

WARHAMMER  
40,000

# THE BLESSING OF IRON

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AN IRON HANDS SHORT STORY

# THE BLESSING OF IRON

by Anthony Reynolds

HE KNOWS WHO started this unrest. He knows who released them from their cells. He sees it written in the data-code that flows through him like a raging current. They hid their tracks well, but this is his world; he knows the slippery back-trails through Penatora's archaic data-core like no other, for he is the beneficiari overseer of the Cog.

They are searching for something. Something termed "the Fallen Asset".

It means nothing to him.

He skims across their path, probing and searching, trying to understand. They are destroying his world to possess this thing. But why?

It is not something, he comes to realise. It is a someone.

Pride is his downfall. He underestimates them. They see him through the data. He tries to pull back, to flee from their sight, but he is too slow. They see him seeing them.

And now they are coming for him.

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HUMANS. THE UN-AUGMENTED. The un-machined. Frail, fallible and illogical organic things ruled by irrationalities and emotion. I feel no kinship towards them.

I do not understand them, nor do I have any desire or need to understand them. I am not comfortable in their presence, and they are certainly not comfortable in

mine.

In truth, I despise them for their lies, their duplicity and their weakness, yet it is my role to protect them. To die for them, if necessary. Such is my purpose.

I am Brother Dolmech of the Iron Hands Chapter. Kaargul Clan, 4th Tactical. I am a genetic son of the Gorgon, the Primarch of Iron, Ferrus Manus. I was made for war, gene-bred and machined to kill the enemies of mankind; to kill in the name of the Emperor and the blessed Omnissiah. Praise be.

I was born human, a wet, screaming thing of flesh and blood. It is a disturbing notion, and it bothers me when I think of it, which is thankfully rarely. I was taken by the Chapter as a child and made what I am. I became far more than human - something else entirely. I began my progression towards becoming one with the blessed machine. I remember little of my time as one of the un-augmented, for which I am grateful. Of my life before the Chapter, I know nothing, nor do I care to. The mewling flesh-thing that I was is dead. In time, nothing of it will remain.

I stand among the grey uniformed Cog militia, a black armoured giant among children. Garbed in my mech-modified Errant-pattern war armour, I am over three heads taller than the largest of them. Most of them are displaying the physical signs of fear. Fear is not a notion that I or my brothers are capable of comprehending, yet we have come to learn how to recognise it in lesser beings. The stink of their sweat fills the manufactorum. It is repulsive. It smells of weakness. I switch to my internal recycled air supply.

There are thirty-two of the militia men and women. They are armed with lasguns, and wear lightweight carapace plas-armour. It offers their fragile flesh-bodies scant protection.

Two skitarii legionaries are stationed here. I hear the click-buzz of their binaric code-speech. I feel more kinship with them than the un-augmented militia. They are kill-brood warriors, armed with belt-fed rotor cannons. They can be relied upon. Even so, they will not be enough. This manufactory plant, designated Cog-349, is already dead.

The enemy have almost breached the reinforced blast doors. They are working at the joins with slam-drills and lascutters. It will not be long. This pleases me. I am impatient for battle to be joined. My squad-brothers, fighting elsewhere upon

this moon installation, have already bloodied their blades. Now it is my turn.

There is a grinding squeal and a sudden spill of molten metal flows onto the deck as melta-charges are ignited. The doors are breached. The enemy is upon us, a veritable flood of humanity. All bear the forehead barcode welt of committed penal inmates. Level 4B+. Murderers, rapists and agitators.

The cog-toothed power axe in my left hand surges into life with a mere synapse impulse. Humming energy plays across its teeth. I heft my bolter in my right hand. Bionic recoil compensators in my mechanical arm tense as I choose my target.

‘Engaging,’ I say, voicing my action across my squad’s closed vox network.

‘Kill well, brother,’ returns the voice of my squad sergeant, Haldaarn, speaking into my ear. The distance and high level of interference makes his mechanised voice crackle and distort.

I open fire.

BENEFICIARI ARMICUS’S GAZE pans across the flood of data. It falls like waterfalls down the glossy screens beneath his fingers. More information transfers directly into his cortex via the subtly vibrating cables plugged into the socket in his left temple. All of them say the same thing: that Penatora IV is dying.

The rabble has breached the doors. Gunfire erupts. It is shocking in its volume. He adjusts his aural dampeners, and continues with his work.

