

The cover art depicts a Dark Angel Lord of Caliban in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose. He is clad in intricate, dark green and black armor with gold accents. His right arm is a large, complex mechanical gauntlet holding a heavy, multi-barreled power weapon. The background is a dark, atmospheric scene with a large, ornate stone structure and a skull mounted on a wall. The overall tone is gritty and dramatic.

WARHAMMER
40,000



DARK ANGELS

LORDS OF CALIBAN

GAV THORPE

The illustration depicts a Dark Angel warrior in the foreground, wearing green and gold armor and holding a large, ornate power weapon. In the background, another warrior is visible, and the scene is set against a dark, industrial landscape with flying creatures and a large, dark structure. The overall tone is gritty and atmospheric.

WARHAMMER
40,000



DARK ANGELS

LORDS OF CALIBAN

GAV THORPE

• **LEGACY OF CALIBAN** •

RAVENWING

MASTER OF SANCTITY

THE UNFORGIVEN

ANGELS OF DARKNESS

THE PURGING OF KADILLUS

A Space Marine Battles novel

PANDORAX

A Space Marine Battles novel

DARK VENGEANCE

ACCEPT NO FAILURE

An audio drama

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A large, faint, light gray silhouette of a Dark Angel, a member of the Space Marines, is centered in the background. The figure is shown in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose, wearing a helmet and armor, with a sword or staff held in front of it.

DARK ANGELS

LORDS OF CALIBAN

GAV THORPE



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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



HONOUR OF THE THIRD

‘Seventeen worlds have drowned in blood. Seventeen worlds and countless millions hewn down by the battle-lust of a single man. Now that rage incarnate has beset Durga Principe. Here we will halt the tide.’

So had been the last command of Master Nadael of the Dark Angels Third Company before he too had fallen to the horde of the arch-traitor Furion. In the darkness they had come, cleaving through the outer perimeter like a blade.

Now the warriors from the Tower of Angels looked to Sergeant Belial for leadership even as the night was torn apart by distant battle cries and the baying of Furion’s manic Skull-scythes. In the ruins of the Temple Saturnis, a complex of sandstone and marble that covered several square kilometres, looked down upon by cracked statues of the Emperor and his saints, Belial held swift council with the veterans of the company.

‘We cannot hold the temple. Master Nadael had hoped to fortify before Furion’s arrival, but it is too late. The naves and galleries provide too much cover for the foe and our superiority of firepower is for nought.’ Belial gestured westward to the palace-topped hill that overlooked the Temple Saturnis. ‘We must withdraw to the flanks of Mount Dawon and await the dawn.’

‘Fine strategy, but flawed,’ countered Sergeant Meneus, chosen representative of the company’s Devastator squads. ‘The enemy will fall upon our turned backs before we can quit this place. It will become our mausoleum.’

‘True, brother, but only if we turn tail and flee like rats. This will be a withdrawal, not a rout. A rearguard will entertain the Skull-scythes while the remainder of the company relocates. I shall lead the defence.’

There was no further argument from the others. They well understood the need

for rapid action and the sacrifice Belial was willing to make. Returning to his squad, Belial ordered his warriors to break out from the Dark Angels line, heading towards the foe. Augur readings showed the traitors were less than a kilometre away and closing swiftly.

‘I am resolved to my death tonight,’ remarked Lederon, second only to Belial in seniority amongst the squad, ‘but is it wise to hasten that moment with our own advance?’

‘If we cannot hold, we must attack, it is that simple,’ explained Belial as the ten Space Marines marched through the tumble of toppled pillars, collapsed shrines and broken chapels. The skies were clear, allowing the three moons to bathe the ruins in pale blue light. ‘Every second and every metre are vital.’

They met the first traitors in a crumbling, plant-choked cloister. Clad in white armour marked with handprints and smears of dried blood the Skull-scythes spilled through an archway. They were met by the fire of the squad’s bolters, missile launcher and meltagun.

‘No forgiveness! No retreat!’ Belial roared as the enemy tumbled to the ground amidst the torrent of bolts and blasts.

The firefight was brutally short, but the peace that followed was only momentary as more of the slaughter-hungry foe converged on the Dark Angels. To tarry was to invite encirclement. Belial led the squad through the archway into the courtyard beyond, laying down fire with his bolt pistol. Like moths to a flame the Skull-scythes were drawn to the fighting, howling for blood and death.

The Dark Angels took a heavy toll, manoeuvring through the ruins for ambushes and crossfires that cut down the traitors as they plunged headlong into the attack. Through streaks of pale light and shadows in roofless cathedrals and across devastated quadrangles Belial steered the squad, always seeking open ground, knowing that at close quarters his warriors would be overwhelmed. Building by building, street by street, they gave ground to the enemy advance, stopping to give fire when possible, moving back towards their battle-brethren when they could not.

‘We have drawn their sting, brother-sergeant. It would be unwise to remain any longer,’ said Lederon. The veteran’s observation was correct: the rest of the Third were clear of the ancient Ecclesiarchy buildings and the squad was almost at the edge of the ruins.

‘Agreed, brother,’ replied Belial. ‘We fall back to the company.’

As soon as he uttered these words, another force of Skull-scythes appeared in the darkness. At their fore strode a beast of a warrior. His plate was adorned with

spiked chains, and from the chains hung trophy-skulls that clattered as they swung. In both hands he bore a massive chain-axe, its teeth glinting in the wan light.

Furion, arch-traitor, thrice-cursed slaughterer.

‘Your little game of hide and seek is over, son of the Lion!’ Furion bellowed as he broke into a run. Behind him, the Skull-scythes screamed dedications to their dark god and followed their champion’s charge.

The Dark Angels opened fire, standing their ground to blaze away at the approaching enemy. Furion ignored the detonations of bolt-rounds on his armour, sprinting through the storm without pause. His axe took Brother Mendeleth’s head clean off in one sweep; the traitor’s return swing eviscerated Lederon in a welter of blood and shattered armour.

‘Keep firing!’ Belial snarled as he bounded forward to meet the attack. He was too late to save Brother Sabellion, whose torso was cleaved from waist to shoulder. Belial would atone for his slowness if he survived.

As shots from Belial’s pistol exploded across his armour, Furion turned to meet the sergeant’s counterattack. Raising his chainsword for the strike, Belial ducked beneath Furion’s blade as the traitor swept it towards the Dark Angel’s throat. The teeth of the chainsword bit into armour, screeching as they chewed into Furion’s left arm.

Furion lashed out as blood spurted from his wounded limb, smashing the haft of his weapon into the side of Belial’s head. Out of instinct, the sergeant raised his blade to ward away the next blow. Razor-sharp shards of metal showered around him as chain-blade met chain-blade. Furion’s next strike shattered Belial’s weapon and sent him stumbling to his right.

Lifting his axe in victory, the Skull-scythes lord loomed over the sprawling sergeant.

‘Blood for the BI—’

Furion’s triumphant roar was cut short by the bark of Belial’s bolt pistol. The explosive round pierced the collar of the traitor’s armour and detonated inside his throat to send his head arcing away into the darkness. For a moment Belial was taken aback by his deadly reflex shot.

The headless corpse crashed to the ground and Belial recovered, realising that only he and Brother Ramiel remained standing amongst friend and foe. Thermal registers betrayed the presence of other enemies close at hand.

‘The death of the Skull-scythes’ leader will cause our foe some strife, and let us hope the search for his successor delays them further,’ said Belial. ‘Our duty

here is done to my satisfaction, brother. To Mount Dawon, where the guns of the Third wait to greet these traitors.'



A HUNT IN THE DARK

The cell stank of despair. There were ancient blood stains painted on the walls and floor, written in the adrenaline-filled reek of sweat in the air. The red glow of a single guttering lamp barely touched the walls, which were hewn from the raw foundations of the Rock, deep beneath the Dark Angels' space-faring fortress-monastery. Here was not the carved stone and intricate tapestries of the Tower of Angels; here was the naked remnant of Caliban, preserved within countless power fields and held together by graviometric archeotech that perhaps even the Master of the Forge no longer fully understood.

The weight of ten thousand years pushed down on Sammael every bit as much as the millions of tons of architecture above this dismal place.

Stripped of his armour, clad only in a black robe of the Ravenwing adorned with a silver symbol denoting his rank as a Black Knight, Sammael was under no illusion regarding why he had been brought here. The two Deathwing Knights that flanked him, resplendent in full bone-coloured power armour, had treated him as a prisoner from the moment they had taken him from his solitary contemplation in the Reclusiam. By ways unknown to Sammael, and passing no other Space Marine or serf, they had brought him down to the lower levels. Though Sammael could not say where exactly in the dungeons of the Rock the cell lay, he knew well enough the reputation of the place and others like it.

On entry to the Ravenwing he had been initiated into the first of the Rites of the Raven and had learn of the Fallen. He had absorbed such knowledge without shock. He was not sure why he had not been surprised by the revelation that warriors of the Dark Angels had turned on the primarch and the Emperor during the uprising of Warmaster Horus. It was possible that his suspicions of such an

event had brought him to the attention of the Chaplains and ultimately the Ravenwing.

As he had risen through the seven Rites, he had learnt more – more about the Fallen and how to hunt them, and more of the arts of the Interrogators that offered them the chance for repentance in cells like this one, dragging forth confession and absolution from bloodied flesh.

A small wooden table and two sturdy chairs were all that furnished the cell; so simple, so domestic in their construction yet given an ominous air by context. Sammael would have felt more comfortable had there been a shelf of torture implements, brands and hooks and knives rather than the plain furnishings, but there was no overt sign of the excruciation suffered by others who had been brought here before.

There was no fear in Sammael as his guards pushed him into the cell and slammed the heavy steel shut behind him. Not fear of torture, at least. He was no Fallen and he could not believe that his battle-brothers would turn their bloody attentions upon him as punishment for the debacle at Kapua. There was no need to extract any account, he would freely tell them what had happened and how the disaster had unfolded.

That was not why he was here, though. There was another reason behind the secret abduction and the intimidating surrounds. The cell was the destination of a journey he had started before Kapua, before Gideon's fall.

The chatter of autogun fire echoed across the wide courtyard, masking the sound of punctured flesh and splintering stone. Only when they had emptied the magazines of their weapons did the firing squad cease shooting, drawing up their rifles to their shoulders in a salute to the armoured Space Marines overseeing the execution. Grand Master Gideon, his black armour overlaid with golden icons and the heraldry of the Ravenwing, gave a signal to their sergeant, who dismissed the troop. The ten defence troopers, natives of Kaphon Betis, filed away, leaving the two Dark Angels with a dozen bullet-riddled corpses.

'A fitting end for traitors,' said Sammael, glaring down at the bodies. 'Filthy xenos-worshippers. The lowest kind of scum, turning on their own kind for the favours of aliens.'

'Misguided for certain,' agreed Gideon. He took off his helm, revealing dark hair and angular features, a scar across his throat disappearing behind the gorget of his armour. He looked at Sammael and shrugged. 'Only a deviant mind could hope for succour from the very creatures that kill and enslave one's kith

and kin. Desperate, insane. The eldar plied their evil in Kaphon for many decades before we came. It is a shame that some succumbed to despair and started to entreat them, but they were a small minority.'

'A tiny group, to be sure, but influential,' replied Sammael. He was aware that Gideon had singled him out to oversee the firing squad, though there were many members of the Second Company that were his senior. It was no secret that the Grand Master had taken a special interest, and there were few that would argue that Sammael did not deserve the recognition and attention he received. Sammael wanted to prove that his superior's faith was well-placed, to demonstrate the qualities worthy of a Black Knight and perhaps, one day, a Master.

'Less than two hundred, but there are many in positions of power. They willingly allowed the eldar to harvest those that looked to them for protection. I am sure the aliens were more than happy to cooperate. Had we not heard rumours of instability and division in this system, the xenos cultists might have turned even more to their twisted cause.'

'By the grace of the Emperor, we arrived and now the threat has been ended.' Gideon waved a hand at the piled bodies. *'These are the last of them. We will depart by nightfall and return to the Rock.'*

'The last?' Sammael was surprised. 'We have not yet caught the ringleader. The so-called Lord Cypher.'

Gideon's stare was as sharp as the Raven Sword hanging at his hip. 'Where did you hear that name?'

'Chatter from the prisoners. One of them thought they would be saved by a 'Lord Cypher'.' Sammael read consternation in the expression of his superior. *'I have not yet had time to search the planetary records, but I am sure we will unearth this traitorous noble soon enough.'*

'You have not spoken of this to anybody else?' Sammael answered Gideon's question with a shake of the head. 'Good, let it remain so.'

Sammael felt as though he had done something wrong, but he had no idea what the infraction had been. He sought refuge in formality to hide his confusion. 'If that is your command, grand master.' Apparently the attempt was unsuccessful.

'This is a far graver matter than you know, Sammael,' Gideon told him. At first it looked as though that was all he would say on the matter, but after a pause he continued, his voice little more than a whisper as his eyes darted around the courtyard before settling on Sammael. 'The title is not from Kaphon Betis, it is from Caliban.'

‘Caliban? Our destroyed home world? How can that be possible?’

‘Cypher is one of the Fallen, Sammael. More than that. The worst of them, intent on destroying all that remains of the Legion he once served. If he has been in Kaphon there is far more at play here than eldar raids and heretic sympathisers.’

The scrape of footfalls outside the door drew Sammael from his the recollection of when he had first heard the name of Cypher. The cell door opened and two familiar figures loomed large in the corridor beyond: Supreme Grand Master Azrael and Chief Librarian Ezekiel. The two most senior Dark Angels entered in silence and the door closed behind them.

Azrael gestured for Sammael to remain seated and stood to one side, while Ezekiel sat in the chair opposite. The Librarian’s bionic eye gleamed red, matching the ruddy glow of the lantern. His other eye seemed a pit of blackness, swallowing the light. Sammael felt himself drawn into those depths, and shuddered despite every effort when he saw golden motes of energy within the gaze of the psyker.

‘You will tell me about Kapua.’ Azrael spoke the words without emotion, a flat statement of fact. Sammael answered, but his gaze was locked with the stare of Ezekiel, unable to break the trance the Librarian had set upon him.

‘There seemed little danger at first. We had detected an astropathic call for assistance in putting down a small-scale rebellion on the world of Kapua. We entered the system some seventeen days later and made orbit over the primary world, Kapua Seven. After short conference with the aides of the Imperial Commander, who we were told were overseeing the fighting personally, Grand Master Gideon organised and launched a standard drop assault on the rebel holdings less than fifty kilometres from the city of Vespengard.’

Ezekiel had not blinked, but it was as though he had allowed Sammael a moment of release and the Black Knight took it, turning his attention to the Supreme Grand Master. Azrael’s cold stare was only slightly less intimidating.

‘Describe the rebels,’ he said.

‘Nothing untoward, master. Dissidents led by political opponents of the Imperial Commander, with weapons looted from the stores of the local forces. Nothing to offer significant resistance to warriors of the Adeptus Astartes.’ Sammael shrugged. ‘We took a few casualties, but in a matter of days the strength of the rebellion was broken, their command shattered and their lairs destroyed.’

‘Gideon became over-confident.’ Again it was a statement, not a question.
‘Faced with poor opposition he underestimated potential threats.’

‘I disagree, master.’ Sammael kept his tone level, trying to be critical of Azrael’s assessment and not the man who uttered it. ‘At that time there was no evidence to suggest any foe more significant than the rebels we had encountered.’

‘Perhaps you do not question Gideon’s judgement because it reflects poorly on his later declaration in support of your elevation to the position of Grand Master. If we doubt the first judgement we must also doubt the second.’

The suggestion riled Sammael a little but he did not rise to the baited words.

‘Your judgement will be final, master. I relate the events simply as I experienced them. You wished for me to offer opinion and I did so.’

Azrael nodded in acknowledgement of this defence. He gestured for Sammael to continue.

‘No commander I have served with could have predicted what happened next,’ said Sammael.

The torrent of reports over the vox-network was the closest to panic Sammael had ever encountered in his time with the Chapter. Each measured, clipped message belied the anarchy that had suddenly engulfed the Ravenwing and it was by its mass rather than individual parts that the underlying consternation could be felt.

Sammael understood the shock in those voices all too well. The same sense of dislocation and unreality was raging in his thoughts as bolter fire and missiles screamed down at the Black Knights from camouflaged bunkers ahead.

‘Power armoured enemy, moving through the woods to the west.’

‘Highly accurate heavy weapons fire, we are withdrawing.’

‘Converging fire from ground level and above. Where did they come from? Sergeant! Sergeant?’

‘Is that a Dreadnought, brother? Sector five. I swear I saw a...’

A blast seared through Teranto’s bike just a few metres from Sammael, turning mount and rider into a roiling ball of superheated vapour and molten ceramite. Sammael swerved to avoid the expanding cloud of gas and atomised matter, recognising a multi-melta hit. His shouted warning was lost amongst the din filling the vox.

‘Armoured vehicles, old Legion patterns, breaking through the buildings on our flank.’

‘By the Emperor, traitors everywhere! Rebels have launched massive counter-attack through the marshalling yards!’

‘Autocannon position, end terrace. Covering fire with grenade launchers.’

‘We need a Nephilim strike, sector seventeen. Heavy armour incoming. Urgent request for air strike! Where is the air cover?’

‘Squadron Astrael reporting. Two Land Speeders destroyed. Request Apothecary retrieval for survivors. Providing cover fire. Enemy are pushing forward, support needed immediately.’

Sammael glimpsed colour ahead: bulky shapes moving through the rubble of a refinery that had been levelled by orbital bombardment. The fortifications around it had shown clear on the auspex scans. Sammael checked his steed’s display again. Still it registered no enemy despite the torrent of fire that had erupted from the supposedly empty bunker line.

‘Some kind of masking shield,’ he said, but nobody seemed to be listening. The Black Knights were each concentrating on staying alive, dodging between mortar bomb eruptions, whickering heavy bolter fire and the stabbing ruby beam of a lascannon. Sammael turned his bike towards this last threat, unleashing a salvo of shots from its plasma talons into the firing pit where the heavy weapon was stationed.

It was then that he saw something that caused him a moment’s pause. The lascannon was no tripod-mounted support weapon as he had expected. It was carried on the shoulder of a warrior in power armour, dwarfing the poorly-armoured rebels.

A Traitor legionary.

Sammael did not know the foe from his deep red livery, but as the enemy Space Marine turned to fire his lascannon the yellow and black sigil emblazoned on his shoulder revealed his former allegiances. A renegade of the Word Bearers Legion. There were others around him – more giants in red armour, some in black, pushing out to encircle the Ravenwing advance.

‘All vanguard squadrons to pull back!’ This last came from Gideon, cutting through the chatter. ‘Withdraw immediately, do not get drawn into prolonged engagement.’

To Sammael’s right the Grand Master pulled his jetbike into a tight turn, pulling away from the refinery and its defenders. Sammael followed suit, the wheels of his mount sending up showers of grits and dust as he hauled Withermare across the broken ferrocrete of the street.

The shots of the rebels and Traitor Space Marines followed them as they sped

back up the road, Sammael's soul heavy with thoughts of failure.

‘Gideon’s response to evidence of the Traitor Legions was to break off the attack. He surrendered what momentum the assault had gained.’

Sammael looked at the Supreme Grand Master and wondered if Azrael was conducting this inquiry to find the truth or was simply seeking to confirm an opinion already formed. The Black Knight spoke up in defence of Gideon. Nobody else could.

‘Grand Master Gideon assessed that we were not in a position to prosecute a successful attack with the speed and decisiveness required. Although it transpired in our later reconnaissance that the Traitor legionaries were no more than a few dozen in number, they had armoured vehicles and heavy weaponry that negated the advantages we had over the rebels. As well as their direct military impact they were also leading the enemy, who numbered several thousand, coordinating their attacks, bolstering their resolve, and had been doing so since the outset.’

‘So it was a trap?’ It was the first question Azrael had asked.

‘I believe so. Gideon also thought that it was likely. Our early successes had been an attempt to lure us into a false sense of confidence so that we might over-extend our efforts. Grand Master Gideon’s swift command to withdraw enabled over ninety per cent of the company to escape the ambushes. Had we stayed to fight, we would have been wiped out.’

‘That is your assessment, Sammael. I have my own.’ Azrael folded his arms, jaw set. ‘Continue with your account. Gideon thought it wise to continue with the attacks even though the enemy were well-prepared in fortified positions.’

‘The Grand Master convened a council of the veterans and the decision was unanimous to continue the offensive. We considered waiting for Chapter reinforcements or the weight of the Imperial Guard, but the risk that the traitors would gain a further grip on the populace, or perhaps escape from Kapua, outweighed the dangers of continuing the campaign.

‘The next phase of fighting vindicated the Grand Master’s decision. Our orbital support had been curtailed by intervention from the traitor’s warships, and our air power seriously compromised. Lacking the firepower needed for a direct attack, the company began a series of supply raids and feint assaults. Over the course of seven days these proved troublesome enough for the enemy to react. The rebels led by the Word Bearers in particular were prone to being lured out of position by these baiting attacks. We later discovered there were also Space

Marines bearing unaffiliated black livery, who proved far less headstrong.’

‘To what purpose were these attacks directed?’

‘With precision strategy, we were able to weaken part of the cordon around the city of Vespengard. If the company could breach the city then the enemy defensive line would be rendered worthless. Once the fortifications had been penetrated, forces still loyal to the Imperium could assault Vespengard while the company continued to confound the enemy from behind their line.’

‘A strategy that seems to have some merit.’ Azrael scratched the side of his nose, his attitude seeming to soften for a moment. Then his expression hardened again and the next words rasped angrily. ‘But it was not, was it? Due to imprecise intelligence, the attack ran into fierce opposition. Gideon led the Ravenwing into an even greater trap than the one they had already survived.’

With Nephilim and Dark Talon fighters screaming overhead and Thunderhawks and Land Speeders pounding the buildings and streets along their flanks, the bikers of the Ravenwing plunged towards the heart of Vespengard. Sammael and his Black Knights accompanied Gideon as always, a few metres behind the Grand Master’s jetbike, their steeds leaving dust and exhaust fumes filling the street in their wake.

Missiles from Land Speeder Typhoons raked along rooftops, setting factories, administration buildings and hab-blocks ablaze while the battlecannons and lascannons of the gunships shredded the improvised barricades that had been thrown across the roads along the path of the attack squadrons on the ground. Heavy bolters and assault cannons on Land Speeder Tornados held the rear, keeping the rebels pinned in their bunkers and trenches.

A sudden surge of energy flashed across the auspex display of Withermare. At first Sammael thought it was one of the inner city power stations exploding, but the truth revealed itself half a minute later when a monstrous engine stepped into view at the far end of the boulevard ahead.

The Reaver Titan was a colossus of the Dark Age of Technology, twelve stories high, its vaguely humanoid form obscured by the purple and blue flickering of void shields. The street underfoot cracked and sagged beneath its weight while windows exploded as its void shields touched them, filling the air with glittering shards. The blare of its war horn roared down the boulevard, overloading Sammael’s autosenses and shattering more glass.

