



## **MALEDICTION (2012)**

**A Dark Angel Audio Drama**

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## **List of characters:**

### **IMPERIAL GUARD**

- \* Regan Antigone - veteran Imperial Guard officer;
- \* Telomian - Imperial colonel;
- \* Murtock - Imperial guardsman, former resident of amidships levels;
- \* Tarrick - Imperial guardsman, former ganger;
- \* Linkmel - Imperial Guard vox officer.

### **SPACE MARINES**

- \* Master Tigrane – brother the Dark Angels Space Marine Chapter;
- \* Cypher – one of the so-called Fallen Angels of the Dark Angels Legion

## **CHAPTER 01**

(engines roaring)

The Lightning fighter craft streaked across the sky and out of the glare cast by Procel V harsh orange sun the throng<sup>1</sup> of people on the ground looked skyward. They screamed as the jet entered a steep dive, heading directly for the crowd's lining the wide streets of the planet's capital. The screams turned to cheers as at the last minute the Lightning pulled out of its dive and ascended again a series of rolls.

From a balcony high above the victory celebrations Regan Antigone leaned on his cane and smiled. It had been a long time since he had heard the sound of a Lightning's engine. And although he was not as quite as grateful to hear it on the previous occasion he knew the vital role that the flyboys had played in the liberation some 25 years ago. Behind the first Lightning came several other Imperial Navy craft, simulating strafing rounds or ground attacks. Each one was greeted by an enthusiastic roar from the celebrants of Amadis.

When the Navy had finished their show boating, it was the turn of the Procel 14th mechanized. Thousands of tons of hardware roared down the streets of the city abreast<sup>2</sup>. Children and adults alike gasped as the enormous war machines swung their turrets this way and that, marked targeting, the very people that a decade and a half before those same guns had run red hot to

save from the forces of the Arch enemy. At the back of the 14th column was the regiment's pride and joy – a Baneblade - and several of the citizenry fainted at the presence of such an awesome tool of war.

After the tanks came the human liberators of Procel V. At the sight of the olive-clad soldiers Regan abandoned his cane and through supreme effort stood unaided for the first time in a quarter of a century. As each troop filed past they turned their heads and saluted in the direction of the balcony. They were not saluting the planetary governor, the visiting Administratum dignitaries or even the Imperial Guard top brass<sup>3</sup>. These salutes were reserved for Regan Antigone – sole survivor of the 1st Procel irregulars, savior of Amadis and hero of the Imperium. For over an hour thousands of the Imperial guardsmen passed below the balcony of the governor's manse<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the pain in his leg, reaching excruciating levels, the only time Regan allowed a tear to flow, was when his own regiment, now the 1st Procel regulars in honor of their bravery in the battle to hold the city, closed out the parade, by standing below his vantage point<sup>5</sup>, singing Imperial hymns in his honor as he took their salute. But the tear was not of the pain, nor an outpouring<sup>6</sup> of emotion at this moment's occasion. It was a tear of shame at the secret he had kept for more than half his life.

## **CHAPTER 02**

(Crowd speaking)

After the parade had finished, Regan, the governor and officials from all branches of the Imperial bureaucracy retired to the state room for the celebratory feast. As he took his seat at the head of the hall alongside various commissars, colonel and backroom paper-pushers it occurred to him that only a small proportion of the guests invited were frontline military men. Granted of the three irregulars who survived the battle for Amadis he was the only one still alive and he wouldn't dare think that the Adeptus Astartes chapters involved would deign<sup>7</sup> to send representatives to such an insignificant gathering, but he came to the realization that little had changed since his days

as a serving Imperial guardsman. The higher echelons will always stay as far away from the action as possible while everybody else does the real work of fighting wars.

(Someone beating the goblet with a fork)

The feast commenced with a series of speeches, a succession of worthies took to the podium to aggrandize the role that their branch of the Imperium had played in the battle of Amadis and to laud<sup>8</sup> the heroism of Regan Antigone.

(Champagne cork flying out, someone filling the goblets)

A string of people he had never met stood before him claiming to have known him all his life and embellishing their stories with facts about Regan Antigone. A Departmento Munitorum official went on at length about how the Regan Antigone he knew had clawed his way up the very depths of the city and was lucky even to have been accepted into the irregulars let alone serve with distinction. While he certainly hadn't been born into the upper sphere of Amadis' society he was far from bottom dwelling trash.

Amadis was no conventional city. It was the remains of an enormous space ferrying craft that had crashed onto the surface of the planet millennia ago. Despite no longer being capable of returning to the depths of space the vast structure had remained intact and thus formed an instant capital for the recently settled world. In the centuries since the populace had fallen naturally into a class system along similar lines to a hive city or ironically the crew of an Imperial Navy vessel.

At the summit with the governor and the assorted bureaucrats who ensured the smooth running of not only the city, but the entire planet of eighty billion souls, the governor's man sat at the very top of the ship and the streets down below with the crenels that ran across the top of the hull. The levels immediately below housed the administrators and military. And continued on down through service industries, hab-workers and menials<sup>9</sup> until at the very bottom of the ship with the criminal underclass – the gangers, and if the whispers were to be believed – mutants.

Before the Arch enemy invaded and laid siege to Amadis, Regan had been apprenticed to a mag-lift engineer and led a

not uncomfortable life amidst ships<sup>10</sup>. Prior to joining the irregulars he had been a bit of a scrapper<sup>11</sup> and had even had to kill on occasion, but to insinuate that he was a hardened criminal before he joined the Guard was just insulting. But that wasn't the most hurtful mistruth. The Departmento Munitorum man was followed by an elderly commissar with the chest covered in medals. He droned on<sup>12</sup> for some time about the heroic exploits of the Procel regiments not only during the battle for Amadis, but also in the years that followed. Then after eulogizing<sup>13</sup> Regan in a speech where he constantly referred to him as ranger he began to speak about Regan's two sons. The commissar claimed that his eldest son Murtock was almost as brave as his father and had successfully defended a vital ammo dump<sup>14</sup> during the campaign to liberate moons on the outer range of the Procel system. His youngest son Tarrick meanwhile had been one of the heroic defenders of Hipstand's Folly – a small moon on the very edge of the system that was used to resupply Imperial Navy craft. Regan had to bite back his anger at these lies. Both his sons had joined the regulars and because of their father's reputation had officer level. Murtock given the rank of major and two hundred men at his command had fought in the campaign to liberate the moons of Procel, but finding himself and his men trapped in an ammo dump by a far stronger force chose to take his own life rather than stand and fight. A young corporal had been the one to successfully lead the defense and some months later was the one who returned Murtock's personal effects to Regan. As the now paraplegic<sup>15</sup> corporal had willed himself out of the hab, Regan had realized that they hadn't even bothered to wash the shit out of the seat of the guard issue combat fatigues<sup>16</sup>, that had been amongst his son belongings. His other son, Tarrick, was neither a hero, nor a coward, merely stupid. Also given the rank of major he was on his first combat mission out of basic training, when his squad's Chimera was sent to defend the outer perimeter of a star port. Leading from the front he was the first out of the Chimera and the first of his squad to die. A laser round took him clean through the side of the skull – a death that probably would have been avoided if

only he had thought to have put his helmet on before leaving the vehicle.

