

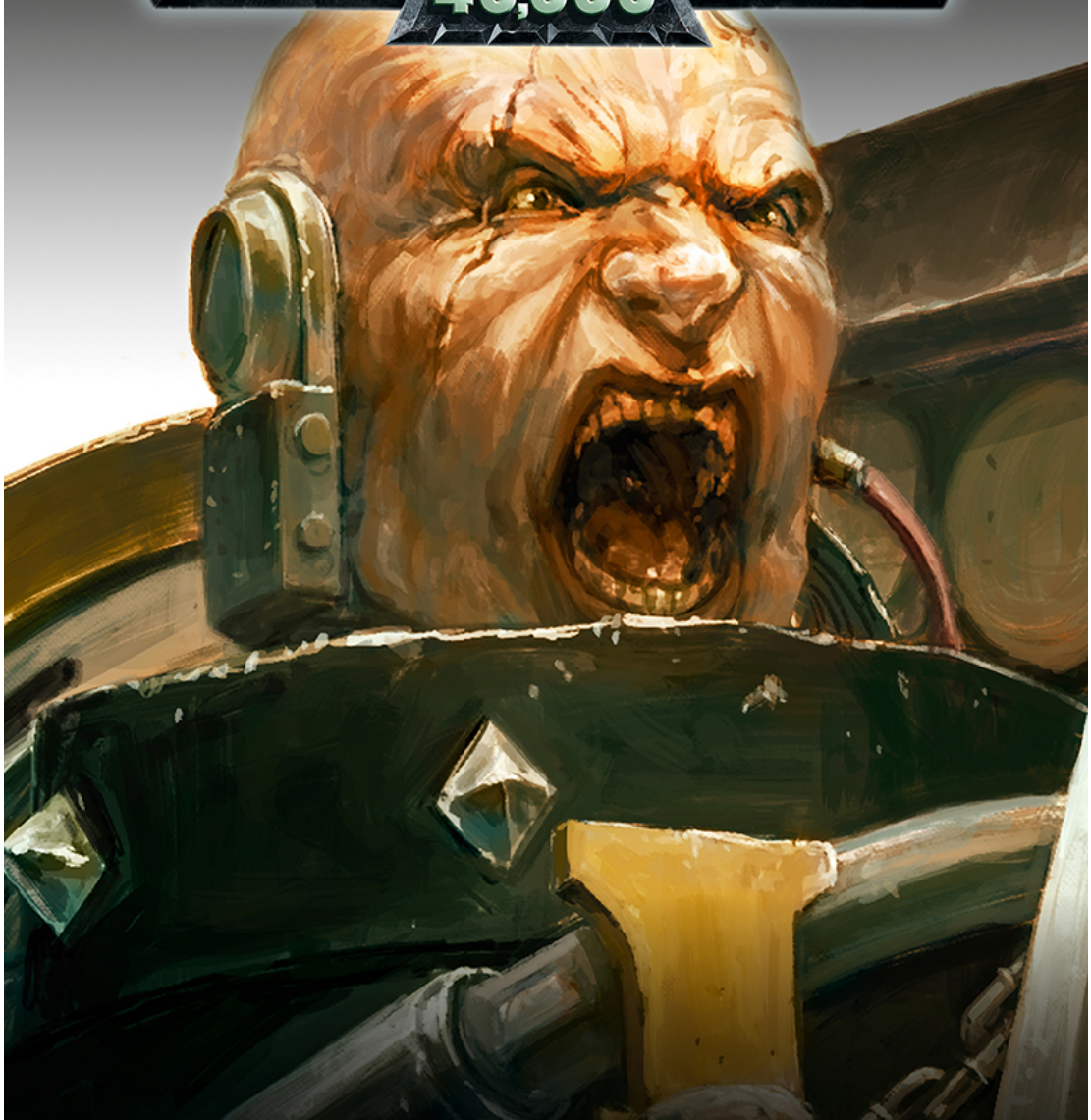
The cover art features a close-up, painterly illustration of a character's face, likely a member of the Deathwatch. The character has a fierce, shouting expression with a wide-open mouth showing teeth. The skin is a warm, golden-brown color with visible texture and shading. The character is wearing a dark, metallic helmet with a circular visor on the left side. The background is dark and industrial, with some mechanical details and a yellowish light source. At the top, the 'WARHAMMER 40,000' logo is set within a dark, metallic banner. At the bottom, the text 'DEATHWATCH 11' and 'CEPHEUS' is displayed in a bold, white, distressed font.

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

DEATHWATCH 11

**CEPHEUS**

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



— DEATHWATCH 11 —

**GEPHEUS**

# CEPHEUS

**Braden Campbell**

The chamber into which he walked was circular, high-ceilinged, and lit only by four immense candelabra – one that hung suspended over a small platform in the centre of the room, and three that cast down flickering orange on the watch captains. To his right, obscured within the shadows, was a scribe-servitor. It had quills for fingers and containers of ink mounted on its forearms. A seemingly infinite scroll of parchment protruded from its mouth and spilled across the floor, while its glowing red optics watched him unblinkingly.

Barefoot and dressed only in a heavy robe, he silently made his way to the platform.

The captains surveyed him coolly. It was a tradition that the petitioner neither wore his power armour nor carried a weapon. He was a Space Marine, just as they were, and as such, no longer experienced fear. Still, was it not written in the Codex, *‘Look to your wargear, brothers, and let it never leave your sight. Your armour is your lifeward, and your boltgun is the Emperor’s wrath incarnate.’* To be unarmed and unarmoured conflicted with his psycho-indoctrination.

He suspected that was exactly the point – for the applicant to rendered humble, to be made pliable and open to manipulation. Perhaps he might reveal some hidden truth or detail upon which they might pounce. Well, such tactics might provide fruitful results against a less experienced battle-brother, but there were very few who had lived a life as long and filled with war as he had. He had long since mastered every nuance of the nineteen implants that separated him from mortal men. He could not be

manipulated or coerced.

He willed his body to quiet itself. His pulse slowed. His shoulder muscles relaxed. The memorised lines of the Codex Astartes that were calling for him to arm himself against the foe lowered their protestations to a whisper.

