

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



— DEATHWATCH 2 —

**BAD BLOOD**

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## DEATHWATCH 2: BAD BLOOD

Steve Lyons

They dropped out of the warp.

Antor heard the pitch of the ship's engines changing, felt a shudder passing through its hull. His eyes snapped open.

The shutter over his single viewport retracted, and he could see realspace again. It had been too long. At the same time, it was too soon.

The strike cruiser *Incontrovertible Truth* would shortly reach its destination: two hours, maybe longer, depending on how accurate its jump had been. He wasn't ready. His blood was running hot today and his mind was unsettled. He needed more time to cleanse himself.

He closed his eyes again and breathed deeply, sitting cross-legged on his utilitarian bunk. He tuned out all other sounds but for those of the machinery, clicking and ticking in time with his dual heartbeats. He tried not to think about the suit of power armour looming over him, its blank-eyed helm accusing.

The armour was black and silver, but for the right shoulder plate. This was a deep red and bore the image of a drop of blood with angel wings: a stark reminder of where Antor Delassio had come from, and what he still carried with him.

A reminder that he wasn't worthy.

*The Cursed Young Prince*. That was what his brothers called him – at least, the handful who shared his secret, who knew of his shame. Antor had sworn to them that he could beat his curse, and indeed, he had kept it under control for months now, but it never entirely went away.

What would they say if they could see me now? he wondered.

There were needles in his veins. He could feel his blood being drawn through them into the machine: a half-rusted arcane box with switches and dials and blinking runes, and bubbling glass vials inside it. The machine was supposed to purify his blood, consecrate it and pump it back into him. He knew from experience, however, that it wouldn't be sufficient. He also needed to meditate and pray.

He tried to clear his mind again, to meditate on the glory of the Emperor. But Antor couldn't keep his thoughts from wandering. He couldn't help but remember another day, four years ago. He had been aboard the *Incontrovertible Truth* then too, quartered in this very cabin.

The day the ship had been attacked.

The day the curse had blighted him for the very first time, and overwhelmed him.

Antor had been so proud, then.

Of course, he didn't let it show. Such had never been his way. Many who had met him had remarked upon the contrast between this junior sergeant's noble bearing and the quiet humility with which he unfailingly comported himself.

Still, when first he had clad himself in the black and silver, with no one but his attendant serfs to see it, he had allowed his chest to swell a little.

Chapter Master Dante himself had awarded him this great honour. Antor had been seconded to the Deathwatch for an indefinite tour of duty. He was one of the very few Blood Angels – at the time – to be welcomed into that august assemblage.

Quietly, he had thanked the Emperor for this opportunity to serve Him and had never really questioned why he, of all his battle-brothers, had been chosen. He had polished his new suit of artisan armour until it gleamed, and had always been the first of every kill team he had joined to report for muster.

He had distinguished himself in a dozen missions already, bringing down the wrath of the Emperor's Inquisition upon the hated xenos across the galaxy.

But that day, he was roused from his sleep by the call to battle stations.

He had already begun to struggle into his armour when his cabin door flew open and a serf – a single serf – arrived to help him. He recited each

invocation and performed each necessary ritual patiently. Lights flared outside his viewport. The ship shuddered with the impacts of missiles against its shields, but Antor didn't allow that to distract him. He would have no use for his jump pack here in the ship's narrow chambers and corridors. He inserted his vox-earpiece and sifted through the channels.

The time was an hour before morning prayers.

They had dropped out of the warp early, as Antor had slept. That meant they had probably arrived in the Erioch System of the Jericho Reach. Some of Antor's brothers were to begin a tour of duty at the watch fortress there. Antor himself was bound for the planet Mariach, along with a new kill team, to push back the eldar raider incursions.

A vessel had been lying in wait for them. A grand cruiser.

It had likely been a proud member of the Imperial Navy, many centuries ago. The touch of Chaos had defiled it, warping its very shape. It was a bigger ship than theirs, and smaller escorts buzzed around it like flies.

Watch Captain Gharvil had launched the Thunderhawks. There had been four in the bays, a three-brother response team for each of them kept on standby at all times.

The *Incontrovertible Truth* carried forty-four Deathwatch Space Marines. There was little the remaining thirty-two could do, however, except prepare themselves and report for muster. Their immediate fate was in the hands of their pilots and gunners.

As Antor left his cabin, an explosion rocked the ship violently. He clung to a sconce, riveted to the wall, to keep his balance. More battle-brothers began to emerge from the doors around him.

'That sounded close,' said Brother Casella. He had come to the Deathwatch from the Crimson Fists; his shoulder plate bore their colours of blue and red. 'I wouldn't be surprised if that—'

Another explosion cut him off. This time, the deck plates dropped out from underneath their feet. In the moment before the artificial gravity compensated, Antor judged that they had been thrown into a lateral spin. He drew his hand flamer *Ignatus*, presented to him in gratitude by the Ordo Xenos, though he had no target for it.

He started to run.

He came up short as he rounded the bend of an arterial passageway, to find a bulkhead grinding down in front of him. Casella came to a halt

beside him.

‘The hull has been breached,’ Brother Lokar – a wiry young Space Wolf with red hair and teeth sharpened to points – growled, loping up behind them. ‘The starboard mid-sections of decks epsilon through theta have been sealed off.’