But still worse was to come. The commissar invited Regan to the podium to accept posthumous<sup>17</sup> medals on behalf of both his brave sons.

(Applauses)

As Regan stood there struggling to hold both medals and his cane, a sudden melancholy washed over him, just as it had, when he had been given the news about his sons' fates. He was about to return to his seat, when the commissar gestured for Regan to take his place.

(Applauses)

Awkwardly<sup>18</sup> Regan turned to face the crowd, uncertain whether to accept the commissar's invitation. One look at the faces of the enthusiastically clapping assembly told him, that he didn't have any alternative. Limping<sup>19</sup> towards the vox assembly he placed the medals on top of the podium and gathered his thoughts. After a brief pause he looked out into the now hushed crowd and prepared to speak.

Regan: "I am humbled<sup>20</sup>".

Crowd (exclaiming): "Oh! Ah!"

A commotion<sup>21</sup> from the back of the hall diverted his attention. All around him people were taking to one knee and bowing their heads until Regan was the only human in the room left standing. When he caught sight of the reason that even the planetary governor himself had bowed, Regan ignored the pain in his leg to do the same.

(Footsteps)

Striding through the center of the state room was a giant power-armored figure nearly three meters tall. The newcomer was clad in an ivory robe, the hood of which shrouded his face in shadow. By his side hung a bolt-pistol just visible beneath the folds of his garb<sup>22</sup> was the scabbard of a great sword. Though his face and much of his armor were obscured by the fine ancient cloth, his immense green shoulder pads were not. The right pad was adorned with the bar relief of a long dagger wreathed<sup>23</sup> by feathers, while the other was emblazoned with stylized ebony wings set through with a dagger. This marked

him out as the member of one of the Emperor's finest and most noble Space Marine chapters – the Dark Angels.

Awestruck<sup>24</sup> the bowing crowd parted to give the demigod free passage amongst them. Regan allowed himself to look up slightly and realized that the figure was heading directly for the stage. Sweating nervously, he cast his eyes towards the ground as the figure arrived before him. Without removing his hood the Space Marine began to speak.

Space Marine: "Regan Antigone, sole survivor of the Procel 1st irregulars, savior of Amadis and hero of the Imperium!"

Regan tilted<sup>25</sup> his head upward slightly, not daring to make eye contact with the goliath, but not wanting to show disrespect either.

Regan (mumbling): "Y... Y... Yes!"

The Dark Angel slid back his hood to reveal his features. A perfectly smooth scalp punctuated only by the occasional pop-mark or scar seemed to shine in the artificial light of the state room and his stern<sup>26</sup> craggy<sup>27</sup> face betrayed no emotion or feeling.

Space Marine: "Stand!"

Regan (mumbling): "I... I... What?"

Space Marine: "For the last time, stand!"

With the aid of his cane Regan climbed to a standing position. He was conscious that every set of eyes in the room was fixed on him.

Tigrane: "I am Master Tigrane of the sixth Company of the Dark Angels Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. Regan Antigone, sole survivor of the Procel 1st irregulars, savior of Amadis and hero of the Imperium! You do not bow before me".

The green-armored Space Marine put his hand to the hilt of his sword, withdrew it in a single fluid<sup>28</sup> motion, pointing it at a 45 degree angle towards the roof of the state room. The blade was made of a material so dark, that it seemed to absorb the light in the room, casting Regan and the angel of death in a pale obsidian gloom. Regan felt as if he was going to pass out, another fluid movement and the Company Master was down on one knee, the point of the black sword now embedded in the floor, head bowed slightly in respect.

Tigrane: “It is I, who bow before you”.

### **CHAPTER 03**

Tigrane: “It seems I’ve saved you again, trooper Antigone”. Once the commotion had died down nervous gubernatorial officials had scrambled around to oblige their esteemed new arrival. Though none of the seats in the state room was strong enough to accommodate the bulk of a Space Marine, one enterprising young clerk had commandeered an ammo crate from somewhere and after draping it with fine cloths had allowed Company Master Tigrane to take his place beside Regan at the head of the feast.

Regan: “Thank you, although I’ve attended many functions like this down the years I never have grown accustomed to public speaking. And it’s no longer trooper Antigone, it is colonel Antigone now – an honorific title of course in recognition of my role in the defense, but it seems I’m not the only one to have received the promotion since the last time we met, lord”.

Tigrane: “Indeed. I haven’t been sergeant Tigrane for many years now since a few months after the Procel campaign in fact. A great honor, but one tinged<sup>29</sup> with much sadness that it took the death of Master Duma for me to ascend to the rank”.

Regan: “I’m sorry, lord. I didn’t mean”.

Tigrane: “I am a soldier, colonel Antigone. I have been conditioned to make fear a stranger to me and I can withstand pain far beyond the threshold of most things that exist in the universe. While the death of my former master saddens me I do not experience grief or emotional pain in the same way that you do. Death be it my own or that of one of my battle brothers is merely an occupational hazard”.

A nervous serving girl approached Regan and the Space Marine and offered to pour them some wine. Tigrane waved her away impassively, but Regan accepted a full goblet and instantly gulped down half of it. While he had been in the presence of the Space Marines before, he had never felt comfortable around them. While mere men if they were blessed with good health and avoided a stint<sup>30</sup> in the Imperial Guard could live for the better part of a century, Space Marines could

live for far longer. It was rumored that the Adeptus Astartes were essentially immortal and that their lives could only be ended through violence. Quite apart from the fact that a Space Marine could kill a man with a flick of his wrist or a spray of saliva<sup>31</sup>, it was this reminder of his own mortality that was the root of his unease, more now than ever in light of his circumstances.

Tigrane: "But I am not here to talk about me. I want to know about you, Colonel Regan Antigone, hero of the Imperium. Where did your life take you after I carried you from that trench all those years ago?"

Regan: "You flatter me, lord. My life has not been that interesting at all in comparison to yours, I'm sure".

Tigrane: "Granted, but please, I insist".

Regan: "Very well. After that last time you came to visit me in the medicare they operated on me to save my leg. Although the limb is still intact they couldn't retain much function and that's why I carry this".

Regan raised the cane to show the Space Marine, but quickly dropped it to the floor, when he realized he was brandishing it like a sword. The Dark Angel smiled and gestured for Regan to continue.

Regan: "Oh, they invalided me out of the Guard. When it became clear that we had fought back the invasion, I was proclaimed a hero. I was made an honorary colonel of the newly founded 1st Procel regulars and showered with medals and accolades. Parades were held in my honor and there were countless feasts and banquets where I was made to tell my story over and over again. They even erected a statue of me and I'm told that there is a small island in Procel's southern hemisphere where half of the boys born since the liberation had been named Regan".

Tigrane was listening intently, but Regan noticed that his brow was furrowed<sup>32</sup>.

Regan: "Something wrong, lord? Is my story not interesting enough?"

Tigrane: "Not at all. It's just that something puzzles me. When my battle brothers and I relieved you in that trench, we carried

away three survivors. But you are speaking as if you were the only one”.