The watch captains were each seated in an elaborate throne ringed with a carved wooden desk. As he took his place in the centre of the chamber, thick servo-arms in the backs of their seats lifted them high above the floor where they could suitably lord over those called before them. The centremost of the three, a man with a short, grey beard, tapped a sheaf of parchment. The black surface of his armour was broken only by the bright green field on his right shoulder plate.

‘This council is now come to order,’ he said in the distinctive brogue of his home Chapter. Nearby, the servitor’s quills began scratching against the parchment. ‘State your name, rank, and Chapter of origin for the record.’

‘Ortan Cassius, Chaplain of the Ultramarines.’

‘Presiding are Watch Captain Bresnik, Watch Captain Seumas, and myself, Watch Captain Drusus.’

Cassius was familiar with Drusus and Bresnik, both of whom were stern but well-respected leaders. In their home Chapters, they each commanded a company of one hundred Space Marines, and both were adherents of the Codex. He fully trusted that they would find no fault in what he had done, for had they been in his place they would have done exactly the same.

He did not recall ever hearing Seumas’ name before, however. Nor did he recognise the heraldry of his home Chapter; a yellow field emblazoned with a black, winged lightning bolt.

Bresnik rubbed his cheek. ‘Chaplain Cassius, you have been called here today before a congress of your superiors in the Deathwatch because you have made a specific request. You are petitioning to assemble a kill team and travel to the Ghosarian System in order to locate certain members of your previous kill team, sent there on a mission of lethal investigation.’

‘Yes,’ Cassius said. ‘There has been no communication with them for some time.’

‘There are many possible explanations for why they have so far failed to report in,’ Captain Bresnik said. ‘The parameters of their mission might

even forbid it.’

‘I am responsible,’ Cassius answered, ‘and so it falls to me to discover what that explanation is. Not only was I their original team leader, but I was also their Chaplain.’

‘Am I my battle-brother’s keeper?’ Seumas said quietly.

Cassius had never heard the Chaplain’s duty put so poetically before, but he found that he liked the turn of phrase. All loyal Space Marines, regardless of their doctrines, beliefs, or traditions, were ultimately brothers – sharing a genetic lineage that stretched back through ten millennia of unceasing duty to the Emperor. It was easy in these turbulent times for the various Chapters to remain at odds, to be insular and isolated from one another. Yet, the Deathwatch was composed of recruits from many different backgrounds. Friend and foe alike had to learn to work together against the common xenos threat, to eradicate the alien from the face of the galaxy. The duty of a Deathwatch chaplain was therefore compounded beyond such parochial boundaries; he had to guard the spiritual well-being of the whole of the Emperor’s family.

‘Yes, watch captain. I am my battle-brothers’ keeper.’

Watch Captain Drusus continued. ‘We have considered your request, Chaplain Cassius, and are prepared to deliver a verdict.’

‘But firstly,’ Seumas interrupted him, ‘I should like to review the events that took place in the Vadol Majoris System, Ultima Segmentum, at 859680.M41, referred to in your reports as “the Incident at Port Cepheus”.’

Cassius frowned inwardly. To him, Seumas seemed callous and arrogant. ‘I have already submitted my report in full,’ he said, ‘and given it my seal to verify the contents.’

‘Yes, I have it here,’ Seumas replied.

‘Then what more can I tell you that you have not already read?’

‘I beg your indulgence, Chaplain,’ Seumas said. ‘I have not had the same amount of time to pore over your report as my esteemed brothers have.’ He laced his fingers together and leaned forwards intently. ‘I would very much like to hear what happened in your own words. And perhaps you would consent to clarify a few things for me?’

‘I am here to serve, my lords,’ Cassius said.

‘Excellent. It is my understanding that in your time with the Deathwatch,

you have undertaken... well, more field missions that I can readily count.'

'Indeed. It is *my* understanding that I currently hold the record for both the number of kill team operations, and tours of re-enlistment.'

'Quite true,' Captain Bresnik confirmed, 'and quite commendable.'

'Many decades of service,' Seumas said. 'Indeed, Chaplain, mankind is in your debt. You have done great things to keep the xenos threat at bay. You've been the death of orks, eldar, borlac, chuffians, hrud – and now, it seems, an Imperial space station.'

Cassius did not bristle at the implied attack on his character. He had calmed himself to the point where his hearts were beating a mere twenty-five times per minute. Watch Captain Drusus, however, was not so restrained.

'I will remind you, Captain Seumas, that your own teams have been far from innocent when it comes to the issue of grievous collateral damage.'

Seumas ignored him. 'Brother-Chaplain, do you feel your actions in this instance were absolutely necessary?'

'*Walls, trenches and towers are no obstacle,*' Cassius said, quoting directly from the writings of Guilliman. '*Lack of imagination and lack of will are obstacles.*'

'The Codex Astartes,' Captain Bresnik said in benediction. For a moment the chamber fell silent. Even the scribe-servitor ceased its transcription.

'As it is written, so it must be. I withdraw my previous comment.' Captain Seumas cleared his throat. 'Be that as it may, Chaplain Cassius, even you must admit that some of the elements in your report strain credulity.'

'Such as?'

'The creatures, primarily.'

'Their xeno-identity has been positively confirmed since the incident.'

Seumas paused, considering his next words. 'Does the name Chaegryn mean anything to you?'

'That is enough!' Bresnik shouted, slamming an armoured fist down on the desk before him. The wood cracked with a sound like gunfire. 'The Chaplain's report stands. Nothing further can be gained from inference and speculation.'

'Indeed,' Drusus said. 'Chaplain Cassius, after reviewing the details of your petition, the council has decided that—'

‘Drogg Mordakka,’ Seumas exclaimed.

Cassius’ heart rate increased. ‘He has been found? Dealt with?’

Seumas reclined into his seat, confident now that the inquiry would continue. ‘Let the record show that the name Drogg Mordakka refers to an ork leader with an apparent predilection for salvaged Imperial technology. No, Chaplain Cassius, he has not been located or killed, in so far as I am aware. That task was given to you, is that not correct?’

‘It was.’

‘By whom?’

‘Watch Captain Drusus.’

Seumas turned to face the elder captain. ‘Perhaps Watch Captain Drusus could elaborate, then.’

