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CRIMSON FISTS STORY

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40,000



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The rendezvous was a set of coordinates in the depthless void almost six hours from Indremer's bustling jump point. Turbulent sailing through the warp from Beryl Ultra had set the Crimson Fists behind; Veteran Brother Fuentes, master of the strike cruiser *Intractable*, had been forced to push the warship's engines to the utmost to arrive at the appointed hour. The summons – a priority omicron and embellished with the Inquisitorial seal – had made it clear that time was of the essence.

Veteran Sergeant Sandor Galleas linked a data-slate to the Thunderhawk's forward auspex array and studied the massive ship awaiting them. Nearly twice as large as the *Intractable*, the *Duchess Hespera*'s armoured flanks bore the scars of battles fought when the Imperium was still young. Craters from torpedo strikes and macro-cannon shells left jagged pockmarks along the length of its dark-grey hull, and its swept bow was crisscrossed with the characteristic scars of particle lance fire. The two Cobra-class destroyers providing close escort were all but lost in the great vessel's shadow.

Ancient and battered but still formidable, Galleas thought, gauging the strength of the surviving batteries and power readings from the reactors. No signs of recent combat. No indications of a takeover. He pored over the data scrolling past the ship's image. The better informed he was, the greater the odds of victory. The Chapter Master had handpicked his squad for the mission – his first independent command since taking charge – and the honour of such an assignment weighed heavily on him.

Brother Efraim's voice crackled over the vox. 'Sixty seconds to touchdown,' the pilot said. 'The cruiser's starboard shuttle bay is open, and mag-seals are active.'

'Acknowledged,' Galleas replied. 'Still no word from the *Hespera*?'

‘Not even a standard challenge. All three ships are running silent.’

‘That’s strange, is it not?’ asked Veteran Brother Ibraim Salazar. He shifted in his crash harness to glance across the troop compartment at Galleas, who stood in the place of honour at the head of the Thunderhawk’s forward assault ramp. Red lantern light shone wetly on the double row of fresh ork tusks that hung from Salazar’s right pauldron. As the newest member of the squad, and only recently elevated to the elite ranks of the Chapter’s Crusade Company, Salazar was jealous of the many battle-honours his brothers wore.

‘There’s no such thing as *normal* where the Inquisition is concerned.’ Veteran Brother Timon Royas folded his arms across his chest and glanced up and down the troop compartment, as though daring the rest of the squad to refute him. A Crimson Fist with more than two hundred years’ service in the Chapter’s Crusade Company, Royas wore the ornate silver pauldron of the Deathwatch upon his left shoulder, signifying time served in the Ordo Xenos’s kill-teams. ‘Secrecy for its own sake is second nature to them.’

‘True enough.’ Veteran Brother Mikael Tauros spoke in low, measured tones, as befit a warrior of his age and experience. He was the oldest battle-brother in the squad, a Crimson Fist of nearly five hundred years’ service and a veteran of some of the Chapter’s greatest campaigns. ‘But this involves the subsector governor. Perhaps the need for secrecy is justified.’

Galleas glanced up from the data-slate. ‘How do you know that?’

Tauros chuckled. Sitting next to Galleas, he leaned forward in his restraints and tapped gently at the image glowing on the data-slate. ‘I know this ship of old, brother. The *Duchess Hespera* fought in the Vexan Crusade, and stood in the battle line against the Reavers of Ythramar. After the Reavers were broken at the Battle of Tamar, the *Hespera* was retired from the fleet rolls with honour, where it passed into the hands of Admiral Ishmael Garth. The same Garth that now serves as governor of the Numidea subsector.’

‘Garth? I know that name.’ Across the troop compartment, Veteran Brother Yezim Olivar turned his red-lit gaze upon Galleas. Unlike his brothers, Olivar’s battle armour carried no battle trophies or campaign seals; instead, long curls of parchment bearing Ecclesiarchal verses hung from his pauldrons and breastplate, and the Imperial aquila on his chest was polished to a mirror sheen. ‘Ishmael Garth and his family are renowned for their devotion to the Imperial cult, and their generous tithes to the Adeptus Ministorum.’

Servos whined softly off to Galleas’s right. Veteran Brother Valentus leaned forward, his polished, steel skull reflecting the red lantern light as he addressed

Galleas. ‘Secrecy is well and good,’ he said, the words rasping from the vox-grille set into the hollow of his scarred throat. ‘But why pull us from the fighting at Beryl Ultra, when there are other Chapters closer to Numidea that could have answered the summons?’

A momentary chill swept through Galleas’s body as the Thunderhawk passed through the grand cruiser’s void shields. Ghostly fingers brushed along his bones and seized at his twin hearts. For the briefest instant, an abyss yawned inside him, hungry and vast, and then it was gone.

‘The answer is self-evident, brothers,’ Galleas declared. ‘We have been called because we are the Crimson Fists, the shield-hand of Dorn. Of all the Space Marine Chapters across the Imperium, there are none more loyal than we. That is why so many of our brothers stand the Long Watch with the Ordo Xenos. That is why the Ordo Malleus called upon us to carry out the ultimate sanction on the Sons of Gideon and the Marines Vigilant when they forgot their oaths to Terra.

‘Time and again the Inquisition has called upon us, because our honour and devotion is beyond reproach. The very fact that we were summoned from the undertaking on Beryl Ultra should underscore how serious the situation must be.’ He blanked the data-slate and secured it to a cradle set into the forward bulkhead. ‘It is a great honour to serve the Inquisition, and we should be proud that Chapter Master Kantor selected us for this task. We must not fail him.’

Murmurs of assent passed amongst the squad as the Thunderhawk’s forward thrusters flared to an angry roar. Galleas reached down and pulled his Phobos-pattern boltgun from its cradle. The transport shuddered slightly as it passed through the hangar’s powerful mag-seal, came to a hover, and then touched down heavily upon the ancient deck. The thrusters were still winding down when the squad’s crash harnesses released and the forward assault ramp deployed with a groaning hiss of hydraulics.

The wave of noise hit Galleas as he started for the ramp. It flooded into the troop compartment and rang from the armoured bulkheads, rising over the muted rumble of the Thunderhawk’s engines. The Space Marine’s autosenses and his own superbly trained mind separated discrete threads of sound from the cacophony: deep-throated hymns and monkish chants, shouted prayers and voices raised in abject praise of the Space Marines and the God-Emperor of Mankind.

The grand cruiser’s starboard hangar deck was a vast, low-ceilinged space that during the warship’s heyday would have been crowded with shuttles, gun cutters and other small craft. Now it was empty – save for a vast throng of cheering,

shouting humans, clad in everything from rich, Ecclesiarchal robes to the rags of interstellar pilgrims. Servo-skulls circled overhead, spilling devotional music from their tinny vox-grilles. Censor-servitors, wreathed in columns of aromatic smoke, formed the edges of a narrow processional through the cheering throng that stretched from the ramp of the Thunderhawk to a gathering of worthies that waited at the far side of the hangar.

Galleas paused at the top of the ramp, struggling to reconcile expectations with reality. The squad fell in behind him, boltguns at the ready.

‘What in the name of the Golden Throne is this?’ Royas growled.

‘None of our concern,’ Galleas replied after a moment. ‘Formation delta. Weapons tight. Let’s move.’

Boots rang on deck plate as the Crimson Fists descended the ramp. Veterans of countless battles across the Imperium of Man, their midnight-blue power armour was blazoned with campaign laurels, oath ribbons and badges of valour, many of them centuries old. The battle honours spoke not just of individual achievements, but epic moments in the history of a Space Marine Chapter nearly ten thousand years old. The Adeptus Astartes towered head and shoulders above the cheering throng, giants shaped by the genius of the God-Emperor himself and forged in the fires of endless war.

At the bottom of the ramp the squad fell into a wedge formation with Galleas on point. Almost immediately the Space Marines were showered with objects: streamers of parchment weighted with lumps of wax, dried flower petals – even credit chits. The tiny, plastic octagons pinged off the curved surfaces of their armour and crunched beneath their feet.

Royas glared balefully at the frenzied crowd. ‘Olivar, would you care to explain why they’re pelting us with rubbish?’

Olivar shook his head. ‘Rubbish? Have you never witnessed a Saint’s Day on Rynn’s World, Royas? They’re *blessing* us.’

