

**DAVID ANNANDALE**

**The Endless Fall**

'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 fall 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 he 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.

'If 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 greensins, 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.

# Document Outline

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- [No.](#)