angel and warps him to serve the Archenemy?'

'Sanguinius!' the traitor son screams. 'Father!'

Zavien roared Jarl's name again, not knowing what his brother truly heard. The cries that returned from his brother's vox-amplifiers chilled his blood – a bellowed, clashing litany of archaic High Gothic and the tongue of Baal that Jarl had never learned.

Surrounded by the ravaged bodies of dead greenskins, the two brothers came together. Zavien's first blow was blocked, the flat of Jarl's chainblade clashing against the haft of his axe. Jarl's armour was pitted and cracked with smoking holes from the impact of bolt shells, yet his strength was unbelievable. Laughing in a voice barely his own, he hurled Zavien backwards.

Unbalanced by his brother's insane vigour, Zavien fell back, rolling into a fighting crouch, shin-deep in marshwater.

Again, Jarl shouted in his unnerving, ancient diction – words Zavien recognised but did not understand. As with Jarl, he had never learned Baalian, and never studied the form of High Gothic spoken ten thousand years before.

'Let this not be your end, my son. Join me! We will take the fight to Horus and drown his evil ambitions in the blood of his tainted warriors!'

Sanguinius removes his helm – a sign of honour and trust despite the war raging around them – and smiles beneficently at his wayward son. His benevolence is legendary. His honour without question.

'It need not be this way,' the Angel of Blood says through his princely smile. 'Join me! To my father's side! For the Emperor!'

Zavien stared at his brother, barely recognising Jarl's face in the drooling, slack-jawed grin that met his gaze. His brother's features were red; a shining wetness from eyes that cried blood.

A meaningless screed of syllables hammered from Jarl's bleeding mouth. It sounded like he was choking on his own demented laughter.

'Brother,' Zavien spoke softly. 'You are gone from us all.'

He rose to his feet, casting aside the empty bolt pistol. In his red gauntlets, he clutched the chainaxe two-handed, and stared at the brother he no longer knew.

'I am not your son, Jarl, and I am no longer your brother. I am Zavien of the Flesh Tearers, born of Cretacia, and I will be your death if you will not let me be your salvation.'

Jarl heaved a burbling laugh, bringing bloody froth to his lips as he wheezed in a language he shouldn't know.

'You disgrace my bloodline,' the Angel said with infinite sorrow, his godlike heart breaking at the blasphemy before his eyes. 'The Ultimate Gate calls to me. A thousand of your masters will fall by my blade before they gain entrance to the Emperor's throne room. I have no more patience for your puling heresy. Come, traitor. Time to die.'

Sanguinius unfurled his great white wings, pearlescent and sunlight-bright in the firestorm wreathing the battlements. With tears in his eyes, tears of misery at the betrayal of one of his own sons, he launched forward to end this blasphemy once and for all.

And I realise I cannot beat him.

When we are shaped into what we are, when we are denied our humanity to become weapons of war, it is said that fear is purged from our physical forms, and triumph is bred into our bones. This is an expression, an attempt at the kind of crude verse forever attributed to the warrior-preachers of the Adeptus Astartes.

It is true that defeat is anathema to us.

But I cannot beat him. He is not the warrior I trained with for decades, not the brother whose every move I can anticipate.

His chainblade, still wet with green gore, arcs down. I block, barely, and am already skidding back in the sulphuric mud. His strength is immense. I know why this is. I am aware of the… the genetic truths at play. His mind cannot contain his delusional fury. He is using everything he has, *everything,* powering his muscles with more force and expending more energy than a functioning mind can allow. I can smell the alkaline reek of his blood through the damage in his armour – combat narcotics are

flooding his system in lethal quantities. In his madness, he cannot stem the flood of battle narcotics fusing with his bloodstream.

His strength, this godly power, will kill him.

But not quickly enough.

A second deflected slice, a third, and a fourth that crashes against my helm; a blocked headbutt that crunches into my bracer and dulls my arm; a kick that hammers into my chestplate even as I lean aside to dodge.

A thunderclap. My vision spins. Fire in my spine.

I think my back is broken. I try to say his name, but it comes out as a scream.

Rage, black and wholesome, its tendrils bearing the purest intent, creeps in at the edge of my vision.

I hear him laughing and damning me in a language he shouldn't know.

Then I hear nothing except the wind.

Sanguinius lifts the traitor with contemptuous ease.

Held above his head, the blasphemer thrashes and writhes. The Angel of Blood stalks to the edge of the golden battlements, laughing and weeping all at once at the carnage below. It is a tragedy, but it is also beautiful. Mankind using its greatest might and achievements as it attempts to engineer its own demise. Titans duel in their hundreds, with millions of men dying around their iron feet. The sky is on fire. The entire world smells of blood.

'Die,' the Angel curses his treacherous son with a beauteous whisper, and hurls him from the battlements of the Imperial Palace into the maelstrom of war hundreds of metres below.

Freed of his burden and his bloodline's honour restored, the Angel in gold makes haste away.

His duty is not yet done.

IV

Consciousness returned with the first impact.

A jarring crunch of armour against rock jolted Zavien from his lapse into the murky haze of near-unconsciousness. Feeling himself crashing down the cliff side, he rammed his hand down hard into the rock – a claw of ceramite clutching at the stone. The Astartes grunted as his arms snapped straight, taking his weight, arresting his tumbling fall.

Damage runes flicked up on his retinal display, a language of harsh white urgency. Zavien ignored them, though it was harder to ignore the pain throughout his body. Even the injected chemical anaesthetic compounds from his armour and the nerve-dulling surgery done to him couldn't entirely wash it away. That was a bad sign.

He clawed his way back up the cliff, teeth clenched, gauntlets tearing handholds into the stone where nature hadn't provided any.

Once at the top, the Flesh Tearer retrieved the chainaxe that had flown from his grip, and broke into a staggering run.

He almost killed me.

That is a hard truth to swallow, for we were evenly matched for all of our lives. My armour is damaged, operating at half capacity, but it still lends me strength as I run. Behind me, the wrecked greenskin tank remains alone, its crew slain, the rest of its missiles aiming into the sky with no one to fire them.

Curse those piggish wretches for bringing down our gunship.

I run on, gathering speed, slowing only to hack hanging vegetation from my path.

I recall the topography of this region from the hololithic maps at the last war council. The mining town of Dryfield is to the east. Jarl's rage-addled mind will drive him to seek out life. I know where he is going. I also know that unless something slows him down…

He will get there first.

Sister Amalay D'Vorien kissed the bronze likeness of Saint Silvana, and let the necklace icon fall back on its leather cord. The weak midday sun, what brightness penetrated the gauzy, polluted cloud cover, was a dull presence in the heavens, only occasionally reflecting glare off the edges of *Promethia*, the squad's Immolator tank.

Her own armour was once silver, now stained a faint, dull grey from exposure to the filthy air of this world. She licked her cracked lips, resisting the desire to drink from the water canteen inside the tank. Second Prayer was only an hour before, and she'd slaked her thirst with a mouthful of the brackish water, warmed as it was by the tank's idling engine.

'Sister…' called down Brialla from the Immolator's turret. 'Did you see that?'

Amalay and Brialla were alone while the rest of their squad patrolled the edges of the jungle. Their tank idled on the dirt road, with Amalay circling the hull, bolter in hand, and Brialla panning her heavy flamers along the tree lines.

Amalay whispered a litany of abasement before duty, chastising herself for letting her mind wander to thoughts of sustenance. Her bolter up and ready, she moved around to the front of the Immolator.

'I saw nothing,' she said, eyes narrowed and focused. 'What was it?'

'Movement. Something dark. Remain vigilant.'

There was a tone colouring Brialla's voice, on the final words. A suggestion of disapproval. Amalay's laxity had been noticed.

'I see nothing,' Amalay spoke again. 'There's… No, wait. *There.'*

The 'something' broke from its crouch in the vegetation at the tree line. A blur of crimson and black, with a chainblade revving. Amalay

recognised an Astartes instantly, and the threat a moment later. Her bolter barked once, twice, and dropped from her hands to clatter to the dirt. The gun crashed once more from its vantage point on the ground, a loud boom that hammered a shell into the tank's sloped armour plating.

Even as this last shot was fired, Amalay's head flew clear of her shoulders, white hair catching the wind before the bleeding wreckage rolled into the undergrowth.

Brialla blasphemed as she brought the flamer turret around on protesting mechanics, and wrenched the handles to aim the cannons low.

The Astartes was cradling Amalay's headless body, speaking to it in a low snarl. Her sister was already dead. Brialla squeezed both triggers.

Twin gouts of stinking chemical flame roared from the cannons, bathing Amalay and the Astartes in clinging, corrosive fire. She was already whispering a lament for her fallen sister, even as she blistered the armour and skin from Amalay's bones.

It was impossible to see through the reeking orange miasma. Brialla killed the jets of flame after seven heartbeats, knowing whatever had been washed in the fire would be annihilated, purged in the burning storm.

Amalay. Her armour blackened, its joints melted, her hands reduced to blackened bone. She lay on the ground, incinerated.

A loud thud clanged on the tank's roof behind Brialla. She turned in her restraint throne, the slower turret cycling round to follow her gaze. Already, she was trying to scramble free of her seat.

The Astartes was burning. Holy fire licked at the edges of his war plate, and his joints steamed. He eclipsed the sun, casting a flickering shadow over her. His armour was black, charred, but not immolated. As she hauled herself out of her restraints, he levelled a dripping chainsword at her face.

'The Flesh Tearers!' she screamed into the vox-mic built into her armour's collar. 'Echoes of Gaius Point!'

In anciently-accented Gothic, her killer said six whispered words.

'You will pay for your heresy.'

I watch from the shadows of the trees.

The Sororitas are tense. While one of them performs funerary rites over the destroyed bodies of their sisters, three others stalk around the hull of their grey tank, bolters aimed while they stare into the jungle through gunsights.

I can smell the corpses beneath the white shrouds. One is burned, cooked by promethium chemical fire. The other had bled a great deal before she died, torn to pieces. I do not need to see the remains to know this is true.

For now, I hide, crouched and hidden. The jungle masks the ever-present charged hum of my armour from their weak, mortal ears, while I listen to fragments of their speech.

Jarl's trail has grown cold, even the smell of his potent blood lost in the billion scents of this sulphuric jungle. I need focus. I need direction.

But as soon as I draw near enough to see the sisters' steel-grey armour and the insignias of loyalty they each wear, I curse my fortune.

The Order of the Argent Shroud.

They were with us at Gaius Point.

Echoes of that battle will haunt us all until the Chapter's final nights.

'My auspex senses something,' I hear one of them say to her sisters. I make ready to move again, to taste shame and flee. I cannot confront them like this. They must not know of our presence. 'Something alive,' she says. 'And with a power signature.'

'Flesh Tearer!' one of the sisters calls out, and my blood freezes in my veins. It is not fear I feel, but true, sickening dread as she uses our Chapter's sacred name. *How can they know?*

'Flesh Tearer! Show yourself! Face the Emperor's judgement for the barbarity of your tainted Chapter!'

My teeth clench. My fingers quiver, then grip the chainaxe tighter. *They know.* They know a Flesh Tearer did this. Their wretched slain sisters must have warned them.

Another female voice, the one carrying the auspex scanner, adds to the first one's cries. 'We were at Gaius Point, decadent filth! Face us, and face retribution for your heresy!'

They know what happened at Gaius Point. They saw our shame, our curse, and the blood that ran that day.

They believe I butchered two of their sisters here, and now lay the sins of my brother Jarl upon my shoulders.

Gunfire rings out. A bolter shell slices past my pauldron, shredding vegetation.

'I see him,' a female voice declares, 'There!'

My trigger finger strokes the Engage rune on the chainaxe's haft. After a heartbeat's hesitation, I squeeze. Jagged, whirring teeth cycle into furious life. The weapon cuts air in anticipation of the moment it will eat flesh.

They *dare* blame me for this…

They open fire.

I am not a heretic.

But this must end.

V

Zavien reached Dryfield just as the sun was setting.

He had left the jungle behind three hours before. The lone warrior's run came to an end at the fortified walls – outside the mining settlement, he heard no sound from within, only the desperate howl of the wind across the wasteland.

Hailing the walls, calling for sentries, earned him no response.

The settlement's gates were sealed: a jury-rigged amalgamation of steel bars, flakboard and even furniture piled high behind the double doors in the wall ringing the village. These pitiful defences were the colony's attempts to reinforce their walls against the ork hordes sweeping across the planet.

With neither the time nor the inclination to hammer the gates open through force, Zavien mag-locked his axe to his back and punched handholds in the metal wall itself, dragging himself to the ramparts fifteen metres above.

The village was a collection of one-storey buildings, perhaps enough to house fifteen families. A dirt track cut through the village's centre like an old scar; evidence of the supply convoys that made it this far out from the main hives, and the passage of ore haulers who came to profit from the local copper mine. Low-quality metal would be in great demand by the planet's impoverished citizens, who could afford no better.

The largest building – indeed, the only one that was more than a hut made from scrap – was a spired church bedecked in crudely-carved gargoyles.

Zavien acknowledged all of this in a heartbeat's span. The Astartes scanned the ramshackle battlements around the village, then turned to stare at the settlement itself.

No sign of movement.

He walked from the platform, falling the fifteen metres to the ground and landing in a balanced crouch.

He came across the first body less than a minute later.

A woman. Unarmed. Slumped against the wall of a hovel, a blood-smear decorating the wall behind her. She was carved in half, and not cleanly.

The wide streets between the ramshackle huts and homes were decorated with trails of blood and the tracks of weight dragged through the dirt. All of these led to the same place. Whomever had come here and slain the colonists had dragged the bodies to the modest church with its shattered windows and corroded walls of flakboard and red iron.

Zavien's retinal locator display was finally picking up faint returns from Jarl's war plate. His brother was inside, no longer running. And from the silence, no longer killing.

The Flesh Tearer stalked past the weaponless corpse, limp in its lifeless repose, slain by his own sword in his brother's hands. Zavien had seen such things before – they were images he would never forget while he still drew breath.

He felt cold, clinging shame run through his blood like a toxin. Just like at Gaius Point.

It wasn't supposed to happen.

At Gaius Point.

It was never supposed to happen.

That night, they had damned themselves forever.

It should have been a triumph worthy of being etched onto the armour of every warrior that fought there.

The Imperial front line was held by the Point's militia and the Order of the Argent Shroud, who had rallied the people of the wasteland town into an armed fighting force and raised morale to fever pitch through their sermons and blessings in the name of the God-Emperor.

The greenskins descended in a swarm of thousands, hurling themselves at the town's barricades, their mass forming a sea of bellowing challenges, leathery flesh and hacking blades.

At the battle's apex, the Sisters and the militia were on the edge of being overwhelmed. At last, and when it mattered most, Gaius Point's frantic distress calls were answered.

They came in Thunderhawks, boosters howling as they soared over the embattled horde. The gunships kissed the scorched earth only long enough to deploy their forces: almost two hundred Astartes in armour of arterial red and charcoal black. The rattling roar of so many chainblades came together in a ragged, ear splitting chorus, sounding like the war-cry of a mechanical god.

Zavien was in the first wave. Alongside Jarl and his brothers, he hewed left and right, his blade's grinding teeth chewing through armour and bloody, fungal flesh as the sons of Sanguinius reaped the aliens' lives.

The orks were butchered in droves, caught between a hammer and anvil, being annihilated from behind and gunned down from the front.

Zavien saw nothing but blood. Xenos blood, stinking and thick, splashing across his helm. The smell of triumph, the reek of exultant victory.

He was also one of the first to the barricades.