Antor was receiving the same information through his earpiece.

‘Throne forbid that we should die today without ever setting eyes upon our enemy,’ said Brother Sanctimus, seconded from the Ultramarines.

‘We won’t. We need to find a way around.’ Antor was already running several potential solutions through his mind, and he knew the others were too.

Eight of them had gathered in front of the bulkhead, in all. Eight Space Marines – none of whom had ever fought together before – from various Chapters. Lokar took charge, leading them back the way they had come. He was a veteran, a Wolf Guard, in his own Chapter.

Antor saw a flaming Thunderhawk reel past a viewport, and a larger shape – a dark shape, a profane shape – loom behind it. He only caught the briefest glimpse of the enemy cruiser.

He couldn’t have described it in any useful detail, nor begun to articulate why it disturbed him so much. He only knew that, in that moment, he felt an indefinable ache in his primary heart.

A chill ran up and down his spine, and he thought he must have bitten his tongue, although he hadn’t.

He was sure he could taste blood.

Antor had heard it called the Red Thirst, but in truth he had rarely heard it discussed at all. He had seen its effects, however.

He had seen brave and noble brothers overcome on the battlefield by an uncontrollable fury. He had seen their faces contorted with madness, seen their eyes ablaze with hatred, heard their screams of primal rage.

He had seen some consumed by it, mowed down as they charged the enemy’s guns and tanks, heedless of any risk. He had heard of others turning upon their allies, lashing out blindly. Some had been subdued and gradually brought back to their senses enough to fight another day, though this was becoming more rare. Each time it happened, an Apothecary or a Chaplain would blame it on something in the afflicted warrior’s blood – if

anything was said at all.

Antor had looked at his fellow Blood Angels sometimes, wondering how many more of them might be containing the rage inside them. He had even wondered – but put the thought out of his mind, for that way led paranoia – if he could fully trust them.

Each time, they had buried their fallen brothers with full honours in the red dust of their primarch's home world, Baal Secundus. They had mourned their dead, but rarely spoken of any of them again. Back then, whenever he prayed, Antor was thankful that he did not share their affliction. He had always kept a cool, clear head and an even temperament, no matter how he might have been provoked.

Perhaps his blood was pure.

Alarms were screaming, both inside his armour and outside of it.

Antor could barely hear them. The explosion had deadened his ears.

It had also blown a jagged hole in the *Incontrovertible Truth's* hull, and one luckless brother had been caught in the blast, his armour shredded. Before he could react, before Antor or anyone else could reach him, he had been whipped out into space.

Antor magnetised his boots. He hauled himself forward, one laborious step at a time. A hurricane was blowing in his face, making his eyes tear up, but he couldn't catch a breath of it. He jammed his helmet down over his head and sealed it, gasping in its recycled air reserves.

Brother Grennon was holding up a bulkhead hatch for him, motioning to him to hurry. Some of the others had already made it through. Antor dived for the narrowing gap, sliding through it on his stomach. Hands caught him by the wrists and hauled him the rest of the way. As he turned to help the brothers behind him, Grennon rolled out from underneath the hatch and let it slam down.

'I could hear the machine-spirits in the shutter, screaming,' he explained, his voice crackling over a short-range vox-channel. 'Another second and this section would have been—'

A voice from behind the bulkhead interrupted. '*Leave us. We'll find another way around and join you later. May the Emperor be with you.*'

'And with you,' Lokar voxed back. He addressed the others through his speaker grille, brusquely. 'He's right. We must keep going.'

Antor was running again; only now he was one of five Space Marines, rather than eight. They had left three behind, trapped by adamantium-plated shields: one of them certainly dead, the others facing an arduous space walk to the launch bays with limited air reserves, in the deadliest possible circumstances.

Lokar held up a hand to halt them. His head was cocked. ‘Do you hear that?’ he asked. His senses were keener than those of his brothers, a quirk of his gene-seed.

‘I hear more explosions,’ said Grennon. He was heavy-set, stolid. Antor hadn’t seen his Chapter’s symbol before: the silhouette of a grasping claw, picked out by orange flames.

‘We are wasting time,’ growled Sanctimus.

‘Something has changed. The vibration of the deck plates,’ said Lokar. ‘I think... yes, we have lost the starboard engines.’

A moment later, vox-chatter confirmed it, along with another chilling development.

*‘All battle-brothers to the port aft cargo hold,’* Watch Captain Gharvil instructed from his command post on the bridge. *‘The enemy ship is coming alongside. Repeat, all battle-brothers to the port aft cargo hold. Prepare to repel boarders.’*

Antor remembered how he had felt, back then.

He remembered the knot that had begun to form in his stomach, tightening with every blind corner he had turned, every obstacle he had found in his path. It was not fear, far from it.

It was a sense of his duty, imperilled.

But that was only natural, wasn’t it?

His ship had been under attack. His battle-brothers were fighting to protect it, to protect him and everyone else on board, and he yearned to fight alongside them – but no matter how hard he tried, how fast he ran, he couldn’t reach them.

He knew that the others, his four disparate allies, felt it too.

Lokar had been taking out his frustrations on them.

