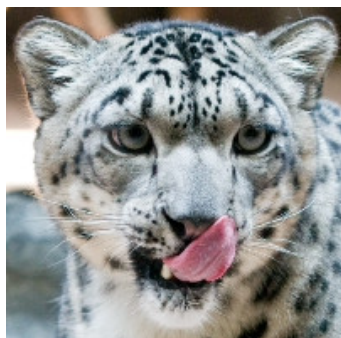


Performed by Gareth Armstrong, Ian Brooker, Jonathan Keeble and
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Created by



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List of characters:

- * Belial – Grand Master of the Deathwing (First Captain of the Dark Angels)
- * Asmodai - Master Interrogator-Chaplain of the Dark Angels;
- * Ezekiel - Current Chief Librarian of the Dark Angels;
- * Azrael - Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels Chapter;
- * Telamenos, Menthias and Dailon – brothers of the Deathwing;
- * Colderaine - 1st Company squad leader of the Dark Angels;
- * Ghazghkull Thraka - the Great Beast of Armageddon

CHAPTER 01

(rain falling down)

The tread of footfalls echoes from the broken buildings. In the distance artillery pounds other city districts, but close to the waterfront the fighting has moved on. The area is secured by Belial and his Deathwing. Hundreds of dead orks litter the streets, but the commander of the first Company does not see them. He sees the human carcasses left to the elements for far longer. Thousands, piled against building and walls like snow drifts, emaciated, dead of hunger and a trampling. The crowds that waited for mega-trolleys that never returned. Killed by their own kind in food riots long before the orks had returned to the city.

He moves his gaze to his companion Chaplain Asmodai. Nothing can be seen of the other Space Marine's expression behind his skull masked helm, but experience tells Belial that it will be a grim sneer of equal hate and disgust. Belial asks the question that has been nagging him ever since the Chapter returned to Piscina IV several years after they had fought the orks, defeated.

Belial: "How could the Piscinians allow such a thing?"

Asmodai: "They are only human".

Asmodai's assessment is as true as it is brief, but the Chaplain expands on his point.

Asmodai: "They were weak. It was a mistake to leave the task of eradicating the orks to lesser warriors. They vacillated, became distracted and did not finish the task at hand".

Belial: "You might cast such an accusation with a clear conscience, but I was here at the start. I am just as responsible for not ending the threat of the orks".

Asmodai: "I did not intend the criticism, but if you feel you should share similar blame I am happy for you to accept it".

Belial: "Then I shall take it as such. I am aware of any deficiencies in my past conduct and make no attempt to avoid or excuse them. I am grateful that we have returned to Piscina so that I can rectify shortcomings in my leadership and personal performance. It is to my shame that the Beast escaped retribution to wreak such havoc upon the Emperor's domains. But its spawn shall be eradicated".

Asmodai: "As they should have been at first encounter".

CHAPTER 02

(distant explosions)

The orks, their remains... They are scattered across the road, felled by my fury. I stood amongst the ruins left by pistol and power blade, alone. My dark green armor splashed with the congealing blood of my foes. Upon the left shoulder guard of my green battleplate I wore the symbol of the Dark Angels, which I prize as an award above all other merit. My right shoulder was marked with my personal heraldry - black to denote the time I'd spent in the Raven Wing, slashed diagonally with a red band from lower left to upper right - for the killing of Furion. An inverted blade above as a swordsman's honor and the commander's icon of the iron halo below. Honors that I had earned in fierce battle, but none of those encounters had been more closely contested than the fight that had just ended.

Amongst the dismembered and decapitated bodies of the aliens lay the four companions of my guard, slain in the brutal combat. Their plate rent apart by jagged axes and cruel power claws. I did not need to check the life sign signal to know that they were all dead. Even Dark Angels cannot survive being ripped apart in such barbaric fashion.

Everything seemed quiet, still... Until the flowering of missiles from a Whirlwind screamed overhead and smashed into a warehouse a few hundred meters further down the roadway, obliterating an ork gun position on the roof. The other sounds of the war raging through

Kadillus Harbor were distant, muted by the bank of dust and smoke that had spread across the city. Bolters reduced to a crackle. The roar of gunship engines teeny, the thump of shells no more than faint thuds. The beating of my hearts seemed louder.

(heavy footstep)

The crunch of a heavy tread. Stone pulverized beneath a tremendous weight. It drew my attention to a dark gateway leading to one of the harbor administration buildings. Ghazghkull the Beast appeared out of the smoke and fire like a monster of myth.

He was far larger than the fallen orks, almost twice my height and as broad as a Dreadnaught. All save his gruesome face was clad in thick plates of metal and whizzing pneumatics. The armor was daubed with thick layers of painting black, the stripes of red and white check decoration. Smoke billowed from the exhaust stacks at the back mounted engine, powering the enormous exosuit, black and stinking of burning oil. Joints whined and pistons juddered as Ghazghkull stepped into the light. Each footfall was like the slamming of a cell door in the depths of a rock. His left hand was encased in a huge claw with sword-long talons. The remnants of the Piscinian soldier - head, torso and one arm - dangled on the lower tide. The Beast's right fist was a mass of gun barrels and ammunition magazines. I thought I saw the magnetic chamber of a plasma gun amongst the mess, looted in some passed battle.