By then, he couldn't see. He couldn't think. His senses were flooded by stimuli, all of it aching, enticing and maddening. He tried to speak, but it tore from his lips as a cry aimed at the polluted skies. Even breathing did nothing but draw the rich scent of alien blood deeper into his body, disseminating it through his system. To be so saturated by xenos taint ignited a fire in his mind, tapping into the gene-deep fury that forever threatened to overwhelm him.

Driven on by the ceaseless urge to drown his senses in the purity of enemy blood, Zavien disembowelled the last ork before him, and vaulted the barricade. He had to kill. *He had to kill.* He was born for nothing else.

He and his brothers had been fighting in ferocious hand-to-hand battle for two hours. The enemy was destroyed. The joyous cheers of the militia died in thousands of throats as, in a wave of vox-screams and howling chainswords, half of the Flesh Tearers broke the barricades and ran into the town.

With no foes to slay, the Astartes turned their rage upon whatever still lived.

The Angel mourned the slain.

Their deaths were a dark necessity on the path to redemption. The prayers he chanted to the ceiling of the Emperor's throne room inspired tears in his eyes, and tears in the eyes of the thousands of loyal soldiers staring on.

'We must burn the slain,' he whispered through the silver tears. 'We must forever remember those who died this day, and remember the foulness that turned their hearts against us.'

'Sanguinius!' a voice cried from behind. It echoed throughout the chamber, where a million banners hung in the breezeless air, marking every regiment ever sworn to fight and die for the young Imperium of Man.

The Angel tilted his head, the very image of patient purity.

'I thought I killed you, heretic.'

'Jarl!'

Wheezing, mumbling, with bloody saliva running in strings from his damaged mouth grille, Jarl staggered around to face his brother.

What burbled from his mouth was a mixture of languages, wet with the blood in his throat. The chemical reek of Jarl's body assaulted Zavien's senses even over the smell of his brother's burned armour and the reek of the slain. The combat narcotics flooding Jarl's body were eating him alive.

Zavien did nothing but stare for several moments after he called his brother's name. The dead were everywhere, piled all across the floor of the church, a slumbering congregation of the slaughtered. Perhaps a hundred of them, all dragged here after the carnage. Perhaps many of them had been found here in worshipful service, and only half the village had needed to be dragged. Trails of streaked, smeared blood marked the floor.

'Burn the bodies,' Jarl said in grunted Cretacian, the tongue of their shared home world, amongst a screed of words Zavien couldn't make out. 'Purge the sin, burn the bodies, cleanse the palace.'

Zavien raised his chainaxe. In sickening mirror image, his blood-maddened brother raised his dripping chainsword.

'This ends now, Jarl.'

There was a bark of syllables, a drooling mess of annihilated words.

The Angel raised his golden blade.

He had been so foolish. This was no mere heretic. Had he been blinded all along? Yes… the machinations of the tainted traitors had shrouded his golden eyes from the truth. But now… Now he saw everything.

'Yes, Horus,' he said with a smile that spoke of infinite regret. 'It ends now.'

VI

The brothers met in the defiled church, their boots struggling to grip the mosaic-laid floor, awash as it was with innocent blood. The whining roar of chainblades was punctuated by crashes as the weapons met. Jagged teeth shattered with every block and parry, clattering against nearby wooden pews as they were torn from their sockets.

Zavien's blood hammered through his body, tingling with the electric edge of combat stimulants. Jarl was a shadow of the warrior he had been – frothing at the mouth, raving at allies that didn't exist, and half-crippled by the lethal battle-drug overdose that was burning out his organs.

Zavien blocked his brother's frantic, shaking cuts. Every time his axe fell, he'd carve another chasm into Jarl's armour. Ultimately, only one warrior was aware enough to know this would never be settled by chainblades.

With a last block and a savage return, Zavien smashed Jarl's blade aside and kicked it from his grip. Its engine stuttered to a halt, resting on the tiled ground. Jarl watched it fly from his grip with delayed, bleeding vision.

Before he could recover, Zavien's hands were at his throat. The Flesh Tearer squeezed, his hands crunching into Jarl's neck, collapsing the softer joint-armour there and vicing into the flesh beneath.

Jarl fell to his knees as his brother strangled him. His gene-enhanced physiology was poisoned by both the curse and the narcotics, and his sight began to darken as his body could take no more punishment.

Darken, yet clear.

Deprived of air, unable to even draw a shred of breath, he mouthed a voiceless word that never left the confines of his charred helm.

'Zavien.'

Zavien wrenched his grip to the side, snapping the bones of his brother's spine, and still strangling.

He stood like this for some time. Night had fallen before the warrior's gauntlets released their burden and Jarl's body finally slumped to the ground.

There the madman rested, asleep among those he had slain.

'It is done,' Zavien spoke into his squad's vox channel, his eyes closed as only silence replied.

'Jarl is dead, brothers. It is done.'

He chose to finish what his brother had begun. Even in madness, there sometimes hides a little sense.

The bodies had to be burned. Not to purify any imagined heresy, but to hide the evidence of what had happened here.

It was never supposed to happen. Here, or at Gaius Point. They had damned themselves, and all that remained was to fight as loyally as they could before righteous vengeance caught up with them all.

As the church burned, pouring thick black smoke into the polluted sky, the sound of engines grumbled from the horizon.

Orks. The enemy was finally here.

Zavien stood among the flames, immune to them, his axe in his hand. The fire would draw the aliens closer. There was no way he could defend the whole village against them, but the thought of shedding and tasting their blood before he finally fell ignited his killing urge.

His fangs ached as the vehicles pulled in to a halt outside.

No.

Those engine sounds were too clean, too well-maintained. It was the enemy. But it was not the greenskins.

I walk from the church, the broken axe in my hand.

There are twenty of them. In human unison, impressive enough even if it lacks the perfection of Astartes unity, they raise their bolters. The Sisters of the Order of the Argent Shroud. The silver hulls of their tanks and their own armour are turned a flickering orange-red in the light of the fire that should have hidden our sins.

Twenty guns aim at me.

The thirst fades. My hunger to taste blood trickles back into my throat, suddenly ignorable.

'We were at Gaius Point,' the lead sister calls out. Their eyes are narrowed at the brightness of the flame behind me.

I do not move. I tell them, simply:

'I know.'

'We have petitioned the Inquisition for your Chapter's destruction, Flesh Tearer.'

'I know.'

'That is all you have to say for yourself, heretic? After Gaius Point? After killing the squad of our sister Amalay D'Vorien? *After massacring an entire village?*'

'You came to pass judgement,' I tell her. 'So do it.'

'We came to defend this colony against your wretched blasphemy!'

They still fear me. Even outnumbered and armed only with a shattered axe, they still fear me. I can smell it in their sweat, hear it in their voices, and see it in their wide eyes that reflect the flames.

I look over my shoulder, where Jarl's legacy burns. Motes of amber fire sail up from the blaze. My brother's funeral pyre, and a testament to what we have all become. A monument to how far we have fallen.

We burn our dead on Cretacia. Because so many are killed by poisons and beasts and the predator-king reptiles, it is a mark of honour to die and be burned, rather than be taken by the forest.

It was never meant to be like this. Not here, and not at Gaius Point.

Twenty bolters open fire before I can look back.

I don't hear them. I don't feel the wet, knifing pain of destruction.

All I hear is the roar of a Cretacian predator-king, the fury rising from its reptilian jaws as it stalks the jungles of my home world. A carnosaur, black-scaled and huge, roaring up to the clear, clean skies.

It hunts me. It hunts me now, as it hunted me so long ago, at the start of this second life.

I reach for my spear, and…

Zavien clutches the weapon against his chest.

'It is death itself,' he grunts to his tribal brothers as they crouch in the undergrowth. The tongue of Cretacia is simple and plain, little more than the rudiments of true language. 'The king-lizard is death itself. It comes for us.'

The carnosaur shakes the ground with another slow step closer. It breathes in short sniffs, mouth open, jaws slack, tasting the air for scents. A grey tongue the size of a man quivers in its maw.

The spear in his steady grip is the one he made himself. A long shaft of dark wood with a fire-blackened point. He has used it for three years now, since his tenth winter, to hunt for his tribe.

He does not hunt for his tribe today. Today, as the sun burns down and bakes their backs, he hunts because the gods are in the jungle, and they are watching. The tribes have seen the gods in their armour of red metal and black stone, always in the shadows, watching the hunting parties as they stalk their prey.

If a hunter wishes to dwell in paradise among the stars, he must hunt well when the gods walk the jungles.

Zavien stares at the towering lizard-beast, unable to look away from its watery, slitted red eye.

He shifts his grip on the spear he crafted.

With a prayer that the gods are bearing witness to his courage, he throws the weapon with a heartfelt scream.

The Flesh Tearer crashed to the bloodstained ground, face down in the dust.

'Cease fire,' Sister Superior Mercy Astaran said softly. Her sisters obeyed immediately.

'But he still lives,' one of them replied.

This was true. The warrior was dragging himself with gut-wrenching slowness, one-armed and with a trembling hand, through the dirt. A dark trail of broken armour and leaking lifeblood pooled around him.

He raised his shaking hand once more, dug the spasming fingers into the ground, and dragged himself another half-metre closer to the burning church's front door.

'Is he seeking to escape?' one of the youngest sisters asked, unwilling to admit her admiration for the heretic's endurance. One arm lost at the elbow, both legs destroyed from the knees down, and his armour a cracked mess that leaked coolant fluids and rich, red Astartes blood.

'It is hardly escape to crawl into a burning building,' another laughed.

'He wishes to die among the blasphemy he caused,' Astaran said, her scowl even harsher in the firelight. 'End him.'

A single gunshot rang out from the battle-line.

Zavien's fingers stopped trembling. His reaching hand fell into the dust. His eyes, which had first opened to see the clear skies of a distant world, closed at last.

'What should we do with the body?' Sister Mercy Astaran asked her commander.

'Let the echoes of this heresy remain as an example, at least until the greenskins take control of the surrounding wastelands. Come sisters, we do not have much time. Leave this wretch for the vultures.'

~ BLOOD DRINKERS ~

THE RIGHT OF HOLOS

By

Guy Haley

The air at the centre of the landing pad glowed golden. Rain hissed as it blew into the light. The teleport locus grew brighter, as intense as hot metal, whiting out the faces of Colonel Indrana's few remaining officers. Most of them had never witnessed a teleport before. A couple of them gasped, holding their hands up to shield their faces. Colonel Indrana squeezed her eyes shut against the glare.

The light shrank, coalescing into nine giant forms. It burned brightly and solidified; where before there had been empty space, angels stood. Indrana blinked away retinal after-images.

The Space Marines were huge, taller than Indrana and the other women under her command by half a metre or more, and far bigger than this world's men. They had come arrayed for battle in power armour, finely wrought and decorated. Each carried the mark of their Chapter upon their left shoulder, a drop of blood hanging above a stylised chalice. Of the nine, five bore armour entirely in the Chapter's red. A guard. One of these carried a banner of fine workmanship, two others sported claws upon their gauntlets as long as Indrana's arms while the remainder carried boltguns. They were alert, their armour's motors whining softly as they swept the pad for threats.

The other four were officers or specialists. Indrana knew enough of the Adeptus Astartes to see that. Their battle plate was ornate beyond compare, and each different to the next as summer was to winter. One was garbed in deep blue, a psyker who carried a staff shot through with crystal, his head nestled in a web of arcane technology. Another wore white armour bearing the marks of the medicae, the third wore a helmet ghoulishly fashioned in the form of a skull, his armour black. And their leader…

The Chapter Master was taller than the rest, a man of noble countenance, clad in red and gold. The pelt of a great beast was pinned to his shoulders. Only he and the psyker had their faces revealed. Beneath the sheen of the rain, Indrana thought their skin and hair looked oddly dry, and yet both were preternaturally *beautiful*, as perfect as the statues on the Reliquary Sanctum; angels cast in plaster.

The Chapter Master looked around at Indrana's tattered retinue. She felt acutely aware of her filthy uniform. She stood as straight as she could. Amusement played in the Chapter Master's pale eyes. It never occurred to her that he might be laughing at her, it was clear to all that his eyes saw evidence of battle, and that he was pleased because of it.

'Colonel Indrana?' the Chapter Master said.

She blinked, momentarily forgetting her own name. He came closer, boots clanging on the landing pad. She was forced to crane her neck to look up at him. She knew she was unpresentable – dark rings surrounded her eyes, smudging her dark brown skin black. Her body odour was rank in her own nostrils. No one had access to the comforts of life here anymore. How different to her he was, tall and shining in his armour, a saint come down from the sky. She felt ashamed.

'My lord.' She bowed, her hands behind her back. Her warrior's braid swung forward, water running from its intricate plaits and beads to drip on the rain-slick metal. Her staff knelt around her.

The giant held his red armoured palms upwards, bidding them to rise. 'Please. We are all servants of the Emperor, brothers and sisters under arms.'

Indrana stood. The Chapter Master looked right into her eyes. His were almost colourless, like a vessel waiting to be filled, like the chalice upon his heraldry.

'I am Chapter Master Caedis of the Blood Drinkers, Lord of San Guisiga. He smiled, revealing white teeth that were too long. 'The Adeptus Astartes have answered your call.'

Colonel Indrana recovered her dignity. 'We are most grateful. We have refreshments and…'

'That will not be necessary. You have fought hard. We will not insult your sacrifice by feasting while the foe still lives. Save your food for your soldiers, give them sustenance.'

'You would see the monster immediately, then?' Indrana shuddered inwardly at the memory of the three-armed horror. As big as the angels of death, it had slain fifteen of the Praetors of Saint Catria before it had been brought down.

'In good time,' said the Master of the Blood Drinkers. 'First I would view the overall situation. There are decisions of tactics and strategy to be made. We must make haste.'

'As you wish, my lord.' Indrana drew in a deep breath. She was cold, soaked to the skin. She could not remember the last time she had been clean and dry. 'This way.'

Indrana squatted behind the parapet of the command post, Caedis stood impassively beside her, his hand upon the wall.

'My lord,' Indrana hesitated. 'I advise you to get down. Rebel sniper teams come far out into the fire zone…'

'I have no fear of them,' he said. He was still, unnaturally so.

'Very well.'

The bulk of the Reliquary Sanctum filled the horizon, the parkland in front of it reduced to ragged mud. Trees stood limbless and splintered amid shell holes filled with stinking water. Tank hulls sat at the limits of the fire zone, hatches blown, streaked with rust and the black traces of fire.

The Sanctum had not been built as a fortress, but its steep walls made it an adequate substitute. Indrana watched as Lord Caedis examined it closely, staring at details an unenhanced human could never see through the rain. It was as large as a small town, a circular wall punctuated by seven spires that commemorated the heroic tasks of Saint Catria, enclosing a plaza and cathedral. Statues of the saint had been toppled from their niches by the rebels, heavy weapons taking their place. Everywhere, the muzzles of guns protruded. She was sure he could see them, even if today she could not.

'Tell me a little of what happened,' said Caedis.

'I don't…' Indrana mumbled. She was terrified. Was she being tested?

Caedis looked at her, and his eyes were kind. 'I wish only to hear the story from your own lips.'

'Hesta, the so-called "living saint",' Indrana began. 'She revealed herself to us eighteen months ago. Said she had been sent by Saint Catria to bless her followers. We didn't know then what she really was.'

'She was not tested?'

Indrana nodded hard, her beads of rank rattled. 'Oh yes, by the Ecclesiarch and his priests. She was tested and tested again. There was something about her, a fervour… Those eyes… We wanted it, I think. This is a devout world, but far from the eyes of the High Lords. She performed miracles; miracles in the name of the Emperor.'