Drusus, clearly annoyed, ran a hand over his beard once more. ‘Drogg Mordakka began raiding Imperial settlements on the Eastern Fringe three years ago. Captain Bresnik and I were aware of him, but did not take any action against him until recently.’

‘Why is that?’ Seumas asked.

Bresnik answered. ‘There were more important threats to deal with. That is, until he attacked the colony on Vinicus.’

‘In the same sector as Port Cepheus,’ Seumas said.

Drusus nodded. ‘Bolstered by that victory, other greenskins rallied to his side. The surge in numbers prompted a re-evaluation, and termination was prescribed. His crusade of violence, the so-called “Waaagh! Mek”, was defeated by a combined Imperial force which included units of the Deathwatch. Mordakka managed to escape destruction however, and Chaplain Cassius was tasked with hunting him down.’

‘And so, Chaplain,’ Seumas glanced down to his notes, ‘your ten-member kill team arrived in the Vadol Majoris System onboard the *Veritas*, a Gladius-class frigate. And as soon as you exited the warp, you received the distress call from Port Cepheus.’

‘That is correct.’

‘They were under attack by xenos life forms.’

‘Again, correct.’

‘You ordered the *Veritas* to respond immediately, because you assumed that the port was being attacked by Drogg Mordakka.’

‘At the time, it was the likeliest conclusion,’ Cassius said.

Seumas leaned forwards again, marking carefully every word that was about to proceed from the Chaplain's mouth. 'But it wasn't the greenskins who were attacking the port, was it?'

'No, watch captain. It was not.'

Port Cepheus was typical of many Imperial refuelling stations. It had a tower at its centre that contained cogitator banks, command decks, and cramped living quarters for any crew or workers beyond mere servitors. From the base of the tower, four fat piers reached out into space. There was an open area on each where a mid-sized vessel could dock. Immense conduits and tanks ran along their upper and lower sides. At their ends were thruster assemblies of titanic proportions that fired occasionally to keep the platform upright and stable. Beneath all of this dangled dozens of pipes, each one several miles long, which vanished into the upper cloud layer of the gas giant that the port orbited. An outside observer might have been left with the impression of a jellyfish trailing its tentacles through the water.

Most of the time, it was a quiet place. Today, however, it was crying out into the void.

Cassius peered into the augur array. There were no enemy vessels on the scope, but sensors could be fooled. He raised his head and surveyed his kill team. There were nine of them standing around him; nine battle-brothers drawn from nine different Chapters. It was not the smallest flock he had ever been tasked with shepherding, but it was certainly the most diverse.

'The distress call is automated,' Cassius said, referring to the string of numbers, time and date stamps, and the two words that were issuing from the port's alert systems.

'*Hostica ignotus?*' Koden asked. The Space Wolf's oversized canine teeth made every consonant he spoke particularly hard.

'Imperial Navy shorthand,' replied Vael Donatus, Cassius' brother of the Ultramarines Chapter. 'And archaic at that. It means the station is under attack by unidentified hostiles.'

'It must be the orks,' Omid snapped. He made a fist with his left hand, the one painted a bright red.

'An isolated promethium refinery on the edge of the system is just the

kind of target Drogg Mordakka would choose,' Captain Ectros added.

Jonat Teven wasn't as convinced. 'Why would they bother to attack this place? Greenskins like a fight – the bigger, the better. There seems little challenge here.'

'Perhaps they need the fuel,' Donatus offered.

'Who else might it be, all the way out here?' Omid asked.

'Brother Donatus,' Cassius said, 'inform the port that their message has been received and that we are inbound.'

'We would be wise to use an encrypted channel,' Omid offered, 'in case Mordakka is inclined to eavesdrop.'

Ectros gave a snort of derision. 'You give the orks too much credit.'

'No, he does not,' Cassius said sternly. He folded his arms and glared. The captain was as honourable and steadfast a Space Marine as any Cassius had ever met. He was a valuable member of the kill team, but he was too used to being in command. Here in the Deathwatch, his rank did not automatically afford him the same level of command and respect as he enjoyed in the White Consuls. Experience outweighed titles, and Cassius had lived twice as long as he. He gestured for Omid to give an explanation.

'Despite what many believe, greenskins are capable of trickery and subterfuge. I wouldn't discount the possibility that Drogg is hiding within the gas giant, ready to ambush us at a moment's notice. We've seen it before.'

Cassius nodded, and gestured to Ectros. 'You have served in the Deathwatch long enough now, Thaniel. Have you not learned that assumptions, especially where alien beings are concerned, can prove fatal? You must divest yourself of your preconceptions, and utilise the varied expertise of your team members. You will never become an effective watch captain until you do.'

Ectros' jaw worked, but he remained silent.

'I didn't hear you,' Cassius said.

'I understand, Chaplain,' he said tersely.

'Don't simply understand. Put it into practice – or else our time has been wasted.' Cassius lowered his arm again. 'Vael, contact the port. The rest of you, look to your wargear and prepare your hearts for battle. Insertion for this mission will be via drop pod.'

Ectros frowned. 'Respectfully, Port Cepheus can accommodate a ship of

this size. Should we not simply dock the *Veritas* on one of the fuelling piers?’

Cassius’ answer was a loaded one. ‘Is that what you would do, brother, if this were your kill team instead of mine?’

Ectros took a moment to consider, looking for what he had missed. ‘Granted, if there is an ork vessel lying in ambush, the *Veritas* becomes a stationary target if she docks. Conversely, if we use drop craft, not only is our deployment safe from possible interception, but the ship will remain free to act against any potential enemies. I see the wisdom of it.’

‘Then hope remains,’ Cassius said.

The others each saluted in their own ways and left the chamber while Donatus accessed the main vox-array. His brow furrowed. ‘There is no response on any of the long or mid-range channels. Even their distress call is being routed through a secondary system. It could be a mechanical failure.’

‘More likely, their communications have been purposefully sabotaged so that no one outside of their immediate vicinity will be able to hear them.’

‘I had reached the same conclusion, brother.’

Cassius opened a channel and called down to the lower decks. ‘Increase to best speed, and prepare for drop-deployment. Forward lance batteries at full ready.’