The eyes snared my gaze or rather eye, for one of the Beast's was bionic, held within a metal plate that covered half of his cranium and face. The remaining eye seemed small, bright red, almost invisible beneath a green brow furrow deep. I expected to see hate or anger or perhaps surprise that I had survived the onslaught from his strongest minions. There was nothing, just the indifferent coldness of a predator seeing prey. I was nothing to the monster, no threat, as insignificant as an insect beneath an armored boot. A pasquinade to be swatted aside without effort.

I must confess this derision offended me and perhaps affected my judgment. I raised my sword in challenge pointing the tip towards the huge ork. I wasted no words and opened fire.

(numerous bolter rounds)

A stream of guided bolts flared from my pistol. I carried seeker ammunition for standard, but my aim was as true as any Space Marine and every round struck the Beast at the chest. Detonations sparked across its breastplate in a shard of metal and heat. Ghazghkull stopped with half a step, head cocked to one side and looked down at the scratches and dents the bolts had made in the armored plate. The ork returned his gaze to me and slowly shook his head as if it disappointed him.

Sheathing my sword I reloaded and fired again as the Beast started towards me once more. Every shot aimed for the exposed face and skull. Two rounds glanced from the jacked gorget that protected the Beast's lower jaw. Another pair clanked from the bionic half of Ghazghkull's head leaving blackened welts on the metal, but not penetrating. My fifth shot hit flesh deflected from the bony cheek beneath and exploded beside the ork's ear rather than beneath skin and muscle.

He seemed to laugh and grunted something at me in his own language.

(numerous gunshots)

A storm of fire from his gun engulfed me for a second, high caliber bullets whining pass my head and slamming into my chest plastron and pauldrons.

(silence)

My displacer field activated throwing me into the warp for the briefest instant. The world vanished. It seemed that an eternity passed in which the universe was born and died. And I became nothing more than a burning flake of ash in the aftermath of its destruction. Every sense told me, I was already dead, blinded and deafened, frozen and yet boiling alive inside my armor.

(explosion)

It only lasted the tiniest fraction of the second in truth, but the transition saved my life depositing me more than a dozen meters to the left and a few meters further from Ghazghkull. My head spun and my stomach felt like it had been turned inside out, but I had been delivered from the torrent of gunfire. I emptied the rest of my pistol rounds at the Beast, while he laboriously turned towards my new position. The bolts cocked ork around the head and face again, but inflicted little more damage than my first salvo. A lone scratch dribbled just beneath the Beast's

good eye. But at last the glare that turned on me showed some emotion. Anger... Anger that I could use.

Something clanked and rattled inside the armor mounted cannon while I reloaded again. I did not shoot, it would have been a waste of ammunition. The Beast gun shrieked spitting blasts of purple light at me. My displacer field activated again throwing me a couple of meters directly forwards with a wrench, still in the path of the ork's fusillade. A blast tore through my left arm scorching through the ceramite of outer armor. Another struck the side of my helmet with a blinding burst of light. I lost my vision and was reduced to rely on the input of my armor, reducing my sight to a monochrome series of vague blotches.

I holstered my bolt pistol, as the warlord came at me and drew the plasma pistol from my belt. I waited for the whine of the generator to descend to the hum of a stable magnetic field and fired.

(plasma pistol shot)

The ork was only three meters away when a plasma wall slashed into the creature's chest. It melted through the armor in an instant and punched into flesh beneath. A burst of cobalt fire that rippled out the neatly punctured breastplate. I have seen such shots that killed traitor legionaries outright. The Beast staggered back swaying violently from side to side. The scene cleared as my eyes recovered. The ork was hunched over looking like he was retching. I kept the pistol pointed at the warlord waiting patiently for the ticking of the recharger to end and the power buildup to start again. The warlord heaved and shuddered, shoulders moving beneath the heavy armor. I have to admit that when I realized what was happening, my aim wandered for a nearly second. The Beast really was laughing harder than ever.

(ork laughing and roaring)

CHAPTER 03

(footsteps)

He waits at the door knowing that what he is about to do, treads a fine line between assertion and disobedience. The seconds and minutes pass slowly until he hears the approach of another. Asmodai steps through the door in the bulkhead, like Belial divested of his armor for the moment and dressed in the robes of the Deathwing, patterned with the

sigils and symbols that denote their stations. Belial nods his head in welcome, comforted by the fact that the Interrogator-Chaplain shares his view on the present matter. Unexpectedly Asmodai speaks.

