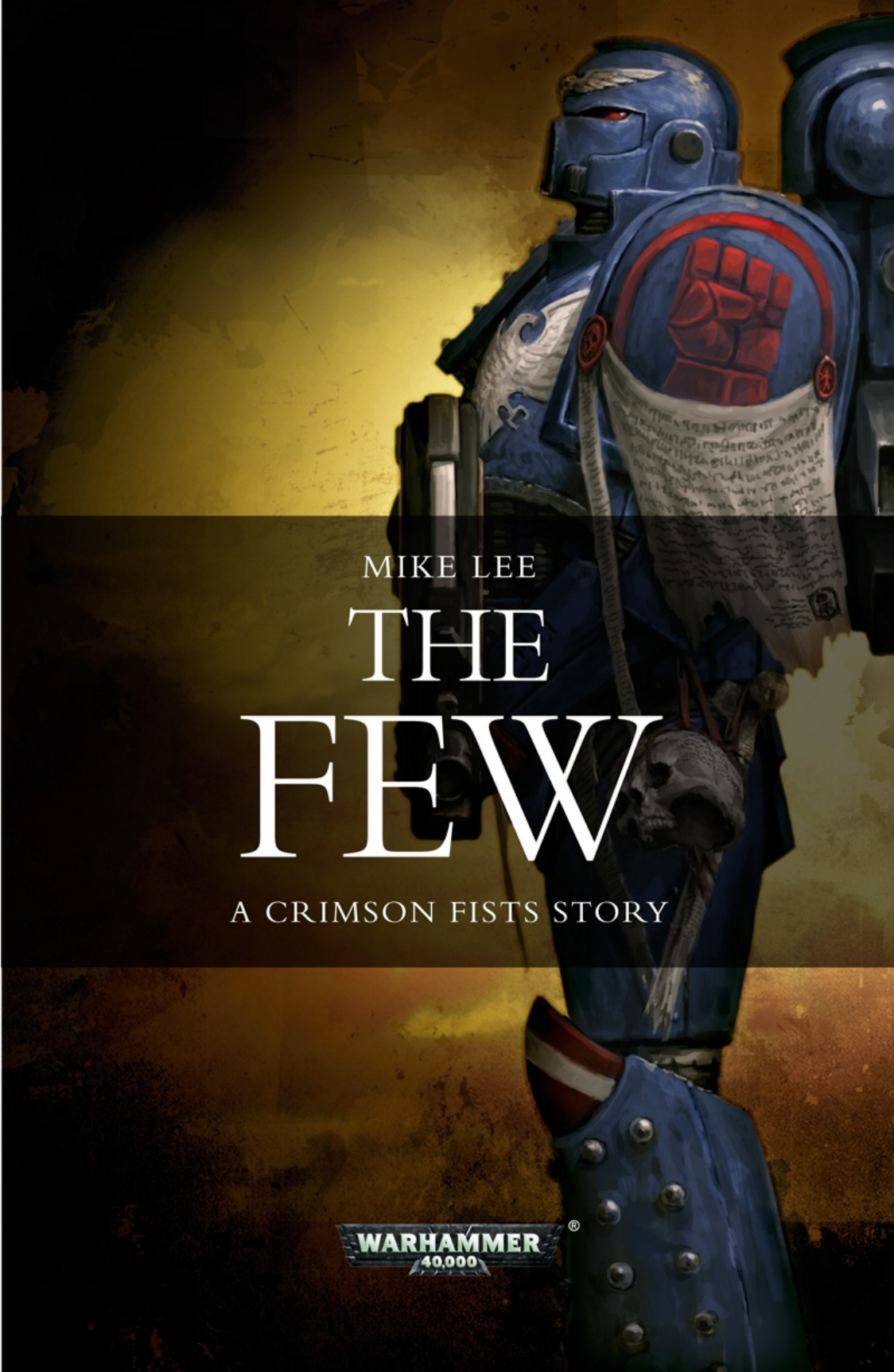




MIKE LEE  
THE  
FEW

A CRIMSON FISTS STORY

WARHAMMER<sup>®</sup>  
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# THE FEW

Mike Lee

The dust storm blotted out the feeble light of Parthus IV's distant sun, leaving the ruined city in darkness. Veteran Sergeant Sandor Galleas could feel the hissing breath of the wind against the battered surface of his armour, eating away at the dark blue enamel and driving sand deep into every joint and crevice. Just ahead, the vast bulk of the alien temple loomed out of the whirling haze, and there – just where Magos Ukhart said it would be – was the jagged fissure in the building's curved outer wall.

'This is your worst idea yet, brother,' Olivar grumbled over the vox. 'I mean it. The Chapter Master won't countenance this.'

Galleas edged closer to the opening, his drum-fed Phobos-pattern boltgun at the ready. The wall to either side of the fissure was pitted in dozens of places by the action of wind and sand. The texture bore a disquieting resemblance to weathered bone.