He has been the beneficiari of Penatora Cog-349 for seventeen years. For seven years before that he had been a beneficiari aide, first class, elevated from the ranks of duty technicians stationed here at Cog-349.

Optics were always his speciality. There is no man alive who is better with eyes than Armicus.

Cog-349 is his life. He knows nothing else. And yet he knows that within minutes it will fall to the murderous rabble.

He knows that he is not a well-loved man. He has no social attachments. He has no one that he would call "friend". He is efficient, however, and not once in his seventeen years as beneficiari had he ever allowed Cog-349's production quotas to fall below the output required by the Penatora master schedule.

His work crews laugh at him when they think he doesn't notice. Even the junior technicians join in. They view him as something of an eccentric, an object of ridicule and jest. A fool. A joke.

They laugh at his daily rituals and inflexible routine. They smirk at his steam-ironed pleats (seven seconds beneath the scald-plate, each one, at precisely 05.00 hours, daily) and at his meticulously parted and oiled hair (combed eight times to the right, five to the left at 05.14 hours). But he does not mind, nor does he begrudge them for it. He does not expect them to understand.

Order is his life. It is his comfort. Yet now his ordered existence is crashing down around him. Penatora IV is being ripped apart. As the news filtered through to him and his worker crews, he had retained an external veneer of calm. That was good. That was what his workers needed.

The unrest started as nothing more than a ration queue brawl in the lower hab-slums. Such a thing was by no means out of the ordinary. Ration-wars between Cog house menials were a monthly - if not weekly - occurrence, but order was generally restored within hours. The appearance of Cog militia usually brought a swift conclusion to hostilities - the threat of incarceration, mind-scrubbing and lobotomisation has a way of making even half-starved hab-workers fall quickly back into line. The beneficiaris of Penatora IV were unforgiving masters. Any unrest risked a loss of production, and that was unacceptable.

Skitarii intervention was rarely needed. On this occasion, however, it was sanctioned, yet even a demi-cohort of kill-brood warriors was unable to suppress the unrest. The speed with which the hab-slum riot escalated was unprecedented.

But what had sent alarm calls sounding out to the listening posts scattered throughout the sub-sector was the full-scale facility-wide failure - or rather, the override - of the moon's penitentiary cages.

More than one million, seven hundred and forty-two thousand inmates simultaneously released from incarceration, free to act as they pleased. Such an occurrence was meant to be impossible, but that impossibility did nothing to stop

the killing that came next. The violence spread like wildfire through a bone-dry forest. Within hours, the entire moon installation was consumed by a frenzy of rebellion and butchery.

Linked to the Penatora wet-frame by a cluster of vibrating cranial cables, Armicus had been updated of the progression of the uprising as it happened.

Some of his workers had wanted to run. These, he let go - he did not try to stop them. Most had chosen to stay, as he had requested. Even now they were working at their stations, continuing to carry out their duties as Penatora IV burned.

Cog-349's production quotas continued to be met. Production in the majority of the nine hundred and seventy-six other Cogs that made up the entire moon-based facility had halted, but Cog-349 continued its output. It didn't matter to Beneficari Armicus that the bionic eyes his Cog was building would likely go to waste now. His superiors had not given him leave to halt production, and so he would not.

There was a certain sublime beauty to it, Armicus had thought. Cog-349 was a pocket of order in the midst of chaos. It made him proud.

Now it is almost over.

Even with his aural dampeners at full, he hears the roar of the rabble and the staccato bark of gunfire. There are so many of them. Nevertheless, Armicus feels a fierce sense of pride in his workers. They do not falter. They continue at their allotted tasks even as they are overrun.

Positioned at his workstation, raised above the others, Beneficari Armicus feels as though he is on an island, and that the seething mass of humanity below is a rising tide. Las-beams spike past him, but he does not flinch. A solid round strikes a data-screen to his side, cracking its glass surface - he simply transfers the data-stream to a secondary slate, and continues to work.

They are climbing to his station now, faces twisted in animalistic fury. Beneficari Armicus feels at peace, despite the chaos raging around him.

In the end, order is all that he has. He clings to it. It gives him comfort.

He will enact his duty until the end, and then he will be at peace.