A young pilgrim dressed in rags darted from the crowd to touch the hem of Brother Valentus’s crimson tabard. Another leaped into the aisle and prostrated himself before the Adeptus Astartes, his face bright with tears. Royas stepped over the pilgrim without breaking stride. ‘Blessing us? For what? Making the rendezvous on time? Walking in a straight line?’

‘Best to ask the shepherd of the flock. That would be him up ahead.’

Olivar pointed out a stout man of medium height clad in the dark, layered robes and golden vestments of the Ecclesiarchy. He was attended upon by a retinue of chanting acolytes, censor-bearers and servitor-scribes, and a pair of

hooded penitents stood at his back, bearing the holy relics of his office: a long staff of polished adamantium, topped by the Imperial aquila, and a massive copy of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*, its holy texts written upon pages of hammered gold. His arms were spread in greeting, as if ready to embrace Galleas like a son, and a beatific smile lit his cherubic face.

The veteran sergeant paid the priest no mind – his gaze was drawn to the tall, scowling figure standing a little behind and well apart from the ecclesiarch and his retinue. The man wore a frock coat of severe cut made from matte Obsidia silk, and his hands were clasped atop a cane of red thornwood carved with lines of hexagrammic script. At his side was a woman in black, her face hidden behind a low-hanging veil. They were attended upon by a hooded tech-priest and two hulking gun servitors, plus a squad of dour, hellgun-armed storm troopers in battered carapace armour.

Galleas raised his right hand and his squad came to a halt at the end of the processional. Like Royas, he wore the silver skull of the Deathwatch upon his left pauldron. Dozens of battle honours and parchment seals adorned his midnight-blue breastplate, and an ancient power sword hung from a gold-chased scabbard at his hip. His gauntlets, and those of his brothers, were the colour of fresh-spilled blood.

‘I am Veteran Sergeant Sandor Galleas of the Crimson Fists,’ he declared, his booming voice cutting through the din. The rapturous crowd fell silent at the sound.

The man in the coat frowned up at Galleas. He had the face of a raptor, with a hooked nose, sharp chin and piercing eyes the colour of polished slate. After a moment he stepped forward, the hardened tip of his thornwood cane tapping hollowly against the metal deck.

‘A sergeant,’ he echoed disapprovingly. His voice was hard and unforgiving. ‘I asked Pedro Kantor for ten of his best.’

Galleas squared his shoulders and stared down at the man. ‘Each of us has fought a thousand battles in the Emperor’s name,’ he answered. ‘We have broken armies and conquered worlds. Who, then, are you?’

The man’s eyes narrowed. ‘I am Lord Inquisitor Anatol Volk, of the Ordo Xenos.’ He half-turned to the veiled woman and the waiting tech-priest. ‘My interrogator, Mamzelle Singh, and Enginseer Maccabin. And this,’ he indicated the priest with a sweep of his hand, ‘is Erasmus Dido, *Pontifex Caelesti Numidea*.’

‘*Ave, Imperator!*’ The pontifex intoned, making the sign of the aquila.

*‘Deus gloriosa!’* the crowd answered, echoing in the vaulted space.

Dido raised his hands to his flock. The pontifex’s round face was serene. His augmented eyes were deep-set dots of phosphoric green light. ‘We give thanks to the God-Emperor of Mankind, who has blessed our sacred pilgrimage and sent his Angels of Death amongst us to stand guard against the terrors of the endless night—’

‘That remains to be seen,’ Galleas interjected. He turned to Volk. ‘You called to the Crimson Fists for aid, Lord Inquisitor, and we have come. What would you have us do?’

Volk gave the sergeant a mirthless smile. ‘Follow me.’

The grand cruiser’s strategium was a dark, vaulted space just aft of the ship’s cathedral-like bridge. It took nearly an hour to reach from the starboard landing bay, transferring from one shuddering, slow-moving lift to another as they climbed from the main hull to the command decks. Along the way, Galleas noted dark passageways and empty crew stations, dank air and bulkheads coated with grime. Most of the bridge stations were dark; the few officers and ratings present were focused on the basic tasks of helming the huge ship and keeping her reactors lit.

Volk was the first to enter the room, crossing to the rear of the strategium while Engineer Maccabin bent over the controls of the giant plot table that dominated the centre of the room. Mamzelle Singh remained outside with the gun-servitors as the Space Marines filed silently into the chamber. When the last of the squad was inside, the strategium’s blast doors groaned shut behind them.

‘We may speak here with a reasonable degree of security,’ the inquisitor said. He motioned to the engineer, who burred a string of binaric and adjusted the table’s controls. At once, a soft, pearlescent light suffused its dark, glassine surface. Volk rested his hands atop his cane and leaned over the table. The pale light transformed his gaunt features into a sinister, spectral mask. ‘The vulgar display on the landing deck was regrettable. Every effort was made to bring you here under the utmost secrecy, but once the ship was underway I had to inform the crew of our rendezvous. We’d barely cleared orbit from Indremer Prime before word got to the Pontifex.’ Volk frowned. ‘I persuaded Dido to limit his welcome to just a fraction of his followers, but by now I’m sure the rest are aware of your presence.’

‘How many are there?’ Galleas said.

‘Nearly twelve thousand, including artisans, patrons and hangers-on. They

have been gathering on Indremer Prime for months, preparing for the undertaking.’ Volk gave the sergeant a searching look, as though he could see past the Space Marine’s helmet and read the expression on his face. ‘They have come from all across the subsector – even Beryl Ultra, where your Chapter is currently engaged.’

‘We are on Beryl Ultra to fight greenskins,’ Galleas replied. ‘The comings and goings of its people are of no interest to us.’

‘Of course. And how fares your crusade?’

‘It has reached a critical phase. Chapter Master Kantor has emptied the halls of the Arx Tyrannus to fortify Beryl Ultra and halt Snagrod’s advance. Now Snagrod’s master, the Arch-Arsonist of Charadon, has turned the full attention of his Waaagh! upon us. Kantor plans a counter-strike with our fleet, along with orbital drops from our reserve companies, to divide the Waaagh! into smaller hordes that we can destroy in detail.’

‘A bold plan,’ Volk said.

‘A masterstroke. We will deal the orks of Charadon a defeat that they will not recover from for many years.’ Galleas returned Volk’s forbidding stare. ‘But Kantor will need every squad he can muster.’

The inquisitor’s smile was ghastly in the pale light. ‘You feel your skills would be put to better use fighting the xenos?’

Galleas frowned at the tone in the man’s voice. ‘That is not for me to say. Why are we here, Lord Inquisitor?’

Volk studied Galleas intently. ‘What do you know of a renegade Space Marine who calls himself Haxan the Defiler?’

A stir went through the Crimson Fists. Galleas felt his pulse quicken at the infamous name.

‘Haxan first appeared during the uprising on Hydra Secundus,’ he said grimly. ‘When he lured Captain Isidor Montes and half a company of Crimson Fists to their doom.’

‘Along with an inquisitor named Matthias Rabe,’ Volk added gravely. ‘My mentor. A brilliant man, keenly perceptive and eternally suspicious, well versed in the ways of our eternal foe.’ His eyes never left Galleas. ‘I imagine he was the first to die when the traitor sprung his trap.’

The inquisitor fell silent, lost in a grim reverie. At last, he shrugged. ‘Of course, Haxan and his followers were gone by the time the second Imperial strike force arrived. Montes’s ship – what was left of it – was drifting in orbit, and the planet below was a lifeless, radioactive waste.’

Volk's expression hardened. 'I have hunted the traitor ever since. And I have learned much about him over the last sixty years.'

'Tell me,' Galleas said.

The inquisitor paused. His cane tapped against the deck as he gathered his thoughts. 'Haxan traded upon the massacre at Hydra Secundus to earn a place with the Red Corsairs,' he said. 'Within twenty years he had a warship – a Gothic-class cruiser taken off Zyphos – and was striking at shrine worlds across the Serpentis Reach. It was during these raids that he became known as the Defiler. Sacred sites were reduced to ash, or sown with terrible plagues, or desecrated in ways too terrible to mention. Thousands of innocent pilgrims were dragged off to the maelstrom, to serve the whims of Haxan's masters or bleed out their lives upon the altars of Chaos. And with each obscene offering, Haxan's reputation grew. More ships and more followers flocked to his banner. By 921, Haxan had a small fleet of escorts and modified trading ships under his command, and was using the Serpentis Reach as a staging area to raid deep into the Loki Sector.'