The fissure itself had been widened over the centuries by the elements and looked large enough for the Space Marines to squeeze themselves through. Darkness filled the space beyond. Galleas's autosenses revealed a narrow stretch of empty floor, thick with the dust of ages.

Galleas worked his way through the opening, boltgun extended. His right knee was heavy and stiff. The sergeant's war-plate was a grim testament to the savagery of war, marked from head to toe by the bite of axe, sword and shell during the terrible invasion of Rynn's World just a few months before. The actuator had been damaged by an ork blade, and despite his best efforts to placate the machine's spirit, the component had continued to degrade.

'The Codex forbids this,' Olivar stressed. 'Without *Arbiter*, we have no support.'

The eldar incursion into the Hebrides sub-sector had reached as far as Hadrian

Secundus and the vital shipping lanes beyond. *Arbiter*, the Gladius-class frigate that had borne them to the sub-sector capital, had been called away to help fight xenos raiders striking from the Serpentis Gulf. One ship against dozens, it would be a long time before *Arbiter* returned, if it returned at all.

Galleas forced himself the rest of the way through the gap, hampered slightly by the bolt pistol and sheathed power sword at his hip. The sound of ceramite scraping against the bone-like material of the wall echoed sharply in the vaulted chamber beyond, leaving fresh scratches across the skull-faced emblem of the Deathwatch that adorned the sergeant's left pauldron. The Crimson Fist swept the room with his bolter, but the space was empty save for a few drifting clouds of dust.

'We have all the support we need,' the sergeant replied coolly. 'It's a simple hit-and-run. By the time the eldar in the city know what's happened, we'll be breaking orbit and heading back to Stylos.'

Olivar was next through the fissure. Like Galleas, the veteran's armour was battered and worn. A quartet of purity seals hung in tattered threads from red stubs of wax affixed to his right pauldron, while a curled scrap of scorched parchment bearing extracts from the Imperial Creed was affixed to the left. In a Chapter that did not especially revere the Imperial Cult, Yezim Olivar's devotion was extraordinary.

The veteran Space Marine surveyed the empty room, his own bolter tucked tightly against his chest. The helm swung back to Galleas, one red lens glowing in the darkness. A small metal plate covered the ruin of the right lens, glinting from the crumpled cheek and scarred brow of the helmet's right ocular. 'The Codex—'

'For a mission like this, the Codex calls for two Scout squads, two full tactical squads, and a Devastator squad for support,' Galleas said, 'with two Thunderhawks over the horizon to provide extraction and close support, if required.' The sergeant stared back at Olivar. 'But there are only three of us, and little more than a dozen Chapter serfs.'

'As if that wasn't shameful enough, arming serfs and sending them to war in our name,' Olivar growled. 'Now you're putting all our lives in the hands of a so-called magos and that trader, Voss—'

'The Chapter Master charged me with ending the xenos incursion by any means necessary,' Galleas snapped, his voice as hard as ceramite. 'So we will go where we must and make use of whatever tools there are at hand. Is that clear?'

Olivar stiffened at the rebuke. The veteran started to speak, but another voice

cut across his over the vox.

‘Storm cell’s weakening. I reckon we’ve got ten minutes. Maybe less,’ said Titus Juno as he slipped through the fissure. The third member of Galleas’s team – he couldn’t think of them as a squad any more, not after all they’d lost on Rynn’s World – was, if anything, even more battle-worn than his companions. Juno cared little for medals and scraps of parchment – he lived for one thing alone, and that was the maelstrom of combat. Like Galleas, Juno wore the sigil of the Deathwatch on his left pauldron. Three human skulls – those of an adult and two small children – hung from his right pauldron, just below the red emblem of his Chapter.

‘We’re running out of time. Let’s move,’ Galleas ordered, leaving Olivar no further room for argument. Bolter ready, he advanced across the room and through the arched opening at the far side.

The sergeant switched channels on his vox. ‘Basta, do you read me?’

The reply came at once, badly attenuated by the haze of static particles kicked up by the storm. ‘I read you, lord,’ the senior armsman’s voice said faintly.

‘Status report.’

‘Stage one complete. Athos and his armsmen have planted their charges and are withdrawing to the pickup point.’

‘Do you have a fix on us?’

‘Yes, lord. According to the magos, you’re one hundred and fifty metres from the objective. Head north through a series of chambers until you come to a spiral staircase on your right.’

‘Understood.’

The Crimson Fists moved swiftly through one room after another, their footfalls kicking up ghostly plumes of dust. Each chamber was as empty as the one before it, their purpose lost to the vagaries of time. After the fourth such room, the Space Marines came upon an antechamber of sorts and the staircase Basta had described. Galleas went first with bolter raised, his autosenses detecting the faint sound of voices drifting down from above.