The Titan’s original battle colours, black and orange, could still be seen on the war banners hanging from its weapon mounts, emblazoned with a horned skull

and flames. Its body was more like living flesh than metal and ceramite, flexing and bulging with ruddy muscles corded with brass-like veins, protected by serrated, overlapping armour plates. Where once the head and crew deck had been there was now a monstrous daemonic face surrounded by curling horns, its mouth rimmed with whirring chainblades like teeth. Piercing yellow eyes blazed with hideous light as its murderous gaze fell upon the Black Knights. Its right arm was a multi-barrelled gatling blaster, its left a huge fist encased in coruscating black energy that crackled from the tips of its barbed claws. Atop its angled carapace a twin-muzzled turbo-laser swung towards the gunships now converging on its position.

With a blinding flash, the turbo-laser opened fire, giving Sammael no time to wonder how such a monstrosity had been concealed from the Dark Angels augurs and orbital surveys; the reality was that it had. The beam intersected with a Thunderhawk, splitting it from cockpit to tail. As the remains of the gunship rained down on the city the gatling blaster spewed a torrent of shells along the boulevard.

The Black Knights reacted without command, veering hard to the left as Gideon wrenched his jetbike away from the stream of explosions tearing towards the squadron. The turbo-laser fire stabbed out again, incinerating a Land Speeder Tornado racing across the rooftops from the west. Too fast for the Titan's main weapons to target, the Nephilim fighters and Dark Talon interceptors plunged down, opening fire with rift cannons and missiles.

Sammael's last glimpse of the Reaver was of the Titan wreathed in coruscating warp power as its void shields absorbed the attacks of the aircraft. Autocannons and anti-air missile streaked up from the surrounding streets, driving off the interceptors and fighters midway through their attack runs.

'All units, break off attack. Withdraw to assault point alpha.' Gideon's voice was laced with regret. *'All units, withdraw.'*

A moment after the order had been issued, a communication arrived from Sergeant Versian leading the rearguard.

'Grand Master, Traitor legionaries converging on our withdrawal sector. Word Bearers and heavy armour have cut off retreat route alpha.'

The news was almost as devastating as a salvo from the Titan. The Ravenwing were trapped inside the city.

Sammael closed his eyes, reliving the moment of realisation. His hearts were beating faster even now, months later. He calmed himself and when he opened

his eyes, he found himself locked by Ezekiel's unblinking stare once more. Azrael's voice seemed to come from a distance, muffled and indistinct.

'Gideon did not form up the company for a forced breakout. He chose to remain in the contested city.'

It was with some difficulty that Sammael dredged up the facts from his memory. The Black Knight had to wonder if Ezekiel was deliberately dulling his senses, or was this simply a side effect of the Librarian's scrutiny?

'Had the company come together and been baulked in the breakout, we would have been exceptionally vulnerable to encirclement. The situation was dire, but we still had the advantage of mobility. By dispersing the company we were able to maintain a moving threat. The Traitors and their war engine could not be everywhere, and if they tried to tighten the trap then it would present opportunities for counter-attack.'

'Surely the battle for Vespengard was already lost, Sammael. What did Gideon hope to achieve by remaining in such close proximity to the enemy?'

'It was the Grand Master's firm belief that the skill with which we had been deceived indicated a superior level of intelligence possessed by the enemy commander. We faced a coalition of forces, and the nature of their purpose in luring our formation onto Kapua suggested a very specific reason why we had been targeted.'

'He thought the enemy commander was one of the Fallen?' Azrael took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'Supposition, nothing more.'

'At the time it made sense, and the possibility of capturing one of the Fallen could not be overlooked. The enemy's only strength was the abomination of the traitor Mechanicus. If the Titan could be overcome, the city would swiftly fall into the hands of loyal forces again and the enemy commander run to ground.'

'A rash decision. It seems uncharacteristic of Gideon to be so foolhardy so soon after being ensnared.' Azrael's voice became more determined even as Ezekiel's stare bore deeper and deeper into Sammael's soul. 'What are you not telling us, Brother Sammael? Why are you holding back?'

'By the Lion and the Emperor, I swear I am being forthright and truthful,' the Black Knight replied, trying hard not to plead. There was no pain, not of the kind he had felt before, but Ezekiel's psychic probing was like tiny lacerations in his thoughts, parting his mind into a thousand pieces to inspect the constituent parts.

Suddenly the sensation ended. Sammael flopped back, realising that he had been hunched forward with every muscle taut. His breath came in short gasps and his hearts thundered in his chest.

‘If you insist,’ said Azrael, looking unconvinced. ‘Gather your thoughts. Do not leave this cell. We will return shortly.’

Ezekiel stood up and followed the Supreme Grand Master out into the corridor. Sammael tried to relax, taking long breaths to ease himself back into a stable state. Through the open door he could see the pale armour of the two Deathwing Knights.

The Black Knight knew that the departure of his superiors was simply part of the interrogation, perhaps to unsettle him further or otherwise disrupt his thinking. It was hard not to get drawn into the notion that this was a battle of wits, Sammael versus Azrael, trying to prove something out of principle and opposition rather than to arrive at the truth.

Sammael forced himself to calm down. Even if he didn’t regard this as a battle, it appeared that Azrael did, and Sammael had learnt long ago the importance of using any lull in hostilities to regroup, resupply and relax. His interrogators could be back any moment or at any day, but he had to be prepared for either eventuality.

A shout from outside snapped him back to full attention. He was uncertain whether moments or hours had passed. Normally his internal time perception was perfect, to all intents and purposes, even when unconscious – an effect of the gene-crafted catalapsean node interacting with his cerebellum, basal ganglia and other time-sensitive brain networks. The sensation of dislocation was alien and awkward.

‘Stay there,’ barked one of the Deathwing Knights through his vocaliser, disappearing from view as quickly as he had appeared. In the darkness of the corridor, the armour of the other faded from view.

Sammael did as he had been told, suspecting that this was part of the interrogation, a test of his obedience to orders. Azrael had commanded him to wait, so he would wait.

Several more minutes passed before the other Deathwing warrior returned. He recognised the posture of a vox-link exchange between the two guards. There seemed to be some form of disagreement between them. After the exchange, the Space Marine that had left departed again. A few seconds later the remaining Deathwing warrior approached the cell.

‘One of the Fallen has slipped his captivity,’ the Space Marine confided. ‘I’ve been ordered to stay here to watch you, but we both know that would be a waste of manpower.’

Sammael hesitated. Was this a snare constructed to betray disloyalty? It seemed

possible, but Sammael could not be sure. If there was actually a Fallen on the loose in the dungeons there could be untold havoc before he was recaptured. Sammael would rather be damned for something he did than something he didn't, but caution tempered his desire for action.

'Do not remain on my account, brother,' he told the other Dark Angel. 'Assist your brethren.'

The Deathwing Knight nodded his thanks and moved out of sight, leaving Sammael alone in the cell with the door open.

The echo of boots drifted away and then returned, along with other noises: the report of a bolt pistol firing and the rasp of motors and screech of metal. The corridors turned these sounds into drawn-out reverberations, but Sammael recognised their sequence easily enough – a close range shot followed by a brief duel of chainswords.

A patter of bare feet and silence followed, broken a dozen seconds later by a grunted cry for assistance. Sammael was at the door before he realised what he was doing.

He paused at the threshold, his instinct telling him that this was no simulation, his rational mind wary of entrapment. In the end instinct won – it had seen him survive and prosper so far.

'Brother!'

The call came from the right. Sammael had no idea where the cell was, or the layout of the surrounding rooms and tunnels, and he simply headed towards the sound. A quiet, wordless cry took him down a corridor to the right a few metres on and then another to the left. It took some time for him to orientate himself again as it seemed he followed the sound in circles for a few minutes.

He came upon another cell, the wooden door open, the splinters of a bolt impact clear beneath the grille of the window. Just inside lay another Space Marine, his chest plastron rent open by a wicked chainsword hit. Blood spilled from the wound, too much even for the warrior's Larraman cells to staunch. He flailed an arm towards Sammael, blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

The wound was real and Sammael's doubts about the veracity of the emergency disappeared in an instant.

'No time. Took my pistol.' The Space Marine's arm flopped to the left, pointing down a long corridor. 'Heading towards the Exactatory.'

Sammael had no idea what or where the Exactatory was, but the wounded Space Marine's vehemence made him certain it would not go well if the escaped Fallen reached it. The Black Knight pulled off his robe and tore a strip from the

hem. Using this as a bandage, he pushed the rest of the garment into the armour breach, plugging the wound, and bound it into place.

The Deathwing Knight's chainsword lay just out of his reach. Sammael picked it up and tested the motor. It was still working.

He had a weapon, but no armour. Not much use against a well-aimed bolt-round, but better than nothing at all. It was impossible not to feel a little trepidation at the thought of cornering a dangerous, armed foe with no protection, but he quelled the sensation. Doing so brought back another memory of Kapua.

The Titan seemed even larger than before, its carapace clearly visible over the intervening buildings, the miasma of the void shields extending higher still.

The shields flared and crackled from impacts as elements of the Ravenwing unleashed plasma and missiles and shells at the enormous war engine, but the energy field generators held firm, protecting the daemon machine from harm.

It did not matter; the assault was simply a diversion to allow Sammael and his Black Knights to close within the void shields, from where they would unleash plasma blasts and armour-piercing grenades. A trio of attack bikes with multi-meltas followed thirty metres behind the command squadron, ready to finish the task.

Sammael had faced many foes, and he trusted the judgement of his superior as much as he trusted the artifice of the armourers who had forged his war-plate and maintained Withermare. Yet looking up at the half-daemonic behemoth gave Sammael pause. All the armour in the world would not stop the beam of a turbo-laser. He felt like a gnat going up against a First Company Terminator.

The Titan's war sirens blared again as it swept its energy-wreathed fist towards a Land Speeder, trying to swat it like a fly. The pilot was too good, dodging the attack even as the gunner continued to rain fire onto the Titan from the skimmer's assault cannon.

The enemy had too much faith in the power of their totemic war machine. Although it was capable of destroying super heavy tanks and levelling buildings, it was just one machine, and its size restricted it to the widest plazas and thoroughfares. As much as the Ravenwing were best suited to city fighting, the Titan needed infantry support even more, to watch its back against an attack just like the one led by Gideon.

None of which made Sammael feel better about riding full speed towards the ancient colossus with nothing more than speed and skill to protect against

attack. He checked again that the plasma talons were charged and activated the targeter to lock on to the huge war engine.

The Titan started to turn.

Sammael watched as the ponderous machine's torso started to swing towards them over the roofs, and a few seconds later a foot crashed through the corner of a building. The cumbersome movements were slowed further in the Black Knight's perception as the baleful eyes of the daemon-possessed machine glared down at the approaching bikers.

With similarly tortuous slowness, the gatling cannon swivelled on its mount.

'Grand Master!' Redevere barked the warning but there was no response.

'Master Gideon, we have been detected' said Sammael. 'Evasive manoeuvres?'

'Full attack speed. It can't target us at full speed,' the Grand Master replied calmly.

The Titan was less than three hundred metres away now. Sammael accelerated, keeping pace as Gideon's jetbike flashed along the boulevard towards their target.

Two hundred metres.

'We'll be inside the minimum ra-' Gideon's words were lost in the roar of the gatling cannon.

Shells the size of groundcars slammed into the boulevard and surrounding buildings, one every half a second, tearing up massive chunks of ferrocrete, pulverising plastek, twisting metal supports. Fire engulfed Sammael as a shell detonated just ahead, lifting Withermare twenty metres into the air.

For a moment he felt weightless as the force of the explosion and gravity equalised. In the cloud of debris he could see other riders and mounts spinning through the dust and fire. Taking a breath, Sammael plummeted groundwards and a second later Space Marine and steed slammed into the shattered surface of the road.

Sammael survived the impact, head ringing, and watched as the fusillade continued, pounding across the neighbouring streets, driving back the rest of the Ravenwing attack. The blur of shells against the cloudy sky came closer again, hammering into a five-storey habplex to Sammael's right. Billowing smoke and rockcrete grit, the front of the building sheared away.

The last thing Sammael saw was the Titan, turning away to confront the rest of the company, moments before the wall of masonry obscured everything and buried him in a welter of grinding shards and thunder.

Sammael had tracked the Fallen enough times that he had a sense for the Hunt. The dungeons of the Rock were an unknown labyrinth but the Black Knight headed in the direction indicated by the wounded Space Marine. There were signs that he was on the right trail: doors broken open, droplets of blood on the floor from an injury the escaped prisoner must have suffered in his duel with the Deathwing Knight and the distant pad of feet echoing down the corridors.

It seemed like an age had passed, and many kilometres, since Sammael had first left his cell, and although the Rock was large and he had ascended and descended several levels, something did not feel right. He wondered if his prey was a psyker, subtly manipulating his perception of time or distance.

This thought brought a strange stab of reality. Or rather a hyper-reality, as though acknowledging the possibility of psychic attack increasing the defences that had been implanted in his mind by the Librarians and the Chaplains. Everything suddenly appeared clean-edged, as if Sammael had pushed through a fog.

He could hear laboured breathing, still some distance away. His own breathing was slow and regular, like his heartbeat, showing none of the exertion or stress he had undergone since the interview had begun. The calm of the hunter had claimed Sammael, focusing body and mind onto a lone objective: capturing the escaped Fallen.

Sammael stopped, alert to danger, and thought back over what he had seen in the previous minutes. He had never been in this part of the Rock, as far as he knew, not even when escorting a prisoner to the handover with the Deathwing. Yet despite this there was something familiar about his surroundings. Sammael realised that he was still being manipulated.

The cross-roads of corridors he was in had smooth stone walls, mortared, the floor lined with pitted flagstones. It reminded him of the chambers higher up in the Tower of Angels. More specifically, he seemed to be in the passageways outside the Reclusiam. And the tunnel he had just run down a few moments before, metal grilles underfoot, ferrocrete bulkheads, that had been aboard a starship. And before that, the earthy smell of the caves of Glodinium where he had fought orks four decades earlier.

Everywhere had been pieced together out of fragments of his memories.

Had he moved at all since leaving the wounded Deathwing Knight? Was the psychic attack because he was close to his foe? Sammael raised the chainsword, thumb lightly touching the ignition stud.

The air wavered and parted like a pair of curtains, revealing the dry, roughly

hewn stone of the Rock. There was a cell door just ahead, letting out the flickering light of candles onto the uneven tunnel floor. A shadow briefly eclipsed them and Sammael heard the flap of bare feet. He padded forward, weapon at the ready.

Reaching the door, he looked into the cell. There was a bulky figure hunched over in the corner, wearing a tattered Chapter robe. Bone-white, the colour of the Deathwing. The Space Marine stood up and turned to look at Sammael, chainsword in one hand, bolt pistol in the other.

He had the face of Sergeant Belial, one of the Deathwing Knights and long-time duelling opponent.

‘You can never best me,’ Belial sneered, saluting with the chainsword. ‘You are a lesser warrior.’

‘You can never best me,’ Belial said solemnly, raising the training blade to the salute. He did not seem to take pleasure in the lecture, but felt compelled to pass on the lesson. ‘You hope that a moment of genius will best a more efficient, superior swordsman.’

‘It takes only a moment to win,’ replied Sammael, replicating the salute.

Around them the rest of the Tenth watched. The honour of being this year’s Company Seneschal, the Scout Blademaster, was to be decided again. Belial had held it for the last six years, and Sammael had been the defeated finalist for the last three. Before Belial’s arrival, Sammael had been Blademaster for seven years.

The two of them lowered their weapons to the guard and started to circle, eyes fixed on each other. Sammael darted a feint towards Belial’s right shoulder and then straightened his blade, aiming for the throat. Belial batted aside the thrust with the flat of his sword and stepped back, waiting for the next attack.

Sammael checked his next lunge as he moved his weight forward, but Belial would not be baited. Sammael stepped to the right, lowered his left shoulder and then turned sharply back, slashing his sword at Belial’s knee. The other Dark Angel’s sword was there to meet the attack, easily blocking the blow. Some might say it was with contemptuous ease, but there was nothing but respect and sincerity in Belial’s expression as he parried yet another attack, eyes focused on the tip of Sammael’s sword.

Gritting his teeth, Sammael forced himself to hold back, trying to tempt Belial into the offensive. Sammael was convinced he had the greater hand speed, and would win if he could draw his foe into an attack-parry-riposte sequence, but

Belial was ever precise in his movements and tactics, never over-extending himself. It was as infuriating as it was successful.

Sammael let his guard drop for a moment, leaving an opening to his left side, ready to dodge should Belial make the attack, but his foe still would not take up the offensive stance.

'You are too good to leave such opportunity by chance,' Belial said quietly.

'Unlike many, I will never underestimate you.'

'Dull,' snapped Sammael, launching a blistering series of strikes towards the head and chest, forcing Belial back step by step to the edge of the circle. 'Dull, dull, dull! You have no élan, brother!'

'And you have no patience,' said Belial, slipping aside from Sammael's last strike, the edge of his practice blade scoring a red welt across Sammael's left cheek, nearly breaking the bone.

Sammael staggered back, blood filling his mouth. His anger flared, directed not at Belial but himself.

Though his pride was hurt, Sammael raised his blade in salute.

'You are the Blademaster once again, brother.' The loss hurt more than Sammael's jaw, but there was form to be observed. 'I am again my own worst foe. But the honour is well-deserved.'

'Too much show,' Belial told him, returning the salute. 'Always looking for the glorious victory, risking defeat in doing so.'

The memory had been more than simple recollection. It felt as though he relived the duel with Belial, and every other duel fought between the two Space Marines. Coming back to his senses, Sammael found himself alone in the cell and wondered why the Fallen who had taken the face of Belial had not killed him.

He still had the chainsword and concluded that the vision of Belial had been a phantasm, conjured in his mind by the renegade, rather than a glamour upon the Fallen himself. Sammael was no expert in psychic matters, but as a Black Knight he had learnt enough to understand the wiles of the Librarians that had turned against the Emperor and the Lion. The escapee had to be close at hand to use that kind of mind-altering power, perhaps even within sight, and that gave Sammael confidence. His prey was getting desperate, his power weakening through use or his injury.

Leaving the cell, Sammael followed the trail of blood droplets to the left, past several tall archways, heading up a spiral stair to the level above. His prey must

have gleaned something of the dungeons and the upper levels from the mind of the wounded Deathwing Space Marine, and the further the Fallen ascended the closer he came to the Tower of Angels. Although this brought the fugitive nearer capture Sammael could not avoid thinking about the consequences of a Fallen Angel running loose in the Chapter monastery.

Most of the Chapter was, as usual, away on deployment at various warzones nearby, but there were still several dozen battle-brothers in the Tower of Angels, Space Marines that had not been brought into the smaller cadre of warriors that knew the truth about the Dark Angels' ancient history. If the Fallen confronted them it would cause untold harm, perhaps irreparable damage to the cohesion of the Chapter. The Dark Angels survived only by considered introduction to the Hunt and the true nature of the Chapter's fight during the Horus Heresy. Should the bulk of the battle-brothers learn that truth, should they be aware of the deception that had cloaked their learning since they had been brought to the Tower of Angels, it would finish the Chapter.

Spurred by this terrible thought, Sammael broke into a run, sensing that he was close on the heels of his prey. Along another corridor and down another flight of steps, the chase brought him onto a balcony above a large space where several passageways joined.

The far end of the balcony was blocked by a wooden door, which was being subjected to heavy chainsword blows by a semi-naked figure. Wary of being tricked again, Sammael dashed in to the attack, seeking to land his first blow before his target knew of the danger.

Some sixth sense warned the Fallen, who spun around, chainsword locking teeth with Sammael's weapon in a clash of sparks and screeching metal. The parry threw Sammael back a step, but he lunged again, driving the whirring chainsword at his opponent's gut. This attack was also turned aside, and it was only as he raised his weapon for another strike that Sammael looked at his foe's face.

He stared into the dead gaze of Gideon.

'You were not worthy,' the former Grand Master told him, skin peeling from his bones, a maggot chewing its way out of a bloodless eye. 'But for the happenstance of survival, another would have been leader.'

'Not true,' Sammael snarled, slashing his blade at the impostor's throat. Gideon turned the clumsy blow aside and counter-attacked, swiping at Sammael's chest and shoulders, forcing him to retreat along the balcony. Even though he knew it was a false apparition, Sammael could not help but think he was fighting the

shade of his dead mentor.

Sammael saw that it was not a chainsword his opponent wielded but the fabled Raven Sword: the badge of the Ravenwing Grand Master.

The air was choked with dust and smoke and the afterwash of heat from the detonations was causing havoc with Sammael's autosenses. At first he thought he had been buried completely, but as the smog started to drift, he saw that only his legs were pinned by a cracked stanchion that had fallen across the road. A few metres away another fractured buttress lay over the crumpled remains of Withermare. Leaking coolant had frosted the rubble around the crushed motorbike, making it appear as though the machine had been flattened by the club of a mythical frost giant. A little further away, patches of lubricant burned with green flame, adding to the sensation of the otherworldly.

Two buildings had collapsed almost in their entirety and the roadway was pocked with twenty metre wide craters from the gatling cannon impacts. The charge chamber of a plasma talon had detonated not far away, turning the surrounding ruin into a glassy molten splash. The beams of the turbo-laser flashed across the reflected surface, reminding Sammael that the Titan was not far away.

An internal sweep of his armour's systems confirmed that the damage was light and Sammael was able to kick away the tangle of broken masonry and plasteel struts without much effort. He pushed himself to his feet and the full import of what had happened struck him.

There were broken mounts and riders scattered across the roadway, some almost completely buried, others smashed to pieces by direct shell hits. He adjusted his vox to a company-wide channel and a flood of disheartening reports crackled through the ether to his ear. The Titan had repulsed the initial attack with ease and left the company scattered again, individual squadrons doing their best to elude the enemy. Heavier vehicles were pressing from the perimeter and, along with the Titan, dominating the open spaces and wider roads. This had forced many of his company brothers into the narrower streets and alleys, where enemy cultists were able to use the dense terrain and their numbers for effective ambushes.

Sammael couldn't raise the Grand Master on the vox and he cast about the ruins for any sign of his commander. It seemed that he was the only Black Knight to have survived the Titan's fusillade as he inspected the black-armoured bodies littering the debris.

His autosenses picked up the thrum of an anti-grav motor off to the left. Something had veered off the street and broken through a plaster wall. Stepping through the gap, Sammael found Gideon's jetbike half-buried beneath a collapsed ceiling, jerking and thrashing as its skim motors malfunctioned.

An arm stuck out of the tons of masonry another couple of metres further on. Forging up the sloping rubble, Sammael attacked the pile with his hands, pulling off pieces of shattered rockcrete and dragging away sheets of plastek insulation.

He revealed Gideon's left arm and head. Neither moved. Doubling his efforts, Sammael dug out the Grand Master's torso, tossing aside a chunk of masonry that weighed almost as much as himself, his armour boosting adrenaline-fuelled strength.

Gideon stirred a little, fingers flexing, but Sammael knew that his mentor was far from well. There was thick blood splashed across the sharp stone and the masterfully crafted artificer armour of the Grand Master was cracked and buckled in dozens of places.

The hand flapped uselessly across Gideon's faceplate. One side of the helm was heavily dented. Realising his commander's intent, Sammael bent down and turned the helm, breaking the seal. With a hiss of air, he pulled the helmet free, revealing Gideon's bruised and blood-soaked face. Pieces of his skull showed through the wound in the side of his head and his ear was nothing but a gristly smear along his jaw.

