



C Z DUNN

MALEDICTION

A DARK ANGELS STORY

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MALEDICTION

C Z Dunn

Engines roaring, the Lightning fighter craft streaked across the sky and out of the glare cast by Procel V's harsh orange sun. The throng of people on the ground looked skywards and screamed as the jet entered a steep dive heading directly for the crowds 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 in a series of rolls.

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

When the Navy had finished their showboating, it was the turn of the Procel 14th Mechanised. Thousands of tonnes of hardware rolled down the narrow streets of the city two abreast. Children and adults alike gasped as the enormous war machines swung their turrets this way and that, mock-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's column was the regiment's pride and joy – a Baneblade – and several of the citizenry fainted in the presence of such an awesome tool of war.

After the tanks came the human liberators of Procel V and 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 head and saluted in the direction of the balcony but they were not saluting the planetary governor, the visiting Administratum dignitaries or even the Imperial Guard top brass. These salutes were reserved for Regan Antigone, sole survivor of the 1st Procel Irregulars, Saviour of Amadis and Hero of the Imperium.

For over an hour, thousands of Imperial Guardsmen passed below the balcony of the governor's manse and, 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 honour of their bravery in the battle to hold the city – closed out the parade by standing below his vantage point and singing Imperial hymns in his honour as he took their salute.

But the tear was not at the pain nor an outpouring of emotion at this momentous occasion.

It was a tear of shame at the secret he'd kept for more than half his life.

After the parade had finished, Regan, the governor and officials from all branches of the Imperial bureaucracy retired to the stateroom for the celebratory feast. As he took his seat at the head of the hall alongside various commissars, colonels 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 to have sent representatives to such an insignificant gathering – but he came to the realisation that little had changed since his days as a serving Imperial Guardsman: the higher echelons would always stay as far away from the action as possible while everybody else did the real work of fighting wars.

The feast commenced with a series of speeches. A succession of worthies took to the podium to aggrandise the role that their branch of the Imperium had played in the Battle of Amadis and to laud the heroism of Regan Antigone. A string of people he'd never met stood before him

claiming to have known him all his life and embellishing their stories with ‘facts’ about Regan Antigone. A Departamento Munitorum official went on at length about how the Regan Antigone he knew had clawed his way up from 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 spacefaring craft that had crashed onto the surface of Procel V millennia ago and, 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 planet. 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 were the governor and the assorted bureaucrats who ensured the smooth running of not only the city but the entire planet of 80 billion souls. The governor’s manse sat at the very top of the ship and the ‘streets’ down below were 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 until at the very bottom of the ship were 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 midships. Prior to joining the Irregulars he had been a bit of a scrapper 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 Departamento Munitorum man was followed by an elderly commissar with a chest covered in medals. He droned on 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 eulogising Regan in a speech where he constantly referred to him as ‘Ranger’, he began to speak about the two sons that Regan had fathered. The commissar claimed that his eldest son, Murtock, was almost as brave as his father and had successfully defended a vital ammo dump during the campaign to

liberate moons on the outer edge of the Procel system. His youngest son, Tarrick, meanwhile had been one of the heroic defenders of Hepstan'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, at 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 defence and some months later was the one who returned Murtock's personal effects to Regan. As the now paraplegic corporal wheeled himself out of the hab, Regan realised that they hadn't even bothered to wash the shit out of the seat of the Guard-issue combat fatigues that had been amongst his son's 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 starport. Leading from the front, he was the first out of the Chimera... and the first of his squad to die. A las-round took him clean through the side of the skull, a death that would probably have been avoided if only he'd 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 medals on behalf of both his brave sons and was met by rapturous applause from the audience.

As Regan stood there, struggling to hold both medals and his cane, a sudden melancholy washed over him just as it did when he'd 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.

Awkwardly, 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 towards the vox-assembly, he placed the medals on top of the podium and gathered his thoughts. After a brief pause he looked out onto the now hushed crowd and prepared to speak.

‘I...’

A commotion 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.

Striding through the centre of the stateroom was a giant, power-armoured figure. Nearly three metres 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 and just visible beneath the folds of his garb was the scabbard of a great sword. Though his face and much of his armour were obscured by the fine, ancient cloth, his immense green shoulder pads were not. The right pad was adorned with a bas-relief of a long dagger wreathed by feathers while the other was emblazoned with a stylised ebony set of wings with a dagger set through them and marked him out as a member of one of the Emperor’s finest and most noble Space Marine Chapters: the Dark Angels.