Indrana looked at the impassive, dry face of the warrior. She saw nothing there but curiosity. 'We are not heretics, lord. We are good daughters of the Emperor. It was not until around six months later that we discovered the truth. The bodies, I mean. Only a few, but important. Our High Justicar was among them. We think he had uncovered the true nature of the cult, forcing them to seize control. By the time that happened, fully half of our people had joined Hesta. They… they would not believe what was shown to them, put right in front of their eyes. That she was no saint, but a murderer.'

Indrana shivered. Memories of riots on the streets, priories on fire. Good women burned as heretics by Hesta's followers.

'You fought.'

'Yes lord, although it cost us dearly. I have few warriors left to me. We took back Orius and Regal well enough, but Hesta had been based in the Sanctum since the beginning, secretly fortifying it. We've trapped the rebel leadership within the Sanctum, but this is the closest we can get,' she said, indicating the defence lines either side of the command centre, curving to encircle the rebel stronghold. 'There is no way through their fire patterns.' She swept her hand past the rebel bastions spaced out before the Sanctum, their outlines hazy in the drizzle. 'Emperor knows we've tried. I've lost so many good women – I am down to less than one half regiment, fewer than a thousand troops. In the end, once you contacted us,

I decided it would perhaps be best to stay put. We keep a constant watch. They cannot get out, but we cannot get in.'

'You made a wise choice,' Caedis favoured her with a wry smile. 'Do not fear, we stand with you now. The Blood Drinkers will succeed.'

'I… I do not doubt it,' she stammered. 'No offence, my lord, I did not mean to imply that this task was beyond you,' she said. She tried to maintain her demeanour while dread contorted her stomach. This man could crush her without difficulty.

'None was taken, colonel, nor would I wish you to fear that any had been,' Caedis spoke gently. 'Do not judge yourself against us. I will not have such a talented commander feel humbled.' He nodded approvingly. 'You have fought well, colonel. The Emperor has rewarded you, directing our attentions to this world and your salvation. Your struggle is over. The Emperor's peace will return to Catria by our hand. This I swear.'

Indrana was ashamed that this angel stood unafraid in full view of the enemy while she skulked behind the plascrete. She rose hesitantly.

'Do not fear,' he said. He took one last long look at the Sanctum. 'Your saint's shrine is a work of great beauty. We will do our utmost to minimise the damage.'

Indrana gave a brief nod. She could not keep her gratefulness from her face. 'I would see it returned to its rightful purpose more than anything else, my lord.'

'Come,' he said pleasantly. 'Show me this beast you have slain.'

Indrana led Caedis down from the roof into the command suite. Women worked at cogitator banks and vox stations. Reports crackled in from all over the planet. She led the giant through the bustle of the place, Caedis forced to bow his head as they exited into the corridor. Behind him, women watched from out of the corners of their eyes.

'This way, lord,' said Indrana. She directed him through the small, prefabricated complex, then down another flight of steps. At the bottom, broad armoured doors barred the way to an ambulance bay, a lighter pair bearing the medicae helix facing them. 'Our medical centre.'

The door opened with a pneumatic sigh. The ward had been emptied of beds; she had taken no chances with the monster. She took him on, into the operating room they had turned into a makeshift morgue. She hesitated before she keyed the door open.

Two of the other Space Marine officers were already within, conducting their own examinations.

The Chapter Master nodded when he saw the naked corpse on the table. The thing was an unholy blend of nightmare creature and human female. Parts of it were covered in a hard, blue carapace, the rest of it sickly purple flesh. An additional arm was jointed awkwardly to the left shoulder, ending in a three-fingered hand tipped with curved talons that could cleave through plasteel. This Indrana knew from bitter experience.

The thing would have not been able to stand straight while alive. Its spine was knobbled, tortured. Sagging breasts were pasted over its alien anatomy. Its face, awkward and small on the swollen cranium, was that of a human, but teeth as black and sharp as fear crowded its mouth.

The Space Marine medicae looked up from the corpse. He had removed his helmet; he had a black cross painted over his face, his brow glinted with metal studs, too many to count. 'It is as we thought, Lord Caedis. Genestealers. The cycle is well underway,' the medic said. The blades of the device on his arm were coated in dark blood. 'This is a second generation, I think. The admixture of human material present in its essence is a match to the population of this world. They must have been here for some time – decades, perhaps. They are ready to move on and spread their contagion. It is good we are here.'

Indrana cleared her throat. The room was large, but with the three warriors it felt tiny, and she herself like a child around whom adults conducted their mysterious, serious business.

'A genestealer? This is the… the *type* of the monster?'

'You are not aware of them? They are endemic in this sector,' the medicae said. His eyes were fierce. In the hard light of the room, features that should have appeared beautiful seemed feral somehow.

'This world is well off the main shipping lanes, Brother Teale,' said the black-armoured warrior.

'Reclusiarch Mazrael speaks wisely,' Caedis said. *There was a warning there*, she thought, but then he turned to Indrana. 'They are an abomination, xenos who infiltrate a host society, infecting it with their genetic material so that those corrupted give birth to monsters, monsters that the parents will do anything to protect. Their will is lost to them. The genestealers are like a sickness, do you understand? A physical menace that corrupts both body and mind.'

'That makes… The rebellion, the uprising. It makes sense,' said Indrana. 'At first we thought them rumours, and then…' She trailed off.

'Our proximity to Catria was not mere chance, colonel,' said Caedis. 'We have been following and cleansing infestations of these creatures for a quarter-century in an attempt to pinpoint their source. Seven worlds we have purged of their evil.'

'How will you find them?' she said.

'They possess a psychic linkage to one another. Weak, but ever present. It leaves a spoor in the warp,' said Mazrael. 'Brother Epistolary Guinian chases it through the empyrean, although the trail is as smoke in the wind.'

'Nevertheless, our crusade nears its conclusion,' finished Caedis.

A look passed between the three Space Marines. Their eyes strayed constantly to the corpse, lingering on its wounds. Something was going on here that made Indrana uneasy.

Caedis in particular appeared transfixed. He shook his head as if clearing it, barely perceptibly, but Indrana saw. 'We will assault the Sanctum

tomorrow.'

'Is there any way to free those in the thrall of the aliens?' she asked. 'There are many of my warriors in the Sanctum. They were good once, pure of heart. Loyal Imperial soldiers.'

The Reclusiarch shook his head. 'No.' Through his helmet's vox emitters, his voice was sepulchral. 'They are blind to reason, and will fight like animals to protect their false family. They must be annihilated, lest the taint remain to overwhelm your world once more.'

The door hissed open. Indrana's astropath, Aland – one of the few men on her staff – walked in, deep in consultation with the Blood Drinkers psyker. The warrior broke off his conversation and looked to his lord.

'We must ask for privacy,' said the Chapter Master abruptly. 'We have much to discuss.'

Indrana hesitated. The four adepts stared at her. Caedis's smile suddenly seemed wolfish. There was a wildness in him, in them all, that scared her.

Astropath Aland came to her side, his staff clicking across the floor. He took her elbow and pulled her gently away. They left the room together.

The door closed behind them, and they walked through the deserted ward.

'There is something here that I do not like,' said Indrana. 'For all their beauty, there is something savage about them.'

'I cannot see their beauty,' said Aland. The lights of the ward reflected from the plastic orbs covering his empty eye sockets. 'And my powers may be feeble compared to those of their psyker, but I can sense that they are conflicted. They have dual natures, these angels of death, although they are in balance for now.'

'Marvellous,' said Indrana. She rubbed at her forehead. She was dizzy with fatigue. 'Let us pray to the Emperor that they keep themselves so.'

'What of the Sanctum, Lord Caedis?' said Mazrael.

Sanguinary Master Teale barked out a laugh. 'We shall storm it easily and drain the tainted blood of those weak-minded enough to fall under the xenos spell.' His eyes shone with atavistic joy as he dissected the genestealer hybrid.

The Reclusiarch and Sanguinary Master; Caedis's chief advisors. The first always the voice of reason, the calm in the storm, the bastion against the rage that could take any of them at a moment's notice. So different from Teale, who urged the embracing of the thirst, the celebration of savagery. The two of them were the twin sides of his conscience, the two aspects of his Chapter: one restraint, the other surrender to the monster coiled round all their hearts.

'The initial assault will be straightforward,' Caedis said, 'though there are many weapons installed. It would be a challenge to take even without the ring of bastions about it. With them there, doubly so.'

‘I welcome that!’ Teale said. He pulled forth a green organ from the hybrid and placed it into a steel bowl. ‘Already the battle-joy stirs within me, I would feel the blood of living foes on my hands and teeth.’

‘Patience, Sanguinary Master, you will have your opportunity,’ said Caedis.

Guinian spoke, his voice sonorous and perpetually tinged with sorrow. ‘We cannot bombard the Sanctum. I require a moment in the heart of their lair. Only then have I chance of locating the ultimate source of this evil.’

Caedis gazed at the genestealer, his eyes fixed on the thing’s oozing fluids. Behind his lips his tongue touched upon lengthened canines. The blood was unclean, laced with the poisonous heritage of the genestealer, yet even so the thirst boiled up in him for a second, filling his mouth with saliva. He forced the thirst down, fettering it under the layers of civility he fought so hard to maintain.

‘The circumstances are favourable?’

‘From what they say of their false saint,’ said Teale, ‘the cycle must be close to completion. She is one of their magi, of that I am sure, and mother perhaps to a new brood.’

‘Young,’ said Guinan. ‘I need to find their young, to follow their calls into the warp for their kin. Then I will find the source,’ said Guinian. ‘We cannot destroy them, or we shall be forced to move on to another infested world and try again.’

‘I would not countenance the destruction of such a building in any case,’ said Caedis. ‘Far better to preserve what beauty we can and engage our foe blade to claw.’

‘Such is the way of Sanguinius,’ intoned Mazrael. ‘The damage will be severe.’

‘But not irreparable,’ said Caedis.

‘And so we will triumph where these lesser humans could not,’ said Teale.

‘Do not dismiss them, Sanguinary Master. That the Praetors of Saint Catria contained the revolt at all is close to a miracle.’

‘And yet, lord, they would ultimately have failed.’

Caedis nodded distractedly. His pulse sounded loudly in his ears, his attention was fixed on the blood of the hybrid. What would it taste like, human blood spiced with alien genes…?

‘One concerted breakout attempt and the Praetors’ work will be undone. This hybrid was surely a test, a probing of the line. The Catrians’ victory has cost them dear – there are too few Praetors left to finish the enemy. They stand in triumph upon the brink of disaster. More hybrids will come and find their weaknesses, and then finally the purestrains. They will be overwhelmed.’

‘There is barely a soul upon this planet,’ said Teale. His blades ran along the underside of the hybrid, slipping easily between the thing’s twisted ribs. Its stomach slid out. Teale pushed it to one side and reached inside

the chest cavity. ‘Two or three hundred thousand. This world is not worth the effort of saving.’

‘There are fewer now. And where are the men?’ asked the Reclusiarch.

‘There is some minor aberration in the populace. Women are by far in the majority. Men rarely survive to adulthood and those few examples which do are feeble-bodied,’ said Teale.

‘Mutation?’ said Mazrael distastefully.

Teale pushed his arms deeper into the hybrid. ‘Inquisition records place them well within pure-blood norms. The disparity in sex distribution stems from environmental effects. They are not mutants.’

‘Then they deserve our aid, as all true humans do,’ said Mazrael. ‘And aiding them will bring us closer to the conclusion of our crusade. What are your orders, Lord Chapter Master? Shall I awaken Brother Endarmiel?’

Caedis did not reply. He stood with his hand upon his chin, gazing at the slow rivers of black fluid leaking from the corpse.

‘Lord Caedis?’ said Mazrael. ‘Brother?’

Caedis head snapped up abruptly. ‘Yes?’ he said, his voice thick.

‘Shall I awaken Brother Endarmiel? I feel we will have need of his talents in the battle ahead.’

‘Very well.’

Mazrael dipped his head. ‘Yes, Lord. What are the rest of your orders?’

‘We shall destroy the other infected sites from orbit. Guinian, please inform Colonel Indrana. She must withdraw her troops from the cities. Have them form a cordon. Send half of our number to aid them. Tell her that she is to hold the perimeter at all costs. Any who flee the cities are to be killed on sight. If even one of these xenos escapes our wrath, it will all have been for nothing.’

Teale pulled another organ out from the creature and put it carefully to one side. He took up a cloth and wiped down his narthecium blades. ‘I have the beast’s heart,’ said Teale. ‘I am ready to prepare for the Rite of Holos. We will sharpen the Thirst and bring our brothers to full battle readiness.’

‘Is there sufficient of its blood for the ritual?’ asked Caedis.

‘The fluids of these creatures are impure, lord – not fit for our needs. The heart can be burned, the ashes used…’

Caedis looked to his brothers. Their eyes gleamed as if silvered, all of them eager to slake the thirst that tortured them.

‘Our serfs dwindle by the day, lord,’ Mazrael said carefully.

‘Then do what must be done.’ Caedis paused, his heart heavy. ‘The lives of a few are small sacrifice for the preservation of the lives of the many.’

The air around the Sanctum was alive with weapon fire. Five Land Speeders wove between solid rounds and las-beams, drawing them away from the following Thunderhawk and its cargo. The speeders wove an intricate pattern, splitting from close formation as they drew close to the

outer defences. Missiles streaked through the air from the Thunderhawk's wings, obliterating a bastion and the guns within. An answering missile burst harmlessly on the craft's fuselage.

The Land Speeders roared on, burning gun emplacements to slag. One caught an airburst from the rebels, spinning out of control before its pilot brought it down hard on the ground. The crew pulled themselves from the wreckage and ran headlong at the enemy guns. In seconds, they were within the great Sanctum, killing all they came across.

The way cleared, the Thunderhawk swooped low. Jets roared as it tilted its nose upward, coming to a near-hover. Lifting clamps disengaged, dropping a scarlet Land Raider onto the battlefield. The tank skidded across the mud, tracks spinning. Cannon barrels blurred as they reached their maximum fire rate, felling cult members and dragging tracks of pockmarks across the Sanctum's stone walls. The tank drove hard at the main portal, a road tunnel that led within. It bucked as it thundered up the embankment onto the ruined road, slewing left to follow it.

A barricade of broken statuary barred the way. Puffs of rock dust erupted in long lines across its surface as the Land Raider's crew blasted at the traitorous Praetors behind. Their return fire was ineffectual against the machine's armour.

The tank drew close to the shattered barricade, and short-ranged flame cannons washed death over them, incinerating those who had not already fallen. The tank angled itself past the barricade, crashing into ancient stonework. Tracks squealed as the Land Raider pushed. Blocks toppled, bouncing from its roof, and then it was through into the tunnel.

One by one, the enemy's guns fell silent as the Land Speeders finished their work. Other sounds took the place of cannon fire – the roar of jets. Battle-brothers plunged from above, jump packs screaming. Mazrael was at their head, obvious in his Chaplain's black. In their wake another aircraft streaked from the grey skies like a thunderbolt. The assault ship headed directly for the hollow centre of the shrine, braking thrusters roaring.

Caedis's Land Raider pushed on through the ornately carved tunnel. Statues of Saint Catria in a hundred different guises went past. Foes – traitor Catrian soldiers and poorly-armed civilians alike – shot without effect at the plasteel behemoth. They were cut down without mercy by the vehicle's guns, crushed against its sides and under its treads. The Land Raider rumbled into the square at the heart of the Sanctum, a grand plaza two thousand metres across, the cathedral soaring from its centre. A giant mosaic of the saint's deeds covered the floor.