The staircase led to a narrow, curved gallery that looked out upon a vast, high-ceilinged chamber. A cold blue light shone up from below, creating ribbon-like auroras in the dust-laden air. The voices Galleas heard, lilting and inhuman, echoed in the vaulted space.

The veteran sergeant left the staircase in a low crouch, edging up to the gallery’s curved parapet. Still deep in shadow, he rose slightly and peered over the lip.

A large gathering of eldar nine metres below stood in a broad semicircle facing an octagonal dais in the centre of the room. A flurry of targeting reticules pulsed in Galleas's vision, highlighting multiple threats stretching in a wide arc to his left. Most of the xenos were warriors, clad in light armour and carrying rifles, though two small squads were armed with pistols and curved, diamond-toothed chainblades. Six eldar warlocks stood closest to the dais; they wore long robes over rune-marked armour, and each carried either a long staff or slender, fearsome-looking spear. It was they who chanted, their free hands lifted towards the dais in benediction.

Upon the dais was a rosette made of delicate crystal more than five metres across. A narrow set of steps led into the centre of the rosette, where a shimmering ribbon of blue light pulsed slowly in midair. The light from the display was reflected upward by curved petals, creating the shifting auroras overhead.

Juno and Olivar took position to either side of Galleas. Olivar glanced over the parapet. 'Xenos witchcraft,' he spat.

'All the strange lights and chanting, and you're just now working that out?' Juno said.

Olivar ignored the jibe. 'They're an abomination in the eyes of the Emperor,' he said. 'We should be smiting the eldar in His name, not skulking up here like a pack of rats.'

'Focus on the mission, brother,' Galleas warned. 'We didn't come here for a battle. For one thing, we can't spare the ammunition.'

There were many worlds in the Hebrides sub-sector that the eldar claimed as theirs – even planets like Parthus IV, which had been rendered lifeless in some mysterious catastrophe countless millennia ago. Since the invasion of Rynn's World, the xenos had encroached into the sub-sector, striking with deadly precision at Imperial Navy bases and strategic settlements across the region. The sector governor had appealed to the Crimson Fists for aid, and Kantor had sent all that he could spare: Veteran Sergeant Sandor Galleas and what was left of his squad, their scars still fresh from the bitter siege of New Rynn City.

Galleas had spent nearly a month studying the eldar's movements, and realized that the attacks on Imperial targets were only a means to the end. The xenos sowed fear and distracted the Navy while sending small expeditions to explore their former domains. The eldar were searching for something, and he meant to claim it. Then he would have a lever to bring about their defeat.

As Galleas watched, the blue glow from the dais began to pulse faster. The

chanting of the xenos rose in pitch, and the ribbon of energy began to swell.

‘That’s it,’ the veteran sergeant said. ‘Olivar, get the detonator ready.’

Olivar fished a small box from his weapons belt. ‘The Emperor alone knows if this civilian rubbish is going to work,’ he grumbled.

Galleas frowned. ‘Tolwyn assured me the mining charges would function.’

The one-eyed Space Marine snorted in disgust. ‘You’re trusting a serf who’s barely learned the elementary Rites of Maintenance?’

‘Enough,’ Galleas warned.

Just then, the ribbon of energy flared from blue to silvery-white, and a figure emerged from its depths. It was an eldar farseer, his angular face uncovered and a long, black sword sheathed at his side. The farseer’s face was lit with triumph. His long, slender hands held a diadem of polished platinum, inset with a trio of brightly glowing crystals. As he descended the steps to the dais, the chanting fell silent, and the ribbon of energy began to fade.

Galleas permitted himself a smile of satisfaction. ‘That’s it, brothers,’ he said. ‘We move on my mark. Olivar, detonate the charges.’

The diversion was a key element to Galleas’s plan. While the Space Marines were making their way to the xenos temple, a squad of Chapter serfs had slipped into the eldar base camp under cover of the storm and planted a series of explosive charges in the vicinity of the enemy’s portal device. If the eldar believed the portal to be threatened they would rush to defend it, and during those moments of confusion Galleas’s team would strike.

Olivar raised the detonator and keyed the activation rune.

Nothing happened. Olivar snarled and jabbed the rune again, hard enough to crack the detonator’s casing. The one-eyed Space Marine glared at Galleas.

‘Athos and his so-called *armsmen* failed,’ he barked. ‘Or else the damned charges were no good to begin with. I *told* you—’

‘It’s the storm,’ Juno declared. ‘The signal’s too weak to get through the interference.’ He readied his bolter. ‘It doesn’t matter. We can still take them.’

Galleas was no longer listening. His mind had gone into overdrive, analyzing and discarding one tactical option after another. There were just over forty eldar in the chamber below, including powerful psykers and close combat specialists, plus close to four hundred more sheltering from the storm in the structures outside. A direct attack invited disaster.

Their best option was to avoid contact. Let the eldar return to their encampment, then withdraw and head for the pickup point. They’d gathered at least some useful intelligence, so the mission could not be considered a total

failure.

