



WARHAMMER
40,000

— DEATHWATCH 10 —
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UNKNOWN**



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Mark Clapham

‘Retreat forty paces before firing,’ said Jensus Natorian, his eyes closed. Here, on an empty deck of the Deathwatch strike cruiser *Lethal Intent*, he could taste the constantly recycled, stale air, smell the oil on his armour, hear his servant cranking the equipment into place.

‘Forty paces, my lord?’ asked Heffl, his primary mortal servant.

‘That should suffice,’ said Natorian. ‘My aim will not go so far wide.’

‘I am not concerned for myself, lord,’ said Heffl. ‘The payload here is quite large, lord, I worry that—’

‘You overreach yourself, Heffl,’ said Natorian sharply. ‘It is only by pushing beyond our own capabilities that we can know ourselves. Now, be quiet until I give the order, or I really may come to harm here.’

‘Yes, lord,’ said Heffl, and Natorian heard him shuffle away indignantly. Heffl primarily assisted Natorian in the quieter aspects of his life, carrying books and maintaining equipment. It was unusual for the servant to be present when his lord was testing his combat skills.

But a Space Marine Librarian was far more than a preserver of sacred texts. Natorian dismissed these thoughts from his mind. He had left his gauntlets and helmet behind, but he still wore the rest of his power armour, wanting to test his own senses, his own fists. The plates of armour shifted as Natorian flexed his enhanced musculature, the armour an extension of his body. He had set his staff, the conventional extension of a Librarian’s will, to one side. This was a test of his own biomancy, without weapons.

He looked inwards, into his own soul, forgot about Heffl, the cruiser, the

smells and sounds of it. Instead he let his mind turn to the galaxy, the Imperium, its borders, and what lay beyond.

Threats: the terrible unknowns outside human space, lurking beyond the Emperor's Light. The creatures that humans knew of, but would always be unknowable to humanity and the Space Marines who walked amongst them: aliens – *xenos* – threatening the Imperium by their very vile existence. Natorian felt rage build up within him. He let his mind go to an ancient memory, a painful moment hidden within himself. He didn't let himself visualise that memory, but got close enough to the emotional wound of it, the ache within that fed his hatred. That hatred built inside him like a fire given fresh fuel.

'Now,' Natorian said, and opened his eyes. As he did so the crude launching device pointing right at him belched fire, propelling chunks of scrap taken from a recent battlefield in his direction. Half a dozen sizeable fragments of plasteel and ceramite hurtled towards him, solid and sharp enough to smash in his unhelmed skull.

He raised his left hand, letting his rage out in the form of bioelectricity that flowed down his fingers to be spat out in precise bursts of white-hot energy. Three, four, five bolts burst through the air, smashing into bits of debris, melting metal and shattering material, turning the projectiles into dust and smaller chunks that ricocheted harmlessly away.

One last boulder remained, a block of rockcrete larger than the Codicier's head, and Natorian brought around his right hand, forming a fist. He let the biomantic energy flood through the muscles of his arm, the punch moving with speed and strength incredible even for a Space Marine, every nerve and sinew inflamed with power. It was less than a second since the projectiles had been fired and Natorian was now moving at a speed where time seemed to slow for him.

As his foreknuckle touched the lump of rockcrete it sent a wave of cracks through it, each one infused with biomantic energy, the block shattering in mid-air.

Then time seemed to resume its normal course, Natorian's energy was spent, and the fragments of rockcrete, now sharp pebbles, maintained their forward motion, less dangerous but still slashing at the skin of his hand and bouncing off his armour.

'Very impressive,' boomed Captain Fakuno, approaching across the deck,

boots clanging against the floor. Heffl bowed deeply as Fakuno passed him.

Fakuno, leader of Natorian's kill team, was a Salamander, one pauldron of his black armour still green-edged and bearing the crest of Vulkan's sons. Like every child of Nocturne, Fakuno's skin was onyx-black, and his pupils a simmering red. Those burning eyes did not lack humour, and Fakuno's face was cracked into a half-smile.

'You should train with us, Natorian,' said Fakuno. 'Not spend so much time alone in the bowels of the ship.'

'I spar with my brothers,' replied Natorian, binding the wounds on his hand. He tripped over the word 'brothers' as he spoke, the word sticking slightly in his throat, but Fakuno didn't seem to notice.

'This is not training,' he added. 'This is...'

He trailed off. He could speak of research, of the search for knowledge that was a part of every Blood Raven's life. Of the deep need to know himself and his capabilities. But he knew that Fakuno wouldn't understand, and would just nod formally in response, that half-smile remaining on his face. Besides, he knew Fakuno would not have sought him out just to chide him for his habits. Give him a breath and he would get to the point.

'Very well,' said Fakuno. 'Just never forget while out here on your own that you are one of us, a part of the team above all else.' Those red eyes caught Natorian's for a second, before Fakuno changed tack, as expected.

'We have a mission,' said Fakuno, taking a few paces away from Natorian as he spoke. 'Genestealers have been sighted on the space hulk *Endless Despair*. There are Space Marines present on the hulk already, but this xenos threat is of special interest to the Deathwatch, and we have already set a course for the hulk.' Natorian felt a tightening in his gut at the mention of genestealers. Fast and lethal, those exo-skeletoned, clawed monstrosities first encountered on the moons of Ymgarl were also one of the most mysterious species known to mankind, and had plagued the Imperium for a long time. They represented a dual horror to Natorian in their repulsive alien nature and their unknowable purpose.

His feelings must have been visible, as Fakuno slapped him on the shoulder.

'I see that has lit a fire in you, brother,' said Fakuno. 'Come join us when

you are finished here, and we will discuss all the information we have on this infested hulk.'

Heffl was straining to lift the training launcher back on to a trolley as Fakuno walked past him, and without acknowledging the servant's existence Fakuno lifted the load up with one hand and placed it on the trolley. Heffl bowed again, muttering words of gratitude.