'We're a long way from the maelstrom, Lord Inquisitor. Such a move seems foolhardy.'

Volk answered with a harsh laugh. 'For a human, perhaps. But a Space Marine, with centuries of experience and an intellect programmed for war? No. You would do the same as Haxan, if your Chapter Master willed it. Am I wrong?'

Salazar spoke over the squad vox-net. *'If I didn't know better, I'd think Volk was accusing us of something.'*

*'He's a zealot,'* Valentus observed. *'It's second nature to him.'*

Royas glowered at the inquisitor. 'I don't care if he's one of the High Lords of Terra. He needs to remember who he's talking to.'

The sergeant glanced at an icon on his helmet display and muted the channel. Volk could think whatever he liked, as far as Galleas was concerned, if it meant a chance to deliver the Chapter's vengeance upon Haxan the Defiler.

'You believe Haxan will attack the *Duchess Hespera*?'

The inquisitor considered his reply. The cane rapped the deck once, twice, and then he gave the engineer a curt nod. A star system took shape on the plot table's display: five worlds orbiting a tired, red star, surrounded by a dense asteroid belt.

'The Ceoris System,' Volk pronounced, leaning over the plot table. 'The system lords were among the first to embrace the Imperial cult during the 32nd

millennium, and spent enormous sums to convert the primary world's capital city into a vast cathedral consecrated in the Emperor's name. Ceoris Ultra was one of the great jewels in the Ecclesiarchal firmament for more than four thousand years, until ships loyal to Goge Vandire bombarded the planet during the Age of Apostasy. The Adeptus Ministorum has dreamed of restoring the ruined cathedral ever since.

'To that end, Pontifex Dido has spent the past five years building support for a pilgrimage to Ceoris Ultra. He has attracted thousands of followers, and gestures of support from powerful figures across the Numidea subsector.' He took in the strategium with a sweep of his hand. 'The very pious Ishmael Garth even offered his prized ship to transport the pilgrims safely to the system. Dido and his followers boarded the cruiser amid great pomp and circumstance after a week of religious festivals and celebrations.'

Galleas contemplated the system map. 'And Haxan knows of this?'

'The Defiler has spies everywhere. He cannot help but know.'

'Indeed.'

'He has not seen such a prize in sixty years,' Volk insisted. 'The *Duchess Hespera* alone would tempt any pirate, but a pontifex and twelve thousand souls in the bargain? It is too rich for the Defiler to resist.' The inquisitor reached out and tapped the table display with a bony finger. 'He will be waiting for us here. He knows how many ships we have, our course and our timetable. Everything he needs to try and take us, except for one crucial detail.'

The inquisitor looked up from the display, staring intently at Galleas. 'Haxan the Defiler will not be expecting *you*.'

Galleas considered the inquisitor's words carefully. The manifest secrecy and the abrupt summons to Indremer now made sense. 'What is the size of Haxan's force?'

'At present, one Gothic-class cruiser, renamed the *Scourge of the Faithless*, four converted merchant ships, plus three Idolator-class raiders and nearly four thousand heretics—'

'Ships and cultists do not concern me,' Galleas said. 'How large is Haxan's warband?'

The inquisitor smiled coldly, sensing Galleas's fervour. 'Eight Red Corsairs — perhaps as many as twelve. There are rumours of a sorcerer as well.'

The sergeant nodded. His pulse quickened at the thought of the battle that lay ahead. It would be one for the annals, a deed of righteous vengeance that would be remembered for centuries to come.

He bent over the plot table. A crimson finger traced a path from the system's jump point to a narrow passage cleared through the outer asteroid belt.

'The attack will come here,' Galleas said. 'Somewhere along this passage.'

Volk studied the sergeant through narrowed eyes. 'How can you be certain?'

'It is what I would do.'

The *Duchess Hespera* was fifteen days upon the face of the deep, crossing the light-years between Indremer and Ceoris. The ancient cruiser was battered by warp storms for most of the passage, and rumours spread of terrifying spectres haunting the passageways close to the outer hull. Five elderly pilgrims were overcome with terror and died during the difficult passage. Pontifex Dido gathered as many of the faithful as he could into the ship's vast chapel, where they listened to the groaning of the hull and prayed day and night to the Emperor for their deliverance.

Galleas and his brothers used the time to familiarise themselves with the layout of the vast ship, and to develop strategies for its defence. Once he was satisfied, he split his squad into groups and simulated every attack scenario he and the rest of his brothers could imagine. By the fifteenth day, Galleas believed that he had anticipated every move Haxan could possibly make.

Things began to go wrong the moment that the grand cruiser emerged at Ceoris. The strike cruiser *Intractable* and one of the *Duchess Hespera's* destroyer escorts were nowhere to be found. The wild currents of the warp had separated them, and there was no telling when they might win their way through. Galleas's plan had been for the Space Marine cruiser to trail the *Duchess Hespera* at the extreme limit of surveyor range, ready to pounce the instant that Haxan began his attack. The *Intractable's* heavy armour and powerful bombardment cannons would have tipped the balance of firepower into the Imperials' hands and sealed the traitors' fate; now the *Duchess Hespera*, with its skeleton crew, would have to face the raiders practically alone. Volk kept the grand cruiser at the jump point for as long as he dared, hoping against hope that the strike cruiser would appear, but after nearly four hours they knew they could wait no longer. Haxan was watching, they knew, having doubtlessly picked up the warp emissions of the *Hespera* and her escort. Any further delay might make the raider suspicious and warn him away from the trap. The Imperials could only press on to Ceoris Ultra and pray that the *Intractable* would arrive in time.

The deck plates rang like an anvil as Brother Salazar landed hard on his right

shoulder and rolled across the empty storage bay. He fetched up hard against the far bulkhead, momentarily stunned. Titus Juno tossed Salazar's combat knife back to him and spun to face the next attacker.

Brother Caron was already in motion, lunging forward with his left hand outstretched and his combat knife held low. Rodrigo and Amador continued to circle Juno, waiting for an opening to strike. As Caron's left hand closed about Juno's right wrist, Amador struck with a shout, leaping for Juno's neck.

The attack was swift and perfectly timed – but Juno, as ever, had anticipated the move. In a single, fluid motion he reversed Caron's wrist hold and spun, throwing him into Amador's path. Amador – a brash and aggressive warrior in the mould of the legendary Captain Alessio Cortez – used his momentum to vault Caron's hurtling form. Against any other opponent, the swift recovery might have succeeded, but Juno was ready for him. He twisted aside as Amador struck, and the combat knife he'd taken from Caron flickered in a deadly arc. Amador landed with a curse, pressing his hand to the gash that was already knitting shut along the side of his throat.

Rodrigo hesitated for a fraction of an instant, considering his next move, and the butt of Caron's combat knife thudded between his eyes.

'Again?' Juno asked, resting his hands on his hips. Helmless, his rugged face was impassive, even serene. A pair of silver service studs gleamed from his broad forehead, just below the line of his close-cropped black hair. Like Galleas and Royas, he wore the sigil of the Deathwatch on his left shoulder, and carried a short, double-bladed sword at his hip.

'Best two out of ten,' Amador growled, giving Juno a red-toothed smile. 'Caron, see about re-setting Brother Salazar's shoulder again.'

'I can do it myself,' Salazar grumbled, sitting up and slowly clenching his right fist.

Brother Rodrigo rubbed absently at the fracture above the bridge of his nose and glanced over at Galleas, who sat with Tauros and Valentus on the far side of the bay. 'This devil is confounding us at every turn,' he said. 'What are we doing wrong?'

Tauros glanced up from his work. His boltgun lay before him on a clean, white cloth, partially disassembled. The veteran grinned. The aquila tattooed across his face lent him a savage look. 'Try shooting him first.'

Sitting next to Tauros, Valentus nodded sagely. 'Or use grenades. Many grenades.'

Rodrigo frowned. 'You know we can't do that. It's fists and knives only.'

‘And that is what you’re doing wrong,’ Tauros declared. ‘Challenging one of the best melee fighters in the Chapter on his own terms.’