‘Russ, but the greenest Blood Claw back home is faster than the four of you!’ he snarled, as another compromised section of the ship was sealed off just as they reached it.

‘You brought us this way,’ Sanctimus snapped back at him, ‘insisting that your “instincts” were superior to our Emperor-given gifts.’

Lokar bridled. ‘My instincts are as much the All-Father’s gift as—’

‘Please, brothers,’ Antor intervened, well-used to mediating between those of shorter temper than he. ‘Listen.’

He was following the progress of the battle through his earpiece. Three of the Thunderhawks had been destroyed; the last had limped its way back into its launch bay. The Deathwatch had taken out most of the smaller enemy ships, at least. The *Incontrovertible Truth* was crippled, however, and unable to throw off the Chaos vessel as it extended a docking claw and clamped onto the strike cruiser’s hull.

‘They’re blasting their way through the airlock,’ Antor reported quietly. His words had the desired effect, refocusing minds upon their immediate predicament.

‘I say we stand the best chance if we descend to one of the lower decks before making our way forward,’ suggested Casella.

‘Let’s do it,’ said Sanctimus, seizing the opportunity to take the lead. Lokar scowled at the Ultramarine, a growl rattling in the back of his throat, but he followed along with the others.

According to the vox-net, fifteen Space Marines – around half of those left aboard – had made it to the cargo hold. The watch captain himself had joined them. They were waiting behind barriers hastily assembled from sturdy cargo crates when the inner airlock door was wrenched from its runners. Frag grenades rolled through the aperture and exploded, loosing shrapnel, smoke and confusion. Then their attackers appeared, marching brazenly out of the thick fog, hammering bolt-rounds out ahead of them.

For a long moment, all Antor could hear through his earpiece was gunfire, then Watch Captain Gharvil’s voice, clearly under enormous strain, came through.

*‘All battle-brothers to the port aft cargo hold, immediately. We’re under attack...’* There was a pause then, and more gunfire. *‘...attack by Traitor Space Marines – Black Legion!’*

The knot in Antor’s stomach twisted. The watch captain could have breathed no viler a curse than that name. And suddenly, he felt that pain in his heart again, sharper this time, as if he had been stabbed through the chest with an icicle. It felt like pain, sadness, loss and the infinite cold of

the void.

The ticking of his lashed-together machinery brought Antor back to the present, to his cabin. His heartbeats had sped up.

Even now, four years on, the memory of that day had that effect on him. He felt as helpless, as frustrated, as he had back then.

He could taste blood again. He was sweating and his robes clung to his muscular torso.

He had never made it to his destination – though his ad hoc team had come close, so tantalisingly close. Casella's plan had been a good one. They had threaded their way through the *Incontrovertible Truth's* undercroft bilges, through the engine rooms where servitors laboured over spitting rune panels and steaming pistons, though most had already been burnt or crippled in the effort.

They had agreed that the conveyors couldn't be trusted, and had been looking for another way up to the mid-decks when Watch Captain Gharvil had perished.

The battle-brothers in the cargo hold had fought well – by their own accounts – but they had been badly outnumbered. Ten, eleven, twelve Black Legionnaires had fallen, but more had poured through the airlock behind them, until the defenders' barriers had been swept aside and they had been overrun.

It was reported that Gharvil had stood toe to toe with three opponents, slaying one with his power sword and badly wounding a second, giving the remainder of the invading force pause and buying time for his few surviving brothers to withdraw.

*'Four of us made it out,'* a breathless voice crackled over the vox-channels. *'We have sealed off the hold, but that won't delay them long. We must deny them the ship! They–'* The rest was swallowed by a furious blizzard of static.

*'They're jamming our communications,'* said Sanctimus. *'We need to reach that hold.'*

*'No. You heard what happened up there,'* insisted Lokar. *'Now is not the time for a frontal assault. We need to employ stealth and cunning. In my Chapter–'*

‘That sounds like the justification of a coward!’ snapped the Ultramarine. The Space Wolf bristled and squared up to him.

‘There must be other groups like ours,’ said Antor quickly, ‘each cut off from the others. If we could find them—’

‘What hope of that, without the vox-net?’ asked Casella. ‘Our attackers are employing the classic tactic – divide and conquer.’

‘We should follow our commander’s final orders,’ considered Grennon.

‘And go marching to the slaughter?’ Lokar scoffed. ‘The situation has changed. Our watch captain is dead. Most of our brothers are dead, and we can’t contact the rest.’

Antor leapt into the ensuing silence. ‘They want our ship. Or any ship, perhaps. They can’t have known exactly where we’d emerge from the warp, yet they were waiting for us. I wonder how long they were waiting?’

‘They could have destroyed us,’ agreed Grennon.

‘Instead, they sent a boarding party knowing some of them would die,’ said Antor.

‘What does any of this matter?’ growled Lokar, impatiently.

‘If we know what they want,’ said Antor, ‘we can predict their next move.’

‘What if there is something aboard this ship?’ suggested Grennon. ‘Something being conveyed to Watch Fortress Erioch? Is that possible?’

‘I don’t know,’ confessed Antor. ‘The watch captain would have known. If there is, they will likely come looking for it. Or for us.’