'If our company is not enough for you,' called Fakuno. 'Know that these Space Marines we join on the hulk are of your own Chapter, led by Librarian Captain Lanneus.'

Fakuno didn't wait for a response to this news, and Natorian didn't give one. He looked down at his bloodied knuckles, and flexed his hand.

Lanneus, he thought. What was Lanneus doing on a space hulk?

Weeks later, Natorian and Fakuno were on the bridge of the *Lethal Intent* as it approached the space hulk *Endless Despair*. The hulk filled the pict screen, and even through a fog of incense Natorian could make out where different ships and other space-borne structures had become fused together to make the hulk.

'Shipmaster, where are we to dock?' asked Captain Fakuno.

'Here, my lord,' said the mortal shipmaster in his control throne, and a crude white glyph appeared on the pict screen.

As the *Intent* moved closer to the hulk, it became clear that a cruiser was already docked with the section of the hulk they were approaching.

'This is why I wanted you here, Natorian,' said Fakuno. 'Do you recognise that vessel?'

'The *Burden of Proof*,' replied Natorian. 'A Blood Ravens strike cruiser, one of the Chapter's finest.'

'Then we are at least in the right place,' said Fakuno. There had been no further communication from the Blood Ravens since the initial call for aid. 'Shipmaster, hail the *Burden*.'

The order was relayed through the ranks, and the *Intent* attempted to contact the other cruiser. Then they attempted again. Tense minutes passed, but there was no response.

'Natorian?' asked Fakuno. 'What say you?'

'It could be a vox failure,' said Natorian. 'It would explain the lack of contact these last weeks. No Chapter is immune from such problems.'

‘...or the signal might be disrupted,’ added Fakuno, eyes narrowed in thought. ‘These hulks are filthy with radiation and energies that interfere with communications.’

Neither stated the obvious possibility – that the genestealers had overrun the Blood Ravens, and everyone on the hulk and the *Burden* was dead already.

‘Find us a place to dock, Shipmaster,’ said Fakuno. ‘Natorian, tell the others to prepare themselves. We will enter the hulk ready for battle.’

A short while later Fakuno, Natorian and the rest of their kill team were standing in an ancient airlock as it cycled the atmosphere before admitting them to the relic of a spacecraft that was their access point to space hulk *Endless Despair*. Fully armoured, combat-ready, they stood in the huge airlock as machinery behind the walls hissed and ground.

‘Inefficient,’ said Stannos, flexing the fingers of his bionic hand impatiently. An Iron Hand, he judged all technology by his own harsh standards.

‘No one comes to a space hulk to admire the facilities,’ said Godrew. Beneath his armour he was the pallid counterpoint to Fakuno, his skin alabaster-white and his eyes jet-black. Natorian knew that beneath Godrew’s helmet, those eyes were giving Stannos a withering stare. The Iron Hand and the Raven Guard clashed verbally all the time, but in battle they fought like a single entity, Stannos laying down heavy covering fire while Godrew finished off enemies with precise shots.

‘Why would anyone come to a space hulk at all?’ said Karlan, the last of their number and a Blood Angel. His exasperation seemed always on the verge of tipping into anger, but Natorian knew that the truly dangerous rage within Karlan was buried deep, and rarely came to the surface.

Karlan’s question had been clearly intended as rhetorical, part of the constant letting out of steam that allowed the Blood Angel to keep lethally calm in battle, but Natorian considered it worth answering anyway.

‘Knowledge,’ he said. ‘If Lanneus commands here, it is knowledge he seeks. Even by the inquisitive standards of my Chapter, his thirst for knowledge is unquenchable.’

‘You know this Lanneus well, Natorian?’ asked Godrew. Natorian saw that Godrew and the others were all waiting expectantly for an answer.

Natorian realised that, unconsciously, he had neglected to mention that he knew Lanneus through any of the discussions they had had about this mission.

It had not been secrecy or a conscious omission. Natorian had just presumed that these Space Marines from great lineages, all from Chapters of the First Founding, would not be interested in the internal concerns of the Blood Ravens, an obscure Chapter whose origins were long lost.

‘He is... was... my mentor,’ said Natorian. ‘He trained me to become a Librarian, taught me the arts of combat, and how to direct my power and my anger. Everything I am, I owe to Lanneus.’

‘Then to this Lanneus we owe gratitude and respect,’ said Fakuno, looking up from adjusting his ornate combi-bolter, a customised hybrid weapon with an attached flamethrower. There was a ripple of assent through the others, a nodding of helmed heads. Natorian did not know how to respond to this, but was saved from awkwardness by the airlock’s inner doors finally beginning to roll open. The kill team dropped into position, weapons raised, ready to open fire and withdraw to cover if genestealers swarmed into the airlock. Natorian felt the tension between his comrades, their intense focus. His biomantic powers rose within him in anticipation, causing the hairs on his arms to rise beneath his armour, his skin prickling.

The airlock door receded fully to reveal... nothing. An empty space, no signs of combat or damage. An empty loading bay, with heavy doors visible at the other side.

Fakuno nodded to the doors, and the kill team moved out, covering each other as they slowly moved across the loading bay.

The doors led to a wide corridor, and the kill team proceeded cautiously. The curve of the corridor seemed to Natorian’s mind to be steering them towards some kind of hub.

It was in the next chamber that they found a figure slumped against a pile of crates, power armour scratched and scraped, a force sword in one hand. Natorian recognised him instantly, gesturing with one hand for the others to lower their weapons, or rather redirect them elsewhere.

For a moment, Natorian thought the Space Marine was dead, that they had reached the hulk too late. But as the kill team cautiously approached him, the helmed head slowly rose, and the slumped figure spoke.

‘Jensus Natorian, my very old friend,’ said Librarian Captain Lanneus, as

if finding him like this were the most normal thing in the galaxy.

