



WARHAMMER
40,000

THE FISSURE



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An Iron Snakes story
by Nik Vincent

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[The Fissure - Nik Vincent](#)

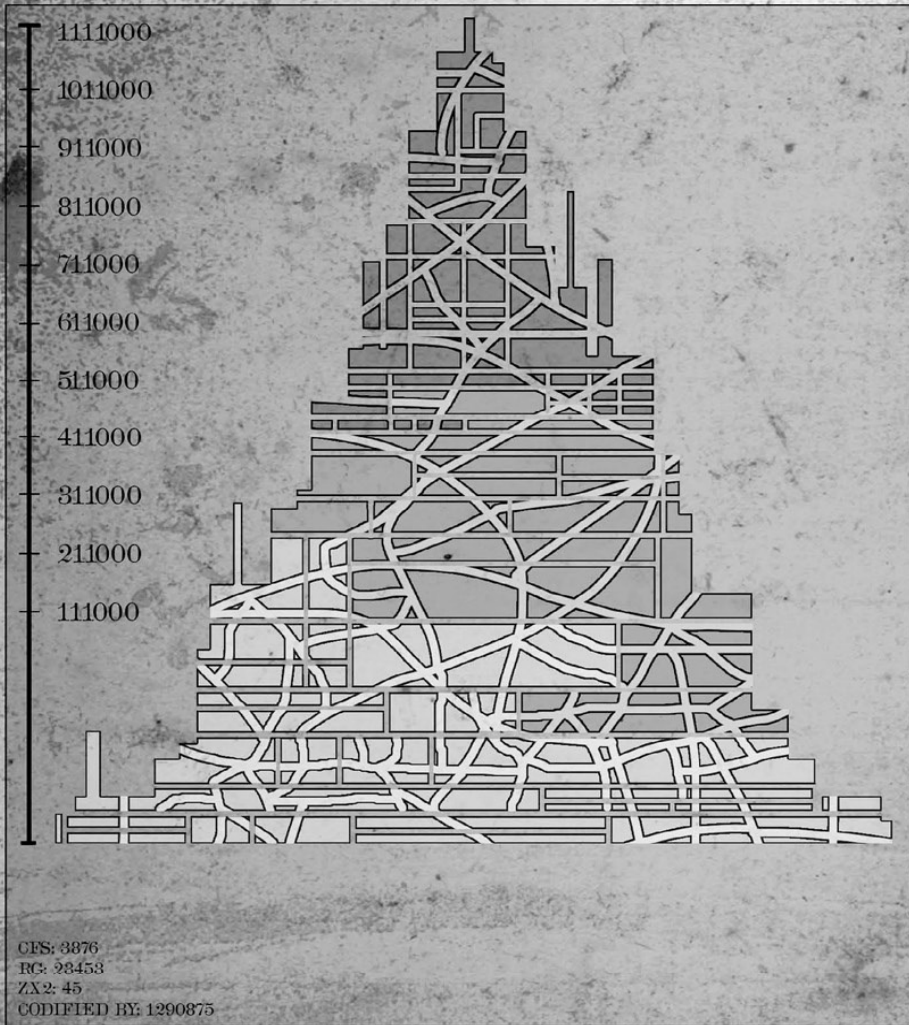
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SANGREL HIVE



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THE FISSURE

Nik Vincent

I

Location: Formal Prime, Sabbat Worlds, 251.M41

Apothecary Utropius broke the seal on Basilion's Corvus-pattern helm and lifted it free of his head. There was no rictus grin on the dead Space Marine's face, no fear in his eyes, no shock, no horror, only a steely, calm determination; only penetrating focus and heroic self-sacrifice, only duty and intent.

Without a word, Utropius passed the helmet to Cleon, who lifted it to his face in both of his gauntleted hands, almost as if he were going to kiss it, before placing it under his left arm. He stared hard at Basilion's face, looking for a sign that his battle-brother knew what he had accomplished before he was spent.