Asmodai: "You are determined to pursue this with the Supreme Grandmaster. Master Azrael and I have frequent disagreement but your standing with our commander is exemplary".

Belial: "I did not accept the position of the Grandmaster of the Deathwing to be popular, brother Chaplain. I admit that the extremity of our cause might lead to consternation, but the outcome warrants the risk to reputation".

Asmodai: "Very well".

Belial activates the door terminal announcing their presence.

(door opening)

A few seconds pass before the door hisses open revealing the chamber of Supreme Grandmaster Azrael. For generations these rooms have hosted the commanders of the Dark Angels and if the legend is to be believed then before that they were used by the Lion himself. The walls are hung with banners showing the heraldry of successive Chapter Masters. Azrael's is taking pride of place above the chair and desk at the far end of the chamber. He looks up stern and beckons the two petitioners to approach. His brow furrows, his gaze lingering more on Asmodai than Belial.

Azrael: "You understand that our campaign on Piscina is ongoing".

The Supreme Grandmaster focuses on Belial who called for the audience, eyes as dark and hard as granite.

Azrael: "All three of us have duties elsewhere".

Belial: "I will be brief, Grandmaster. I think that we waste valuable time and resources trying to reclaim the Piscina IV from the ork infestation. With the Rock in orbit we possess the weaponry required to obliterate all life on the planet and should do so before casualties amongst our ranks become excessive".

Azrael: "I am surprised that out of all my warriors you are prepared to abandon the Piscina IV without a battle. You have already strived so hard to guard this world for the Chapter and the Emperor, why give in to the counsel of despair now?"

Belial: "No despair, brother Azrael. Only a long-delayed acceptance of the consequences of my failures many years ago. Had I succeeded in eliminating the ork threat properly at its arrival the current situation would not have developed. That I did not as allowed the orks to gain a grip on this world, that no effort of the Chapter can prize away".

Azrael: "I see".

The Supreme Grandmaster stands up and starts to pace back and forth behind his chair, one hand stroking his chin, the other lightly gripping the thick robed belt at his waist. Belial takes this as an opportunity to argue his case further and Azrael says nothing to stop him.

Belial: "We cannot accomplish this task alone without ignoring other battles that require our intervention. The longer we spend on this lost world, the more judder other planets of the Emperor. The Piscinians have been rendered useless as allies, would you have us wait until forces from the Imperium arrive to assist us?"

Asmodai shakes his head thumping a fist into his other hand.

Asmodai: "Impossible, all three of us know that the Fallen interfered with the Piscina during the stewardship of Chaplain Boreas and his companions. We risk knowledge of their existence spreading beyond the world if outsiders become involved in the campaign".

Azrael stops and turns towards the Chaplain, his hands moving to clasp each other behind his back. Talk of the Fallen, the Dark Angels that turned against the Lion and the Emperor during the Heresy, earns an even fiercer scowl from the Supreme Grandmaster.

Azrael: "You suggest that I destroy the population of an entire world to keep secret the existence of the Fallen. An act that will earn us further investigation and suspicion, no doubt. Sometimes I think you desire a confrontation with the Imperium, Asmodai".

Asmodai: "There is a precedent, brother Azrael, and the presence of the orks presents far more justification than has sometimes been offered".

Azrael: "If there is evidence of the Fallen to be removed, it will be removed. If I listen to your council every world where even rumor of the Fallen is found will be left a lifeless wasteland".

Asmodai has not mentioned the previous petitions to call for Exterminatus and this revelation annoys Belial. He wonders for a moment if his desire to vanquish the orks is being used by the Chaplain.

The Deathwing commander steps closer to his superior, feeling that the terms of the conversation have moved away from his initial purpose.

Belial: "The Piscinian system is tainted. We can no longer recruit from here with innate confidence. If we become mired in the war against the greenskins, we compound the failure of my earlier campaign".

Azrael's eyebrows rise in surprise.

Azrael: "Your campaign? Your failure? Did you not hold the orks sufficiently to stop the world being overrun? And did not the entire Chapter under my command conduct the intended annihilation? You would embroil us in the intrigue with the Imperium and throw away millions of lives because of your impossible quest for perfection".

Belial: "Apologies Supreme Grandmaster... Our failure and it is not perfection I seek. It is simply an absence of error. Our warriors spend days in the Reclusiam pondering their failings and atoning for the deficiencies. Those of us of higher ranks must hold to an even stricter code".

Azrael: "The reasons are irrelevant. We cannot place ourselves in higher moral authority than people we are sworn to protect. If there is atonement to be made should it not be painful? Should it not involve sacrifice? You suggest the easy route, thinking there would be no repercussions, no regrets".

There is truth to Azrael's words that Belial cannot argue against but equally he cannot hide his consternation of this refusal.

Azrael: "And I see from your expression that there is some other purpose for wishing swift conclusion to our war in Piscina".