Fakuno had taken charge once Lanneus proved himself alive, asking short, sharp questions, his voice echoing upwards into the atrium above. Lanneus had answered lucidly and to the point – the area was secure, he was the only Blood Raven left alive here, the genestealers remained a threat. While Fakuno got his situation report from Lanneus, the others looked around them, checking for threats. They were in an open chamber overlooked by railings, a great atrium curving up into the ship over their heads, floor after floor. Natorian couldn't see anything move, though there was evidence of a struggle having taken place at some point.

'We hailed your cruiser yet received no response,' Fakuno said. 'Are there genestealers on board?'

'No,' said Lanneus, shaking his head. He was standing as if emerging from hibernation, stretching. How long had he been sitting there? 'A skeleton crew are still in place. I ordered them to lock down the cruiser until they received orders otherwise.'

'And you are the only Blood Raven who still lives?' asked Fakuno.

'Yes,' said Lanneus wearily, and as he removed his helmet he looked much older than Natorian remembered, his once silver hair now sheer white, hanging over the alabaster shoulder guards of his armour. That hair was receding on top, and the old Librarian's face showed many lines. 'My brothers fought well, but many died when we first encountered the genestealers, and none survived the sealing of this area. I am the last.'

'Then how are you still alive?' asked Karlan, and Natorian felt a spike of anger at the implied accusation.

'I do not know. It is an embarrassment to live so long in a life of war,' said Lanneus, without rancour. He turned to Natorian. 'You should not have saved my life so many times, young Jensus. I am sure you have done the same for your brothers in the Deathwatch in these years since, yes?' Natorian didn't know what to say under the gaze of both his Deathwatch brothers and his mentor.

'He has, Librarian Captain Lanneus,' said Fakuno. While Lanneus had removed his helmet and left his sword sheathed, Fakuno and the rest of the kill team remained on their guard.

'All of us have killed many xenos,' said Lanneus. 'But Jensus here

brought slaughter down upon the alien filth the moment his talent emerged, a reckoning loud enough to wake the black ships and Inquisitor Belicor. He rushed through the warp to see if this formidable power was enemy or friend, and finding the latter brought him to our Chapter, a child still soaked in xenos blood.’ Natorian felt buried memories try to surface, but pushed them down. The truth of it was irrelevant to the story, and Lanneus meant only to compliment him.

‘Chapter legend, nothing more,’ said Natorian, trying to shrug it off.

‘You do not wish to speak of it, you never did,’ said Lanneus. ‘Apologies, brother, long absence has made me forget my tact. Besides, we need not speak of ancient history when you have no doubt fought many great battles against the enemies of man with your new battle-brothers.’

Natorian did not know what to say to this, but Fakuno intervened.

‘He has,’ said Fakuno. ‘Now if we might discuss the matter that brought us here...?’

‘The xenos,’ said Lanneus, all good humour fading instantly. ‘We skirmished with them deeper into the hulk – that was when we lost most of our number. We lowered the bulkheads that connected this ancient ship to the rest of the hulk, and it was in sealing this ship that the remaining battle-brothers of my retinue died. I lowered the last bulkhead myself, and the genestealers have made no attempt to breach these barriers since.’

‘You made no efforts to go back and eradicate the xenos yourself?’ asked Natorian. ‘Not even after they killed our brothers?’

He intended it only as a question, but fuelled by his own hate it came out more as an accusation. Natorian immediately regretted offending his master, even if he could not understand why all efforts were not made to purge the genestealers.

Lanneus did not react with anger at any offence; instead there was a disappointment in his eyes that stung Natorian worse than any rebuke.

‘I am the only one left,’ said Lanneus. ‘The genestealer numbers are great, and my rapid death would have served no purpose. Furthermore, there was something in their behaviour that suggested that the Deathwatch might wish to investigate further, to increase their understanding of these creatures.’

‘And what is that, Librarian Captain?’ asked Fakuno. The Salamander’s courtesy towards Lanneus was slipping, and there was impatience in his

tone.

‘Do you not see?’ said Lanneus. ‘The genestealers would normally pursue any human presence with murderous intent, yet here they only defend the edge of their territory, pushing no further. Why do you think that is?’

‘It is unnatural for them,’ said Karlan.

‘They are guarding something,’ said Lanneus. ‘And if genestealers have something they need to guard, surely that is something the Deathwatch would want to identify and destroy?’

‘It could be a weakness,’ said Fakuno, his mind opening to the possibilities. ‘Something we could directly target in future encounters. We will gather what intelligence we can, then end them.’

‘At last,’ said Lanneus, turning to Natorian. ‘They begin to understand the necessity of knowledge.’

‘We do not know anything yet, all we have is conjecture,’ said Stannos bluntly.

‘True,’ said Natorian. ‘But we know the shape of what we don’t know, and that is a place to start.’

Lanneus agreed to be their guide to the genestealer territory, and a short time later he led the way. Natorian found himself walking beside his old mentor, slightly ahead of his kill team. The geography of the ship seemed familiar to Natorian, reminding him of Imperial ships he had been on before, but everything was slightly... off. The way the high ceiling of the corridor tapered off above them, the angle of the walls, all marginally different to the norm. There were no Imperial insignia to be seen, but neither were there symbols of traitors or other enemies of the Imperium.

‘What is this wreck, Lanneus?’ asked Natorian, quiet enough not to be overheard. ‘Why are you here? I know that look, there’s something here so valuable that these genestealers, even the deaths of our brothers, are a distraction to you. I can tell.’

There was a brief, difficult silence broken only by the sound of their boots clanging on the grated floor beneath their feet.

‘Do you see the paintwork ahead on the wall?’ asked Lanneus. ‘What does it suggest to you?’

At first, Natorian couldn’t see any paintwork at all, taking the reddish smear for rust. It was a rough, round shape, a thin central column twisting

off at both sides, and curving at the top.

‘It looks... like an avian creature,’ said Natorian, ‘a very indistinct rendering of a bird.’ He tore his eyes away and kept walking, before the others caught up. ‘Is this all you have? An image of a red bird? That could mean anything – the chances of it relating to our Chapter are infinitesimal, Lanneus.’