MY FIRST SHOT takes a shaven-headed human square in the forehead. The penal welt branded into the weak flesh there acts as a perfect target. The rocket-propelled bolt penetrates, punching a hole straight through. It detonates just as it is driving out the back of the skull. The explosion takes his head in a shower of blood, shrapnel and bone shards.

The mob is packed so tight that the blast takes down five more of them. Bolt rounds are designed for use against armoured targets. Against unarmoured foes such as these it is utterly devastating. I acknowledge that it is overkill, yet the scale of the destruction serves a purpose. I can see the shock and terror on the faces of those behind them. Dripping meat, all that remains of their comrades, clings to their faces. My second shot takes out another three. The third shot, five more.

The sound my boltgun makes as it fires is deep and satisfying, a solid and repetitive bass note that all but drowns out the hissing swish of the militia's lasguns, and even the whine of the skitarii kill-brood's rotor cannons.

The escaped prisoners have some guns, taken from guards or slaughtered militiamen, and they return fire as they come, but the vast majority of them are armed with nothing more than makeshift clubs and blades. They come on in a screaming, rabid rush, trampling over those that fall, crushing them into the floor. One of the humans at my side takes an incandescent green las-blast to the head, and he falls without a sound, his flesh cooked. Another strikes me, scorching my armour.

Scores of insurgents are cut down by the weight of militia fire. The skitarii rotor cannons scream like Thunderhawk engines, tearing furrows through flesh. The concussive shock of my detonating bolt rounds sends men cartwheeling into the air. Thirty, forty, fifty are killed, and then they are upon us, having closed the distance.

I charge in to meet them, closing the distance in three steps. They back away from me, as well they should, but the weight of those pressing from behind means that they cannot escape. I storm into their midst, bringing my relic axe around in a wide arc. Its cog blade cuts through them eagerly, severing the limbs

of three men in one sweep; cleaving straight through muscle, meat and bone. Hot blood gushes like a trio of erupting geysers.

I kick one of them in the chest. His ribcage collapses, his organs pulped, and slams backwards into the others.

Bones break. I swat back another of them with the stock of my bolter. His neck snaps and he hurtles into the mob, a living projectile that takes down three others. One more bolt round fired at close range - four dead, three seriously injured - and I put away my bolter, mag-locking it to my thigh.

I put my fist through the face of an enemy that has stumbled too close. The force of the blow punches out the back of his head. They are so frail, the un-augmented. Their bones break so easily. I bury my axe in the head of another, hacking down from crown to sternum. I tug the blade free, blood cooking on its keen edge.

One of them has the temerity to attempt to strike me. He has a power baton, of the kind used by a prison warden. My axe cuts the weapon, then the wielder, in half.

Most of the militia are down; only one of the skitarii remains active. I can hear his binaric war-cant as he attempts to link with his fallen kill-brood. The barrels of his rotor cannon are glowing hot. It vents steam, pausing its fire, and in that moment the skitarii is engulfed beneath a surge of stinking humanity. It is a demeaning end for one that has joined with the machine.

I continue to kill, clearing a circle wherever I move, but I am but one battle-brother. They cannot harm me, but I cannot stop them all.

‘Tactical update: Cog-349 is lost,’ I say, even as I carve through. I am not breathing hard. My primary heart beats at a sedentary pace. My secondary heart is still - it is not needed in an exercise such as this.

I drop to one knee and cut the legs out from beneath two combatants, severing the limbs at the thigh. They fall screaming their pathetic screams, their stinking organic life-force spraying forth wildly. I kill another as I rise. My axe carves him open from groin to throat. Viscera spills out upon the floor. He clutches at his innards as he dies.

‘Understood,’ comes Sergeant Haldaarn’s distorted response. I can hear the crackle of weapons fire behind his voice. ‘Fall back to my location, Brother Dolmech. You have done what was needed. Affirm.’

‘Affirm,’ I respond.

My purpose here was never to save Cog-349. It was always going to fall.

I raise my helmet’s vox-amplification levels. ‘Beneficari Armicus.’ My voice is a mechanical growl, designed to inspire fear.

The rabid mob clambers like primitive proto-humans on his position. I target them. A bolt takes one of them in the lower back. All that remains of him a moment later is a falling rain of blood and churned flesh, and a pair of hands that cling momentarily to the rungs before they drop. The others die in turn.

‘Beneficari Armicus,’ I repeat. ‘You are coming with me.’

