

WARHAMMER  
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

ENHANCED AUDIO EDITION

# FROM THE BLOOD

ANDY SMILLIE

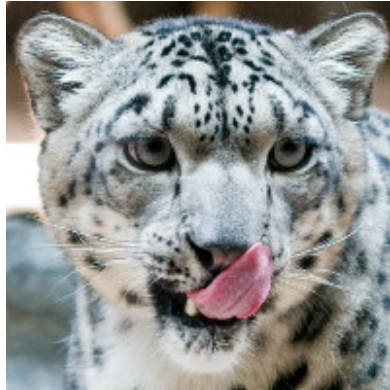


# From The Blood

An Space Marine Battles Audio Drama

Written by Andy Smilie

Created by



&



## List of characters:

\*\*\*\*\*

Balthiel's serf lay dead on the floor, his body chalk-white from exsanguination. Arterial fluid had run from his orifices until his veins were empty. Hoarfrost rimed the chamber walls. Unnaturally frozen air molecules cracked like agitated ice. Balthiel knelt in the centre of the lightless cell, oblivious to the serf.

'By his Blood, am I made.' The Librarian trembled as he spoke, forcing each word through bloodied lips. It took all of his focus, all of his training to stay conscious. Pain that he thought he could never have endured wracked his body. His hands ached from gripping the floor, his fingers dug knuckle-deep into the steel.

The unknown figure stepped towards Balthiel.

'By his Blood, am I armoured.'

Blood trickled from Balthiel's nose, striking the floor with a regular rhythm. He heard each droplet as it fell. They thundered in his mind like the firing of a siege cannon. Weeping, he held the trance; he would see the end of the vision this time. He had to. He would know the face of his tormentor.

The shadow-fire obscuring the figure filtered away...

'By his Blood...' Balthiel shuddered, crying out in pain. Smoke exuded from his pores and drifted off his skin in a black-grey pall.

A black-armoured Space Marine stood before Balthiel. Its battleplate resembled his own, but it bore the bloodied saltire of the damned upon its pauldron. It laughed. The humourless sound swelled in Balthiel's mind, the persistent rumble of a storm-wracked sky.

'By his Blood, shall I triumph.' Balthiel's voice was a tortured whisper.

The Space Marine removed its helm, exposing its true face. It was a red-skinned beast. A daemon. Still laughing, it opened its fanged mouth and roared. 'From the Blood are monsters born.'

The psychic vision faded, throwing Balthiel up and back against the wall. He collapsed to the floor. Before darkness took him, the Librarian tapped the last of his strength and called for aid. 'Apothecary...'

'Master Zargo, Brother Arjen.' Balthiel clamped his fist to his breastplate, saluting the two Angels Encarmine. 'Chapter Master Gabriel Seth sends his regards.' Balthiel entered the strategium proper, joining Zargo under a grey-blue hololith projection of the Stromark System.

'I see Seth at least had the good sense to avoid this conflict,' said Zargo, a snide smile stretching his lips.

Balthiel hid the annoyance from his face. He'd fought alongside Zargo and his Chapter before. Of all the sons of Sanguinius they were the most aloof, displaying a contemptuous disregard for the weak. Their arrogance surpassed that of the Blood Angels themselves. Balthiel held Zargo's gaze. The Chapter Master's haughtiness did far more to mark him as an Angel Encarmine than the winged Chapter symbol on his left pauldron.

'My lord is needed elsewhere,' said Balthiel.

Castellan Zargo grinned, a glimmer of disappointment in his eyes. He would have enjoyed sparring with the Flesh Tearer. Zargo turned to the strategium's sole human occupant. 'Leave us.'

Admiral Vortimer's face crumpled. He was master of the Emperor's Fist, the largest warship in the Epeyrion battlegroup, and this was his war room. Vortimer pulled his shoulders back in an effort to regain some dignity, and glared up at the three giant warriors. Each took up the space of four of his officers as they stood around the tactical

console. The Space Marines' crimson armour purred as they examined the hololith.

This was not the first time Vortimer had encountered the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. On Pleuvus Seven, he had borne witness to the speed and ferocity of a White Scars assault. Still, it seemed impossible that even a superhuman could manoeuvre clad in such heavy battleplate.

Awe, and if he was honest, fear, held Vortimer's tongue in check. He made the sign of the aquila, clicked his boots together and left the Space Marines to their task.

'It is as well he is gone,' said Arjen as the door closed on the admiral. 'The drumming of his coward heart was growing tiresome.'

Even a passive reading of Arjen's mind revealed the malice behind his jest. It would not be long before Zargo's First Captain succumbed to the rage boiling in his blood. Of that, Balthiel was certain. 'My orders are to secure Stromark Prime,' said Balthiel. He looked to Zargo.

'Yes, we will enter the Stromark system together. You will drive for Prime while we take Secundus.' Zargo manipulated the image. Blue orbs depicted the sister worlds. Each planet had been a bastion of industry, charged with supplying the Emperor's armies with the weapons needed to prosecute their campaigns of reclamation. The petty feuds that had long existed between their rulers had escalated to a system-wide conflict and could no longer be ignored.