‘There are other indicators,’ said Lanneus. ‘Signs that what is left of this ship, embedded here in the hulk, relates to the early years of the Blood Ravens. Scattered references to battles in our history match the path of *Endless Despair* through the galaxy. There are other—’

Natorian cut him off with a raised hand. ‘If this comes to anything, then it will be a great day for our Chapter,’ said Jensus. ‘And on that day, I will share your joy. But my concern is with the matters of the Deathwatch. I cannot become too enraptured with dreams of knowledge yet unfound. I desire answers as much as you, old friend, but these matters cannot distract from my duties.’

Lanneus threw up an apologetic hand.

‘You have become your own man, Jensus Natorian, and I am proud of that,’ said Lanneus. ‘It is good to see you stand your ground like this. But remember, it was you who asked me what my mission was, I did not provide answers unsolicited. There’s plenty of Blood Raven curiosity in you yet.’

‘I’m sure there is,’ said Natorian. ‘I’m sure there is.’

The kill team caught up with Natorian and Lanneus as they reached the bulkhead, and Fakuno had the others take position, bolters raised, as the two Blood Ravens opened the great shutters to the next part of the hulk. Natorian and Lanneus had to crank them open manually using levers at either side, and as the great rusty teeth of the bulkhead separated they could see ahead into a different space altogether, an unfamiliar architecture of twisted black metal and curved walls. Of the genestealers, at least, there was no sign, and all was quiet.

‘This is no Imperial ship,’ said Karlan, stepping through the gap, bolter muzzle twitching from side to side. The space they were walking into had tube-like corridors curving off in four directions, wide enough for two Space Marines to walk abreast.

‘This is the work of xenos,’ said Natorian, hissing with contempt. He could feel that familiar rage bubbling inside.

‘What species?’ asked Stannos.

‘I do not know,’ said Lanneus. The entire team was through into the alien ship, and he and Natorian began to close the bulkhead once more. ‘We did not investigate far before the first attack.’

‘It does not matter,’ said Fakuno. ‘The genestealers would not leave any other species alive.’

‘This way,’ said Lanneus, indicating a central tunnel after closing the bulkhead. He held the hilt of his force sword tight, and Natorian wondered how it felt to be here once more, close to where his brothers died. Natorian could feel the tension in the kill team as they moved further into the alien ship, but for Lanneus the expectation would be worse.

‘Stannos, I want your eyes up front with Lanneus,’ ordered Fakuno. ‘Godrew and Karlan take the rear, if anything tries to block our escape route I want to know. Natorian, you’re with me. Stay close – they will try to separate us so they can get their claws in, let us not gift them with the opportunity.’

There was an exchange of nods, and the kill team moved out, running from cover to cover, Lanneus and Stannos taking the lead.

The corridors were shaped more like pipes than access tunnels, curved and never entirely straightening out. Natorian had the impression that they were turning sideways and moving downwards, overall, but the layout had a way of baffling his sense of direction. Eventually they emerged into a wider open area with equally curved walls, arteries leading off in different directions. Natorian wasn’t sure what to compare it to, he only knew its alien unfamiliarity stirred hatred in him.

‘It is like walking into a fossilised heart,’ said Karlan, as if responding to Natorian’s unspoken question. The Blood Angel didn’t sound impressed.

‘Reading recent genestealer activity,’ said Stannos. The bionic eye implant that protruded from his helmet saw traces and residues invisible even to the sharp eyes of his fellow Space Marines. ‘Heat signatures everywhere, exhalation vapour in the air. Also older traces, burn marks from lasfire, evidence of bolter discharge some time ago.’

‘This is where you were ambushed?’ Fakuno asked Lanneus. The kill

team had dropped into position as the Salamander and Blood Raven took stock, fanning out to cover all possible approaches. They were exposed here, and they knew it.

‘I could not be sure at first, but I think so, yes,’ said the Librarian Captain. ‘This is where we first encountered genestealers. We fought them off easily enough. Apologies, captain, I didn’t recognise the place. They must have cleared away their dead since then.’

Fakuno briefly twitched his head between Lanneus and Natorian, as if checking for a reaction. Natorian could imagine those red eyes burning behind the lenses of his helmet.

‘A little advance warning next time we might be walking into a trap, Librarian Captain,’ said Fakuno. ‘Even if you are not certain, there is no harm in being over-prepared.’

Lanneus dipped his head in an apologetic bow.

‘I will. Following our initial encounter we pursued a group of genestealers down this tunnel,’ said Lanneus, indicating one of the exits. ‘The xenos attacked in much greater force, and that was when we lost many of our number. The rest of us fought our way back out.’

‘Then we should not go down there, if they’re laying the same trap as they did for the Blood Ravens,’ said Fakuno. ‘Stannos, which is the coolest trail?’

‘This one has virtually no readings,’ said Stannos, indicating a tunnel to the right.

‘Then that is where we will proceed,’ said Fakuno. ‘Let us show these genestealers that they are not the only ones who can pick off their prey.’

Natorian checked the readings on his helmet display as they moved out of the heart-shaped chamber, checking that his power armour’s life support was functioning. He had a sensation of pressure, of the atmosphere thinning, darkness pressing in at the edge of his vision. Nothing life-threatening for a Space Marine, at least not immediately, but...

Nothing. Oxygen supply and air pressure normal. Then why did the walls seem to curve and tighten, like they were about to squeeze in and—

‘Natorian?’ asked Fakuno. ‘Are you with us?’

‘Yes,’ said Natorian.

‘You stopped,’ said Fakuno. Natorian found himself looking down at his

own legs. He had indeed stopped walking.

Fakuno nodded. 'We must keep moving.'

It was in another chamber, wider this time, that the genestealers attacked. Natorian barely had a sense of the chamber's details before they struck – of a larger space than the previous heart-shaped room, of a high ceiling with tunnels going off from high up on the walls, of barely visible tracks to those holes that could act as clawholds.