Regan: “I apologize, lord. I thought you knew. Tarrick never came out of his coma and they switched off his life support only days after the liberation. Murtock managed to regain consciousness briefly, but the blight was so strong in him, that he was dead within weeks. Even now the toxins the enemy unleashed during the siege are still killing people”.

Regan’s voice trailed off<sup>33</sup> and the Dark Angel stared at him as if he could see right through him, peer into his very soul.

Tigrane: “What aren’t you telling me?”

Not for the first time Regan looked the angel of death in the eyes.

Regan: “It’s me. For some reason I did not contract this virulent<sup>34</sup> strain<sup>35</sup> of the blight as the others. It’s been killing me, but it’s been killing me slowly. Even so the surgeons tell me that I only have weeks to live, months if I am lucky. I am dying, my lord. The enemy couldn’t kill me with bullets or bombs twenty five years ago, but they got me in the end”.

The Dark Angel’s facade slipped briefly and something approaching emotion registered on his face.

Tigrane: “That saddens me, Regan Antigone. No man deserves a slow lingering death, especially such a brave servant of the Golden Throne”.

The Space Marine’s features hardened again and he locked Regan with his steely gaze.

Tigrane: “I should honor you in some way”.

Regan: “Please, lord, that isn’t necessary. I have already been honored more than one man deserves in a hundred lifetimes”.

Tigrane: “Then indulge<sup>36</sup> me. Tell me your story again. Tell me how you and two of your comrades held off an entire Arch enemy attack and ensured that Amadis did not end up in their clutches. Tell me, so that I can record it accurately in the annals of my chapter and remember your glory for all eternity”.

Regan glanced towards the back of the hall in the vain hope that another surprise guest would make an entrance and spare him having to lie once more. There was to be no savior this time.

Regan: "As you wish, lord".

## CHAPTER 04

Colonel Telomian: "Another wave incoming. Man the walls and don't shoot until you have a definite kill. Conserve your ammo, there is plenty more of these bastards out there".

At the colonel's command Regan unslung his lasrifle from his shoulder and joined the other members of his unit, perched<sup>37</sup> to top the muddy trench that had been home for the past two months. He stared out into the soupy miasma<sup>38</sup> clinging to no man's land and waited until he could make out shapes in the mist. The man lying next to him in the redoubt<sup>39</sup> - Tarrick, bottom-dwelling trash who would kill you just as soon as look at you - squeezed off a shot and a dozen weapons fired back in response. Now that the enemy had made their position unknown, the men of the 1st Procel irregulars easily picked off<sup>40</sup> the frontline and as successive phalanxes of the enemy stepped over the corpses of the fallen, more of them entered the kill zone and succumbed to relentless<sup>41</sup> Imperial fire.

Regan: "Tarrick, the power-pack spent, pass me another".

The former ganger loosed another shot out of the liquid trench, then reached a tattooed hand into the breast-pocket of his filthy tunic and tossed Regan a power-pack. He smiled, revealing a set of false metal teeth, the intricate ink work around his lips distorting to make it appear as if he had a rictus<sup>42</sup> grin.

Tarrick: "Don't let Telomian hear you. He thinks we should be able to repel these attacks with nothing more than our bare hands and few choice curse words".

Regan caught the power-pack, ejected the spent one from his rifle and replaced it. He resumed his position and spying one of the attackers took aim and pressed the firing start. Nothing happened. Sharing an anxious look with Tarrick he released the new power-pack and frantically<sup>43</sup> started clearing out the mud to conglomerate<sup>44</sup> it in weapon's cliphouse. The enemy soldier was only meters away and realizing that Regan would not have his weapon functioning in time; Tarrick concentrated his fire on the advancing cultist. Incredibly the onrushing attacker avoided all of the tattooed ganger's shots and launched himself over the

top of the trench, landing right on top of Regan and throwing him against the hard earth of the back wall.

(Sounds of fight)

Tarrick swung around and aimed of the interlope, but the Chaos mutated freak raised a distended<sup>45</sup> arm and knocked him from the top of the trench, his weapon spilling into the mud below.

The cultist turned to face Regan, opening its mouth in a grotesque parody of a smile. Its lips were ringed with rotting fangs and maggots crawled over its tongue, its eyes were like those of a fly and the scrappy<sup>46</sup> remains of its uniform did little to cover the bulbous<sup>47</sup> layers of oozing<sup>48</sup> fat that made up its torso. Raise its both club-like arms to the air, it prepared to land the killing blow on the still prone Regan. He closed his eyes and awaited the inevitable.

(Laser shot)

It never came. He opened his eyes to see the beaming face of Murtock - another irregular recruited from amidships levels of Amadis - looking down at him, hand held down to help lift him from the muddy trench floor. Regan accepted in gratefully and rose to his feet. Tarrick stood unaided and using the butt<sup>49</sup> of his rifle rolled over the bloated cadaver to check that it was really dead.

Tarrick: "Bastard is uglier than me".

Regan: "Thanks, Mer, I owe you one".

Murtock: "Don't thank me, just promise that when this is over and we are all back in Amadis, you name your firstborn after me. Ha!"

(Soldiers laughing)

The three men laughed, they shared moment of rare break in the relentless horror of life in the trenches, before once again picking their weapons and resuming the business of killing".

## **CHAPTER 05**

(Footsteps in mud, wounded soldier crying in the distance)

The assault though ferocious was not as unrelenting as many of the previous attacks and within an hour the waves of the enemy combatants spewing<sup>50</sup> forth from no man's land ceased. And

the defenders could take stock and lick their wounds. The dead would be counted, their bodies burned.

A shot rang out from further and longer trench, and Regan and Tarrick dropped the dead irregular they were carrying and reached for their weapons in anticipation of another attack. They soon relaxed again, once they realized it was merely one of their own snipers picking off wounded cultists and mutants, who had fallen before they had reached the trench.

Regan: "What took you so long? I thought you are going to fetch us some water. I can't shift a taste of mud from my mouth and Tarrick recons is this so dry that Telomian have requested to use it for combat exercises".

The podgy figure of Murtock ambled through the sludge towards the two seated men, shoulders slumped in defeat, crouching down so that his head was no longer in line with the leap of the trench, he removed his helmet to reveal his shock of curly auburn hair.

Murtock: "There is no left".

Tarrick: "What do you mean, there's none left? We are stationed in a muddy gash in the earth, where water pisses out of the very walls we are trying to defend".

He twisted a finger into the dirty wall of the trench and pulled it out with a wet pop. To prove his point a trickle of water seeped down towards the ground, leaving a narrow channel in the trench wall in its wake.

Murtock: "Orders are not to drink it. Something to do with that Emperor-forsaken mist that's clinging to the ground. It contaminates everything it touches. Some of the lads billeted further round the trench, caught a small canid in no-man's-land and ate it. When they were found the next morning in their bunkhouse it looked as if they'd been pulled inside out. That's what I heard anyway".

Regan: "So what are we supposed to do in the meantime? We'll all be dead of the dehydration by the time the next attack wave comes".

Murtock simply shrugged. Regan removed his water bottle from his belt and shook it, but it didn't make a sound. Tarrick did likewise with the same result. They both looked at Murtock, who

fumbled<sup>53</sup> his own bottle from his belt and imitated his comrades. Nothing.