The Apothecary took his flask from his belt. It was an old example, worn by generations of Apothecaries before him. The flat, silver lozenge was dull and tarnished, and dented in several places, but the gold of the seams and stopper was still visible, as was the heavily worked silver and gold image of the Great Yorgos. He had been the first Iron Snake to be blessed with that name, and the engraving showed him wielding a magnificent harpoon, carried high above his shoulder like a javelin, bearing down on a vast, thrashing wyrm. The creature was spraying great golden plumes of water across the surface of the flask from its muscular flanks and tail, writhing frantically in the face of inevitable death.

Utropius unstopped the flask, leaned over Basilion, and began to pour drops of Ithaka's sacred water onto his forehead. He made the ritual signs with his right hand, and recited the sacred words that would lay his battle-brother's soul

to rest and commend him to the God-Emperor in whose service he had perished.

When it was done, Cleon turned to the sheer, smooth, burnished face of the rockcrete wall directly behind them. He placed Basilion's helmet on the ground next to his brother and took up his meltagun. Two minutes later there was a niche in the wall. It was smooth and symmetrical and about as perfect as it could be, and the Corvus-pattern helm that Basilion had worn as an Iron Snake fit snugly into it.

The first incantation complete, the Apothecary bound Basilion's eyes and mouth so that he could neither see out nor drink in, as was the Iron Snakes' custom, and then he went to work on his hand.

II

The penetrating beam of consuming blackness spread and sucked light out of the air and out of every surface.

The first the workers knew that anything was happening was when they were overtaken by darkness; not the usual inky lack of light, but something sinister, like the opposite of light rather than its absence.

Then there was the sound. The constant thrum and squeal of the drills and cutting tools reached a crescendo, and then seemed to die away, but the vibration they made, cutting rockcrete and plasteel, shaping, riveting and making seams went on, interminably, the various frequencies cutting across each other in ever-more disturbing wave patterns that made eardrums burst and vitreous humours tremble and turn opaque, crystallise and finally shatter.

Then something screamed. It was a low, rumbling scream, too low, too throaty, too loud to be human. It was distorted by the dark air that streamed through the fissure and into the half-built, below-ground structures that would form the base of the new hive district.

Core samples had been taken and examined, the ground had been excavated, piles had been driven and the foundations poured. There was going to be a bonus for the contract being completed ahead of schedule. There was pressure from the Administratum overseers and the Hive elders. Premium storage facilities and small-scale hab-units, single and double occupancy, were in short supply and high demand. The Imperium expected. Work was accelerated, shifts were doubled, checks were cursory at best, and corners were cut. Then the

excavations exposed something.

They called it ‘the Fissure’. They tried to get close enough to fill it, plug it, cover it, stem the tide of blackness, force the darkness back to wherever it had come from. No one dared to speculate on what it was or where it had come from, nor dared voice their fears. No one truly knew. There were legends of the empyreum, but it was more myth than reality, and if it were real it was a distant, impossible thing.

The Administratum sent for the hive militia. There was nothing else for it.

The first penetration of the warp, the first slender beam of un-light, killed two hundred construction workers who were erecting the retaining walls that would form the dozen underground levels of the hive, and the deep foundation upon which the great skeleton of the above ground levels rested. More than half of that number died as the blackness cut a seam through the veil that separated one reality from the other, where the warp met real space. It tore a ragged slit in time and space, and conjoined the two.

The other half died with promises of great financial rewards and of heroic tales told in their names, wearing little more than the standard construction hazard armour, intended to protect heads and limbs against machinery, falls and falling building materials. There was no protection against the warp or its denizens, but they did not know it was the warp, and were easily persuaded that it was some natural, if rare, geological phenomenon.

When the hive militia arrived two days later the remaining workforce had fled, and no one remained except for the unit boss, holed up in one of the temporary habs. He had built a complex structure from dismantled sections of the cots, tables and chairs that provided the basic furnishings of the temporary workers’ accommodations, an elaborate nest that he had climbed into the centre of, and curled up inside it, foetus-like.

‘Get him out,’ said the sergeant in charge when he could not rouse the civilian by bellowing at him, but the task proved impossible. The structure was a magnificent feat of engineering, stronger than it appeared, and functionally impenetrable. It wouldn’t have mattered. The man was insane, his mind turned to insensible mush by the warp and by the miserable mortality he had witnessed. They had died. They had all died, his comrades, his brothers, his workforce, his friends: all dead.