Then they came, almost in a swarm. Claws and hands reached out of those holes, and four-armed figures leapt directly at the Deathwatch.

The first one went straight for Karlan, a blur of limbs scuttling across the floor of the chamber. The genestealers had four upper limbs as well as two legs, bulbous heads and chitinous exo-skeletons. Hate-filled eyes stared out from beneath a ridged forehead; a stunted snout was barely noticeable over a wide mouth filled with sharp, curved teeth. Of the four arms, the top two ended in three viciously long talons, while the bottom two had more human hands, perfect for grabbing hold of an enemy and pulling them close to deliver a killing blow.

Lanneus and the kill team opened fire before the xenos could reach Karlan, and while the creature's armour was formidable, it was no match for the combined firepower of six Space Marines. Natorian was not naive enough to consider this any sign of the battle to come. The lone genestealer had surged forwards as a sacrifice, drawing the kill team's fire and allowing the rest of them time to swarm closer and attack en masse. Two dozen, three dozen genestealers moved in from all sides, and more emerged from the holes in the walls in a mass of scything claws and vicious teeth.

'Form a circle and pick your targets,' ordered Fakuno, readying the flamethrower attached to his combi-bolter. 'I will lay down alternating bursts of fire to keep them back. Concentrate your fire elsewhere when I am about to shoot. Godrew's position is forward.'

Natorian was on Godrew's right. He could feel the hate rising in him, and let out targeted bursts of bioelectricity at the closest genestealers. He restrained himself from unleashing the full extent of his power – a force this large needed to be worn down. If he burned himself out early he would be no use in the battle ahead. So he hit the first genestealer with enough

power to cause serious damage but not destroy it. The creature flailed backwards, jerking and smoking, as bioelectricity wracked its body. He did the same to another, and another, whispering meditative words to try and keep his rage in check.

‘Right flank,’ shouted Fakuno, and on cue Natorian pulled back his staff and stepped back into the circle, allowing Fakuno to step forwards and release a wide arc of burning promethium. Nine or so genestealers were consumed with flame, stumbling blindly as they burned. As Fakuno shouted again and turned his flamer in the opposite direction, Natorian resumed unleashing biomantic attacks on the dying genestealers, cutting down the ones that got too close.

‘That should have put the fear of the Emperor into them!’ Karlan said with a snarl, and Natorian could see that while the genestealers were still entering the chamber from all sides they were moving more slowly now, trying to regroup under the onslaught of flame, bolter fire and psychic attack.

‘We have the advantage,’ said Fakuno. ‘We must drive them back.’

Under Fakuno’s command the kill team, supported by Lanneus, began to drive the genestealers away, forcing a large group of the xenos towards one wall of the chamber. As Fakuno incinerated the cornered genestealers the rest of the kill team used bolter fire and searing biomantic lightning to drive back the other xenos. The creatures had begun to pull back, withdrawing to the holes in the wall from which they had emerged.

Over the roar of bolters, Natorian barely heard the distinct hiss of air escaping. Debris on the floor began to tumble towards Fakuno’s position. Natorian glanced back to see that the wall behind the genestealers that Fakuno had incinerated was white hot, cracks running across it. Fragments were beginning to be pulled towards those cracks.

Natorian was about to shout a warning but it was too late. Fractures emerged in the wall at tremendous speed, hairlines turning into chasms within seconds, and the whole wall collapsed outwards, sucked away into the vacuum of space. The genestealers went too, limbs flailing as they were sucked outwards. Natorian found himself being pulled towards the abyss, but as he fell managed to find a handhold on the rough floor. He seized Karlan as the Blood Angel fell past, grabbing one of his arms and swinging him around so he could hold on to the floor too. As they began to

pull themselves towards the nearest exit, Natorian looked around to see Fakuno and Stannos doing the same, but of Lanneus and Godrew there was no sign.

Ahead, the tunnel entrance began to close, the material of the walls contracting as if alive. Time seemed to stretch as Natorian and the others dragged themselves towards it, using precarious hand- and footholds to prevent themselves being sucked out into space.

Natorian and Karlan got through the gap first, and forced the entry to stay open as Stannos pulled Fakuno through. When the last of them had made it, they let it go and the opening closed entirely, the wall closing up as if the chamber had never been there.

‘Godrew? Lanneus?’ Fakuno was saying into the vox as he got to his feet. ‘Can you hear us?’

Several seconds passed with only static on the vox, before finally there was a reply.

‘We live, for the moment,’ said Godrew. *‘Lanneus and I are out on the hull, we are trying to find an entry back into the hulk. Where are you? How fare the others?’*

‘We are still within, all together,’ said Fakuno. ‘Find a way back in, we will push on and regroup when we can. Stay alive, brothers.’

‘By the Emperor’s will,’ said Godrew, and Fakuno cut the vox.

They quickly checked their equipment for damage sustained in the battle. Natorian looked at the readouts on his helmet display. Everything was in working order.

‘No damage here,’ he said.

‘Battle-ready,’ said Karlan.

‘Lost some grenades to the vacuum,’ said Stannos. ‘Otherwise, fully combat-effective.’

‘The luck of command, then,’ said Fakuno inspecting his combi-bolter. ‘The flamethrower is damaged. I will have to rely on bolter fire from here on out.’

Stannos tilted his head, looking at Fakuno’s weapon, which had been passed down by many Salamanders before him.

‘Crushed ignition, shattered tank... yes, that will need some repairs,’ said Stannos, reading whatever complex diagnostics his bionic eye showed

him.

‘Thank you for your second opinion, brother,’ said Fakuno drily, checking his bolter’s ammunition and looking down its sights. ‘We need to minimise fire and explosives, if we are to avoid another breach. From here on out we aim tight for the head and body.’

‘What manner of ship is this, with walls like eggshells?’ asked Karlan.

‘Perhaps it is not a ship,’ said Natorian. ‘It may be an artificial moon or station. Either way it is very old, very alien.’

He spat out the last words with disgust.

‘Could the genestealers have built it?’ asked Karlan.