The Sanctum shuddered. Filigreed galleries crumbled as Blood Drinkers landed among the cultists from on high. Grenades shattered friezes, bolts brought saints down from their lofty perches.

All this Caedis observed. Strapped tight into his Land Raider, scenes of violence were projected upon screens in the vehicle's command suite. He

yearned to join his men outside the tank, to sing the hymns of battle and smite the foe. All inside the Land Raider with him felt the same – Teale, Guinian, and the four veteran brothers who accompanied them – but he could not allow them the pleasure of combat yet.

'The real foe lairs deeper within the Sanctum. We will proceed. Let Brother Endarmiel and the others deal with this first line of defence. Our battle is not here.'

The assault craft spun slowly in the air above the mosaic, its thrusters burning the face of the saint. Cargo grapples retracted, and Brother Endarmiel dropped to the floor, landing upright, his heavy feet shattering tesserae that had endured for three thousand years.

Endarmiel was ancient, even by the standards of the Blood Drinkers, crippled in a long ago war and entombed inside a towering Dreadnought walker. Within his giant body of metal, Endarmiel had fought on with distinction for more than a thousand years, his wisdom helping guide generations of Blood Drinkers to victory after victory.

That Endarmiel was no more.

The Blood Drinkers controlled the curse of their founder with some success, and so Endarmiel had remained sane for a long time, but no one, not even a Blood Drinker, could resist the Black Rage forever. As the decades turned to centuries, Endarmiel's fall became an inevitability. He was a living reminder of the darkness inside them all.

Endarmiel strode toward the cathedral. Inside were many of the false saint's followers. Las-bolts and autocannon rounds sparked from his walking tomb.. He strode on heedless. He roared mechanical warcries that urged the Blood Drinkers to greater fury, ancient words that evoked heroes of distant centuries, and drove a powered blood fist through the cathedral's great door. Carved wood splintered. Rocks thrown from the building's towers clanged from his armoured shell. Then the door was torn asunder, and he was inside.

Caedis watched as a stick-thin man holding up a blasphemous icon was crushed under Endarmiel's foot, and then the ancient was deep into the church's interior and the multitude within, and lost to sight.

'To the left, past the cathedral's north tower, that is where our quarry lurks,' said Guinian. 'The taint of the xenos lies heaviest there.'

'Then let us engage them, and rip out their throats!' called Teale.

Caedis directed his driver across the plaza. The tank's weight turned tiles to powder and its guns shattered exquisitely carven stone, saddening the Chapter Master.

Fire rained down from above. Those Praetors turned traitor had kept some semblance of discipline. They fired by rank, fell back, fired again, although their guns were little use against the battle plate of the Blood Drinkers. Here and there, a brother fell, but when the Space Marines closed into melee, the humans did not last long.

The Land Raider smashed into an archway picked out by Guinian.

‘Lord, we can go no further. The corridor beyond is too narrow.’ The driver’s voice came into the passenger cabin.

‘Open the assault ramp!’ ordered Caedis. ‘Withdraw and support the assault.’

Metal creaked on stone, the mechanism’s powerful hydraulics crushing it to rubble as it forced the ramp down.

‘Deploy!’ Caedis shouted to his honour guard. ‘Advance cautiously!’ Too often had the Blood Drinkers lost their heads on this crusade, charging in to engage and suffering at the claws of the genestealers because of it. These were his finest warriors, to be sure; if any of the battle-brothers could resist the Thirst it would be these veterans, but none who called Sanguinius father could claim to be wholly proof against its lure.

‘Steady my brothers!’ called Sanguinary Master Teale. ‘Hold tight to your thirst, embrace your fury, but do not succumb. Savour your anger and save it – now is not the time to strike with blade, but with bolter!’

Caedis could feel it himself: the desire to throw off circumspection and charge forward, sword raised. More than anything else he wished to confront the enemy face to face, to rip at them with his hands, and then…

He reined in his passion. He swallowed. His mouth was dry – he yearned for the warm slickness of blood to soothe his throat.

‘Brothers, ware the shadows!’ Caedis watched his honour guard deploy, taking up station behind the wide corridor’s pillars. Brother Metrion had left the Chapter banner aboard Caedis’s flagship, a flamer in his hands now instead. He took the point position, weapon ready. He was covered behind by Brother Atameo’s bolter. Brothers Hermis and Erdagon held back, blue energy playing across their lightning claws. The corridor was wide enough for groundcars, its ornate columns and carved stone screens providing ample opportunity for ambush. This was where the real test would begin.

‘Prime genestealer ground,’ said Caedis. ‘They will assault us first here.’

‘Let them come,’ snarled Teale.

Caedis drew his sword, *Gladius Rubeum*. The unsheathing of it activated the weapon’s power field and the holo-generator in its hilt. Scenes of victories from the Chapter’s history played up and down the blade.

Metrion went forward slowly, Hermis behind him, pausing to illuminate pools of darkness with gouts of burning promethium. He reached the end of the corridor, where daylight ended and only darkness remained. The others followed. They scanned every surface; walls, floor and ceiling. Attack could come from any angle.

Caedis looked into the next corridor, but there was no light source there. The systems of his armour banished the dark, image intensifiers in the helmet rendering it in grainy green and grey. ‘I see nothing.’

‘Their leader is here, my lord,’ said Guinian.

‘The false saint?’

Guinian nodded. ‘She watches us.’

‘We go on.’

Again Metrion advanced, washing the shadows bright with cleansing flame. He stopped halfway, swiftly unscrewing his depleted promethium canister and replacing it with another.

In that moment, the genestealers attacked.

Autogun and lasgun fire erupted from the far end of the corridor, poorly aimed but in such volume that the Blood Drinkers ducked back to the shelter of the pillars. Guinian, Caedis and Atameo returned fire. The corridor resounded to the distinctive double-crack of bolts, lit by flashes as the rounds embedded themselves in stone and flesh, blowing both apart with equal ease.

Caedis saw hunchbacked figures with scuttling walks. Their features were alternately lost to the grain of the lens images then blurred by the intense glare of bolt detonations, wisps of image distortion trailing brightly from crooked limbs. Only when Metrion braved the storm of fire and bathed the crowd in purifying flame did the Blood Drinkers truly see their enemy.

Hybrids filled the corridor. Like the specimen killed by Indrana's soldiers, they were neither human nor alien but a mixture of both, the result of the genestealers' terrible manner of reproduction. Some appeared entirely alien. Others could perhaps have passed for human in poor light. In keeping with the populace of Catria, they were mostly female, with lank hair and bizarrely delicate features. They shrank back from their burning sisters and hissed.

'This is the first wave! Hold back! Hold back!' ordered Caedis.

Metrion lost control and hurled himself into the mob of creatures, letting forth another cloud of fire before he cast his flamer aside and drew his knife and pistol. Caedis cursed and gunned down three of the beasts that threatened his standard bearer, but soon Metrion was lost amidst a sea of flailing limbs.

Hermis and Erdagon went to his aid. Lightning claws flashing, they carved their way through the crowd of malformed beasts. Caedis tasted metal as Guinian unleashed a spear of psychic energy at the mob, skewering several of the half-women. Caedis advanced, Teale at his side, both firing as they went.

Then Caedis was in the fray, *Gladius Rubeum* rising and falling, its energy field crackling as it ripped chitin apart like paper. Hybrids came at him from the left and the right, but all fell to his blade. One penetrated his defences, its claws gouging a line in his greave. Sparks flew from his plate as the monster severed some vital connection. The damaged leg locked for a moment and Caedis felt the support of the armour waver.

All the while he struggled with his own rage. The Thirst battered at his reason, threatening to topple his soul into an orgy of bloodletting that would never cease. He cried out. Combat became a blur of leering faces and flashing claws.

And then, the foe was gone. A handful of hybrids fled, Hermis hard on their heels. Guinian called for him to halt, but he paid no attention. Caedis panted lightly. *Gladius Rubeum* had been well-blooded.

'Master?' said Guinan. 'What ails you? I sense turmoil about you.'

'Nothing, Brother-Epistolary,' said Caedis. His voice croaked. He licked lips that should not yet be so dry, not so soon after the Rite of Holos. He was thirsty, *so thirsty*...

Teale knelt by the fallen Metrion, and slid a needle from his narthecium into the downed Space Marine's flesh. The device hissed and a cylinder of red fluid emptied into his veins. 'He'll live,' Teale said flatly. Metrion's armour had been split in two places. Blood oozed through the gashes, colouring the scratched metal red again.

Caedis had to tear his gaze away. As Teale called in his acolytes to bear the wounded brother away, his own voice trembled. He had his own internal battle to fight.

'Come,' he said. 'We must aid Hermis.'

Guinian paused, Caedis felt something tighten at the back of his skull as the Epistolary sent his senses outwards. 'Alas, I fear he may already be beyond our help. He has drawn the enemy out in number. If we hurry, we might still save him.'

They ran down the corridor, caution running from them as blood runs from a cup. Caedis could feel it. Once one succumbed to the battle-joy of the Thirst, others were sure to follow. Only the great will of the Blood Drinkers' elite kept them from rushing headlong into whatever danger threatened Hermis. The sounds of fighting grew, Hermis's snarls and battle-oaths loud over the helmet vox.

They rounded a corner and burst into a broad courtyard. The sun slashed the space in two, one side bathed in dazzling daylight, the other in deep shadow. Two civilian groundcars, luxury models, were parked by grand arch on the far side. Armour plating and concealed weaponry were readily apparent to Caedis's eye.

Brother Hermis fought in the middle of the square against a horde of monsters – hybrids close in form to their monstrous father. Hermis stood precisely where the line of light bisected the courtyard. One of his lightning claws pointed upward. Sunlight fought with the crackling lightning playing on its blades.

The other claw was in darkness, arcing upward toward the belly of a hybrid that loomed over him, a devil assailing an angel.

Several more alien abominations darted toward him, arms outstretched. One lay dead on the floor at the veteran Space Marine's feet, and another was missing one of its upper arms, but fought on regardless. Hermis's helmet had been torn from his head. Blood ran from a wound in his arm. His face was twisted with battle-joy.

To Caedis's blood-crazed mind, the veteran's battle appeared frozen in time, a study in light and dark as dramatic as any of the statue groups that crowded the Sanctum.

Swift motion wiped the impression away. Hermis went down, claws rending his armour apart. Teale bellowed. Boltguns fired. Alien flesh burst, splattering the pale stone with their gore. Erdagon ran toward the square's centre in a shallow arc, out of his brothers' lines of fire. Three genestealers turned to intercept him.

Caedis's head felt light – his throat was closing up, as dry as desert sand. He shook within his armour as he fought the desire to charge headlong at the genestealers, knowing that his bolter was a better tool here. With every kick it gave, he imagined the sensation of *Gladius Rubeum* biting into his enemies, and he felt his will ebbing away.

Guinian raised his arm, palm outstretched. Eldritch energy blazed around him, and abruptly died.

From behind the limousines, something that could almost have been a woman stepped out.

Almost.

Her body was as human as any of the other inhabitants of Catria, but her face betrayed her alien origins. Her features were a little too heavy, her nose was slightly ridged, making it appear wrinkled in disgust. Her mouth was unnaturally downturned. And her eyes – they blazed with a contempt for humanity born in the cold places between the stars.

She carried a staff glowing with wyrding might; an alien psyker, a cult witch. The Blood Drinkers had encountered several on the way to Catria.

Caedis's resolve crumbled, and he dropped his bolter – he could restrain himself no longer. Chanting the war cries of the Blood Drinkers, he raised *Gladius Rubeum* high above his head and ran at the hybrid magos.

The taste of metal. A blast of psychic energy.

Caedis was flung across the square, his armour dragging sparks from the stone as he skidded across it. The tactical overlays in his helmet lenses flickered. He clambered up, clumsily batting away a darting claw as he did so. Grasping hands sought to pin his arms, a genestealer's upper claws formed into a pair of single points to drive down at his armour, but Caedis shucked off the creature's embrace and brought *Gladius Rubeum* up in a wide arc as he stood, divesting the genestealer of three of its arms. He finished it with a return downwards blow.

Guinian stepped forward to confront the witch, sending aside a blast of energy meant for Caedis.

The air was taut, quivering with unnatural colours. Guinian shouted his praise to the emperor and Sanguinius. His hand upraised, red energy arced from his hand. The witch stood her ground, a dome of flaring light covered her, turning aside the attacks of the Epistolary.

Caedis advanced to the square's centre where Erdagon stood over his fallen brother, lightning claws weaving an impenetrable cage, keeping the

talons of the hybrids at bay. He was on the defensive; power armour was not proof against the genestealers' diamond-hard claws. Caedis sought to even the odds.

He felled a hybrid from behind, cutting it near in two, the litanies of battle upon his lips. *Gladius Rubeum* crackled as its energy fields ripped apart another, and then Erdagon was free to attack. Another foul creature died, and another. Back to back, Erdagon and the Chapter Master fought, singing the great songs of battle, surrendering themselves fully to bloody rage.

More genestealers were coming into the courtyard, forcing Teale and Atameo back. Teale discarded his empty gun, and laid about him with his chainsword, the blade's metal teeth juddering as they bit into chitin. Atameo snapped off bursts of fire as he walked backwards, dropping three, four, five of the gangling beasts. Then he fell. The hybrids were fast, their reflexes outmatching those of the Adeptus Astartes. One had been able to pass through Atameo's bolter fire and punch a clawed hand through his armoured torso, eviscerating him.

A rush of alien anger burst over the square. Guinian cried out. The crystalline matrix about his helmet sparked and he stumbled, overwhelmed by the cult witch's warp-born powers. Teale grabbed him by the arm, and pulled the Librarian to the centre of the square, where the others surrounded him.

'She is strong!' gasped Guinian.

The four Blood Drinkers stood with the alien dead piled about them. The genestealers came on from every arch and doorway; creeping down stone columns, slinking out of dark corridor mouths.

The Space Marines, heroes among heroes all, were outnumbered. Reports from the rest of the Sanctum came in through Caedis's helmet vox. Relief was deadly seconds away.

The false saint smiled. Her teeth were small and pointed, her gums dark. 'You test the might of Mother Hesta, you test and you *die*. This is our world now, it belongs to the Children of the Stars.'

She raised her staff, glowing with wyrding energy.

'The blood of life flows quickly!' Teale said, intoning the first line of the Sanguis Moritura.

'Only in death can it be stilled!' replied the others.

'Let not ours be stilled easily, let it flow on and outward – let it flow from us as we slay those who free it!'

'Blood is strength, in death it quickens!'

They sang then the hymn of fury, dry lips bitten red by sharp teeth. They prepared to sell themselves dearly.

Hesta pointed her staff at them and laughed.

Stone burst inwards. Lumps of saints flew across the square, battering down several genestealers. A cloud of dust billowed outwards.

Brother Endarmiel strode through the breach, roaring metallically. White dust coated black armour. Twin blood fists whirred. He pivoted and drove a mechanical arm forward, smashing hybrids to a pulp. Hesta's eyes widened and she cast her bolt of gathered power at the war machine. Purple light flared around Endarmiel's black armour. He leaned into the blast, weathered it, then strode on and smashed a fist toward the false saint. Hesta stumbled, energy flaring around her as her psychic shield took the brunt of the blow. She snarled, swinging her staff at the war machine's leg. It connected with a resounding boom. Brother Endarmiel staggered, and Hesta howled victoriously, but the Dreadnought extended one mighty fist. The storm bolter slung underneath fired, and Hesta was cut to pieces.