'Governess Agrafena has fortified her palace well.' Zargo indicated the line of reinforced positions framing the palace. 'There's a dense network of anti-air batteries and surface-to-low-orbit missiles. We cannot risk Thunderhawk deployment.' Several threat sigils sprang up across the hololith as Zargo spoke.

'Teleporters?' asked Balthiel.

'The palace is void shielded. Drop pod assault is the only option,' said Zargo.

Balthiel studied the hololith, executing the mission in his mind. He had led hundreds of such attacks on enemy positions. There were always casualties. 'Losses are likely to be significant.'

‘You must find a way, Flesh Tearer. The Axion campaign will stall, perhaps even collapse, should the Stromarkians continue to focus their efforts on destroying one another. You must ensure compliance, the Emperor demands it.’

‘Why not send an assassin, murder the perfidious weaklings in their sleep?’ suggested Arjen. ‘We belong on the front, killing orks.’ Arjen drew his hand through the hololith, distorting the image.

‘Were it only that simple, brother.’ Chaplain Appollus stepped from the shadows of the corridor, his black armour seeming to coalesce from the darkness.

‘Chaplain.’ Zargo greeted the Flesh Tearer coldly, annoyed by the contempt in his tone.

Arjen said nothing.

Balthiel suppressed a smile, reading Arjen’s desire to kill Appollus even as the Angel Encarmine formed the thought. +Not with a dozen of your brothers.+ The Librarian pushed his words into Arjen’s mind.

‘There is more to this conflict than the greed of two individuals. The Stromarkians have long been rivals. This war runs in their blood.’ Appollus adjusted the hololith. Prime spun into sharp focus. ‘We must crush their spirit. We must remind them that the needs of the Imperium are of more importance than their own petty concerns of state.’ Appollus tapped the keys on the tactical console. The hololith shuddered. The image resolved to show several clusters of red orbs that blinked over Stromark Prime, indicating primary bombardment targets. ‘We will drown the Stromarkians’ arrogance in a tide of blood.’ The hololith continued to change as Appollus spoke. Its cogitators extrapolated landing sites and predicted enemy casualty rates, illustrating the destruction Appollus and his Death Company would wreak upon Stromark Prime.

We cannot repeat Honour’s End. Seth’s words rang in Balthiel’s mind. He stared at the Chaplain. Appollus’s eyes were as dark as his armour. Balthiel remembered his vision, the black-armoured daemon etched into his memory, and shivered. The Death Company were a terrible force to behold, their unrestrained fury the stuff of nightmares. Tendrils of icy foreboding stabbed at Balthiel. They were about to

unleash terror upon Stromark. Such a massacre would not be without cost.

Balthiel reached out tentatively with his mind, probing the Chaplain's thoughts. He saw nothing. Appollus's intentions were hidden behind mental barriers as fierce as the skull helm he wore in battle.

The Librarian turned back to the slowly turning image of Stromark Prime, his eyes lingering on the civilian casualty numbers as they continued to count upwards. 'The Blood grant me strength,' Balthiel mouthed.

Death's Cowl bled into real space, exiting the warp in a shimmer of fractured light. The vessel's hull stretched to infinity, defying all laws of artifice, before snapping to its original proportions. Tendrils of ethereal fire clung to the Cowl's ashen flanks as it powered towards Stromark Prime, a final echo of the nightmare realm that the Flesh Tearers strike cruiser had traversed.

'Range?' Chaplain Zuphias's voice boomed across the Cowl's command bridge like the rumble of thrusters. Even by Space Marine standards he was ancient, his oil-black armour scrubbed clean of insignia by the ravages of time.

'Seven minutes to optimal firing distance, liege.'

'Nine minutes to deployment range, liege.'

The surveyor and tactical serfs spoke near simultaneously, a practice Zuphias insisted upon. On the battlefield, he had commanded hundreds of warriors, interpreting an unceasing barrage of sensory information, while he fought blade-to-blade with his enemy. He would have his warship function at maximum efficiency. There was no place in battle for civility.

Zuphias nodded, and opened a vox-link. 'Chaplain Appollus, you have less than nine minutes. Be ready.' In response, an acknowledgment sigil flashed on Zuphias's retinal display. Zuphias stared across the monastic expanse of the bridge. Below him, dozens of serfs scurried around, performing the myriad tasks necessary for the strike cruiser to function. He pitied them. They existed as echoes of the warriors they delivered to battle. The serf's ashen robes were a poor substitute for the dark armour worn by the Death Company ensconced in the lower decks. The saw-toothed blades wrought into the floor of the

bridge were no more than a homage to the Chapter symbol all Flesh Tearers carried on their pauldrons.

Zuphias looked up and growled, glaring through the real space window as Stromark Prime edged closer. He would give his primary heart to be making planetfall with Appollus and his battle-brothers.