‘That would seem unlikely,’ said Stannos. ‘They are mindless creatures, not builders.’

‘Whoever built this ship, they are long dead,’ said Fakuno. ‘While those genestealers are very alive. We need to rejoin our brothers, and finish this.’

There was only one way to go, and they ran in that direction, boots crunching through debris underfoot, constantly alert for a further genestealer attack. As they ran, the corridor opened out into a vast chamber, a high vaulted ceiling above divided by columns. Natorian had a gut sense that they were heading towards the threat, a familiar rising anticipation and tension.

‘Some of this is bone,’ said Stannos, looking down at the debris they were kicking and crunching through as they ran, his enhanced senses taking in information at a speed even other Space Marines could not comprehend. ‘Also armour, spent ammunition.’

‘I smell blood too,’ said Karlan. ‘Old blood, but blood. Thick enough to get through these filters.’ He tapped the muzzle of his helmet. ‘No, wait... fresher blood, over here.’

They were approaching a pile of bodies, a huddle of humanoid forms entangled in a heap.

‘Form a defensive position,’ Fakuno ordered. ‘These are not ancient bones.’

They halted near the bodies, Stannos and Karlan pointing their weapons outwards, searching for any movement, while Fakuno beckoned for Natorian to join him to inspect the corpses.

‘What say you, Brother Natorian?’ asked Fakuno, as he rolled over the

top corpse. It was of a mortal man in red uniform, stained with a darker red.

‘Servants of my Chapter,’ Natorian said, though Fakuno would have guessed that just as Natorian had, the moment they saw fallen mortals. He helped Fakuno move more corpses. The servants’ clothes were slashed, but also burned in places. Some seemed to have died in terror, others looked placid, as if death had come quietly. The corpses were in the early stages of decay, and very limp, as if their bones were shattered.

‘Genestealers did not kill these people,’ said Natorian quietly. ‘Not all of them. They seem to have been dropped from a great height, perhaps after death...’

He looked up, but the darkness consumed any hole in the ceiling above from which the bodies could have been discarded into this sprawling crypt.

‘If I wanted facts, Natorian, I would have used Stannos’ eyes,’ said Fakuno, a cold urgency to his voice. ‘What do you *see*?’ Natorian looked down at the bodies once more, and felt a series of fleeting impressions. Of fear, of confusion, of a sense of betrayal and that the universe was not as it should be. Of a powerful presence, strong enough to dominate weak and powerful souls alike. Natorian could feel that presence himself, above them now.

He shook off the impressions like a bad taste, filled with revulsion.

‘Something terrible nests near,’ he said, spitting the words. ‘It can break the minds of men to its will and it cannot be allowed to leave here.’

The words seemed inadequate as he mouthed them. The impressions were so fleeting, vague, lost emotions of the dead. He realised he was offering no concrete threat, nothing tactically useful. But what need did they have for his advice, these scions of great Chapters, with their long history dating back to when the Emperor himself bestrode the galaxy?

‘Whatever this evil is, we will find it and destroy it,’ said Fakuno, and Stannos and Karlan gave an enthusiastic ‘aye’ of support. Natorian had offered them vagaries, yet they trusted his instincts implicitly. He realised that this was what it was to be part of the Deathwatch, part of the Adeptus Astartes even: that long history or pedigree meant much, but little compared to the bonds formed in battle, and the bonds between this kill team were stronger than any ancestral history.

They kept moving, and when Natorian passed a pillar bearing the faint

signs of a red bird painted there long ago he only briefly paused. He thought to mention it to his brothers, but then decided against it and moved on, quickly and in silence. The dreams of the Blood Ravens were irrelevant to the Deathwatch.

At the far end of the crypt, they found stairs leading up, spiralling away into darkness, and they followed them. After the organic shapes of previous rooms, these steps were flat and angular, worn to a polish – countless footsteps had passed this way over the millennia.

When they reached the top, they emerged into one corner of a vast chamber of onyx, the floor chiselled perfectly flat, the walls reaching up in sharp, brutal columns, all intersecting high above where a sickly light fell from some unknown source. High on the walls were sprawling balconies and alcoves carved into the black, stone-like substance, and at the very centre of the room, protruding from the floor, stood a sculpture of twisting shapes and harsh angles, light gleaming off its many facets in impossible ways.

‘It looks like an altar in a cathedral,’ said Karlan.

‘A black cathedral,’ said Stannos. ‘I have never seen a place like this built in worship of the Emperor.’

‘There’s no stench of heresy here though,’ said Natorian. He knew the presence of Chaos, of daemonic influences and the heretical sects that bowed to them, but this wasn’t that. It was alien, dead. As foul as this alien architecture was, it was not the source of Natorian’s visions.

‘This is not the work of genestealers,’ said Fakuno.

‘No,’ said a new voice, and the brothers of the Deathwatch snapped their weapons in its direction. It was Lanneus who spoke as he walked alone across the sheer black floor. His voice was cracked, his armour battered and scorched. He was alone.

‘The genestealers moved in here from elsewhere in the hulk,’ said Lanneus.

‘How do you know all this?’ asked Karlan. ‘And where is Godrew?’

‘Godrew did not reach the interior, I’m afraid,’ said Lanneus. ‘He struggled, but was lost to the wilds of space. And as for how I know, I simply observe, and apply my own knowledge. There is nothing that cannot be discovered if you apply your mind to it. Isn’t that right,

Natorian?’

‘That is certainly our belief,’ said Natorian, the words terse and hollow in his mouth. Lanneus’ manner perturbed him.

‘You bring us news of our brother’s death, and lecture us on knowledge?’ spat Karlan. ‘How is he lost and yet you found your way back to us, Librarian?’

‘Karlan, you... overreach yourself,’ said Fakuno. ‘Do you not see, this is no time for petty recriminations?’

‘Karlan is right to feel angry,’ said Lanneus, and Natorian felt a strange pressure building behind his eyes. ‘This old Blood Raven does not blame him for his thirst for vengeance, for his outrage.’