‘TAKE THIS,’ SAYS the black armoured Adeptus Astartes giant, tossing him a lasgun wrested from dead hands. Armicus catches it awkwardly. Bodies are strewn across the deck around them, victims of the Space Marine’s wrath. ‘You know how to use it?’

‘Yes,’ replies Armicus. With shaking hands he checks the power-clip - half charge. Safety off. Shoulder rest unfolded.

‘Use it,’ orders the giant.

He lifts the weapon to his shoulder and squeezes the trigger. The shot goes high, striking a bulkhead, making paint blacken and peel. There is only marginal recoil. Compensating, he fires again. His second shot also misses its intended target, but his third strikes home. It takes a slabmuscle inmate in the chest, cooking flesh and making his orange penal overalls burst into flames.

‘Good,’ says the giant. He kills a handful of enemies with each shot. ‘Let’s go.’

The Iron Hand moves through them like a scythe, killing with every strike. He is always in motion as he drives them back; a furious god among men, unstoppable

and terrible in his potency. Blades break against him, and ranged fire ricochets off his armoured form, barely leaving a mark. He responds with lethal force.

There is no flourish to his fighting technique, no extravagance or refined finesse. Every movement is designed to kill, it seemed to Armicus, with the least amount of energy expenditure. It appeared to be the perfect application of effort versus reward.

To Armicus, the destruction this one Space Marine leaves in his wake is far more terrifying than the braying mob.

But there are so many of them. There are so many that Armicus cannot miss with his lasgun. He shoots into the crowd again and again. He shoots until the power cell of his weapon runs dry. The enemy press in.

Something hits Armicus in the side of the head. He cries out and falls to his knees. He touches his scalp and his fingers come away bloody. Blood runs down his neck. The tide closes in.

The Iron Hand is suddenly standing over him. He smashes the enemy back, clearing a circle in the midst of the sea of humanity. His humming cog-toothed axe bites out, hacking apart flesh, and his bolt pistol barks. A mist of blood appears where a body was moments before. It settles on the black clad giant and upon Armicus. He can taste it on his lips.

‘We must find another way,’ the giant says. ‘This is unsustainable.’

COG-349 BURNS. THE rioters have accessed promethium stores and burner fluids, and have put them to work. Flames, smoke. Black and coiling, and quickly out of control.

Brother Dolmech leads the way, striding purposefully now that he has smashed a path through the enemy. Beneficiari Armicus has to run to keep up. The Space Marine’s bolter swings left - target kill - then right - target kill.

They are behind the frontal wave of rioters now. Those that remain in their path scatter upon sighting the hulking armoured giant. They recognise death when they see it.

With no targets in sight, Armicus finds his eyes drawn back to the Iron Hand. The immense figure terrifies him. He is simply too big - Armicus finds it impossible to rationalise.

He appears more like a machine than something that was ever human, armoured from head to toe in thick black war plate. A symbol of a white gauntlet is laser-etched onto his left pauldron. He has the mechanical gait of one whose legs are not his own, Armicus can see that clearly - his whole life has been dedicated to the creation of servitors, after all. The giant's left arm, from what he can tell, is augmetic from the bicep down. His helm is an intimidating blank, though the right hemisphere is an armoured metal cranium, replete with sensors, communication arrays and intricate targeting systems. He wonders what the giant's face must look like, beneath.

THEY LOCATE A small service elevator a little over a kilometre beyond Cog-349's armoured borders. The route to it is narrow and circuitous. The narrow passageway scratches at Brother Dolmech's shoulder plates. The smell of the fire clings to them.

There has been no communication between the pair but stilted practicalities. Turn left. Stop. Wait. Run.

Beneficiari Armicus still bleeds from the left temple. He dabs ineffectually at the stain it has left on his lapel. In spite of the crush, he suffered only scrapes and bruises. Nothing serious.

The Iron Hands giant has borne the brunt of the enemy's attentions. His armour is scorched and pitted from small arms fire though it has not slowed him. A spear of lasgun fire struck him on the left wrist, scorching the bionics there, and now it sparks intermittently.

To access the elevator, they must leave the darkened confines of the service-alleys. They pause in the shadows. A pack of branded prisoners scurry past the entrance. Their fists are bloodied, and they are clutching weapons.

'Stay behind me,' orders the Iron Hand. Without waiting for a response, he moves out behind the group.

I STEP OUT into the open. My bolter bucks. Three shots. Meat splatters up the industrial walls.