‘There’s nothing to fight here,’ said the sergeant.

‘Then what’s that?’ asked his corporal, raising his old, Guard-issue long-las to his shoulder as he spoke, and sighting it. Something loomed in the mouth of the

Fissure: some creature.

‘What the Throne is that?’ His voice was distorted by the rush of black air that accompanied the creature, and, in a split second, half a dozen weapons were raised and firing at the beast.

Some of the las-rounds hit solid black and popped like fireworks, spraying arcs of dense, grey impotent sparks. Some slowed until they stalled altogether, fading and dying in the heavy, cloying air. Only the hard rounds from two autopistols, one fired from the sergeant’s hip and the other carried by the oldest member of the unit, an ex-Imperial infantryman who couldn’t bear to retire, hit home, and only then because the beast was emerging from the warp ether, just a few metres from their feet.

It was an unwholesome creature, about a metre and a half across, with five unequal, bony limbs and a gelatinous, drooping body like a half-filled bladder. It had several orifices, which might have been for breathing, eating, hearing, communicating or evacuating waste, for their purposes were not obvious, but it had nothing that resembled an eye.

Two rounds hit its body mass, and a third and fourth took out its biggest limb, which caused it to list, and then flop in a mess of ichor and some green liquid that resembled bile, except that there was more of it than might be expected from a relatively small creature. There was no doubt that it was dead, but one of the hive militia nevertheless vomited copiously at the sight of it, and another fainted clean away.

‘We need serious firepower, and no mistake,’ said the infantryman.

‘If you’re addressing the sergeant—’ began the corporal.

‘Shut up,’ said the sergeant, and turned to the soldier. ‘We can call in further units, and—’

‘That thing came out of the empyrean. We need firepower of a different order. This is quite beyond our resources.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked the sergeant.

The soldier raised an eyebrow.

‘Holy Emperor!’ murmured the sergeant.

‘You should return to the governor’s palace and persuade him to have the astropaths send out an urgent request for support,’ said the soldier. ‘We need the Adeptus Astartes, and until they get here, the best we can hope for is to build a damned great wall and pray to the God Emperor of Mankind.’

‘The Emperor protects!’ said the corporal.

‘You’d better bloody hope so,’ said the soldier, holstering his auto-gun and

walking away.

III

Utropius, Apothecary to the Iron Snakes, broke the seal on Basilion's left gauntlet. His right hand and arm were entirely missing. It didn't matter. Basilion had always favoured his sinister side; it was better to honour him with his left gauntlet, which was virtually intact, despite his left shoulder joint having been torn out of his armour, dislocating his shoulder, rupturing the muscles in his neck, arm and back, and tearing the flesh, which hung in ragged, bloodless strips.

The Apothecary removed the gauntlet. It was intact but for some superficial scratches and dinks in its surface, and passed it to Cleon, who held it up to his face in both of his hands, and then stowed it for the journey back to Ithaka once their duty here was done. Utropius was already pouring sacred water onto Basilion's muscular, unmarked left hand, as perfect in death as it had been in life, only pale and inert. Utropius held the hand in his, poured the water, pushed his flask back into his belt, and then made the signs with the same hand, still holding his battle-brother's hand.

The words of ritual prayer rang clearly in the air as they had over every Iron Snake who had met his end in service, and as they would over every Iron Snake who would ever meet his end in duty to the Emperor of Mankind. Finally, Utropius bound the fingers of Basilion's left hand together so that he might never wield a weapon again, that his soul might never strive nor do battle in death, that all might end in eternal peace.

IV

The foolish came first to the Fissure, the foolish, the curious and those drawn by the subliminal call of the empyrean. They came to gawp and to marvel, and they came to die. Some revelled in the un-light, drawn to it, sucked in by its murderous intensity. They walked into it. They could not help themselves, and they could not be helped.

The hive militia set up a cordon that was breached, over and over again, and

hundreds of construction workers were brought in to build defensive barriers and walls, metres high and thick.

The faithful came to pray... The God Emperor's faithful and the heathens alike.

Months passed. The great, gleaming hive spread east, away from the Fissure, and around it. The huge project covering hundreds of square kilometres, reaching three kilometres below ground and fifteen above, was being constructed at the height of the planet's growth and wealth, and reflected all that it had to offer. It was naive to think that the Fissure could end that. Nothing could stop the march of man.