The *Veritas* had been designed to transport a single Space Marine unit, along with all the attendant serfs and vehicular support, rapidly across interstellar distances. Her engines were among the best in her class, and before long, the station loomed large beneath them. The vox-channels still registered nothing but empty static and background noise, and the endlessly repeating distress call that no one save the crew of the *Veritas* would ever be able to hear.

By the time Cassius and Donatus entered the cramped space within the drop pod, the other team members had stowed all of their weapons and locked themselves into restraining harnesses. Donatus took a moment to ensure that his prized Artifex pattern boltgun was safely racked before locking himself into place.

The deployment doors slowly closed. Cassius took his place in the sole remaining alcove and signalled to the bridge crew that all was ready. Deep

reverberations came through the pod walls as cumbersome machinery was roused from sleep.

There was an anticipatory moment of stillness, and then they were away.

The pod rocketed from the ship with a velocity that would have pulverised most mortal men. The Space Marines were lifted upwards until their restraints creaked. Cassius muttered the Liturgy of Freefall, asking the Emperor's blessing to be upon the machine-spirit of their transport. Otherwise, there was no sound but the dim roaring of thrusters beneath their feet, until Donatus spoke over the vox-channel they all shared.

'Brother-Chaplain, I've been monitoring Port Cepheus' short-range comms. Something is coming in.'

'Let's hear it.'

The kill team's helmets were immediately filled with a woman's strained voice. As she shouted, the background was filled with overlapping cries, the whine of turbine engines and staccato lasgun fire.

*'...don't care, just secure the main door! Incoming Imperial vessel, I pray you can hear us. We are evacuating the station via Aquila lander. Repeat, we are evacuating the station.'*

'Port Cepheus,' Cassius shouted back, 'this is Chaplain Ortan Cassius of the Deathwatch, commanding the starship *Veritas*. A relief force is currently inbound to your location. Remain where you are.'

Someone was screaming. The woman's voice called over the din to her would-be saviours. *'Not a chance. We're lifting off.'*

Cassius cursed. Fear always drove mortals to act irrationally.

He called up the pod's exterior feeds. His helmet's visor display was suddenly filled with a scene from the landing scanners mounted at the base of the exterior doors. Port Cepheus seemed to be rushing up towards him through a halo of retro-rocket flame. As they had seen on the long-range augurs, three of the station's docking spars were vacant. On the fourth sat a bulk freighter – its hull was ancient, pitted and dull, and thoroughly unremarkable.

Then he saw the lander, near the base of the central tower. Its wings were spread like those of an eagle, but the rest of it displayed none of its namesake's gracefulness as it heaved up from the deck and began a wobbling climb.

'Aquila lander,' Cassius called, 'you will not be permitted to dock with

our ship until we have ascertained the nature of your distress call.'

*'There's no ti—'*

The link went dead.

Cassius watched the Aquila as it began a drunken roll to one side, before striking the deck with its wing tip. The fuselage came down hard on the docking pier, and the fuel tanks inside the hull ruptured. Still within Port Cepheus' limited atmospheric envelope, the lander exploded, the short-lived fireball scattering smouldering hunks of armour plating noiselessly across the surface of the station.

The others did not respond, though many of them had also witnessed the crash. The pod signalled that it would impact in ten seconds.

'Weapons ready!' Cassius barked. He flicked off the external feed and drew his bolt pistol. 'Consider our landing zone hostile!'

And then, with a mighty, thundering impact, they were down. The restraining harness retracted from Cassius' shoulders, and the doors surrounding them all fell away with a flurry of locking bolt reports.

As he and the others exited the pod, it became immediately apparent that the port's gravitic generators had been sent offline by the force of the lander's destruction. The mag-lock plates in the soles of their armoured boots vibrated softly as they worked to keep each warrior securely bound to the space station's deck.

Cassius found himself flanked by Omid and his heavy bolter on one side, and by Donatus on the other.

'Auspex,' the chaplain barked. 'Scan for survivors.'

Koden moved up beside Omid, a portable scanner in his outstretched hand. He aimed the device towards the wreckage of the Aquila, pieces of which were already beginning to drift away into the void. 'No survivors. Nothing within fifty yards in any direction.'

'No life forms at all? What about from within the station?'

Koden shook his head.

Cassius surveyed the area. Port Cepheus' central tower lay a short distance to his left, but its viewports were dark. Beyond the crashed lander loomed the corroded hull of the bulk cargo freighter. What few windows the ship had were as black and lifeless as the station's. Huge, twisting pipes connected its cylindrical midsection to the pier's deck plating. White lettering, faded to obscurity, stretched across its bow.

‘Brother Pranus,’ Cassius called.

One of the Space Marines near the back of the formation raised his head. His right shoulder guard was a field of blue emblazoned with a skull and a twelve-pointed star. ‘Brother-Chaplain?’

‘Go with Omid and two others. I want a sweep of that freighter.’

‘Understood, my lord.’ Pranus gestured to the Space Marines on either side of him. ‘I’ll take Brothers Siegfric and Thalassi.’

Cassius nodded in agreement. ‘Captain Ectros and I will lead the remainder of the team through the station on the chance that there are additional survivors. We will also retrieve the station logs and personnel files from the cogitator banks. Keep the vox-channel open at all times.’

‘We are no longer concerning ourselves with potential eavesdroppers?’ Ectros asked. The captain’s voice carried a trace of cynicism that Cassius did not fail to notice.

‘Mordakka is not here,’ he said quietly.

‘Can we be so certain?’

Cassius watched as Pranus, Omid, Thalassi and Siegfric made their way past the wreckage of the Aquila and towards the freighter.

‘If he were, he would have attacked us by now.’

‘*Hostica ignotus*. If not greenskins,’ Ectros asked, ‘then what?’

To that, Cassius had no answer.

The central spire’s nearest voidlock stood open. Within, a blinking blue light futilely warned of complete depressurisation. Cassius and Donatus entered first, followed by Ectros and the others.

Beyond the open airlock was a large, darkened chamber filled with storage lockers, and a wide, circular stairwell. A ceramic cup surrounded by frozen droplets of some dark brown liquid twirled end over end in the absence of gravity.

Cassius pointed to Koden, who once again held up his auspex.

‘Still registering no life forms,’ he said. ‘The station’s atmospheric envelope has failed. This is hard vacuum.’

‘Vael,’ the Chaplain said, ‘lead the way. The xenos must be purged!’