Directly confronted Belial must confess his ulterior motive knowing that there is selfishness behind his dismay, but unable to deny the Supreme Grandmaster.

Belial: "There were reports of the Beast, sightings a few thousand light years from our current position. It will be better use of our might to strike down the creature that dealt the fatal wound to Piscina rather than to remain here and mire ourselves with the scraps left behind".

Azrael: "So it is to be revenge, is it?"

Belial: "I will prefer you not cheapen my motives with such terminology, Supreme Grandmaster. It is justice to punish those guilty of the crimes,

is it not? The Beast ruined Piscina. We are simply putting the planet out of its misery".

Azrael looks to speak but pauses confounded by Belial's argument. He sits down steeping his hands to his chin, as he rests his elbow on the reports strewn desk. He looks at Belial for some time and then moves his gaze to Asmodai, eyes narrowing slightly.

Azrael: "It is a bleak day when the Adeptus Astartes must weigh the life and death of the whole world, an entire culture that has supported and praised them for generations. You are both dismissed".

Belial: "Are you refusing my proposals, Supreme Grandmaster? Am I to conclude that my plan does not find favor in your eyes? You will not conduct Exterminatus?"

Azrael: "You have made sound arguments, brother. I will not decide the fate of the world in a moment".

CHAPTER 04

Ghazghkull straightened and broke into a run covering the ground with strides surprisingly swift for the bulk of his armor. It took only an instant to calculate that the plasma pistol would not be recharged before the Beast was upon me. I was in no haste to meet the Beast in single combat, not while there were other courses of action open. I holstered my plasma weapon as I turned and pulled out my bolt pistol as I broke into a run. I fired blind on the move dispensing a shot every second. The compact cogitators fitted into each bolt guided them towards the warlord. I heard the crack of their impacts, but had no idea where they struck.

I headed for one of the abandoned warehouses, the front wall listing like a sinking ship, the roof pulverized by the earlier bombardment. My auto-senses switched to low visibility mode as I ducked beneath the cracked lintel, the secondary door into the darkness within. Slowing I leapt over piles of collapsed masonry and navigated pass fallen beams, ducking and turning as dictated by the mangled debris. I paused and checked behind frequently knowing that the ork could be upon me in moments.

Ghazghkull was silhouetted against the main cargo doors almost filling the gap. I activated the vox.

Belial: "Captain Belial requesting gunship strike. Aim for my homing signal, level the whole building. Turn it into rubble".

I was younger then, still occasionally prone to such imprecise melodrama. I detached my homing device and dropped it to the floor. I moved away heading towards the rear of the warehouse. Looking again I saw that Ghazghkull was shouldering his way through the tangled wreckage. Plaster and masonry dust falling thick as he heaved aside a broken wall. The glow from the bionic eye glinted from shuttered window paints and falling sky lights. The tread of the warlord's steps was muffled by the rubble under foot. A soft crunch of settling gravel and crushed brick, that I could use to determine his position even as I circled, my back to the enemy.

I needed him to come further into the building to ensure there will be no escape. I stepped out in front of the Beast and fired the last two shots in my pistol.

(two bolter rounds, Beast roaring and smashing)

The bolts exploded against the ork's engine pack letting out a cloud of steam and spray of thick lubricant. His claw opened and shut several times as the Beast saw me and turned. I backed away holstering the pistol and drawing my plasma weapon. I checked the chrono display and was satisfied that there would not be enough time for the Beast to get out of the warehouse before the gunship arrived.

I fired the plasma pistol aiming not for the ork, but for a metal girder above him, holding back the collapsed remnants of the upper floor.

(several shots, floor falling down and covering the ork)

A shot parted a support causing it to buckle in moments. Tortured metal twisted and gave way. Several tons of plast-board and ferrocrete fell on the Beast, not enough to knock the creature from his feet but distracting, giving me time to break to the right, heading for an external door I'd seen as I entered.

Once outside I turned and headed back to the main harbor front where I had first encountered the Beast. Granting me a clear view to the Thunderhawk's attack run.

(torrents of gunfire)

Missiles streamed from its wings and heavy bolters let out a fusillade of fire. The nose-mounted las-cannon sent stabs of white into the building

and the fuselage battle cannon opened fire. The missile hit a second before the shells detonating only after penetrating the warehouse wall and throwing up a plume of shattered bricks and plasteel. A battle cannon shell ripped into the interior, fire and smoke belching from the hall as it exploded within. The Thunderhawk circled and continued to rain down vengeance with las-cannon and shell. It turned broken brick to gravel, glass to glittering splinters and metal stanchions into molten droplets. The power erupted into a plume of burning gas sending a cloud of masonry shards into the sky. Small pieces of ferrocrete fell on my armor like rain and on the roadway around me.

(metal shards falling from the sky)

After continued punishment the warehouse collapsed, the last vestiges of its wall and roof reduced to several tons of rubble. The pilot affirmed that the target was destroyed.