The Grand Master slowly nodded and forced a smile, showing blood-flecked teeth.

'I knew you had survived. The brothers were right, you were born for greatness.'

'What are your orders, Grand Master?' asked the Black Knight. 'Do we continue the attack or withdraw?'

'I cannot say,' whispered Gideon. Groaning with pain, he freed his right hand from the rubble, presenting the Raven Sword to Sammael. 'The company is yours to lead.'

With that final effort, Grand Master Gideon, veteran of six centuries of war, died.

'No! I am right. You chose me.' Sammael checked his retreat and brought his sword up to deflect his foe's next attack. He was surprised to see that it was not a chainsword in his grip, but the hilt of the fabled Raven Sword.

Gideon's tattered face twisted into a hate-filled snarl as the dead Grand Master

launched a flurry of attacks.

‘You are not worthy to bear that sword,’ Gideon insisted, raining blow after blow against the meteoric iron of the blade. ‘Too rash, too clumsy, too weak. They are all better than you. Impatient, ill-disciplined upstart!’

The words had lost their venom. Sammael remembered the look in Gideon’s eyes as he had presented the Raven Sword as his final act. It had been relief. Relief that for Gideon the Hunt was over. He had been a good Master of the Ravenwing, but it was not the fate of warriors to die in peace. Sammael had seen something else in his mentor’s gaze, something that now leant strength to his sword arm.

Pride. Pride that it was Sammael who had lived to take the blade. It had been Gideon’s intent, surely, to name Sammael his successor in better times. It was not happenstance, it was not luck that Sammael had been the one chosen by Gideon, nurtured by the Grand Master for many years.

‘I earned this,’ Sammael whispered. ‘It is mine.’

The Raven Sword gleamed as Sammael countered dead Gideon’s next blow. The Black Knight grabbed the hilt in both hands and twisted his wrists to deliver a riposte. The top of the blade sliced across the forehead of his dead mentor, spilling not blood but maggots and filth. Sammael felt nothing as he sliced again, cutting open his foe from throat to ear.

Still Gideon would not fall. The reanimated corpse dribbled thick blood from rot-ravaged lips and lunged forward, seeking to pierce Sammael’s chest. Sammael moved, allowing the blade to penetrate his shoulder, but in doing so he opened up the space for a swing at his opponent. With one last slash of the Raven Sword, Sammael cut Gideon’s head from the shoulders.

Still the thing was not wholly dead. From the ground it spat its hate at Sammael.

‘Tell me, coward, how you despoiled my legacy! How did you survive when I did not?’

‘I was no coward, nor braver than you,’ Sammael replied. ‘Just better.’

Sammael connected his vox to the command broadcast via Gideon’s downed jetbike. He took a deep breath and then issued his statement.

‘This is Sammael. Master Gideon is dead. The rest of the Black Knights are dead. I am assuming command of the Second Company. Orders to follow.’

Sammael’s priority was to get mobile again so he could see for himself what was happening. The Titan had directed its attention elsewhere and he was able

to scour the rubble for a functioning steed. He recognised the markings as the bike that had belonged to Redevere. There was no sign of the former owner beneath the tumbled ruins.

Mounted and moving again, he pieced together what had happened from the bike's auspex records. The Titan must have detected the energy signature of the Black Knights' plasma talons, and calculated that they were the greatest threat despite the diversionary attacks. It had deliberately exposed itself to the assault, luring Gideon into the charge before turning to fire its gatling blaster.

Sammael recalled his last question to Gideon, one that he now faced. Did they stay or withdraw?

The Titan still dominated Vespengard and if the Ravenwing exited the city it would take a lot of effort and lives to retake it. The Titan was really the only thing stopping the company controlling Vespengard, nothing else the enemy possessed was fast enough or powerful enough to keep the Ravenwing contained. Weighed against that was the fact that it was a Titan and one assault had already failed.

The first matter was to steady the company following the recent setbacks. Issuing his orders in the same clipped, calm tone he had heard from Gideon so many times, Sammael started to wield the Ravenwing as if it was his own, trusting to the squadron leaders to interpret and carry out his orders according to their individual situations. The Ravenwing prided themselves on their independence of thought and Sammael was not going to fight against that nature.

Land Speeders and aircraft concentrated their attack runs on the Titan, keeping it occupied in the central part of the city. They were fast enough to elude its counter-fire, and the enemy still had not moved in other units to support the war engine against these attacks. It seemed they thought it was so powerful that it could fight anything by itself, but they were wrong. Sammael would show them just how wrong.

Sammael brought in Darkshrouds to cover the movements of the bike and attack bike squadrons. Under the utter blackness of the ancient shroud generators he brought the company together in the warren of streets, warehouses and marshalling yards that dominated the western part of the city.

Although utter destruction had been prevented, there were few facts to lighten Sammael's mood. He had received word from the Implacable Justice in orbit that the battle-barge had detected two more traitor vessels emerging from the cover of an asteroid field. There would be no orbital support for the moment while the

ship engaged these new foes.

Thirty per cent of the company's warriors were dead or too badly injured to fight. The two remaining Thunderhawks were used to evacuate them from the contested city. A similar proportion of machines were also destroyed or damaged, but a hasty reorganisation brought some semblance of structure back to the force, matching functioning mounts with capable riders. Sammael now appreciated fully the many days of training he had undergone on bike, Land Speeder, attack bike and aircraft and the versatility of the company's tactics proved its worth now.

Concentrating on the grander strategy, Sammael left it to his subordinates to implement the improvised reorganisation. His time was better spent drafting fresh orders and assimilating the latest intelligence reports from the Land Speeder recon sweeps and the last orbital augur scan.

When order had been restored, Sammael made the decision he had been delaying for the best part of a day: to fight or leave.

To admit defeat, to preserve life only to expect others to sacrifice theirs for the victory abandoned, was not in Sammael's mind. It would be an insult to the Dark Angels that had already made the gravest sacrifice. Worse, it would be a condemnation of Gideon's decision to attack – a condemnation that Sammael did not feel.

Gideon's reasoning had been right even if his execution had ultimately proved to be flawed. Sammael would now perfect the plan.

The attack began with Darkshrouds circling the city centre to come at the enemy from the north, moving as though they were screening an attacking force. At the same time Land Speeders and attack bikes approached from the east, fighting their way through some of the more lightly contested streets.

Both manoeuvres were a diversion.

Sammael and a few of the company's best riders roared towards the Titan through the blazing remains of the central power station, turned to a ruin by the Titan's bombardments. Here plasma reactors and burning power lines masked the energy signature of the half a dozen bikes approaching at speed. Only the best could negotiate the tangle of molten ferrocrete and shattered plastek, the undulating turns of roadway and cratered earth. Where Gideon had launched a massed attack, Sammael sought victory with just a handful of warriors. It was counter-intuitive to take on the Titan with less firepower, but it was the only way Sammael could see that the Titan's sensors could be fooled.

Their timing was perfect. The Titan was turning to the east, moving away from

the feint attack in the north, just as Sammael and his squadron burst from cover.

Static blurred and fizzed at Sammael's autosenses and his skin crawled as he crashed through the half-seen boundary of the Titan's void shield. Point defence turrets of heavy stubbers and autocannons opened fire from the body of the Titan but the bikes were coming too fast for the weapons to track, their fire trailing across the pocked ground behind the charging riders.

Forming a line behind Sammael, shells screamed past just centimetres away, and the squadron raced along just a couple of metres from the Titan's leg, riding one handed. They threw melta-charges as they passed, the magneto-clamps of the anti-armour bombs attaching to the Titan's artificial skin.

A bestial roar of annoyance split the sky as Sammael peeled away. More turret fire cracked the air around the commander as he sent the detonation signal.

Sammael turned to see the chain of explosions tearing through the armour and struts of the possessed Titan's lower leg. Oil and ichor poured from the wound like blood while the half-organic matter within fractured, toppling the Titan sideways.

A plaintive wail of war sirens heralded the Titan's fall as it ploughed into a burning factory and disappeared in a plume of dust and fire.

A moment later an explosion like a star being born tore out the heart of the city, levelling buildings as a dome of plasma rose into the air. A half-circle of golden energy burned itself into Sammael's memory.

The vision faded as Sammael staggered back, looking to steady himself against the balustrade. Instead of carved stone, he felt his spine touching wood, and as his vision cleared he found himself staring into a single golden eye.

Reality resolved from his swirling thoughts. The cell reasserted itself into his conscious mind, along with the chairs and the table.

Ezekiel leaned back and nodded, finally breaking his gaze.

'The test is passed,' the Librarian announced.

Sammael shook his head, trying to clear the last vestiges of the nightmare that had been visited upon him by the psyker. His eye caught the look of Azrael, who was standing to one side as he had been all this time. Sammael's memory, his real memory, welled up like a spring, filling in the last few minutes; he had not moved from the chair the whole time.

'Congratulations,' said Azrael. He smiled, the expression full of warmth and pride. 'Gideon's choice was wise. You are worthy of becoming Grand Master.'



HOLDER OF THE KEYS

‘I did what I had to do. I did what I had been trained to do. What I had been created to do. I killed them. I fought as hard as I could against my enemies. I focused my lethal attention on them to the exclusion of all other concerns until they were destroyed.

‘They came at us, in armour chipped and cracked by countless previous battles. Veterans of war, their anger and hatred honed to a razor’s edge. The sky burned and the ground buckled beneath their rage as they tried to wipe us out. No price was too high to pay for our deaths.

‘They wore our blood as a trophy. It glistened on their black armour and slicked their bared silver blades. With eyes of red they gazed upon us and thought nothing of the slaughter. Heartless, merciless, deadly. They hungered for the kill. For our lives. Nothing would stop them.

‘The thunder of their bombardment continued and the fury of lasers and tracers lit the night sky as bright as day. Such a war-tumult I have never known. Not even during the misguided wrath of the Great Crusade was a world so wracked by such vigorous ire.

‘Beyond the red and blue and green beams that criss-crossed the sky the stars themselves paled beside the detonations of the continuing battle in orbit. The hulls of starships fell as comets. Fragments of armour descended in fiery hail, hissing and burning. Where they landed, the ancient forests around our cities blazed.

‘None could be spared to quell the spreading flames. The arcologies were wreathed in the smoke, those within choked by the fumes. Hundreds of thousands suffocated, lungs seared by hot smog. There could be no evacuation.

Outside was as lethal as within. Thousands more died in the panicked stampedes. We watched our homes reduced to ashes.

‘Such were the blessings of Terra in that anointed age.

‘The vox-channels were a-howl with the cries of the dying and the wounded. Even those of us hardened by centuries of battle could make no sense of the anarchy. Nobody was in command.’

A face from nightmare loomed out of the darkness. It was a skull sheathed in flowing blood, sparks of golden fire for eyes. When it spoke, the sparks became intense flames, searing his soul. The voice echoed inside his head, coming from within.

+How did you kill them? The attack. Remember the attack. I am the key to the prison of your guilt. Repent of your crimes and know peace.+

Memories fluttered to the surface and he could not resist the urge to speak, to give voice as witness to the terrible events.

‘Amongst the plasma and torpedoes fell drop pods, filled with warriors thirsting for blood. The outer brochs and ravelins had been silenced, reduced to slag. The capital still stood proud and tall amongst the ruins of our lands. The Gorgon-forged aegis-ward was still operational. As our foes’ anger fell upon it the sound was as of a myriad of roaring dragons. Two gunships, shadows against the darkness. They saw us, our thermic signatures stark to their artificial eyes. We sought shelter amongst the broken keeps and shattered curtain walls.

‘The flare of their missiles cut the darkness. Nemethiel died then, torn in half by the strike. Galderian lost a leg and we had to abandon him. He insisted and we had no choice but to comply. His bolter rang out in defiance until another missile struck.

‘We sought shelter within an orillon at the Bronze Gate. Once we had paraded on the training grounds east of that immense bastion. Now the open mustering field had become a cratered, plasma-scorched wasteland. The five thousand banners that had lined the field had been toppled. The mighty stands where thirty thousand cheering brothers had watched the jousts and duels were charred splinters and puddles of molten steel.

‘It was temporary respite. The gunships knocked, their battlecannon shells an insistent request for entry. The Bronze Gate was sterner yet than their attacks, with deep foundations and thick walls. In time they disgorged their bloodthirsty cargo, who set to the tower portals with lascutters and melta charges.

‘We welcomed them with lascannon and bolter. The crackle of Hereth’s tempest lance illuminated our hunters with an azure flare before shattering the armour of

the first through the breach. Such a storm was our defiance that the assault relented and the enemy withdrew.

‘And then the horror was unleashed, as the gunships pounded our position with phosphex shells. The deadly purple fire lapped at the gate tower and streamed through the breach. It was drawn to us, filled with a disturbing hate of its own.

‘We fell back again, but it followed, spreading, pooling, searching for us, filling every room with a fire that gave off no smoke. If I had doubted it before, I did not doubt then that our enemies were truly vile. They were possessed of no emotion at all and showed no compunction in the deployment of such hideous death.

‘But for the grace of the universe, we would have died. A terrible death, agonising, lingering, as the hungry flames ate through our armour and devoured our flesh.

‘Who could ever say we were not right to defend ourselves against such horror?’

The face loomed larger, shifting, growing flesh over the bone. A monstrous wolfshhead it became, snarling, breath as hot as the crawling phosphex, its jaws dripping fire like saliva. Its golden eyes reflected the prisoner’s bloodied, scarred face. Yet in that reflection he was twisted, eyes missing, flesh torn even more, weeping. It was not a mirror of what was, but a reflection of what was to come.

+A lie! Justice was meted out. A fate you deserved. What happened before the gunships? What had you done to deserve such retribution? We will unlock the truth, you and I.+

‘Nothing!’

He became aware of a pain, a dull ache. It nagged at him, like a rat gnawing at the base of his skull.

+Do not avoid the question. Admit your crimes. Tell the truth and be set free.+

The gnawing became more insistent. To distract himself he stared at the apparition floating just in front of his face. The eyes of the wolf were growing larger, engulfing him, mesmerising. The desire to confess was strong. The panting of the wolf revealed itself as his breaths, coming sharp from bloodied lips, become vapour in the chill air.

He shuddered.

‘They had chased us from orbit. There they had spat their hate upon us, spewing fighters from burning flight decks. Like a storm of swords they fell upon our station. We manned the defence batteries. Macro-cannons and mass-fusillade laser barrages. A wall of fire, a barrier of lightning and plasma and

missiles to fend off the rage of a demigod.

‘Somehow they made it through. Torpedo bombers targeted us, destroying the cannon galleries and upper platforms. Assault pods crashed into the lower decks. We stayed at the guns as long as possible. We had orders and followed them. We would make the traitors pay. Slay them. Teach them that we would never again be slaves.

‘We fired until the power cells melted. We fired until the barrels of the rotary cannons glowed. We fired even as bulkhead after bulkhead was breached and the foe swarmed towards us.

‘When the enemy was at the door we stopped firing and took up our bolt pistols and power swords for close work. Landevort had a volkite carbine he had kept since the Two hundred and thirty-first Expedition. Took it from the dead hands of an Ultramarine. “For the battle to end all battles,” he used to say when he polished it and gloated to the newer recruits.

‘And that battle was upon us, we knew.

‘We opened the doors and charged. Bolt pistols barked, swords hissed and Landevort’s carbine spat archaic fire. They had not been expecting a counter-attack. Up we fought, up through seven decks of death and hell and the clamour of close battle. Six of us made it to the saviour pods, and not before we had accounted for twenty of the foe. The station was lost. We knew it would be.

‘Fight hard, withdraw quickly, form the line again. That was the strategy. We would keep back the rage of a whole empire as long as one of us remained to keep up the fight.

‘Even as we sought to leave a fresh onslaught fell upon us. Hadreus was the best of us, master of blades, and he leapt to our defence while others of the garrison departed in the saviour pods. His chainsabres held the door for three full minutes. There was a lull and we called for him to come back. We would not desert him. But then we saw who led the foe and knew that Hadreus had left it too late.

‘Arch-traitor, once the noblest of us, who should have stood at our lord’s right hand. Caliban’s glorious son. Now lickspittle to the filth of Terra. Paladin. Pure Blade. Houndlord. Dread Corswain.

‘In beast’s mantle he approached, a greatsword in his grasp, its edge spilling white fire. Where such a sword came from, what debts he owed for its gifting, who would dare say? Hadreus knew better than to wait for the attack. He threw himself at the Pure Blade and his guard. Corswain was there in a moment. His sword rose and met Hadreus’s descending blades. The ring of their clash echoed

back to us and we knew that Hadreus had swung his last strike.

‘Corswain moved in a way I have never seen any warrior move. Even encumbered by his armour, he was past Hadreus in an instant. His sword parted our companion from gut to nape in one blow.

‘It was always part of the plan to leave the station. But I admit, freely, that we saw Corswain look upon us in that moment and we fled, for to remain was to die.’

+Your cowardice needs no confirmation. We have a list of those that held true and those that fell. Your treachery is all the proof we need of your low moral courage.+

He found himself in those dark forests on Caliban that he had called home. Darker even than he remembered. The trees crowded close together, leaving nothing but slanted shadows and moonlight. Hot breath steamed in the still. Eyes of golden fire gleamed in the night.

He started to run. The panting grew louder and his hearts hammered with effort. He could feel hot breath at his back. He blurted a confession, hoping it would allay the pursuing beast.

‘It was dishonourable to destroy the station! Scorched earth, that was the command. Leave no pursuing foe. The reactor was set to overload from the moment the battle started. It was not an honourable blow, but we were desperate.’

The wolf’s growl was so close, right behind him. He made the mistake of looking back. No wolf now, the apparition had become a monster outright. Its flesh was scaled, body sinuous, claws and fangs burning with golden flame. A beast of Caliban Lost, like he used to hunt as a knight of the Order. The monster’s roar was inside his head, a pain that threatened to split his skull apart.

+Lies! You are damned if you do not confess all! Not the victim, the brave defender. Murderer, cold-blooded slayer of brothers. Admit your sins and be free.+

The monster sunk its talons into him and the pain released a memory, torn from the depths of his mind.

+Starfire!+

+The word echoes in your thoughts. You hope that you will never hear it. A single word, dripping with so much meaning. But for all your regrets, you do not hesitate. That one word sets you into action.+

+Lured close by your fake protestations of surrender, a strike cruiser approaches your station. The others look to you, their leader. Even now, with so

much at stake, you have a chance. Obey the order or stand down. They trust you.+

+Starfire!+

+You choose to listen to the lies of your lord rather than the oaths you had sworn to the Lion.+

+“Open fire,” you tell them. “Full barrage. Let these fawning oafs know that Caliban will die free!”+

+And the cannons open fire and the shields of the strike cruiser burst into red blossoms. Blasts from other platforms overload the shield generators and the target starts to turn away. But you are not satisfied with driving them off. There will be no mercy. The bombardment continues. The strike cruiser cracks, its armour pierced, the welter of hammerblows upon it from laser and shell too much to bear.+

+“No relent!” you cry. What a perversion of that great motto of your grandfather. “No relent.”+

+And your brothers die in their hundreds by your treacherous hand.+

The pain was all-consuming. He was engulfed by it. He could stand no more and realised that the shriek of the splintering warship was the scream from his lips.

A robed figure looked at him, one eye glittering with gold, the other a biomechanical replacement. It was his last vision as sanity faded and skull-faced armoured giants entered to drag him away.



BATTLE-BROTHERS

The attack was going well. Elements of the Second and Fifth Companies of the Dark Angels had created a significant foothold on the rebel space station known as Port Imperial, and with a storm of firepower were pushing towards the central habitation and command spires. Though one might not have considered a star fort the ideal battleground for the bikes and Land Speeders of the Ravenwing, Port Imperial was more akin to a city in space, its halls and tunnelways more like plazas and streets than the confines of a starship's chambers and passages.

With speed and daring, the Dark Angels had seized several landing zones and now the warriors of the Second Company were racing ahead to fracture the enemy resistance whilst the infantry of the Fifth Company secured what gains had already been made. The foe – pirate scum that presented barely a threat to the power armoured Dark Angels Space Marines – were being driven back, their prepared defences circumvented by the insertion of squads and squadrons by Thunderhawk and boarding torpedo.

Sergeant Cassiel and his bike squadron were amongst those at the forefront of the fighting. Having been thrown into the heart of the enemy star fort, theirs was a simple mission: rove the station sowing death and discord wherever they encountered the enemy.

Cassiel had not been drawn into the ranks of the Ravenwing for blindly following orders, but nor had he reached the rank of sergeant by second-guessing the intent of his superiors. His initiative had been enough to attract the attention of Grand Master Sammael and seen him initiated into the Rites of the Raven, but there his curiosity ended, making him an ideal squadron leader for the Second Company. He did not, therefore, wonder too much what brought the Ravenwing

and their comrades in the Fifth Company to Port Imperial, but assumed that the anarchy the Dark Angels had discovered on the world of Piscina IV was somehow connected to the pirates.

Grand Master Sammael had explained that it was likely the pirates were led by a renegade of the Legionis Astartes, a traitor who had turned on the Emperor right at the birth of the galactic Imperium. Cassiel had been in the Ravenwing for seventy years and knew well enough what this meant; the Ravenwing would secure this renegade so that he could be taken back to the Chapter and face punishment for his crimes.

This was privileged information, known only to those in the Ravenwing. It was his task, along with the veteran Black Knights that served as Sammael's inner cadre, to ensure that the Fifth Company were not unduly exposed to the machinations of the renegade. Sometimes Cassiel envied the warriors of the Fifth Company, and those like them that did not have to suffer the spiritual taint of the Truth. A careful facade was maintained by the Chaplains to ensure that the majority of the Dark Angels remained blissfully unaware of the taint that could touch even the soul of a Space Marine. On occasion, when afforded time for reflection in his squadron's dormer, Cassiel was wistful for the days before he had been introduced to the Truth.

Today was not such a day. Cassiel was proud to be part of the spearhead that would bring the renegade to justice. He led his squadron secure in the knowledge that they honoured the memory of their primarch, the Lion, and did service to the Emperor through their deeds.

As such, the squadron had penetrated more than a kilometre from their insertion point and were making ground quickly towards the more heavily defended interior of Port Imperial. Auspex readings from his bike, *Incitatus*, had located a group of pirates trying to assemble for a counter-attack. Cassiel led his warriors directly into the ill-judged ambush, securing a large elevator unit to bring the fighting to the heart of the concentration of enemy signals. Las-fire and bullets criss-crossed the conveyor shaft as the squadron ascended in the open cage, stopping just one floor beneath the mass of enemy.

When there was just enough room between the opening cage door and the wall of the elevator, Sabrael hit the throttle and surged out of the carriage, his bolters blazing into the enemy waiting in the chamber outside, bike slamming through their falling bodies. With just enough room to pass Cassiel and hit the gap Annael accelerated from behind the sergeant, exiting the car a second before the sergeant could follow.