Donatus moved to the base of the stairwell, his boltgun at the ready. They began their climb in single file. On the second level, they passed a space that had once served as a communal dining area. Chairs and long metal

tables drifted aimlessly, banging into one another. Above that, they encountered floor after floor of empty hab-compartments.

It was on the seventh level that they encountered the remains of two makeshift barricades. Supply crates and empty fuel drums now floated freely, but Cassius could see how they had been used to block the stairs. An empty lasgun lay on the floor, secured in place by a frozen pool of blood. Tattered shreds of beige cloth drifted lazily, their edges stained red.

A nearby wall caught Cassius' eye. It looked as if something had exploded against it, leaving a dark stain. Tiny, jagged shards were embedded all around it. He pulled one of them out and held it between his fingers. It was deep indigo, shot through with veins of black.

'Up here!' Donatus called.

Cassius flicked the fragment away.

The command deck was located on the next and topmost floor. A set of thick blast doors, their external surfaces covered with deep scratches and grooves, greeted the Space Marines. Something – perhaps several somethings – had been trying desperately to get in here.

Cassius pushed past Ectros and the others to Donatus' side, and together they hauled the doors open.

The chamber was circular in shape, with archways to both left and right. In the centre of the room squatted a bank of bulky cogitator machines. Two of their front panels had been removed so that a nest of wires and connectors spilled from the open space. The wall opposite the blast doors was dominated by a long crystalflex window.

Wordlessly, Cassius signalled for Ectros and Koden to each search one of the adjoining rooms while he crossed to the window. Through it, he could look out on all four of Port Cepheus' docking piers. There was a second Aquila lander, he saw, sitting quietly on an elevated platform near the pitted freighter. The topmost viewports of the large ship were now brightly lit, and so he opened a vox-channel to the second team.

'Pranus, report.'

*'Brother-Chaplain, we have completed a search of the lower decks and are currently on the vessel's bridge. We've seen no indication of hostile xenos or the vessel's crew.'*

'What is the status of the ship itself?'

*'Completely intact.'*

‘Are you able to rouse its machine-spirit?’ Donatus asked. He had squatted down to examine the patchwork wiring more closely.

‘Yes,’ came the reply. ‘*Easily.*’

‘What is the vessel’s name?’ Cassius demanded. ‘Where did it come from?’

‘*The Pride of Ghosar. An ore freighter from the Ghosarian System. It arrived forty-seven hours before we did.*’

‘Has it been resupplied?’

‘*Yes, Chaplain. The ship is fully refuelled, and carries a full cargo load. A return course to the planet of Ghosar Quintus has already been plotted.*’

Donatus pulled something free from within the tangled innards of the cogitator and stood up. In his hand he held a battered dataslate.

‘Station logs?’ Cassius asked.

Donatus nodded. ‘Useless. Scrambled and corrupted.’

Koden emerged from the nearest doorway and said, ‘Equipment storage. Thoroughly ransacked. There are compartments for fifteen environment suits. Half a dozen of them are missing.’

‘Ectros?’ Cassius called out.

The captain stepped back into the room. He held a rectangular device in his left hand. ‘I found nothing of note, save for this.’

‘A vox-corder?’

Ectros nodded and handed the box to Donatus. After a moment, he depressed a button on the side of the device, and the voice of the woman they had spoken with earlier filled their helmets.

*‘I’ll... I’ll try to make this as brief as possible. If for some reason we are unsuccessful in our escape attempt, then at least there’ll be some kind of record. It’s been nearly two days since the creatures appeared, and in that time more than half of the station’s crew have either been killed or gone missing. I have no idea what happened to all the servitors. Maybe they just tore them apart so that they couldn’t repair any of our communications systems.*

*‘These things – we don’t know what to call them – are smart. We thought they were just animals at first, but they disabled the primary power grid somehow, and slaughtered our astropaths. They intentionally cut us off from any kind of outside help, isolating us so that they could finish us off at leisure. Chameron was able to reroute a distress call through the*

*secondary systems, though. He wasn't even sure that it would reach far enough for anyone to hear.*

*'I want it noted that the crew of Port Cepheus defended this installation to the end. I mean, they're mostly dock workers and menial mechanics, but they did the work of any Militarum guardsmen. They set up barricades on the floor below us, and when the... things... rushed them... well, they kept... they kept on...*

*'Well, there's only six of us now. Myself, Chameron, Chief Medicae Gyr, Alexis and the Inge brothers. The blast doors seem to have held the damned things off for now, but it's only a matter of time before they find some other way to get in here. So, we've decided to just run for it while we can... try and get off the station and rendezvous with the approaching Adeptus Astartes frigate. We'll take the lander – no way I'm going anywhere near that freighter. It's no coincidence that the infestation started right after it arrived. I know it.*

*'Anyway, I guess that's all there is to say. May the Emperor have mercy on us. This is Overseer Lusi Arevik, Port Cepheus, Vadol Majoris System.'*

The recording ended with a click. The Space Marines digested the information in silence for a moment.

'Pranus,' Cassius said, 'were you privy to that?'

'Yes, Chaplain. We heard it all.'

Cassius rifled through his memory. There were many species in the galaxy that propagated themselves by becoming stowaways. They would attach themselves to the outer hulls of starships or hide away within their cluttered holds. Almost all of them were animalistic vermin of one kind or another, and certainly couldn't have precipitated a slaughter such as this. The only possible candidates he could call to mind were—

*'There's something else you should see, my lord – patching through to your display now.'*

Brother Pranus' rune-icon blinked up in Cassius' helm, and his visual feed overlaid the visor. The Chaplain saw the dismal interior of the *Pride of Ghosar*, all bare metal bulkheads and worn decking. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Then Pranus turned to the rearmost wall of the bridge, and Cassius was filled with fresh hatred for all the unspeakable forms of xenos he had ever encountered.

Elegantly depicted in ageing fresco was a devotional mural of the Emperor of Mankind, defiled as though by some madman's whim. His teeth were fangs, and his too-many hands tipped with elongated claws. Beneath this abomination, rendered in crudely sprayed lacquer, were the words '*BLESSED BE THE TRYSST! ALL HAIL THE FOUR-ARMED EMPEROR!*'

Blinking away the feed in disgust, Cassius returned his attention to the chamber in which he stood.