Sounds echo in the confined space. There are four corridors leading to this junction. There are footfalls approaching from three directions. I differentiate the various sounds reverberating through the corridors. Eleven men within fifty metres, closing in fast. One of them is wounded or crippled, dragging his left leg slightly. Two of them are labouring under a heavy load. I hear the sound of metal on metal - an ammunition belt. A heavy-bore weapon.

‘Hail the elevator,’ I command.

The beneficiari limps forward and keys a seven-digit code into the keypad alongside the conveyor’s sealed door. I cannot see the keypad, but I know the numbers he presses from the muscle-movement of his arm and shoulder. Seven-two-four-six-five-two-one.

I hear the carriage begin to rise. I discern that it is nine floors down. Too slow.

The first group round a bend, ten metres away. I drop the first. His chest explodes, soaking the others. The shock of the blood makes them freeze for a fraction of a second.

Foolish. I close the distance and cut them down, conserving ammunition.

I hear the next ones coming, and aim up one of the subsidiary corridors. It is poorly lit, that one - the lumen strips set into the ceiling are flickering and weak. I fire a fraction of a second before I see my target. The bolt round takes the first man in the throat. The velocity of the shot slams him back into the wall and the bolt detonates a microsecond later, decapitating him.

The carriage is still two levels down. Figures appear from three directions at once, firing as they come. I kill four of them instantly. It is not enough. Las-fire and solid autogun rounds slice towards me. I am struck once in the left knee, and twice in the chest. My return fire kills another two.

One of them has braced his feet wide, and a heavy stubber is brought around to bear. My bolter is already swinging around to drop him, but I am too slow. Curse

my weak flesh.

He fires.

Metre-long muzzle flashes spit from the barrel and a flurry of high-calibre rounds are unleashed.

THE MIGHTY WARRIOR is in front of Beneficiari Armicus, shielding him with his bulk. Armicus cowers, his face pale and fearful as rounds stitch across the wall, tearing jagged holes through the sheet plating. Dozens of rounds strike the Space Marine, yet he does not fall. He endures. He returns fire.

The elevator arrives. Its three overlapping doors slide back like the eyelids of some rusting, mechanical reptile. The interior is dimly lit by a cluster of blinking red lumen orbs.

Armicus is frozen, rooted in place. The Iron Hand shoves him - too hard - and he is hurled inside, slamming against the far wall. He cries out as his shoulder dislocates. The Space Marine backs in after him, firing. The elevator strains noticeably beneath his weight. The enemy are massing. Solid rounds ping around them.

The doors do not close.

‘Over capacity,’ intones the servitor hardwired into the carriage control panel. It is nothing more than a head and upper torso, and is almost completely concealed by ribbed cables and piping. A faded barcode welt can be seen emblazoned upon its forehead - once, it had been an inmate here on Penatora IV. ‘Six personnel maximum.’

From a crumpled heap on the carriage floor, Armicus laughs. The Iron Hand glances down at him momentarily. His helmet is ruptured, and his left eye lens is cracked and dark. Then he looks back into the corridor and fires his bolter out through the lift doors. Screams and the sickening sound of exploding meat follow.

A mechadendrite snakes out from the Space Marine’s left wrist, waving in the air like a leech seeking blood. It wafts to and fro for a second, then stabs forward,

sinking into the servitor's throat plug. The pallid, hairless creature shudders and jerks spasmodically, its singular organic, milky eye rolling back in its head.

'Code override,' the servitor drools. The tri-doors slam shut and the engines groan and wheeze. They begin to ascend.

The mechadendrite retracts with a whirr and a snap, releasing the servitor.

The Space Marine mag-locks his weapons, and toggles the release catches on his damaged helmet. There is a hiss of equalising pressure as he removes it. His face is not unlike that of the twitching servitor hardwired into the wall. They both share the same milky-white, translucent flesh, and both have a considerable amount of wiring, cabling and mechanics protruding from their temples. However, where the servitor has a vacant look upon its slack-muscle face, the Iron Hand wears an expression of keen intelligence and determination.

'Laughter is a physical expulsion of air from the lungs. It is used by humans to express mirth, surprise, pleasure, or, to a lesser extent, unease, nervousness or derision. Which of those communication modes are you denoting with your laughter?'