Brother Endarmiel turned from the shattered remains of the magos and turned upon the brood. Caedis and the others charged forward.

Caught between the rampaging Dreadnought and the lord of the Blood Drinkers, the genestealers were doomed. Their claws could do little against the plating that protected Endarmiel's sarcophagus. They scored the metal, paring red blood marks and sacred scrolls away, leaving raw tracks in the adamantium, but they could not find their way through it. They died, crushed by Endarmiel's fists, impaled by *Gladius Rubeum*, cleaved in two by Guinian's force staff, torn apart by chainsword and lightning claw.

Erdagon fell, but the slaughter continued unabated.

Caedis slew another of the half-xenos, driving his sword point through its alien skull.

'Come,' said Guinian hoarsely. 'Our target lies within. I can sense them, and they can sense me. Their mother is dead and still they do not fear.'

There were only three of them now: Teale, Caedis and Guinian. Teale turned away from them. The roars of the Dreadnought were deafening as it finished the last of the hybrids, and he had to shout to make himself heard.

'I must remain here and put aside the blood rage. Erdagon can be saved, and I must retrieve the gene-seed of brother Hermis. Go with fortune and fury, sing well the hymns of battle-joy.'

Caedis gave his assent to the Sanguinary Master. Teale set about his solemn work. Battle-brothers were arriving in the courtyard in Endarmiel's wake, the fight was nearly done. Caedis motioned for a squad to follow, and together they exited the square and descended into the catacombs beneath Saint Catria's Reliquary Sanctum.

How many holy women lay interred there? At the base of the stairs, in a wide corridor paved with marble, the burials began, hollows in the wall like shelves five high, each housing a set of mummified remains. Corridors led off at regular intervals, all crammed with desiccated corpses.

The Blood Drinkers advanced, the Thirst boiling within them.

In a tomb remade in a crude parody of a nursery, they found the purestrains. Hollow-eyed women and feeble men snatched the mewling

creatures from cribs arranged around a throne of bone and iron as the angels of death entered. Four arms stole around the neck of each surrogate parent, and purple snouts nuzzled human necks. The bewitched humans turned to shield their hellish young with their own bodies. Some raised weapons; bolters barked, and these few fell.

A wave of psychic malice came from this twisted family. Cold, alien eyes stared with hatred from the changeling babies.

'Do not kill them, not yet,' ordered Epistolary Guinian in his stern and sorrowful voice. 'I must take the knowledge I seek from their minds.'

The children of Mother Hesta hissed, tubular tongues sliding over wicked teeth. Reptilian eyes possessed of deep and terrible wisdom regarded them. Their false mothers crooned over them frantically as though they were human infants, blind to their heinous form.

Guinian undid his helmet clasps, air hissing as the neck seal came undone. He set his helm on the floor, and stared at the xenos brood. 'Know me now, oh foul and repellent beasts, for I will have what I seek.' Guinian's eyes glowed, and he reached out to the creatures.

The purestrain young let out a haunting cry as one, heard as much in the mind as in the air. Fingers shifted on weapons in armoured hands.

'Wait!' commanded Caedis. The Thirst threatened to undo their task nigh to its completion. 'Do not fire!'

Guinian eyes slid open. Triumph pulled his dour face into a smile. 'My lord, I have it.'

'You can augur the path of the hulk, brother? You can find the initial source of the xenos contagion?'

'Yes, my lord. I have the psychic scent of these *things*,' Guinian spat the word. 'There are patterns and trails, lord, even in the chaos of empyrean. I can lead us to their foul progenitor.'

Caedis nodded. His eyes swam. The Thirst tortured him. Never had it assailed him so strongly, and a shadow of apprehension stole over his heart.

'Excellent news' he said, forcing himself to master his will. 'I will recall the Second and Fifth Companies to our fleet. This will be a gathering of heroes! We shall crush this abomination at its source once and for all.'

'Please!' called one of the women. She was tall and famished, her vitality bled away by her monstrous family. 'The children! Please, do not harm the little ones!'

Caedis shook his head slowly. 'Your actions are no sin of your own, but you are forever lost to us. We will commend your souls to your Saint Catria – perhaps she will judge you kindly.'

Caedis raised his hand. The Catrians wailed and screamed.

He let it drop.

Promethium and bolter fire cleansed the chamber.

‘Where were they found?’ demanded Colonel Indrana. She fought and failed to keep the horror out of her voice. From outside the command centre she could hear the thunder of the Space Marines’ departing craft, taking the angelic warriors back to their fleet.

‘Bunker 85. No one saw or heard anything,’ said the medicae adept. ‘I have never seen anything like this. These cuts…’

‘Yes. I can see them,’ snapped Indrana. She stared. The medicae facility smelled like an abattoir, not a place of healing.

‘Colonel, what should we do?’

‘Burn them,’ she said curtly. ‘Burn them all. Contact the families. Tell them they died in defence of our home and the Emperor’s domain.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Immediately!’

The room burst into activity, her order breaking the air of terror in the room, each of the women present thankful of a task to perform.

There was no relief in action for her, not for Indrana. There was no one to order her, nothing to distract her from the terrible sight of her slaughtered soldiers. Slaughtered was the right word, she thought – they had been killed like animals. She looked upon the seven pallid corpses of her guardswomen, their skin bled to a sickly ashen grey, and she shuddered as she considered the nature of Catria’s deliverance.

~ BLOOD DRINKERS ~

BLOOD CALM

By

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.

Sorael 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 Sorael's wild charge. Sorael 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. Sorael landed badly. Castor dropped low, swept a leg out to take the Fifth Captain's feet from under him, but Sorael hopped over them, sending another blow at Castor's head. Castor raised his blade, pushing off on Sorael's with his own to roll away and spring to his feet.

They circled. Sorael crouched, blade gripped two-handed. Castor had one arm behind his back, sword swept out in front of him, point down. Sorael 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.

Sorael 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. Sorael snarled. Both of them were rocked by the bright red that welled up in Sorael'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.

Sorael came at him again. Castor held his ground, driving his blade down onto Sorael's with all the force he could muster.

Steel shattered, Sorael jumped back, arms wide, but Castor threw himself forward, shoulder into the other's sternum. The impact collapsed Sorael'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 Sorael'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. Sorael 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.

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

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

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

~ ANGELS SANGUINE ~

THE BLOOD OF ANGELS

By

C.S. Goto

'Would you really want to meet an angel? With the tip of one wing in heaven and the other dripping with blood, could there be any soul more tortured?'

- Angels Sanguine Chaplain, addressing aspirant Baalite warriors.

The burners roared, ripping the heavily shadowed air into strips of flame. Vast stone pillars reached up towards the rapidly descending figure, twisting into arches that aspired to the heavens. The jump pack threw fire into the yawning dark of the temple, propelling Tenjin down from the ugly crater he had punched through the gargoyle infested roof. At his back, chasing his diagonal path down through the echoing hollows of the inner sanctum, a shaft of moonlight pierced the shrouded gloom like a javelin stuck in his back. As Tenjin turned, gyroscoping throughout his spot-lit descent, searching for his target, the moonlight glinted off the blood-red that covered the right-hand side of his armour. He seemed to pulse with life.

The sanctum reverberated with the gaseous thunder of the jump pack, obliterating the awful silence that fled from its sanctimonious haven. Tenjin could hear nothing but the roar of flames and power. Blood throbbed in his brain, pounding out a pattern in his ears, sending a thrill through his body like the drums of war. His rapid drop from the giant and ornate ceiling had pushed him through greater negative g-forces than a normal man could have withstood, but his augmented body registered only a slight red tinge in his vision as some capillaries burst.

In the gloom that engulfed him, Tenjin could see almost nothing. His bloody eyes scanned the darkness for any sign of movement. The flames from his jump pack sent the shadows dancing into frenzies, projecting grotesque and unnatural images against the distant walls and pillars. His eyes flickered and darted, struggling to separate the random flood of movement from the silhouette of his enemy, knowing all the time that Ansatsu could see him clearly, falling out of the night sky like a burning meteor.

There. A flash of red. Deep red lost in the darkness. Darting from pillar to pillar. Gone again.

Tenjin slowed his descent, provoking a powerful roar of resistance from the jets of his jump pack as they struggled to balance his gigantic form. He was hovering now. Stationary. Twenty meters from the ground. Fire spilled

out from the base of his pack, incinerating a ceremonial banner, which fell in burning tatters from its tethers strung between two great pillars beneath him. Fragments of burning textile fluttered to the ground, shedding moments of light across the stone floor, rendering the temple into fractions of daylight.

There. Behind the pillar on the left. The red flashed back into hiding, but it was too late. Tenjin leaned forward over the barrel of his flamer, balancing the back-thrust it was about to produce with an angle from his jump pack. The flamer screeched into life, sending a jet of chemical fire hissing through the air until it plumed and rushed around the pillar like water around rock. The darkness receded from the flames, as though scorched by its ferocity. From the other side of the pillar came a sharp explosion, like a grenade suddenly igniting after being unexpectedly superheated by the chemical fire. An armoured warrior rolled crisply out from behind the stone column, accelerated but unhurt by the concussion. He rolled into a tight crouch, one knee resting on the ground, and clicked off two shots from the bolter in his left hand.

The bolts dove into the stream of flame and rocketed up against the current, seeking the source. Tenjin was an easy target - a fiery angel, hovering in a void of darkness. Ansatsu despatched his shots and then was back into the shadows. Tenjin twisted to the side, firing his jump pack suddenly, but the jets could not move him in time; the bolts punched squarely into his flamer, shattering its structure. In a single swift movement, Tenjin cast the flamer into the gloom and cut the power to his jump pack. As the bolts ignited in his weapon, the flamer exploded into a blinding rage of chemical flames. It spiralled straight into the immovable stone of a giant column.

Hidden behind the sudden and impossibly bright flash, Tenjin dropped heavily into a crouch behind the altar at the centre of the temple. His landing cracked the immense flagstones at his feet, but he was instantly ready with his bolter braced on one knee behind the cover of the altar. With his jump pack extinguished and his flamer destroyed, Tenjin could be just as invisible as his foe.

‘Come out, traitor!’ Tenjin’s voice echoed between the mighty columns that dwarfed the two Space Marines.

‘It is you who are the traitor, Tenjin…’ The echo decentred Ansatsu’s voice, so Tenjin could not get a fix on his position. From behind the altar, Tenjin scanned the shadows with his red eyes and strained his ears in the sudden silence.

‘You have violated the sanctity of a Temple of Sanguinius and attacked the Honour Guard of a high priest, one of Sanguinius’ Chosen! You damn your soul and those of your fallen Death Company. You do a great dishonour to our glorious Chapter-‘

‘No!’ Tenjin could not listen to this. ‘It is you who damn our souls through your polluted ways!’ The red in his eyes grew darker as blood

gushed into his brain, drowning his thoughts and curdling his intent. The blood of Sanguinius flows in my veins. Just as he stood firm in the face of his death, so I shall not falter now. For the Emperor and Sanguinius!

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius! Death! Death comes for you!' Tenjin was on his feet, spraying fire from the hissing barrel of his remaining gun. 'DEATH!' The superheated air roared into a kinetic frenzy, forging a ring of inferno around the chaplain as he swept the melta-gun from side to side. The giant stone pillars started to crack under the tirade; bubbles began to appear in the cracks. In an instant, the bases of two columns melted away into an ooze of molten rock and the stone above tumbled down to the ground in a deadly cascade of masonry. The distant ceiling split and collapsed, sending shards of decorated plascrete falling into the fray.

'DEATH! DEATH COMES FOR YOU!' Tenjin was screaming as he brought the world down around him, firing a continuous barrage of melta into the vague space within his Chapter's most holy sanctum.

Above the roar of the melta, Tenjin heard a metallic ring and the burst of jets. Suddenly, from amidst the ocean of fire and magma that oozed unstoppably over the ground, a figure rose into the air, blasting gravity away with the force of its jump pack. In one hand, Ansatsu held the Grail of the Angels Sanguine and, in the other, the Chapter's Exsanguinator - the symbols of his status as Sanguinary High Priest.

Ansatsu started to accelerate away from the liquid hell that was engulfing the floor of the temple. His jump pack flamed gloriously as it pushed him out of the fire and into the encompassing darkness of the majestic arched roof - a burning angel returning to heaven. But Tenjin was moving faster than thought. He had already discarded his melta-gun and clicked his jump pack back into life. Having discarded his heavy weapons, Tenjin was lighter than Ansatsu and he rocketed through the space between them like a bolt from a gun. Tenjin roared through the gathering shadows, feeding energy into his power fist, which hummed into life over his left arm.

Just as Ansatsu reached the hole in the roof, Tenjin reached him. There was no pause for breath, no hesitation, no ceremony, no thought. Tenjin ploughed into Ansatsu diagonally from below, punching his power fist straight through the armoured plate covering his stomach. The fist ripped through armour, flesh and bone, and then armour again, as it wrenched free out of Ansatsu's back, impaling him on Tenjin's arm. Ansatsu opened his mouth in pain and shock. His eyes focussed momentarily on Tenjin. Then he was dead.

The momentum carried Tenjin and Ansatsu out of the hole in the roof before Tenjin could bring his jump pack to a stop. He looked down from the moonlit sky, surveying the ruined Temple of the high priest and the litter of dead Space Marines in the courtyard in front of it. For the Emperor and Sanguinius.

Addiss allowed his hood to hide the horror on his face. On the steps of the Temple of the high priest, he could see the chaplain kneeling before the hideously violated figure of Ansatsu. A torrent of blood had gushed down the stairway, flooding out of the hole punched through his body, leaving the high priest in a pool of his own essence. The chaplain was soaked in blood and his eyes shone with red. His power fist lay in the liquid that puddle at his feet and his naked hand held the Chapter's grail, wrenched from the death-grip of his lord. In his right hand he held the Exsanguinator, rammed unceremoniously into the cavity in the high priest's abdomen. The device was working energetically, sucking out the sacred blood of Sanguinius' Chosen. But the chaplain was not collecting the precious fluid into the Exsanguinator's reservoir, rather he let it spurt and gush out of the machine into the thick pool around the body. It congealed and coagulated as it trickled and oozed across the chaplain's armour, coating him in a new layer of ichor.

The inquisitor had seen more than enough. He made a swift signal, sending a knot of his retinue scattering into an offensive arc, encircling the foot of the staircase that acted as a podium for the gruesome chaplain's performance. With another signal from Addiss, the Marines lifted their hellfire bolters and focussed their implacable attention on the Angel Sanguine at the apex of the steps. He ignored them, intent on his task.

'Chaplain! It is finished. Cease!'

Tenjin turned his head slowly, his burning eyes dancing from the shrouded inquisitor to the Deathwatch Marine at his left shoulder. There was a flicker of recognition. The chaplain squinted slightly, as though in disbelief that the killing had not yet ended. Was it disbelief or relief? He couldn't tell.

'Chaplain. If you cannot hear me, you will die.' Addiss knew that there was a point of no return. A place somewhere beyond humanity from whence even a Space Marine of the Angels Sanguine could not return. He watched the chaplain slowly rise to his feet, thick tendrils of blood running down his slick armoured form, adding to the pool at his feet. He could see the fiery red in the Angel's eyes and, for a moment, he feared the phantom of righteousness that burned deeply in his glare.

'There are things far worse than death…' Tenjin's voice was tremulous, yet it thundered. The blood was pounding in his head, disrupting his thoughts and dragging his voice from unknown depths within him. 'I do not fear you.'