The veteran sergeant reached his decision in less than a second. By that point, Titus Juno was already vaulting over the parapet, his bolter spitting death at the xenos below.

Galleas bit back a curse. There was no time for anger or recriminations. Without hesitation he planted a boot on the parapet's curved rim and leapt into space, following his brother into battle.

The air inside the vaulted space reverberated with the percussive double note of bolter fire. With a thought, Galleas switched the ammo selector on his boltgun. The Sternguard typically went to war armed with specialized ammunition tailored to the mission at hand, and Kantor had permitted the team to draw a small allotment of the hard-to-replace shells from the Chapter's depleted armoury. As he fell, Galleas switched from silenced stalker shells to standard mass-reactive rounds and snapped off a burst at the warlocks standing at the foot of the dais. Two of the psykers were already down, their ivory war masks cratered by Juno's deadly fire. A third staggered as Galleas's burst stitched across his torso, the explosive rounds shattering the unnatural, alien armour and driving splinters deep into the alien's chest. The warlock raised a hand, as if to lay a deadly curse upon the attackers, but his wounds overcame him in an instant and he collapsed onto the floor.

Galleas landed hard, cracking the polished stone beneath his feet. Pain flared behind his right knee as the damaged actuator failed to support his weight, dulling to a sullen heat in the space of a heartbeat as the suit's systems injected a measured dose of neural inhibitor into his spine. Warning icons flashed. The veteran sergeant blinked the symbols away and charged after Juno, instinctively compensating for the reduced mobility in his right leg. He switched his bolter to his left hand and drew *Night's Edge*, the ancient blade awarded to him by the Chapter Master himself nearly two hundred years before. Galleas thumbed the weapon's activation rune as the power sword hissed from its scabbard, tracing an arc of blue fire through the dust-laden air.

Olivar's boltgun thundered. The shots streaked over Galleas's head and detonated amidst the ranks of the eldar warriors beyond the warlocks. The one-eyed Space Marine was using dragonfire shells, designed to eliminate targets in cover using a blast of superheated gas. The explosions were deadly to the lightly armoured xenos warriors, but more importantly the thunderous blasts in the relatively confined space were deafening and disorientating. A few eldar were slain, their bodies scorched by the intense heat, but many more were stunned by

the flash and concussion.

Another warlock pitched backwards, felled by Juno's deadly fire. The veteran sprinted towards the enemy, switching his bolter to his left hand and drawing a short, broad-bladed sword from a battered scabbard at his hip. The eldar were recovering quickly from the ambush and already the air buzzed with razor-edged projectiles and the crackle of psychic energies. Shots burst against Galleas's breastplate and pauldrons, shattering into needle-like splinters against the curved ceramite plates. The veteran sergeant took aim at another of the warlocks and snapped off a burst, the heavy boltgun bucking in his hand. The rounds struck just as the psyker unleashed a seething bolt of lightning from her outstretched fingertips. Tendrils of energy lashed at Galleas, scoring his armour and sending hot daggers of pain into the flesh beneath, but the sergeant was spared the worst of it as the psyker's concentration faltered under the hammering of shells against her own armour. The warlock staggered beneath the blows, runes flaring as the xenos war-plate managed to deflect the explosive rounds.

A heartbeat later, Juno reached the foot of the dais, where a warlock stood with spear levelled to receive the Crimson Fist's charge. Behind the xenos, the enemy farseer swept down the shallow steps, robes flaring, his witchblade drawn and seething with eldritch power.

Juno never slowed. For all the world, it looked as though he were rushing to his death, intending to impale himself on the eldar's outstretched spear. The warlock believed it, too, bracing herself and levelling the point of her weapon at the centre of the Space Marine's chest. It was the moment the veteran had been waiting for. His boltgun barked once, and a shell punched through the side of the warlock's right knee. Juno spun as the alien toppled, the point of the spear sliding past his breastplate by mere millimetres and his blade flickering in an upwards cut that intersected the eldar's neck as she fell. The blade's monomolecular edge cut through the alien's armour like cloth. Blood sprayed in a gleaming arc as Juno completed his spin and ran on, sparing not a glance for the psyker who toppled dead in his wake.

The farseer leapt at Juno with a howl of rage, his witchblade flickering through the air as he sliced at the Space Marine's torso. The eldar was blindingly fast, but Juno had anticipated the blow and was already weaving to one side, allowing the blade to slip harmlessly by. His bolter came up and hammered out a burst, aimed not at the farseer but at the last warlock who was rushing to his aid. The three shells struck the onrushing eldar in the neck and head, blasting her from her feet.

Galleas watched the battle unfold with a cold rush of awe. Even amongst the

Adeptus Astartes, Titus Juno's skill in combat was nothing short of extraordinary. The swirling chaos of battle was as ordered and predictable to him as a game of regicide and, like a master, he was always two or three moves ahead of his foes. Now Juno had slain the last of the farseer's bodyguards and placed himself between the eldar and the rest of his force, expertly creating an opening for Galleas to exploit.