‘I do not need you to defend me,’ snarled Karlan, his temper flaring. His words were beginning to slur.

‘Karlan!’ shouted Fakuno, standing between the Blood Angel and the Blood Raven. ‘Enough!’

The rest of the chamber seemed distant now. Even Stannos, who had not spoken, seemed transfixed with the argument between Lanneus and Karlan. Something was sticking in Natorian’s head: Blood Angels, Blood Ravens, blood, blood, blood.

Karlan let out a bestial roar and lunged at Fakuno. Stannos tried to pull him back.

Blood, thought Natorian. Blood will be spilt.

Blood had been spilt, long ago, when Natorian was a child. The blood of all he cared for, while Natorian hid. Red blood spilling across the floor, and over the bodies—

It had been aliens who spilt that blood, the blood of Natorian’s family. Just as it had been aliens that he had fought across the galaxy ever since, fought with cold, hard, rage. Aliens all around them. A galaxy full of aliens to be fought.

Aliens to be fought now. Natorian’s cold hatred of the alien cut through the thoughts of blood and burning, allowed him to see the truth.

They had all been beguiled, focussed on each other, their minds clouded.

The genestealers were all around them. Dozens of them, close enough to touch the Space Marines in their midst, closing in quietly. Natorian drew in a sharp, flat breath – how could they not have seen what was right in front of them?

There was only one way. That cold, hard rage flowed through Natorian, focussed into bioelectricity, into his weapon. Natorian slammed the base of his staff into the floor and unleashed a shock of bioelectricity that shot through the air to his target as he spoke the name.

‘Lanneus!’ boomed Natorian, and a bioelectric bolt hit Natorian’s mentor in the chest, knocking him back. The genestealers scrambled out of the way as Lanneus reeled and stumbled between them, then closed their ranks.

Lanneus’ influence broken, the kill team could see the genestealers all around them, and reacted fluidly. Fakuno and Stannos let go of Karlan, who shook his head and let out a low groan, but quickly regained his senses. Fakuno and Stannos raised their bolters, opening fire. Natorian focussed his anger, letting out a steady stream of bioelectric bursts into the genestealers, driving them back. They had held back while Lanneus had the Deathwatch under his influence, but now they responded to being attacked with slashing claws, jumping forwards to gouge and tear at the Space Marines.

‘Fakuno to *Lethal Intent*,’ Fakuno snapped, while firing bursts into the mass of xenos. ‘We have located the genestealer threat and are being overwhelmed. I authorise an immediate neurotoxin strike to our position. Come about and target our beacon.’ Stannos began to set up a homing device, his gauntleted fingers adjusting the sensitive equipment quickly and carefully.

‘How did we not see them?’ demanded Stannos as he worked, clearly unnerved that even his senses could be overcome. ‘How?’

‘Lanneus,’ said Natorian. He felt no undue humility speaking to these First Founding Adeptus Astartes now. He was one of them, and he knew of what he spoke. This was the knowledge that mattered, the kind gained through hard experience. ‘He influenced us all, drew us into conflict and blinded us to our own mission.’

‘He filled my mind with anger,’ said Karlan. His voice was weary and battered, but his bolter joined the fray, firing on the xenos surrounding them. ‘Pushing thoughts of rage into my head.’

‘How could a psyker blind us all?’ asked Stannos.

‘It was not Lanneus alone who did this,’ said Natorian. ‘Something else acted through him, something that got into his head and increased his

abilities. It bent Lanneus' mind to its will, subjugated him.'

+Subjugated?+ said Lanneus. He was in Natorian's mind now, reaching out from somewhere among the genestealers. +I have been freed, my mind opened to new knowledge.+

From somewhere within the horde of genestealers a dozen chunks of debris were flung into the air, crackling with psychic energy as they rained down on the kill team at a velocity that would pierce even power armour.

'No!' shouted Natorian, wielding his staff upwards, a barely controlled bioelectric burst disintegrating the missiles before they could reach their targets. The burst pushed outwards as well as up, knocking half a dozen genestealers back, buying the kill team a precious few seconds before the next attack.

'The neurotoxin strike is incoming,' said Fakuno. 'The *Intent* will need to align with this section of the hulk first, so we must hold this position and protect the beacon until then.'

+You will be dead long before,+ said Lanneus in Natorian's mind. +I will crush you and your beacon.+

Genestealers themselves were swept forwards towards the kill team next, picked up in a wave of psychic energy that ripped slabs of stone from the sheer black floor and turned them into projectiles. Natorian felt spent from the effort of deflecting the previous wave but forced himself to block the wave of psychic energy, holding his staff with both hands, the shaft glowing white as he willed the projectiles to slow. The genestealers themselves kept moving forwards, and as his brothers fought the creatures hand-to-claw he found himself pushed unwillingly out of the defensive circle into the mass of xenos.

+Why bring me here to kill me, Lanneus?+ he asked with a thought.

+I summoned you before my eyes were opened,+ said Lanneus. +I wish I had not. To kill my own brothers was bleak necessity. Your death will weigh heavier still.+

Lanneus' thoughts had an edge of exhaustion, of frustration to them now. Natorian could feel the exertion of the psychic attacks wearing his mentor down, the contradictions of the lies the Librarian Captain had told himself to justify his betrayal pulling at his sanity.

A genestealer ran at Natorian, clawed limbs slashing. Natorian ducked under one blow and, bioelectric energy coursing through his muscles,

punched the creature so hard its purple skull crumpled beneath the blow.

+Where are you, Lanneus?+ he asked without sound. +Stop hiding behind these creatures, let us resolve this like brothers.+

‘I do not hide,’ Lanneus said aloud, and Natorian spun around to face his mentor, raising his staff defensively.

Lanneus’ force sword hit the centre of Natorian’s staff, breaking it in two with a tremendous release of psychic energy that sent both Blood Ravens reeling.