It was true that he commanded the power to obliterate planets, to cut a bloody path through the stars. But naval engagements were detached, passionless things that left him as cold as the void they were fought in. Zuphias yearned for the immediacy of personal combat. To once again hear the bark of a boltgun, to feel it judder in his hand as it spat death. He wished for nothing more than to taste the sharp tang of supercharged air as his crozius struck down an enemy. He sighed; such things would never again be his to experience.

A monstrous, red-skinned daemon clad in fire and bronze had mortally wounded Zuphias in the Lypherion campaign. Khorne's mightiest child, its axe a burning totem of murder, the daemon had shattered Zuphias's bones and bisected him with a single stroke of its blade. Only his tenacity and burning anger had kept his twin hearts pumping until the Apothecaries found him. They had interred him in the Cowl's command throne, keeping his body alive through a regimen of electroshocks and bio-fluids. Zuphias was to be transferred to a Dreadnought sarcophagus on his return to Cretacia, given an armoured body in which to continue his battle against the enemies of his Chapter. But operational requirements had necessitated he remain on the Cowl. Now, after more than six decades, he could no longer be removed from the vessel.

Zuphias looked down at the bundle of wires and cabling that replaced his legs. This was to be his fate until oblivion claimed him.

The chamber's luminators flickered as the ship sensed its captain's frustration.

'Enemy contacts, liege. Closing.' Klaxons wailed overhead, ringing out as the surveyor relayed the information.

'Show me,' Zuphias growled.

'Yes, liege.' The surveyor tapped a series of dials on his console, activating the tactical hololith. The panel of green light flickered as it resolved to hang in the air above Zuphias.

The Chaplain's eyes narrowed as he studied the hololith. A pair of warships and a shoal of support frigates were moving to intercept them. He looked to each of the warships in turn, bringing them to the forefront of the image with a thought. The Cowl's machine-spirit analysed their engine signatures, displaying a raft of tactical data, including the offensive and defensive capability of each vessel. The Pride of Halka was a Lunar-class cruiser, the Emperor's Guardian a Dictator-class whose energy output suggested it was carrying a full complement of Starhawk bombers. Three Cobra-class destroyers were trying their best to hide among the modest flotilla.

To the front of the chamber, a communication serf spun round from his console to address Zuphias. 'My liege. They have sent a request to negotiate over the comm-net.'

'Vox silence, hold course.'

'Liege?' The comms serf had spoken without thinking. He felt his throat go dry as too late he realised his error.

'We are not here to settle a dispute,' said Zuphias, bunching a fist in anger. 'We are not arbitrators. We are the chosen of Sanguinius, the Angels of Death, and we have come to deliver judgement.'

Sweat glistened on the comms serf's brow as he stammered through a reply. 'Yes, liege. Forgive me.'

Zuphias could have killed the serf for his insolence. He knew of several of his brothers who would have done so for less. But he needn't expend the effort; the serf would not live long.

He did not learn the names of his human crew; to do so would be a waste. Their time on the Cowl was short lived. It was a vessel unlike any other. Home to the bulk of the Flesh Tearers Death Company, it was tasked with but a single objective – to bring ruin to the enemies of the Emperor. The human mind was unable to cope with the miasma of anguish that saturated the ship. Most killed themselves within two Terran years.

Appollus stared down from the gantry. Below, twenty ashen-armoured Death Company warriors stood in ranks of five. Each awaited the command to board the drop pods that stood on deck like giant black teardrops, ready to bring sorrow to the Stromarkians.

Serfs drifted between the rows of the Death Company, anointing their armour with lubricating oils and unguents of warding. Appollus regarded the nearest serf as its body quivered. A neuro-cable threaded through the serf's crimson robe, connecting its brain to its spinal column. The serfs were all lobotomised, little more than drones. Appollus felt his grip tighten on the gantry's support rail. His warriors deserved better. But no sane man could be coerced to stand so close to the murderous Space Marines. The Death Company were cursed, the walking dead: their bodies intact, their minds consumed by the Rage. Without the burden of conscience, all that remained for them was to ensure that they didn't enter death's embrace alone. Appollus was honoured to lead them in their final charge.

In the eaves of the chamber, the Chapter's cherubs began intoning the prayers from the Iraes Lexican.

'Our wrath shall be unceasing.' Appollus echoed the choir, reciting pertinent lines. Uncoiling his rosarius, the Chaplain began the moripatris, the mass of doom. The service was traditionally held on the eve of battle, to draw out those among the Flesh Tearers whose rage threatened to take them and fold them into the ranks of the Death Company. Appollus had never needed the moripatris to identify his flock. Even before his induction into the Chaplaincy, he had always been able to look into the eyes of his brothers and measure their spirit. 'Flesh is ephemeral, wrath eternal.'