V

Months passed. The Fissure was shut away behind a tonnage of rockcrete so massive as to be utterly impenetrable.

Construction had moved on, the area cordoned off, hung with tarpaulins and semi-permanent hoardings to advertise the new habs and to steer people's eyes away. There was nothing to see.

There was, however, something for the believer to stay for, something for the cultist, something for the Chaos enthusiast, something for the follower of the Ruinous Powers. There was the promise.

Word spread far and wide, and they came, mostly singly or in pairs, to this strange, forbidden place, hidden behind the promise of a bright, manmade future. They came and they prayed, and they sacrificed and they flagellated, and they taught each other all they knew.

They faced the Fissure, and they spoke their words at the tons of rockcrete that divided them from the warp, and for a long time, nothing happened.

VI

It took the three-man unit of Apothecary Utropius and Battle-brothers Basilion and Cleon twenty-two months to travel from Ithaka. The governor did not expect them, had almost forgotten he had sent out the call, and when he did remember, he felt foolish for believing the old Guardsman who had suggested the warp might have bled into his hive city. What did a Guardsman know of the warp?

There had been some panic. There had been deaths, but it was a construction site; things happened during construction work on this scale. It was industrial damage, nothing more.

When they came, the Space Marines terrified the governor, just as the threat of the warp had terrified him, and when they insisted on examining the site, he dared not resist their intentions, however foolish he felt. At least there were only three of them, as vast as they were, and as imposing, for the governor had never been in the company of such warriors before. At least he did not have to endure the embarrassment of being faced with an entire squad when there was no enemy for them to battle.

VII

Basilion had bled out through his back. His right arm and leg were almost entirely missing, and his left shoulder was wrenched and ragged. The air purifiers in his armour were mangled or missing, the backplate was torn and the flesh pulped, and the top edge of the breastplate was buckled and broken, although the seals at the neck and waist were almost entirely intact. The breastplate itself was pristine, apart from a film of rockcrete dust; there wasn't a scratch or a dink on it anywhere.

Cleon removed his helmet and stood guard over Basilion and Utropius as the Apothecary leaned over the corpse, one foot on either side of his battle-brother's waist, and reached down. He did not think about Basilion's missing right leg or his twisted left. He did not think of the beast.

The Apothecary did what he was trained to do: he concentrated his mind on the words he must recite while he extracted the gene-seed from Basilion's chest, the gene-seed that was the legacy of the Iron Snakes, the gene-seed that made the future possible.

He laid the last of the winding cloths over the wound in Basilion's chest, and made the signs over his battle-brother's body with his left hand while he wielded the reductor in his right.

He was gone. Basilion was no more. He had departed his body as his gene-seed was extracted. There was nothing left of him now, only his helmet in its final resting place, and his gauntlet, power sword and his gene-seed returning home.

VIII

No one knew when the Fissure began to penetrate the walls that had been built against it, no one but the cultists who were gathered before it. Those who did not die in the first concentrated thread of un-light were in rapture to it, their minds befouled with the warp. They were turned to Chaos. They tore open the bodies of the heretic dead, illuminated as non-believers, as frauds, as fickle pretenders, and they gorged themselves on the flesh that was not, could not be, turned.

Their hunger sated and another dark step taken towards ruin, they turned back to bathe in the narrow beam of un-light with renewed energy, with vigour and intent. A woman stepped into a curling drift of utter blackness, and began to chant and spit a sequence of hard, guttural, incomprehensible sounds. Then a young man joined in, his voice lower than hers, setting up a discord. Then a third voice joined and a fourth, until all the remaining pilgrims were chanting, each in a slightly different key, each in a slightly different rhythm, so that the discord built, splitting the air, visibly, dividing the un-light.

As white light divides into the colours of the rainbow, so the un-light divided. Streaks of dense, fathomless grey shook away from each other, trembled and formed jagged bands in the air, each vibrating at a different frequency. When they bled together they seemed to repel each other, like iron filings reacting to magnetic fields. Each frequency, each band, distorted the sound of the chanting as it passed through, creating further discord, generating a cacophony that caused the crack in the massive rockcrete wall to grow and spread at an alarming rate, until a section of wall eight metres high and five metres wide was crazed all over with beams of banded un-light streaming through at all angles.