The Iron Hand's left eye has been replaced by a high-grade augmetic. Its lens shines with cold blue light, and it whirrs as its focus adjusts onto the crumpled beneficiari.

Armicus stares up at him. The beneficiari's skin is waxy, and covered in soot and sweat.

He recognises the Iron Hand's augmetic eye. Bionics have been his life for the past forty-seven years. He knows his own handiwork when he sees it.

'Why do you laugh, Beneficiari Armicus?' repeats the Iron Hand.

'Your eye,' whispers Armicus. 'It is one of mine. It was constructed by Cog-349.'

'That is correct.'

The beneficiari draws his knees up to his chest and takes a shuddering breath. He begins to rock. The lift is vibrating as it roars up through the core of the moon.

‘You are shaking. Your heart rate is one hundred and fifty-six beats per minute, and rising. You are hyperventilating and your adrenal levels are spiking. Diagnosis: You are going into a state of shock, Beneficari Armicus.’

The beneficari’s haunted eyes flicker towards the Iron Hand.

‘Why❖ why am I alive?’

‘Your vital functions have not failed. Hence, you live.’

‘You are going to kill me?’

‘Negative. I am Brother Dolmech of the Iron Hands Chapter. Kaargul Clan, 4th Tactical,’ says the Iron Hand. ‘I will not kill you. Faced with the prospect of death, you continued with your allotted function. Your actions were commendable. I would see you rewarded by the Chapter for your duty. The Blessing of Iron awaits you.’

‘I thought❖ I thought you were going to kill me. For what I know.’

‘What do you know?’

Beneficari Armicus stops rocking and turns to face Dolmech.

‘I know who ran the override code that released the prisoners of Penatora IV. I know who started all this❖’

‘Who?’

‘It was you. It was the Adeptus Astartes.’

THE CONVEYOR GRINDS to a halt. Hot air vents as the tri-doors retract.

I step out first, bolter raised. Target search negative.

‘Come,’ I say.

The human was speaking nonsense. A symptom of frailty and weakness, I deduce. A resolution of physical shock and trauma.

The only Adeptus Astartes on this world are myself and my four battle-brothers. None of us gave the override code to unlock the prisoners. It was an illogical theoretical. Penatora IV is important to the Adeptus Mechanicus; hence it is important to the Iron Hands Chapter. There would be no benefit to causing this mass destruction.

I wonder briefly if I made an error/failure in choosing him for the Blessing of Iron. I override the notion in 0.054 of a second. Shock trauma. It does not detract from my initial assessment.

We are located higher within the moon's sub-strata here, less than a hundred metres from the arid surface. Alcoves and arches loom overhead. It is dark, but darkness means nothing to me.

My sensors detect something for a moment, up above. I am instantly in a state of readiness. I scan the shadows. I run a pulse-sweep with the auspex built into my left vambrace augmetic. Negative. Blink. Negative. I lower my bolter.

I calibrate for Sergeant Haldaam's location. Seven point three-five kilometres distant. The human will slow me, but he has earned the honour that will be bestowed upon him. We have the time.

They come out of the darkness from above. They were hidden to my eye and to my scan. Their presence was shrouded. They descend, propelled downward on arcs of flame.

I raise my bolter.

Target lock. Target lock.

There are two of them, at first.

My systems blink a warning within my better eye - the augmetic constructed by Cog-349. They have target lock on me as well.

Target lock. There is a third. It detaches itself from the darkness, hurtling down with the speed of a missile.

I want to fire. I want to destroy these threats.

I do not fire. Neither do they.

They land, two behind, one in front. They hit hard, their ceramite boots slamming into the grid-worked decking. Their jump packs scorch the metal black.

They are Adeptus Astartes. They are Space Marines.

Their armour is dark, but it is not the black of my Chapter - except for the one in the front. The armour of the others is the deep, dark green of an abyssal sea. Robes drape over their heavy ceramite plate.

The one in front, the only one among their number who is clad in black, wears a helmet of gleaming bone. We Iron Hands do not have Chaplains in our ranks, but I recognise one all the same.

‘Dark Angel,’ I say.

‘I WOULD BE more comfortable if you lowered your weapon, Iron Hand,’ says the skull-faced newcomer. ‘You may surrender the human to our custody.’

Dolmech does not comply. His bolter remains levelled squarely at the warrior’s head.