Appollus used the moripatris in his own way, combining it with the teachings of the Iraes Lexican to churn his warriors into a fervent rage. They would fight possessed of an unshakable purpose, ignorant of even the most grievous wounds. They would set about the foe with the strength and vigour of a Cretacian jungle terror. They would slaughter unto death.

Searing spears of light flickered out across the void to stab at the Death's Cowl's prow as it powered towards the Stromarkian fleet. The vessel's shields rippled and flared, failing under the vicious onslaught.

'Status?' asked Zuphias.

'Shields collapsed, liege. Cycling again now,' said the tactical serf.

At range, the Stromarkians had the advantage. Their warships were studded with huge turrets, each housing quad-banks of energy projectors that spat concentrated beams of destruction. Such lance

weaponry enabled them to easily outdistance the Cowl's weapon batteries.

'Helmsman, more speed,' Zuphias snarled as the Cowl shook under another lance strike, and leaned forward in his throne. 'Get us closer.'

'Yes, liege. All ahead full,' said the helmsman.

Zuphias took a calming breath and sat back. 'Follow this attack line, take us through them.' Manipulating the hololith controls, he indicated a course that would bring the Cowl through the middle of the Stromarkian vessels. It was a bold, aggressive move, one that would expose the Cowl to a withering hail of broadsides. But it would allow Zuphias to close the distance quickly and prevent the Stromarkians from manoeuvring away.

A slew of warnings scrolled across his retinal display. Trajectory assessments, collision predictions and damage projections cautioned him against his course of action. He blinked them away with a snarl. He would trust to the discipline of his crew, to the Cowl's speed and the metres-thick layers of armaplas and ceramite plating that wrapped its hull, to bring them victory.

Zuphias growled as another barrage of lance strikes struck the Cowl, burning through the outer layer of ablative plating to scar the strike cruiser's flanks. He stared out through the real space window, his eyes fixed on the distant outlines of the two Stromarkian vessels. More than ten thousand souls cowered inside each of their hulls. He would kill them all.

'By the Blood,' Balthiel snarled as the drop pod bucked in its cradle. He felt helpless as the Stromarkian guns continued to hammer the Cowl without answer. Mag-harnessed inside the assault craft, the Librarian was indebted to the capriciousness of fate. He hoped Zuphias knew what he was doing. Even from the bowels of the ship, Balthiel could feel the Chaplain's anger, his desire to rend, to kill. It boiled through the ship like an inferno, smouldering at the edge of Balthiel's thoughts.

The Death Company could sense it too. Balthiel fought down the urge to draw his force sword as he thought of the five death-armoured killers who shared his drop pod. He had never been so close to a squad of the cursed. Under normal circumstances, only a Chaplain was

considered to have the strength of mind and purity of spirit to accompany the Death Company into battle. A tangible air of mortality followed them. It drove even the soundest of warriors mad and dragged them into the Rage's embrace.

Balthiel took a breath and relaxed his muscles. He was no Chaplain, but he had little choice. Without the aid of his gifts, the Death Company would never make it through the air defence batteries guarding the skies above the governess's palace. Deploying further out would allow the defenders valuable time to bolster their lines. Appollus had been clear: Stromark Prime had to die in a day.

Craning his neck, Balthiel regarded the Death Company to his left and right. Their crimson optics glowered in the low light and, together with the incessant snarls that rumbled in their throats, reminded Balthiel of the Night Terrors. Figures of Cretacian folklore, the Terrors were said to stalk the darkness. They awaited the unwary, boiling away the soul of a man with a single glance before fading into the shadows. Balthiel's unease grew as he thought again of the black-armoured daemon that haunted his dreams.

Balthiel felt the Death Company grow angrier in response to each jarring strike against the Cowl. He sensed their desire to be free of the drop pod, to be vambrace-deep in their enemies' entrails. They were the most terrifying warriors Balthiel could conceive. He had seen the sons of Angron humbled by their battle fervour, and borne witness to the terrible violence the enraged Flesh Tearers were capable of.

But he did not fear them. He feared no one.

Balthiel's disquiet was rooted in the weakness of his own flesh.

His burden was great. As a son of Sanguinius, he feared the Flaw, the blood lust and the madness, the promise of succumbing to the Rage and joining his brothers in the black armour of death. As a Librarian, he feared the moment of laxity that would see his soul devoured by the things that hungered in the warp.

Balthiel growled in frustration. He was twice cursed, destined to succumb to the monster within or the daemon without. He focused on the Death Company, on their anger. He listened to their hearts beating, pounding in their chests, racing to thrust blood around their murderous veins.

Balthiel felt his own pulse quicken in response. He craved the charnel drumming of his twin hearts, the visceral immediacy of combat that filled him with a clarity of purpose and armoured him against doubt.

He would kill until killed. Duty demanded it, but his soul willed it.

Zuphias ignored the red warning sigils that flared across his console. If the Cowl was functioning well enough to complain, then they were far from dead. 'Power the bombardment cannon, target the carrier.'