Galleas chuckled, reaching for the sanctified oil sitting atop the cloth. Murmuring the Litany of Maintenance, he applied the oil at the proper points along his boltgun’s exposed receiver. He had set his own helmet aside to perform the rite, revealing a lean, square-jawed face and a head of curly, black hair. Off to his right, Olivar and Royas sat with their backs to the metal bulkhead, deep in meditation. Each prepared for the coming battle in his own way.

Valentus lifted his boltgun from the cloth and attached its drum magazine. Servos whined faintly from each wrist. Both of Valentus’s arms and one of his legs were bionic, and most of his internal organs had been replaced during his long service with the Chapter.

‘A bad omen, losing *Intractable*,’ he rasped, his steel face inscrutable as he gave the weapon a final inspection.

‘Not an omen. A tactic,’ Galleas corrected. ‘Haxan could be actively trying to weaken us.’ He began to reassemble his bolter, each part clicking into place with speed and precision. ‘Didn’t Volk tell us the Defiler might have a sorcerer in his warband?’

‘I’m more concerned about what Volk *isn’t* telling us,’ Tauros said. ‘There’s something else going on here, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.’

‘He is nearly as hostile to us as he is to Haxan,’ Valentus pointed out.

‘Haxan is a traitor,’ Galleas snapped. ‘He foreswore his sacred oaths to his Chapter and dishonoured his brothers with his crimes. We are *nothing* like him.’ He slapped the drum magazine home in his bolter with a sharp *clack*. ‘There is a reason the Inquisition calls upon us more than any other Chapter. Our loyalty to the Emperor is unimpeachable.’

‘How then do you credit Volk’s behaviour?’ Tauros asked.

Galleas performed his final weapon check, and then set the bolter aside. ‘He is a man obsessed,’ the sergeant said after a moment. ‘It’s obvious from the way he has engineered this trap.’

‘Obvious? How do you mean?’

‘Consider the facts, brother. Volk has pursued Haxan for sixty years, learning that he has become a Corsair, and harbours a hatred for the Imperial cult. Now all of a sudden, Erasmus Dido has all the support he needs to launch a much-publicised effort to rebuild the cathedral at Ceoris Ultra – and is given a potent but vulnerable warship to escort the pilgrims to the system. I do not believe in coincidences – not on such a vast scale. No, Volk had his hand in this from the

beginning, using his influence to make Dido's plan a reality. He is using this ship and more than twelve thousand souls as bait for the Defiler.'

The hatch to the storage bay creaked open. Valentus straightened, setting his boltgun aside. 'Name of the daemon,' he said, as Inquisitor Volk entered the room.

Galleas rose smoothly to his feet and went to the inquisitor, who waited just past the hatchway. Volk was surveying the chamber with a combination of bemusement and dismay, his cane rapping an agitated tattoo upon the deck. He didn't flinch as Amador's hurtling form crashed into the bulkhead just a few meters to his right, followed closely by Caron.

'Were the quarters we provided you on the officers' deck not to your liking?' Volk asked.

'Pontifex Dido's pilgrims kept appearing, offering their blessings,' Galleas replied. 'It was... distracting.'

'I've had Sergeant Ploss and his storm troopers searching for you for days.'

'We have to change locations every twenty-four hours or the pilgrims find us again. They are very persistent.'

Volk suppressed an irritated sigh. 'Be that as it may, we are less than two hours from the outer asteroid belt. We should discuss tactics for the coming battle, should we not?'

Galleas frowned. 'I fail to see why, Lord Inquisitor. The calculus of the engagement is extremely simple.'

'Indeed?' Volk stared up at the Space Marine. 'Assume for the moment that I am not a specialist in hostile boarding actions, sergeant. Enlighten me.'

'Very well.' Galleas clasped his hands behind his back. 'Haxan will strike us at or near the midpoint of the passage through the outer belt, where his ships will enjoy the most cover, and we will have the most difficult time trying to escape. He will further compound this by attacking from multiple directions, knowing that we do not have enough crew to fully man the ship's batteries.'

'Haxan will send in his raiders and his converted merchants first, to destroy or drive off our escort and absorb much of our fire. The merchants will also unleash waves of small craft loaded with boarding troops. Our defensive turrets will shoot down many of them, but more than enough will get through to reach the *Hespera's* outer decks. That will force us to choose between fighting the boarders, or manning the guns against Haxan's ships.'

'That's no choice at all,' Volk said darkly. 'We must stop everything and fight the boarders, or be overwhelmed.'

‘Meanwhile,’ Galleas continued, ‘Haxan and the *Scourge of the Faithful* will be drawing nearer. He will want to seize the *Hespera* as quickly as possible, to minimize the damage to his prize, so he will be compelled to take an active hand in its capture. You counted on that much, did you not?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well. He could try to get aboard using boarding torpedoes. It’s likely the *Scourge* carries them, but there is the risk of being shot down by defensive fire before he can reach the *Hespera*.’ Galleas gave the inquisitor a wolfish grin. ‘Far more likely he will manoeuvre in close and attempt a teleport attack. And then we will have him.’

‘How so?’

‘Because we know where he will strike. If one wishes to capture a ship quickly, there are only two objectives worth considering: the bridge and the enginarium. Its brain and its heart, for all intents and purposes. Control those, and the rest of the ship is yours.’

Volk considered this. ‘So we must protect two critical locations at the same time.’

Galleas nodded. ‘I expect that Haxan will strike at the enginarium first. Capturing it gives him control of the ship’s vital functions. From there, he could cut power to the weapons, shut down life support, seal off parts of the ship – any number of moves to seal our doom. I will wait for the traitor there, along with six of my brothers.’

The inquisitor’s cane rapped against the deck. ‘And if you guess wrong?’

‘Brother Tauros, Brother Juno and Brother Valentus will defend the bridge. If I am wrong, they will be able to hold out long enough for help to arrive.’

Volk looked for a moment as though he might press the issue further, but after a moment’s thought, he relented. ‘Enginseer Maccabin and his gun servitors will help defend the enginarium,’ he declared. ‘Mamzelle Singh and I will remain on the bridge, with Sergeant Ploss and his squad.’

‘As you wish,’ Galleas said.

‘One more thing,’ Volk said. ‘I don’t care what happens to the rest of Haxan’s warband, but the Defiler must be taken alive. I mean to put the traitor to the question and uncover the full extent of his crimes.’

Galleas scowled. ‘Capture a Chaos champion? That... may not be possible.’

‘Not even for ten of Kantor’s best?’ Volk’s expression hardened. ‘You were brought here for a reason, sergeant.’ The inquisitor spun on his heel, his cane rapping harshly on the deck as he left the room.

‘Deliver Haxan the Defiler to me, Sandor Galleas, or by the Emperor you will answer for it.’

Klaxons wailed their banshee song down the empty corridors of the *Duchess Hespera* as the grand cruiser neared the outer asteroid belt. Gun crews – barely enough to serve half of the ship’s surviving guns – raced to their stations. Armsmen broke out the ship’s meagre armoury and settled into defensive positions at key points throughout the ship. Pontifex Dido and the faithful gathered in the chapel once again and prayed to the Emperor for their salvation.

Galleas found an unmanned station in the ship’s enginarium and prevailed upon Enginseer Maccabin to link the display with the ship’s surveyors. He wanted to be able to see the battle as it unfolded, and to be ready to adjust his tactics as needed. As the displays came online, his brothers moved about the maze of control stations at the forward end of the vast chamber, choosing primary and secondary firing positions in advance of the coming attack. The gun servitors had been set to siege mode and were emplaced with good fields of fire covering the enginarium’s main hatch. Credit chits, parchment ribbons and scraps of cloth lay in drifts across the grimy deck. Not even the hellish depths of the ship’s reactor spaces were beyond the reach of Dido’s pilgrims.

The passage through the outer asteroid field was a narrow one by astronomical standards, kept clear of hazards by periodic sweeps from Ceoris Ultra. Automated beacons along the route helped ships pick their way along the channel and provided navigational references for rescue crews in the event something went wrong. According to the charts, the passage would take nearly four hours, with the *Hespera*’s speed restricted to little more than a crawl. The density of the belt – thought to be the product of a destroyed planet billions of years ago – provided ample concealment for pirate ships, and allowed them to approach very close indeed before they could be detected.