In that fractional instant, he caught the barest glimpse of *something* as it flew up the main stairwell and through the open blast doors – a blur of limbs and chitinous shell and teeth that hurled itself against Brother Koden's shoulders. The Space Wolf gave a grunt and stumbled forwards with the unexpected impact.

Cassius raised his crozius arcanum, the gilded power maul that was the symbol of his office, above his head. He meant to remove the creature from Koden's back with one fell blow, but he never got the chance. The crystalflex window beside him shattered soundlessly as three more creatures forced their way into the control room. Like the one attacking Koden, they were multi-limbed and covered with an indigo-coloured shell. Their heads were dominated by mouths filled with teeth the size of knives.

Possessed of a hellish speed, they were upon the team before they could react.

The xenos slashed at Cassius' chest with their claws. One of them attempted to bite its way through the top of his helmet. With a cry of defiance, he swung the crozius. One of the monsters was struck across the face. Globules of dark blood sprayed out from between its teeth and splattered against the wall.

A pair of jaws clamped around his left leg. The reinforced plating of his greave buckled slightly but did not give way. Again he brought his maul down, and again he made his attackers bleed.

Still, the damnable things refused to die. Distantly, he realised that they were trying to render him defenceless by pinning him to the floor, and that it was only the magnetic plating in his boots that was holding him upright. He saw his brethren fighting back with the righteous zeal that befitted loyal servants of the Deathwatch.

He shouted an oath to the Emperor. Then a long talon raked across his

faceplate.

Half blinded, Cassius swung his crozius on instinct. He felt reverberations up the length of his arm as an alien skull exploded across the weapon's weighted end.

A dark maw filled his vision as one of the creatures made to bite at his faceplate. He drew his pistol from the holster on his hip, and fired.

In the airless vacuum, he was denied the rewarding sound of a bolt leaving the chamber. Instead, he had to content himself merely with the sight of the monster's head exploding into ribbons and shards of bone.

Cassius wiped his eye-lenses clear. The last of his attackers had somehow sprung backwards and was now scuttling up the wall. Cassius fired at it three times, but it dashed out of the way towards the ceiling. In its wake, it left deep claw marks in the metal plating. When it was directly overhead, it sprang at him.

Its mouth was gaping in a silent roar. Its tongue moved like a snake.

Cassius drove the crozius past its lethal teeth and out the back of its skull in a blaze of concussive force. Its body, headless but still twitching, bounced away towards the storage chamber.

Cassius whirled around. Five more of the aliens drifted lifelessly around his men. Donatus and Teven were still on their feet, flanking the blast doors and firing down the stairwell with the boltguns. Koden was on his knees – he had apparently managed not only to dislodge his attacker, but cleave it in two with his power axe. But tiny jets of gas were venting from the back of his armour, evidence of a breach all the way to his sealed undersuit. Captain Ectros was standing over the body of Brother Radovan, whose right arm, Cassius noted, was now missing below the elbow.

His instincts had proved correct. Port Cepheus was infested with genestealers.

'Kill team,' he growled over the vox. 'Report!'

'We have two men wounded,' Ectros replied. 'One of them critically.'

'I'm fine,' Koden growled.

'*Pranus here, my lord. We are on our way to you.*'

Cassius shook his head. 'No, Brother Pranus – remain where you are. The xenos have the tactical advantage in this place.'

Ectros slipped an arm under Brother Radovan and lifted him up, while Cassius moved behind Koden. The Space Wolf's armour had indeed been

breached in half a dozen places. His enhanced lungs would protect him for a while, but Cassius knew that not even the toughest of Space Marines could operate at full combat readiness for very long in a total vacuum and expect to survive.

‘Donatus, lead us out of here,’ Cassius barked. ‘And send word to the *Veritas*. We will clarify the extent of our operational jurisdiction. Mark my words, I shall not suffer this infestation to remain.’

At the top of the stairwell were five dead genestealers, each shot through half a dozen times. Donatus shoved their drifting corpses aside, clearing a path for the others. Retracing their magnetised path through Port Cepheus’ dark, airless corridors, they passed the smashed barricades and habitation levels without incident.

They reached the second level, where the space was thick with drifting detritus. Cassius motioned for everyone to go ahead of him. Donatus, Teven and Koden started down towards the entrance level. Ectros, still carrying Brother Radovan, moved to follow them.

Suddenly, tables and chairs were being knocked aside.

Cassius had remained halfway up the step to the third level, where he could survey the cluttered room from on high. The control room, a confined space with limited firing avenues, had been an excellent place for an ambush. So too was this.

His diligence was rewarded.

There were five of them. They came at Ectros from all sides, but this time Cassius was ready for them. He shot two dead as they sprang from their hiding places. Then, bounding down the steps, caved in the skull of a third one with his maul.

Ectros kept hold of Brother Radovan as he spun around. Levelling his chainsword across his body, he caught the first of the remaining genestealers in its thorax as it leapt at him. The second one, however, ploughed into him at the hip, and wrapped its monstrous clawed hands around his abdomen. The ceramite gave like waxed parchment, and cooled gases vented from his ruptured plate.

Over the vox, Cassius heard a sound completely unfamiliar to him. It took a full second for him to realise that it was Ectros crying out in pain.

The captain brought his sword down, and severed two limbs off the

creature attached to him. It twisted away, trying to save itself, but Ectros lunged and caught it in the chest, the chain-blade chewing its way between two bony, rib-like plates.

Cassius struck the final genestealer, collapsing its exoskeleton and covering the crozius' golden wings with foul ichor.

The wounded captain's breathing came over the vox in sharp gasps. 'Right through my armour,' he muttered. He inhaled deeply, altering the pressure in his lungs and commanding his enhanced body to start conserving oxygen. He gave a comradely nod to Cassius, and continued down the stairwell.

As they exited the central tower back through the voidlock, Cassius called to Pranus and the rest aboard the *Pride of Ghosar*.

'Brothers, activate the freighter's engines. Prepare it to leave the port.'

'Yes, Brother-Chaplain,' Pranus replied. '*I will have the others meet you at the starboard lock.*'

'No,' Cassius said. 'Once the ship is ready, you are to follow its return course back to its home system.'