There was a click and then a roar of energy as Tenjin's jump pack ignited once again. He rose slowly into the air, arms spread wide, with the grail held aloft in his left hand. Droplets of blood fell from his feet, sending miniature tidal waves rippling through the pool around Ansatsu.

'I name you Traitor! Face me! For the Emperor! FOR THE EMPEROR!' Tenjin's voice was incensed.

‘You go too far,’ muttered Addiss under his breath as he clenched his fist into the firing signal. A volley of bolts ripped through the air, focussed at the centre of the offensive arc, riddling Tenjin with tiny explosions. The impacts pushed him back through the air and smashed him into the heavy doors of the temple. There was a mighty crunch as the collision sent splinters flying and decimated the jump pack on Tenjin’s back. He slumped to the ground, crumpled and broken.

Climbing the steps towards the temple and the fallen Angel, Addiss paused to survey the scene. The inquisitor’s retinue remained at their posts, guns trained on the ruined chaplain, overseeing the bloody mess of the high priest on the temple steps. Beyond them lay the gold-tinted bodies of Ansatsu’s honour guard - the Chapter’s standard fluttering forlornly in the gentle night breeze, still clutched in the dead fingers of the standard bearer. Interspersed amongst the bodies were those of Death Company Marines, the chaplain’s own guard, who had fought to their deaths, first against their own Chapter and then finally against the might of the inquisitor’s retinue.

‘For the Emperor. For Sanguinius,’ whispered Addiss in awed disbelief.

‘Do you know where you are?’

Tenjin opened his eyes and tried to look around. His head would not turn; thick straps of adamantium ran taught across his forehead and chin, clamping him to the cold table. He lifted his gaze to the face of the interrogator. ‘No,’ he said.

Addiss looked down at the chaplain. The red had faded from his eyes, leaving them glazed and slightly pink. The Angel Sanguine had been stripped of his armour and then strapped to the Lestrallio Tablet. Thick scars covered his skin, punctuated occasionally by the fresh craters left by the bolter shells of the inquisitorial retinue. Tenjin’s augmented body was already healing the wounds. The blood had clotted and scar tissue was beginning to knit over the holes in his flesh.

‘No? But you have been here before, chaplain. You have seen this place before, albeit from a slightly different perspective.’

The bright light above the table shone directly into Tenjin’s sore eyes and disoriented him. He squinted and searched his field of vision for clues. The Apothecarion. Of course. They had brought him to the Apothecarion. Tenjin had been here many times, as a chaplain of the Angels Sanguine. He had manacled his most desperate battle brothers in adamantium and strapped them to this table. He had watched them thrash and spasm, spilling their tortured minds through their mouths until the Black Rage finally destroyed them totally - crushing their consciousness and snapping their spines with a last violent twist. He had listened to the rantings of Angels lost in the echoing visions of Sanguinius’ death aboard the battle barge of Horus himself, reliving those moments of hell as though they were their own. This was the place were the curse of the Blood Angels

found its most pitiful voice - no glorious death in combat, swamped under insurmountable enemies, battling to the last - just the screams and shivers of a solitary Marine, alone with his inalienable nature.

Tenjin laughed quietly, blood gurgling thickly in his throat. How pathetic. Did this inquisitor really think that the source of the curse could be divined on Lestrallio's Tablet? Lestrallio himself had died in terrified lunacy strapped to a table just like this one, screaming at a phantom of Horus: 'I name you Traitor!' Does this inquisitor really think that I am so lost to myself that I need to be bound to this fate? Does he think that this is about the Rage, that I succumbed in the midst of my own?

'I see that you recognise your place at last, chaplain.' Addiss watched Tenjin's amused eyes in confusion. The glaze was fading, and the chaplain was gradually recovering the pristine, penetrating stare that revealed the clarity of his mind.

'You must answer some questions.'

'What do you hope to learn from me, inquisitor? Why didn't you kill me?' Tenjin's amusement was balanced precariously against a rising sense of suspicion.

'I am here partly because your actions forced me to intervene in the internal affairs of a Space Marine Chapter. You and your battle brothers killed the Sanguinary high priest and slaughtered his honour guard. Your chaotic mutiny was only thwarted by my intervention - who else could cleanse the twisted mess you created?'

'You are here to judge me, then? Would you judge Sanguinius?'

The inquisitor paused over this apparent blasphemy. 'Only the Emperor can judge you. I am here merely to understand you and your kind. You will answer some questions. Let's begin three months ago, when High Priest Ansatsu Rakuten transferred you from the First Company down to the Tenth…'

'As you wish, my lord.' Tenjin bowed deeply, touching his right fist to his heart. He stood upright, looked straight into Ansatsu's eyes for an instant, and then turned to leave. His anger was suppressed and barely noticeable - effectively transmuted into a dignified bearing.

Ansatsu watched his veteran chaplain carefully. He had known Tenjin for more years than a normal man would ever witness. The chaplain was the best of the Angels Sanguine. He was glorious in battle and meticulous in his duty to administer to the cursed and the doomed. Before every battle, Tenjin would wander amongst his company, stripped of his armour, carrying his ceremonial Death Mask under his arm. As he approached, each Angel would drop to one knee and clasp his right fist to his chest. Tenjin would stop, kneel before his flock, gaze deeply into their eyes and say nothing. Nothing at all. A silent blessing. The blessing of silence before the storm to come. Under his influence, fewer Angels were lost to the Black Rage on the eve of battle. He reassured them, inspiring them

with pride and courage, suppressing the desperate thirst for blood that bubbled just below the surface.

When First Company Chaplain Reontrek had died, Tenjin had been the natural replacement. The body of Reontrek had been found deep in the catacombs of Hegelian 9, where the Death Company had been loosed to root out and slaughter the remnants of a defeated Tyranid army. The company had rampaged through the cavernous underworld, slaughtering indiscriminately, slaking their lust with alien blood. It seems that the Tyranids vanished before the Thirst, and the Death Company continued its search and destroy mission for several weeks before they were brought back under control by the high priest himself, Sanguinius' Chosen enwrapped in the Holy Shroud of Servius and bearing the Standard of the Angels Sanguine. Only a power that inspired such awe could arrest the Rage of the Death Company.

Ansatsu had found the body of Reontrek, torn to pieces by the maniacal fury of his own company. The chamber was strewn with fragments of black armour coated in viscous streams of blood. The bodies of six or seven Marines lay in varying stages of dismemberment, some still twitching pathetically, crying out for battle. It was then that Ansatsu had resolved to make Tenjin the next Death Company chaplain. Tenjin would bring the Rage under control, or he would die trying.

The young chaplain had been greatly honoured and had excelled where Reontrek had failed. Never again had the Chapter lost control of its Death Company; it was transformed by the rigid discipline and quiet inspiration of its new chaplain. Yet Ansatsu had not seemed altogether pleased by these long decades. He watched Tenjin like a hawk, suspicious and cynical.

Tenjin could feel Ansatsu's eyes boring into his back as he walked from the Temple of the high priest, fresh from his demotion. I will not turn around, he thought as he walked purposefully down the great staircase that dropped away from the imposing doors at the entranceway. His footfalls resounded heavily in the stone, echoing the gravity of his thoughts, and a swirl of wind whipped a red dust cloud into a shroud around his descending form. The sands of this desert planet stirred and Tenjin paused on the last step to allow them to engulf him. When the dust finally cleared, he was gone.

'So you killed him to avenge your honour? Your anger became your Rage?' Addiss fired the accusation from nowhere, forcing a logical step where Tenjin could not see one.

'No, inquisitor. My honour was not slighted. All service in the name of the Emperor and Sanguinius is of equal honour. I killed him because he was a traitor. For the Emperor and Sanguinius, I took death to him.'

The inquisitor watched the sparkling eyes of the chaplain focus with determined resolution. 'But you were affronted by the actions of the high

priest. You were angered by his treatment of you.' No longer questions: statements.

It was not anger. But there had been Rage. 'I could not understand why he would transfer me from my station in the First Company. I was the only chaplain who could keep the Death Company under control. Ansatsu knew this.'

'So, your pride was your undoing?'

Tenjin smiled painfully and a bubble of blood caught in his throat. He coughed, straining the muscles in his neck against the adamantium shackles. 'No, inquisitor. My pride was Ansatsu's undoing. It made me suspicious of his motives.'

The hooded figure knelt silently, gaze fixed on the floor, the black of his ornate power armour glinting where it was revealed beneath the folds of his heavy cloak. He was perfectly motionless, rigid in fierce deference and discipline.

Ansatsu considered the hunched figure for a few moments, inspecting the battered Angels Sanguine insignia on his shoulder, etched magnificently at some time before the high priest had even been born. He let his eyes caress the lines of the angelic wings, feeling them slide along a series of deep gashes in the figure's chest plates until they fell into the eye-sockets of the Deathwatch's skull on the other shoulder. What kind of claws could have made such channels in the armour of a Space Marine, pondered Ansatsu with interest.

'Welcome home, librarian.'

Ashok lifted his eyes to meet those of the high priest and could see the sincerity in those words. There was more than welcome in Ansatsu's eyes - delight perhaps.

'It is good to be back, my lord.' In truth, Ashok had never considered Baalus Trine his home. The traditionally peripatetic Chapter had relocated on this irradiated rock only shortly before he had been summoned by the Deathwatch. He had not returned even once during the intervening decades.

'It is an honour to see you again, Ashok.'

'The honour of service is mine, my lord.' The librarian had served under Ansatsu for only a year, between his ascension as high priest on Baalus Trine and his own call from the Deathwatch.

'You will find much changed.' Ansatsu searched Ashok's eyes for something unspoken as he continued, 'And for the better, I think.'

'I have heard of some new developments here on Baalus Trine - interesting developments.' Ashok returned the high priest's gaze with a casual undertone of curiosity.

Ansatsu seemed satisfied. 'Just today I have felt it necessary to remove a veteran chaplain from his position in the Death Company - you may remember Chaplain Tenjin?'

‘Indeed I do. He was a chaplain in the Second Company when I left. A solid man, I thought. I recall that he was assigned to the Death Company after that business on Hegelian 9.’

Of course, Ashok had been one of the survivors of the Hegelian 9 expedition. He had slaughtered seven of his Death Company brethren before bringing his Thirst under control by the force of his own will - mastering it and transforming his Rage into an awesome weapon. He had been presented with a Shroud of Lemartes - guardian of the damned - and the Deathwatch had called for him almost immediately. Ansatsu smiled as the realisation grounded itself in his thoughts. ‘I perceive pollution in our midst again, librarian, and Tenjin might better serve us elsewhere. We will see what the Death Company can do without this chaplain.’

Ashok nodded gravely. He had heard rumours of this pollution. ‘Tell me more about this Tenjin and the corruption of our purity.’

The first company scouts knelt in formation, heads bowed and fists clasped to their chests. They were arrayed before their attack bikes, which gleamed in the desert sun. The red dust speckled the armoured panels, hazing over the gold trim, the bulging tires and the black exhaust tubes that bristled out of the massive engine blocks. The scouts were bedecked in light battle armour, wearing the colours of the Angels Sanguine with the fresh pride of recent initiates. A crisp, vertical line bisected the armoured suits, separating the fathomless black of the left-hand side from the blood-red of the right. The warriors’ armour, like their nature, was split between the glory of a bloody battle and the darkness that lurks within a blood-thirsty soul.

The scouts of the Angels Sanguine wore no helmets, so Tenjin could gaze directly into the eyes of each as he passed along the line, inspecting his new company. Each pupil blazed, fierce with deference and courage. Tenjin poured his wisdom into his stare and said nothing. In the eyes of some he could see sparks of recognition, fractions of moments in which the scout opened himself to Tenjin’s influence; flickers of relief and self-assurance danced in the fires of their determination. But from others Tenjin received nothing. Blank eyes returned his gaze; eyes replete with hostility and violence. Impatient eyes. It was in these looks that Tenjin paused, delving deeper into the souls that they reflected.

There are too many. Tenjin hesitated at the end of the line and turned to take it in again. Too many are balanced too finely. He walked slowly back along the inspection line of his new company, pausing, lingering in front of nine separate scouts. They are right on the cusp, teetering on the brink of the abyss, desperately seeking combat. Too desperately. There are too many, he thought, an entire squad. The chaplain touched his hand to the forehead of the nine tainted scouts, muttering a silent mantra, and then walked swiftly off into his Reclusium. The nine sprung to their feet and

followed their chaplain, their heavy boots kicking up eddies of sand as they marched.

'You nine will accompany me as my Honour Guard,' explained Tenjin as the others stood to attention. It might be the only way to control you once the enemy is sighted. Nothing fights the Thirst better than pride. 'We will form a single squad, together.'

The scouts barked their enthusiasm in unison. They were keen to impress their new chaplain, especially one as celebrated as Tenjin.

'Local intelligence reports possible contamination in one of the settlements on the far side of the Bhabatrix mountains. We will investigate and, if necessary, purify the contamination. Understood?'

Tenjin was concerned. NINE new scouts seemed destined to succumb to the Rage in the battle to come - their very first battle as Angels Sanguine. This was an unprecedented figure, especially amongst such recent initiates. The Thirst usually took time to develop. Exposure to battle. Experience of shedding blood and slaughtering the enemies of the Emperor. Internalising the tragic mission of Sanguinius. These were the factors that usually seemed to induce the Thirst. Incidents increased gradually the longer an Angel served. The First Company, the Death Company, was full of veterans, the oldest, most experienced and most blood-drenched warriors of the Chapter.

Nonetheless, the Death Company held its name for a reason. Its Marines, the mightiest and most invulnerable of all Space Marines, brought death to innumerable enemies of the Emperor. They also brought death to themselves. Lost in the craze of the Rage, thirsting for blood, violence and combat, many would take on vastly superior numbers of the enemy - more than even a Death Company Angel could defeat. No matter how glorious or magnificent the victories of the Death Company, fewer would return to Baalus Trine than had departed. Death Company suffered more losses than any other company of the Angels Sanguine - bathing in more blood than even Khorne could crave. Tenjin shivered at the thought of the fate of his predecessor on Hegelian 9.

Nine novice scouts on the verge of the Rage seemed incredible, but Tenjin pushed his concern to the back of his mind. Perhaps I am wrong about them. Perhaps they are just awestruck. It has been a long time since I looked into the eyes of such inexperienced warriors. Let us see what combat does to their souls.

The high priest reclined languorously into the thick, viscous fluid, letting it slip around his body, coating his exposed skin in a deep lustrous red, seeping gradually through the nodal points in his carapace. He lay back into his ceremonial sarcophagus, inscribed with the ancient glyphs of previous high priests, permitting the blood to flood around his form, leaving only his face and chest exposed to the quiet reverence of the temple air.

‘My children, you may leave,’ whispered Ansatsu in a voice that echoed and snaked around the silence of the pillars in the sanctum.

A clutch of three men bowed deeply and unclasped the mechanisms from their necks, letting shiny droplets of blood speckle down onto the pristine white of the flagstone floor. After long moments of deference, the men eased out of their bows and shuffled awkwardly out of the sacred chamber, their bizarrely muscled forms forcing them to limp and stoop as they went. By the time they had gone, a heavy tablet had scraped into place in front of Ansatsu’s face, sealing him into the ritual rest of a Sanguinary high priest.

He lay in meditation, feeling the delicate pressure of the blood enwrapping his body, replacing the customary, firm metallic touch of his armour with the tepid embrace of the fresh fluid. Tiny waves rippled into tranquillity as they eased their way through the nodal mechanisms of the high priest’s carapace, drawn in by some long forgotten osmotic process.