All stations reported manned and ready. Gun crews crouched nervously over their weapons. Surveyor operators bent over their scopes, searching for the slightest sign of danger. Down in the enginarium, officers watched over the rumbling plasma reactors, murmuring the Rites of Containment under their breath. The air was sharp with ozone, like the moments before a furious storm.

The tension slowly mounted as the grand cruiser drew nearer to the midpoint of the passage. Twice, shouted alarms from the surveyor teams set hearts racing and weapons indexing on targets that turned out to be false readings and metallic debris.

The minutes ticked away. The *Duchess Hespera* reached the midpoint of the passage and continued on, unmolested.

Still the crew remained vigilant, but the further the Imperial ships got from the midpoint, the more they began to wonder. Were the Corsairs really out there? Doubts, tiny and fleeting at first, began to loosen the tension. Fatigue started to take hold. Galleas used a series of meditative techniques to keep his mind focused on the surveyor display.

An hour later, the *Hespera* was three-quarters of the way along the passage, and a palpable sense of relief had taken hold. The most dangerous part of the transit was well past. The gun crews were tired, and the surveyors' eyes ached from staring at the glowing displays. Brother Tauros, standing watch on the grand cruiser's bridge, called to Galleas over the squad vox-channel. 'The ship's senior officers have had enough. They're asking permission to stand down. Captain Tancred is mulling it over.'

'What about Volk?'

'He's still convinced Haxan is out there, waiting to strike.'

'The Lord Inquisitor is right,' Galleas replied. 'Let us hope the captain listens.'

Half an hour later, with the end of the long passage in sight, Captain Tancred sounded the all clear. The gun crews secured their weapons, and the grand cruiser's chapel erupted in shouts of deliverance.

Tauros called again over the vox. 'Lord Inquisitor Volk demands your presence in the strategium at once,' he said to Galleas.

'We're holding position,' Galleas said stubbornly, continuing to study the surveyor display. 'Haxan is trying to lull us, convince us that the worst has past.'

'You want me to explain that to the inquisitor?' Tauros asked.

Warning chimes sounded. Galleas watched as three energy readings sprang into existence directly in front of the slow-moving Imperial ships: Idolator-class raiders powering up their engines and weapon arrays. At the same moment, points of fire flickered amongst the asteroids to either side of the *Duchess Hespera*.

The sudden attack caught the crew of the grand cruiser completely by surprise. Motes of light – laser pulses, particle bursts and volleys of macrocannon fire – crisscrossed the narrow passage and burst against the *Duchess Hespera*'s void shields. Energetic cascades reverberated through the layered fields, causing the ancient ship's hull to reverberate beneath the blows.

The wailing of the alert klaxon was all but lost amid the thunder of the Corsairs' bombardment. The *Duchess Hespera* ploughed on through the barrage,

wreathed in flickering clouds of radioactive gas and boiling plasma. Her void shields were holding under the assault, but the interference kicked up by the impacts was limiting the range of the grand cruiser's surveyors. Galleas could just make out the first waves of Corsair boarding craft streaking from the cover of the asteroids on either side of the passage, followed by the larger bulk of their mother ships. There was no sign yet of Haxan's flagship, but Galleas knew she had to be close by.

The Corsairs kept up their attack, striking now from three sides as the *Idolators* opened fire with their particle lances and weapons batteries. The swarm of boarding vessels drew closer with each passing second as the *Hespera's* shocked gun crews fought to get their weapons back online. The rumble of the ship's plasma reactors rose to a thunderous roar under increased demands for power from weapons, shields and engines.

Then came a sudden flare of power from close along the *Hespera's* starboard side as her lone destroyer escort, the aptly-named *Furious*, went to full thrust and charged the three raiders blocking their path.

Unlike the *Duchess Hespera*, the *Furious* had remained vigilant right up to the moment of the attack, and as the trap closed about the grand cruiser, the escort's captain had sprung into action. Partially obscured by the roiling blast clouds covering the *Hespera's* flank, the *Furious* put on speed and surged ahead of the massive ship, putting herself between the *Hespera* and the enemy raiders. The move caught the enemy by surprise; before they could swing their guns to bear on the oncoming destroyer, the *Furious* unleashed a volley of torpedoes at two of the raiders and opened fire with her main batteries on the third. Laser bursts and massive shells streaked through the void, bursting in globes of red and yellow fire against the *Idolator* shields. The barrage collapsed the raider's shielding with a flare of bluish light, but the ship itself was unharmed.

The Corsairs' reply was swift and brutal; particle lance fire from all three raiders clawed at the night, converging on the sleek hull of the *Furious*. Her shields blazed for a single moment under the onslaught, then gave way. The ravaging beams raked the proud destroyer from bow to stern, ripping open her decks and detonating her reactor.

The *Furious* vanished in an expanding cloud of incandescent gas and debris, less than ten seconds after her gallant charge began. But her final blows had yet to land: even as the raiders were tearing the Imperial ship apart, her torpedoes bore down on their targets. Streams of tracer shells from the raiders' defensive turrets slashed at the incoming missiles, but the bursts were wide of their mark.

Before the gunners could correct their aim, the torpedoes struck, passing through the raiders' void shields and engulfing the two Idolators in globes of nuclear fire.

The deck of the grand cruiser trembled beneath Galleas's feet as the warship's thrusters flared. Slowly, ponderously, the *Duchess Hespera* began to put on speed, attempting to force her way through the gap opened by the *Furious*. At the same moment her batteries went into action, unleashing a storm of shot and shell on the approaching Corsairs. Tracers ripped through the oncoming swarms of boarding craft, shredding hulls and detonating fuel cells in bright, brief flashes of light. To port, one of the *Hespera*'s lance turrets locked on to an approaching Corsair and fired, collapsing the converted merchant's shielding. The raider attempted evasive action, swinging wide to port, but it was too little, too late. A powerful salvo of macrocannon shells tore into the Corsair's starboard side, transforming it into a gutted, burning hulk.

Galleas bared his teeth in a wolfish grin. The Corsairs had the upper hand, but they were swiftly learning that the *Hespera* was still a force to be reckoned with. The first boarding craft were passing through the grand cruiser's void shields, jinking wildly to try and throw off the Imperial gunners' aim. To starboard, another of the Corsair ships staggered under a barrage from the *Hespera*'s weapon batteries, her hull spewing streamers of gas and molten debris.

Where is Haxan? The sergeant wondered. He studied the display, searching for any sign of the traitor's flagship amongst the asteroids. The *Scourge of the Faithful* had to be close, ready to unleash the Defiler and his warband. He's clever, the sergeant thought, looking for clues amid the data stream. He knows that he'll be a priority target the moment he appears, but he's got to leave the asteroids to get close enough to teleport aboard. But there was no sign of the enemy flagship anywhere in the surveyors' 270-degree arc.

Galleas's eyes widened. The engines of a starship generated a turbulent wake of particles that created a sensor blind spot directly aft. Normally, a ship like the *Hespera* would have multiple escorts to cover the gaps in her surveyor coverage, but now...

'Tauros! Inform Captain Tancred that Haxan's flagship is directly astern! He's moving in our engine wake!'

Ionization from the *Hespera*'s own weapon batteries filled the vox-channel with howls of static. 'Say again?' Tauros replied.

Before Galleas could respond, a flash of movement at the far end of the enginarium caught his eye. The blast doors had opened, the sound lost amid the thunder of the reactors. The gun servitors twitched, their heavy bolters first

tracking, and then pulling off target as their logic circuits recognized the profiles of half a dozen of Dido's wide-eyed pilgrims. The zealots dashed into the echoing chamber, three of them burdened by heavy, iron-bound copies of the *Lectitio Divinitatus* clutched against their chests.

The sergeant scowled at the oncoming pilgrims. He wasn't going to order his brothers to leave their firing positions to throw the zealots out, and the engine crew couldn't leave their stations. Then he saw the three book-bearers split up, avoiding the crew and heading for different parts of the room. The remaining pilgrims rushed past the gun servitors, reaching into the satchels that hung from their hips.

*Haxan has spies everywhere*, Volk had said.

Galleas grabbed up his bolter. 'Kill the pilgrims!' he shouted over the vox. 'Now!'