Awestruck, the bowing crowd parted to give the demi-god free passage amongst them. Regan allowed himself to look up slightly and realised 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.

‘Regan Antigone, sole survivor of the Procel 1st Irregulars, Saviour of Amadis and Hero of the Imperium.’

Regan tilted his head upwards slightly, not daring to make eye contact with the goliath, but not wanting to show disrespect either.

‘Y... yes,’ he said, barely able to form the words.

The Dark Angel slid back his hood to reveal his features. A perfectly smooth scalp punctuated only by the occasional pock mark or scar seemed to shine in the artificial light of the stateroom and his stern, craggy face betrayed no emotion or feeling.

‘Stand,’ the Space Marine commanded.

‘I... I... What?’ Regan replied.

‘Do not make me say it again. Stand.’

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

‘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, Saviour of Amadis and Hero of the Imperium, *you* do not bow before me.’

The green-armoured Space Marine put his hand to the hilt of his sword and drew it in a single fluid motion, pointing it at a forty-five degree angle towards the roof of the stateroom. 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.

A gasp went up from the crowd, 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.

‘It is *I* who bow before you.’

‘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 stateroom were strong enough to accommodate the bulk of a Space Marine, one enterprising young clerk had commandeered an ammo crate from the 14th Procel Mechanised and, after draping it with fine cloths, had allowed Company Master Tigrane to take his place beside Regan at the head of the feast.

‘Thank you. Although I’ve attended many functions like this down the years I never did grow accustomed to public speaking.’ The initial shock of the Space Marine’s arrival had subsided and Regan, although not entirely at ease, had composed himself enough to form complete sentences. ‘And it’s no longer “Trooper” Antigone; it’s Colonel Antigone now. An honorific title of course in recognition of my role in the defence but it seems I’m not the only one to have received a promotion since the last time we met, lord.’

‘Indeed. I haven’t been Sergeant Tigrane for many years now, since a few months after the Procel campaign in fact. A great honour but one tinged with much sadness that it took the death of Master Dumah for me to ascend to the rank.’

‘I’m sorry, lord. I didn’t mean—’

‘I am a soldier, Colonel Antigone,’ the Dark Angel interrupted. ‘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 cup and instantly gulped down half of it. While he had been in the presence of Space Marines before, he had never felt comfortable around them. While mere men, if they were blessed with good health and avoided a stint in the Imperial Guard, could live for the better part of a century, Space Marines could live for far longer. It was rumoured 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 flick of his wrist or a spray of saliva, it was this reminder of his own mortality that was the root of his unease. More now than ever, in light of his circumstances.

‘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?’

‘You flatter me, lord. My life has not been that interesting at all in comparison to yours, I’m sure.’

‘Granted, but please, I insist.’

‘Very well. After that last time you came to visit me in the medicae, 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 then quickly dropped it to the floor again when he realised he was brandishing it like a sword. The Dark Angel smiled and gestured for Regan to continue.

‘They invalided me out of the Guard and, when it became clear that we’d 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 honour 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's a small island in Procel's southern hemisphere where half of the boys born since the liberation have been named Regan.'

Tigrane was listening intently but Regan noticed that his brow was furrowed.

'Something wrong, lord? Is my story not interesting enough?'

'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.'

'My apologies, 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 killing people...'

Regan's voice trailed off and the Dark Angel stared at him as if he could see right through him, peer into his very soul.

'What aren't you telling me?'

For the first time, Regan looked the Angel of Death in the eyes.

'It's me. For some reason I didn't contract as virulent a strain of the blight as the others. It's been killing me, but it's been killing me slowly. Even so, the chirurgeons tell me that I only have weeks to live, months if I'm lucky. I'm 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 façade slipped briefly and something approaching emotion registered on his face.

'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.

'I should honour you in some way.'

'Please, lord. That is unnecessary. I have already been honoured more than one man deserves in a hundred lifetimes.'

'Then indulge 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 saviour this time.

‘As you wish, lord.’

‘Another wave incoming! Man the walls and don’t shoot until you’re sure you have a definite kill. Conserve your ammo – there’s plenty more of these bastards out there.’

The colonel’s command tore through the unnatural silence and, unslinging the lasrifle from his shoulder, Regan joined the other members of his unit perched atop the muddy trench that had been home for the past two months. He stared out into the soupy miasma 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 – 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 positions known, the men of the 1st Procel Irregulars easily picked off the front rank 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 Imperial fire.