Ansatsu closed his eyes and concentrated on the flow of his blood, visualising the gradual intermingling of the fresh with the staid, pumping the new vitality around his augmented body under the enhanced pressure of two hearts. The blood coursed through his omophagae organ and he could feel the effect immediately. A gradual warmth spread through his body, dappling his skin with rains of pain and pleasure, disorienting his senses and rendering the immersion tank into a box of blades and fire. Ansatsu twitched, sending ripples and splashes around the dark interior of the sarcophagus. The glory of Sanguinius burned in his blood.

With a sudden hiss of depressurisation the elaborate lid of the high priest’s sarcophagus retracted into the wall of the sanctum and a rush of cold, dry air slapped Ansatsu in the face. His eyes snapped open and he sat bolt upright, sending a red shower sleeting over the edge of his tank, splattering the decorated exterior of another of the sarcophagi that lined the wall of the ritual chamber.

He walked across the cold floor, blood cascading into a trail at his heels, and Ansatsu the altar where the Exsanguinator was kept. Lifting it from its podium, the high priest clicked the mechanism into place over the dedicated valve in his neck, which had been installed as part of the Ritual of Ascension to the High Priesthood. The device buzzed into life immediately, awoken by the trace of Sanguinius flowing through it. The mechanism clucked quietly, sucking a supply of Ansatsu’s precious blood into a reservoir in the hilt of the Exsanguinator. Finally, pulling the machine from his neck, he detached the reservoir and poured small quantities into each of the ceremonial goblets that adorned the altar, ready for the internalisation of the neophytes and recent initiates.

The night was broken by the oranging beams of the low moon as the bike squadron roared through the narrow mountain pass, sending torrents of rocks tumbling into avalanches. Powerful headlamps cast startling cones of light across the moutainscape, floodlighting the column of scouts from

within. The path was only wide enough for single file, but the riders were confident and undaunted. They bounced and swerved their way over the uneven terrain, skirting the sheer drop to their left and scraping the paint from their armour against the mountain side on the right.

Tenjin raised his hand in a fist and slid his bike to a halt on the crest of the rise. The engine cut and the lights died as his squadron fell into silent obedience behind him. He was silhouetted against the moon, shimmering in an aura of golden light. Tenjin had an eye for drama, but he also knew the function of awe when leading squadrons of the cursed. He click the comm.

There was a hiss of static. ‘Silence now. Nagaboshi and Endo with me. The rest, hold position here.’

Two scouts from the front of the line dismounted and marched to take positions alongside Tenjin. The three of them stood magnificently astride the top of the mountain pass. The moonlight played around their armour, sending sparks of brilliance dancing into the thin air. The other scouts gazed at their battle brothers in awe, with pride swelling in their chests.

Below them, tucked under a ledge in the precipice, there was a makeshift camp. A fire burned gloomily in its heart, spewing thick curdles of smoke into the sky, blotting out the stars and threatening the moon. Figures were moving spasmodically in the spaces between the tents and the flames. They were jerking and shuddering, twisting their naked forms into bizarre contortions. And laughing. Laughing loudly. In the background there was a faint, pulsating impact. Its power drove the figures into renewed frenzies of motion.

The chaplain took a step forward and brought his enhanced vision into tighter focus. The faces of the figures were wide-eyed and their mouths hung open. Dribbles of spittle trickled indelicately from their teeth, as though they were slightly rabid, running down their chins and necks, splashing across their abdomens like body paint. Like body paint - that was not spittle, it was blood. The patterns on their chests looked worryingly familiar.

Tenjin quickly scanned the rest of the camp. Figures sat languorously in the dust, knees pulled up to their chests, rocking slightly, blood oozing from the corner of their mouths. Some pulled chunks of meat out of the fire and gnashed at it hungrily, licking their lips like salivating dogs. A desperate group stood fearfully, chained to each other and to the mountain face at the side of the cave under the ledge.

The smoke swirled into a dense column, gyring back and forth like a lazy tornado. Then it clicked. The black smoke, the bloody mouths, the tearing of flesh. Tenjin strained his eyes into the fire. The flames leapt and flickered crazily, they crackled and hissed, spitting sizzling shards of fat into the faces of the lunatic figures. There.

The flames seemed to burn with an unusual red, tinted into orange by the reflection of the moon and the hunger of the fire.

There was a hand. It had been licked clean of flesh by the flames, but it was a human hand. It reached out of the fire as though thrown out for help; the last desperate action of a drowning man. Other forms began to resolve themselves in the fire. Feet, arms, heads and legs. Tens of them, piled on top of each other and set alight. A gargantuan pile of burning flesh, sending pungent plumes of death into the night sky - a grotesque barbeque.

'What are they doing, sir?' Endo's eyes were taught and perplexed. He was horrified and fascinated all at once.

'Dancing, Endo. They are dancing.' Tenjin turned to the scout and looked into his eyes. They were burning and tinged with red. 'Just dancing,' he said gently, narrowing his gaze.

'What should we do, brother chaplain?' Nagaboshi's low voice broke Tenjin's concentration. He turned to face the other scout and was shocked to see his eyes wild and blood riddled. 'We must do something!' Nagaboshi insisted, his voice being dragged from some almost inaudible depth.

Tenjin paused for a moment, searching in the eyes of the scout, looking for something more or less than the urgency of blood. He could see nothing. Turning back to the grisly and gruesome party below them, he scanned the scene once more. The macabre dancers still twitched and wretched around the fire, the blood markings on their chests spelling out the sign of Khorne. The chaplain had to fight with himself to control his own Rage - he could feel it pulsing under his diaphragm, prodding him into rapid, shallow breathing. In his mind he whispered the Moripatris, drawing the thoughts deep into his lungs and letting them deepen his breathing back into normalcy.

'You two, with me,' he commanded in a powerfully whispered voice that permitted no resistance. The two scouts at his shoulders turned and followed Tenjin back to the waiting squad, snatching impatient glances back over their shoulders as they crept through the mountain darkness. At least they were following.

From a receptacle protruding from the back of his bike, Tenjin withdrew a spherical package, wrapped carefully in a shimmering black cloth. He unfolded the velvety material with care, revealing the stylised, bespiked skull of his Death Mask. It glinted with depths of darkness in the moonlit, emanating new shades of black into the night. The mask hissed into place as Tenjin pulled it over his head, the latches securing themselves into his carapace with unerring precision. Tenjin's face was gone and the scouts found themselves gazing into the face of death himself - inhuman eyes burning with purple intensity in the skeletal sockets.

With the scouts of the Angels Sanguine arrayed before him, Death gripped his right fist to his chest, clasping the glowing Rosarius medallion tightly in his hand - the soul armour of a Space Marine chaplain, a reluctant gift from the Ecclesiarchy. In his left, the chaplain held forth the Crozius Arcanum, his staff of office. The wings of Sanguinius radiated

from the Crozius, spilling fountains of red light from the droplet of his blood enshrined in its heart, bathing the scouts in an aura of purity. I can do no more than this, Tenjin worried inside himself, looking into the mixed expressions of awe and impatience before him as he invoked the ritual of Moripatris - the Mass of Doom.

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius! Death! Death comes for the deviants!'

'DEATH COMES FOR THE DEVIANTS!' enjoined the scout squad with a single voice.

In an instant the scouts were back on their assault bikes, engines purring with impatient power. Tenjin was at the head of the column, riddled with anxiety about his novice team, torn between a deep-felt need to annihilate the deviants on the other side of this mountain and an equally deep concern that this side of the mountain hosted an infinitely more dangerous deviance. He pushed the thoughts aside - battle will reveal their souls.

Raising the Crozius above his head he shouted, 'For the Emperor and Sanguinius!' Tenjin's bike roared into life, bursting over the crest of the path in a blaze of blood reds and blacks, gilded with gold. Behind him came his column of righteousness, each Marine leaving the ground as he cleared the pass, their bikes leaping the sharp descent in a single jump, before thudding and skidding into the dust in the midst of the repugnant camp. Head lamps blazed brighter than the flames of the cannibalistic fire and the staccato onslaught of bolter fire drowned out the drums of the dancers.

The librarian gently pushed back his hood, revealing his unshadowed face to the high priest for the first time since his return. 'Thank you,' he said, accepting the glass of red liquid from the outstretched arm of Ansatsu.

The two Marines knelt ceremonially, facing each other across a silent space, underspread with the ancient Shroud of Servius. There were no attendants and no surveillance servitors in this place - they were quite alone.

Ansatsu watched intently as the librarian drank deeply from his glass. 'It has been a long time since I have tasted the blood of Baalus Trine,' conceded Ashok.

'It is sweet, is it not?'

'It does have a special quality, indeed.'

'The Deathwatch must change a Marine - even a librarian,' mused Ansatsu, as though to himself.

'Yes, but change comes in many forms and from many places,' replied Ashock with a faint smile, toying with the residue of his drink, swirling the blood into a whirlpool. He looked up, fixing Ansatsu's eyes with his own, which seemed to glitter with an unfathomable blackness at their core. 'Things are changing here too.'

‘Had you not left so soon after our adoption of this planet as our home - so soon after I was honoured with the position of high priest - you would understand the changes more completely. After Hegelian 9, I had great hopes for you.’

Ashok nodded his head slightly, reaching out with his thoughts and testing the substance of Ansatsu’s words. ‘Yes, I can see that now. But the Deathwatch also had plans for me, and it was my honour to serve. For the Emperor and Sanguinius.’

The cultists fell like animals, squealing and running in panic. No, not in panic, in pleasure, Tenjin reflected as he watched the appalling features of a bloody, crazed face dissolve under the impact of his power fist. It was an orgy and a blood bath all at once.

For a few moments the scout squad maintained its formation - the column circling around the camp, herding the deviants into a tight pack and then loosing bolts into the dense group. Tenjin had pulled his bike over into the shadows on the outskirts of the camp, just beyond the flickering light cast by the fire, picking off stragglers and the particularly fleet of foot. His power fist hummed with life and dispensed instant death to all those who glimpsed his terrifying features.

Not many had escaped the tactics of the squad and the chaplain soon slid his bike to a standstill and surveyed the scene. He was relieved to see the discipline of the rookie squad, their clinical workmanship as they whipped the cultists into a spiralling pen of execution. And he watched the cultists themselves, each bearing the mark of Khorne etched into their chests with blood, each perversely elated about their blood-drenched fate. They offered little resistance - this was not really a battle fit for Space Marines.

As the relief settled into his thoughts, Tenjin began to notice more details. The cultists were deformed. Some had scales piercing the skin on their arms. Others had the suggestions of aborted limbs sprouting from their abdomens. Most were overly muscular yet stooped in stature, as though their muscles had outgrown their skeletons and pulled them back into themselves. Some seemed blind, just running into circles because of the momentum of the crowd.

But it was not just the cultists. The prisoners chained at the edge of the camp were similarly mutated. Tenjin glanced back and forth between the prisoners and the cultists - the only visible difference was the grotesque brand of Khorne on the chests of the cattle at the centre of the scouts’ ring of death.

Suddenly the scout squad broke formation. First to go was Nagaboshi, who swerved his bike violently out of the column, skidding the back wheel in an arc and then gunning the engine. Nagaboshi roared forward into the heart of the cultists firing wildly with his bolter, riddling the cattle with shells, punching holes through bodies and the crowd. In an instant he was upon them, his bike scything through the bloody bodies, crushing bones

and skulls under its weight until the shear mass of the crowd brought it to a halt. Then Nagaboshi was on his feet, spinning frantically in the heart of the cultists, loosing bolts in all directions. The shells from his bolter started to escape the rapidly thinning crowd, some punching into the armour of the encircling scouts, who rapidly broke formation.

Endo leapt from his bike as a bolter shell smacked into the engine block, sending hissing jets of steam rising into the night. He cast his own bolter aside and pounced into the remains of the cultists, grabbing at figures with his bare hands, tearing limbs from bodies.

The other scouts scattered throughout the rest of the camp on their bikes, cutting down any deviant that they could find. Tenjin watched in horror as a knot of bikers roared passed the manacled prisoners and gunned them down in a merciless drive-by.

The chaplain kicked his bike back into life and held the Crozius aloft, urging energy into the staff and flooding the camp with the aura of Sanguinius. By the time he reached the centre of the camp, projecting a litany of control from his Death Mask, Endo had fought his way through the remnants of the cultists and was upon Nagaboshi in a flash. He smacked his fist into the back of his battle brother, shattering his spine and sending him sprawling forward into the sand.

Tenjin slammed the shaft of the Crozius into the ground and a bright light burst from the blood of Sanguinius held in its core. The scouts lurched into motionlessness all over the camp, stunned by the flood of awe that rushed out over them. They strained against the invisible leashes, as though battling with constraints secured deeply within them. Endo rocked visibly and then fell to ground holding his head in agony.

The chaplain stood majestically in the centre of the camp, emblazoned and radiant with the power of Sanguinius pulsing in his hands. There was blood everywhere, soaking into the sands and gathering into pools around the piles of corpses. Not a single tribesman was left standing. They were all dead. Cultist and prisoners alike. Including Nagaboshi, three scouts were also dead - although there was no way that the primitives of Khorne could have slain a Marine.

‘Explain yourself, chaplain.’ The high priest stood impassively before the altar in the Temple of Sanguinius. Behind him was a Marine that Tenjin felt he should recognise. He bore the insignia of the Deathwatch on one shoulder plate and held the ornate Force Staff of a librarian in his right hand. His face was hidden under the folds of his Psychic Hood.

Tenjin was kneeling before them. ‘The tribesmen were followers of Khorne, my lord. They were also mutants. Purification was required.’ The chaplain knew that this was not the desired response.

‘Yes, but what of the villagers, the prisoners of the cultists?’

‘They too were mutants, my lord.’

‘But not cultists?’

‘No, my lord. They were sacrificial prisoners of the cultists.’

‘You are aware, brother chaplain, that all the tribes of Baalus Trine are at least slightly mutated, thanks to the radiation of this inhospitable world? We may be far from Baal Primus here, but it took the Angels Sanguine many centuries to find its first home world with conditions similar enough to that of the Blood Angels. Since then, we have passed through a long succession of planets over the millennia, but only this world has warranted the name of Baalus. We have settled here for a reason. Our gene-seed requires hosts with a genetic make-up compatible with those of our father Chapter - compatible with the people chosen by Sanguinius himself. The people here must be protected - they are part of our nature. Might I remind you, chaplain, that I myself was born on this planet.’

‘I could not prevent their slaughter, my lord. The scouts were enraged by the deviance.’

‘You could not, or would not, brother chaplain?’ intoned the hooded librarian.

‘And what of the dead scouts, Tenjin? What of Endo, who even know lays half-mad, ranting on the Table of Lestrallio in the Apothecarion?’ There was an odd quality in Ansatsu’s tone that made Tenjin recoil. The librarian also shifted his stance slightly, as though steadying his own thoughts. There was a vague elation in the air.

Tenjin flicked his gaze from the high priest to the librarian and back again. Something was wrong. The Deathwatch Marine was no stranger here; he bore the markings of an Angel Sanguine, battered and scraped by innumerable encounters with unspeakable foes. When did he return to the Chapter, and what horrors did he bring back in the darkness of his expanded consciousness?

‘You are confined to your quarters, chaplain, until we determine your fate.’ The high priest waved his left hand casually and the librarian clicked to attention, bowed slightly, and then stepped up to escort Tenjin back to his rooms.