The three men near the gun servitors pulled battered laspistols from their satchels. Galleas paid them no mind. The sergeant vaulted over the terminal, trying to catch sight of the book-bearers. There was a flicker of movement as one of the pilgrims dashed between two control consoles. Galleas's bolter thundered, the sharp double *crack* cutting through the howling roar of the reactors. The zealot was blown from his feet, the book falling from his hands and spilling open on the deck. A melta charge concealed in a hollow within the massive book gleamed malevolently in the light of the battle lanterns.

More bolter fire echoed across the room. The three pistol-wielding zealots fell in an instant, torn open by mass-reactive shells. Then there was a flare of white light and two massive blasts that hurled Galleas to the deck.

Sirens wailed. The pulse of the mighty reactors faltered. Shafts of yellow emergency light cut through the billows of thick smoke filling the cavernous chamber. Galleas checked the status readouts of his squad; none appeared injured. He surged to his feet. Imperial officers were dashing across the enginarium, bellowing orders. Yellow flames were licking along the portside bulkhead.

'This is Tauros – what's happened? Are you all right?'

Galleas noted that there was much less ionization on the vox-channel – a bad sign. 'There are traitors among the pilgrims,' he said over the vox. 'Two of them set off suicide charges in the enginarium. What's happening on the bridge?'

'Tancred was ordering a turn to port when the explosions went off. We've lost power to the defensive turrets and the portside weapons.'

The smoke was getting thicker. Galleas tasted polycarbonates and toxic

byproducts in the back of his throat. He returned to the modified terminal to find it blackened by one of the suicide charges. The flickering display showed that Tancred had heeded his warning and had brought the grand cruiser about so its surveyors could see back the way they'd come.

The *Scourge of the Faithful* was right behind them, well within teleporter range. The cruiser had turned along with its prey, unmasking its starboard lance batteries.

Galleas realized he'd been outwitted a split-second before the enemy ship opened fire.

Particle lances blazed against the darkness, converging on the *Duchess Hespera*. They flared against the grand cruiser's void shields, shattering them one after another in a series of terrible concussions, like the hammer blows of an angry god. Consoles exploded, lighting the gloom with showers of red and white sparks, as the shields failed and the grand cruiser's defences were breached.

At once, the air seemed to thicken inside the enginarium. An energetic charge built within the smoke, sending electrostatic arcs crackling through the haze. Galleas knew at once what was happening.

'Sons of Dorn, the hour of battle is at hand!' the sergeant called out over the vox. 'Prepare to repel boarders!'

The charge built to a critical mass in the space of a second. There were four intense flashes of light, so bright they left afterimages on Galleas's helmet display, followed by a thunderclap of displaced air as a quartet of Red Corsairs teleported into the enginarium.

The boarders appeared near the chamber's blast doors, just as Galleas expected. He knew from personal experience that the massive power fields generated by the ship's reactors made teleporting into their midst problematic at best. The traitors were armed with bolt pistols and chainswords, and their power armour, bearing the faded heraldry of the Chapters they had forsaken, had been desecrated with foul sigils and obscene trophies of flesh and bone. One of the Corsairs was clad in armour more twisted and blasphemous than the rest. Baleful, bloodshot eyes glared from fleshy masses on the traitor's pauldrons, and barbed spikes of bone protruded from the ceramite plates at knee and elbow. A heavy cape of stitched human hides hung from the traitor's misshapen shoulders, and his helm sprouted four curving horns that added nearly a metre to his already imposing height. He carried a bolt pistol in one hand and a twisted staff in the other that left trails of frost glimmering in the smoke. Here was the sorcerer that Inquisitor Volk had warned him about.

Galleas reached for the sword at his hip. Called Night's Edge, it had been earned in battle against the forces of Chaos during the Thorian Liberation. He thumbed the ancient blade's activation rune, sheathing it in an energy field that crackled hungrily in the haze.

For a split second, the traitors were shocked at the sight of the Crimson Fist standing before them. Galleas snarled behind his helmet's faceplate and raised the sword in challenge.

*'For Dorn and the Emperor!'* he roared, his voice ringing from the bulkheads. *'Death to the betrayers of mankind!'*

The Red Corsairs had recovered from their shock and were already moving as Squad Galleas opened fire. Boltguns boomed, their projectiles' rocket motors kicking in a millisecond later and carving razor-straight lines through the swirling smoke. The gun servitors spun, autoloaders rattling, and opened fire with their twin-linked heavy bolters at nearly point-blank range.

One of the traitors was hit outright. Flux-cored vengeance rounds from the veterans' boltguns punched through the Red Corsair's thick, ceramite plates like they were cheap flakboard. The traitor took a single step, blazing away with his bolt pistol, before gurgling a blasphemous curse and toppling to the deck. The rest plunged fearlessly through the murderous crossfire, moving with the speed and skill unique to the Adeptus Astartes. One of the Corsairs ducked beneath a gun servitor's blazing weapon arms and chopped his chainsword deep into its torso. Sparks and oily fluid jetted from the wound.

A bolt pistol round ricocheted from Galleas's left pauldron. He charged the traitors, firing his bolter one-handed at the sorcerer. The rounds should have stitched a line of glowing craters from breastbone to chin, but at the last moment the air seemed to waver around the renegade, and the shots flew harmlessly by. In response, the sorcerer levelled his staff and unleashed a bolt of ravening energy black as the void itself. Galleas saw his peril and ducked, tucking his armoured body into a roll that carried him beneath the destructive ray. The beam tore through a cluster of crew stations and helpless servitors, blasting them apart.

Galleas rolled to his feet. A Corsair stepped into his path, slashing at him with a battered chainsword. He parried the blow with Night's Edge, the power sword carving a spray of molten metal from the chainsword's screeching teeth. Galleas brought up his bolter and fired point-blank, punching a glowing hole through the traitor's shoulder, then decapitated the Corsair with a backhanded blow.

The sorcerer spoke again, and this time a chorus of otherworldly voices echoed in reply. Across the enginarium, glowing seams of ghastly light took

shape in the smoky air. The seams split wide with a terrible shriek, unleashing a pack of howling daemons amid the Space Marines and the surviving crew. Hateful and insane, the abominations lashed out at the nearest living thing they could reach. Servitors were torn from their stations and ripped apart. Imperial officers abandoned their stations and tried to run, but were pulled down by the howling fiends. The Crimson Fists turned their bolters on the daemons, blasting holes in the warp-spawned creatures or leaping upon them with their combat knives.

A trio of daemons leapt upon the surviving gun servitor, tearing and biting at its flesh. The construct spun, trying to dislodge the creatures, its heavy bolters raking the traitors and Galleas both. A shell glanced off the sergeant's armour, stunning him. He staggered just as the sorcerer charged, swinging his blasphemous staff at Galleas's face.

Galleas brought up Night's Edge at the last moment, blocking the staff. The sword's energy field seemed to shrink from the sorceries worked into the sorcerer's weapon; it radiated a terrible cold that sank through Galleas's armour and tried to still his labouring hearts. With an oath, he pushed the staff away and brought up his bolter – only to have it knocked aside by the sweep of a Corsair's chainaxe.

The last of the sorcerer's retinue pressed his attack, chopping at Galleas's neck. Adamantium teeth bit into the sergeant's gorget, shrieking and leaving a trail of sparks. Galleas fell back before the blade could do more than scratch the surface. The sorcerer's force staff lashed out at him again, missing him by the smallest of margins. A deep, bone-chilling laugh echoed in Galleas's ears.

The Corsair struck again, his chainaxe grating against Galleas's left pauldron. The sergeant gave ground, but the traitors were swift and relentless. The force staff jabbed at his face, then his midsection. One touch, he knew, and the weapon would snuff out his life force like a candle flame.

The sorcerer laughed again, savouring his sport. 'Fool,' traitor spat. 'Your death is at hand. Curse the false Emperor and offer your soul to the true gods!'

Galleas roared in defiance and counterattacked, slashing at the sorcerer's neck. Even as he struck, he saw the Corsair angling further to his left. The sorcerer was already recoiling, dodging back to avoid the sword stroke. In another moment, the traitor would lunge forward, chopping down with his chainaxe. And then, when he turned to block the blow, the staff would lash out like a serpent.

Night's Edge hissed through empty air. The Corsair saw his opportunity, and the chainaxe fell.