‘Tarrick. My power pack’s spent. Pass me another,’ Regan yelled over the din of battle.

The former ganger loosed another shot out over the lip of the 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 inkwork around his lips distorting to make it appear as if he had a rictus grin.

‘Don’t let Telomian hear you. He thinks we should be able to repel these attacks with nothing more than our bare hands and a 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 stud.

Nothing happened.

Sharing an anxious look with Tarrick, he released the new power pack and frantically started clearing out the mud that had conglomerated in the weapon's clip housing. The enemy soldier was only metres away and, realising that Regan would not have his weapon functioning in time, Tarrick concentrated his fire on the advancing cultist. Preternaturally, 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. Tarrick swung around and aimed at the interloper but the Chaos-mutated freak raised a distended 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 maw in a grotesque parody of a smile and released a burbling, guttural roar.

The thing's lips were ringed with rotting fangs and maggots crawled over its tongue. Its eyes were like those of a fly and the scrappy remains of its uniform did little to cover the bulbous layers of oozing fat that made up its torso. Raising both its 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.

It never came. Instead he heard the sound of a single las shot followed by the wet thud of a body hitting the muddy trench floor.

He opened his eyes to see the beaming face of Murtock, another Irregular recruited from the midships levels of Amadis, looking down at him, chubby hand held out to help lift him from the muddy trench floor. Regan accepted it gratefully and rose to his feet. Tarrick stood unaided and using the butt of his rifle, rolled over the bloated cadaver to check that it was really dead.

'Bastard's uglier than me.'

'Thanks, Mur. I owe you one,' Regan said, futilely brushing the mud from his uniform.

'Don't thank me. Just promise me that when this is over and we're all back in Amadis you'll name your firstborn after me,' the teenage Guardsman said as he picked up Regan's lasrifle and handed it back to him.

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

The assault though ferocious, was not as unrelenting as many of the previous attacks and within an hour the waves of enemy combatants spewing 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 along the 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 realised it was merely one of their own snipers picking off wounded cultists and mutants who had fallen before they'd reached the trench.

'What took you so long? I thought you were going to fetch us some water?' Regan said. 'I can't shift the taste of mud from my mouth and Tarrick reckons his is so dry the Tallarn 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 lip of the trench, he removed his helmet to reveal his shock of curly, auburn hair.

'There's none left.'

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

'Orders are not to drink it,' said Murtock. '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.'

‘So what are we supposed to do in the meantime?’ Regan queried. ‘We’ll all be dead of 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 his own bottle from his belt and imitated his comrades. Nothing.

‘What about him?’ Tarrick pointed a tattooed finger at the corpse they’d just unceremoniously dumped in the sludge. Murtock and Regan shared an anxious look.

‘C’mon, Tar. You know that orders are that corpses are to be recovered with their kit so it can be redistributed. Telomian will have you up on a charge if he finds out,’ Murtock cautioned.

Ignoring his friend’s protest, he leant down to the corpse and, after removing a half-full water bottle from the dead man’s belt, began rifling through his pockets.

‘What’s this then?’ Tarrick’s 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.

‘It’s not amasec, my friends, but it looks like...’ He plunged his hand inside the dead man’s tunic again and it re-emerged holding a set of dog tags. ‘Trooper Meslen here was in possession of prohibited materials, to wit – and I quote the Guardsman’s primer here – “liquids of an intoxicating or stupefying nature likely to impair or inhibit a Guardsman’s ability to fight if imbibed”.’

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

‘Way I see it, I’m doing old Meslen here a favour. Wouldn’t want that kind of stain on his service record. I mean, what would his grieving family think if they found out that he were both dead and a drunkard. I don’t think I could have that on my conscience, quite frankly.’

‘So not only are you unable to 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.’

The three Guardsmen turned in alarm. They’d 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 he'd strode the half kilometre from his command bunker the couple of centimetres of wet, brown stain that caked the bottom of his grey field coat. Despite his fresh attire, the colonel's bearded face looked as tired and battle-weary as any of the rank and file troops in the trench. His wide, bloodshot eyes lent him a crazed bearing that was beginning to make itself evident in his voice too.

'Or, alternatively, by making that first shot I drew the enemy into revealing their positions,' Tarrick said, a cocky lilt evident in his tone. 'We used to pull 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 balled at his side when the vox-unit on Linkmel's back sounded.