‘We wouldn’t have to go to them,’ Casella realised. ‘We can find a good defensible position and lay an ambush for them.’

Lokar’s eyes flashed. ‘Stealth and cunning. We can strike at our enemies from the shadows, tear out their throats before they even know we’re there.’

Antor Delassio waited.

They had planned their ambush carefully, and not without further disagreement. They remained on one of the lower decks, assuming that anything of value – and so secret that they hadn’t been briefed about it – would be hidden down there.

They had chosen a rarely used passageway, but one that – with so many rendered impassable – their enemies were almost certain to pass through.

Casella had shot out two lumen-globes, cloaking the Deathwatch in darkness. So much damage had been done throughout the ship that his sabotage would likely go unrecognised as such.

The servitors had failed. The last engine had sputtered out some twenty minutes ago. The *Incontrovertible Truth* was now a dead husk, drifting helplessly. All was silent, but for the occasional creaks of tortured adamantium settling into place.

Antor crouched out of sight. He had made sure that his armour was sealed, giving off no emissions or heat signatures that an auspex could detect. He had cleaned and reloaded his hand flamer.

Brother Sanctimus had agreed to wait one hour. If there were no signs of Black Legionnaires by then, the remaining Deathwatch would seek them out.

‘They are probably storming the bridge already,’ he had grumbled.

In the event, they appeared long before the hour was up: four of them, to begin with, advancing raggedly by sections. Antor hadn’t expected them to be so disciplined. Their black power armour had burnished golden highlights. On their shoulders, each bore an eye symbol staring out of an eight-pointed star, and their bearing betrayed a monstrous pride.

After all they have done, thought Antor, barely noticing that his right hand had curled into a fist, too aware of his own heartbeats in his ears.

He couldn’t see his battle-brothers from his position. They had no way of signalling each other to coordinate their attack.

Lokar acted first, as everyone had known he would. Once the traitors had passed his hiding place, he fired a burst of expertly placed bolt-rounds into their backs. Barely had they begun to react when Brothers Sanctimus and Grennon tackled them from left and right. Antor relished the screams their chainswords made as their teeth chewed on the traitors’ armour.

Blood rushed to his head as he uncoiled himself and burst through the storeroom door. Red blotches filled his vision and, as he blinked them away, he almost stumbled. Consequently, he was a fraction of a second behind Casella, emerging from the doorway opposite to block the traitors’ path, his boltgun already roaring.

The nearest traitor saw Antor’s misstep and barrelled towards him, hoping to overrun him as he brought *Ignatus* to bear. He wasn’t fast enough, and was met by a gout of flaming promethium to the face which

sent him reeling.

Too bad he was wearing his helmet, Antor thought. He fancied he could detect the pungent smell of burnt flesh all the same.

He struck downward with his chainsword, spattering his artisan armour in gore. He had already raised his arm again when he realised that his enemy was dead. Abashed, he thumbed his chainsword's activation rune, letting it sputter to a halt. He turned to face his battle-brothers, but saw no reproach in their eyes.

Antor paused. The battle was over. When... When had he...

He shook his head in confusion. The events of the past few minutes were already a blur to him. He remembered Sanctimus standing tall in the thick of the melee bellowing orders, which Grennon and none of the others had followed. He remembered the smell of electrical discharge, fire and blood.

The Black Legionnaires had fought hard, but the Deathwatch's numbers and the element of surprise had ultimately won the day.

With their deaths, the knot in Antor's stomach unwound a little.

'Four down,' Casella gloated.

Sanctimus nodded curtly. 'We did well. Better than I expected, thank the Emperor.' Casella was nursing a lame arm, while a plasma pistol burst had warped one side of Grennon's chest armour and must have melted the flesh beneath it too. Otherwise, the Ultramarine was right – they were blessedly unscathed.

'The traitors will have voxed for reinforcements,' Antor reminded them.

'We have to move,' agreed Grennon.

They had pre-planned their escape route. Lokar led the way by virtue of being the fastest of them. He had removed his helmet, and he curled back his lips to expose his fangs. 'We'll lay another ambush on another deck. Two, three more times, and these traitors will wish they had never set foot aboard our ship.'

This time, nobody disagreed with him.

Four down, thought Antor. It's a start, at least.

Further along, they climbed a maintenance ladder, squeezing their armoured bulks through a hatchway designed for serfs and mobile servitors.

Emerging onto the next deck up, they were greeted by a sight that

dampened their newfound optimism. There had been a battle here too, but with a very different outcome. Three Deathwatch Space Marines lay sprawled across the deck plates, their bodies burnt, slashed and battered. Antor knew their names; he had been due to fight alongside two of them on Mariach.

A Black Legionnaire, too, had been left where he fell. But only one.

‘Do these savages not even come back for their own dead?’ rumbled Sanctimus.

Lokar sniffed the air. ‘They are still close by. We should move on.’

Before they did, Grennon knelt beside the bodies. He salvaged a handful of bolter clips and tossed them to the others. ‘In case of need.’ He eyed a powerful plasma gun, clutched tightly in the Black Legionnaire’s dead hands, before quickly dismissing the idea of wielding a weapon so irredeemably tainted.