The sergeant bore down on the farseer, battering the xenos with bursts from his boltgun. The xenos staggered beneath the blows, but by luck or design each shot was deflected by the alien's runic armour. As he charged into range, Galleas struck with his sword, aiming a furious stroke at the farseer's neck, but the eldar's witchblade deflected it with a terrible ease. A return stroke cut across the sergeant's breastplate, slicing a centimetre deep through ceramite and adamantium and leaving a glowing scar across the Imperial aquila. Galleas felt his hearts lurch as the alien's psychically charged weapon left a glancing mark on his soul.

Undaunted, the veteran sergeant pressed his attack. *Night's Edge* hammered at the farseer's guard, seeking an opening, only to be turned aside again and again. Twice the eldar's blade leapt at Galleas, but his superhuman reflexes kept it from piercing his chest.

Galleas's mind raced. A change in tactics was required. With a thought, he switched the bolter's shot selector again. The sergeant feigned a blow at the farseer's head, then raised his boltgun and fired point-blank into the enemy's chest.

The dragonfire shell burst in a flower of red and black, and the concussion smote Galleas like a hammerblow. Temperature readings spiked in his helmet display as the superheated gas washed over him, but he was prepared for the blast and the farseer was not. As the eldar reeled from the explosion, *Night's Edge* fell, and the power sword's energy field blazed as it cut through armour and the flesh beneath. Galleas's blade struck the farseer atop the left collarbone and chopped deep into his chest. The alien fell with a shriek, blood pouring from the rent in his armour, and the diadem slipped from nerveless fingers, ringing like a chime as it bounced across the stone floor.

Wails of anger and dismay rose from the eldar as they saw their farseer die. Juno was already surrounded by the xenos sword-wielders, his armour turning aside blow after blow as he held his opponents at bay. As Galleas placed his boot on the farseer's chest and pulled his sword free, Olivar came up beside him. The one-eyed Space Marine took careful aim and fired into the melee. He had

switched from dragonfire rounds to deadly, armour-piercing vengeance rounds, which punched neat, glowing holes through the enemy's war-plate. Two of the xenos fell. Juno impaled a third on his blade and the rest fell back in disarray.

Galleas deactivated *Night's Edge* and scooped up the xenos diadem with the point of the blade. A storm of enemy projectiles enveloped the three Space Marines, ringing discordantly as they shattered or ricocheted from battered armour. The veteran sergeant keyed his vox. 'Basta, the charges didn't work!' he said. 'What's the situation outside?'

'Not good,' the armiger said, his voice taut. 'The xenos are leaving their shelters and converging on the temple. A large force has already made its way inside.'

As he spoke, a cacophony of hissing shrieks split the air of the temple chamber, and a volley of missiles struck the dais to Galleas's right. The thunderous blasts sent a cloud of crystal shrapnel buzzing through the air in all directions. Galleas fired a long burst down the missiles' flight path, and struck a pair of heavily armoured eldar advancing into the smoke-filled room. The skull-masked xenos shrugged off the mass-reactive shells as they prepared to fire another salvo.

'Fall back!' Galleas shouted to his brothers, and then switched channels once more. 'Change of plan, Basta. We can't make the pickup point. You're going to have to come to us.'

'We can't...' the armiger stammered, rattled by the tone of urgency in Galleas's voice. 'That is, there's no secure landing zone...'

Juno fell back past Galleas, firing quick bursts at the growing alien force as he went. Olivar sighted one of the skull-masked aliens and fired a single shot that punched a glowing hole through the eldar's forehead. The aliens' reply was immediate – missiles tore through the air on trails of pale grey smoke converging on Olivar's position, but the one-eyed Space Marine was already on the move, dashing through the thickening haze of propellant and ducking behind the dais.

A trio of xenos projectiles rang off Galleas's helmet. The veteran sergeant fell back, firing a burst of dragonfire rounds into the enemy's ranks. His mind raced as he recalled details from Magos Urkhart's hand-drawn maps. 'The temple is connected to several of the surrounding buildings by sky bridges,' he told the armiger. 'We'll head for the nearest one and await you there!'

'Understood, lord.' Basta said something more, but the words were lost in a sudden spike of interference.

'On me, brothers!' Galleas ducked around the dais and raced past his brethren,

heading across the chamber towards an archway on the far side of the chamber. Juno and Olivar fell into step behind him without a word, firing bursts back the way they'd come. As they ducked through the archway a massive volley of missiles streaked across the chamber and slammed into the wall next to them, spraying the Space Marines with fragments and filling the air with dust and smoke.

Juno paused to set a pair of grenades on a proximity fuse and leave them just inside the archway. Angry shouts and eerie howls echoed in the great chamber beyond as the eldar leapt into pursuit.

'How are we getting out of here?' Olivar asked.