Cassiel paused for a moment longer to assess the battlescape. The elevator had deposited them in a warehouse-like chamber, several hundred metres square, and enemy fire descended like a storm from gantries above and behind. Below the walkways more pirates used bulky cargolifters and metal-cased extractor vents as cover, poking out to snap off shots that were wide of their targets more often than they hit.

Ahead, Annael rode over a pile of fallen pirates, cries of pain cut short indicating that at least two had still been alive. The wheels of his bike throwing up a spume of body parts and crimson, Annael hurtled into the mass of enemies while unleashing a constant hail of bolts into the broad space where the foe had lain in ambush.

Remarkably, a man beside the elevator door had been missed by both Sabrael and Annael and he hurled himself at them with a chainsword, the teeth of the weapon sparking across Annael's backpack. The biker braked and hauled his steed sideways, using it as a weapon; the pirate disappeared beneath the rear wheel, the man's remains pulped into the metal decking.

Cassiel whirled his bike around, the bolters at maximum elevation as he cleared a gantry above the elevator door, while Sabrael was racing to the far end of the chamber, his weapons gunning down several foes that were making a break for a stairwell up to a mezzanine floor. Fire from Zarall and Araton announced the opening of the other elevator door behind the sergeant as they broke out into the other part of the chamber.

Cassiel shifted his gaze and accelerated, the bolters mounted in the fairing of his bike adjusting their aim to where he looked. He pressed the firing studs and a hail of fire cut down two pirates lurking in the shadow of a large crate, the bolts puncturing flesh and snapping bone with their detonations. To the sergeant's right Annael slewed his machine around and fired at a handful of foes skulking beside a bulk-hauler, the flash of bolts sparking from the upraised lifting blades on the front of the vehicle. Las-fire snapped back as he cruised across the warehouse, still firing, the fusillade puncturing balloon tyres and severing hydraulic hoses.

Annael's next salvo struck a pool of leaking fuel. A blue fireball engulfed the load-hauler and several pirates, who staggered from their hiding places with clothes and hair aflame. Cassiel had no time to finish them off as he turned his bike to the left to confront a trio of foes clambering down one of the mezzanine ladders. Metal splinters filled the air as *Incitatus*'s guns blazed again, shredding the vulnerable pirates. Their ragged corpses flopped to the deck as Cassiel

continued to the ladder, one hand on the handlebars, the other pulling a grenade from his belt. He primed the charge and tossed it up through the ladder opening, accelerating away before the explosion scythed down more enemies trying to seek cover above.

‘Maintenance access, quadrant four, high,’ Annael reported sharply.

Cassiel switched his gaze to the left and saw more enemies issuing from a metre-high crawlspace. One of them was dragging a heavy stubber into view as a companion set up a tripod for the machine gun. Sabrael responded first, cutting back along the storage hold, bolt pistol in hand. He fired up through the mesh of the walkway, tearing the legs from the renegade with the stubber and sending another pitching back into the bulkhead minus his left arm.

Trusting that the threat would be dealt with, Annael was continuing his circuit, picking up speed as he curved across the open ground in the centre of the warehouse, Cassiel turning his bike to a counter-circuit of the space. The pair of them opened fire in brief bursts, driving the pirates further back into the darkness behind the stores.

Annael brought his bike to a stop facing a pallet laden with metal drums and fired on full automatic as Cassiel crossed past him. The sergeant noticed a movement in the shadows and directed his volley into more crates and drums lining the far wall, the bolts punching through the metal containers with ease. Cassiel fired again to ensure nobody survived behind the containers, the thrum of the bolters echoing loudly as the din of battle grew quieter.

Cassiel slowed, sensing the enemy were all but wiped out. As he looked back over his shoulder for a quick sweep, he saw there were only a handful of foes left.

One of them had a final surprise for the Dark Angels. A blue plasma bolt shrieked down from overhead, smashing into the rear of *Incitatus*. Molten metal, ceramite and hardened rubber sprayed into the air and the sergeant was flung from his mount as it careened past Annael, trailing sparks across the floor.

Pain surged up through Cassiel’s right leg and his helmet display was alight with warning runes, a high pitched alert whining in his ear. The plasma blast had thrown him from his mount, and the sergeant’s first glance was to check the condition of his steed. The whole back fairing armour had been melted through, the rear wheel turned to a slag of silver and black. Half a metre further forward and the plasma bolt would have struck the sergeant full on.

Incitatus was wrecked, and as he checked himself, the sergeant saw that his right leg was missing below the knee. The plasma had cauterised the wound with

its own energy; no immediate danger. Pulling free his pistol, Cassiel located the plasma gunner, who was skulking behind a support pillar while his weapon recharged. Increasing the magnification of his autosenses, the sergeant picked out the glow of the plasma gun's combustion chamber. A single bolt penetrated the shielding and the plasma gun detonated, enveloping the pirate in superheated gas. Skin blistering, flesh sloughing away from the bone, the man toppled over the walkway rail and spun crazily to the floor, his impact punctuated by another small detonation.

'Brother-sergeant?' Zarall drew his bike to a stop beside Cassiel, shielding the sergeant from the fire of the few remaining enemies.

'I will signal Command with my position. My steed is no more, anyway. Araton, you have the lead.' The sergeant looked down at the remnants of his leg, his augmented blood clotting the injury further, the spurts of dark red slowing to a trickle. 'It looks like I will not be riding with you for some time. Not until we return to the Rock and I can have a bionic fitted.'

'Nonsense,' said Sabrael as he and Annael turned their bikes' bolters on the remaining enemy. 'You can still ride gunner in an attack bike. I will drive for you.'

'I am obliged for the offer, brother, but if I am to be at the mercy of another's riding, I will choose Zarall or Araton. You are too fast for my liking!' Cassiel made light of the injury, knowing that he was in no immediate danger from the wound. More deeply felt was the damage to his steed, and his pride. Speed was one of the best defences of a Ravenwing biker, and Cassiel knew he had slowed too early, giving the plasma gunner an easier shot.

The last of the opposition died when a burst from Sabrael cut him in half across the chest. The warehouse suddenly fell quiet save for the throb of idling engines, the *ping* of cooling metal and the *clink* of settling shell cases.

'Area clear,' Annael announced. He joined the others as they gathered around Cassiel. Zarall dismounted and helped the sergeant across to the gantry stair where he was able to sit down, the metal steps sagging slightly under the Space Marine's weight.

'Keep pushing hubwards and then come around to sector four to meet up with the Grand Master's advance,' Cassiel told them. The ruined stub of his leg was now a black and brown mottled mass of coagulant and Larraman cells, the scab thick and leathery. Reloading his pistol, the sergeant gestured towards the wide warehouse doors. 'No delays. Get moving.'

'We will return for you, brother,' said Sabrael, slapping a fist to the aquila on

his chest as he turned his bike away. ‘Unless the Apothecaries reach you first.’

‘Concentrate on the mission, brothers. I am not the first casualty we have ever suffered.’

‘Vengeance shall be ours,’ said Zarall. ‘Every drop of blood shed by our own will be atoned for by a river from our foes.’

Cassiel noticed Annael, the newest recruit to the squadron, and raised a hand in thanks as the other Dark Angel bowed his head in respect as he rode past.

‘You are doing well, Annael,’ Cassiel said as Annael turned away and gunned his steed after the others. ‘A true brother of the Ravenwing.’

‘We will be using fists and pistols before we are done,’ Annael said as the squadron rolled out through the opening doors.

‘We shall smite the enemy, brother,’ replied Zarall. ‘Any way that we can.’

‘This is Sergeant Cassiel, signalling Grand Master Sammael.’ The sergeant watched as the others disappeared from view. ‘I have been rendered combat ineffective. Request Apothecary and Techmarine attendance to my transponder location.’

In an upper loading deck half a kilometre from the Ravenwing’s main insertion, Grand Master Sammael paused to take stock of the strategic situation. Pirate corpses littered the bay around Sammael and his command squad, and amongst the sable-liveried warriors of the Dark Angels one stood out in his white armour: Apothecary Gideon.

Gideon’s comm-net feed buzzed with activity, tuning in to any transmissions containing key words and phrases that required his attention: ‘Apothecary’, ‘medical aid’, ‘casualty’, ‘injured’, ‘trauma’. During the initial attack there had been no need of his attention, the shock of the Ravenwing assault preventing any serious casualties. However, as the fighting became more protracted and the defenders of Port Imperial responded in force to the intruders, several engagements had resulted in more significant injuries to the Space Marines under his charge.

The Apothecary had just finished replying to a call and was about to request permission to respond when his vox tapped into a communication to the Grand Master, replaying the last few seconds of transmission.

‘This is Sergeant Cassiel, signalling Grand Master Sammael. I have been rendered combat ineffective. Request Apothecary and Techmarine attendance to my transponder location.’

A coded identifier tag confirmed the transmission originated from the sergeant,

though not all casualties were capable of broadcasting their identity or position.

‘Understood, brother,’ replied the Grand Master. ‘Remain in position. There is a squadron within two kilometres of your location, await their arrival.’ Sammael cut the link with Sergeant Cassiel and turned to Gideon. ‘Join with Sergeant Charael and his Black Knights. They will perform escort for you. Of the casualties, which is your priority?’

‘Brother Gabrael needs my attention swiftly,’ replied the Apothecary, referring to a communication he had received moments before Sergeant Cassiel’s. ‘The others are stable as far as I can judge by the reports.’

‘Very well.’ Sammael paused, checking the data display on his steed. ‘Tell Charael you can cut through a maintenance hangar grid-north-west of here. That should take you to Gabrael and his squadron with least delay.’

‘As you command, Grand Master,’ said Gideon. The Apothecary turned his bike around and headed back towards the docking spar where the majority of the Ravenwing had inserted aboard their gunships.

Following the telemetry guidance of his steed, *Eclipse*, Gideon sped through the empty chambers and tunnels of Port Imperial, occasionally passing piles of bodies and other signs of fighting. His bike’s augur detected the signal of Charael’s Black Knights not far ahead even as the distant ring of detonations and grenade blasts echoed back down the corridors.

Gunning the engine, Gideon caught up with the Black Knights as they exchanged fire with a group of pirates holed up behind makeshift barricades at the end of a transit corridor. Plasma fire had smashed through some of the upturned containers and wrecked transport loaders, but not enough to clear a gap for Charael’s squadron to ride through. Thwarted by the barrier, they had withdrawn and were using the grenade launchers of their steeds to lob explosives beyond the barricade. Despite this, there were still several life signals on Gideon’s display as he joined the squadron.

‘The Grand Master said you would be joining us,’ said Charael. The huntmaster turned his ornate winged helm to look at the Apothecary as sporadic las- and bullet-fire whipped down the long corridor towards the Black Knights. ‘How bad is Brother Gabrael’s condition?’

‘Severe chest injury,’ said Gideon. ‘Last report said he was rapidly deteriorating. We have little time.’

Charael grunted in response and returned his gaze to the two-metre-high barricade.

‘The wall must part before us,’ he told his squadron. ‘Durrigan, load stasis

grenade. Squadron, pistol covering fire. Follow me!’

Gideon fell in behind the six-strong squadron as they once more roared down the tunnel towards the enemy. The weight of fire increased to greet them as Charael surged ahead. Fifty metres from the barricade, the Black Knights slewed their bikes to a stop and opened fire with their bolt pistols, the rounds snapping past Charael as he continued to close with the enemy.

‘Durrigan, now!’ ordered the huntmaster.

The Black Knight’s grenade launcher coughed once, sending a glittering orb arcing over the barricade. Just as it fell from view, the stasis charge detonated, throwing up a crackling globe of white. Everything inside the field slowed for a moment. Gideon could see a pirate reloading the charge pack on his lasgun, seemingly frozen in place; another rebel was suspended in the act of ducking behind the plasma-melted engine of a cargo hauler, his face caught in a wide-eyed stare.

Tyres screeching and skidding across the deck, Charael hauled his steed sideways and tossed something onto one of the barricade sections. The charge was caught right on the edge of the stasis field and hung in midair, a red light glinting at its centre. Turning his steed around, the Huntmaster headed back towards the squadron.

Two seconds later the stasis field collapsed. Bullets and las-flares rang out, criss-crossing with bolt-rounds, while the charge thrown by Charael clanged heavily against the barricade.

Another second passed before the melta bomb detonated, shredding the metal carcass of a loading vehicle, spraying white-hot metal and deadly splinters.

The Black Knights needed no further order and formed up in a line behind their huntmaster as he aimed his bike at the gap.

‘No cease in our speed, we will return for justice later,’ commanded Charael as his bike disappeared into the pall of smoke billowing from the ruined barricade.

Gideon trusted to his autosenses and aimed for the gap, on the tail of the last Black Knight. The squadron plunged through the opening, still accelerating as the shocked pirates hurled themselves out of their path.

Not pausing to finish off their foes, the squadron raced on into the depths of Port Imperial, forming up in escort around Gideon. A few last desultory rounds sparked from their armour and the walls as the pirates sent a final flurry of shots after them.

The Apothecary activated his vox-link.

‘Sergeant Tennerus, how is Gabrael?’

‘Barely conscious, brother.’

‘Hold firm, we will be with you shortly.’

Gideon cut the link and concentrated on following Charael as he swerved between heaps of debris, past collapsed walls and through doors at breakneck speed. The Apothecary was determined that no Dark Angel would die today if he could prevent it.

Considering his situation, Cassiel concluded that he had been in more dire circumstances before, but not many. Glancing around the battle-marked warehouse, he considered his options and formulated a plan. His first priority was to reduce the number of entrances into the chamber, so that the enemy would not be able to come at him from too many directions.

Heaving himself from the steps, he used the wall as a brace to hobble towards the main doors. He activated the locking mechanism and keyed in a new override code so that the pirates would not be able to open it again. With this done, he conveyed himself across the chamber in a series of leaps towards the elevator, pausing every few seconds to scan the upper level and hatchways for foes. It was not a dignified way to move, but it was effective, and within a minute he had reached the elevator doors.

Pushing himself upright inside the cage, he smashed a fist into the control panel, ripping out the workings with his gauntleted fingers. To make sure of his handiwork, he pulled a grenade from his belt, set the charge to ten seconds’ delay and forced it into the ragged hole he had made.

Exiting the elevator, Cassiel propelled himself back towards the remains of *Incitatus*. He had covered about twenty metres when the grenade detonated behind him. Tortured metal screeched for a moment and he turned to see the cage dropping from view, its descent ending with a thunderous crash a few seconds later.

With a combination of jumping and crawling, he dragged himself on to the broken remnants of his steed and checked its condition. There was no way it could be ridden; the back end and wheel were completely destroyed. However, a quick diagnostic scan showed that most of the major systems were still working and he activated *Incitatus*’s auspex. The scanner blinked into life on the display, showing roughly half a dozen life signals close at hand, on the level above the warehouse.

Pulling free his bolt pistol, the sergeant manoeuvred himself with his back propped up against the bike, facing towards a pair of maintenance ducts about

thirty metres away. His autosenses picked up the sounds of heavy breaths and the scrape of boots issuing from the narrow passages.

‘Come on in, little rats,’ he muttered.

The first pirate that crawled out of the duct was a woman, dressed in dirty blue coveralls and a padded helmet. She had a lasgun slung awkwardly across her chest and she struggled to free the weapon as she stood up.

Cassiel’s bolt took her full in the face, blowing her head apart.

Switching his view to thermal scan, he sent three rounds into the other vent access, the white detonations of the bolts creating a spatter of orange against the accessway lining. Turning his attention back to the first duct, he fired again, two bolts greeting another pirate as he tried to push himself free of its confines.

The vague blobs of heat that signified the presence of the other attackers withdrew before he could fire again. Turning slightly, he checked *Incitatus*’s display. The gunfire had attracted some attention, or perhaps the rebels had communicated his presence in some other way. Whatever the cause, more signals were converging on his position from above.

Pulling himself to his right, Cassiel searched through his bike’s remaining pannier storage compartment and found another four bolt pistol magazines and several frag grenades. He laid them on the decking beside him within easy reach, took another look at the auspex returns, and waited for the next group of attackers to make their move.

Gideon and the Black Knights found Gabrael and his battle-brothers at a crossroads of sorts: a high vaulted chamber where six tunnelways converged. The area was choked with fallen debris from the bombardment of the two strike cruisers and Gabrael lay atop a mound of rubble next to his half-buried steed. Sergeant Tennerus was dismounted beside him while the rest of the squadron had been dispersed to hold three of the intersecting passages; their bike-mounted bolters rang out intermittently as they confronted incoming groups of pirates.

‘Praise the Lion you are here, brother,’ said Tennerus, stepping away from the prone Space Marine.

‘We will aid the defence,’ announced Charael, indicating to his squadron to follow him as he continued past the casualty. ‘Take all the time needed.’

‘I think Sergeant Cassiel might prefer otherwise,’ replied Gideon as he stepped off *Eclipse*’s saddle.

‘A grenade dislodged a partially collapsed support,’ explained Tennerus. ‘Bad luck, nothing more.’

Gabrael's helm had been removed and his face was covered with waxy sweat, eyelids flickering between wakefulness and unconsciousness. A trail of blood showed where he had been dragged from the rubble, but it was not the half-tonne of rockrete that had caused the damage. Jutting from the left side of the Space Marine's chest was a five-centimetre-thick reinforcing spar. Thick, coagulating fluid bubbled across his plastron from the wound, coating his black armour with a slick sheen.

Gideon worked in silence, removing Gabrael's shoulder guards first, trying not to move the casualty, so that he could decouple the breastplate. With this done, Gideon stood and gestured to Tennerus.

'I need you to pull out the bar, sergeant.'

Tennerus nodded, grasping the jutting shaft in both hands. He steadied himself, planting his feet apart to brace, and then looked again at the Apothecary.

'Swiftly and surely, brother,' Gideon assured the sergeant.

With another nod, Tennerus flexed his grip and then pulled.

Gabrael moaned, blood-flecked saliva bubbling from his mouth as the sergeant wrenched away the spar and chestplate together, exposing the wound. The Space Marine had been forced down onto the jagged metal, which had driven up through his ribcage into the chest cavity, piercing a lung and possibly one of Gabrael's hearts. Any normal human would have died instantly, and many Space Marines too, but Gabrael was obviously made of sterner stuff and Gideon was impressed he was able to remain semi-aware.

'Bad, but not fatal,' Gideon announced, examining the damage.

He activated the narthecium built into the gauntlet and forearm of his left arm, spraying anaesthetic agent into the bloody gash. Bloodied miniature bonesaws and suturing needles worked at the wound under Gideon's direction, stitching and patching the internal damage as best he could, stemming the worst of the blood loss. The Apothecary finished with an organic foam sealant that quickly hardened, reinforcing the scabbing that was already occurring.

'He can be moved,' Gideon said, standing up. 'Sergeant, detail one of your warriors to take him back to grid alpha. I have orderlies there ready to evacuate casualties back to the strike cruiser. They will be able to stabilise him further.'

'Our thanks, Brother-Apothecary,' said Tennerus.

Gideon said nothing and opened up a communication channel.

'Sergeant Cassiel, your signal is still strong. What is your condition?'

Several seconds passed before Cassiel replied.

'I am a little busy with these pirate scum, Brother Gideon, but otherwise faring

well.'

'Acknowledged, sergeant. I will be en route to your position shortly.'

'I'll be waiting. Nowhere else to go for the moment.'

Gideon smiled at the sergeant's poor joke and cut the vox-link. He reviewed the last few minutes' worth of filtered transmissions and assured himself that there had been no further serious injuries requiring more immediate attention than Cassiel.

'Huntermaster, please fix on Sergeant Cassiel's position. Let us leave Sergeant Tennerus and his brothers to their mission.'

'As you wish, Brother-Apothecary,' came Charael's reply. 'Fixing augurs on Cassiel's location beacon. One and a half kilometres, grid north-east.'

Gideon mounted *Eclipse* and raised a hand in salute to Gabrael as Tennerus lifted the wounded Space Marine to his feet. There was already more clarity in the Dark Angel's eyes.

'Only in death does duty end,' Gabrael said hoarsely.

'Aye, brother,' replied Gideon. 'Yours will not end this day.'

Slipping another magazine into his bolt pistol – only two left – Cassiel wondered why the rebels seemed so determined to kill him. In his current state and position he posed no operational threat to their plans, yet they had come at him three more times since the squadron had departed. Twenty-two more bodies lay cooling in the dim light of the warehouse as testament to the welcome he had given them.

He had heard over the vox-link talk of the 'Unworthy'. From the scattered information he gathered that these rebels were more than mere pirates. They had a cult-like mentality, and it seemed that they considered slaying him as some kind of unholy goal. Fortunately, their single-mindedness was not matched by their skill, or their tactical acumen. They seemed willing to die by the dozen in exchange for just his death; a situation that allowed him to continue to aid his brothers' efforts by continuing to survive.

With an instinctual glance at the auspex, the sergeant confirmed that the Unworthy had given up trying to enter the warehouse through the maintenance ducts and accessways. Now they had gathered outside the main doors.

Casting his gaze towards the large portal he could see the glow of some kind of cutting gear heating up the metal; a las-cutter most likely, unwieldy and slow compared to a melta-charge. Though their entry would not be swift, their numbers were still growing. The life signals merged together on the auspex but

numbered at least two dozen.

For a moment, Cassiel considered signalling to command for assistance. He dismissed the notion quickly. The Ravenwing and Fifth Company had a task to complete, to apprehend the mysterious enemy commander who was referred to as the Overlord by the Unworthy. It would be a grossly selfish act by Cassiel to distract them from that objective simply for his own survival.

With that decision made, the sergeant considered how best to confront the growing threat outside the main doors. He evaluated his resources.

Firstly, himself. Mobility impaired, thirty rounds of bolt pistol ammunition remaining. His short-bladed power sword was still sheathed at his waist. Sufficient for the moment, but against a concerted attack from a single direction he would eventually be overwhelmed.

Secondly, *Incitatus*. Pulling himself over the bike's remains, Cassiel inspected his fallen steed's weapon systems. The right-mounted bolter was operational but the ammunition and feed had been destroyed by the plasma blast. The left bolter system was still intact.

His hands moved without thought, centuries of maintenance and experience guiding his fingers better than conscious effort, as he decoupled the bolter from its mounting and dragged free the chain of bolt ammunition. Setting this to one side, he checked on the doors, seeing droplets of metal now running down the inside. He still had a couple of minutes until the Unworthy made their first breach.

He freed the right-hand bolter next, pulling it away from the mangled remnants of the feed mechanism. He gave silent thanks to the ancient tech-priests that had first devised the wargear of the Adeptus Astartes ten thousand years before as he slipped back the bolter's casing, exposing a slot that matched his pistol magazines. He slammed in the spare and reattached the bolter to *Incitatus*, dragging the bike through ninety degrees so that the front mounting was aimed towards the door. The fairing canopy would add to the protection afforded by his power armour.

The outline of a roughly man-sized hole was glowing across the door now, the metal flowing into pools to cool on the decking.

Cassiel settled as best he could and rested his arm on the top of the bike's fairing, pistol in hand, and waited.

With a *clang*, the cut section of door dropped into the warehouse. Cassiel did not wait to see an enemy, but opened fire immediately, sending a flurry of bolts into the opening, rewarded by shrieks of pain from whoever had been wielding

the las-cutter.