One of the beams of light began to coalesce into a searing, pinpoint shaft of un-light, which fell on the nearest of the chanting acolytes, the woman who had begun the unholy ritual. Her eyes were glazed and her nose and mouth trickled black blood as the inhuman utterances came from her throat. The un-light fell in jagged lines across her face and around her wrists as she knelt at the altar that was this new Fissure, and her skin began to singe and blister. Then it began to smoke and cauterised as the un-light cut her eyes from their sockets and sheared through her wrists. The other disciples watched more beams coalescing as they approached them, praying for them, chanting ever louder in their bliss.

It took hours for the beams of un-light to do their work, to slowly dismember, eviscerate and then remove the organs of the acolytes until only the skeletons and vocal chords remained, chanting their never-ending hymn to Chaos.

The governor was relieved when the Space Marines refused his offer to accompany them to the site, sending the captain of the hive guard in his stead.

The captain fell to the ground in a seizure as he entered the site of the Fissure and saw what had become of the acolytes. They had been chanting for several weeks, their flesh rotting around them, their reeking skulls suspended on fleshless spines, the rasping, guttural sounds still emanating from their wretched throats.

The rockcrete wall, shot through with beams of un-light, crazed with darkness, split into a myriad greys, seemed to throb and flex as the voices continued to build towards some relentless crescendo.

‘Not nothing, then,’ said Utropius.

‘It is never nothing, my brother,’ said Basilion, raising his power sword to cut down the chanting corpses, one by one.

Where the beams of un-light struck the weapon, they made it tremble and thrum in the Space Marine’s hands. The blackness seemed not to be reflected off the sword’s perfectly polished surface, but to be absorbed by it.

Crashing into the spinal columns of the corpses made no difference to their integrity or their ability to chant, so Basilion began to attack skulls, hacking at craniums and mandibles, but the unbroken corpse-beasts continued to sing.

Utropius lifted his lascannon to his shoulder and shot a burst of las-fire into one of the corpses, the largest of the group, who’d been a butcher in his former life, over two metres tall, weighing two hundred kilos. The las-rounds fizzed and sparked, and died in the air around the corpse. Those that did reach their target lit up in the un-light, were absorbed by it, and, somehow enriched it, enhanced it, making it even more sinister.

The butcher’s corpse bobbed its skull and stretched its spine, as if pulling itself up to its full height and inflating its chest, and the sounds that came from its dead throat were louder and more insistent than ever.

‘Hard round weapons, only,’ said Utropius, unshouldering his lascannon and priming the boltgun he carried as a sidearm.

Basilion continued relentlessly to do battle with the corpse-beasts, the un-light, when it crossed paths with his blade, disappearing into it, darkening and dulling its surface as it sliced and hacked at the floating bones.

Cleon took one look at the threads of un-light penetrating the rockcrete wall and knew that his meltagun was useless. If the wall was to be penetrated it must be done strategically or by whatever was on the other side. The meltagun was a liability, so he, too, must rely on his sidearm, and hope that he could come to the

aid of his brother, Basilion, since it had fallen to his lot to control the situation.

The Iron Snakes filtered out the cacophony that was growing all around them as the corpses redoubled their efforts to open the Fissure and bring forth the beast they had come to worship and sacrifice themselves for. They relied, instead, on their internal helmet comms. There was little necessity to speak. Each warrior knew his brothers and had weighed up the situation and his own strengths and weaknesses, and was acting accordingly.

The wall was fragile and unpredictable, and must not be attacked. The corpse choir clearly had some power over the wall, and possibly over what awaited on its other side, the dark side, for the Space Marines had known, before they were within ten kilometres of the site, that they were approaching the presence of the immaterium.

Killing the dead in the face of the un-light was their first task, and they were ill-equipped to accomplish that task, not least because, while they were not under the immediate threat of attack, the singers simply would not perish. The Apothecary and Cleon could not use their main weapons, since the melta was too risky and the lascannon impotent in the un-light, and they had only their sidearms – a Godwyn pattern boltgun and a standard issue boltgun respectively – the shells from which did little more than ricochet off vertebrae and skulls. Only Basilion's power sword seemed able to inflict any damage on the pilgrims.