'We find a staircase to the southeast and head up,' Galleas replied, crossing the empty room past the arch and peering through the entryway on the far side.

'Is this your idea, or Basta's?' the one-eyed Space Marine growled.

'Does it matter?'

'Of course it does!' Olivar snapped. 'Basta's not one of us. We can't depend on him. Can't you see that?'

Galleas bit back an angry retort. 'South-east through the chambers. Look for a staircase on your left,' he ordered. 'Go!'

For a moment, it looked like Olivar would protest. Then Juno dashed past, heading in the direction indicated, and the one-eyed Space Marine silently fell into step behind him. Galleas followed, covering their retreat. Not five seconds later, Juno's grenades went off in the room behind them.

They found the staircase a few moments later and started to climb. The winding course of the stairs concealed the Space Marines from view and shielded them from fire. On the way up, Galleas sheathed *Night's Edge* and hooked the diadem to a clip at his belt. As shouts echoed up the staircase, he pulled a couple of grenades from his belt and sent them bouncing down the steps to slow the pursuit.

'Landing up ahead,' Juno called over the vox.

'Keep going up,' Galleas ordered. 'Three more landings, then work your way north until you get to the far side of the spire.'

The Space Marines kept moving, as the sounds of pursuit grew louder and closer with every passing moment. At the fourth landing, Galleas left behind two more proximity grenades as Juno and Olivar moved north through more empty rooms.

He caught up to them less than ten seconds later. The room they'd come to had an archway on the far side, and past that a slender bridge whose far end was

swallowed in the last vestiges of the storm.

Juno stood in the archway, staring out into the murk. 'What now?'

Galleas could hear the sounds of pursuit as the eldar closed in behind them. The sergeant backed swiftly across the room and stared out at the ancient, weathered span. As near as he could tell, they were at least eighty metres off the ground.

'Basta!' He called. 'We're almost in position. Where are you?'

There was no reply.

Olivar tossed a grenade through the archway behind them. The eldar were very close. 'Onto the bridge,' he ordered. 'Move!'

Juno went without hesitation, stepping out into the storm. The bridge was just a bit wider than they were, providing no room for error. Gusts buffeted the Space Marine as he edged across the span.

Shadows appeared in the archway. Olivar and Galleas fired as one. 'Go!' the sergeant ordered, and Olivar reluctantly obeyed.

Xenos burst into the room, armed with chainswords and firing pistols. Galleas switched to vengeance rounds and fired single shots, punching the first two from their feet. Olivar fired as well, shooting past Galleas as he edged onto the bridge. Juno was already a third of the way across, crouching low against the wind, when a black spot of nothingness flickered into existence five metres behind him. The spatial distortion lasted a fraction of a second, twisting the air around it into a knot and disintegrating a two-metre section of the span.

Juno's blistering curse cut through the static over the vox. At the edge of the bridge, Galleas stared down into the haze, and could just make out the angular shape of an eldar weapons platform in the courtyard below. The cannon's projector was raised to maximum elevation, its aiming point drifting as the hover platform was shifted about by the high wind.

Olivar snarled a curse and pulled a krak grenade from his belt, but the range was too far and the wind too high to have a chance of scoring a hit. Galleas pulled a grenade of his own and threw it into the room, but an eldar snatched it out of the air and flung it back at him. It detonated a metre in front of his faceplate, peppering his armour with shrapnel. Shots rang from his breastplate and pauldrons. The eldar advanced, but Galleas ripped through the front ranks with a burst from his boltgun. The enemy wavered briefly, but pressed forward once more. Whatever the diadem was, it was worth their lives to reclaim.

Galleas reached for *Night's Edge*. And then a rising howl sawed through the storm wind as the gun cutter descended through the haze.

The ship was a lean, ugly and scarred thing with a bulbous nose that had been broken its share of times and a pair of thick blisters above its intakes. Its flanks were a faded green, lined with old scars and scabbed over with rusty hull patches. Against its rugged jaw the name *Delilah* was painted in curving, yellow script.

*Delilah* bellowed as she slowed to a hover, the dusty air trembling as her thrusters swivelled and went to full power. Below, the eldar weapon platform fired again, but the shot went wide, tearing a hole in the sky a dozen metres above the ship. A moment later, the cutter lowered her nose and let out a ripping snarl from the autocannons in her chin. A stream of burning tracers drew a line of fire across the courtyard until it intersected the weapon platform. The xenos weapon and its operator vanished in a bubble of absolute nothingness as its warp generator was breached.

Thrusters howled as the gun cutter slid smoothly up to the broken end of the bridge. A hatch clanged open along its side, revealing the ship's red-lit interior. Galleas fired another burst into the room and then stabbed a finger at the hatchway. 'Go! *Go!*'

Juno turned and sprinted for the cutter, leaping from the end of the broken span and across the intervening space into the bobbing craft. Olivar paused just long enough to unleash another long burst of covering fire before doing the same.