The adamantium door slid closed behind him with a solid crunch, leaving Tenjin alone in his sparse quarters. He thought back over the events of the last weeks. He had been demoted from the Veteran First Company by the high priest, despite the fact that he was the only chaplain who could control their Rage. For an anxious minute, Tenjin wondered what kind of havoc the Death Company was raging out in the frontiers without him, while he had been reassigned to the novice Tenth Company, the scouts - a company always in need of guidance, to be sure, but not usually one teetering on the cusp of the Thirst.

Nonetheless, on his first mission, a fairly routine home world scouting sortie, he had lost control of an entire squad. The scouts had slaughtered indiscriminately, even killing three of their own. One was so lost to himself that he was even now strapped under adamantium shackles, raging

against his daemons on the Tablet of Lestrallio. Tenjin had never heard of a scout being so utterly lost.

On the other side of the chamber, Tenjin spied his battered copy of the Codex Sanguine. His was one of the few original copies that remained, inherited from the veteran Chaplain Reontrex. It contained the restricted sections on the Curse that the Angels Sanguine had inherited from the Blood Angels - only chaplains and the high priests were permitted access to these pages. Tenjin clicked a switch, releasing the transparent cabinet that controlled the atmosphere around the ancient text. He carefully lifted the volume from its pedestal and sat in meditation. The familiar pages washed through him; he didn't need to read them, for long ago they were committed to his photographic memory. Holding the book merely reassured him - he was touching a piece of the Angels' ancient legacy. He read in contemplative silence, with his eye lids gently closed over his tired eyes.

So it was that after the terrible death of Sanguinius the Blood Angels were divided into myriad successors, of which the Angels Sanguine were the most glorious and faithful to his image. But the blood of Sanguinius himself no longer ran with life, so what little remained was drained into the Red Grail of the Blood Angels, from whence it was consumed by the high priests of the successor Chapters. Thus could the blood and vitality of Sanguinius be preserved in the bodies of his children. New initiates and neophytes in the Angels Sanguine would be injected with the blood of their high priest and would drink from the Grail of Angels, overflowing with this blood, partaking in the essence of Sanguinius himself through the medium of his Chosen One. The omophagae organ of the neophyte then works to transpose the blood of Sanguinius' Chosen into the soul of each Marine - thus each successor Chapter gradually took on the characteristics of its high priests, the Chosen. The Angels Sanguine drew their essence from Sanguinius himself and from the courage and honour of Servius, the first high priest of this ancient Chapter -

Tenjin broke out of his meditation, struck by a terrible realisation. He scanned his enhanced memory, searching for recollections of each Marine to whom he had administered as they succumbed to the Rage or the Thirst. The pattern was undeniable - before Ansatsu had become the high priest, the Rage was focussed in the veteran companies of the Angels Sanguine, presumably brought on by increasing and persistent exposure to bloody battle. Since Ansatsu had taken the Grail of Angels, however, incidents of the Rage had started to increase in the more junior companies. Tenjin's recent experience with the scout squad was the culmination of a definite trend.

What had Ansatsu said to him in the temple: all the tribes of Baalus Trine are at least slightly mutated. There had been a hint of satisfaction to his tone, Tenjin realised in hindsight. He also realised that the Angels Sanguine drew their new recruits from these mutants - that Ansatsu

himself had been recruited from amongst their number, the first Baalus Trine Marine to rise to the rank of high priest. In the blood of the high priest runs a strain of deviance! Tenjin could hardly contain his visceral response to this insight, and he was on his feet in an instant, searching for a weapon. The purest blood of Sanguinius was diluted and curdled by the sullied blood of Ansatsu before being injected into the neophytes - of course the Thirst would strike increasingly at the novices, as the essence of Sanguinius was drowned out by the pollution of Ansatsu. The Grail of Angels was transformed into a Grail of Damnation. How long would it take for the whole Chapter to be ruined beyond repair? By the Throne, numbers were low enough already. Tenjin resolved that this must end, now.

'Endo, can you hear me, my child?' Ansatsu gazed affectionately down at the young scout and smiled. 'Well done, my son. Well done.' The scout bucked and thrashed under the admantium shackles, shrieking at the unseen images that tortured his soul and screaming in agony as his blood burned.

In full battle armour, resplendent in blood red on his right and deathly black on his left, Chaplain Tenjin pulled his Death Mask over his head, grabbed his flamer and melta-gun, securing his ancient power fist to the holster on his leg. The Rosarius glowed righteously, suspended over his primary heart on a chain of some long forgotten metal. On his back, his jump pack hummed quietly, waiting impatiently to burst into life on his command.

The chaplain flicked a krak grenade at the locked doors of his chamber. It detonated on impact, blasting the door violently out into the corridor. Tenjin stepped through the residual flames, emerging into the passageway beyond like a phantom of death itself. Two of his guards had been killed instantly, squashed into pulp by the sudden impact of the heavy adamantium. The others just stared at the chaplain looming over them in terrible clarity, flames licking at his armour, purple eyes piercing their souls from the depths of his Death Mask. The guards, dazed from the concussion and terror, turned and ran, vanishing into the maze of corridors - Tenjin let them go, not caring about the alarms that they would raise.

The route to the Temple of the high priest took Tenjin through the holding cells around the Apothecarion, the secured encampment of Death Company initiates while they waited to join their cursed battle brothers on campaigns off-world. The chaplain blew the doors without a moment's hesitation, detonating a melta-bomb against the blast shields. Once inside, Tenjin was unsurprised to see the remnants of his scout squad, bedecked in the black armour of the Death Company. A chaplain knelt before them, chanting a litany of tranquillity, keeping them in control of themselves until they would be needed in battle. Without pausing for breath, Tenjin

fired off a pulse of melta, instantly rendering the head of the shocked chaplain into a pool of molten flesh and bone.

'You six with me!' he demanded with a whispered authority that the novice Death Company could not resist. 'There is blood to be split. For the Emperor and Sanguinius!'

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius!' rejoined the Death Company as they chased out of the chamber, hot on the heels of the veteran chaplain, eager to please the awesome figure and desperate for battle.

The corridors were alive with guardsmen, digging themselves into junctions and blind corners. But they were no match for the rampage of the Death Company, which scythed through them, leaving a wake of blood and screams.

By the time Tenjin reached the Temple, Ansatsu's honour guard were arrayed before it. His standard bearer stood forward of the group, raising the banner of the Angels Sanguine for the charging Death Company to see. 'In the name of Sanguinius and his rightful Chosen, cease this treachery!'

The Death Company slowed, their already confused minds tugged in two different directions at once as the symbolism of their own standard yanked at their thoughts. But Tenjin was ready for this and was immediately at the front of the charge, his Rosarius blazing with life and his Death Mask filling his squad with awe. He fired his flamer as he ran, letting the flames plume out before him, obliterating the image of the Standard Bearer. This was enough, and the Death Company ploughed on through the flames to engage the honour guard - stoked with their own powerful sense of righteousness. By the time they caught sight of the standard again, it was too late, the two forces were already locked in combat and the formidable momentum of the Rage had obliterated their ability to reason.

Tenjin himself was in the air above the battle, the jets of his jump pack roaring with life as he cursed the cowardice of Ansatsu, hidden behind his honour guard in the sanctuary of his great temple. The chaplain blazed a fiery path through the night sky, heading for the roof of the temple, which bristled with the ugly, gothic magnificence of gargoyles and jagged turrets.

Another krak grenade and the roof was open - a gap large enough for a Space Marine yawned into the darkness below, and Tenjin was through it before the rain of masonry had even fallen to the ground. Casting his Death Mask aside, he left the battle raging outside, searching for his prize in the shadowy interior. He gunned the engine of his jump pack. The burners roared, ripping the heavily shadowed air into strips of flame …

'I think that I know the story from here,' said Inquisitor Addiss, leaning back from the Tablet of Lestrallio and clicking a switch to release the adamantium bonds that shackled Tenjin. As the inquisitor shifted, Tenjin caught a glimpse of the strange Deathwatch librarian behind him.

Tenjin looked confused, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ground as he struggled to sit up. His injuries were severe and even this slight

movement racked him with pain. Without his armour, he felt weak and exposed. ‘Then, you believe me, inquisitor?’ The chaplain was suspicious and incredulous.

‘It doesn’t matter whether you are right. It doesn’t even matter whether I believe you. What matters is that you believe yourself, and that I believe that.’

‘Does the Inquisition not care what I have done?’

‘The Inquisition is more interested in why you have done it, brother chaplain. Your purity and honour are our concerns - your actions are your own. As I said, only the Emperor can judge those.’

‘I have been true to myself,’ insisted Tenjin, reassuring himself and the inquisitor all at once.

The inquisitor and the librarian exchanged glances. ‘Yes, that is clear to me now. What may not be clear to you is that you have also done a service to the Inquisition.’

Tenjin tilted his head and looked quizzically at the inquisitor. ‘No, that is not clear to me. My service was to the Emperor and Sanguinius.’

‘Indeed. But it is also the case that I have been surveying the behaviour of your former high priest for some time. I was suspicious of his affection for the mutant tribesmen of Baalus Trine, suspicious enough to enlist the aid of Ashok as he returned from his term of service with the Deathwatch.’

Tenjin’s eyes fell on the shadowy figure behind the inquisitor - the same one who had stood at the shoulder of Ansatsu three months before. He was the same Marine who had stood beside the inquisitor outside the temple, when Tenjin had finally been brought to the ground. And Tenjin was sure that he had him before - long ago. What role did this librarian serve?

‘Ansatsu trusted Ashok, evidently believing that the Thirst of the Death Company could not really be mastered, and suspecting that he had been tainted by his years of exposure to the forces of Chaos in the Deathwatch - our librarian did not seek to disillusion him. Ashok reported on the “tastes” of the high priest - the blood rites in which he participated, drinking the blood of the Baalite cultists and their mutant victims. For the Inquisition this demonstrated that he was tainted already, perhaps a legacy of his years as a tribesman himself. For Ashok, however, a librarian of the Angels Sanguine, the fear was that this blood drinking would transform Ansatsu into a devoted follower of Khorne, as his omophagae organ internalised the cravings of the cultists whose blood he consumed. Ashok told me that Ansatsu’s thoughts betrayed a plan to transform the Angels Sanguine, but he could discern no details. For a long time he suspected that you were part of that plan.

‘The Inquisition was also not ignorant of the increasing Thirst of the neophytes and the younger Marines,’ continued Addiss, ‘and I was suspicious that this was some part of Ansatsu’s plan, but we could not work out how Ansatsu might control this. Your explanation of the function of the Grail of Angels is compelling in this regard.’

Tenjin was wide-eyed. ‘When did you know that I was not part of this?’

‘Not until now. Ashok began to doubt your complicity when Ansatsu removed you from the Death Company, letting it rampage uncontrollably around the frontier, shedding immeasurable oceans of blood in which the high priest seemed to delight. But the actions of the scout squad under your command made him suspicious again - perhaps you were the agent of their corruption? However, Ansatsu was shocked and delighted by the slaughter those scouts unleashed. His plan was beginning to take shape. Now, it seems to us, he had the perfect excuse to remove you from the scene - his veteran chaplain, the most experienced Angel in the arts of controlling exactly what he wanted to release.

‘Your bloody confrontation with the high priest was ambiguous for us. It was possible that it was the result of your own flaws, that you had succumbed to the Thirst and that you were lashing out against your own battle bothers. There was Rage in your eyes when we found you outside the temple, and we could not take any chances.’

‘Hence the Tablet of Lestrallio.’

‘Exactly so. We had to be sure that you had acted out of honour and faith in the Emperor and Sanguinius, not out of a blind thirst for blood. It doesn’t matter whether your theory about the Grail of Angels is correct - Ansatsu was corrupt and your motives were pure …’

The inquisitor trailed off, distracted by the movements of Ashok behind him. The librarian had dropped to his knees, sweeping his cloak into a whirl as he bowed his head and gripped his fist to his chest.

Tenjin had also seen the flamboyant deference of the veteran librarian, and understanding began to seep into his mind as though carried in his blood. He swung his legs over the side of the tablet and pushed himself painfully to his feet - the imperatives of dignity.

Addiss shifted his eyes from Tenjin to Ashok, his incomprehension gradually turning to suspicion as he saw the eyes of the two Angels Sanguine fix on each other, sharing an unspoken understanding. The inquisitor narrowed his eyes and calculated silently, sandwiched into this moment of recognition without sharing it. He had never trusted librarians, with their Psychic Hoods and Force Staffs. They reeked of Warp-taint. He could taste them in the air, and they made him nauseous.

And then there were the Angels Sanguine: Addiss had been within an eldar’s blade width of requesting a Sisters of Battle retinue for his visit to Baalus Trine. How mutated did they have to be before they became heretics - living offences to their armour and their gene-seed? He had only changed his mind when he realised that such a request would have handed authority over to the Ecclesiarchy on a platter. Emperor knows that there is no love lost between the Ecclesiarchy and the chaplains of the Blood Angels. Addiss was not about to let go of this case.

Clarity began to filter through his confusion, and Addiss began to understand the impromptu ceremony being enacted around him. The

pieces were falling into place. With Ansatsu gone, the veteran chaplain Tenjin had become the most senior figure in the Angels Sanguine - he would automatically accede to the position of high priest.

He watched the chaplain and the librarian as their eyes flashed in concentration, and he wondered what they would do now. How would they render these events into silence? How could they explain the loss of so many of their Chapter, including their high priest - especially with their numbers so low already? Would the Ordo Hereticus be interested in these explanations?

An unwelcome thought forced its way into Addiss' mind, pushing his pontifications aside and stamping its presence into his consciousness.

This is how we guarantee silence.

The inquisitor jolted out of his reverie and turned on his heel. The face of the librarian was deathly white and his eyes burned with a blinding red, piercing Addiss' soul and holding his body immobile.

You will tell no one of this, brother inquisitor.

Addiss could feel his oesophagus contracting, squeezing his breath out into the cold air of the Apothecarion. He opened his mouth to protest, to demand that Ashok release him, to force him to remember the battles they fought together over the last decades, but no words came out. He grasped at his throat in a futile attempt to tear away the invisible hands that strangled him.

Struggling against the librarian's restraints, Addiss turned to the face of Tenjin, letting his eyes reach out for some mercy from the new high priest. He found nothing but blood in those eyes, and he watched in horror as Tenjin performed a crisp cutting signal with his hand.

'For Sanguinius and the Emperor,' said Tenjin with clinical calm.

Ashok's eyes flared even brighter and Addiss spun involuntarily to face him, his feet hardly touching the floor. He tried to look away, but Ashok held his gaze immovably.

The thoughts seemed to form somewhere down near his stomach, swelling and pushing their way up through his abdomen. For Sanguinius and the Emperor, death comes for you. The words bubbled through his blood, rushing through his jugular, flooding his brain with fatal certainty. Death comes for you. Death comes. It is here.

At the very end of his life, Addiss saw the world in glorious red-shift, a spectrum of crimsons, scarlets, and rubies. The capillaries in his eyes ruptured in their thousands as the blood in his head quested for a vent - creating new escape routes for the building pressure.

As the inquisitor lay dead, blood oozing freely from his eyes into a slow flood around his prone body, Tenjin nodded his approval to Ashok. 'For Sanguinius,' they said together.

'Take the Second Company and deal with the remnants of his retinue,' said Tenjin with calm certainty, 'none must be allowed to leave this place.'

Ashok nodded his assent. Sliding his hood over his head, the Angels Sanguine librarian swept out of the Apothecarion, his Force Staff crackling in his hand.