A moment passed where none of the kill team members said a word. Finally, Pranus cleared his throat. '*Chaplain, a kill team cannot be divided without higher authorisation.*'

'*Inquisito lethale omni tempore,*' Ectros said quietly. 'At all times, lethal investigation.'

'We *have* been commanded by a higher authority,' Cassius said. 'Our original mission stands – the *Veritas* and the kill team under my command are to pursue Drogg Mordakka and the remains of Waaagh! Mek unto their righteous destruction. However, Brother Donatus reports that the *Veritas* has received additional orders from a Watch Commander Vaerion. Do you know him?'

'*I do not recognise the name,*' replied Pranus. Ectros shook his head, glancing back as Donatus sealed the voidlock behind them.

Cassius continued. 'It matters not. I am to divide the kill team, and dispatch you to Ghosar Quintus on a new mission that will be relayed separately. The new team is codenamed Excis.'

No one else spoke.

'We are the Deathwatch, brothers. For us, this is more than a mandate, more than a mere mission. It is a holy charge! It falls to us to purge the

stars of inhumanity so that mankind may inherit them once more. This was what our great master, the Emperor, began ten millennia ago, and we are the heirs of his undertaking. Drogg Mordakka still lives, and that cannot stand! The planet Vinicus must have retribution. The blood of millions cries out from the ground for us to avenge them, and we will oblige. I will find the greenskin leader, and I will end him. Yet, I cannot also ignore this new threat. Here too, Imperial lives have been taken and must be answered for, blood for blood.'

'Therefore, Pranus – you, Omid, Thalassi, and Siegfrie will go to Ghosar Quintus. Whatever else Watch Commander Vaerion tasks you with, you will find the source of the genestealer infestation and you will eliminate it.'

'Yes, *Brother-Chaplain*,' said Pranus. His enthusiasm, stoked by Cassius' homily, was evident even over the vox-channel. '*We will go at once!*'

'And I will go with you,' Ectros said. 'We should divide the kill team equally.'

Cassius glared at him. 'If you are going simply to uphold protocol, then you need not bother. You are wounded, and we do not yet even know the extent of the mission to Ghosar Quintus.'

'I am going because my battle-brothers on that freighter need someone to lead them. I am going because it is what *you* would do.'

Behind his faceplate, Cassius smiled grimly. He raised the crozius arcanum above his head. 'Then go, Captain Thaniel Ectros, with all the blessings of the Emperor. Go with praise for His great name and damnation for His enemies, and He will be with you, yea, even unto the end of all things.'

Ectros passed Radovan to Donatus, saluted the group with the sign of the aquila, and headed towards the *Pride of Ghosar*.

'Shall I call the *Veritas* for retrieval?' Donatus enquired.

'If the ship were to dock, then the genestealers could find their way aboard. We cannot risk it. The port has one more lander. We will take that, and invoke full quarantine protocols upon arrival.'

'Then we will return and cleanse the station,' said Teven, 'once the wounded have been healed.'

'No, we will continue the hunt for Drogg Mordakka,' Cassius replied. 'That continues to be our primary duty.'

Donatus inclined his head. ‘But what then of Port Cepheus?’

From the command deck of the *Veritas*, Cassius watched as the *Pride of Ghosar* slowly moved away from the station. He recited a prayer for those in departure, and then ordered the forward gunnery crews to obliterate the port’s nearest stabiliser.

‘The watch captains will question this decision,’ Donatus muttered.

‘But not my motives,’ Cassius replied. ‘Not my resolve. By this act, we purge any remaining xenos infestation. Had I more Space Marines and more time, I would do it with more discretion. As it stands, I have neither.’

The deck plates beneath their feet shook as the *Veritas*’ weapons were readied. Then, searing beams of light shot out from her bow, cleaving into the station’s flank in a cascade of explosions.

Port Cepheus, mortally wounded, began to tilt.

Three stabilisers were not enough to keep it aloft, and the gravity of the gas giant below began to drag it downwards. Farther and farther it fell towards the swirling cloud tops, picking up speed as it went. Mounting external pressures caused the superstructure to crumple in upon itself. The docking piers bent towards the central tower. Further detonations ripped along them as the promethium in their storage vaults ignited, ripping along the length of the intake pipes. Into the infernal, crushing, stygian depths, went Port Cepheus, compacting and burning with every mile, until it finally vanished from sight.

Only when he was certain that the entire station had been utterly destroyed did Cassius order the *Veritas* to break orbit and renew the search for Drogg Mordakka.

Only then did he send word to his superiors in the Deathwatch of what he had done.

‘I trust that the Chaplain’s account answers all of your questions, brother?’ Drusus asked pointedly.

Seumas, deep in thought, looked up and nodded silently. Drusus wearily rubbed at his temples before continuing.

‘Then, if there is nothing further, we will return to the issue at hand. Chaplain Cassius, there has been no distress call received from Captain Ectros, nor any other member of Kill Team Excis. It is to be assumed that

they never reached Ghosar Quintus, most likely falling prey to genestealers while on board the freighter *Pride of Ghosar*, which also cannot be found. Your petition to assemble a new kill team and undertake a second mission in force to the Ghosarian System is hereby denied.'

Cassius' eyes grew wide with surprise. 'Then I will go alone.'

'Your dedication is an example to us all, Chaplain,' Captain Bresnik sighed, shaking his head, 'but there are other wars to fight, and other engagements that demand our attention. This is simply not a priority for the Deathwatch. Your petition is denied. May the Emperor guide you all the rest of your days. This council is adjourned.'

The scribe-servitor completed its hectic quill strokes. The three thrones of the watch captains lowered themselves to the floor, and the desk portions swung open. Bresnik rose and walked quickly out of the chamber. He did not so much as glance at Cassius as he passed. Seumas remained seated, his focus turned entirely inwards. Drusus got up from his throne, and walked to the servitor. He tore the length of parchment from its mouth, and rolled it into a tight scroll.

Cassius finally broke his stunned silence. 'Captain Drusus, I must protest.'

'The decision stands, Chaplain. Need I remind you that your original mission remains incomplete? Drogg Mordakka remains at large.'