The first pirate through was cut in half by Cassiel's next salvo, as was the next. There seemed to be no fear in the Unworthy as they leapt through the gap, wildly snapping shots from lasguns and autoguns, each met by one or two carefully-placed bolt-rounds.

In the press of bodies, one of the pirates made a move for the door control panel. From the inside, the override code could be circumvented. Cassiel recognised the danger immediately and adjusted his aim, ignoring another Unworthy who was levelling her automatic pistol in his direction. The pirate reaching for the door controls fell with a fist-sized hole in the back of his head as the other let loose with a burst of fire.

Bullets sprayed from *Incitatus*'s front mounting, flecking chips of ceramite and paint into Cassiel's face. He didn't flinch, and calmly fired back, sending two bolts into the Unworthy's gut and chest. The momentary distraction had allowed two more pirates to enter, and they again split, forcing Cassiel to divide his fire as a las-flash streaked off his left shoulder guard.

Ditching the empty bolt pistol, Cassiel grabbed the manual trigger of the bike bolter and fired on full automatic, emptying the fifteen-bolt magazine in a few seconds, shredding the handful of Unworthy that had gained entry. A glance down at the auspex glowing beside him showed that there were about half a dozen foes left.

Cassiel freed a grenade from his belt and lobbed it through the hole in the door, the flash of its detonation silhouetting two pirates for a moment before the fragmentation shards flung their bodies through the opening.

Silence descended, broken by the patter of feet as the surviving Unworthy retreated. Through the ragged breach in the door he could see them regrouping at the far end of the corridor. With this he realised that as well as he could see them, they could see him. If he remained where he was, and if the Unworthy could find another plasma gun or perhaps a rocket launcher or other heavy weapon, he would be in plain sight for a long-range shot.

He rolled away from the bike to get out of sight, taking the dismantled bolter with him. From this angle he could still see a few metres up the passageway, but no further. Cassiel gathered up the snaking cable of the ammunition feed and coiled it on the floor next to him.

Pressing the firing stud on his bike's handlebars, Gideon unleashed a ripple of bolt detonations into the packed enemies ahead. Around him, more fire spewed

down the passageway from his escort. The green-skinned brutes parted like a wave before the charge of the Black Knights; the presence of orks aboard Port Imperial had come as a surprise to the Dark Angels. Somehow, the xenos fiends had found common cause with the Unworthy and were proving a tougher foe to eliminate.

Gideon and the squadron were responding to a call for aid from a squad from the Fifth Company, who had been set upon by the orks whilst clearing out a maze of chambers beneath one of the major power and coolant interchanges. One of the Space Marines was already dead and another critically wounded, forcing the Apothecary to adjust his priorities.

As more orks tumbled lifelessly to the floor, Gideon caught a glimpse of his green-armoured brethren defending a stairwell and intersection. The orks came at them from above and below and the squad was engulfed in a storm of bullets, las-fire and grenade blasts.

Like a thunderbolt, the Black Knights swept into the press of foes, swinging their glowing corvus hammers, Charael leading the charge with glittering power sword chopping to the left and right. Gideon tracked his fire to one side, sending another hail of bullets into one of the adjoining corridors as he slowed at the junction, cutting down more foes.

Stirred by the arrival of reinforcements, the warriors of the Fifth Company sallied out from their defensive position, bolters blazing, their sergeant wading into the orks with wide sweeps of his chainsword. Gideon slowed only enough to avoid a pile of the dead, cannoning through the orks directly, sending them sprawling to either side; the Black Knights were around him to guard against counter-attack.

Tyres screeching, Gideon brought *Eclipse* to a stop at the foot of the stairwell and leapt onto the steps, his narthecium activated. Halfway to the next landing, two brothers of the squad stood guard over their wounded companion, their bolters holding back a mob of human pirates trying to descend.

Gideon ignored the fighting and stooped over the injured Space Marine. His helmet had been cleaved almost in two, skull and face opened up by the jagged teeth of some viciously toothed chain-weapon. His right ear was missing and his jaw hanging limply, breaths coming fast and ragged. Now and then a spray of bullets or spatter of las-fire sparked from the bulkhead beside the Apothecary but he focused on the task at hand.

He inserted one of the narthecium's injectors into the neck of the wounded battle-brother, sending a stream of stimulants into the Dark Angel. Almost

immediately his eyes flickered open, confused and roving. The Larraman cells coursing through the Space Marine's bloodstream had created a thick clot over the worst of the wound, but prevented Gideon from seeing the damage within. He applied an anti-coagulant and deftly scraped away the scab, exposing torn artery and shattered skull.

'Not much I can do about the bone damage here,' he told the warrior, who had now fixed the Apothecary with an intent, almost mindless stare. 'The blood loss is another matter.'

Reaching into a pouch at his belt, Gideon brought forth a length of resinous, flexible piping. It was a crude substitute for cartilage and flesh but would suffice for the moment.

'Be still, brother,' he said, laying a hand on the Space Marine's chest as he attempted to sit up.

Skilfully and swiftly, Gideon removed two centimetres of damaged artery from the neck of the Space Marine, quickly replacing it with the surgical tubing. Bio-gel and organic weld secured the bypass in place, but before the Apothecary could apply a layer of protective foam sheath a shouted warning from above drew his attention.

The Unworthy had rushed the two Space Marines at the top of the stair, and though a handful lay dead, one had managed to slip past in the fray and came at Gideon with an upraised axe.

The Apothecary reacted in a moment, punching the blades and syringes of his narthecium into the pirate's chest, hurling him backwards. Blood frothed from the gaping wound and the man spasmed and thrashed as a lethal cocktail of elixirs created for the augmented physiology of Space Marines coursed through his all-too-human system. Blood poured from his ears and mouth and his eyes burst from the internal pressure.

Two seconds later the man fell still, organs and nervous system totally overloaded by the stimms and vital fluids that had ravaged his body.

Back at the top of the stairwell, the Space Marines had thrown back the fresh attack and were finishing off the wounded with single bolt-rounds.

'Apologies, Brother-Apothecary,' one of them said, turning to look at Gideon. 'Such disturbance will not happen again.'

Gideon nodded and returned to his charge, cauterising and sealing the wound. When he was done, he glanced back down to the intersection to see that Charael and his warriors, with the help of the Fifth Company battle-brothers, had slain the orks.

‘My work here is almost complete,’ said Gideon.

‘The presence of the orks has changed the strategic situation,’ replied Charael. ‘Master Sammael requests that we rejoin the main assault.’

‘Then do so,’ said the Apothecary. He switched his comm-feed and hailed Sergeant Cassiel.

‘This is Cassiel,’ came the reply.

‘What is your current situation, brother-sergeant?’

‘Combat outcome is deteriorating, Brother-Apothecary, although physically I have suffered no further injury.’

‘I am only a few hundred metres from your position, but we have a substantial enemy presence between us. Can you relocate?’

There was a pause and some grunting.

‘I shall attempt to move position, brother, though I must confess I am not wholly sure where I might find sufficient surcease from attack.’

‘If possible head to rimwards, brother, the fighting is strongest towards the central spires.’

‘Understood. Location transponder still operational.’

‘Keep strong, sergeant, I am coming.’

‘We cannot ride escort, brother,’ said Charael as Gideon cut the link. ‘Did you not hear?’

‘I understand, huntmaster,’ Gideon replied. He strode back to *Eclipse* and mounted. ‘Thank you for your assistance but I will proceed alone from here.’

Charael lifted his blade in salute to the Apothecary’s decision and Gideon raised a fist in reply.

‘Speed well and bring salvation, brother,’ said the huntmaster, before leading his squadron away.

Cassiel had not been entirely truthful in his report to the Apothecary. His entire leg was now numb and his right side and arm were also starting to lose sensation. Knowing that his strength would not last forever, he worked quickly, knowing from the auspex scan that his foes were once again gathering their strength before their next attack. He had accounted for another forty enemies, give or take a couple, but each Unworthy that fell seemed to only add to their determination to see him dead; perhaps they desired to settle the score regardless of cost.

Looping the bolter feed around his arm, the sergeant set about uncoupling the main unit from *Incitatus*, the bulky cogitator and display that retained the spirit

of his steed. Detaching the device from the bike, he set it to one side and primed the anti-tamper mechanism of his fallen mount. With a grunt, he grabbed the machine-spirit casing under one arm, took up the bolter and crawled back across the warehouse towards the open elevator shaft.

Detached from the bike's scanning systems, the auspex had been reduced to short range, intermittently beeping out the welter of contacts behind Cassiel as he dragged himself metre-by-metre towards his escape route. The sound became a more insistent shrilling as the enemy signals started to close once more, and with a last effort, the sergeant hauled himself to the edge of the shaft. A glance at the display showed that the Unworthy, dozens of them, were only a few metres beyond the broken doors.

Taking a deep breath, Cassiel looked down the shaft. The remnants of the elevator cage were about twenty metres below, three levels down. Pieces of snapped metal jutted dangerously up towards him, but a look up confirmed there were no good handholds to effect a climb. At least not with the bolter and machine-spirit console to carry.

The sound of running footsteps spurred the sergeant into action.

He pushed himself over the lip of the drop, angling his fall so that his backpack would take the brunt of the damage.

Cassiel's landing smashed his head into something hard and through the ringing in his ears he dimly heard the thunderous reverberation of his fall echoing back up the shaft. He lay dazed for a moment, vision swimming. A damage warning indicator flashed at the edge of his vision and a whining tone alerted him to several systems failures in his armour, but he did not care.

'The Machine-God blessed you well,' he muttered in thanks to the spirit of his powered suit. 'I shall see that proper honour is paid when opportunity presents.'

The open access door above glowed brighter for an instant, followed by the sharp noise from the explosion of his bike's self-termination – one of the Unworthy had not been able to fight curiosity, apparently. Shrieks of the wounded and cries of surprise sounded out moments later.

Smiling grimly to himself, faculties returning, Cassiel pulled himself free from the tangle of the cage around him; the metal struts had been flattened by the impact of his fall. Rolling to one side, he managed to pull himself upright, powered fingers tearing at the mesh of the cage door. Shots started to ring out from above, shells and las-blasts lighting the interior of the elevator shaft.

Cassiel considered firing back but decided to conserve energy and ammunition. With a snarl, he pulled apart the last segment of the cage door and flopped out

into the hallway beyond.

He checked his surroundings, finding himself at the end of a short corridor, which split into a T-junction ten metres away. There were no other routes of entry or exit.

Would the Unworthy attempt the climb down? Unlikely, he concluded, but not impossible. Also, a grenade thrown down the shaft might gift his foes a lucky bounce into the hall. And, when he thought about it, he was Ravenwing and mobility, however much impaired, was still a weapon to be used.

The throbbing pain from his leg was becoming harder to ignore as his armour's suppressant systems started to run out of stimulants. Steeling himself, Cassiel forced himself upright, slumping against the bulkhead wall. He looked back at the remains of the elevator cage but saw nothing that would be strong enough to fashion into a crutch, so he turned away and started hop-shuffling his way along the corridor, bolter in one hand, *Incitatus*'s spirit in the other.

The Dark Angels' drive towards the central command and habitation spires had punched through the defenders of Port Imperial, leaving scattered bands of pirates and orks in their wake. As Gideon rode through the dilapidated tunnels the roar of *Eclipse*'s engine heralded his approach, sending stray auspex returns and half-seen figures running from his path.

Here and there he encountered signs of fighting – bullet-pocked walls, bloody corpses and discarded weapons. Occasionally shots sounded in the distance, echoing oddly through the maze of chambers and passages, their sources unknown.

Gideon opened a vox-channel, concerned that his efforts might yet turn out to be in vain.

‘Sergeant Cassiel, respond. What is your situation?’

Several seconds passed without reply. The Apothecary turned his bike onto a main thoroughfare, noting as he did so the orkish graffiti and the drifts of garbage against the walls. A check of the bike display confirmed that he was only four hundred metres from Cassiel's transponder position, but also that there were quite a number of unknown energy signatures converging in front of him. An off-ramp less than a hundred metres ahead would take him into the sub-decks where Cassiel would be found.

Taking the curving ramp, Gideon had to brake sharply as he almost rode into an improvised barricade across the roadway. Storage vats, plates of corrugated metal and other detritus were heaped across his path, metal spars jutting out like

the stakes of a revetment.

As he wrenched *Eclipse* to the side, tyres juddering over the uneven floor, Gideon saw something else: metal discs half-hidden amongst the trash strewn over the ferrocrete surface. Explosive mines. He braked harder, shedding beads of rubber from the reinforced tyres of his steed, avoiding a mine by less than a metre.

He stopped, staring at the obstacle, calculating a path through the mess of explosives and debris, but as he did so he also saw a number of enemy signals congregating on his position from stairs and ducts along the rampway.

A pair of Unworthy burst out of a floor-level maintenance hatch to his right, pistols spitting bullets. A glance directed *Eclipse*'s bolters in their direction and the Apothecary opened fire, cutting them down as shells sparked from his armour and the canopy of his steed. Others were taking position behind the cover of the barricades; pirates and orks together.

'Shade of the Lion,' Gideon cursed, returning fire with his bolt pistol as enemy shots zipped and buzzed around him.

Immobile, he would make too easy a target for his foes, but the mines and obstacles gave him no room to manoeuvre. With a frustrated snarl, Gideon wrenched his mount around, turning back to the main tunnel. As much as he wished to fight, he had a greater priority. Just as the Grand Master was intent upon reaching his objective and would deal with the survivors later, so he too had to withdraw from battle to achieve a higher goal, though it pained him to do so. He might be an Apothecary by rank and expertise, but he was still a Space Marine of the Dark Angels and it wounded his honour to leave the enemy without retort.

Hitting the main transit route again, he opened the throttle full, knowing that every delay and backtrack cost him time and might cost Cassiel his life.

Firing again as another Unworthy came around the corner of the corridor, Cassiel put a bolt into the man's leg, sending him toppling sideways. Another shot ripped open the pirate's chest as he struggled to stand. The sergeant continued to unleash a hail of bolts as more foes tried to dash across the passage to the sanctuary of a doorway to his right. None reached their goal, their bodies and limbs ripped and torn by the flurry of detonations.

In the brief pause that followed, Cassiel turned and hopped further along the concourse, heading towards a stairwell twenty metres away. A las-blast skimmed from the wall next to him and Cassiel turned back again after only a few metres,

firing once more at a pirate poking his weapon around the corner. The bolt hit the man's lasgun, shattering the weapon, sending slivers of plastek into his old, wrinkled face. He fell back out of sight with a cry.

More Unworthy burst into view, firing their weapons wildly in Cassiel's direction as they raced towards the door, trying to outflank him. Bullets cracked against the sergeant's armour and one struck the elbow joint of his left arm. His hand spasmed with pain and *Incitatus*'s mind core fell to the deck with a clang.

Thoughts muddled with pain, Cassiel returned fire, cutting down two foes, but two more reached the haven of the doorway and disappeared into the hall beyond. The sergeant gazed numbly at the bike console lying at his feet and for a moment considered leaving it there; a free hand would be invaluable.

He could not forsake the spirit of his mount, though. He had sworn on his honour as a warrior of the Ravenwing to serve and protect his steed as it served and protected him, and he was not about to abandon *Incitatus*'s machine-spirit to an uncertain fate.

Summoning up what focus he could, Cassiel directed a deadly torrent of fire at the next band of reckless pirates to dash into the corridor. The first was flung back by two hits to the chest; the second fell with half her head missing; the third was sent spinning to the deck with a bolt in the shoulder, his arm hanging by threads of bone and sinew. As he fired, Cassiel dimly noted that there were about thirty rounds remaining in the feed belt of his weapon.

With a last salvo of fire to drive back any more pursuers, Cassiel stooped to snatch up *Incitatus*'s cogitator. Gripping the boxy device to his chest he laboured towards the stairwell, aware that another door ahead passed into the same room into which some of the Unworthy had run.

The pirates emerged just ahead of him, autoguns held at their waists, firing madly. Cassiel snarled as he was caught in the hail of bullets, his shoulder guards and plastron sparking with impacts, chips of ceramite and slivers of paint forming a dust cloud around him. Raising his bolter he returned fire, still slumping against the wall, hopping forward as best he could.

The two men were cut down in a single fusillade, bodies raked with bolts, their blood splashing against the walls and decking. More fire rattled against the sergeant from behind, but this time he did not pause but with a herculean effort propelled himself towards the welcoming sanctuary of the now-empty doorway.

He almost fell into the room – some kind of storage bay lined with empty shelves and broken crates – and only saved himself from toppling by slamming against the frame of the door. Cassiel pivoted and fired back up the corridor

before launching himself across the corridor towards the steps.

Even the sergeant's enhanced muscles and power armour-boosted leap could not make the gap and he fell short, falling with a loud clatter a metre short of the stairwell. Rolling to his side, he fired blindly along the passageway, his good leg trying to find purchase to heave himself the last metre to the next moment of safety.

A rocket sped past his head, exploding behind him.

Cassiel had thought he had no strength left but the appearance of a heavy weapon amongst the enemy spurred him into another impossible effort, flinging himself bodily down the stairs. He rolled and bounced down the steps, cracking armour and ferrocrete, coming to an ungainly stop at a landing. Out of instinct he turned and pushed himself away from the wall, once more tossed and spun by his descent down the next flight.

The chamber below was lit only by dim red emergency lighting. In the gloom Cassiel could see only one exit, a sealed door just to his right. Hooking the bolter on his belt, the sergeant tried the wheel-lock but it would not move, rusted shut by decades of neglect.

The sound of boots on the steps caused him to turn, snatching up the bolter again. He did not need to check the auspex to know that dozens of foes were close on his heels, intent on his death. The sergeant fired as the first of them rounded the landing above, and kept firing as more and more Unworthy descended.

Still shooting, Cassiel allowed himself to slump to the deck, propped up against the door.

The bolter clicked empty but it took a moment for his pain-addled senses to register that he was out of ammunition. He tossed the weapon aside, but the hesitation allowed the Unworthy to set upon him with blades and rifle butts before he could draw his sword.

Still Cassiel fought back, snatching a man by the throat to slam him into his companions. The sergeant swung the cogitator as a weapon, cracking open the skull of a pirate even as his fingers drove into the chest of a third.

There was a heartbeat's pause as the dead men fell away, the others behind blocked by their deceased comrades. Cassiel snatched his sword from its sheath, its glowing blade swinging up to sever the arm from a woman looking to drive a knife into the sergeant's face.

Cassiel's rage at being cornered like an animal boiled up inside him. A maul clanged against his helm and an axe head skittered from his right pauldron as he

surged up, power sword carving a bloody ruin through the foes that surrounded him.

‘For the Emperor! For the Lion!’

The sounds of fighting from ahead had fallen silent, raising grim suspicion in Gideon. Like a white-and-black thunderbolt he had fallen upon the Unworthy as they had surged towards Cassiel’s last position, *Eclipse*’s bolters roaring as the Apothecary drove headlong through them.

Confronted by the vengeful apparition of the Apothecary, unharmed and bellowing for vengeance, the Unworthy scattered, fleeing back into the ducts and holes rather than face his wrath. Coming to a turning, Gideon slowed, heaving his bike around the corner, the heavy machine pulping through the remains of a score of dead pirates. Cassiel had certainly taken a heavy toll before succumbing.

Following the blinking light of the sergeant’s transponder on the display, Gideon came to a halt next to a stairwell. More bodies littered the steps, a mess of flesh and blood. The Apothecary saw from the auspex return that the Unworthy had withdrawn several dozen metres, scampering away through the narrow hatches and under-levels where he could not follow.

With pistol in hand, Gideon descended the steps, treading carefully over the dead Unworthy. At the bottom of the stairs was a scene of total carnage: bodies lay upon each other, gouged, limbless or decapitated, at least another dozen.

Of Cassiel there was no sign.

It was only as the Apothecary shifted one of the bodies that he spied black armour. Dragging aside the dead pirates, he unearthed Sergeant Cassiel from the mound. He still held his power blade in one hand and the cogitator console of a bike in the other.

‘Brother? Brother Cassiel?’

The sergeant’s armour was a bloody mess, but how much was his and how much had belonged to his foes was impossible to tell. His helm was scratched and battered, but otherwise seemed intact. Lowering to one knee, Gideon rapped on the sergeant’s breastplate.

‘Sergeant! Sergeant Cassiel!’

The Space Marine’s arm twitched and Gideon had to react quickly, grabbing Cassiel’s wrist as he swung his power sword towards the Apothecary.

‘It is Gideon, brother!’

Cassiel’s arm relaxed and he slowly turned his head to look at the Apothecary.

‘A welcome sight, Brother Gideon,’ croaked the sergeant.

‘For me, also. I am glad my efforts have not proved fruitless.’

Gideon helped up Cassiel, supporting the sergeant with his free arm.

‘An effort that is appreciated, brother, but I do not understand something. There must be others requiring your assistance, why expend so much energy for me when my brothers still fight?’

‘I will attend to them soon enough, brother-sergeant,’ Gideon said, guiding Cassiel to the steps. ‘None have been fighting harder than you. They know, as you did, that no matter where they fall, the Chapter shall not forget them, and nor shall I.’

Cassiel looked down at the blood-slicked, battered casing of his bike’s cogitation engine.

‘Aye, I understand, Gideon. We stand together and fall together.’ He clasped the cogitator to his chest. ‘The Master of the Forge will find a new body for my steed, even as mine is repaired. We fight for the Emperor, for the Lion and, perhaps above all, for each other. That is what it is to be battle-brothers.’



ACCEPT NO FAILURE

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 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 buildings and walls like snowdrifts, emaciated, dead of hunger and trampling, the crowds that waited for megatrawlers 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 thought the orks defeated.

‘How could the Piscinans allow such a thing?’

‘They are only human.’ Asmodai's assessment is as true as it is brief, but the Chaplain expands on his point. ‘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.’

‘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.’

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

‘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.'

'As they should have been at first encounter.'

The orks, their remains, lay scattered across the road, felled by my fury. I stood amongst the ruin left by pistol and powered blade, alone, my dark green armour 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 prized as an award above all other merit. My right shoulder was marked with my personal heraldry – black to denote the time I had spent in the Ravenwing, slashed diagonally with a red band from lower left to upper right for the killing of Furion, an inverted blade above as the swordsman's honour and the commander's icon of the iron halo below.

Honours 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 signs 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 a flurry of missiles from a Whirlwind screamed overhead and smashed into a warehouse a few hundred metres further down the roadway, obliterating an ork gun position on the roof. The other sounds of the war raging through Kadillus Harbour 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 tinny, the thump of shells no more than faint thuds.

The beating of my hearts seemed louder.

The crunch of a heavy tread, stone pulverised beneath a tremendous weight. It drew my attention to a dark gateway leading to one of the harbour 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 Dreadnought.

All save his gruesome face was clad in thick plates of metal and wheezing

pneumatics. The armour was daubed with thick layers of paint in black, with stripes of red and white check decoration. Smoke billowed from the exhaust stacks of the back-mounted engine powering the enormous exo-suit, 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 the Rock.

His left hand was encased in a huge claw with sword-long talons. The remnants of a Piscinan soldier – head, torso and one arm – dangled on the lower tine. 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 past 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 his cranium and face. The remaining eye seemed small, bright red, almost invisible beneath a green brow furrowed deep. I had 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 armoured boot, a pesky gnat to be swatted aside without effort.