The Cowl's single, prow-mounted bombardment cannon was a mammoth weapon, accounting for almost thirty per cent of the strike cruiser's mass. The heaviest armament carried by any Space Marine ship, it was designed to pulverise cities from high orbit but worked just as well against enemy vessels.

'Yes, liege.' The gunnery serf made the necessary adjustments to the targeting cogitators, gradually feeding power to the bombardment cannon's firing cells. In the depths of the Cowl, a thousand indentured workers pulled on the metres of thick chain that lifted the magma shells from their housings and loaded them into the weapon's breech, an onerous task that took them less than a minute under the stern direction of the gang-master's neural whip. 'Weapon ready. Target acquired.'

A reverberating thrum shook the Cowl from prow to stern as its primary weapon cycled to full charge.

'Fire,' said Zuphias.

The Cowl shuddered as the bombardment cannon unleashed its wrath, sending a salvo of magma warheads burning towards the Emperor's Guardian.

The Dictator-class's shields flared like a new-born star, overloading as the first of the warheads struck home. The remainder rolled over the carrier in a tide of destruction, stripping the hull and destroying the superstructure. Secondary explosions erupted along the Guardian's length, blanketing its outline in flame.

'Target hit, liege. Shields down, engines disabled. Vessel crippled,' said the surveyor.

Zuphias kept his eyes fixed on the tactical hololith as the surveyor serf relayed the damage assessment. The Dictator-class was defenceless. Its engines were leaking plasma, a blue mist that bled

away into the void. What little of the carrier's crew survived the conflagration would soon die from exposure.

The Cowl's master snarled. 'Fire again.'

The Emperor's Guardian was a drifting hulk. It posed no further threat to the Cowl. The mission dictated they expend their efforts elsewhere.

The gunnery serf turned to Zuphias, his objection dying in his throat. The Chaplain's scarred flesh was pulled drum-tight over his face, as though his bones fought to break free of it. The bionic ocular that sat in place of his right eye shone crimson, while his skin was cast into blue relief by the hololith. The serf swallowed hard. 'Liege, yes, liege.'

The deck shook under Zuphias as the Pride of Halka raked the Cowl with its lances. Zuphias growled; they should not have been able to fire again so soon. He consulted the data streaming across the tactical hololith. The Stromarkian vessel had diverted energy from their engines, decreasing the recharge time of their weapons. They sought to punish the Cowl for the damage wrought on the Emperor's Guardian.

Zuphias grinned. Such careless indulgence of anger would cost them.

'Ready to fire, liege,' said the gunnery serf.

'Finish them.'

Without the protection of its shields, the Emperor's Guardian was defenceless against the wrath of the bombardment cannon. The magma shells slammed into its hull with fierce intent, pulverising its armoured skin. Secondary explosions erupted from within the vessel as fire consumed everything. It broke apart from port to starboard, shattered by the merciless barrage.

The two pieces of the ship tumbled away from one another, falling towards Stromark Prime like flaming heralds of the fate that awaited the world. A wing of hastily launched bombers raced away from the dying carrier, their ident-runes flashing on Zuphias's tactical display as they burned at full thrust.

Zuphias grinned. It was a noble effort, but their flight was in vain. He watched with grim satisfaction as one by one they blinked dark. Bubbling explosions and secondary detonations had continued to wrack the aft section of the Guardian until the ship's warp drive ruptured. The

bomber wing was annihilated by a halo of expanding plasma as the Guardian's death throes overtook it.

The Cowl shuddered as a hail of las-fire and solid projectiles hammered its starboard side, forcing Zuphias to brace himself against his throne. Below him, a handful of serfs jerked back from their stations, killed by an electrical discharge. The shock had blackened their skin and left flames licking their robes.

Five more willing servants stepped from the wings of the bridge to take over from their fallen comrades.

'Liege, we are in weapon battery range.'

Zuphias was pleased by the replacement gunnery serf's dedication to duty. He seemed unperturbed by the blood that smeared his console or the smell of charred flesh. 'So it would seem,' said Zuphias. Broadside for broadside, the Cowl was outgunned. The Halka's hull was pockmarked by gun ports and weapon housings, each ready to unleash a hail of tank-sized shells upon the Flesh Tearers vessel. 'Helmsman, new heading.'

The Halka's directional thrusters faltered, emitting a guttering flare as they tried to react to the Cowl's sudden course shift. With her engines running below optimal, the Stromarkian vessel was left to flail in the void like a beached sea mammal as the Cowl manoeuvred.

The strike cruiser turned, presenting only its armoured prow to the Halka's guns.

Zuphias felt his muscles bunch in anticipation as the Halka grew to fill the real space window. At such close range, he could make out every detail of the ship's gilded hull. Its armoured skin had been finely wrought into towering basilicas, pious bulwarks against the dangers of the void.

Zuphias scowled. He had no intention of trading blows with the Stromarkian vessel. He was going to ram it.

The shrill call of klaxons rang out as the Cowl bore down on the Halka.