Antor was glad when they moved away from that place. The loss of a brother, any brother, was a tragedy. It was a fact of his existence, however, to which he had grown accustomed long ago. And yet, there was something indefinable about this loss that made it weigh heavily upon him. Perhaps it is the premonition of my own fate, he considered.

Little more than a minute later, they heard footsteps: more than a dozen pairs, by his reckoning, half of them heavily armoured, coming their way.

Lokar, as always six steps ahead of the others, flattened himself beside an open hatchway and waited. For the rest of the Space Marines, there was scant cover to be had. Instead, they drew their weapons, ready to defend themselves.

However, the footsteps turned away from them.

‘Sounds like they’re descending a stairway,’ Grennon whispered.

Lokar motioned to the others to stay put, and crept after the footsteps. Antor was amazed at how silent he could be in power armour.

He returned after a couple of minutes to report. ‘Eight traitors, plus degenerate human slaves, headed downward. I don’t think they were a search party – if they were, they weren’t searching very hard. They seemed to know where they were going.’

‘They’re headed for the engine rooms,’ Antor realised.

Sanctimus glared at him accusingly. ‘Then you were wrong. It is our ship they want – and they want it in working order. We should have defended

the engines. Or gone to the bridge, as I wished.’

‘Should we go after them?’ asked Grennon.

‘They outnumber us,’ said Lokar, ‘but if we sneak up behind them, Russ willing, we may be able to—’

‘I say we stick to our plan,’ said Casella.

Antor nodded. ‘I agree. The engines are dead. Let the traitors try to repair them if they wish – if that is indeed what they are doing. In the meantime, we shall be hunting down their allies, trapping and exterminating them like rats. If the Emperor is with us, we may find more survivors too and build our numbers.’

His voice, rarely raised in passion, was rich and sonorous. The others listened to it and – somewhat to his surprise – were swayed by it. ‘And if we cannot prevail, and the ship is truly lost... then, brothers, we can take more *drastic* measures.’

They continued on their way. Antor only wished he felt as confident as he had sounded.

Just hours ago, he had known his mission. He had been assigned to a kill team, with a clear chain of command. He had been briefed on his goals, and on the nature of the enemies that would try to keep him from achieving them. He had known exactly what was expected of him. He had been ready to serve – as he always did – diligently.

In spite of his rank in the Blood Angels, Antor had always been content to serve in the Deathwatch, and never to lead.

He hadn’t been prepared for this. None of them had.

Antor Delassio had never lost a battle before. Not before that fateful day.

He had almost begun to believe he never would, that even when he was himself struck down – as one day, inevitably, he would be – his sacrifice would only speed his brothers to victory. He had faced that prospect with his usual equanimity.

The first of his brothers to die that day was Grennon.

They had attacked four more Black Legionnaires. This time, one of the traitors had detected them somehow: an inadvertent sound, something out of place, perhaps a lingering heat trace in the air. He had shouted a warning.

This time, their prey was ready for them.

The leader of the traitors wore a lightning claw – three blades wreathed in a dazzling energy field. When the traitor slashed at Grennon, his armour seemed to warp away from its touch and the blades tore into his chest.

He fought on for a minute – maybe even longer – after that, kept going by the stimulants his armour was pumping into him, by his natural adrenaline and his own sheer bloody-mindedness. Sadly, none of these commodities were inexhaustible.

Eventually, his body had to accept that it was dead.

Lokar went down next, a chainsword cutting deep into his stomach.

And just like that, the odds had shifted.

Sanctimus engaged the leader, the clash of lightning claw and chainsword blade lighting up the passageway. Antor and Casella were left with three Black Legionnaires to deal with, although fortunately two of them were already wounded.

Lokar had rent the armour of one between the ribs, and Antor found the same niche with his blade, cutting into flesh and muscle.

As one traitor fell away, another lunged at him, a huge metallic mass crushing him against the wall, pinning the wrist of his flamer hand. A hateful voice blared out of a speaker grille at him.

‘You should have found a dark corner to crawl into, and waited to perish with the rest of them. You would have suffered less.’

Antor’s right arm and chainsword were trapped between them. He gunned the blade anyway, cutting into his own armour as well as the traitor’s. But he had no hand left free to deflect his foe’s pistol, and its muzzle was pressed against his eye lens. A bolt-round at this range would pulp his brain.

The killing shot never came. Instead, the traitor stiffened as blood crested his helm and rolled down his face in rivulets. Lokar had found the strength to stand, somehow, and had buried his blade in the back of the Black Legionnaire’s head.

It had taken all the strength he could muster. The Space Wolf swayed for a moment, then crashed to the deck plates again.

‘No!’

Antor didn’t recognise the shouting voice – not until he realised that his throat was raw, and that he was still roaring.

*No longer were there three enemy warriors in front of him. There were*

*twice, three times, maybe ten times that number – ghosts picked out in crimson, indistinct. He launched himself into the midst of them with his chainsword grinding and Ignatus flaring, determined to deal out as much pain as he could to them before... before they could...*

*Pain. Sadness. Loss. The infinite void...*

The next thing he knew, he was running. Casella was beside him, supporting him, urging him to hurry. ‘Don’t look back!’

‘L-Lokar?’ Antor stammered. He was trembling, ineffably cold inside his armour.