Galleas dropped his bolter. As the axe came down he caught the weapon by the haft and pulled the traitor forward, into the path of the sorcerer's staff. The Corsair stiffened, howling in agony as the weapon's energies consumed what remained of his blackened soul. With a triumphant shout, Galleas lunged over the Corsair's falling body and thrust Night's Edge through the sorcerer's faceplate.

The sergeant withdrew his blade. He turned his back on the sorcerer's collapsing body and gathered up his bolter. Grotesque shapes leapt, slithered and scurried around him, making for the enginarium's open blast doors. The daemons could sense the thousands of pilgrims aboard the stricken ship, and now, free from the sorcerer's control, went seeking easier, sweeter prey.

Galleas had no choice but to let the creatures go. By now, Haxan and the rest of his warband were already on the bridge. If Captain Tancred fell, the rest of the crew might well surrender, and then the *Duchess Hespera* was doomed. He keyed his vox-unit. 'Brother Tauros! Status report!'

Static howled across the squad channel. Tauros's voice tried to penetrate the interference. '...heavy attack! Traitors...'

'I hear you, brother. Hold on!' Galleas beckoned to the rest of his squad with his sword. 'Formation omicron! Move!'

As one, the veterans abandoned their positions and rallied around their sergeant. Galleas surveyed the enginarium, looking for surviving members of the crew. He found only Enginseer Maccabin, bent over the hacked and bleeding remains of one of his gun servitors.

'You!' Galleas snapped, seizing the enginseer by the arm. 'Seal the blast doors after we're gone and then get control of lift E-35! When we get to the lift, you take us straight to the bridge. Do you understand?'

The enginseer nodded dumbly. Galleas let the tech-priest go and turned to his brothers. 'Switch to standard rounds. Kill everything that gets in our way. Stop for *nothing*. Tauros, Juno and Valentus are depending on us.'

Galleas led the squad out of the enginarium at a run. He knew from their countless drills that they could reach the ship's bridge in eight minutes, twenty-two seconds, assuming they had full control of the lift and nothing blocked their path.

In a fight between demigods, eight minutes was as good as an eternity. Galleas feared the battle would be over long before they arrived.

Relentless, resolute, the Crimson Fists stormed through a hellscape of horror,

blood and fire.

The handiwork of Haxan's followers were everywhere. Corpses littered the passageways, seared by lasgun fire or hacked apart by axe and sword. Blasphemous signs were painted on the bulkheads in smears of fresh blood. Flames burned out of control in some sections, while others echoed with distant screams and the howls of the damned.

Twice they came upon packs of bloodthirsty cultists, hunting for fresh prey. The Space Marines cut down everyone in their path, blasting them with volleys of boltgun fire. Galleas reaped the enemy like wheat, plunging into their midst with Night's Edge blazing in his hand. The survivors scattered, seeking easier prey. Though it galled him to the core, Galleas had no choice but to let them go.

The farther he went, the angrier he became. It had never occurred to him that Haxan would slip agents amongst the pilgrims. They'd had weeks to explore the enginarium and determine where their bombs would do just enough damage to leave the ship defenceless and kill the crew. A token force could then move in, finish off the survivors and turn their attention to the rest of the crew, while Haxan and most of his warriors focused on seizing the bridge. A clever and ruthless strategy, worthy of the Adeptus Astartes. The thought of such experience and skill being turned against mankind filled him with righteous indignation.

They reached lift E-35 at a dead run. The doors to the lift were open, and a tangle of dead pilgrims lay heaped on the floor. There was no time for decorum; the Space Marines took hold of the corpses and jerked them out of the way like rag dolls. Galleas led his brothers inside and keyed the rune for the bridge. The lift began to move at once, gathering speed as it began the ascent to the top of the dorsal tower.

Twenty-two seconds. The veterans used the brief respite to change magazines and ready their combat knives. Standing in the blood of the innocent, Olivar bowed his head and intoned the Litanies of Hate. Galleas keyed his vox.

'Tauros? Do you copy?'

Static howled in his ears. 'Juno? Valentus? Can you hear me?'

There was no reply.

'It's the interference,' Royas assured him. 'Nothing more.'

Salazar nodded, a bit too quickly. 'If the bridge had been taken, we would have heard. Haxan would be calling on the rest of the ship to surrender.'

A portentous silence fell over the squad as the lift approached its destination. As the car slowed to a halt, Brother Amador drew his combat knife and touched

the flat of its blade to his forehead.

‘Justice for the innocent. Vengeance for the fallen,’ he intoned.

‘Amen,’ Olivar said.

The doors to the lift ground open. ‘On me!’ Galleas commanded, then dashed into the passageway beyond.

The approach to the grand cruiser’s bridge had been turned into a charnel house. The bodies of armsmen lay in heaps, chewed by the teeth of chainswords or rent by bolter or lasgun fire. Swirls of propellant vapour hung heavy in the air, along with the reek of blood.

Screams and angry shouts echoed down the passageway, punctuated by the crack of bolter fire and the snarl of lasguns. Galleas’s spirit rose at the sound. Up ahead, he could see that the bridge’s blast doors had been blown open, and a mass of lasgun-armed cultists were clustered around the breach, trying to join the battle inside.

Galleas keyed the shot selector on his boltgun. ‘Dragonfire rounds!’ he called out. ‘Three shots! Fire!’

Bolters thundered as one. The veterans aimed not at the cultists, but at the bulkheads directly above their heads. The shells burst on impact, creating clouds of volatile gas that exploded a split-second later. Within the close confines of the passageway, the effect was devastating. The few cultists that weren’t incinerated by the blasts were knocked senseless, and the path into the bridge was swept clear. Sword held ready, Galleas charged onto the bridge.

A scene of carnage awaited him.

For eight and a half minutes, Haxan and his warriors had been forced to contest every square meter of the *Duchess Hespera*’s bridge, from the blast doors all the way to the very foot of the captain’s throne. Officers, ratings and armsmen lay upon the deck, tangled up in the corpses of their foes. Volk’s storm troopers had fallen next, pulled down one by one as they emptied their hellguns into the enemy. They had accounted for nearly ten times their number before the last of them had died.

The survivors had fallen back to make their final stand defending the ship’s captain. Inquistor Volk was halfway up the dais to the throne, his staff clenched in one hand and an inferno pistol in the other. Mamzelle Singh stood beside him. She had thrown back her veil, revealing a delicate, dark-skinned face inked with a feral world’s tribal tattoo. She was sheathed in a crackling aura of psychic power, but it was clear that she was reaching the end of her strength.

At the bottom of the dais a desperate melee raged. Eight traitors in desecrated

power armour surrounded Tauros, Juno and Valentus. The veterans had emptied their bolters and now fought hand to hand, fending off chainswords and axes with combat knives and a single short sword. Even with Juno's superlative skill, it was clear that they could not last for much longer.

Galleas could not risk firing into the melee. 'Death to the traitors!' he roared, brandishing Night's Edge like an avenging angel, and charged into the fray.

Half of the Corsairs spun at the shout, opening fire on the Crimson Fists with their bolt pistols. Galleas was hit in the chest and shoulder, but the curved plates of his armour deflected the rounds. One of the traitors, clad in the desecrated harness of the Doom Eagles, leapt into Galleas's path and slashed at his leg with a chainsword. Galleas knocked the weapon aside with a furious sweep of his sword and stabbed the traitor through the throat.

A Corsair to Galleas's left grappled with Olivar, his chainsword inching closer to the veteran's throat. The sergeant yanked his sword free and fired a point-blank shot at Olivar's foe in a single motion. Then a blow crashed against the right side of his helm, blanking out his helmet display for an instant and knocking him nearly off his feet.

Galleas staggered backwards, blocking another strike with a wild swing of his sword. Another blow crashed against his breastplate, teeth shrieking as the chainblade tried to bite deeper into his chest. Then his display reset and he found himself facing a Corsair wearing the colours of the Marines Malevolent. The traitor brought up his bolt pistol, aiming at Galleas's faceplate. He ducked just as the pistol went off, lunging forward and chopping his power sword deep into the Corsair's side.

'Haxan the Defiler!' Galleas bellowed, putting his shoulder to the traitor's corpse so he could rip his sword free. 'The Crimson Fists have come for you! Face me, and suffer our wrath!'