Tarrick: "What about him?"

Tarrick pointed a tattooed finger at the corpse that had just so unceremoniously dumped in the sludge. Murtock and Regan shared an anxious look.

Murtock: "Come on, Tar! You know the orders, that the corpses are to be recovered with their kit, so it can be redistributed.

Telomian will have you upon the charge if he finds out".

Ignoring his friend's protest, Tarrick lent down to the corpse and after removing a half-full water bottle from the dead man's belt, began rifling<sup>54</sup> through his pockets.

Tarrick: "What's this then?"

His stubby fingers emerged from the inside of the cadaver's tunic, grasping a small silver flask. He unscrewed the cap and put the container to his nose.

Tarrick: "It's not amasec, my friends, but it looks like".

He plunged his hand inside the dead man's tunic again and it reemerged holding a set of dog tags.

Tarrick: "Trooper messed in here was in possession of prohibited materials. To wit and I quote the guardsman's prima here - liquids of intoxicating or stupefying nature likely to impair<sup>55</sup> or inhibit a guardsman ability to fight if imbibed<sup>56</sup>".

The tattooed former ganger screwed the cap back onto the flask and slipped it away in the folds of his own tunic.

Tarrick: "Way I see it; I'm doing old mister here a favor. Would that kind of thing stay on his service record, I mean, what would his grieving family think, if they found out that he was both dead and a drunkard? Oh, I don't think I could have that on my conscience quite frankly".

Telomian: "So!"

The three guardsmen turned in alarm.

Telomian: "Not only can you not follow a direct order from me not to shoot until you have a confirmed kill, but it appears you can't follow a simple standing order to recover casualties with full kit".

They had been so distracted by Tarrick's corpse looting, that they'd failed to hear colonel Telomian and his vox trooper

Linkmel approaching. Whereas Linkmel and the three other irregulars were caked in filth from head to toe, the colonel appeared as if he had just slipped into a fresh uniform, the only giveaway that it strode the half-kilometer from his command bunker, the couple of centimeters of wet brown stain<sup>57</sup> that caked the bottom of his grey field coat. Despite his fresh attire the colonel's bearded face looked as tired in battle weary as any of the rank and file troops in the trench. His wide blood shot eyes lent him a crazed bearing that was beginning to make itself evident in his voice as well.

Tarrick: "Or, alternatively by making that first shot I drew the enemy into revealing their positions. We used to pull the stuff like that all the time in ship's bottom. There was this one time..." Telomian had run out of patience with the insubordinate ganger and looked ready to strike him with the gloved fist bold at his side, when the vox unit on Linkmel's back sounded.

Amadis Prime (over vox): "Forward 19, this is Amadis Prime, do you copy? Over".

Linkmel reached an arm around to pick up the vox receiver on his back, but Telomian spun the trooper roughly around and picked up the handset himself.

Telomian: "This is Forward 19, go ahead, Amadis. Over".

Amadis Command (over vox): "Reinforce and resupply denied. Up here we can't spare food or water, let alone able bodies. You are on your own, Forward 19. Good luck and good hunting".

Telomian was just about to protest, when the line to Amadis command went dead. In frustration he threw the handset away along the trench, causing Linkmel to slide through the mire<sup>58</sup> to retrieve it. Nostrils flaring he turned his attention back to the three men. Fearing the full brunt<sup>59</sup> of the colonel's wrath and noticing his hand straying towards the bolt-pistol holstered at his waist Regan, Tarrick and Murtock began to edge away slowly. Then abruptly the colonel's demeanor<sup>60</sup> cooled and sanity embraced him again.

Telomian: "I can have all of you upon charges for your conduct, but in light of current circumstances I believe that would be

counterproductive. However, as you saw fit to deprive your fellow soldiers of food and water".

Murtock (interrupting): "But, sir, it was only water; we so didn't actually find any..."

Telomian (interrupting): "As you saw fit to deprive your fellow soldiers of food and water, it is only fitting that you should make amends by finding them food and water".

The colonel's piercing stare withered Murtock where he stood.

Regan: "And how do you propose we do that, sir? Walk up to the enemy trenches and ask them if they'd mind lending us a barrel of fresh water in a couple a couple of ham hocks?"

Another piercing stare, another guardsman withered.

Telomian: "Not a bad idea, trooper Antigone. Let's call that the backup plan. What I am actually ordering you to do is march back to Amadis and see what you can lay your hands on.

Tarrick here must still have some contacts among the criminal fraternity and failing that is a finely stocked zoological garden on the upper levels, that I'm sure would provide several days supply of fresh meat".

The three olive-clad troopers looked around at each other in amazement. Regan motioned with his eyebrows at Tarrick, encouraging his to speak. When the ganger didn't bite, Regan stepped up.

Regan: "With the greatest of respect, sir, that's the most ridiculous thing we've ever been ordered to do. Even if the three of us could get to Amadis and back with enough food and water to make it worthwhile, I am not prepared to deprive the people we are trying to defend. We might as well poison the water supplies ourselves and spare them the slow death of dehydration or starvation".

The other two irregulars looked on apprehensively, anticipating the colonel's hand finding its way back to the butt of his pistol.

Telomian: "Thank you for being honest and forthright with me, trooper".

Murtock and Tarrick visibly relaxed, grateful that neither them, nor Regan would be the victim of battlefield justice.

Telomian: "In that case we'll be going with the backup plan".

(Footsteps in the mud)

## **CHAPTER 06**

Murtock: "Why did you have to go and open your big mouth? If he'd sent us back to Amadis, all we'd have to do was go AWOL for a few hours and come back empty-handed».

Even at a whisper, the rebreather he was wearing ensured Murtock's voice carried across the barren<sup>62</sup> muddy expansive no man's land. His two comrades advancing in front of him cut him glances that told him to shut up in no uncertain terms.

Regan had considered the possibility of pulling a fast one before he'd answered back to the colonel, but given Tolomean's current frame of mind, returning from Amadis without food or water would be tantamount to signing their own death warrants. Far better to take their chances on patrol on no man's land or, as the colonel had put it, "reconnoiter<sup>63</sup> the enemy's positions and determine the strength and troop types arrayed against us". Or to put it in yet clearer terms, a suicide mission. Time and distance had lost all meaning in the flat brown terrain and the three irregulars had no idea how long it had been since they had left the relative safety of the trench. Though they were fairly certain they were still continuing in a straight line, but cloying mist made it impossible to tell, just how close they were getting to the enemy trenches.

Regan stopped suddenly, held up his hand and motioned his comrades to halt. The enemy had not mined the contested zone, but other obstacles awaited anyone full hardy enough to venture there. And it was the rotting corpse of an enemy combatant that had drawn Regan's attention. Satisfied that the monstrosity was dead, but not daring to touch the corpse in case it had been booby-trapped, he signaled for them to continue advancing.

Tarrick broke formation and got closer to Regan. He lifted his rebreather slightly to keep his voice at the barest minimum.

Tarrick: "Way I see it, we should just sit tight here and then head back to the trench in a couple of hours. We'll just tell the colonel that there's lots of the enemy and there all big ones too. What's he going to do? Strode out himself to double check?"

Regan put his own rebreather to one side to reply.