Casella shook his head. ‘He was still clinging to life by a thread. He said... no, he *ordered* us to leave him.’

Antor’s auto-senses warned him of more armoured figures ahead of them. They turned back, but footsteps were approaching behind them too. Casella kicked open a hatchway and pushed them both through it.

They were in a tiny maintenance bay. Casella wrenched a grille from the wall. He sucked in air between his teeth, and Antor realised for the first time how injured the other Space Marine was. He was limping, and his left arm, already hurt, appeared to have been dislocated from his shoulder and was mangled besides. He had lost his bolter.

He wanted to ask about Sanctimus. He vaguely remembered the Ultramarine falling...

They had won the battle, but at too high a price.

‘The service ducts. Go.’ Casella helped Antor clamber into the hole in the wall. Then he replaced the grille between them.

‘What about you?’ Antor protested, through the steel mesh.

‘They know we’re here. We can only hope they don’t know how many of us there are. We must scupper the ship. If I stay behind and engage them —’

‘No!’ He surprised himself with the vehemence of his outburst.

Casella turned away with a wry smile and headed out into the passageway. Then he was gone, a war cry ringing from his throat. ‘There is only the Emperor! He is our shield and protector!’

He was greeted by the sounds of chainblades and bolter fire.

Under the cover of that noise, Antor crawled away through square metallic ducts, scraping his knees and shoulders against the sides.

Casella was right, he told himself. One of us had to stay, and he was injured. The thought gave him cold comfort. It didn't slow his pounding heartbeats.

Did he already know, back then? Did he understand – on some level, at least – what had begun to happen to him? Looking back, from a distance of years, it was impossible to say.

Perhaps he had simply pushed the thought out of his mind, afraid to face it.

Did I not have the right to be angry?

He had emerged from the ducting into a small, empty crew cabin.

The door was locked, but torn from its mountings: evidence that the traitors had already searched in there. He removed his helmet and doused his head in the sink. He gargled to cleanse the iron taste of blood from his tongue.

He lowered himself uneasily onto the bunk, too small for his armoured frame. He tried to blink away the red shapes that still writhed behind his eyes. They filled him with a sense of dread. He didn't dare look at the shapes directly. He was afraid he might see too much.

He had to try to clear his mind. He remembered...

*'You should have found a dark corner to crawl into,' the Black Legionnaire had snarled, his helmet pressed up to Antor's face. His eyes had blazed dark red behind his retinal lenses.*

*'They want our ship. Or any ship, perhaps,' Antor had mused.*

*'You should have found a dark corner to crawl into...'*

*'It is our ship they want – and they want it in working order.'*

His eyes snapped open in surprise as the deck plates lurched and then thrummed beneath his feet.

'The engines...' he breathed, and in that moment it was as if a prism had suddenly shifted in his mind and made everything crystal-clear to him.

*'Do these savages not even come back for their own dead?'*

Perhaps not, thought Antor, if they intend to cremate them...

*'You should have found a dark corner to crawl into... and waited to perish with the rest of them...'*

He knew why the Black Legion wanted the *Incontrovertible Truth* now. They wanted it for the one thing it could do that their own grand cruiser

could not: approach the Deathwatch facilities unchallenged. They had been bound for the Erioch System. Some of Antor's brothers were to begin a tour of duty there.

Watch Fortress Erioch!

It was one of the Deathwatch's most important outposts. It served them as a command centre, a garrison, an armoury, a place of study and training, and a repository for holy texts and relics. It was home to the Jericho Reach's Watch Commander – the Master of the Vigil – and the sector's first line of defence against any xenos threat.

Erioch was well defended. Any single hostile ship approaching it would be atomised before it could get close. One of their own strike cruisers, however – clearly wounded in battle, limping home, its communication systems crippled – might give the gunners pause for a moment.

Too long.

If the *Incontrovertible Truth* made it into a docking bay, or even just dive-bombed the parapets with every warhead in its missile tubes armed...

Antor's temples throbbed. He massaged them with ceramite-clad fingers. He had to think clearly, to reason. He was the only survivor of his impromptu kill team, perhaps of the entire ship's complement. There was no one else to tell him what he should do.

Sanctimus was right, he thought, we ought to have defended the engine rooms. Better yet, damaged them beyond repair. Too late for that now, though.

He had come too far. It would take him too long to get back to the engines now, with the ship already underway again. He was closer, far closer, to the bridge. So, that was where he had to go. He wondered how many of the traitors he would have to face there. How many came aboard? How many had died?

It occurred to him, suddenly, that this was a suicide mission for the Black Legion. So, there would be no more left aboard than they might need. The rest would likely have abandoned ship, having ensured – so they thought – that the last of its rightful owners were dead. How many might they have left behind?

Too many...

But only he could prevent what was about to happen. The responsibility was his. He levered himself to his feet, but felt a familiar knot tightening

in the pit of his stomach again. ‘There is no cowardice in conviction,’ he recited, seeking solace in the Emperor’s wisdom, ‘and there is nothing... there is nothing to fear but... failure...’

He was almost there when it hit him.

Antor couldn’t breathe. His vision had tunnelled, dark red, until he could hardly see. He clung to a bulkhead for support.