Belial: "Return to the battle, brother".

I was sure than even if Ghazghkull had survived, the ork would be heavily injured and easy to finish off. A mistake, a moment of overconfidence I have regretted ever since. I could still hear the ping of the pursuable transponder deep beneath the smoking the remnants, its coordinates appearing in my visual display.

(bricks falling away)

Something shifted in the rubble. It might have been simply debris settling but I was going to leave nothing to chance. I approached the ruin, plasma pistol at the ready.

CHAPTER 05

He lies in the gloom, the shadows held back by the fitful light of a pale lamp in the bulkhead above his cot. Azrael has not yet replied to his proposal and four days have passed. Four days and four more missions in Kadillus Harbor and across the East Barrens. Four missions, hundreds of dead orks and yet how many more await their death. Four missions, another dead brother of the 1st Company, another suit of tactical Dreadnaught armor consigned to the techmarines for repairs that might take months if they can be completed at all. And nothing to say of the battle brothers killed and wounded in the other Companies. Belial and the Dark Angels could spend a year, five years and still the

purging of Kadillus would not be complete. And the world of Piscina IV would not be freed from the threat of the orks.

(weird noise)

His thoughts were interrupted by the chime of the door terminal and a voice on the local comm.

Ezekiel: "It is brother Ezekiel".

Belial sits up and barks at the vocal pickup mounted on the wall.

Belial: "More lights, door open".

The lights brighten and the door whines aside revealing the chief Librarian arrayed in his battleplate, his heraldry the blue of the Librarium. Belial is taken aback by the other Space Marine's appearance as he moves towards the vox catcher to warn the armory of his arrival.

Belial: "A mission? I received no warning".

Ezekiel: "No, brother, I have just returned from battle. You can relax".

Belial: "I think not. Did the Supreme Grandmaster apprise you of my proposal?"

Ezekiel: "He did, but another issue eclipses it for a moment. I bear a message that cannot be communicated across the vox network".

Intrigued Belial beckons for Ezekiel to enter and orders the door close behind him. The Librarian casts a glance around the sparse quarters before continuing.

Ezekiel: "Sammael and the Raven Wing have returned. The Supreme Grandmaster is to convene the Inner Circle as soon as they make orbit".

Belial: "And they have news? Of the old enemy?"

Ezekiel: "It would appear to be the case. I have decoded certain messages within the transmission which indicates that they have in their custody an individual of significance".

Belial: "One of them alive?"

The thought hardens Belial pushing aside his dark mood, but then the importance of Ezekiel's news to his current situation becomes more clear.

Belial: "The Deathwing are going to be redeployed, aren't they? Perhaps the whole Chapter? That it is why you have come here. That is why my proposal will not be addressed yet".

Ezekiel: "I cannot say for sure what will happen. I came to you only as a courtesy, brother. It is likely that if information is gleaned from this new captive, an expedition will be launched. The Deathwing will, you are correct, be required to spearhead such an operation in concert with the Ravenwing".

Belial: "So I am to leave Piscina again before my task is completed?"

Ezekiel: "That is not your decision to take. Brother Sergeant Seraphial – one of the knights of the Old Order – has also sent word. He has been forced to elevate three of the battle brothers to the status of Deathwing. You can access the full details on his engagement report".

Belial: "I see. Three more brothers to welcome to the damnation of the truth. I do not envy them the next few days. We shall see if they really have the metal to become Deathwing".

Ezekiel: "I must speak to brother Chaplain Saphon. I will see you at the convening of the Inner Circle".

Belial bid farewell to the Librarian with a nod and turns his attention to his network terminal. He spends some time reading the reports of Sergeant Seraphial, one of the Inner Circle's lesser ranked agents. At times it is useful for the Inner Circle to have eyes and ears in places where those of officer rank would arouse suspicion and quieten tongues.

Several more days pass, days of fighting orks and rebels, days of monotonous bloodshed. Yet every encounter, every skirmish and battle is treated with equal importance by the master of the 1st Company. He may wish the battle ended, but not the smallest detail in tactics or execution escapes his attention. None that exceed expectation go without praise and none that fall short go without penance. Belial notices his own distraction on occasion thinking about his entreaty to Azrael or the meaning of the returning Ravenwing. But he tries his best to conquer the uneasy feels. He would expect nothing less of those under his command and certainly expects total focus from himself.

Eventually Sammael and his 2nd Company reached the Tower of Angels above Piscina and Azrael convenes the Inner Circle. Before he

can attend, Belial has another matter to address, one more duty to execute. To welcome the newest inductees of the 1st Company.

CHAPTER 06

(ramp opening)

He waits for them to arrive from their ship, an imposing figure of absolute authority as far as the battle brothers are concerned, unaware as they are of the debates and dichotomies that cause him such anguish on occasion. His mind is filled with dark thoughts and his mood is grim. Two of the newcomers – brothers Menthias and Dailon – disembark swiftly from the Thunderhawk and come to attention in front of the Grandmaster.