Regan: "Too risky. The enemy has probably got patrols out here too. If we encounter one, I'd rather we are on our feet and ready to react".

Tarrick nodded and resumed his position in their formation without any protest. Though the three men were of the same rank and inexperienced soldiers, Regan has emerged as their de facto leader during their time in the trenches. Murtock and Tarrick had grown to trust him implicitly<sup>64</sup> and it had kept them both alive so far. If they were going to survive a pointless patrol in no man's land, then following Regan was the best way to achieve it.

Hours passed with nothing more than the occasional corpse or discarded weapon to break the monotonous terrain, when just as they were beginning to doubt the existence of the enemy trench, the mist began to thin out and the landscape took on a different aspect. Carefully stepping over a length of razor wire Regan signaled for them to hit the ground. For the next few minutes progress was painfully slow as they practically swam through the mud. With every meter they advanced the mist became thinner and Regan was convinced that it was the enemy themselves, who were controlling the weather. What other explanation was there for the poisonous fog hanging only over Amadis and the trenches doubt to defended.

The silence also gave way the nearer they encroached on the enemy position and the three men grew more concerned about being spotted, that being heard. Ordering to stop Regan pulled out a set of field magnoculars. While the Imperial trenches were crowded, those of the Arch enemy looked more like a cattle container, such was the volume of bodies crammed<sup>65</sup> into such a tight space. Regan now realized why they were able to send so many attack waves against the defenders' positions. Sheer weight of numbers meant they were content to gradually whittle<sup>66</sup> down the Imperial forces, until taking Amadis became a formality. Cultists and mutants unloaded crates from armored vehicles and lowered them down to waiting arms. Occasionally a bigger better-armored soldier would shout orders and several of the subordinates would scurry<sup>67</sup> off and unload a freshly

arrived vehicle or lag-ammo containers further along the trench. To Regan it looked like they were preparing for an advance, one bigger than the Imperial forces had experienced thus far. When Regan turned the magnoculars on the once green plains that lay beyond the vast brown gash that had been gauged from the earth. What he saw made him realize that when the enemy's next advance came, it would be for the final time.

## **CHAPTER 07**

Telomian: "Artillery pieces?"

Regan: "Yes, sir, about two dozen. Some of them look primitive - catapults, ballistae, that sort of thing. But a lot of it was modern stuff".

Telomian: "And they were still in the process of moving them into position?"

Regan: "The big guns? Yes!"

The command bunker of Forward 19 normally a hive of activity grew quiet and the eyes of every adjutant and guardsman in the cramped earthen shelter were on the conversation going on between the colonel and the three bejacked men who had just hold themselves back across no man's land. So far the war had been one of attrition, but the introduction of artillery on the side of the Arch enemy rendered the Imperial forces impotent. No longer would the Chaos forces need to rely on manpower alone and no matter how many guardsmen mend the thousands of kilometers of trench, there wasn't much they could do against artillery shells flying over head and reducing Amadis to scrap.

Telomian: "And how long do you estimate before those guns will be operational, trooper?"

Regan: "A couple of hours tops".

(Astonished voices speaking)

Tarrick: "Of course, the low-tech stuff is already up and running. If they wanted..."

Telomian: "A thief ganger is an expert tactician now, trooper. I am well aware of the capabilities of their archaic weaponry. And quite frankly I am more concerned about those siege engines

that are about to start pounding the city. Linkmel, get me a line to Amadis command".

Linkmel removed the vox unit from his back and setting it upon a table strewn with battle maps and order sheets began manipulating the dials in an attempt to get a clear signal.

Murtock: "He's got that look in his eye again. What do you think he is going to do?"

Regan: "What can he do? The city is surrounded by the enemy so an evacuation or retreat is out of the question. Amadis command won't have time to press-gang any more bodies to reinforce and besides what could we do if they did? A bigger audience for the pyre69 techniques display?"

Murtock: "You've been spending too much time with Tarrick. You just sound as callous70 as he does".

Their tattooed comrade bristled at this and narrowed his eyes at the chubby71 guardsman. Murtock's usual shock of open hair was camouflaged under a lair of rapidly drying mud and like the other two men he was covered in wounds picked up on their rapid dash back across the kilometers of mire. Patches of crimson blood were all that broke the monotony of brown their uniforms have become.

Linkmel: "I have a line, sir. It's a weak one though. I'm not sure how long I will be able to maintain it".

The colonel grabbed the handset from the vox trooper and through static cracks and pops he was able to deliver his warning. No response came and after several tense moments of Linkmel twiddling dials a faint reply carried across the air waves.

Amadis Command (over vox indistinctly): "Maintain your positions... enforcements... are... on way... all line... repeat... the line..."

Telomian: "Please repeat, Amadis command. What kind of reinforcements? How long before they get here?"

Amadis Command (over vox indistinctly): "Astartes..."

The garbled72 signal cut off abruptly and this time Linkmel couldn't reinstate it. After several tense minutes he abandoned trying to raise Amadis command and shook his head in the colonel's direction. The lithe73 officer simply ran a hand through

his beard and stared off into the distance at nothing in particular, deep in contemplation. Then his reverie suddenly broken as if struck between the eyes by an invisible pallet, he addressed the anticipative soldiers in the bunker.

Telomian: "It seems obvious to me, men, that there is only one course of action open to us now. We are going over the top".

## **CHAPTER 08**

(Rain pouring, thunder)

Murtock: "I don't like this, Tar, it's been hours. Surely we should have had some kind of signal by now".

Tarrick: "They haven't stepped out to the commercial district to pick up pastries and a hot cantina recaf. They are storming an enemy position for Throne sake. I'm pretty sure we'll know if they've taken it. But I'm even more certain that if they haven't, the enemy will let us know soon enough".

Several dozen men stood on the wall of the trench gazing out across no man's land, desperately hoping to see a flare or signal fire informing them of victory. As yet the only lights in the sky had been the occasional flash of lightning. An unnatural storm had swept in shortly after colonel Telomian had led the bulk of the irregulars in the direction of the enemy trenches. The sky glowed purple and green in short percussive bursts before the blanket of darkness descended again and a peal of thunder rang out. Shivering under their standard issue ponchos the skeleton force of wounded soldiers took little comfort that the penetrating downpour had finally washed away the mist that had clung to no man's land since the Chaos invasion began.

Tarrick: "Do you see anything?"

Tarrick had to yell to be heard over the din<sup>74</sup> of rain and thunder. Regan standing in the elevated redoubt ten meters further along from the ganger was peering out across the mired<sup>75</sup> expanse through his magnoculars.

Regan: "Nothing yet".

The sky flashed again with an aberrant purple light and for the briefest instant Regan thought he could see something. He pointed the magnoculars skyward desperately trying to track the shape in the pitch-black night. As if sensing his frustration the

sky lit up again for the scantiest<sup>76</sup> time and Regan had the horrifying revelation, as to what was heading towards the Imperial trenches.

Regan: "Down, down, incoming!"