For a moment that felt like a year, he was elsewhere, another time, in a place of never-ending pain and terror. It felt almost like a premonition... and when it ended, when he finally managed to get a hold of himself, it left him with a dark, sick feeling that he couldn’t swallow down, no matter how hard he tried.

‘There is no cowardice... in conviction...’ he repeated through clenched teeth, willing himself onward.

He had encountered no enemies in the passageways thus far, which suggested that his suppositions had been accurate and few traitors remained. He had been lucky, too, that nothing – no decompressed areas – had blocked his route. He had found more bodies, though – more Deathwatch battle-brothers slain.

The hatch that led to the bridge had been blown open. The gaping hole was unguarded, a sign of the traitors’ conceit. Antor flattened himself against the wall beside it, waiting to be certain that they hadn’t detected his approach.

Lokar should be here instead of me, he thought. He was the stealthiest of us.

He gathered information through his auto-senses, without showing himself. He pinpointed three traitors on the bridge: more than he had hoped, fewer than he had feared. One stood at the captain’s command post, while the others had taken the strike cruiser’s controls. They had lain down their weapons and stripped off parts of their battleplate, and howled accursed hymnals as they prepared to meet their dark gods in death. They don’t trust their slaves to do this for them, he realised. There were too many traitors for Antor to fight alone.

Grennon should be here instead of me, he thought. He was the strongest of us.

He felt the engines stepping up a note. Assuming that the traitors would

be momentarily occupied, he stole a glance through the open hatchway. The first thing he saw was a vast, cathedral-like structure, bristling with spires and towers. It filled the forward viewport, rotating languidly against a velvet backdrop.

*Erioch!* It was close enough that he could make out the devotional statuary upon its ramparts. He had to act now.

His mind was racing, but he had a plan. He would tackle the traitor helmsman from behind. He would only have a second before the others reacted, but it might just be long enough.

Casella should be here instead of me, he thought. He was the boldest of us.

He didn't have to beat the traitors. He only had to wrench the helmsman's hands away from the controls for an instant. He couldn't vox the watch fortress – he could see that the console had been wrecked – but he could send them a message nonetheless. He could throw the *Incontrovertible Truth* off-course – he only had to make it dive, bank, spin or just falter in its approach, and they'd know something was wrong.

There would have been no response to the fortress' hails, no advance warning of their arrival.

He knew that he could trust his battle-brothers to do the rest.

A suicide mission for me too, then, Antor thought, and for a moment, the magnitude of what he was facing overwhelmed him...

*He was in that place of pain and terror again. Its blood-red shadows were more distinct than ever; he even thought he recognised some of them, although he couldn't be sure of it...*

He clawed his way back to the here and now. He focused on another thing he had seen on the bridge: the bodies of the crew, heaped unceremoniously in a corner. They may only have been Chapter serfs and servitors, but still they had died for the Emperor.

Antor felt his gorge rising and, this time, he welcomed the anger as an antidote to his fear. He let it blaze inside him, let its heat suffuse him, energise him. Someone has to make the traitors pay, he told himself. No amount of suffering could ever be enough to punish them for their manifold sins.

So, Antor let the anger take him. He rode onto the bridge on its crest, his chainsword screaming, the battle cry of his parent Chapter bursting from

his lips.

‘For the Emperor and Sanguinius! Death! *Death!*’

Antor remembered.

Blood rushing in his ears, his temples pounding. He remembered battlements framed in the forward viewport, a flash-frozen image steeped in red.

He remembered hurling himself forwards, yanking, wrenching, smashing at whatever came to hand. He remembered black-gauntleted fingers grasping for him, tearing him away, still kicking and screaming.

He remembered a power sword battering at his chest, slicing into his hip, and yet he hadn’t felt the blows. He remembered battering at thick, heavy armour plate, making only the slightest of dents. And then...

*Then, he was elsewhere. It felt like something else was working his muscles, bearing his pain, screaming in his voice, but he was only distantly aware of it.*

*He was fighting red shadows, wave after wave of them. He had thought they would never stop coming.*

*The darkest, most terrible shadows.*

*Fire.*

*Spinning metal teeth.*

*His fists and feet thundering over and over into a bloody, quivering mass.*

*And then...*

He had removed his helmet and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

*Something sticky. Something red. Something that tasted like... his deepest fear made manifest. He had tried to deny it for four years since then, told himself it couldn’t be true, but... like iron and...*

It wasn’t real, he tried to tell himself every time the thought came to his mind.

It wasn’t real.

For a long time, Antor Delassio had dreamed, and his dreams had been drenched in shades of red.

His eyes had opened upon a vaulted ceiling, and dust motes dancing around bas-relief sculptures. Reverberating footsteps and the ticking of machinery had filled his ears. An Apothecary’s white mask loomed over

his bunk.

‘Don’t try to sit up,’ he had cautioned.

Memories rushed back into Antor’s head and, with them, a stab of dismay. His throat was unaccountably dry.

‘You are in the medicae ward,’ the Apothecary told him. ‘You were critically injured, but we reached you. Your hibernator implant did its job. You have spent two months, one week and three days in suspended animation under our supervision.’

‘The watch fortress,’ Antor croaked.

The Apothecary nodded. ‘This is Watch Fortress Erioch,’ he said.