'Forward Nineteen? 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. 'This is Forward Nineteen. Go ahead, Amadis. Over.'

'Reinforce and resupply denied. We're on our arses up here and can't spare food or water, let alone able bodies. You're on your own, Forward Nineteen. 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 to retrieve it. Nostrils flaring, he turned his attention back to the three men. Fearing the full brunt 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 demeanour cooled and sanity embraced him again.

'I could have you all up on charges for your conduct but, in light of current circumstances, I believe that would be counter-productive. However, as you saw fit to deprive your fellow soldiers of food and water—'

'In fairness, sir, it was only water. We didn't actually find any...'

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

‘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.’

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

Another piercing stare. Another Guardsman withered.

‘Not a bad idea, Trooper Antigone. Let’s call that the back-up plan. What I’m 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, there’s a finely stocked zoological garden on the upper levels that I’m sure will 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 him to speak. When the ganger didn’t bite, Regan stepped up.

‘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 make it to Amadis and back with enough food and water to make it worthwhile, I’m not prepared to deprive the people we’re trying to defend. We might as well poison the water supply 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.

‘Thank you for being honest and forthright with me, trooper,’ the colonel said.

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

‘In that case, we’ll be going with the back-up plan.’

‘Why did you have to go and open your big mouth? If he’d sent us back to Amadis, all we had to do was go AWOL for a few hours and then come back empty handed.’

Even at a whisper, the rebreather he was wearing ensured Murtock’s voice carried across the barren, muddy expanse of no-man’s-land and 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 Telomian’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 in no-man’s-land or, as the colonel had put it: ‘Reconnoitre the enemy 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’d left the relative safety of the trench. Though they were fairly certain they were still continuing in a straight line, the 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 anybody foolhardy 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 signalled 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. ‘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’s there’s lots of the enemy and they’re all big ones too. What’s he going to do? Stroll out here himself to double-check?’

Regan pulled his own rebreather to one side to reply.

‘Too risky. The enemy have probably got patrols out here too and if we encounter one, I’d rather we were on our feet and ready to react.’

Tarrick nodded and resumed his position in their formation without any protest. Though the three men were all of the same rank and inexperienced soldiers, Regan had emerged as their de facto leader during their time in the trenches. Murtock and Tarrick had grown to trust him implicitly 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 an enemy trench, the mist began to thin out and the landscape took on a different aspect. Carefully striding over a length of razor wire, Regan signalled for them to hit the ground and, for the next few minutes, progress was painfully slow as they practically swam through the mud. With every metre 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 dug to defend it?

The silence also gave way the nearer they encroached on the enemy position and the three men grew more concerned about being spotted than being heard. Ordering them 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 into such a tight space. Regan now realised 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 down the Imperial forces until taking Amadis became a formality.

Cultists and mutants unloaded crates from armoured vehicles and lowered them down to waiting arms. Occasionally, a bigger, better armoured soldier would shout orders and several of the subordinates would scurry off and unload a freshly arrived vehicle or lug 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 gouged from the earth, what he saw there made him realise that when the enemy's next advance came, it would probably be for the final time.

‘Artillery pieces?’ Colonel Telomian asked.

‘Yes, sir. About two dozen,’ Regan replied. ‘Some of them looked primitive – catapults, ballistae, that sort of thing – but a lot of it was

modern stuff.'

'And they were still in the process of moving them into position?'

'The big guns? Yes.'

The command bunker of Forward Nineteen, 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 bedraggled men who had just hauled 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 manned the thousands of kilometres of trench, there wasn't much they could do against artillery shells flying overhead and reducing Amadis to scrap.

'And how long do you estimate before those guns will be operational, trooper?' Telomian asked, studying a tactical map on the bunker wall.

'A couple of hours, tops.'

A murmur of concern sounded from those working in the command bunker.

'Of course, the low-tech stuff is already up and running, if they wanted to—' Tarrick added.

'A thief and an expert tactician now, trooper?' the colonel said, turning away from the map. 'I am well aware of the capabilities of their archaic weaponry, but quite frankly I'm 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.

'He has that look in his eye again. What do you think he's going to do?' Murtock whispered to Regan.

'What can he do?' Regan replied. '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 good would it do if they did? A bigger audience for the pyrotechnics display?'

'You've been spending too much time around Tarrick. You sound just as callous as he does.'