(Something falling from the sky)

Regan managed to throw himself to the floor of the trench just in time as did most of the other irregulars. One man wasn't so lucky and unable to move at any great speed due to an injured leg took the full force of colonel Telomian's lifeless corpse fired by catapult from the enemy's position. Body parts and viscera<sup>77</sup> cascaded down on the trench and ponchos already wet with rain water became sleek with blood. More corpses followed the colonel's. Those still able to press themselves against the front wall as body after body of both Imperial guardsmen and enemy troops landed in the trench.

Tarrick: "Is this signal clear enough for you?"

Tarrick sneered at Murtock, who was clinging to the wall of the trench like it was his wet nurse.

With every impact, human shrapnel skittled<sup>78</sup> along the dugout until the floor resembled that of an abattoir<sup>79</sup>, such was the volume of blood and body parts. Regan let out a scream as a section of tibia<sup>80</sup> speared him in the back of the calf<sup>81</sup> and he turned to the man next to him for aid. Puzzled when he didn't receive the response he spun the man around only to realize that the other part of the tibia had embedded itself in the unfortunate irregular's chest, killing in instant. For what seemed like an eternity the unholy deluge<sup>82</sup> of corpses rained down on the last few surviving irregulars, huddled together in their trench. Some of the men were weeping and wailing, this latest horror too much to bear on top of the many that already endured. And just when it seemed there would be no end to it, the barrage slowed before coming to a halt altogether, as the Chaos forces ran out of their grizzly ammo.

Many still shaking and crying the guardsmen extracted themselves from the shelter of the trench walls and looked around dumbfounded.

(Man crying in tears)

Whichever way they looked, men they once called friends and comrades lay in ruin, one final act of desecration inflicted upon them by an enemy that was both relentless and ruthless in equal measure. One of the survivors began babbling incoherently and attempted to scramble up the back wall of the trench in the vain hope of fleeing back towards Amadis. Battling through the pain in his leg Regan grabbed the back of the man's poncho and pulled him from the side of the trench, unceremoniously depositing him in the channel peep below, where he curled up into a ball and sobbed<sup>83</sup> gently.

Tarrick: "What the hell did you do that for? He's got the right idea. There's nothing we can do here, except become sport for the kind of monster that can do this".

Tarrick held both arms out and gestured all around him.

Regan: "We all swore solemn oaths when we took the Emperor's coin that we would defend the Imperium even in death. If those reinforcements are on the way, then we owe it to them, answer the people cowering<sup>84</sup> in that city behind us to fulfill that oath".

Tarrick: "You are as mad as Telomian. There aren't any reinforcements coming, just like there wasn't any food, water or ammo. You can stay here and end up as a plaything for the enemy, but I am getting out".

The ganger made to pick up his lasrifle when as suddenly as it began the torrential<sup>85</sup> rain stopped falling.

Regan: "That didn't sound like thunder to me".

Silence, then the pause gave birth.

(Immense explosion)

The handful of men in the trench were thrown to the ground by the impact of the first artillery blast and struggled to regain their footing as their position was bombarded by further shelling.

Regan grabbed the hood of Tarrick's poncho and lifted him back onto his feet.

Regan: "Still want to try making it back to Amadis?"

Tarrick: "I will take my chances here, thanks".

Regan: "Good. You can heavily<sup>86</sup> take some of these bastards down and..."

Tarrick turned to see where Regan was pointing. He soon wished he hadn't, when he saw the horde of cultists and mutants that were using the cover of the artillery barrage to make their way across no man's land.

(Explosions, horde crying)

## **CHAPTER 09**

(Laser shots)

Regan: "Keep firing! Those of you too wounded to fight, act as loaders for those who aren't. Don't let the enemy breach the trenches".

With no officers to lead them the irregulars had turned to Regan for leadership and in spite of his youth he had rallied the men and formed some semblance<sup>87</sup> of an organized defense. He'd spread the lines thinner than Telomian had on previous attacks and because there were lasrifles to spare each shooter had two rifles – one to fire while the other was being reloaded by an injured comrade. Though not ideal, the constant stream of lasfire was keeping the predominantly close combat armed enemy at bay.

Regan: "What's the ammo situation like, Mur?"

The podgy<sup>88</sup> guardsman had taken a shrapnel wound to the shoulder during the artillery barrage and had been acting as Regan's loader ever since. He held up a single power-pack and shook his head.

Murtock: "Last one".

Regan depressed the firing start on his rifle and drew a blank. He tossed it back to Murtock and took the proffered replacement.

Regan: "Keep that one for yourself".

Murtock looked puzzled.

Murtock: "Why?"

Regan: "Because even without a power-pack Imperial Guard lasrifles make pretty handy clubs and I have a feeling we'll be needing those soon. If you do have to fire it, make sure you keep it off dews<sup>89</sup> back for one final shot".

Murtock was just about to repeat his previous question, when understanding crept upon him.

Murtock: "Oh!"

Along the length of the trench the irregulars' weapons ran dry and as the enemy breached the Imperial lines, the battle became up-close in person. Fastening on his bayonet attachment Regan stabbed out the first two cultists to make it to his position. The first took the full length of the steel blade in his thigh while the second attacker found himself impaled upon it and hurled backwards. Murtock put a lasround through the head of the first cultist before making to do the same with the second only to stop himself from wasting the shot, when he realized that Regan had finished the job faster than a round. He knelt down to peel for the knife sheathed in the Chaos worshipper's belt. Only after moving aside what he thought to be a cloak, did he realize the cultist was clad in a second skin – one stitched together from the flayed corpses of his enemies.

Murtock: "Holy Throne!"

Regan: "Man up, Mur! I need you with me for this. Come on, let's make sure that they don't do that to the people of Amadis". The hand-to-hand fighting was intense. Although the Chaos forces possessed strength in numbers, the close confines of the Imperial trench made it difficult to press that advantage. Just as the months that trench warfare had been about softening up and reducing the numbers of the Imperial Guard, the endgame followed a similar pattern. For every cultist or mutant that fell, another appeared to take his place, while the irregulars' numbers slowly dwindled.

Murtock and Regan fought back to back swinging with bayonet and rifle butt trying to keep a clear zone around them. The stench of the enemy was almost as dangerous as their weapons, and there were times when both men found themselves fighting one handed, the other used to cover their mouths and noses to prevent being overcome.

(Laser shots)

Two maggot-infested cultists they'd been battling against collapsed backwards, the backs of their skulls disintegrating from a pair of shots to the head.

Tarrick: "Looked like you needed a hand".

Nearest vile ganger was virtually unrecognizable from the Tarrick that had last seen only minutes earlier. A vicious wound had opened up his cheek and the flesh hung loose exposing his teeth and part of his upper jaw. His face was streaked with thick blood from a pumping head wound and the remains of an enemy blade jutted from his right thigh.

Regan: "Ready to make good on that oath that we swore?"

Tarrick (mumbling): "We all get to go sometime, might as well go out fighting".

The three men formed a circle as a ceaseless tide of enemy troops filled the trench. With a combination of lasfire, blade and improvised club they made their last stand. Cultist after cultist fell until the exhausting blood loss taking its toll, Tarrick lost consciousness.

(Body falling)

Regan and Murtock put themselves between the enemy and the body of their friend and fought like the Emperor himself was at their back to prevent them from being further mutilated.