'I am not one to question the judgement of my superiors, but—'

'Then, as your superior, trust me when I tell you that there is no need for you to travel to Ghosar Quintus. Return to your quarters, Cassius, and meditate upon the wisdom of this council. We cannot chase ghosts and phantoms through all the dark corners of the galaxy.' Drusus took the record of the inquiry and placed it into a pouch on his belt. As he left the chamber, he called back over his shoulder. 'It is almost certain that the *Pride of Ghosar* was infested with genestealers *after* leaving its home system.'

*Home.*

For a moment, Cassius thought of the magnificent mountain ranges and windswept lowlands of the Ultramarines capital world. It had been entirely too long since he had last set foot upon it, or been within the walls of the Fortress of Hera. He could return there now, if he so chose, and watch the golden domes of the Chapter monastery blaze in the light of the rising sun.

He could once again walk through its vaunted halls, and praise the Emperor and primarch in the Temple of Corr–

‘You’ll never see it again,’ Seumas said.

Cassius’ head snapped around. He and Seumas were alone. ‘Do you mean Macragge?’

The watch captain rose up slowly from his seat. ‘The record of this meeting. Our Brother-Captain Drusus will either destroy that scroll, or bury it in a scriptorium so deep that it will never be seen again. Not by you or I, or any other living being.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘Why indeed...’ Seumas moved slowly towards Cassius. ‘Do you uphold the sanctity of confession?’

Cassius blinked.

‘It has been a long time since I have heard the confessions of any Space Marine,’ he replied. ‘Have you been derelict in your duty somehow?’

‘No. Quite the contrary. But, in the course of serving the Emperor, I have had to... dissemble. I have had to keep information from my brothers-in-arms while I discerned which of them I could truly trust.’

‘And you trust me?’

‘After hearing about the incident at Port Cepheus first-hand, I do. I asked you earlier if you had ever heard the name of Chaegryn.’

‘I have not.’

‘Chaegryn is the name of an Ordo Xenos Inquisitor.’

‘Very well. What does that have to do with me?’

Seumas began walking slowly towards the door. ‘As I said, I have been keeping information. Collecting it. Sorting it. Finding connections, parallels, and... *unpleasant* coincidences. When your report came to my attention, I tried to corroborate some of its details. And, within the records of the Deathwatch, I came across a handful of mentions of the very star system that Captain Ectros went to investigate.’

‘Ghosar.’

‘It was a report from one Inquisitor Chaegryn. Heavily redacted. Entire sections of it had been covered up or erased. Still, there was enough left to provide a partial picture. It seems that the Inquisitor went to Ghosar Quintus to investigate an alien threat, one that drew a lot of unwholesome attention from his peers. Shortly after arriving, Chaegryn sent back a

message saying that all was well, that there was no problem whatsoever, and that under no circumstances should anyone attempt to investigate the matter further.’

The watch captain halted. His gaze was cold.

‘Brother-Chaplain Cassius, almost all other information regarding that star system has been purged. Were it not for your report and a handful of bureaucratic remnants, its very existence would be in doubt. And Ghosar Quintus is not the only such example. Over the past two thousand years or so, more than one hundred and twenty worlds on the Eastern Fringe have likewise reported the presence of genestealer infestations, and then all but vanished from Imperial records.’

Cassius did not know what to say. Seumas glanced around them before continuing in a more hushed tone.

‘There is a conspiracy at work here, and the creatures you encountered at Port Cepheus appear to be integral to it. Sweeping portions of the Deathwatch are ignorant of these facts – either wilfully, or because they haven’t taken the time to put together all the pieces of the puzzle. But I have. I can give you the requisition codes for the documents in question. It’s all there, in the archives.’

Cassius stared. ‘You’re insane,’ he muttered finally, and turned to leave.

‘Then go to Ghosar Quintus. I’m sure you’ll find all the proof you could ever want.’

‘The other watch captains refuse to sanction my petition.’

‘I know someone who could approve it anyway.’

Cassius froze, his hand hovering just above the door plate. He glanced over his shoulder as Seumas closed the distance between them once more.

‘Who?’

‘Watch Commander Vaerion.’

‘And what of the kill team selection?’

‘I would suggest that you begin your own preparations now. I would go myself, but that would raise too many questions. I have no idea how far this rot has already spread.’

‘Are you so certain of what we will find when we get there?’ Cassius asked.

‘I am certain of the danger. You and I both know that there is far more to these beings than mere vermin clinging to hulls and hulks.’

Still, Cassius did not move.

‘We both neglect our duty by doing nothing,’ Seumas said. ‘I can offer no further argument.’

‘It is enough,’ Cassius said as he left the chamber.

Vael Donatus was standing by a grand viewport on the embarkation level when Cassius found him. Through the armourglass, they could see the *Veritas* being prepared for departure. ‘What did they say?’ he asked. ‘Did they approve the petition?’

‘No,’ Cassius replied. ‘Yet, strangely, we will likely be going nonetheless.’

Donatus did not understand. Nor did he feel the need to. The Chaplain was including him in this endeavour, and that was enough for him. ‘Then what must we do now, brother?’

‘We must prepare a new kill team, you and I. But it must be done with caution and secrecy. We take only those skilled and experienced individuals in whom we have the utmost trust, and none of the watch captains must be aware of it. Not until we can contact Watch Commander Quovis Vaerion.’

Cassius saw Donatus’ eyes narrow with unease.

‘I know, brother. I too hate to undermine our betters. It is not for a Space Marine to be duplicitous, doubly so for two sons of Guilliman.’ The Chaplain placed a reassuring hand upon Donatus’ shoulder. ‘But this is how it must be. Ectros, Pranus, Omid, Siegfric, and Thalassi – I sent them into a place from which, it seems, no one returns. They have become lost. And I must do all I can to find them... or avenge them.’

Donatus nodded. ‘As always, I will stand by you. Whatever may come.’

‘Then let us prepare,’ Cassius said. ‘The dark secrets of Ghosar Quintus await.’

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Braden Campbell** is the author of *Shadowsun: The Last of Kiru's Line* for Black Library, as well as several short stories. He is a classical actor and playwright, and a freelance writer, particularly in the field of role playing games. Braden has enjoyed Warhammer 40,000 for nearly a decade, and remains fiercely dedicated to his dark eldar.

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