'Brace! All hands brace!' The surveyor serf's voice crackled through every vox on the Cowl, warning of the imminent collision with the Halka.

The Halka's shields hissed and cracked, overloading as the Cowl pushed into their embrace. The Stromarkian vessel's guns fell silent, its crew dumbstruck by the insane manoeuvre and unable to adjust their aim in time. The Halka's metal hide buckled and crumpled as the Cowl's armoured prow slammed into it. Explosions rippled out from the point of impact, racing ahead of the Flesh Tearers vessel, heralds of the carnage to come.

'Bring them death.' Zuphias drove the Cowl deeper into the Halka, using the serrated armour of his vessel like a gargantuan chainblade to mutilate the Stromarkian ship. The Flesh Tearers ship continued forwards, ripping along the Halka's flank until it was wedged in place, tangled in the mess of destruction.

Breaches opened up across the Halka, its hapless gunnery crew sucked into the void like withered chaff. Fire washed through the ship, scrubbing entire decks and mushrooming out through lesions in the hull to illuminate the destruction.

'Now. Fire.' Zuphias slammed his fist against his console.

With the Cowl's weapons batteries pressed against the Halka's ruined hull, every shot found its mark. A torrent of missiles, las-bolts and plasma rounds savaged the Stromarkian vessel, stripping its armaplas bonding and broiling its innards.

The Halka's hull fractured, breaking off in chunks under the unremitting onslaught. Internal detonations wracked the vessel from prow to stern, signalling its end.

The weight of firepower ripped the Cowl free from the Halka.

'Helmsman, full reverse. Shields,' said Zuphias.

The Cowl's weapons fell silent, its shields flickering into life a microsecond before the Halka's engines imploded.

The Pride of Halka detonated in a blue flash. Adamantium blast shutters locked down over the Cowl's real space window, protecting the bridge crew from the piercing brightness. The shock wave crashed through the shields, and broke against the hull.

'Report?' Zuphias sat forward in his throne.

'Shield generators are disabled. Hull integrity failed on decks seven, eighteen and thirty,' said the surveyor.

‘My brothers?’ asked Zuphias.

‘Assault bay is secure.’

Zuphias nodded and looked out through the real space window as the shutters receded. Nothing but debris remained of the Stromarkian battleship. ‘Target the frigates. Kill everything.’

Jurik walked as fast as he dared, weaving his way between the military and clerical staff that rushed past him in the opposite direction. It angered him that they paid the halls they moved through so little respect. The Primus was a palace like no other. A jewel of architecture and sculpture, it was founded by their forefathers and had been the seat of leadership on Stromark Prime for ten thousand years. Though the governor’s palace on Stromark Secundus was considerably larger and better defended, it could not claim the same grandiosity as the Primus.

Jurik slowed as he reached the Hall of Remembrance, his soiled boots sullyng the marble floor. ‘Forgive me,’ he said, glancing up at the stone sculptures that lined the walls. He stopped at the end of the corridor, smoothed down his tunic, and ran a hand through his hair. Taking a breath, he pushed open the vaulted glass doors and stepped into the royal receiving chamber.

Soft, haunting music played on wooden stringed instruments wrapped the vaulted room in a blanket of calm. ‘Governess.’ Jurik bent to one knee as he addressed the ruler of Stromark Prime.

Governess Agrafena stood with her back to Jurik, her attention fixed on the red-crested birds that fluttered between the trees outside in the palace gardens. Clad in a black bodyglove overlain with a mesh of refractive armour, she was not as Jurik had come to expect. Her long locks had been tied back, hidden in a tight ponytail that draped her back like a scabbard. Instead of the golden sceptre of her office, she carried a slender sword and rested her hand on its golden hilt. ‘At another time I would have had you flogged for this interruption.’

Jurik stayed silent, a bead of sweat forming on his brow.

‘What do you have to report?’ Agrafena motioned for Jurik to continue.

‘The fleet, governess. Our fleet is gone.’

‘And our divisions? What news of them?’

Jurik faltered before answering. 'Gone, too. They are all gone, my lady.'

Agrafena turned, fixing Jurik with a granite stare. 'Gone? Explain yourself, footman.'

Jurik allowed himself a quick glimpse of his ruler's face. Her eyes were hard, as they always were, her skin ice-smooth like the northern lakes. A mist of ruby and crimson coloured her cheeks, and though it did little to warm her demeanour, Jurik almost smiled. It lifted his spirits to see that she had not lost herself completely to the chaos ruling around her. 'My lady, our armies have been scattered, destroyed. Every soldier beyond the shield... everyone outside the palace... is... they're all dead.'

Agrafena stared at him for a moment, her eyes unwavering as she received the news that her world had been reduced to a mortuary. 'The Brigade Halka?' Agrafena asked after her personal regiment. The thousand elite warriors who protected the Primus.

'Captain Aleksander and his men stand ready, governess...'