Murtock fell next. A hulking mutant launched itself over the leap of the trench knocking over the two guardsmen and half a dozen of his co-fighters. Regan quickly scrambled back to his feet and shot the mutant clean through the side of the head, but the bruit<sup>91</sup> fell forwards onto the insensible Murtock, trapping him beneath its bulk.

Distracted several pairs of hands tried to pull Regan to the ground, his damaged leg finally gave way and he splashed back into the mud and viscera carpet of the trench floor. He lay there stunned for a second before he felt cold blades sliding under his flesh, as the cultists started to flense<sup>92</sup> his skin as part of their gruesome<sup>93</sup> ritual. He threw back his head to scream, but no sound came. As awareness began to drain from him, he swore he saw the vapor trail of a flier in the night sky and heard the sound of a weapon being discharged nearby. He put it down to the pain and the loss of blood playing tricks on him. He opened his mouth to scream again but the noise he heard sounded like more weapons fire. Where had the cultists gone? They had just been there, stealing his flesh to make themselves a new skin. He closed his eyes, but knowing that

he'd never wake up if he fell unconscious fought them open again.

That's when he saw the angel. There silhouetted against the brightest of Procel V six moons was the most beautiful thing Regan Antigone had ever seen - an angel in the Emperor's own image with wings of metal and clad in green power armor. It wore no helm save the halo of moonlight and the tools of its vengeance lay sheathed about its waist. It gently lifted the guardsman from the filth of the trench floor and cradled him in its arms.

Tigrane: "I am sergeant Tigrane of the Dark Angels and I have your salvation".

(Engines working)

Regan couldn't be sure, if the angel had spoken to him or was communicating directly into his mind, but the last thing he remembered before finally letting sleep take him was ascending to the heavens on the angel's metal wings.

## **CHAPTER 10**

(Music, chatter)

Regan: "And the rest of the story you know as well as I".

The previously somber and ceremonious atmosphere had relaxed over the time it had taken Regan to recount<sup>94</sup> his story. Old majors and colonels sat around swapping war stories over glasses of expensive liquor and some of the younger backroom staff had pushed the tables away from the middle of the state room to create an impromptu<sup>95</sup> dance floor.

Tigrane was pensive<sup>96</sup>, his massive armored hands placed together steeple-like in front of his mouth, eyes narrowed. He was just about to speak when an elderly colonel with the bushy handlebar moustache blundered over to their table, obviously drunk.

Drunken colonel (mumbling): "Ha! I beg your pardon, my lord, but you've been hogging our guest of honor all night. There are some officers from Procel VII desperate to meet the liberator of Amadis".

The old man was either too drunk, too fool of himself, or a potentially damaging combination of both to care how he was

addressing one of the Emperor's finest. Tigrane's expression did not falter, but where his elbows met the table, wood began to splinter and crack, as if the Space Marine was tensing in readiness to strike. Regan was frozen to the spot. The septuagenarian<sup>97</sup> colonel just stood there swaying precariously, entirely oblivious to the gravity of the moment. Tigrane relaxed and an obviously forced smile crossed his lips. Tigrane: "How indelicate of me. Please go and talk to those fine young military minds and see if you can't impart but a little of your wisdom upon them".

His tone was different to earlier, as if there was more that he'd wanted to say and hear. Regan turned to accompany the colonel when the Company Master spoke again.

Tigrane: "Besides colonel Antigone and I can talk more later". The next few hours were spent recounting his tale to rising stars of the Procel system's military machine, but with each telling details changed as panicked by the Dark Angel's demeanor Regan struggled to keep track of the lies. Nervously he kept glancing around the room to monitor Tigrane's movements, but the massive armored figure just sat impassively at the front of the room, taking neither food, nor drink. Having just fended off a challenge to some of the details of his account from the young major barely old enough to shave let alone lead men to their deaths, Regan spotted that Tigrane was no longer seated at the head of the hall. A quick scan of the room told him that the Space Marine must have taken his leave of the celebrations and failing a minor ailment Regan decided to do likewise.

He was halfway across the hall when as if from nowhere the enormous figure of the Dark Angel emerged to block his path.

Regan: "But I thought... how?"

Tigrane: "I was trained by sergeant Naaman himself in the art of camouflage. You think that because of our size we can't hide ourselves in a room full of people? Now, do you think I am stupid, colonel Antigone?"

Regan: "I... Of course not, lord... Why do you..."

Tigrane: "And why do you insist on lying to me?"

Regan: "Please, lord, I... I don't know".

Tigrane: "There are aspects to your story that have bothered me ever since I first heard it. You were all raw recruits, boy-soldiers practically, with nobody to lead you. Why didn't you flee back to the city or head for the bunkers as soon as the artillery barrage started? How did you know the correct way to defend the trench? None of you were officers or had any schooling in tactics".

Regan: "Please, I swore an oath".

Tigrane: "And how, colonel Antigone, how in the name of the Lion did most of the enemy dead have wounds from bolt and plasma weapons, when all your regiment was equipped with lasguns and knives?"

Regan slum98 to his knees, a house built out of a quarter century of lies crashing down around him.

Tigrane: "On your feet".

(Regan moaning and groaning)

With the aid of his cane Regan pulled himself slowly upright again. He looked up at the angel, holding back the tears that were welling at the corners of his eyes.

Tigrane: "The truth of it, now".

Regan: "Very well".

## **CHAPTER 11**

(Bombs exploding)

The handful of irregulars in the trench were thrown to the ground by the impact of the blast and struggled to regain their footing as their position was bombarded by further shelling.

Regan grabbed the hood of Tarrick's poncho and lifted him back onto his feet.

Regan: "Still want to try making it back to Amadis?"

Tarrick: "To the right".

Regan: "I'm coming with you then".

Irregulars scaled99 the walls to escape barrage and spare their lives. Shouting and screaming panic spread through their ranks like an airborne virus. Some clawed at each other pulling comrades down from the mud sleeked sides of the trench in an attempt to be the first to escape the artillery exploding around them.

Then came the miracle. The sky glowed a brilliant orange for an instant, forcing Regan to shield his eyes. When he looked up again the lone figure of a hooded Space Marine stood on the edge of the trench. When he spoke, the fleeing guardsman froze, mesmerized by the imposing newcomer's voice.

Space Marine: "You swore an oath to your Emperor, that you would give your lives to defend this city. Now it's the time that you make good on that oath or I will be the instrument of his vengeance upon you".

More unnatural lightning flashed in the sky and Regan could see that the silhouetted figure carried a pistol in each hand. His robes fluttered freely in the breeze and beneath the notably dry fabric a scabbard hung from his belt.

Space Marine: "None of you shall flee this field of battle. Pick up your arms and make ready for the enemy assaults".

Unquestioningly each and every irregular removed himself from the wall and retrieved his lasrifle. The Space Marine jumped down from the edge of the trench and began organizing the guardsmen.

Space Marine: "Spread the line thin, each of you fit enough to fight take two lasrifles. Those of you who are wounded act as loaders for the others. Make every shot count".

He moved along the trench, indicating to the guardsmen where to position themselves. When he reached Regan he pointed to a redoubt in the trench wall and after looking Murtock up and down took his weapon from him and handed it to Regan.

Space Marine: "Remember, every shot counts".