The eldar saw what was happening and surged forward, their guns filling the air with buzzing projectiles. Galleas fell back across the bridge, firing steadily, until the blister on *Delilah*'s shoulder swivelled about and brought her portside quad-bolter to bear. The heavy guns thundered, taking the veteran sergeant by surprise as shells chewed the archway and the aliens crowded into pieces.

Galleas recovered in an instant, ducking his head away from the storm of red tracers and running for the ship. The bridge was trembling beneath his boots as the bolters tore into the ancient tower. He could almost feel the old bone splintering with every step.

*Delilah* continued to fire as smoking shell casings fell in streams from the blister's ejection ports. The recoil was great enough to shift the heavy gun cutter, widening the gap between it and the broken bridge. Galleas forced himself to run faster, telltales winking red in his helmet display. He leapt – and just as he did so the right knee actuator seized, spoiling his leap.

He wasn't going to make it. Galleas saw it at once. The veteran sergeant plummeted, crashing hard against the lower edge of the hatch. Boltgun and

power sword went skittering across the deck as Galleas scrambled for a handhold. The cutter rocked beneath the impact, as if trying to shake him loose. His armoured fingertips scraped along the tilting deck plate as he slipped back into space.

A hand closed like a vice around his wrist. ‘Where do you think you’re going, brother?’ Juno asked, jesting through clenched teeth. Another hand seized Galleas by the edge of his right pauldron, and as the cutter started to slide forward he found himself hauled up and through the hatch.

Olivar and Juno hauled Galleas to his feet as *Delilah*’s main engines roared and the cutter began to pick up speed. Old servomotors groaned, dragging the side hatch shut.

The forward compartment of the gun cutter was originally built to accommodate a full landing party of Naval ratings and their equipment, but now it was crammed with makeshift crew stations and salvaged survey gear. Basta sat with his back to the forward bulkhead, strapped into a jump seat next to the long-range surveyor station. The armiger’s dark blue Chapter livery looked black under the red interior lights, and gave his lean face an almost skeletal cast. As the cutter picked up speed, the young man let out an explosive breath and slumped in his seat. ‘Thank the holy Emperor,’ he said, his voice all but lost in the thunder of the engines.

Next to the survey station was a plot table, its flakboard piled with sheets of yellowed parchment. Magos Urkart was bent over his maps, spidery metal hands splayed atop the parchment like the feet of a dusty old cyber-raven. ‘Was it there?’ he asked, the words gurgling up from his scarred lungs. ‘Did you find it?’

Seals popped with a soft hiss as Olivar pulled off his helmet. The Space Marine had a bald head and a rough-hewn face made all the more bellicose by the jagged scars that radiated from his crushed eye socket. The eye itself was gone, cleaned out by the Chapter Apothecaries and the interior lined with synth-flesh until a suitable replacement could be obtained. Passages from the Litanies of Hate had been tattooed in neat lines across his forehead and the flat planes of his cheeks.

‘Mind your manners, wretch,’ Olivar growled. ‘Take that tone with one of us again and I’ll tie that vox-unit around your ears.’

‘Enough, brother,’ Galleas said quietly. As he spoke, the hatch to the rear compartment grated open. Tolwyn, the tech-serf, stepped through the hatchway. He approached Galleas, head bent in shame. The mechadendrites fitted to the harness around his torso twitched in time to the wringing of his gloved hands.

‘Forgive me, lord,’ he said gravely. ‘I didn’t reckon on the storm affecting the detonator signal. I take full responsibility—’

Olivar was on him in two steps, his hand closing around tech-serf’s throat. ‘You *imbecile*,’ he snarled, shaking the young technician. Tolwyn writhed in the Space Marine’s grip, breath hissing through clenched teeth. ‘I ought to throw you out the hatch and leave you to the xenos!’

‘I said *enough!*’ Galleas crossed the compartment and shoved himself between Olivar and Tolwyn. ‘Put him down, brother. He and the others did their best.’

‘Their *best* nearly got us killed,’ Olivar spat. He shook his head angrily. ‘I *told* you this was a mistake, brother. They’re *weak*. Treating them as equals shames not only us, but the entire Chapter.’

Galleas reached up and unsealed his helmet. He was a study in contrasts compared to the craggy-faced Olivar, with a long, square jaw and high cheekbones framed by a full head of curly, dark hair. His eyes were a pale green, like polished jade, and seemed to glow in the red light.

‘We are all servants of the Imperium, each according to our gifts,’ he said evenly. ‘And were it not for them, we never would have made it to Parthus IV at all. They serve, and do so willingly, risking lives far more fragile than our own.’

A voice called back through the open access way between the flight deck and the forward compartment. ‘Anybody got a problem with this boat, sound off now,’ Sabina Lucan said. *Delilah*’s pilot twisted in her seat and craned her head around to peer at the Space Marines from beneath her leather flying cap. Her augmented goggles were perched on her forehead, revealing her polished silver eyes. She gave Olivar a roguish grin. ‘I’ll be glad to turn around and put you back where I found you.’