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

'I have a line, sir. It's a weak one though and I'm not sure how long I'll be able to maintain it,' said Linkmel, holding up the receiver.

The colonel grabbed the handset from the vox-trooper and through static cracks and pops he was able to deliver his warning. After several tense moments of Linkmel twiddling dials a faint reply carried across the airwaves.

'...aintain your position. ...inforcement... on way. Hold... line. Repeat. ...the line.'

'Please repeat, Amadis Command. What kind of reinforcements? How long before they get here?' The colonel was practically shouting, as if raising his voice would somehow make the signal clearer.

'...artes ...nings ...hold—'

The garbled 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 lithe 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 pellet, he addressed the anticipative soldiers in the bunker.

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

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

'They haven't stepped out to the commercia district to pick up pastries and a hot canteen of recaff,' Tarrick replied. 'They're storming an enemy position, for Throne's 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 they'd seen were the occasional flashes of lightning that accompanied the unnatural storm that 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 and sick that the colonel had deigned to leave behind took little comfort that the penetrating downpour had finally washed away the ground layer of mist that had clung to no-man's-land since the Chaos invasion began.

'Do you see anything?' Tarrick had to yell to be heard over the rain and thunder. Regan, standing in an elevated redoubt ten metres further along than the ganger, was peering out across the mired expanse through his magnoculars.

'Nothing yet,' Regan answered.

The sky flashed again with an aberrant purple light and for the briefest instant Regan thought he could see something. He pointed the magnoculars skywards desperately trying to track the shape in the pitch-black night. As if sensing his frustration, the sky lit up again for the scantest time and Regan had a horrifying revelation as to what was heading towards the Imperial trenches.

'Down! Down! Incoming!' 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 that had been fired by catapult from the enemy's position. Body parts and viscera cascaded down the trench and ponchos already wet with rainwater became slick with blood.

More corpses followed the colonel's and those still able to pressed themselves against the front wall as body after body – both Imperial Guardsmen and enemy troops – landed in the trench.

‘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 along the dugout until the floor resembled that of an abattoir, such was the volume of blood and body parts. Regan let out a scream as a section of tibia speared him in the back of the calf and he turned to the man next to him for aid. Puzzled when he didn’t receive a response, he spun the man around only to realise that the other part of the tibia had embedded itself in the unfortunate Irregular’s chest, killing him instantly.

For what seemed like an eternity, the unholy deluge 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 they’d already endured over the preceding months. Then, 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 grisly ammo.

Many still shaking and crying, the Guardsmen extracted themselves from the shelter of the trench walls and looked around dumbfounded. 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 hauled him from the side of the trench, unceremoniously depositing him in the charnel pit below where he curled up into a ball and sobbed gently.

‘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.

‘We all swore solemn oaths when we took the Emperor’s coin that we would defend the Imperium even in death,’ Regan said, as much to the other surviving Irregulars as to Tarrick. ‘If those reinforcements are on the way then we owe it to them and to the people cowering in that city behind us to fulfil that oath.’

‘You’re 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’m getting out.’

The ganger made to pick up his lasrifle when as suddenly as it began, the torrential rain stopped falling and a muffled *crump* sounded in the distance.

‘That didn’t sound like thunder to me,’ Regan said.

Silence.

Then the pause gave birth.

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.

‘Still want to try and make it back to Amadis?’ Regan said through a mouthful of mud.

‘I’ll take my chances here, thanks,’ replied the former ganger.

‘Good. You can help me take some of these bastards down then.’ 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.

‘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 age, he had rallied the men and formed some semblance of an organised defence. He’d spread the lines thinner than Telomian had on previous attacks and because there were lasrifles to spare due to casualties incurred during the bombardment, 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 las-fire was keeping the predominantly close-combat armed enemy at bay.

‘What’s the ammo situation like, Mur?’ asked Regan.

The podgy 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.

‘Last one.’

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

‘Keep that one for yourself.’

Murtock looked puzzled. ‘Why?’

‘Because even without a power pack, Imperial Guard lasrifles makes 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 enough juice back for one final shot.’

Murtock was just about to repeat his previous question when understanding crept up on him. ‘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 and personal. Fastening on his bayonet attachment, Regan stabbed out at 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 hefted backwards against the back of the trench. Murtock put a las-round through the head of the first cultist before making to do the same with the second, only to stop himself when from wasting the shot when he realised that Regan had finished the job first time around. He knelt down to pilfer the knife sheathed in the Chaos worshipper’s belt and only after moving aside what he thought to be a cloak did he realise the cultist was clad in a second skin, one stitched together from the flayed corpses of his enemies.