Apothecary Utropius continued to fire his boltgun judiciously across the face of the wall, while Cleon holstered his sidearm and began to attack the skulls with his fists, using them like punch bags. They simply bobbed and bounced, as if on springs instead of spines, and came back for more.

Basilion did the real work, hacking and slashing, lunging and swinging, finally beginning to disconnect vertebrae, smash teeth, and, in one case, managing to sever the skull from the spine of one of the corpses, even though the skull landed on its side on the rockcrete platform that formed the floor, and continued to wheeze out its discordant melody.

It was Utropius who first felt the change in the air. The joints in his Mk IV armour began to vibrate, squealing with his every move, and he knew that something was about to change. With their filters on, and in their Corvus-pattern armour, his battle-brothers did not experience the change in atmosphere so readily, and were still doing their damndest to break the choristers when he sent out the cry... Too late.

Then the wall came tumbling down.

Every hack, slash, lunge and swing that Battle-Brother Basilion had inflicted

on the corpse choir finally bore fruit, and, suddenly the creatures disintegrated as one, falling to dust and bone shards on the rockcrete floor at the Space Marines' feet.

The vibration in Utropius's armour seals had reached a new pitch, and he was facing directly at the wall when it happened, while Cleon and Basilion were looking around at the mess of bone fragments littered all around them.

The crazed section of the wall that had been leaking un-light, crumbled and fell away. The Fissure was no longer a fissure, but a gaping hole in real time and space, a vast portal onto the warp.

As the light changed, as the un-light flooded over them in a great wave, as the myriad greys coalesced, crashing like a wave through the gap where the wall had been only seconds before, Cleon and Basilion raised their eyes to see what Utropius was already raising his useless lascannon against.

They had no name for it, although Utropius had to find the words to describe it in Basilion's death report.

It was Chaos, and it was daemonic. It had to hunch and duck to step through the portal. When it stood upright, it became clear that the hunch was permanent, that the beast's shoulders were so massive that its neck appeared to emanate horizontally from its chest. It was also bifurcated, carrying a mismatched pair of heads, both bestial, neither entire. One was eyeless while the other had three mouthless faces upon it. It appeared, at first, to have two pairs of arms and three legs, but when it turned, a third pair of arms seemed to sprout from its back, although they appeared flaccid, inert. Its gait was more a rolling glide than a stride and its centre of gravity was low to the ground. It was also the palest creature that the warriors had ever seen, with the thickest, whitest, smoothest hide, like the best marble, entirely without blemish, and with a dense, otherworldly sheen that seemed to bounce the un-light off its surface, creating an aura that confused the eye.

By the time Utropius had fired his lascannon and the rounds had fizzled to nothing in the un-light, Basilion was under attack. He swung and thrust with his power sword, but the beast had the longer reach, and the blurring of its form by the reflection of the un-light made it difficult to place in the environment, so every one of Basilion's first half a dozen strikes missed its target.

Cleon quickly shouldered and aimed his meltagun, and fired a first blast of intense heat that somehow the daemon side-stepped onto, catching it directly in the torso. The un-light sucked the light out of the air, turning it ever blacker, making Cleon gasp inside his helmet. Then he saw the massive residual heat

burn into the creature's chest, and for a split-second there was relief, but only for a moment. As soon as that relief was registered it was replaced by calm, cold horror.

The heat from the melta-fire was absorbed by the dense sheen of the monster's white hide, which glowed even whiter in a starburst formation across the centre of its torso, and Cleon realised that the beast had stepped into his line of fire deliberately. The thing bellowed a high-pitched scream of triumph, a split note as if blown too hard through a reed instrument.

Cleon and Utropius heard the words in their helmets as the beast reached out, and Basilion lunged and turned.

'Hard weapons and hard rounds only,' said Basilion, breathing steadily as he attacked the daemon.