'Then we shall win the day. We shall show the Secundians our true mettle. The Brigade Halka has never been bested. These walls never breached. Never. I will not yield to them, Jurik. I will condemn all to ash before I make peace with those treacherous cowards.'

'You cannot mean...'

'I mean exactly that.'

Behind Jurik, the noble visage of Stavros Halka, her father, looked down upon her. The oil on canvas portrait of Stromark Prime's most celebrated leader hung over the chamber's far wall, next to the family crest. Stavros had been a great tactician, a peerless swordsman and beneficent ruler.

Agrafena lingered on the painting, finding her own face in her sire's. She would not disgrace his memory by failing, whatever the cost.

'Forgive me, governess... but it is Space Marines we face. The Emperor has sent His immortal champions to destroy us. We cannot... we cannot best them.'

'Lies!' Agrafena lashed out with her arm, striking a crystal sculpture of Stromark Prime from its place on the mantel. The irony was not lost on Jurik as the fragile globe shattered across the floor. 'Everything can

be killed.’ Agrafena spread her arms, gesturing to the dozen members of her honour guard that stood watch around the chamber. They were gene-bulked warriors, armoured in thick carapace and carrying heavy plasma rifles. She lowered her voice. ‘You need only find the right weapon.’

‘Balthiel.’ Appollus’s voice burst across the vox-link, shaking the Librarian from his reverie. ‘I am not against dying today, brother,’ the Chaplain’s voice thundered. ‘But it shall not be because you failed to do your duty.’

‘Patience,’ said Balthiel. ‘I will not be able to hold the shield for long. We must wait as long as possible.’

‘You sound like Zargo. The coward waits in orbit around Secundus while hundreds bleed to save him sully his hands. He is a disgrace to our warrior bloodline.’

‘You cannot force his hand, brother,’ said Balthiel.

‘Have you ever known anything that I cannot force?’ Appollus let the words hang for a few seconds so their meaning would properly sink in. ‘Just don’t wait too long, Librarian.’

Balthiel bit down a reply. He understood Appollus’s agitation. It went against everything the Chaplain stood for to trust his life to a psyker.

Warning runes twinkled like bloodied stars from the drop pod’s ceiling as another barrage of anti-aircraft fire barked at its hull.

Balthiel opened a comm-channel. ‘Brother Jophiel.’ He looked up as he spoke. Back on board the Cowl Jophiel was watching, monitoring Balthiel through the pict-recorder mounted on the wall of the drop pod. ‘You are my keeper.’ Balthiel stared down at the remote melta charge locked to his thigh. ‘Do not hesitate.’

The light on the pict-recorder blinked twice in acknowledgment. Balthiel closed his eyes. ‘Emperor, defend my soul this day of battle. Let my weaknesses be overcome by Your strength that I may serve the Chapter.’ The temperature inside the drop pod plummeted as Balthiel reached out with his powers. A layer of unnatural frost formed on the walls, crusting the Death Company’s armour as Balthiel eased his consciousness from his body.

The shield of Sanguinius, as it was known amongst Balthiel's order, was a psychic barrier, a physical manifestation of a Librarian's will. He knew of no one who had ever attempted to manifest the shield on the scale he prepared to. Drawing on such power was dangerous. His soul would blaze in the warp, a refulgent feast for the denizens of that daemon realm. Should he succumb to their seditious whispering, should the foul powers take command of his flesh, Jophiel would end him.

Free from his flesh, Balthiel's mind ghosted through the cold ceramite of his armour, pushing out beyond the drop pod to hang in the Stromarkian air. Above him, a dozen dark stars were burning downwards. He let his mind wander over them, the way Cretacian children ran their hands through acaulis bushes. Appollus and the rest of the Death Company's minds shone like hot embers, their thoughts fixed on the slaughter to come. Balthiel pulled back, turning his attentions to the ground below.

The palace void shield shivered violet-blue as another piece of the Emperor's Guardian finished its fall from orbit and dissolved against it.

The Stromarkian defence guns flared from under the shield's protective mantle, spewing a torrent of explosive rounds towards the Flesh Tearers assault force.

Balthiel turned his back on the weapons to look up at the drop pods. He held out his hands. Thread-lines of golden energy grew from his fingertips, weaving into a shimmering blanket that expanded to fill the air beneath the Flesh Tearers vessels.

The Librarian focused on the barrier, strengthening it with his mind. It was as unbreakable as his spirit, an indomitable shield without flaw or weakness. It could not be breached by man or daemon. Unless he was weak. Unless he was flawed.

'We are fury,' Appollus's voice snarled over the vox.

Blood ran from Balthiel's nose and ears as the Stromarkian guns hammered his psychic barrier.

'We are wrath.' The Chaplain's voice barely registered as Balthiel fought to maintain the shield.

'Sanguinius, my father. Sanguinius, my armour. Aid me now.' Balthiel's body trembled as he forced the words through bloodied lips.

The drop pod shuddered as it tore through the palace's defences, bucking violently as it struck the earth.