Belial eyes them patiently simultaneously disappointed by them and yet full of empathy. He is disappointed because they have disobeyed orders and witnessed the Fallen first hand. Sergeant Seraphial could perhaps have organized their deaths to maintain the close secrecy around knowledge of the traitors, but he has seen promise in the warriors and has chosen to spare them. Belial feels for them also because he knows what they do not, what they will learn soon. Myths and outright lies have been their diet up until now and their next meal will be the raw truth as unpalatable as grox tripe. He has known even the most mentally strong warriors to lose their courage, their purpose and duty when they have learned that much of what they fight to protect is a lie.

The third – Telamenos – descends after another minute has passed, his gaze casually appraising Belial as if he was at a briefing or report. Telamenos falls into place without so much as a word of apology. Such disrespect on meeting his new Grandmaster for the first time has to be confronted lest it lead to further laxity. Belial can see the latent arrogance that lingers behind their confident looks. They have been welcomed into the elite of the Chapter, why would they not be pleased with themselves?

Belial keeps his thoughts from his features as Telamenos comes to attention. The Grandmaster touches his fingers to his belt, a moment of self restraint, feeling the three large keys that are symbols of his Inner Circle duties. Until his hand finds the pommel of the Famed, sword of silence, one of the three Heavenfall Blades forged from meteoric stone

in the Chapter's ancient past. Belial allows his displeasure to show as he glances at Telamenos.

Belial: "You are tardy".

Telamenos: "Brother Seraphial had parting words for me, Grandmaster".

Belial: "Did I ask for explanation?"

Taken aback by the question Telamenos shakes his head in reply. Belial's brow furrows deeply.

Belial: "Speak when spoken to".

Telamenos considers this.

Telamenos: "No, Grandmaster. You did not ask for explanation".

As the gunship takes off, dust and hot air wash over the 1st Company's newest warriors. Telamenos's eyes are locked on Belial seeking approval perhaps or fearing further condemnation.

Belial shifts his gaze to Dailon and then to Menthias. The latter is heavily bandaged, still recovering from the wounds suffered in their latest battle. Each of them is a fine warrior, their records speak as much. Yet they have come to the Deathwing under a cloud, disobeying orders and coming face to face with the Fallen, forcing brother Seraphial's hand. They will learn how to fight with tactical Dreadnaught armor and they will recite the litanies and rites of the 1st Company, but will they have the heart to do what has to be done when the needs of the hunt of the Chapter are at odds with the needs of the Imperium? It is a question that cannot be answered, not hypothetically at least. They will either be capable or not. And only the experience of being placed in such a situation will provide the truth. It is the same unknowable quality that the Inner Circle demands of its members. Loyalty doesn't have to be unquestioning despite the efforts and rants of Asmodai, but first and foremost it has to be to the Inner Circle and the Chapter.

Belial has long harbored doubts about the direction the Chapter is heading and his desire to hunt down Ghazghkull is fueled in no small part by a longing to engage in a straightforward honorable act that has uncontested benefit. Too long he has been forced to tread a line between oaths to the Dark Angels and protection of the Imperium. It would be a blessing to achieve victory without any tarnish.

Belial realizes he is putting Azrael in one of these difficult circumstances. The Supreme Grandmaster must have considered in private the possibility of Exterminatus not just of Piscina, but other worlds. While it remains private speculation the tacit agreement not to discuss such a subject has held the status-quo. Belial's request has forced the issue into the open, demanding that Azrael take a view and that in turn means that the others of the Inner Council will be forced to back or argue against the proposal. On a matter of such importance a potential schism threatens, unwittingly instigated by Belial and encouraged by Asmodai. Whether Azrael refuses Belial's plan or accepts it, there are likely to be unforeseen consequences. The thought sours his mood even further.

Belial has offered a solution but ultimately it is not his choice. Does that make it easier for him to suggest wiping out millions of lives, the final responsibility belonging to Azrael? If the Supreme Grandmaster had asked the same question of him would Belial be so sure in his arguments knowing that the debate was of practical importance and not just one of principle.

Does one of this warriors standing before him have the same kind of focus and attention to duty that might one day see them elevated to the highest rank of the Dark Angels? Is Belial looking at a future Supreme Grandmaster? From what he sees Belial doubts it, but there's never been a new addition to the Deathwing that did not initially disappoint him. Even those that have later earned his respect and became heroes of the Chapter.

He stares at Menthias.

Belial: "Have the apothecaries cleared you for combat?"

Menthias starts to tremble and casts his gaze ground-wards earning a concerned glance from Telamenos.

Menthias: "No, Grandmaster".

Belial: "If you cannot fight, you cannot train".

Belial crosses his arms revealing the tattoos on his skin from shoulder to elbow and lines of miniscule text. Belial notices Telamenos's interest and steps in front of him, raising and flexing his massive biceps so that the Space Marine can see more clearly what is written there.