Basilion's lunge missed again, but as he turned, the daemon took hold of Basilion's shoulders and wrenched hard at them, pulling at the armour to get at the flesh beneath. Basilion was shifted off-balance, but, in righting himself, he swung tight with his sword arm and struck his first blow, scoring a deep slit in the daemon's left forearm. There was no blood, just oozing ichor, but the skin separated to reveal fibrous greenish matter beneath that resembled muscle. The sheen on the monster's skin shifted as if it were some separate entity, flowing into the wound, filling it and sealing it off.

It was enough. Basilion knew how the daemon's physical presence differed from his visual presence and he could take advantage of that.

Utropius began to take pot-shots at the daemon with his boltgun, missing until he was able to assess Basilion's movements, and could then prove something of a distraction to the beast. The bolt-rounds caused only the most superficial wounds, but they made the creature flinch and swat at the annoyance, enabling Basilion to do his work.

The daemon relied too heavily on its ability to appear physically elusive, and then on its second skin to protect it. Basilion quickly overcame the first; the second had to be a matter of perseverance. The Space Marine, known for his prowess at hand-to-hand combat with a bladed weapon, went into overdrive, cutting and thrusting, hacking and slashing, swinging and slicing. It was not his intention to cause one fatal blow, but to strike over and over again. This was a war of attrition, and he was in it alone.

Cleon watched his brother for a moment, marvelling at his skill, and then set to work doing the only thing he could: he began to work on the rockcrete using his melta to cut new sections of wall to fill the gap where the Fissure had broken

through. He worked hard and he worked fast, and as soon as this threat was over, the Fissure would be blocked off. Cleon would see to the physical barrier and they would ensure that the governor, that the Imperium of Mankind, maintained a spiritual barrier in perpetuity. The faithful would be brought in to claim back this place and to pray over it.

The daemon took flesh wounds over three of its limbs and down the left side of its torso while it raged and stomped and grabbed at its assailant. Then it came a little to its senses. It stood its ground, reached out its hands and gathered the un-light around it, between its upper pair of hands. Its lower pair of arms continued to pinwheel, trying to grab at Basilion, who was too quick on his feet, too clever to get caught.

The first searing thread of black light took advantage of the ripped seal at Basilion's left shoulder joint. It slowed the Space Marine down for a second, and the daemon caught him, wrenching his left shoulder from its socket and tearing the flesh and muscles of his neck and back. Basilion threw his power sword to his right hand, and, drawing a breath as his Larraman's organ began its work, he set about the daemon anew.

The daemon's many flesh wounds were beginning to ooze slightly. The dense sheen covering its skin was thinning, and more and more of it was pouring into the open gashes that were appearing all over it. The skin looked more grey than white, and the creature began to look slow and sickly.

Basilion's sword, almost black by the time he had finished attacking the corpse choir, was losing some of its colour, and regaining a little of its shine.

The daemon continued to draw un-light between its hands, to gather it into hard black balls, and then to send slender beams of it to cut into Basilion's armour and flesh. His right leg was the new target as the next beam of un-light left the daemon's hands and cut into the armour across the Space Marine's thigh. He tried to avoid it, but could not step away; all he could do was fight on, cutting and slicing, leaving as many marks in the daemon's skin as he could possibly manage. He caught the fingers of the daemon's left hand as it raised them to control the un-light, slicing across the four digits and then twice across the outstretched palm and again across the wrist. With every new cut, every existing wound leaked a little more steadily, the sheen on the skin grew a little duller and the daemon came a little more into focus.

Then Utropius's bolt-rounds began to penetrate, embedding themselves in the sheen, causing it to gather and cover the new injuries, spreading it ever thinner, making it work ever harder.

Basilion's right leg was gone, the stump cauterised. It did not prevent him fighting on. His left arm was useless, his shoulder torn away, but he would live.

Then the sheen began to drip from the daemon's skin, thinned and contaminated by the fluids that it was meant to contain, and the beast grew angry. The bolt-rounds hurt, and the Space Marine with his endless swinging was a thorn in its side. The sheen began to run down every surface, every contour of the daemon's body, and off at every joint and angle, and with it ran the daemon's lifeblood, the ichor that powered its physical being.