‘Holy Throne,’ he gasped.

‘Man up, Mur. I need you with me for this. C’mon – let’s make sure that they don’t do that to the people of Amadis!’ Regan said, grabbing his friend by the collar and hauling him to his feet.

The hand-to-hand fighting was intense and, 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 of 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.

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.

'Looked like you needed a hand,' Tarrick spat through a mouth full of blood.

The erstwhile ganger was virtually unrecognisable from the Tarrick they'd 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.

'Ready to make good on that oath we swore?' Regan asked.

'We've all got to go sometime. Might as well go out fighting.' The cockiness was still evident in Tarrick's voice despite his grievous injuries.

The three men formed a circle as a ceaseless tide of enemy troops swarmed the trench. With a combination of las-fire, blade and improvised club they made their last stand. Cultist after cultist fell until, exhaustion and blood loss finally taking its toll, Tarrick lost consciousness. 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 him from being further mutilated.

Murtock fell next. A hulking mutant launched itself over the lip 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 brute fell forwards onto the insensate Murtock, trapping him beneath his bulk.

Distracted, several pairs of hands tried to pull Regan to the ground, but 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 his skin as part of their gruesome ritual. He threw back his head to scream, but no sound came.

As awareness began to drain from him he swore he saw the vapour trail of a flyer in the night sky and heard the sound of a weapon being discharged nearby, but 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 weapon fire. Where had the cultists gone? They were just there, stealing his flesh to make themselves a new skin. He closed his eyes but, knowing that he'd never wake up again if he fell unconscious, fought them open again.

That's when he saw the angel.

There, head silhouetted against the brightest of Procel V's 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 armour. 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.

'I am Sergeant Tigrane of the Dark Angels and I am your salvation.'

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.

'...and the rest of the story you know as well as I,' Regan concluded.

The previously sombre and ceremonious atmosphere had relaxed over the time it had taken Regan to recount 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 stateroom to create an impromptu dance floor.

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

'Beg pardon, milord, but you've been hogging our guest of honour all night and there's some officers from Procel VII who are desperate to meet the Liberator of Amadis.'

The old man was either too drunk or too full of himself, or a potentially damaging combination of both, to care about 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 were tensing in readiness to strike. Regan was frozen to the spot. The septuagenarian colonel just stood there swaying precariously, entirely oblivious to the gravity of the moment.

Tigrane relaxed and an obviously forced smile crossed his lips. '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.

'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 demeanour, Regan struggled to keep track of the lies. Nervously, he kept glancing around the room to monitor Tigrane's movements, but the massive armoured 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 in his account from a 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, feigning 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.

'But... I thought... How...?' Regan stammered.

'I was trained by Sergeant Namaan himself in the art of camouflage. You think that because of our size we can't hide ourselves in a room full of people?' the Company Master hissed. 'Now, do you think I'm stupid, Colonel Antigone?'

‘I... Of course not, lord. Why do you—’

‘Then why do you insist on lying to me?’

‘Please, lord. I don’t know—’

‘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?’ The Space Marine’s raised voice was attracting attention and a crowd of onlookers had formed. ‘How did you know the correct way to defend the trench? None of you were officers or had any schooling in tactics.’

‘Please... I swore an oath...’

‘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 were equipped with were lasguns and knives?’

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

‘On your feet,’ Tigrane said.

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.

‘The truth of it. Now,’ the Dark Angel boomed.

‘Very well...’

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 on to his feet.

‘Still want to try and make it back to Amadis?’ Regan said through a mouthful of mud.

‘Too right,’ replied the former ganger.

‘I’m coming with you then.’

Irregulars scaled the walls to escape the 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-

slicked sides of the trench in an attempt to be the first to escape the artillery exploding around them.

Then came the miracle.

A peal of thunder rang out and the sky glowed 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 lip of the trench.

When he spoke, the fleeing Guardsmen froze, mesmerised by the rape and honey tone of the newcomer's voice.

'You swore an oath to your Emperor that you would give your lives to defend this city. Now is 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.

'None of you shall flee this field of battle. Pick up your arms and make ready for the enemy assault.'

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 organising the Guardsmen.