There are more on his chest that Telamenos cannot see, almost hidden against the dark subdermal layer of Belial's black carapace. They are the most important reminders, close to his heart. They are lines from the liturgies of battle and other texts scribed with a neat rounded script by Belial himself. Some are repeated over and over, lessons to be heeded again and again, others written only once as solitary reminders of the moment's oversight or error.

Belial reads in Telamenos's expression the curiosity that has brought him to the Deathwing, but the battle brother at least has the good sense and discipline this time to hold his tongue. Belial decides to indulge them, a morsel of information about their new master for them to savor, but also a warning if they are clever enough to heed it.

Belial: "Lessons not to be forgotten".

The Grandmaster turns away and starts towards the door speaking without looking.

Belial: "Brother Dailon, you will report to quarters and await further instructions. Brother Menthias, you will report to the Apothecarion for further treatment. Brother Telamenos..."

Belial turns back, his gaze as hard as flint as he looks at his newest warrior.

Belial: "Brother Telamenos, you will report to the Chaplains for two days penance and contemplation for the disrespect you have shown me. Use the time to reflect on the necessity of making apology when you keep the superior waiting. You may also like to think on the importance of first impressions. I will be watching you closely".

The Three Space Marines reply in unison, but Belial's thoughts are already moving to other more pressing matters.

Dailon, Menthias and Telamenos: "Yes, Grandmaster".

He leaves, the three battle brothers fully expunge from his thoughts the moment he steps through the bulkhead. The Inner Circle awaits and with them Belial's and possibly Piscina's future.

CHAPTER 07

(fallen bricks falling away, Beast roaring)

The Beast erupted from the hill of ferrocrete and brick, scattering debris like a detonating warhead. The ork's armor was dented and broken in many places and blood trickled from his left leg mixing with dark fluid that spilt from the severed hydraulic link. The warlord's gun arm hung uselessly trapped inside the broken exo-armor. It had a slight limp as he dragged itself out of the rubble and started towards me. Even wounded the Beast looked to daunting prospect of hand-to-hand combat. I could see no other option as the warlord plowed through the remnants of the warehouse, bellowing challenges or threats or, perhaps, oath.

The whole ork invasion would lose impetus if the warlord was killed. The only way to be sure would be to drive my blade through his heart, slash open his throat or perhaps decapitate him. I did not relish the prospect of a close quarters encounter, but if I withdrew now the Beast would confront some other element of the Dark Angels' force or the Piscinian free militia. Minging misdeeds that could be avoided if I stood strong and I regret to say, his dismissive attitude at the outset of the encounter still nagged me. And I wanted Ghazghkull to know he had been bested by me in the moments before he died. Foolish sentiment, arrogance, that has no claimed me since.

(plasma pistol shot)

The importance of this duty lent strength to my limbs as I raised my plasma pistol and fired, shooting as the warlord slid down the rubble pile a few meters away. The shot melted a spray of cables sticking out of the already defunct gun sending up a shower of sparks and molten metal. But there will be no second shot before we met in hand-to-hand combat.

(Belial holstering the pistol and unsheathing his blade)

There were no snarls or posturing and I held my silence. I could read the simple intent to kill in the creature's eyes and the same was in my mind. I took up my blade in both hands as the greenskin broke into a charge, power claw raised for the first blow. I kept to the roadway, secure footing beneath my boots and at the last moment stepped to the left and brought up the sword of silence. My blade slashed across the Beast's upraised arm, ringing from the lightning wreathed power claw. Energy flare as I move past turning my wrist to set the rip of the sword whipping across the warlord's knee, pneumatic pipes parted, but the Beast was not hobbled yet.

(Ghazghkull's first blow)

Ghazghkull's claw crashed down on my backpack. Then when most needed the archaic technologies of the displacer field failed to activate. Warnings flashed as power systems failed, the reactor reduced to an emergency output only by the blow. The displacer field was just a lump of useless wires and crystals incased within my breastplate.

(Ghazghkull's second blow, almost silence)

Suddenly encamped by the weights of my armor I was slow to turn. The Beast was on me punching me in the chest. The displacer field flared for a final time to my surprise, hurling me ten meters to the left, but I lost my footing as I reappeared on the edge of the destroyed warehouse, my compromised battleplate unable to stabilize in time. I fell to one knee, as though I was making supplication to the foul creature. I was able to straighten just in time to dodge the next swing of the power claw as the Beast pressed on his attack.

(sword swinging, Beast roaring)

My sword struck the gorget cleaving through the painted metal, but deflected from flesh and bone. The Beast kicked, a hydraulically assisted blow that hit me square in the groin sending me back a couple of meters. More warnings blared as I crashed onto my already damaged backpack. Ghazghkull loomed over me as shutdown icons blinked into view. My right arm was dead, the fiber bungles severed somewhere near the shoulder, sword gripped uselessly in my fist. The power claw burned bright against the smoke-churned sky as the Beast lifted it high above his head ready for the killing blow. I spat a curse. I do not remember the words, childish lily, but I was bitterly disappointed and angry at the time.