'We are death!' Appollus finished the axiom as the Death Company burst from the drop pods to taste Stromarkian blood.

The polished marble of the palace floor was slick with blood. The torn remains of governess Agrafena's bodyguard lay strewn around the antechamber. The elite of the Stromarkian army were now little more than fleshy gobbets, churned up by chainweapons and blasted apart by bolt-rounds. Balthiel stood in the middle of the chamber, a halo of psychic energy glistening around his body as the quickening faded.

'It is done,' he said, exhaustedly.

Outside Balthiel could hear the roar of chainweapons and the harsh crack of bolt pistols as the Death Company continued to vent their rage upon the corpses of the Stromarkians.

'Bring them to heel.'

Appollus slammed a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. 'Not yet. Stromark Secundus has yet to be cleansed.'

'That is not our fight.'

'There will be no fight.' Appollus gestured towards a heap of bodies at the far side of the room. One of them was moving.

Agrafena's vision swam. She felt cold, weak. Shaking with effort, she pushed Jurik's corpse from on top of her. The footman had taken a round meant for her. Touching a hand to her abdomen, Agrafena felt the sticky wetness of blood. Jurik's sacrifice had been for naught. The explosive bolt had torn through his chest, showering Agrafena in lethal fragments. She was dying.

The governess didn't spare the footman a second thought, her mind fixed on what she must do. She dragged herself up against the wall, wiping away blood from her lips. A wracking cough doubled her over. She gritted her teeth against the pain, bracing herself against the wall, and straightened. She would die on her feet and she would not die alone.

Balthiel snapped his bolt pistol up to fire.

'Wait.' Appollus grabbed Balthiel's wrist, staying the Librarian's hand. The governess had fought to the last. Even now, in the face of

certain oblivion, she refused to accept what her body told her to be true. She would kill with her last action.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Balthiel.

Behind his skull mask, Appollus grinned darkly. The governess was one of his flock whether she knew it or not. ‘Wait... and watch.’

Agrafena bit down and depressed the data chip secreted under her tongue, opening a vox-link. ‘Omega One. Epsilon Nine...’ she struggled through the command, each word costing her more blood. ‘This is Governess Agrafena. By my father.’ Pain crushed the beauty from Agrafena’s features. ‘For our children. Launch.’

‘Brother...’ Balthiel looked to Appollus as the governess slid to the floor.

‘Zargo has yet to set foot upon Secundus,’ said Appollus. ‘They have deployed more Guard regiments and requested a further force to hold orbit so that they may depart the system. This will force Zargo to act, and expedite the resolution on Secundus.’

‘Brothers.’ Zuphias’s voice crackled over the vox, his communication distorted by the charged particles lingering in the world’s atmosphere, an after-effect of the orbital bombardment the Cowl had rained down upon it. ‘Surveyors detect a massive energy build-up on the near side moon.’

‘You knew?’ Balthiel looked to Appollus.

The Chaplain nodded.

‘I knew you were a bastard, Appollus...’

‘From the Blood are monsters born, brother.’

On Stromark Prime’s second moon, within one of the many mining complexes operated by the Halka consortium, thousands of long-dormant Apocalypse missiles rumbled to life. The missiles crested the surface, arcing round the moon’s orbit to burn towards the manufacturing and population centres of Stromark Secundus.

Above Agrafena, the marble visages of her ancestors stared down approvingly. A final bout of coughing sent her into spasms. Blood filled her mouth and trickled from her ears. She let her head loll to the side, and found her father’s portrait. The artist had done well to capture his rugged nobility. Agrafena gazed into her father’s eyes and smiled.

Her legacy would outlast his – her final thought, as the last Halka blood bled from her veins.

The gentle hum of the luminator was lost under the heavy chatter of keys being depressed in rapid succession. A hundred thousand servitors stood in regimented rows, tirelessly inputting the endless information that defined the Imperium of Man. The lobotomised serfs worked in total darkness, their augmented eyes having no need of the light.

Senior Clerk Mathias Wido was just as able to see unaided but he enjoyed the luminator's warm glow. It made him feel more... human.

Mathias scribbled on the record slate with his data quill, double checking his calculations. Yes, everything was as he'd concluded. He placed the slate down on his desk and sat back in his chair.

The aged Jovian oak creaked as it adjusted to one of Mathias's rare movements. His skin ached as his lips pulled to a line across his face in the closest approximation of a smile that he could muster. He'd checked the data thoroughly. The numbers had stayed the same: Three hundred billion, dead. Eight million structures reduced to rubble. A further fifteen million ruined. Seven continents declared uninhabitable. Four oceans boiled to dust. Some would describe this as a catastrophe. To the war machine of the Imperium it was merely an inconvenience. The population of Stromark would be recovered to acceptable production levels within only seven generations. Full output could be regained in as little as ten.

Mathias picked up the slate and closed the file, tagging the Stromark incident as an occasion of minor loss.

He paused, before pulling another data-slate from the pile towering beside his desk and beginning the process again.