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

A stream of guided bolts flared from my pistol. I carried seeker ammunition as standard, but my aim was as true as any Space Marine and every round struck the Beast in the chest. Detonations sparked across its breastplate in a shower of metal and paint.

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 armoured plate. The ork returned his gaze to me and slowly shook his head, as if in disappointment.

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 jagged gorget that protected the Beast's lower jaw. Another pair clanged 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.

A storm of fire from his gun engulfed me for a second, high calibre bullets whining past my head and slamming into my chest plastron and pauldrons. My displacer field activated, throwing me into the warp for the briefest instant. The world vanished and 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 armour.

It only lasted the tiniest fraction of a second in truth, but the transition saved my life, depositing me more than a dozen metres to the left and a few metres 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 caught the 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 arm-mounted cannon while I reloaded again. I did not shoot. It would have been a waste of ammunition.

The Beast's gun shrieked, spitting blasts of purple light at me. My displacer field activated again, throwing me a couple of metres directly forward with a wrench, still in the path of the ork's fusillade. A blast tore through my left arm, scorching through the ceramite outer armour. Another struck the side of my helm with a blinding burst of light. I lost my vision and was reduced to relying on the input of my armour, 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. The ork was only three metres away, and the plasma ball slashed into the creature's chest. It melted through the armour 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 kill Traitor legionaries outright.

The Beast bellowed as he 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 build-up to start again. The warlord heaved and shuddered, shoulders moving beneath the heavy armour. I have to admit that when I realised what was happening, my aim wandered for a millisecond.

The Beast really was laughing, harder than ever.

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 a door in the bulkhead, like Belial divested of his armour 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.

‘You are determined to pursue this with the Supreme Grand Master? Master Azrael and I have frequent disagreement, but your standing with our commander is exemplary.’

‘I did not accept the position of Grand Master of the Deathwing to be popular, Brother-Chaplain. I admit that the extremity of our cause might cause consternation, but the outcome warrants the risk to reputation.’

‘Very well.’

Belial activates the door terminal, announcing their presence. A few seconds pass before the door hisses open, revealing the chamber of Supreme Grand Master Azrael. For generations these rooms have hosted the commanders of the Dark Angels, and if 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 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.

‘You understand that our campaign on Piscina is ongoing.’ The Supreme Grand Master focuses on Belial, who called for the audience, eyes as dark and hard as granite. ‘All three of us have duties elsewhere.’

‘I will be brief, Grand Master. I think that we waste valuable time and resources trying to reclaim Piscina Four 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.’

‘I am surprised that out of all my warriors you are prepared to abandon Piscina Four 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?’

‘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 has allowed the orks to gain a grip on this world that no effort of the Chapter can prise away.’

‘I see.’

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

‘We cannot accomplish this task alone without ignoring other battles that require our intervention. The longer we spend on this lost world, the more danger to other planets of the Emperor. The Piscinans 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.

‘Impossible! All three of us know that the Fallen interfered with 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 Grand Master.

‘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.’

‘There is precedent, Brother Azrael. And the presence of the orks presents far more justification than has sometimes been offered.’

‘If there is evidence of the Fallen to be removed, it will be removed. If I listened to your counsel, every world where even rumour of the Fallen is found would be left a lifeless wasteland.’

Asmodai has not mentioned 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.

‘The Piscina System is tainted. We can no longer recruit from here with any confidence. If we become mired in a war against the greenskins we compound the failure of my earlier campaign.’

Azrael’s eyebrows rise in surprise.

‘Your campaign? Your failure? Did you not hold back 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 intrigue with the Imperium and throw away millions of lives because of your impossible quest for perfection?’

‘Apologies, Supreme Grand Master. *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 their deficiencies. Those of us of higher rank must hold to an even stricter code.’

‘The reasons are irrelevant. We cannot place ourselves in higher moral authority than the 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 will be no repercussions, no regrets.’

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

‘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 Grand Master. Belial sighs heavily.

‘There were reports of the Beast, sightings a few thousand light years from our current position. It would be a 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.’

‘So it is to be revenge, is it?’

‘I would prefer you not cheapen my motives with such terminology, Supreme Grand Master. 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 report-strewn desk. He looks at Belial for some time and then moves his gaze to Asmodai,

eyes narrowing slightly.

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

‘Are you refusing my proposal, Supreme Grand Master? Am I to conclude that my plan does not find favour in your eyes? You will not conduct exterminatus?’

‘You have made sound arguments, brother. I will not decide the fate of a world in a moment.’

Ghazghkull straightened and broke into a run, covering the ground with strides surprisingly swift for the bulk of his armour. 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 pulverised by the earlier bombardment. My auto-senses switched to low visibility mode as I ducked beneath the cracked lintel of a secondary door into the darkness within.

Slowing, I leapt over piles of collapsed masonry and navigated past 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 and requested a gunship strike on my position. For an aiming point, I detached my homing device and dropped it to the floor. The ping of its comm-signal sounded clear as I moved away, heading towards the rear of the warehouse.

The Winged Retribution answered my request and I ordered the gunners level the whole building and then turn it into rubble. I was younger then, still occasionally prone to such imprecise melodrama.

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. A glow from the bionic eye glinted from shattered window panes and fallen skylights. The tread of the warlord’s steps was muffled by the rubble

underfoot, 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 would be no escape. I stepped out in front of the Beast and fired the last two shots in my pistol. 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 an upper floor. The shot parted a support, causing it to buckle in moments. With a creak, the tortured metal twisted and gave way. Several tonnes of plasboard 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 had seen as I entered.

Once outside, I turned and headed back to the main harbour front where I had first encountered the Beast, granting me a clear view to the Thunderhawk's attack run. Missiles streamed from its wings and heavy bolters let out a fusillade of fire. The nose-mounted lascannon 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. The battle cannon shell ripped into the interior, fire and smoke belching from the hole as it exploded within.

The Thunderhawk circled and continued to rain down vengeance with lascannon and shell. It turned broken brick to gravel, glass to glittering splinters and metal stanchions into molten droplets. A power inlet erupted into a plume of burning gas, sending a cloud of masonry shards into the sky. Small pieces of ferrocrete fell on my armour like rain and on the roadway around me. 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 and I despatched the gunship back to the fighting, thinking that 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 personal transponder deep beneath the smoking remnants, its coordinates appearing in my visual display. 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.

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 Harbour 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 First Company, another suit of Tactical Dreadnought armour 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.

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

‘It is Brother Ezekiel.’

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

‘More light. 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 armoury of his arrival.

‘A mission? I received no warning.’

‘No, brother, I have just returned from battle. You can relax.’

‘I think not. Did the Supreme Grand Master apprise you of my proposal?’

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

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

‘Sammael and the Ravenwing have returned. The Supreme Grand Master is to convene the Inner Circle as soon as they make orbit.’

‘And they have news? Of... the old enemy?’

‘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.’

‘One them alive?’

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

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

'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.'

'So I am to leave Piscina again before my task is completed?'

'That is not your decision to take. Brother-Sergeant Seraphiel, 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.'

'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 mettle to become Deathwing.'

'I must speak to Brother-Chaplain Sapphon. I will see you at the convening of the Inner Circle.'

Belial bids farewell to the Librarian with a nod and turns his attention to his network terminal. He spends some time reading the reports of Sergeant Seraphiel, 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 First 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 returned Ravenwing, but he tries his best to conquer the unease he feels. He would expect nothing less of those under his command, and certainly expects total focus from himself.

Eventually Sammael and his Second Company reach 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 First Company.

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 Menthius and Daellon, disembark swiftly from the Thunderhawk and come to attention in front of the Grand Master. 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 Seraphiel could perhaps have organised 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 lose their courage, their purpose and duty when they have learned that much of what they fight to protect is a lie.

The third, Telemenus, descends after another minute has passed, his gaze casually appraising Belial as if he was at a briefing or report. Telemenus falls into place without so much as a word of apology. Such disrespect, on meeting his new Grand Master 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 Telemenus comes to attention. The Grand Master 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 glares at Telemenus.

‘You are tardy.’

‘Brother Seraphiel had parting words for me, Grand Master.’

‘Did I ask for explanation?’

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

‘Speak when spoken to.’

Telemenus considers this. 'No, Grand Master, you did not ask for explanation.' The Thunderhawk's engines build to a roar and as the gunship takes off dust and hot air wash over the First Company's newest warriors. Telemenus's eyes are locked on Belial, seeking approval perhaps, or fearing further condemnation. Belial shifts his gaze to Daellon, and then to Menthius. 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 Seraphiel's hand. They will learn how to fight with Tactical Dreadnought armour and they will recite the litanies and rites of the First Company, but will they have the heart to do what has to be done, when the needs of the Hunt and 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 does not 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 harboured doubts about the direction the Chapter is heading and his desire to hunt down Ghazghkull is fuelled in no small part by a longing to engage in a straightforward, honourable 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 realises he is putting Azrael in one of those difficult circumstances. The Supreme Grand Master 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 Grand Master 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 these 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 Grand Master?

From what he sees, Belial doubts it, but there has never been a new addition to the Deathwing that did not initially disappoint him, even those that have later earned his respect and become heroes of the Chapter.

He stares at Menthius.

‘Have the Apothecaries cleared you for combat?’

Menthius starts to tremble and casts his gaze groundwards, earning a concerned glance from Telemenus. ‘No, Grand Master.’

‘If you cannot fight you cannot train.’ Belial crosses his arms, revealing the tattoos on his skin, from shoulder to elbow, lines of miniscule text. Belial notices Telemenus’s interest and steps in front of him, raising and flexing his massive bicep so that the Space Marine can see more clearly what is written there. There are more on his chest that Telemenus cannot see, almost hidden against the dark sub-dermal 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 a moment’s oversight or error. Belial reads in Telemenus’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 savour but also a warning if they are clever enough to heed it.

‘Lessons not to be forgotten.’

The Grand Master turns away and starts towards the door, speaking without looking. ‘Brother Daellon, you will report to quarters and await further instruction. Brother Menthius, you will report to the apothecarion for further treatment. Brother Telemenus...’

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

‘Brother Telemenus, 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 a 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.

'Yes, Grand Master.'

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

With a bellow, the Beast erupted from the hill of ferrocrete and brick, scattering debris like a detonating warhead. The ork's armour was dented and broken in many places and blood trickled from his left leg, mixing with dark fluid that spilled from a severed hydraulic link. The warlord's gun arm hung uselessly, trapped inside the broken exo-armour, and he had a slight limp as he dragged himself out of the rubble and started towards me.

Even wounded, the Beast looked a daunting prospect in hand-to-hand combat, but I could see no other option as the warlord ploughed through the remnants of the warehouse, bellowing challenges or threats, or perhaps both.

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 Piscinan Free Militia, meaningless deaths that could be avoided if I stood strong.

And, I regret to say, its dismissive attitude at the outset of the encounter still nagged at me and I wanted Ghazghkull to know he had been bested by me in the moments before he died. Foolish sentiment, arrogance, that has not claimed me since.

The importance of this duty lent strength to my limbs as I raised the plasma pistol and fired, shooting as the warlord slid down a rubble pile a few metres 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 would be no second shot before we met in hand-to-hand combat.

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, grunting with each tread, 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 flared as I moved past, turning my wrist to send the tip of the sword whipping across the warlord's knee. Pneumatic pipes parted, but the Beast was not hobbled yet.

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

Suddenly encumbered by the weight of my armour, 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 metres to the left, but I lost my footing as I reappeared on the edge of the destroyed warehouse, my compromised battleplate unable to stabilise in time.

I fell to one knee, as though I was making supplication to that foul creature.

I was able to straighten just in time to dodge the next swing of the power claw as the Beast pressed home his attack with furious snarls and grumbles. 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 metres. 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 fibre bundles severed somewhere near the shoulder, sword gripped uselessly in my fist.

The power claw burned bright against the smoke-choked 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, really, but I was bitterly disappointed and angry at the time.

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 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 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.

Azrael has offered no answer to the question of utter extermination. Belial is to be sent on some wild mission at Sapphon's behest, chasing a dubious lead tricked 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 Asmodai'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, wry 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 a Space Marine the pain would not only be negligible, 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 acidic compound that gnaws at his flesh, making every stroke and flourish a localised 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.

My armour 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 armour bearing down on Ghazghkull, their storm bolters as relentless as their advance. Two of the Terminators broke from the squad, power fists gleaming 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 recognised the heraldry of Sergeant Caulderain. The First 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 Caulderain's next words.

'Beacon was on target. Company Master is secured, activate teleport.'
And then Kadillus Harbour disappeared.

I was alive, but so was the Beast. A shame I bear to this day.

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 honour of the Dark Angels.

He applies the last stroke of the flesh-pen, pulling in a sharp breath as he finishes. 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 learnt so long ago in the Tenth Company. He speaks the teaching out loud, making an oath out of the words, sworn to the harshest master he knew: himself.

'Do not win the battle, win the war. Victory is counted not in days but generations.'



ALL MUST END

They hid their fears well. They were Space Marines, trained and engineered to fear nothing, yet Harahel could sense the discomfort of his companions. Psychic powers, matters of the warp, from astropaths to Navigators to the Imperial Tarot, were forces beyond understanding for them, and there was no amount of Chapter orthodoxy or mental conditioning that could completely eradicate that dread of the unknown and the unnatural.

Their fears were laid bare to his othersense, as plain to the Dark Angels Librarian as their physical features. To his psychic awareness everything was visible, infused by immaterial energy from the warp. Some scholars in the ancient past had believed the warp was a separate realm, existing alongside, but divided from, the material universe. They had not been psykers. They did not see the power of the warp, the empyrean of dreams and emotions, leaking back into reality through even the dullest mind. It was little more than a smudge of power, but its presence was enough for Harahel to see into the souls of the others gathering in the brightly lit chamber.

Even as the glow of the candles highlighted the faces of the assembled Dark Angels officers, so the miniscule trickle of soul power gave curves and edges to their thoughts. The patterns were ever-changing, as moods varied and concern rose and fell, but Harahel could see the shapes within and discern their meaning.

Sammael, Grand Master of the Ravenwing, was the calmest of them. Or perhaps calm was not the right word. He was the most prepared, for he had seen Harahel perform these divinations at least a dozen times previously. Excitement touched on the underlying nervousness; they were close to capturing one of the Fallen, and as Master of the Hunt Sammael could feel success edging into view.

His thoughts were the brightest too, glittering and golden. Perhaps too bright with optimism to survive much longer in his current role, but foolhardiness was frequently the deadly stalker of the Masters of the Second Company.

Harahel carefully stepped to the centre of the room, taking care not to disturb the hexagrammic wardings he had drawn onto the decking. The principal alignments were denoted by candles at the points of a twelve-pointed star enclosed within a circle, in turn encompassing a hexagonal device with runes he had marked in molten lead. He sat directly under the candelabrum – made of meteoric iron from the remnants of destroyed Caliban – in a large, plain chair.

As he lowered himself he considered Grand Master Belial, commander of the First Company, leader of the Deathwing. Belial's thoughts were sharp and precise, controlled to the point of obsession, like masonry carefully chipped and smoothed by a lifetime of experience, rather than something organic and grown like the others. The Deathwing commander's thoughts barely changed as he stood with arms folded, surveying the others in the room with a wary stare.

Harahel was not surprised to see that the most closed thoughts of all belonged to Asmodai, the Master of Repentance. His mind was a steel shell of utter conviction. Only the tiniest glimmer of his soul shone through the defences, brutally and efficiently stifled by centuries of practice and a natural closed-mindedness that Harahel found remarkable. Had the Emperor encountered Asmodai ten thousand years ago when he was perfecting the gene-seed of the Dark Angels, it was possible that all Space Marines might have ended up with such single-minded zealotry.

That free thought was still possible for the Adeptus Astartes was evident from the roiling display of Sapphon's emotions. They pulsed green and blue and red, almost at random, the sign of an active, creative mind at work. Sapphon's soul was well protected, like the others, but his thoughts were quite readable. Currently the Master of Sanctity was thinking it strange that such a ceremony should be conducted in the light, when so many of the Dark Angels' inner mysteries took place in darkened chambers.

While Harahel's mind-sight regarded his companions, his regular senses took in other features of the room: the scent of the candles mixed with a hint of oil and a touch of rust; the heat of the other Space Marines and the flickering flames that lit them; the creak and murmur of the starship's bulkheads and decks; the undercurrent of the plasma engines throbbing through the vessel from aft to prow.

He allowed it all to become one, merging physical and psychic as he closed his

eyes. As his eyelids descended, the two worlds – the real universe and the warp-echoes – became as one in his thoughts, so that even though he no longer looked upon the chamber with his physical sight he was well aware of what transpired around him.

Harahel placed his hands in his lap and allowed the psychic power to flow. He could sense the apprehension of the others increase as they noticed flickering light from beneath his eyelids. The Librarian rested his head against the back of his chair and exhaled smoothly, pushing away the last of the trepidation he had felt when he had proposed the ceremony. Any warp-delving was risky, and in this place, so close to the Eye of Terror, the risks were greater than usual. But Harahel was strong and had trained for three hundred years. He was ready.

The Librarian was about to release his mind into the warp, but disturbances close at hand held him back. The thoughts of the others, so disparate, so at odds, made this initial navigation harder. Harahel needed to smooth their troubled emotions before he could perform the transition.

Sapphon was considering the nature of psykers and daemons, wondering if the reason they were so terrible was because they interacted directly with unconscious senses of the soul. He was not far from the truth, as Harahel saw such things, but now was not the time for such speculations. Thinking about the warp and its inhabitants stirred the stuff of the empyrean in a cyclic effect, so that it gained power even from idle speculation.

‘Do not fear for my soul, Brother Sapphon,’ Harahel said quietly. ‘Every hour you spend reciting the hymnals and catechisms of the Chapter, I spend hardening my spirit against temptation and possession.’

At the mention of such things Asmodai, standing to Sapphon’s right, shifted his weight, perturbed. The steel of his mind became a dagger, flames of righteousness flaring along its length, directed towards the Librarian. A single thought blazed so strong the psyker could not avoid it: *If Harahel shows the slightest sign of possession I shall kill him.*

A smile crept onto Harahel’s lips.

‘Please, Brother Asmodai, draw your pistol if it would make you feel more comfortable. I assure you, the wards are intact. The only person at risk is me.’

Regardless of the assurance offered by the Librarian, Asmodai drew his bolt pistol and aimed it at Harahel’s head.

‘Do not be too quick to use your weapon, brother, for there may be strange occurrences that are simply part of my delving into the warp.’

‘You seek to send your soul to a world upon the edge of the Eye of Terror,’ said

Asmodai, his aim unwavering. ‘I will take any precaution I feel necessary.’

‘As you see fit, brother. Now I must beg silence, and to assist me it would be beneficial if you all focused on a particular thing, to stop the turbulence caused by your disparate thoughts as I enter the immaterium.’

‘The Canticles of Nazeus?’ suggested Saphon. He received a nod in reply.

The Master of Sanctity began the invocation and the others joined in after a few seconds. Their combined voices rose and fell as they chanted, the sound shaped by the chamber, fading into the distance as Harahel prepared again to let go of his conscious thoughts. The Librarian was silent and still, withdrawing from his body, entering a trance so that his soul, or a portion of it, might lift his thoughts from their physical vessel to the turbulent eddies of the immaterium.

The chanting, the focus on the hymnal to the exclusion of other thoughts, stilled the ripples and echoes that had been disturbing Harahel’s concentration.

‘*Sanctus Imperator protectorum,*’ the Librarian whispered. ‘Be free.’

There was a feeling of detachment as his spirit lifted away from his mortal form. Always he was connected to the warp and the physical, a conduit for the unreal to enter the real, but with practised precision Harahel slipped away from himself like a ship departing its mooring.

Heat, light, sound, all worldly sensation dropped away from his awareness. Instead the weft and weave of the empyrean, the warp-sound and psychic thrum that he usually relegated to background noise became central to his universe. The real faded and the unreal solidified, still connected but transposed within his mind.

All around the Librarian was the tumult of the warp, but here, in the immediate space around him, was a calm pool, soothed by the devotional intoned by his brethren. They knew nothing of the effect it had, but the benefit remained.

Harahel tugged himself free of his body, loosing part of his consciousness onto the waves of the empyrean, allowing the pressure of the warp to carry him a short distance from the mortal host of his mind. He turned, not literally but in focus, to see his body sitting in the chair, surrounded by the wards and his battle-brothers. A trail like a golden cable snaked back to his body, tethering soul to flesh. It too was a construct of many years’ training, allowing him to find his way back to his mortal shell.

Pulling back, Harahel watched the starship dropping away, deck by deck, until he saw it from outside, floating like a bubble on a stream, encased within the shimmer of its Geller field. A pulsing, irregular and powerful, drew his attention away from the warship and he focused on the source.

Distance was physically meaningless in the warp, but his brain could not cope with a dimensionless state, no matter his training. It was impossible to shape thoughts without a sense of up and down, near and far, in and out.

The pulsing came from somewhere close by, in galactic terms at least. A storm swirled on the edge of Harahel's perception, both sucking in all things like a vortex whilst simultaneously spewing forth tides and currents of warp power.

The Eye of Terror.

The greatest warp storm in the galaxy, so huge it covered dozens of light years of real space, an overlap between realms where material and immaterial were interchangeable. In the real universe it was perceived as a pulsing purple or red orb in the heavens, but from the warp the Eye of Terror looked less like an abyssal gulf and more like a deep window onto stars and planets, nebulae and comets that all glittered with energy.

The Eye of Terror fluctuated constantly, and in its heaving Harahel could see that which existed between worlds, neither warp nor real, giving glimpses of the realms of the Chaos Gods. Such sights would drive lesser men insane, unable to interpret the swirling energies and tempestuous eddies. The training of the Librarian allowed Harahel to impose order onto the disorder, in a limited fashion, contorting his senses to imagine towering iron fortresses, tides of crystal waves, gleaming mirrorscapes and rotting forests.

He was dimly aware of his body reacting back on the starship. Out of instinct he narrated his journey, passing on what he experienced to the others. It required no more effort of thought than to keep his hearts beating and his lungs filling, a genuine stream of consciousness.

'Boundaries falling, walls breaking, the tumble of worlds and civilisations,' muttered Harahel, his lips barely moving. His eyes continued to move, as though in recognition or mockery of the warp-visions conjured by his othersense.

The power of the Eye of Terror was all-consuming. The Librarian felt it drawing him, pulling him into the maelstrom at its heart with irresistible force. Harahel was nothing but a mote on a raging ocean and his golden tether spooled out behind him like a lifeline connected to a warrior ejected into the vacuum of space.

Faster and faster he was pulled towards the inevitable crushing forces that raged through the Eye of Terror, and though Harahel diverted every thought and effort to fighting the inward tide there was nothing to stop his descent to the bottom of the opening pit of darkness.

He tried to make the tether go tight, to turn it into a golden rod that would hold

him in place, but the force from the Eye of Terror was too strong. He felt the attention of intelligences vaster than any living creature, save perhaps the Emperor Himself. They momentarily regarded him in the same way one might notice a fleck of dust settling nearby. Harahel feared for a moment that one of those malign consciousnesses might reach out and examine the speck in more detail, or perhaps flick it away without a thought, but the sensation passed and he remained alone and adrift on the flooding power of the warp storm.