'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. 'Remember. Every shot counts,' he said as he handed it to Regan.

His initial awe and fear at being in the presence of a Space Marine waning, Regan dared to speak.

'My lord, where are the rest of your Chapter?'

The hooded figure paused, as if unsure of the question or possibly the answer. 'There is only I. 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 too.

'I am, lord,' Regan replied, bowing his head slightly out of respect.

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

'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!' the Space Marine bellowed.

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 metres 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 green-armoured figure in action. Moving far faster than an unaugmented human, the Space Marine easily loosed off six or seven shots to the Guardsmen's one, each one a killshot. His bolt pistol ran empty and in the time it took Regan to inhale then exhale, the old clip had been ejected and a new one fitted, ready to spit death at the enemy. Regan recommenced firing and felt a little foolish for asking where his battle-brothers were; who needs an entire Chapter when a lone Space Marine is so effective?

'We're running out of power packs. Ready yourself for close combat!' ordered the Space Marine.

Within seconds of each other, the Irregulars' weapons ceased firing and without the wall of las-fire 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 that did manage to avoid the blades finding their lives ended by the 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 defences, forcing those trying to prevent the Chaos tide from washing over Amadis even further on to the back foot.

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

It was all in vain though.

Unable to stem 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 and the air was filled with the screams of dying Guardsmen as the cultists hauled them to the floor and flayed 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-armoured 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 on the wind. He turned to face the last three surviving Irregulars, casually crushing the skull of a cultist in one of his immense fists.

'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.'

'Please. We're dying. Help us,' Regan pleaded.

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

'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 leapt over the top of the trench and cast him to the ground. Regan was able to loose off a shot to kill the beast but the unconscious form of his friend remained trapped underneath it.

‘Please!’ Regan sobbed.

‘Your oath or so help me if you survive this I will hunt you down and perform atrocities upon you that will make you beg me to have let you die here.’

The Space Marine threw out an elbow and nearly decapitated a cultist who had the temerity to try and sneak up behind him.

‘You have my oath! I shall not utter 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 Guardsmen.

‘Cypher,’ Tigrane whispered. The word hung there for a beat. ‘Curse me for a fool. He was there within our grasp and got away again because you made an “oath” to him.’

The entire stateroom had fallen silent. All eyes were on the giant in the centre of the room and the small crippled figure before him.

‘My lord, I owed him my life—’ Regan began.

‘You owed him nothing! Nothing, you hear me?’

The Space Marine’s right hand reached down to the holster at his belt and, impossibly quickly, he drew his bolt pistol and held it to Regan Antigone’s forehead.

‘No... please, no. I’m already dying. You know that,’ Regan said, fighting back tears. ‘I’ve already suffered so much because of this damn war. I lost both my boys, my beautiful boys. In the time I have left, I just want to be left in peace and go and visit their gravesites. Please, grant me that? As one old soldier to another.’

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

‘This man is no hero of the Imperium. This man is a traitor who consorted with the enemy during the liberation of Amadis and lied about

his role during the defence. 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 spread around the room.

'Kneel,' Tigrane said, his voice entirely devoid of emotion.

'I...' stammered Regan.

'Kneel!' the Dark Angel yelled.

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

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

Tigrane remained inexpressive.

'All this over a secret?' Regan said, defeat evident in his voice.

The Space Marine's impassive features were replaced by a sneer. He bent his knee slightly so that he could reach down with the bolt pistol and place it against the much smaller man's temple.

'Regan Antigone, you have been found wanting in the eyes of the Emperor and of his loyal servants. You have willingly fraternised with, and granted aid and shelter to, enemies of the Imperium. You have dishonoured 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.'

In those last few seconds of life, Regan Antigone closed his eyes. His last wish, as the report of a single bolter round echoed around the state room, was that when the angel came to take him to the heavens this time, his sons and the friends he'd lost in the trenches would be there to welcome him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Domiciled in the East Midlands, **C Z Dunn** is the author of the Apocalypse novel *Pandorax*, the Dark Angels novella *Dark Vengeance* and the audio dramas *Trials of Azrael*, *Ascension of Balthasar* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories. Having spent many years in the publishing industry, with a strong leaning towards genre fiction, he is an expert in e-publication, audio production and zombies.

The ancient enmity between the Dark Angels and Crimson Slaughter comes to Bane's Landing as Master Balthasar stands between Kranon the Relentless and the Hellfire Stone.



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