Natorian stood facing Lanneus, the two halves of his staff in his hands. His mentor was panting, luminous mist rising from his mouth, his eyes white with psychic energy. He was truly lost now. This was a dangerous moment – the Blood Raven could open a rift into the warp itself if forced into a further psychic attack. Natorian could feel the presence of his kill team close by, fighting the genestealers. Lanneus’ attention had slipped from them to his old apprentice, so Natorian needed to buy them time to protect the beacon.

Natorian let the broken halves of his staff fall to the floor.

‘I surrender to your greater knowledge,’ he said. ‘Show me what you have seen, Lanneus.’

‘I will show you, Jensus,’ said Lanneus, walking towards Natorian, one hand raised. His eyes were burning, tears streaking down his cheeks and searing the skin red. ‘Open your mind to me, and I will let its will pass through me into you. It is a great, bestial intelligence, a power unseen since the primarchs walked the galaxy.’ Natorian could not lie to his mentor to get close enough to do what had to be done. He chose his words carefully as he took off his helmet and dropped it to the floor. He could feel the primal intensity of the horror that possessed Lanneus reaching out to him. It was lusting after the direct physical contact that would make Natorian’s possession so much easier.

‘I will help you, Lanneus,’ he said with his left hand outstretched.

Lanneus clasped Natorian’s hand in his own with gratitude.

‘Thank you for your faith, Jensus,’ he said. ‘Together we will—’

The sentence ended when Natorian brought his right hand around in a fist, every bit of biomantic power coursing through his arm, strengthening the bones and muscles beyond even the capacity of a Space Marine, streaks of bioelectricity crackling off the knuckles of Natorian’s gauntlet.

The blow hit Lanneus' jaw with unnatural strength and speed, and an explosion of psychic energy was unleashed as Natorian's fist met Lanneus' face. The impact vaporised Lanneus' head on contact, a blinding light illuminating the chamber, but the blow also reverberated down Natorian's arm, the feedback shattering every bone in his arm and hand in multiple places.

The pain was incredible, beyond anything Natorian had ever experienced in his life of war, and as Lanneus' corpse fell to the floor Natorian stumbled backwards, his arm limp and held together only by his power armour. He fell to his knees, but as he did so the genestealers were in agony too, blinded by the psychic explosion that killed Lanneus, flailing and lashing. Natorian looked across and saw the three survivors of his kill team, their armour dented and slashed, but still alive. He was determined to help them, but as he forced his body to move missiles smashed through the outer wall of the chamber.

The barrage hit, neurotoxic agents rapidly spreading inside as the chamber began to void through the ragged punctures in the hull. Natorian could hear the distant sound of explosions as missiles burst through into other parts of the hulk, unleashing puffs of acidic poison into the whole area.

As the genestealers began to reel, their flesh bubbling and bursting as the toxic clouds consumed them, Natorian quickly scooped up his helmet with his good hand and locked it back on to his head. The chamber was filling with roiling clouds of toxin in spite of the pressure loss, and the flailing genestealers were kicking debris in every direction as they ran.

'Natorian, withdraw,' Fakuno ordered over the vox, and Natorian looked up to see the rest of the kill team clearing a path for him, releasing a burst of bolter fire on any genestealers who got too close.

Lanneus' force sword caught Natorian's eye, and as a genestealer lurched towards him, screeching in agony and body boiling, Natorian swept up the blade in one hand and decapitated the creature with one swipe.

As he ran to join the kill team, Natorian felt something pull at his consciousness, and he looked across the chamber. There he could see a genestealer, to the eye barely different to any other, but to a psyker like Jensus Natorian it was a burning presence, alight with psychic power. This was the presence he had felt before, much stronger than the psychic

background noise of the genestealers, the terrible intelligence that had broken the mind of a once-noble Space Marine like Lanneus.

Then the creature collapsed to the floor, the rushing toxic mist consuming it, and Natorian's sense of its psychic presence was gone.

As detonations spread deadly clouds of toxins throughout the black cathedral, the kill team evacuated.

Natorian watched the bombardment of *Endless Despair* through a viewport on board the *Lethal Intent*. Explosive blooms lit up space as the cruiser's guns bombarded the hulk. Eventually, the Blood Ravens cruiser *Burden of Proof* was consumed by the spreading explosions. Natorian had argued that his Chapter should be contacted and allowed to retrieve the ship, but he had been overruled. The *Endless Despair* was to be marked on Imperial maps as dangerous, and to be destroyed by a larger strike force. The fate of all Blood Ravens on board would be listed as 'Unknown' in the Imperial archives, and no further expeditions into the hulk, or any ship connected to it, would be allowed.

Natorian's broken arm was bound as it healed, and he rested his shattered hand on the pommel of Lanneus' force sword, which now hung from a belt around his waist.

'Will you return the sword to the Chapter, my lord?' asked Heffl. 'The artificers hold a number of fine staffs of great heritage which might replace yours, I am sure they would be proud to—'

'No, Heffl,' said Natorian. 'I will keep the sword.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Heffl with a deep bow. He knew when his master wished to be alone, and he withdrew.

Looking on as the *Endless Despair* burned in silence, his hand on his dead mentor's sword, Natorian knew then that there would never be an end to it. From those blighted memories of his early life as the xenos had killed his family, to the life of war he had lived since then as a Blood Raven and a member of the Deathwatch, the different species of alien maintained a relentless onslaught on humanity, and they never stopped. They ravaged, they killed, they even had abominable psykers amongst their numbers that could corrupt noble souls like Lanneus to their repulsive purpose, forcing brother to slay brother. There was no end to the horror of the xenos threat.

They would keep coming, again and again, until the last light in the galaxy was extinguished.

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Mark Clapham is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Iron Guard* and the short stories ‘The Siege of Fellguard’, ‘The Hour of Hell’, ‘In Hrondir’s Tomb’ and ‘Sanctified’, which appeared in the anthology *Fear the Alien*. He lives and works in Exeter, Devon.

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Published in 2016 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN 978-1-78251-959-1

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