His initial own fear of being in the presence of the Space Marine waning, Regan dared to speak.

Regan: "My lord, where's the rest of your chapter?"

The hooded figure paused as if unsure of the question or possibly the answer.

Space Marine: "There is only me. We cannot rely upon my legion arriving in time to save this city. It is up to you and these men here to defend it. Are you fit for the task?"

It wasn't just the words, but his voice too that rallied Regan's spirits. At that moment he would have followed the mysterious

Space Marine into the Eye of Terror itself, if he'd ordered him to.

Regan: "I am, lord".

Space Marine: "Then don't stop fighting until the angel of death comes to claim you".

## **CHAPTER 12**

(Laser shots, bolter rounds)

Space Marine: "Keep fighting. Those of you too wounded to fight act as loaders for those who aren't. Don't let the enemy breach the trenches".

The volley of fire from the Imperial trench was unrelenting and wave upon wave of cultists and mutants fell against the onslaught. The strategy the hooded Space Marine had employed to defend the trench was working to perfection with no enemy combatants making it within ten meters of the irregulars' position.

Regan passed his empty lasrifle back to Murtock and gratefully accepted the replacement offered to him. As he did so, he caught sight of the daunting 103 green-armored figure in action. Moving far faster than an unaugmented human, the Space Marine easily loosed off six or seven shots to the guardsman's one, each - a kill shot. His bolt-pistol ran empty and in the time it took Regan to inhale, and then exhale the old clip would be ejected and the new one fit in, ready to spit death at the enemy. Regan recommenced firing and felt a little foolish for asking where the stranger's battle brothers were. Who needed an entire chapter, when a lone Space Marine was so effective? Space Marine: "We are running out of power-packs. Ready yourself for close combats".

Within seconds of each other the irregulars' weapons ceased fire. Without the wall of lasfire the exclusion zone in front of the trench filled with thousands of Chaos foot soldiers intent on slaughter. As they launched themselves over the top, they were met by an array of bayonets. The trench effectively turned into a giant pit-trap as they became impaled upon them. More of them came but met with the same response, those few who did managed to avoid the blades finding their lives ended by a butt

of a rifle used like a club or a shot from the Space Marine's plasma pistol. Despite having the sword slung at his side the hooded figure never seemed tempted to draw it even when it would have been a more efficient method of ending a cultist's life.

The frenzied melee went on. Whenever a cultist fell, another took its place. Whenever an irregular fell, a gap opened in the Imperial defenses forcing those trying to prevent the Chaos tide from washing over Amadis even further onto the back foot.

A gangrenous mutant bounded down along the trench, unnatural limbs flailing<sup>104</sup> this way and that, knocking both friend and foe aside. The vile beast made it as far as the section of the trench the Space Marine was defending before a gauntleted fist made violent contact with the side of its head, rendering it to pulp. The headless corpse swayed there momentarily, before crashing to the ground. In the time it had taken mutant to realize it was dead the robed stranger had already turned away and killed three more of its brethren.

It was all in vain now. Unable to stand the flow of enemy troops the irregulars soon found themselves succumbing under sheer weight of numbers. The more bodies that crammed into the trench, the harder it became to swing weapons in the enclosed space. The air was filled with the screams of dying guardsmen as the cultists hold them to the floor and flayed<sup>105</sup> them alive. Regan, Murtock and Tarrick found themselves fighting back to back, managing somehow to prevent the cultists and mutants from overwhelming them. Nearby the green-armored hulk was fighting his way through the mass of diseased and warp-altered bodies as if attempting to reach the three stricken guardsmen. Then without warning he simply stopped and raised his head to the sky, as if he had caught a scent of the wind. He turned to face the last three surviving irregulars, casually crushing the skull of a cultist in one of his immense fists.

Space Marine: "My battle here is over. Now, make your oath to me that you will not speak of what happened here as long as you live".

Regan: "Please, we are dying here. Help us!"

Tarrick slumped to the floor of the trench, the loss of blood from his multiple wounds finally becoming too much for him to bear.

Space Marine: "Your oath, now or I will kill you where you stand and save the enemy the trouble".

Murtock fell. The bloated form of a mutant knocked over the top of the trench and cast him to the ground.

(Body falling)

Regan was able to lose off a shot to kill the beast, but the unconscious form of his friend remained trapped underneath it.

Regan: "Please!"

Space Marine: "Your oath or so help me! If you survive this I will hunt you down and perform such atrocities upon you that you will beg me to have let you die here".

He threw out an elbow and nearly decapitated a cultist who had the temerity<sup>106</sup> to try and sneak up behind him.

Regan: "You have my oath! I shall not order a word of this to another soul. Now please, help us!"

Satisfied the robed Space Marine ran off in the opposite direction, both pistols glowing hot as he cut a path through the mass of enemy soldiers converging on the abandoned guardsman".

## **CHAPTER 13**

Tigrane: "Cypher!"

The word hung there for a beat.

Tigrane: "Curse me for a fool, he was there within our grasp and got away again, because you made an oath to him".

The entire state room had fallen silent. All eyes were on the giant in the centre of the room and the small crippled<sup>107</sup> figure before him.

Regan: "My lord. I owed him my life".

Tigrane: "You owed him nothing. Nothing! You hear me?"

His right hand reached down to the holster<sup>108</sup> at his belt and impossibly quickly he drew his bolt-pistol and held it to Regan Antigone's forehead.

Regan: "No, please, no. I am already dying, you know that. I've already suffered so much because of this damn war. I lost both my boys, my beautiful boys. In the time I have remaining I just

want to be left in peace. I'm going to visit the grave sites.

Please, grant me that as one old soldier to another".

Tigrane towered over him unflinching<sup>109</sup>, finger poised on the trigger. Without taking his eyes from Regan he addressed the room.

Tigrane: "This man is no hero of the Imperium. This man is a traitor who consorted<sup>110</sup> with the enemy during the liberation of Amadis and lied about his role during the defense. His name is to be struck from the records and all memorials and dedications to his false heroism are to be destroyed by order of the Dark Angels chapter of the Adeptus Astartes".

The onlookers shook their heads and a murmur<sup>111</sup> spread around the room.

Tigrane: "Kneel!"

Regan: "I..."

Tigrane (in fury): "Kneel!"

Regan dropped his cane and let gravity do the work of bringing him to his knees. He looked up at the angel of death.

Regan: "You don't have to do this. Only you and I know".

Tigrane remained inexpressive.

Regan: "All this over a secret".

The Space Marine's emotionless features were replaced by a sneer<sup>112</sup>. He bent his knees slightly so that he could reach down with the bolt-pistol and place it against the smaller man's tempo.

Tigrane: "Regan Antigone, you have been found wanting in the eyes of the Emperor and of his loyal servants. You have willingly fraternized with and granted aid and shelter to enemies of the Imperium. You have dishonored the memory of those who sacrificed themselves so heroically and brought shame upon your regiment. Regan Antigone, you have been found wanting and for that your life is forfeit<sup>113</sup>".

In his last few seconds of life Regan Antigone closed his eyes and prayed that when the angel came to take him to the heavens this time his sons and the friends he had lost in the trenches would be there to welcome him.

(Bolter shot)