Ulthor was located upon the very edge of this insane landscape, and to learn more Harahel knew he would have to venture into the unpredictable fronds of energy that licked about the outskirts of the Eye of Terror. His mental tether, the golden thread of his life, held firm, but he had no way to navigate. He had been turned inside-out, upside-down and back-to-front, and was so caught in the raging torrents that characterised the Eye of Terror that he was no longer sure how he could forge his way back to the others.

And then he glimpsed a solitary silver star.

He knew exactly what it was, and let his soul reach out towards it, latching on to its light as a drowning man seizes upon the lifebelt thrown to him. As he let the silver gleam fall upon him, Harahel was invigorated, filled by strength and warmth and a sense of belonging. The glow from the star melted through the raw Chaos, turning aside storm and wave, calming the warp around the Librarian even as it calmed his racing thoughts.

The beacon held true against all the buffeting of the Eye of Terror, strong and unwavering even here near the heart of the pulsing flow of energy. More than a beacon, it was a rock upon which to settle for a moment, a bridge to cross, a fortress against the madness and uncertainty.

The Astronomican.

The Guiding Light.

The Soul of the Emperor.

Harahel murmured his relief.

'The barrier sweeps aside, revealing the light beyond, the silvery path.'

Empowered by the grace of the Emperor's light, Harahel turned his attention to locating the world of Ulthor, hidden within the fronds of warp energy leaking from the Eye of Terror. He drew upon his psychic strength to manifest a form within the warp, as a daemon might create a false vessel in real space. Fuelled by the light of the Astronomican, Harahel appeared as a knight of silver and white fire, blazing with the cold purity of his cause. In his hands he held a blade of dark green edged with pale flames, the crosspiece fashioned with splayed wings

to match the Chapter symbol emblazoned on the chest plate of his immaterial armour. A cloak of deep blue hung from his shoulders, the colour of the Librarian.

Back on the Dark Angels ship, the Librarian's body straightened on the chair, his power armour whining with movement, limbs trembling slightly as his muscles became rigid for a moment. He relaxed again, frown softening, mouth opening with a gasp.

Fully formed, Harahel's immaterial avatar delved into the rifts of the warp, racing for the fringes of the Eye of Terror. The silver light of the Astronomican was left glittering in his wake.

Time flowed in curves and circles, passing and not passing in relation to real space, so it might have been a fraction of a moment or a thousand years before Harahel caught sight of that which he sought. On the very edges of the Eye of Terror stood a huge edifice, part crumbling cliff face, part immense stone tower, cracked and overgrown. A palpable miasma of decay surrounded the decrepit structure, a dark cloud that stained the warp and real universe in equal measure.

As the cloud parted for an instant, split by some random eddy of the warp, Harahel saw that the crumbling, monolithic keep was itself dwarfed by a far greater expanse. It was nothing more than an outhouse to a truly dread-inspiring mansion with a thousand broken-glass windows and countless sagging, cracked roofs. The tower of Ulthor lay in the shadow of the titanic manse, enveloped whole by the darkness and corruption spilling from great rifts and blasted holes in the structure of the mightier building. Harahel flinched, taken aback by the monstrous apparition, but the vision passed, swallowed by the warp currents a moment later, leaving Ulthor standing like a bony, upthrust finger surrounded by yellowing mists.

Still the silver star of the Astronomican shone overhead.

'On the border it stands, neither here nor there, real and yet unreal. Claimed but still free, the world of decay, a blossom in the dead garden. Upon the brink of hope and despair it stands. Death and rebirth, the spiral of decline, until nothingness...'

His words brought reaction from the mortal realm, vague and distant.

'He is losing his mind,' he heard Asmodai say. 'Or something is taking it!'

'Hold your fire and your tongue,' said Sammael. The Chaplain laid a hand on his companion's bolt pistol. Asmodai's annoyance at the Grand Master flared like a plume of fire in the warp, but it was met with ice formed from the determined thoughts of Sammael. 'Do not think your reputation and rank greater

than mine, Asmodai. Lower your weapon, *Brother-Chaplain.*'

'I cross the border, unseen by the many eyes, and the garden wilts around me,' whispered Harahel, unheeded by the others.

With reluctance, his ire dimming, Asmodai dropped the bolt pistol to his side. He glared at Sammael and returned his gaze to Harahel.

Harahel could feel the filth of Ulthor trying to leech his power from him. It was simple enough to siphon the rank warp energy into the hexagrammic wards, protecting his soul from corruption. On the starship, the air began to fill with shadows outside the hemisphere created by the warding signs.

Harahel moved his warp-self closer to Ulthor. He found that he could not approach the tower directly, but was forced to alight in a vast overgrown garden that clustered about the broken rocks at the bottom of the immense cliff.

As he explored, the Librarian allowed what he encountered to filter through his thoughts, shaping the shadows and light into representations of his warpsight. He could project visual images, but these were a flat caricature of what he felt coursing through his warp-self.

The garden was grown upon a foundation of misery and hopelessness. The twisted, stunted trees delved deep into the soil of despair, drawing up sustenance from broken dreams and shattered hope. As Harahel's feet sank into the mire he could feel the leeching effect trying to suck away his resolution, but he was able to resist the melancholy draining, the ground hardening beneath his tread as white fire burned the tainted mulch.

The air was thick with buzzing flies and the boles of the trees were rampant with many-legged creatures of all descriptions. They jumped about the sagging branches and leaves and regarded the intruder with glittering, multi-faceted eyes. Fungal growths vomited spores as Harahel passed, while microbes consumed everything with slow decay.

A fog of sadness laid droplets upon the foliage like the tears of the lost and abandoned. The sultry rustle of the leaves was filled with murmuring laments, of loves past and opportunities squandered. From the mulch underfoot jutted stones that would trip the unwary, jagged rocks upon which ambition was broken and pride bruised. Low-hanging vines moved like serpents, ready to catch the unwary in the grip of self-pity. Arachnids with pale and bloated bodies spun webs of self-doubt between the tree limbs, the souls of the damned writhing within, wrapped more and more with loathing and despair as they struggled against the vile threads.

But not all was dismal. There were bright fronds and blossoms of rainbow hue

hiding in the gloom. Caterpillars with striking tiger stripes and neon hairs gambolled amongst ruddy petals and nestled in leopard-spot cocoons, from which burst forth bulbous moths with death's head wings.

Here and there a chink in the canopy allowed a precious ray of light to fall upon the forest floor. In the fitful gleam of this nourishment, fragile flowers of hope pushed their way clear of the rotting carpet of insect corpses and leaves.

Yet the garish colours and joyous patterns could not hide the true nature of this place. By such phantasmal attractions were the unwary lured into despair.

The moment of freshness and clarity following recovery from a long sickness.

The joy of seeing a loved one after prolonged absence.

The swell of pride and fulfilment at the birth of a child.

These were snares of the emotions, moments of weakness to be exploited, for only those truly accepting of the eternal pain of existence and the inevitable corruption within were proofed against the heartbreak of disappointment and setback.

Not in endless drudgery, the thankless toil of everyday existence, was the Lord of Decay present, for in monotony was a base sort of comfort. It was the high notes, the tantalising promise of better, the scattered moments of elation, that were the cruellest weapons, for they set the mundane and pointless into stark contrast and plunged the soul into true despair. For every speck of light and colour, the forest and shadows seemed all the darker and more forbidding.

A masquerade of glittering jewels hid the dark truth that all things faltered and failed, a facade of happiness and fulfilment erected by the ego of all sentient creatures to persuade them there was a meaning within the interminable pointless cycle.

Slowly, across aeons of time, the decay grew stronger. Entropy picked apart all that existed, turning civilisations to dust and suns to clouds of cooling gas. Nothing could escape the grip of the immortal destroyer: time. Life became death and, in turn, death became life. Everything was sustained by this simple cycle of existence.

The Librarian let his companions see what he could see, showing them drooping leaves turned by autumn to russet and gold, mist streaming between the trunks tinged with green and black, a diseased smog. In the distance an immense edifice soared above the woods, indistinct, giant and grotesque.

Something was approaching. He heard buzzing from a distance, which swiftly became an incessant droning converging from all directions. The shadows seemed to merge and deepen, thickening if that were possible, becoming tangible

like a pool of oil. The noise drowned out the fluttering of dried leaves and the drip of foggy tears.

From everywhere, fat-bodied flies spilled from beneath the gloom of the decaying forest. The swarm engulfed Harahel in moments, pressing closer and closer until a layer of furry blackness covered him, constantly moving. They found gaps in his armour to settle on his skin, not biting, but squashing their bloated bodies into his flesh, oppressive through virtue of their numbers. They sought the visor of his helm, thickening on his face, pressing through to cover his eyes and blot out the light of the Astronomican.

He tried to sweep them away with his gauntleted hand, but they were too thick, too numerous. Like a drowning man thrashing at the waves, his blows moved slowly, the thickness of the swarm itself so dense that it was suffocating. Where he crushed them, vomit-yellow smears stained his armour, bubbling and blistering like acid. The droning was intolerable, making his head throb, burning his eardrums with its monotony.

Harahel flailed, gritting his teeth, but parting his lips simply allowed more of the flies to push in, skittering along his gums, trying to squeeze their soft bodies between his incisors. His nostrils were blocked by squirming insects forcing their way up into his sinuses, seeking the warm passages down into his lungs. The Librarian attempted to dislodge the swarm with the leaves hanging lank from drooping branches, crashing through the trees, almost tripping on the rocks of folly that appeared beneath his tread. Blood-like sap splattered his battleplate, sticky fluid seeping into the joints and hardening to a paralysing resin.

It was as though they were buzzing inside his head now. He could feel thousands of grotesque bodies pushing into his organs, crawling along nerves and arteries, clogging his lungs and heart.

This was how all things ended. Even the mighty Space Marines of the Adeptus Asartes. Even the Astronomican. Even the Emperor.

It was all so pointless to struggle. What if he were to prevail today? There would be another battle tomorrow. Each day brought fresh threats against mankind. The Space Marines were pitifully and ridiculously few. Fewer than one Space Marine per world in the Imperium. The forces of the Imperial Guard numbered in the countless billions, but their souls and hearts were weak and in time even that bulwark would crumble like a wall battered by the constant wind and rain. Courage would falter, and what then?

Why did it matter? To die today was no better and certainly no worse than dying tomorrow. That was the nature of the inevitable, the unavoidable. Orks

could be slain, eldar craftworlds destroyed, tyranid fleets scattered, but there was no way to defeat time or death. It was folly and pride to believe that anything made a difference.

Harahel's courage suffocated even as imaginary lungs were starved of breath. He felt the darkness consuming him. No, not consuming, *welcoming*. He had but one chance to rid himself of the curse of life. It was simple, to accept that the Lord of Decay was his master. In doing so he would become one with decay, its ally, not its victim. No matter how superhuman his mind and body, only acceptance of the ascendancy of the Master of the Dead Manse could save Harahel.

A distant voice, a connection to the real world, brought him back from the void of oblivion. He reached out with his thoughts, drawn back to his body by the contact.

'Ulthor, brother,' said Sammael, stepping closer to the Librarian. The black of his robes seemed to suck in what little light remained, leaving his face a pale mask floating in gloom. 'Cast your mind to the world of Ulthor. It is close, brother.'

Sammael's faith was like a cleansing touch, his brotherhood a source of infinite strength. Harahel did not fight for himself, for his eternal soul or his mortal body. He fought for his brethren in the Chapter. He fought for mankind. He fought for the Emperor.

In a moment, refreshed by the contact with his physical form, the Librarian found that the fly swarm had gone. Not dissipated, but burned away by silver flames crackling across his body, their daemon-essence absorbed, their power neutralised by a psychic surge, leaving nothing but wispy husks flying away on a strengthening breeze of his renewed will.

Though he had fended off the flies, Harahel knew his trials were far from over as he pressed on towards his goal. Storm clouds swirled and thickened overhead, the sky turning from grotesque yellow to black, as though bruised by the battering of some huge fist.

The rotten canopy of the dead forest swayed as the gales came, bringing with them a tumult of broken branches and tattered leaves that crashed against Harahel's armour as he advanced into the tempest. Step by step he forged forward, jaw clamped tight with determination.

Back aboard the Dark Angels starship, Harahel's body flinched and tensed again. His breathing came more quickly and his fingers moved from his lap to grip the arms of the chair.

With Sammael's words driving him, he fixed on the shadowy tower atop the distant cliff, taking one slow step after another, leaning hard into the gale. The storm did not wholly obscure the light of the silver star. Harahel could see the paler gleam like a path in front of him, occasionally being blotted out as darkness swirled, sometimes turning into forked lightning that split open the storm and lit the road ahead.

Coming to the foot of the cliff, Harahel paused and looked up. From this perspective the edifice seemed almost endless, the city-tower out of sight, the heights of the cliff lost in the gloom of distance.

He reached up and took hold of a jutting rock. Pulling himself up, he found a foothold and raised himself off the ground. Harahel fixed his stare at the vaguest line that delineated clifftop from sky and climbed. His thoughts shaped the cliff face so that wherever he sought a handhold for fingers to grip or a niche for toes to set upon, there was always something there.

His was not the only will that guided the formation of the dark rock. Roots split the stones, jabbing like spears into his body and legs, scratching across his armour. Others writhed like tentacles, trying to grasp wrists and ankles, seeking to wrench him from his precipitous advance. The more he ascended, the more violently the cliff struggled against him, lashing whips of roots trying to dislodge him, to send him plummeting back to the hungry forest below.

Wasting no energy, not even to snarl or groan, Harahel pushed upwards, his thoughts enclosed behind a barrier of steel as his immaterial form was shielded by the silver of his armour. The labour was nothing, a test of will more than muscle, and no sooner had he come to this realisation he found himself grasping a fistful of rock to haul himself onto the cliff top.

It had seemed to him before that the tower of Ulthor had been almost upon the edge of the great drop, but he found that it had been a lie, a trick of hope rather than objective perspective. The tower had disappeared and in its place he saw an immense ebon-petalled flower.

'The black rose, a thousand flies crawling on the petals. The stem bends but does not break, swayed by foetid winds carrying pollen of despair to the bright flowers of hope. A choking presence, cloying.'

He could see the tiny pollen grains pouring into the sky like the fume from a fire. If he focused he could see that each miniscule dot was in fact three globes attached to each other, and each of the globes was a grinning skull. The smog rose higher and higher, whirling about in a vortex of wind until it reached the storm clouds, where it drifted down across the whole of the foetid garden and the

dead woods beyond.

Like black snow the pollen fell, and though he brought up a corner of his blue robe to cover his nose and mouth he could feel the tiny particles passing through the weave, settling about his tongue and throat.

He thought they might bring pain, but instead he felt numbness stretching from where they alighted on membrane and muscle. His jaw felt slack and his airways opened, allowing more and more of the black pollen beads into his body.

Individually, the tiny intruding specks were inconsequential, but as they grew in number Harahel felt them melting into his body, trying to become part of him. Like the flies before, the pollen set itself in his flesh, looking to become a seed, to send out roots into his thoughts.

He staggered, mesmerised by the apparition of the gigantic black rose. There was purity in its blackness, hidden colours and depths that he had never imagined existed. The pollen was not a poison, it was an elixir of truth, granting him the ability to see the universe as it really was. Through eyes stained grey he saw the atoms at the heart of suns perishing to produce heat and light. He saw the dust of dead novae collecting over the ages to form new worlds, new stars. In bacterial sludge he saw energy transferring from one state to another, never disappearing, simply finding new forms, infused with immortality.

The sludge expanded and grew, became higher life, sentient and self-knowing, and the innocence faded. The blossom began to wilt with the pain of knowledge. To see, to hear and feel was to deceive oneself. The mind existed only as a barrier to the reality that all was transient and nothing as permanent.

He wanted to help the flower, to sustain its beauty, but already he was guilty of the sin of knowing. Harahel's resistance was a poison in the bosom of the earth, seeping into the roots of purity. It was his adherence to falsehood that was causing the bloom to sag, the petals falling away one by one, each loss accompanied by a wrenching pain in Harahel's heart.

The Librarian gasped loudly and flung a hand to his face, covering his eyes, though they were still shut. The darkness around him was absolute, the vista of light-woven scenes playing about his head and turning like a kaleidoscope, coming in and out of focus.

For the first time since besting the cliff Harahel noticed the soft ground underfoot, welcoming and golden. He wanted to lie down, to be subsumed into the layer of fertile earth so that his essence could give life to new creatures. In accepting his role he would purge the toxins he had brought forth with his presence. His conversion to the truth would be nourishment, enriching the bloom

of death that he desired so strongly. Sacrifice would water the roots, his blood and soul fertiliser to make the stem stand strong again, to push forth new flowers so that the great process of reproduction could spread the pollen of truth across the galaxy.

Though Harahel's conscious thoughts wanted him to surrender, his instincts – his inner mind protected by centuries of ritual and practice – pushed him on towards his goal. Where the mind was weak, the soul remained strong. Though he could no longer see the silver star, he could still sense its presence, lighting his way to his objective. He followed it blindly, trusting to the Emperor to deliver him to his purpose.

He stumbled on, fighting the sensations, trying to stay awake. He was so tired. His legs were leaden, and he had long since given up trying to shield his face with his cloak. Every breath drew in a thousand more pollen globes. Harahel was almost at the last of his resistance, numbed and exhausted.

The Librarian turned as he fell, looking back the way he had come. Before his eyes closed forever he caught a glimpse of the silver star.

Forcing his eyes to remain open he allowed the light of the Emperor to stream into him. Its presence drove out the black pollen, purging arteries and veins, heart and lungs, guts, hands and feet.

As the pollution within him cleared, so too did the sky. The storm receded, revealing a beautiful azure heaven untroubled by cloud or wind. A silver sun touched him with warmth. The armour that was his second skin absorbed the strength of its rays, abating the numbness to fill him with fresh vigour.

The tower was close now and Harahel knew that it had been there all along, concealed by the glamour of the black rose. He could almost reach out and touch the moss-covered, pitted stone walls. Tendrils of plant life covered the crumbling brickwork, obscuring doorways and windows, twisting around the skeletons of those that had attempted to climb them before. The wind returned, now chill and laden with the scent of death. As the vines stirred, skulls chattered to the Librarian, their rictus warnings wordless but strangely comprehensible.

Only the foolish followed in the footsteps of those that had perished. Only the prideful dared to think themselves strong enough to overcome the obstacles that still lay ahead. Arrogance would be Harahel's downfall. Better to return in failure than never return at all.

The snickering of the death's heads fuelled the Librarian's doubts. His companions would never know – could never comprehend – the risks he had taken already. It would serve no purpose to die here, ensnared by the evil of this

broken keep. How could he protect humanity from beyond the grave?

Despite these misgivings weighing down every step, Harahel resolved to push on. It was the destiny of every Space Marine to ultimately offer up his life for mankind, and it was not for Harahel to decide that one day was better than another. This was the task at hand and he would apply himself to it with all his strength and will until he succeeded, or died.

All that remained was to traverse the mire that surrounded Ulthor like a moat. Bubbling tar pits and sucking marsh lay between him and his goal. Fronds of rushes stood out from the boggy ground, rattling in a dry wind. The noise of escaping gases and the movement of something sinuous and large beneath the surface caused Harahel to pause at the swamp's edge.

There looked to be pathways through the mire, but the Librarian was not so easily fooled. He was beginning to get the measure of this place. The false hope was the foundation of everything that passed in this immaterial reflection of Ulthor. All that seemed achievable was simply a ruse created to drag the interloper further into the web of despair, drawn so far from their normal path that they could not find their way out again. The seemingly secure route would doubtless peter out, leaving him stranded, succumbing to isolation and despair.

Then he remembered where he was. He did not have to toil across the morass, he could simply extend his will and make it something else. Just as its light had resurrected his flagging strength, so now the heat of the silver star, guided by his power, baked the corrupted earth dry, turning marsh to packed dirt, tar to hardened puddles of blackness. The plants withered under the harsh light of Harahel's power, drying and cracking beneath his psychic glare.

The energy of the writhing grasses and towering rushes seeped into the ground to escape the glare of the Librarian's assault. Here the warp power swelled roots and tubers, which in turn leached more nourishment from the dirt, continuing to grow to enormous proportion. Harahel could sense them bulging like seed pods, the latent power within pulsing and churning. As he scanned them with his mind he felt that he was being regarded by malign beings in return.

The roots started to move, burrowing towards Harahel, metamorphosing from vegetable matter to something else, something not quite animal but sentient and aware. White-bodied, feeling their way towards the Librarian by latching on to the scent of his soul, the loathsome slug-like beasts closed in.

'A field of maggots, laid beneath the bosom of the world, full of vitality, waiting to burst forth. They hear me. The blind worms see me.'

Beads of sweat were running down the psyker's physical brow and the light

leaking from beneath his eyelids took on a rusty hue.

‘The warp is claiming him,’ he heard Asmodai snarl as the Chaplain shoved Sapphon aside to stand at the very edge of the psychic circle. ‘Something is burrowing into his mind.’

‘Do not break the field,’ warned Sapphon, taking a step closer. ‘We must trust to his assurances, brother.’

On the edge of awareness, Harahel noticed Asmodai dart a look at Sapphon that conveyed his contempt for the assurances of psykers more clearly than any words. The psyker flinched, feeling the lash of contempt striking his soul. Sammael moved up beside the Chaplain, eyes flashing with anger, but he did not lay a hand on Asmodai.

Breaking into a run, Harahel forged his way past the dead and dying blooms of the march-plants, heading towards the base of the Ulthor tower. His armoured boots left imprints in the dust that filled with grey ooze from below. The slime puddles took on a bulbous shape, turning grey from green, budding grasping hands and beady eyes. Clawed fingers and antlers sprouted from fist-sized daemonic minions. Snarling and giggling, they tumbled after Harahel, forming a carpet of vicious, grinning faces and red eyes.

The Librarian focused his powers ahead, trying to see into the tower that represented the world of Ulthor. Much was barred to his sight, encrusted with vile mould and lichen that blotted his thoughts, but he was able to pierce the foundations of the city, which stretched deep into the rotten earth.

He sensed mortal souls for the first time since leaving his companions, tainted by the touch of the Lord of Decay. In the roots sprawling from the city he saw icons and livery known to him, and warriors clad in ancient, decay-ridden suits of war-plate: the Death Guard. He sought more information, hoping to glimpse their dire primarch, the dread Mortarion, but there was no sign of the daemon-cursed leader of the Traitor Legion. Instead Harahel witnessed row upon row of ghastly sarcophagi housing bloated, pale warriors, while an endless line of young slaves were herded into dark cellars, trailing implants that twitched and sputtered with their own life.

The mites of decay were on his heels, scrabbling and grasping, threatening to trip him. Harahel knew he had to stay upright. If he fell he would be engulfed by the daemonic creatures, cut off from the silvery light that yet remained his guiding star.

Broken nails scratched at his armour and tugged at his cloak. Chitters and sniggers followed him, just a step behind. Harahel sensed the overwhelming

nature of the foe behind him, but he could not stop himself from turning to see the extent of the threat.