A shadow fell over him. Someone – maybe Olivar, maybe Amador – shouted a warning. A huge fist, crackling with its own energy field, swiped at Galleas's head. He brought Night's Edge up just in time, but the detonation of the intersecting fields knocked him to the deck.

Haxan the Defiler loomed before him. The scourge of the Loki sector wore no helmet, revealing a pale, rugged face and piercing blue eyes. Polished skulls grinned from his battered pauldrons, and litanies of blasphemous script inked on scraps of human hide covered the aquila upon his chest. He bore an ancient bolt pistol that had passed through the hands of great heroes, and a scarred power fist that shone a lustrous crimson against the deep blue of his battered armour.

Galleas knew that face in an instant. Its visage could be found in the Chapter's Hall of Heroes, back on Rynn's World. 'Montes!' he cried.

'No longer,' the former captain snarled, his blue eyes bright with rage. His power fist reached for Galleas's head.

Galleas brought up his sword again, blocking Haxan's strike and rolling away from the blast. In an instant, he was back on his feet. He had lost his bolter, but Night's Edge still glimmered in his hand.

'Traitor!' he spat. He felt sick, down to his very soul. 'Abomination! You were sent to save Hydra Secundus, but you slaughtered them instead!'

Haxan's face twisted into a sneer. 'Lies upon lies. There was no uprising on Hydra Secundus – just a bloodthirsty lunatic named Matthias Rabe. He pronounced Exterminatus on an innocent world just to hide the evils he'd done.'

Galleas lunged at Haxan, aiming a blurring thrust at the traitor's chest. The Defiler saw it coming and swatted it aside with his power fist. His counter-blow nearly took the sergeant's head off.

'You name me an abomination, but the real monsters lair at the heart of ancient Terra,' Haxan said, his voice rising. 'Ghoulish servants of a corpse-god upon a golden throne. They are a cancer at the soul of the Imperium, and they must be swept away in blood and fire.'

'You broke your sacred oaths,' Galleas declared. He lashed at Haxan's neck, driving the traitor back. Haxan swung at the sergeant, but the blow went wide.

'Better to serve the darkness,' Haxan shot back. 'Old Night hungers, but it does not lie.'

'You murdered your brothers!'

For a brief instant, the rage faded from Haxan's eyes. His rugged features became a mask of grief. 'I tried to tell them the truth. I *ordered* them to stop. But they would not believe me. They listened to Rabe, and let the world burn. What else could I do?'

Galleas saw his moment, and struck. Night's Edge blurred through the air as he stabbed for Haxan's chest. The traitor slapped the blade aside with contemptuous ease – and the sergeant spun on his heel, bringing the power sword around in a blazing arc and severed Haxan's left arm at the elbow. The crimson power fist went inert as it bounced heavily across the deck.

Haxan reeled backwards, roaring in shock and pain. His bolt pistol came up, aiming at Galleas's head – but a flickering, blue nimbus blazed around his head, and his expression went slack. The traitor's eyes rolled back in his head, and his body sank slowly to its knees.

‘He is ours!’ Inquisitor Volk cried.

Galleas paused in mid-stride, sword raised for another blow. He looked about, uncomprehending, and saw that the last of the traitor’s warband had fallen, and the battle was done. Volk was making his way slowly down the stairs, while Mamzelle Singh remained where she was, her face taut with strain.

‘We must get him in restraints!’ the inquisitor snapped. ‘Quickly! His will is very strong. It was only the pain of his wound that allowed Mamzelle Singh to control him at all.’

Galleas stared down at Haxan. ‘You knew. All along, you knew.’

Volk glared at the sergeant. ‘Of course. It is my business to know these things.’

‘And you did not tell us.’

The inquisitor’s expression hardened. ‘You were brought here for a reason, sergeant. I told you that before. I needed to see how you would react when confronted with the truth.’ His lips drew back in a mirthless smile. ‘I had to see for myself how deep the rot went.’

‘You *dare* accuse us of corruption? The Crimson Fists have served the Imperium for millennia!’

‘Innocence proves nothing,’ Volk said flatly. His smile turned cruel as he gazed at Haxan. ‘Once I put this traitor to the question, we will have the truth soon enough.’

Red light flared beyond the bridge’s towering viewports. Galleas turned to see the *Scourge of the Faithful* off to port, streaming plumes of fire. Bright motes streaked from the darkness at the grand cruiser’s stern and struck the Corsair’s hull, punching deep into its armoured flank. Moments later, a familiar sight glided silently into view: the *Intractable* had arrived at last, thrusters blazing, her bombardment cannons tearing Haxan’s flagship apart. The other Corsairs were already turning away, desperate to escape the strike cruiser’s wrath. Small craft were scattering from the *Duchess Hespera* in ragged waves, fleeing for the dubious safety of their mother ships. Galleas wondered how many of Dido’s pilgrims had been carried away with them, consigned to a terrible fate for the sake of Volk’s schemes.

The sergeant deactivated Night’s Edge and slid the blade slowly into its scabbard. He went and recovered his boltgun.

‘What about Rabe?’ he asked.

‘Never mind about him,’ the inquisitor warned. ‘Singh can’t hold Haxan for long!’

‘Was it true? What Haxan said about Hydra Secundus?’

Volk scowled at him. ‘Do you expect me to dignify that with an answer?’

Galleas stared at the inquisitor. ‘I expect you to tell me the truth.’

‘You know everything about Hydra Secundus that you need to know,’ Volk answered coldly.

After a moment, Galleas nodded. Then he raised his bolter and shot Haxan the Defiler in the head.

Volk went pale with rage. ‘You will pay for this! I warned you, did I not? I told you to deliver Haxan to me, or you would answer for it!’

Galleas pointed to Haxan’s corpse. ‘There is my answer. The traitor is dead. Your mentor is avenged. It’s done.’

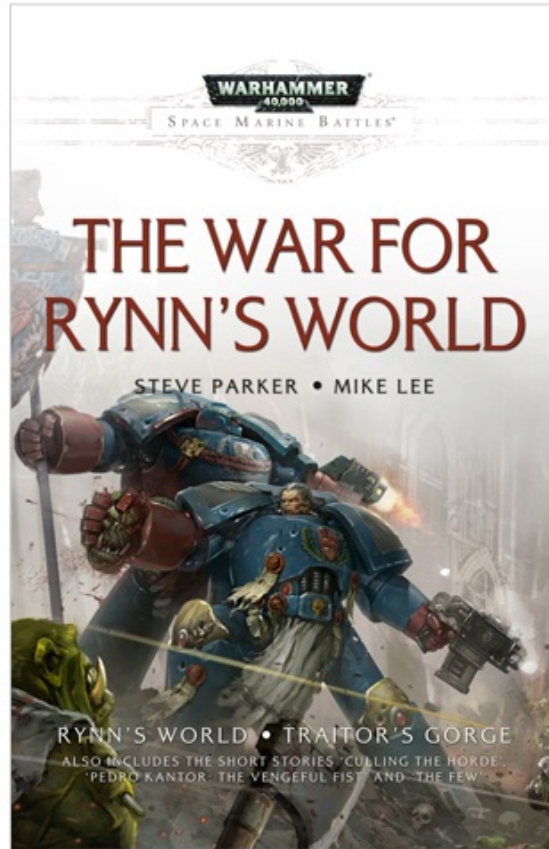
With a heavy heart, he gestured for his brothers to gather up Haxan’s corpse. Back on the *Intractable*, his body would be burned, his wargear sealed away beneath hexagrammic wards. With luck, and the proper cleansing rites, his weapons and armour would serve the Crimson Fists once more, and the stain on the Chapter’s honour would be wiped away forever.

It was like the truth of what happened on Hydra Secundus, Galleas thought bitterly, and the fall of Captain Isidor Montes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mike Lee**'s credits for Black Library include the Horus Heresy novel *Fallen Angels*, the Time of Legends trilogy *The Rise of Nagash* and the Space Marine Battles novella *Traitor's Gorge*. Together with Dan Abnett, he wrote the five-volume Malus Darkblade series. An avid wargamer and devoted fan of pulp adventure, Mike lives in the United States.

Chapter Master Kantor is forced into a desperate defence of the Crimson Fists home planet, Rynn's World.



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