Olivar dropped Tolwyn to the deck and started forward, but Titus Juno stepped into his path. ‘You heard the sergeant,’ Juno said calmly. ‘Stand down.’

For a moment it looked as though Olivar would press matters further, but at the last moment he thought better of it. He turned away from Juno and headed aft, glaring hard at Galleas as he passed. Tolwyn shrank against the bulkhead as Olivar went by, but the Space Marine ignored him, passing through the hatchway into the rear compartment.

Tension hung heavy in the forward compartment. Galleas spoke quickly. ‘How long until we can pick up Athos and his squad and dock with the *Venture*?’

Lucan’s grin widened. ‘She’s on the far side of the planet just now. Forty minutes, give or take.’

The veteran sergeant frowned slightly. Forty minutes was disgraceful for a

Space Marine pilot, but swift-going for a civilian ship, he was forced to admit. ‘Signal Master Voss and inform him that we will break orbit and make for Volcanis as soon as we are docked.’

Lucan’s expression darkened. ‘There’s been a word from Styros. An eldar fleet has appeared in-system. The governor is recalling all ships to defend the capital.’

Galleas considered this a moment, and then shook his head. ‘The attack on Styros is a diversion,’ he said. ‘We go to Volcanis.’

Lucan nodded and turned back to her controls. Within moments the signal was sent to the rogue trader, just beyond the planet’s terminator.

With the crisis past for now, Juno shouldered past Galleas and found a place to sit and then began to intone the litanies of maintenance as he unloaded and stripped down his boltgun. Tolwyn crossed the compartment and furtively knelt beside the giant, adding his voice to the litany and producing vials of sanctified oil. The veteran sergeant stepped up to the chart table and unclipped the diadem from his belt. ‘This is what the xenos were after,’ he said.

Magos Urkhart stirred at the sight of the xenos relic. ‘The Diadem of the Celestial Spheres,’ he whispered, his mechanical hands twitching possessively. ‘At long last...’

Galleas studied the delicate object. ‘Are you certain?’

‘It can be no other,’ the magos said, his voice full of wonder.

The veteran sergeant nodded thoughtfully, and with a swift blow smashed the diadem against the chart table. The relic crumpled, hidden circuits crackling, and the crystals set into the diadem blew apart.

‘That should complicate the eldar’s plans,’ Galleas said, handing the smoking wreckage to Urkhart. ‘Well done, magos.’

He turned away from the stricken xenoarchaeologist and glanced over at Basta, who was bent over the surveyor display. The armiger’s expression was bleak. Olivar’s words had cut him to the quick. The sergeant could only hope that he could rise above the criticism and improve his tactical skills, like any battle-brother of the Chapter was expected to do. If he proved unfit, there was no way to replace him, and Galleas needed every member of his unconventional team to face the challenges waiting on Volcanis.

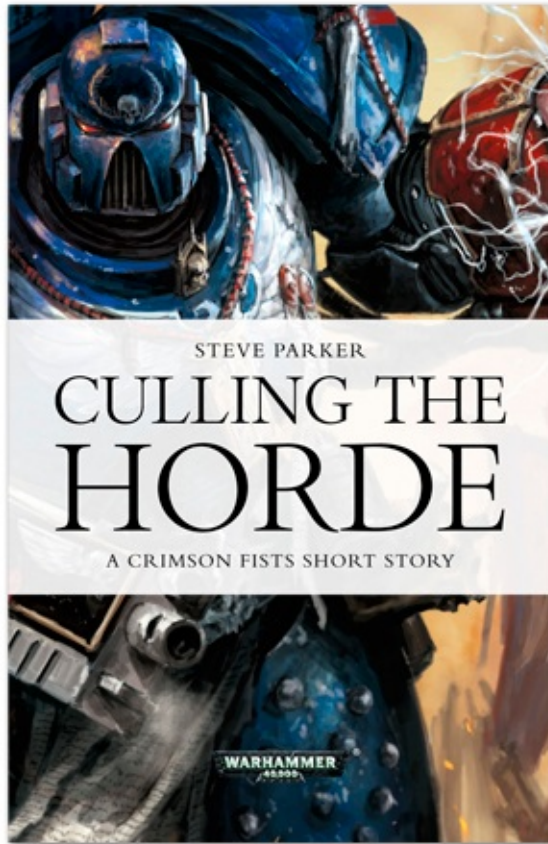
*We few must do whatever it takes, Galleas thought grimly. There is no other choice. Our monastery is gone. Our relics are dust. Little more than a hundred of us remain, and the High Lords of Terra have abandoned us to our fate.*

*We must do more, and with far less, than any other Chapter in the history of the Imperium. Not for a year, or a decade, but for centuries to come. And we*

*must not fail.*

## 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.



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