Angered, the daemon did not have the patience to gather the un-light for another onslaught, so it blundered forward and lunged at Basilion, grabbing low at his left leg. Basilion had been compensating as best he could for his missing lower limb, but could not resist being bowled over. The daemon grasped the leg with all four of its great, clawed paws and swung and twisted Basilion through the air. Basilion refused to be disorientated, and decided to take full advantage of being inside the daemon's reach, inflicting as many long, deep cuts on the creature's massive torso, shoulders and neck as he could manage before he was flung aside, his left leg badly twisted and mangled, his armour disjointed and mostly missing, broken at all the seals.

Utropius had stopped shooting and was offering up a prayer.

Basilion landed face down, and the daemon stepped onto his back, jamming two of its heels hard between the Space Marine's shoulders as it gathered together more un-light. It fed one beam directly into the back of Basilion's armour while rending and tearing to get at flesh and muscle and bone. It fed a second beam directly at the right shoulder joint of Basilion's armour, severing the limb that was wielding his power sword, silver-bright and gleaming once more, utterly destroying the Space Marine.

Utropius never let up with his boltgun, firing round after round at the daemon, whose body was now a dull grey, weeping ichor from every wound, the sheen utterly used up and gone.

It wasn't the bolt-rounds that killed it, though.

The warp daemon suffered a death by a thousand cuts.

When they were sure that Basilion had triumphed, Utropius and Cleon threw the daemon's corpse back through the portal, now as lifeless and dull as the beast, and placed the rockcrete panels that Cleon had cut over the place they called the Fissure.

IX

Basilion's body was left in the care of the governor, who ordered a state funeral for the great warrior, and a permanent shrine to be built to him on the site of his death.

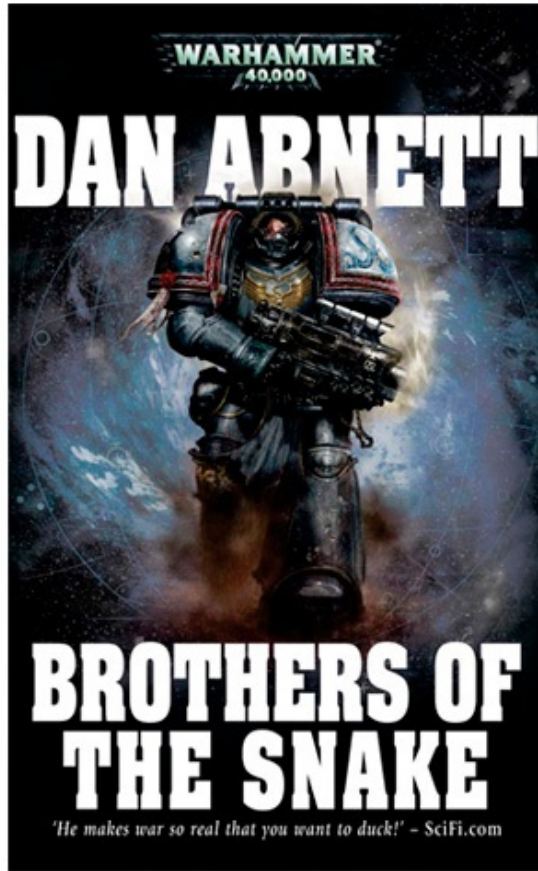
On their return to Ithaka, Apothecary Utropius deposited the gene-seed in the repository, Basilion's gauntlet in the reliquary and his power sword in the armoury as was the Iron Snakes' custom. Three things came back to the home planet, by right, of which one must be brought to life, one must be brought to use and one must be brought to rest.

Then the Apothecary and his battle-brothers stood on the shore at sunset as Utropius emptied his flask back into the ocean, the flask that had carried the Ithakan water that could have no other Imperial use, for it had anointed the Iron Snakes' dead brother, and it could bring nothing but ill-fortune to any who used it thereafter.

Basilion is dead. Long live the gene-seed. Long live the Iron Snakes. The Emperor protects.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nik Vincent is the author of the Gaunt's Ghosts short story 'Viduity' in *Sabbat Crusade*, and 'Cell' in *Sabbat Worlds*, which focused on the Imperial resistance on a Chaos-held world. She also co-wrote, with Dan Abnett, the novels *Gilead's Blood* and *Gilead's Curse*. She has also written a number of short stories focusing on the Iron Snakes Space Marines, including 'The Third Wise Man' and 'The Fissure'.



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