As he became stronger, over the next few days, he asked more questions.

The *Incontrovertible Truth* had indeed been on a collision course with the watch fortress. Then, even as Erioch’s gunners realised what was happening – too late to do anything about it – it had suddenly veered away from them. They had held their fire.

They had despatched Thunderhawks instead. The strike cruiser had been found drifting at the edge of the system, and had been boarded. The hull had already been holed in several locations by improvised breaching charges, the great engines stalled.

There were questions for Antor too. During his recovery, he was visited by several watch captains, an inquisitor and, once, even the Master of the Vigil himself. They had pieced together much of the story, but needed to hear the rest from him. No one else could tell them what had happened aboard that ship, on that fateful day.

No one but Antor Delassio. He was the sole survivor.

They had found him, barely breathing, on the bridge. He had been surrounded by black-armoured corpses, each of them badly mutilated.

The inquisitor, in particular, wanted to hear the details many times over. Antor couldn’t answer him. Squirming under a beady-eyed, suspicious glare, he had mumbled excuses: ‘I took them by surprise. They were trying to regain control of the ship, they’d been in a fight already, they were wounded, and I... I don’t remember...’

The Apothecary came to his patient’s aid. ‘After such action, some loss of memory is only to be expected. Even Space Marines have their limits.’

He had wanted to tell them the whole truth – as far as he knew it – but he couldn’t. He felt ashamed. He remembered the faces of other Blood

Angels contorting with madness. He remembered their eyes ablaze with hatred and their screams of primal rage. He remembered thinking it could never happen to him.

*The Red Thirst. The Black Rage.*

He could still feel it stirring inside him, two months later. He could still taste the faintest tang of blood on his tongue. He knew that it was a part of him now.

They were calling him a hero. There was even some talk of awarding him the Iron Halo, for what the Master of the Vigil described as ‘exceptional initiative’.

He had prevented an attack that would have left the Deathwatch crippled in the local region. He had avenged his slaughtered brethren, and enabled the gene-seed of some to be salvaged. That ought to have calmed his righteous anger.

But it wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough.

There were traitors out there still, in their massed legions, revelling in their depravity, scars across the face of the galaxy. They had to suffer for their sins against the Emperor, every one of them.

Until they did – until the very last traitor was destroyed – the rage that boiled in Antor Delassio's veins would never be satisfied.

His hatred of the heretic weighed as heavy as his hatred of the xenos.

Perhaps it was being on board the *Incontrovertible Truth* again. That might have been why he couldn't clear his mind, couldn't help but remember.

Antor detached himself from his machinery. He washed out the vials that his tainted blood had touched. He had just finished secreting the machine's components in his armoured backpack when there came a knock at his door. He summoned his team of serfs into the cabin, and they helped him into his armour.

His kill team was due to assemble. It would be led by an inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos, so Antor would be under constant scrutiny. He knew what was expected of him. He only prayed he would be strong enough to serve. He could feel the Red Thirst stirring inside him again, despite his precautions.

*The Cursed Young Prince...*

Three times now, since that day, he had succumbed to the curse. He was fortunate that, each time, his battle-brothers had been able to coax him

back from the brink. He had told them there was something in his blood, but he had declined to talk about it. He knew that he should have been honest with them, warned them of the danger he posed to them.

They hadn't yet seen him at his worst. Nobody had.

He ought to have confessed his sins to a chaplain, but he couldn't.

He knew now why he had been chosen for this assignment to the Deathwatch, what had brought him to Lord Commander Dante's attention. He had been sent to represent his Chapter here – rubbing shoulders with witch hunters and the elite of other Chapters – only because of his humble nature. He must have seemed the most reasonable, the most even-tempered of them all, one that surely the curse could never touch.

If Antor's secret were discovered, he would face disgrace and worse. At the very least, the Deathwatch would expel him. Worse still, the purity of his gene-seed itself would be questioned. He would bring suspicion down upon every Blood Angel serving in the kill teams.

He had no choice.

He lowered his gleaming black helmet over his head, to hide the sweat on his face. He checked his reflection and tried to reclaim something of his pride. He had his duty, and he would perform it diligently. He would conquer his curse, as he had conquered it every day – almost every day – for the past four years.

The monster that dwelled inside him could never be slain, but Antor was determined to temper it.

Only, he couldn't help but shift his gaze to the emblem on his shoulder: the blood drop with angel wings. He stepped out of his cabin and couldn't help but remember stepping through that door once before to find his ship under attack.

The rage had saved his life that day. It had kept him on his feet, kept him fighting with a ferocity that had staggered his opponents, even after he ought to have died, as his brethren had. As every battle-brother, every watch captain, every inquisitor in Watch Fortress Erioch would have.

And that was one thing, the one thing above all, that he couldn't forget.

It was the only thing he had left.

Antor Delassio may have been cursed – but once, that curse had saved them all.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steve Lyons**'s work in the Warhammer 40,000 universe includes the novellas *Engines of War* and *Angron's Monolith*, the Imperial Guard novels *Ice World* and *Dead Men Walking* – now collected in the omnibus *Honour Imperialis* – and the audio dramas *Waiting Death* and *The Madness Within*. He has also written numerous short stories and is currently working on more tales from the grim darkness of the far future.

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