The carpet of daemon-things stretched far and wide, in places forming hummocks as scores of the plague-mites scrambled over each other to get at him. He needed just a little more time to probe the secrets of Ulthor.

Drawing a silver blade, he carved a flaming furrow into the mass of daemons, bursting their bodies with concentrated waves of loathing and disgust. He formed his hatred for the creatures into bolts of fire that leapt from his eyes, and as he did so he stretched the rest of his thoughts into the tower, trying to hunt down its secrets.

'The pods, all in a row, dangling from the tree of death like the hangman's fruit.' Harahel's body was feverish now, skin ashen, limbs twitching like a palsy victim.

On the surface, gun towers and fortifications of rusted metal jutted from the ground like broken teeth. The fortress spread like a cancer, infused with the will of the Death Guard, raised by mortal servants and daemoniac conjuration given form as shuffling mobs of mindless vassals. He pulsed a warning back to his companions in the only way he could.

'Little skins of metal, peeling back, revealing the maggot within the womb. The thorns drip with blood, coiling about the city, snaring all that will enter.'

A ring of white fire exploded outwards from his knightly form, incinerating the decay-daemons by the thousands, leaving him in a charred circle, unmolested for a few moments. The curtain protecting the innards of the city parted. Harahel did not hesitate, but plunged in, throwing his soul into the breach to see what lay concealed behind the tower walls.

Something stirred in the heart of the city, swollen and monstrous, yet in its centre Harahel saw something else – a window back into the reality of the material universe. He thought he recognised the stars somehow, a vision of a system imprinted on his memory but one he had never visited in his long years of service. The shattered ruin of a world slowly orbited the star, a billion chunks of rock and vacuum-scoured ice. Now and then he glimpsed something impossible: the evidence of human artifice. The face of a statue, the broken remnants of a wall, a piece of power armour or bolter.

Harahel could not shake the feeling of familiarity as he spied the remnants of a window spinning through the ruin, the glass stained with green in the shape of a white wing.

This was the warp and he knew that what he saw was not real – not a physical

place but an idea. These were symbols, not literal objects, but Harahel could not decipher their meaning. He tried to take in as much as possible, staring into the open abyss in the hope of seeing something that would decode the message.

This train of thought took him to another level of understanding. A message, perhaps? An astrotelepathic projection? If it was an astropath's missive, it carried none of the usual markers and templates. But then, what was one to expect this close to the Eye of Terror? The message could be from ten thousand years in the past, or even the future, it was impossible to say.

Rather than trying to riddle the source, Harahel concentrated on absorbing all of the elements, so that he might deconstruct its meaning at leisure once he was back in his body.

It seemed to him that somehow the massive inhabitant of Ulthor was communicating with something else, outside the Eye of Terror. But that didn't strike the Librarian as quite right. The hole opening up between the real and unreal was a conduit, formed of a mass, a singular entity.

The thing in Ulthor and whatever it was communicating with, or had communicated with, or would communicate with, were one and the same in some fashion.

Hidden deep amongst the asteroids was something else, a part of the beast that lurked in Ulthor. Just as the shining knight was Harahel's presence in the warp, the daemon-thing of Ulthor had a guise in the real world. A perfect matt-grey sphere amidst a cluster of asteroids glinted against the starry void.

He saw prison bars falling away and felt a surge of release. Something longed to escape the warp. Something that had already imparted a piece of its essence into the material world but had been thwarted in the past. Was the time coming when it would escape completely? The thought filled Harahel with foreboding, a sinister sensation far deeper than simple horror. The scene foreshadowed an event of great importance, and he had been fortunate to have glimpsed this warning. His psychic sense was like a shrill alarm, telling him that great disaster was about to befall his brethren.

He knew this place but he could not bring himself to believe the truth of it. The time had come to leave, so that he could take what he had seen to the others. He had not been able to project the vision-within-a-vision, so he would have to tell them first-hand of the connection between Ulthor and the broken world.

The window closed as the city-beast sensed Harahel's presence. Like a blast door closing, the vision disappeared, unreality slamming down into the Librarian's psychic view. Lashing out with rage, Ulthor's unnatural ruler

summoned forth the daemons of despair and decay and within moments Harahel was surrounded by a horde of grotesque apparitions.

They fell upon him without a sound, and though he lashed out with his flaming blade, he was soon overwhelmed as more and more of the daemons piled onto him. For every cyclopean creature he cut down, two took its place. For every handful of bulbous mites he destroyed, a welter of fresh daemons surged into the breach. The ground itself, once obedient to his will, now rebelled. The mire started to bubble up around his feet again, becoming softer and softer with every passing heartbeat.

Finding himself up to his thighs in the marsh, Harahel's movements were woefully hampered. He twisted to look at the Ulthor tower but couldn't see it properly, as though it was somehow deliberately avoiding his gaze.

He looked up, hoping for a glimpse of the silver star, but nothing but black clouds filled the heavens. With a choked cry Harahel realised that he was cut off.

Outnumbered and engulfed, he was borne down to the ground, which opened up beneath him like a grave.

He felt maggots latching onto him, gnawing at his psychic body, burrowing and prying at his armour, peeling away his defences even as the other daemons battered and tore with their fists and claws and prised at the joints of his armour with rusted blades and broken horns.

Their touch withered him. Armour became rust and flaked away. Skin slewed from flesh, and flesh rotted to the bone. Bone became dust as the convulsing earth of the grave consumed him. Only the core of his soul remained, guarded by the precious silver light of the Emperor, an impenetrable shield of faith and determination forged over decades of inculcation into the defensive rites.

A worm slid into the remnants of a decaying eye, slipping along the optic nerve into the meat of his brain. Others followed, passing along neural pathways, slithering and sliding between synapses, seeking a route into his mind, taking control of the flesh.

They heard what he heard, saw what he saw. He had sought to spy on them, and now they looked to turn his own body against him, to wield it as a weapon against the Dark Angels.

'The city, Harahel, what of the city?' asked Sammael, eyes flicking between Asmodai and the Librarian. 'Think of the city.'

Ulthor was just a memory now. It collapsed into nothing in his thoughts, flowing over him like a sandstorm, blowing away the last vestiges of his psychic construct. Yet it was also still there, impermeable, eternal, made not of brick and

mortar but hopelessness and woe.

‘The majesty of decay, towering and fallen, standing solid upon the shifting sands.’

He reached out to the hidden silver star, a prayer in his thoughts, seeking the strength of the Emperor to free him from the grip of the foes leeching his will, tunnelling into his thoughts. Across the warp divide he could see back aboard the starship and felt something else looking through his eyes as more worms dug into his flesh.

He had to get back, but for the moment he was no longer in control.

Suddenly the Librarian stood up, knocking the chair to the ground. He noticed Sapphon feeling a moment of dread as Harahel opened his eyelids, revealing milky-white corpse eyes. A rope of saliva drooled from the corner of his mouth.

Harahel saw Asmodai raise his pistol and silently thanked the Emperor for the Chaplain’s unflinching dedication to duty. He wanted to tell Asmodai to shoot, but his lips were no longer his own, his tongue a limp slug rotting behind his teeth. He wanted to beg the Chaplain to fire, to end the life of his mortal form, to cut the golden thread that linked soul to physical body, a golden thread that was now the route of intrusion used by the daemons.

The worms were now burning at the silvery light of his last defences, etching a path like acid on metal, while their companions slinked down through sinew and vein, energising muscle and organ with warp energy. They were preparing the body for full possession, infusing it with their own power so that they could reshape it at a whim.

‘No!’ shouted Sammael, tackling Asmodai to the floor.

Harahel’s body was becoming a portal. Their control was not yet absolute. If he wanted to resist physically he had to extend his will from beyond the moat of pure energy that kept the daemons at bay. Better to die body and soul than surrender the physical and spend an eternity trapped inside his own thoughts, impotent and ashamed.

He allowed a sliver of his mind to extend back into the real universe, burning along the golden thread of his existence.

‘They are here!’ snarled Harahel.

Sapphon drew his pistol while Asmodai wrestled himself free from the grip of Sammael. The Master of Sanctity aimed at the Librarian’s left eye, knowing the shot would punch through into the pysker’s brain and slay him in an instant, cutting off the conduit for whatever was trying to use his soul as a bridge into the mortal world.

He was about to pull the trigger when Harahel collapsed with a shriek.

Harahel looked at Sapphon, trying to plead with his eyes, urging him to shoot as he had urged Asmodai to shoot,

There was nothing left. The daemons possessed his form to the innermost fibre and smallest atom. It was just a shell for their power, a puppet whose strings had been taken from the Librarian. He tried to wrest control again, opening up more of his thoughts to the psychic assault of the daemons in return for just a few seconds of corporeal influence.

Their response was instantaneous and agonising. Shards of vital pain coursed through Harahel, and he fainted, relinquishing even consciousness for a moment.

The Librarian lay still, face down. The light flowed back from his body to the candles and the strange shadows faded back to normal. The lead symbols of the floor had turned to indistinct blobs, sizzling, spitting and steaming as though on a hot plate.

Sanity and sensation returned, but it was with despair that Harahel saw what had happened. Only the most slender thread of energy connected him to his body, overwhelmed by formless slime and writhing maggots. He was a silent, inconsequential witness to his own actions.

Harahel pushed himself slowly to all fours and looked at his companions. Trickle of blood marked him from ears, nostrils and eyes, quickly drying and clotting on pallid skin. Sapphon looked into the Librarian's eyes, dark brown with disappearing flecks of gold, and saw the warrior he knew looking back. Asmodai was not yet convinced, his pistol once again aimed at Harahel.

Harahel screamed, but the scream was voiceless. He could see the tiny flickers of warplight that were the souls of his brethren and he wanted to touch them. An instant of connection, a moment of intuition, to urge them to kill the thing that was waking before them.

He had no strength left. All that remained – his body, his thoughts, even his memories – now belonged to the daemonkin. The Librarian had no power to throw his warning into the mind of another, no energy to spark revulsion or suspicion with a glance.

‘What are the three Abjurations of Assiah?’ demanded the Chaplain.

The daemons plucked the knowledge from Harahel's brain. His tutelage by the Chaplains, session after session in the Reclusiam alone and with the other initiates, flashed through his existence. He could not stop the words rising unbidden to his thoughts, and from there the daemons carried them to his lifeless lips.

‘Despise the mutant, abhor the heretic, loathe the alien,’ Harahel replied, voice hoarse.

Despair. It was total, enveloping Harahel with its darkness. The Lord of Decay had known this would happen from the moment Harahel had parted the veil of the warp and looked upon the entropic garden. It was folly, arrogance, to believe that anyone could escape the clutches of the immortal destroyer.

Not even a Librarian of the Adeptus Astartes, one of the most highly-trained psykers birthed by humanity, could resist the slow turning of the aeons. Naive pride had sent him into the empyrean realm, hoping to undo the plans of the Lord of Decay’s mortal followers. This had provided a gateway for the daemons, and through misguided intent Harahel had doomed his companions and the others aboard their starship. Lies would bring them into the warp and there they would be consumed.

If Harahel had possessed a body he would have convulsed with weeping, torn apart by the grief of what he had done. Total, all-devouring despair tore ribbons from his mind, casting out sanity like streamers of thought that dissipated on the waves of the empyrean.

‘And name the six principal Lords of the Keys,’ Asmodai insisted, the muzzle of his pistol following Harahel’s head as the Librarian righted the chair and, with much wincing and grunting, forced himself upright.

Again the daemons delved into his brain, bringing back the scent of freshly lacquered wood, the droning of Chaplaincy epistles, the growl of his masters prowling along the benches ready to exact retribution for one misspoken word, one heartbeat of hesitation in intonation.

Harahel lunged at a memory, frantically latching on to it, trying with all his strength to stop it surfacing but the daemons pried it from his grasp and traitorous lips spoke the words.

‘Nessiad, Direstes, Thereoux, Mannael, Dubeus and...’

With one last agonising effort Harahel reached out, blossoming like a flower, revealing everything to his core as he grasped the silver star, letting it burn through him. He could not destroy the daemons, but he could hold them at bay.

For what seemed like an eternity he drove them back, feeling their teeth and barbs tear at his soul. Every effort to purge himself inflicted more pain and misery upon body and spirit. In the real world less than a heartbeat passed, but for Harahel it was an immortal age of mind-shredding agony as he made himself a conduit for the power of the Emperor, turning his psychic-self into a pyre, the flames igniting the energy of the daemons.

They scrambled to fight him, to blot out the silver fire with their darkness, to expunge flame with grotesque slime. In the moment of conflict Harahel stopped fighting. Rather than striving to regain control, Harahel withdrew from himself, for an instant forcing the daemonic presence to reveal itself.

For a brief moment the silver fire consumed Harahel, cowing the daemons. He wrested control of his body.

The Librarian hesitated, a twitch in his eye. ‘And...’

Asmodai fired.

The bolt took off the side of Harahel’s skull, ripping through the intricate wiring of the psychic hood, spattering gore across the rune circle.

Harahel watched his body dying, the slow ebb of life from heart and lungs. He was satisfied. The daemons fled the falling corpse and the empty shell of his mortal self crashed to the deck.

For a moment more his soul lingered in the warp, surrounded by the vengeful, ravenous daemons. The Librarian felt no fear. Sanctuary was close at hand, for his mind was a fortress once more, if only for an instant. Not for him a mindless eternity awash upon the tides of the warp, a mote in the whorl of greater beings.

The silver fire of the Astronomican consumed the last of him, turning the last vestiges of his soul to a flicker of fire that was absorbed by the greater light.

And then Harahel was no more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost*, as well as the novellas *Corax: Soulforge*, *Ravenlord* and *The Lion*, which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*. He is particularly well-known for his Dark Angels stories, including the Legacy of Caliban series. His Warhammer 40,000 repertoire further includes the Path of the Eldar series, the Horus Heresy audio dramas *Raven's Flight*, *Honour to the Dead* and *Raptor*, and a multiplicity of short stories. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the *Time of Legends* trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. He lives and works in Nottingham.

[An extract from *Ravenwing*.](#)



How did the Lion die?

It was a simple question, innocently asked, and Brother Annael had wondered why, in over four hundred years of service to the Dark Angels Chapter, it had not occurred to him before. It was the question that had propelled him from an assault squad in the Fifth Company to the ranks of the Second Company, the lauded Ravenwing, and that was when he had found out the truth.

Horus, arch-traitor, thrice-cursed, had murdered the primarch of the Dark Angels.

So he had been told by Brother Malcifer, Chaplain of the Ravenwing, when Annael had been inducted into the lore of the Second Company. Annael had understood immediately why such knowledge was so closely guarded; that the Dark Angels had been brought to the brink of destruction by other Space Marines had been a testing revelation.

He had known that there were always the weak-willed, even amongst the Adeptus Astartes, who put themselves and their ambition above the call of duty and their oaths of dedication to the Emperor. He had fought against such heretics on eight different occasions, bringing the justice of death to them with chainsword and bolt pistol, but had never suspected the full horror of the temptations that draw good warriors away from the service of the Emperor.

Weeping, Annael had listened as Malcifer had related the tale of the Horus Heresy, a cataclysmic civil war that had threatened to destroy the Imperium at its birth. The Dark Angels, the First Legion, greatest of the Emperor's warriors, had fought against the evil of Horus and those primarchs who had been corrupted by his silken-tongued promises, and they had triumphed. The victory had been won at great cost, and Lion El'Jonson, the primarch of the Dark Angels had given his life to defeat the enemy.

Now that he was a member of the Ravenwing, it was Annael's duty to hold to that knowledge and keep it as a sacred fire in his heart to lend strength to his sword arm and to fuel his courage in battle. Armed with such understanding, it was the Ravenwing that sought out those traitors who had turned on the

Emperor, so that they might be brought to account for their sins. As a Space Marine of the Dark Angels, Annael had never lacked conviction, honour or valour, but as a chosen warrior of the Ravenwing he now understood the importance of discretion and brotherhood even more sharply.

As the attack sirens sounded again across the strike cruiser *Implacable Justice*, Annael considered the sacrifice of the Lion and knew that he was willing to make the same sacrifice to protect the Chapter and the Emperor's dominion. His existence was not for a normal life, but to be an instrument of the Dark Angels' vengeance against those who had so wronged them.

While he pondered his change of perspective, Annael continued with his pre-battle preparations. He had already donned his armour, allowing the adepts of the Techmarines to perform their consecrations to the Machine-God before attending to his mount.

That machine, called *Black Shadow*, was as much a symbol of his position in the Ravenwing as the emblem on his knee and the markings on his shoulder pad. In the Scout Company he had been taught to honour his weapons and his armour, and they had served him well for four centuries of battle. Now that same honour extended to his steed, and Annael was attentive in his application of the unguents to the engine and suspension, and conscientious as he spoke the dedications to the spirit of the motorbike.

It was a fine mount, and it had a history no less acclaimed than his own. In the yellow light of the boarding bay's lamps the black enamelled fairing gleamed with polish that he had applied himself only an hour before. A serf of the armoury was checking the belt feeds of the twin bolters housed in the front cowling above the handlebars, muttering invocations that would ward away jams and misfires.

'Are you excited, brother?' Still with a hint of his Lauderian accent, Zarall's deep voice was unmistakable. Annael looked around and saw his squadron-brother standing at the back of *Black Shadow*, his helm in one hand so that his features could be seen. Zarall had a broad chin and rounded cheeks, a flat nose and bright, blue eyes, and his head was topped with white hair cropped almost to the scalp. His black armour was festooned with purity and devotional seals – strips of parchment on which were written the sacred oaths and texts of the Chapter, fastened with red wax. There were twenty-eight in all, each awarded by the Grand Master of Chaplains, Saphon, for heroic deeds and clarity of faith; Annael had six and was one hundred and fifty years Zarall's senior.

'I am always excited by the prospect of purposeful endeavour,' replied Annael,

standing up. Zarall raised his eyebrows doubtfully and Annael relented in his attempt at nonchalance. ‘All right, I feel as I did the first time I dropped as a full battle-brother. It is as if the last four hundred years had never happened.’

‘You have a fine steed and attend well to its requirements, there is no need for apprehension,’ said Zarall.

‘I did not say that I was apprehensive,’ replied Annael. He patted the saddle of *Black Shadow*. ‘I said I was excited. I am accustomed to the drills and procedures of the squadron. I have no doubt that I will acquit myself with honour and courage.’

‘Yes, but you are to be blessed on your first drop with us,’ said Zarall. ‘Grand Master Sammael himself will lead the attack. Be sure that his eye will fall upon the deeds of his newest recruit.’

‘And his eye will see only that which pleases him,’ Annael assured the other Space Marine. ‘Did Sergeant Cassiel ask you to ensure I was aware of the importance of my inaugural performance?’

‘Not at all, brother,’ said Zarall. The Space Marine smiled, realising that his questions were intrusive. ‘I meant no disrespect. I wished to pay my regards and tell you that I am pleased to have you serve as my squadron-brother. The Emperor is equally pleased to count you amongst the First.’

Annael grasped the hand that Zarall offered, acknowledging the apology and the praise. It was unbecoming of a Dark Angel to feel prideful, but Annael gained some satisfaction from his battle-brother’s confidence.

‘We shall bring honour to the squadron and the company, together,’ Annael said. Another armoured figure appeared behind Zarall. ‘Brother Araton, have you word yet of when we embark?’

‘Sergeant Cassiel is still in briefing with the Grand Master,’ said Araton. Stepping past Zarall, Araton looked over Annael’s bike, his experienced eye taking in every detail at a glance. He was more slender of features than Zarall, his hair shoulder-length, nose regal and eyes deep blue. ‘You have yet to calibrate your sighting arrays, brother.’

‘I was about to attend to that,’ said Annael, opting to take Araton’s comment as observation rather than criticism.

He swung a leg over the saddle of *Black Shadow* and powered up the control panel set underneath the twin bolters. The screen flickered into life with a green light, showing a selection of scanning options. With a sub-vocal command Annael brought up the sighting display inside the lens of his right eye and activated the link between his armour and the machine. After a brief burst of

static, the data from the bike's array transferred into his autosenses, half of Annael's view becoming a schematic of the mustering bay, the other members of the squad and their bikes highlighted by glowing red runes.

Annael deactivated the link and stepped off the bike, returning his attention to his companions. Brother Sabrael had joined the group, the white of a freshly painted chevron bright on his right greave amongst several other battle honours. Annael had heard at length from Sabrael how the honour had been earned against the orks of Pahysis; several times, in fact.

'Be sure to keep up when we attack, brother,' said Sabrael, the hint of a laugh in his voice. His aristocratic tone had become familiar to Annael during his induction into the company, a remnant of the Dark Angel's upbringing in the privileged classes of Aginor Sigma. How the son of a coddled elite had managed to pass the harsh initiation tests of the Chapter was a mystery to Annael, but Sabrael had proven himself a capable, if impetuous, warrior over decades of battle, his name frequently appearing in the *Honoris Registarum*. 'And try not to fall off that fine machine.'

'I will take especial care,' replied Annael, wondering when the novelty of his induction would cease to provide amusement for his squadron-brethren. 'When you dash into more trouble than you can handle, be sure that I will not be far behind to drag you out.'

Sabrael laughed and walked away to his own machine, his armour managing to replicate the slight swagger in his step.

'Forgive Sabrael's exuberance,' said Zarall. 'He is a good warrior, despite the constant vexation he causes the Chaplains.'

'Do not be too swift to follow his example,' said Araton. 'We fight as a squadron. The line between enthusiasm and foolhardiness can be crossed all too easily.'

'I can hear you over the vox-net, brothers,' Sabrael's response came to Annael's ear via his helmet communicator. 'I know well the time for action and the time for contemplation, in right proportion.'

Annael was about to reply when Sergeant Cassiel's voice broke over the comm.

'Embarkation in ten minutes, stand by your mounts. Final briefing in five minutes. Be glad, for Grand Master Sammael has found us a worthy target of attention. There will be honour aplenty to spare for all of us.'

Zarall and Araton departed to their machines, leaving Annael to complete his pre-battle checks. Mounting *Black Shadow* he ran a series of diagnostic tests on the bike's systems and all seemed to be functioning within tolerable parameters.

He made a vocal note in his battle log to commend the Techmarines of the armoury on their diligence in preparing the machine for its new rider.

When he was ready, Annael thumbed the ignition rune and the engine of his mount growled into life. *Black Shadow* came alive beneath him, trembling with suppressed power. Gunning the engine, he monitored the performance display in front of him and was satisfied that all was in working order. In time, he had been told by Cassiel, he would know by sound and feel whether all was well with his steed, but for the moment he relied upon the internal systems to warn him of any cause for concern.

Engaging the gearbox, Annael allowed *Black Shadow* to roll forward a short distance, thick tyres gripping the meshwork of the deck, blue-grey smoke chugging from the exhausts. He wheeled the bike around and saw that the other squadron members were lining up by the gateway to the docking hangar.

The attack siren sounded three times: five minutes until the drop would begin. Easing into his place at the back of the squadron, Annael felt his excitement rising again. Inside his helm, he grinned, amused at himself for feeling like a neophyte at his first battle.

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First published in Great Britain in 2015.

This eBook edition published in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS UK.

Produced by the Games Workshop Design Studio.

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ISBN: 978-1-78251-508-1

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