CHAPTER 08

(drilling noise)

By the light of the bulkhead lamp Belial continues his work, the flesh pen buzzes in his grip, thick fingers moving with surprising grace for the their size. He applies the ink just below his left pectoral, in a space he has been saving for a very special act of penance and remembrance. A maxim from the *Tactica Imperialis* which he was taught a few days after being inducted in the Scout Company. He crafts each letter slowly, the

vibration of the stylus, the pain of his pierced flesh etching into his mind the lesson as much as it etches the form of the words into his skin. He takes his time, teeth gritted, thinking back to the debate of the Inner Circle.

(Belial gasping calmly)

Azrael has offered no answer to the question about extermination. Belial is to be sent on some wild mission at Sapphon's behest, chasing a dubious lead, trick from the Fallen captured during Sammael's latest excursion. To make matters worse another Fallen, perhaps the most duplicitous and scheming of their kind, is to be taken on the mission as some kind of secret weapon. It seems like folly and Belial has spoken against the plan as has Asmodai.

Belial pauses in his work for a moment wondering if there is any significance to the fact that he seems to be agreeing more and more with the hard-line Chaplain in recent years. Is Amsodai's fanaticism to be Belial's fate or is it simply a matter of necessity to find a like-minded ally at present? The question brings a rare dry smile to his lips as he ponders this and the nature of the tenet he is applying to his flesh.

He resumes the tattooing, the smile quickly replaced by a grimace. For a normal man the pain of such decoration would be expected, but to one with the body of the Space Marine the pain would not only be negligible, it will be beneath notice. But there can be no penance without punishment as Azrael correctly asserted. And so the ink that Belial uses to carve the lesson into his skin contains an acid compound that gnaws at his flesh making every stroke and flourish a localized agony. The lesson does not end in moments, nor in minutes. The scars of the tattoo bear with them the remnant of that pain so that the soreness is a reminder of the mistakes Belial has made to be endured until his death. Too many mistakes, too many miscalculations, too many dead that need not have died. Too many escaping death that should have been slain. But for all the sins intentional and unintentional committed the pain is not yet too much for him to bear.

CHAPTER 09

(sounds of the battle)

An armor registered an odd increase in air pressure. A moment later exploding bolts flared across the body of the Beast, hundreds of rapid

detonations. I turned my head and saw five Space Marines in Terminator armor bearing down on Ghazghkull, their storm bolters as relentless as their advance. Two of the Terminators broke from the squad, power fists clinging as they charged the ork warlord, bodily smashing into the Beast to bear it away from my prone position. The remaining three Deathwing veterans formed up around the task force commander, weapons at the ready. I recognized the heraldry of Sergeant Colderaine, the 1st Company squad leader looked down at me. The lenses of his helm reflected the flash and flare of the Beast's power claw tearing into the other Terminators. I will never forget their sacrifice, nor will I forget Sergeant Colderaine's next words.

Colderaine: "Beacon was on target. Company Master is secured, activate teleport".

And then Kadillus Harbor disappeared. I was alive but so was the Beast. A shame I bear to this day...

CHAPTER 10

(drilling noise)

Not this time vengeance against the orks, the hunt for the Fallen takes precedence. Belial understands this even though it is inconvenient. He does not think Azrael will call for Exterminatus and the fighting on Piscina will be protracted. The reports of the Beast will be filed and then the reports will stop and the victims of the monster's rampage will be buried and Ghazghkull will move on and elude justice for another decade.

But Belial takes comfort from the advice he now inks into his flesh to remain vexing until the day of his death. Today's lesson is not one of condemnation, but one of hope. It is even truer now than it was a few days before, when he had sought retribution against the Beast and its kind. Another foe demands justice, a foe far older than the Beast and even more deserving of hate. The hunt continues and the Fallen will be rooted out from the darkness and brought into the light of examination. There is no higher cause and for all the mental torment it causes Belial on occasion when more pressing temporal matters occupy his thoughts, he knows in the deepest part of his heart that there is no more important calling than to expunge the ancient stain upon the honor of

the Dark Angels. He applies the last stroke of the flesh pen pulling in a sharp breath as he finishes.

(Belial gasping)

Setting aside the instrument he stands up and raises his arms stretching the skin of his torso, taking an odd pride in the flare of pain across his epidermis. The pain subsides to a dull ache that will last for decades, enough to serve as a reminder. He reads the message he has written to himself again, nodding in thanks for the wisdom he learned so long ago in the 10th Company. He speaks the teaching out loud making an oath out of the words, sworn to the harshest master he knew. Himself...

Belial: "Do not win the battle, win the war. Victory is counted not in days, but generations".