The other Space Marine is unarmed. He has not reached for the ornate crozius at his hip. The two Dark Angels flanking Dolmech and Beneficari Armicus have their weapons trained, however. Plasma pistols. Their heat coils burn with the power of contained suns.

‘Your comfort is of no concern to me, Chaplain,’ Dolmech says, ‘and I am not handing this human over to you.’

‘I understand that our presence here is unexpected,’ says the Chaplain, ‘but I remind you that we are not the enemy.’

‘You are shrouding my vox-signal. You are stopping me from communicating with my battle-brothers.’

The Chaplain nods. ‘Aye. You wouldn’t be able to stop us if we were to seize him, you understand. No one would ever know. It is out of respect that I ask, and do not simply demand.’

‘I reiterate: remove your vox-shroud, and submit yourself for appraisal.’

‘That is not going to happen. Do not be a fool, Iron Hand. We are comrades. Brothers. This human is of importance to us. What is he to you?’

‘Beneficiari Armicus is under my aegis. I will judge any assault on him is an assault on the Iron Hands Chapter.’

‘I do not want to assault him, brother,’ says the Chaplain. ‘I merely want to speak to him.’

Armicus knows this to be a lie. The Dark Angels’ mere presence radiates the threat of violence towards him.

‘No,’ says Dolmech. ‘He is to receive the Blessing of Iron. He is of the Iron Hands now, and will be protected as such.’

The Chaplain turns his burning red lenses on the quivering human. ‘The Blessing of Iron, you say?’ He stares down at him for a long moment. There are a number of audible clicks from the helmets of the three Dark Angels. Internal closed-vox.

Abruptly, the two veterans put up their weapons. Target lock is removed.

Beneficiari Armicus lets out a long, slow breath.

‘Very well,’ says the Chaplain. ‘I see that I have erred, brother. I intended no disrespect to you or your august Chapter. We have what we came for, and I am sure that we can rely upon the discretion of this most worthy human.’

The three Dark Angels watch Dolmech and Armicus as they leave, standing as motionless as statues. After a few moments they are swallowed by the darkness.

‘I do not understand,’ says the first Dark Angel. ‘We have the asset, but that human knows what we did to attain it. The Iron Hands will seek reparation, will they not?’

The riot had merely been a diversion. A distraction that allowed them to swoop in and seize their true target - the one inmate that knows where their Fallen brother was last seen.

‘The beneficiari is to receive the Blessing of Iron,’ replies the Chaplain, simply.

‘An honorific?’ asks the second.

‘In a sense. One that is rather specific to the sons of the Gorgon.’

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FOR NINE HOURS, the united combat squad Haldaarn held Cog-001 against the rioting inmates of Penatora IV, ensuring that the heart of the installation - the central servitor construction facility - was not destroyed in the mayhem. Ammunition was exhausted after the first seven hours. The final two hours were conducted with close combat weapons only. Four thousand, four hundred and eighty-seven confirmed kills. The Iron Hands suffered no casualties.

After the siege, eighteen Skitarii demi-cohorts landed. In the ensuing battle, a further four hundred and seventy-one inmates were slain before order was restored.

The Iron Hands departed Penatora IV ninety-seven hours after having made planetfall. They returned to the Chapter cruiser, the Iron Will.

Battle-brother Dolmech took Beneficiari Armicus with them.

I DO NOT understand humans. Nor do I wish to.

The Blessing of Iron is a great honour, and yet Beneficiari Armicus bleats like an animal as the saw cuts into his scalp.

‘Are you sure this one is worthy?’ Brother Doxgaarn asks.

What I say next I will come to regret, but the decision has already been made.

‘He will serve.’

His arms are removed and replaced with blessed heavy-duty augmetics. He screams even as the bionics are fitted, yet by the time the spine-plugs are rammed into his nervous system his screams have faded. He whimpers and moans, but he will never scream again. Soon, even those pitiful sounds cease. The physical lobotomisation is unnecessary after the mind-wipe, but will better facilitate the neural programming.

His transformation is complete.

No longer is he Beneficari Armicus. That name is dead, along with all his human weaknesses. He is a servitor now. He will serve until he is no longer needed, or until his

systems fail. That time may not be for many hundreds of years.

It is a great honour that I have bestowed upon him. He is now more of a machine than I. His human emotions, memories and fears have been burnt away. He is one step closer to the divine.

I envy him.

Praise be to the Omnissiah.