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**A BROTHER'S
CONFESSION**

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

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A BROTHER'S CONFESSION

Robbie MacNiven

Once, before it had been carved from its bedrock and cast adrift among the stars, the Chapel of the Dioskuri had been a high, cold place. Mountain raptors had called it their home as readily as the lonely pilgrims who had trekked through snow drifts and along knife-backed ridges to reach it. Stories were told among the Primaris Space Marines that fragile bones of birds and woven votive offerings left by worshippers could still be found in its darkest corners. Kastor, who frequented the chapel more than any of them, had certainly never come across such relics. They had long since crumbled to dust, for it had been ten thousand years since the Dioskuri had lain heaped beneath mountain snow, or moaned with the bitterness of a midwinter wind. Ten millennia had gone by since it had been uprooted and rebuilt, stone by stone, on board the battle-barge *Spear of Macragge*. Now its pilgrims were god-warriors of the former XIII Legion and its attendant, Kastor, wore the skull-helm of an Adeptus Astartes Chaplain.

He donned that helmet now, though there was no immediate threat of battle. The black armour and vestments of a Chaplain were as ceremonial as they were functional. They represented the wearer's grave charge: to uphold the faith and purity of his battle-brothers, and act as both judge and executioner for those who failed. In that moment, as the *Spear of Macragge* traversed the currents of the warp on its way from combat operations in the Atari system, Kastor stood in judgement.

'It is time, brother.'

The accused had surrendered himself of his own volition and now knelt before Kastor and the chapel's altar, shrouded in the black cloth of judgement. His name was Polixis, and he was the Apothecary of the Fulminata – one of the

strike forces of Primaris Marines who, a century earlier, had joined the Ultramarines Chapter. Light from the tallow candles set around the chamber flickered along the strong lines of his face and gave his blond hair a deeper, golden sheen.

‘Speak now, before the Emperor’s sight.’

The ritual words rang through the chamber, scraping from the vox vocaliser of Kastor’s helmet like an executioner’s blade across a whetstone.

Polixis was silent before answering, his head dipped, as though he was trying to find the words that would most succinctly convey his guilt.

‘I killed my battle-brother,’ he said eventually, his voice low but firm.

Kastor remained still.

Polixis raised his burning gaze to meet the Chaplain’s darkened visor. ‘I killed Artimaesus Tulio, of the Fulminata.’

Five Days Earlier

The de la Sario manor house shook with gunfire, screams and the fury of the Primaris Space Marines. The Fulminata rarely tasted defeat, and yet on this day, their objective was slipping away.

Polixis launched two shots from his bolt pistol. The hard rounds punched through the charging Tchari supplicator’s bare breast and burst open his chest cavity. The man, clad only in a white loincloth and a silver hook-nosed mask, dropped instantly. Two of his cult kindred threw themselves into adjacent doorways. A spray of las-fire whipped into the dark stonebark panels that lined the hallway as they attempted to keep the Primaris Apothecary at bay, forcing him to one side.

Polixis advanced, using speed to close the distance before either cultist could pin him. He slammed another shot into the doorframe that sheltered one of them. A hail of splinters ripped through the man’s torso. He dropped, screaming. His comrade managed to fire two last las-bolts into Polixis’ left greave and breastplate before his weapon’s power pack whined, its charge empty.

Neither shot penetrated the Space Marine’s white battle plate.

The Apothecary fired a double-tap at point-blank range into the man, shredding his muscled body and painting his blood up the walls. He turned to the other, who lay on the floor with several wooden stakes protruding from his abdomen. Polixis’ fingers wrapped around the struggling man’s throat, then twisted. There was a loud crack and the cultist became limp in his hands. He tossed him aside, then moved on down the corridor without pause, reloading as he went.

Time was running out.

The door at the far end of the corridor caved beneath his boot just as Intercessor Squad Nerva stormed the chamber beyond from the other side. The dining space resounded with the click-crash of auto bolt rifles and the shattering of glass. Polixis arrived in time to split another of the Tchari in two as he fumbled for a grenade from the bandolier strapped over his chest. The round blew half the cultist's skull away and sent his broken silver grotesque spinning across the room.

'The hall is ours,' said Sergeant Nerva.

'There's no sign of the governor in the servant's quarters,' Polixis added, striding across the room to join the squad as they spread out.

'Aerial scans show him being removed to the west of the manor house by the cult,' Nerva said, voice grim, while four Primaris Marines from his combat team – Ovido, Plinus, Priscor and Quintillius – secured the battered room, scanning the heretical Tchari corpses. 'The captain has ordered an air strike to neutralise him.'

Polixis said nothing. It took a conscious effort to bury the anger that surged through his thoughts. Nerva and the Primaris strike team had arrived at the manor as dawn broke, hoping to recover Governor de la Sario before the cult could reach him. Only the ruler of Atari could access the gene-vault that contained the codes for the planet's orbiting weapons platforms. Unless the governor was now neutralised, the heretics of the Tchari – daemon-worshippers who had risen in a coordinated revolt against Imperial rule – would have access to weaponry capable of scouring Atari bare.

'The western and northern portions of the estate are overrun,' Nerva continued. 'The captain is moving to secure the vault as we speak, but there are over four hundred cult members converging on us. We have orders to evacuate.'

'What about his daughter?' Polixis asked. 'Her gene-stamp will be as effective as his.'

'My second combat squad were searching for her, but their flanks are overwhelmed and time is tight,' Nerva said. 'If both father and daughter are lost to the cultists, we need to extract and consolidate at the vault. The heretics can't be allowed to access it.'

Polixis was about to reply when the heads-up tactical display scrolling across his visor pinged.

'The second combat team are taking casualties,' he said. The sigils that represented the vitae-signs of the two members of the Intercessor squad –

Scaevola and Tulio – had both blinked yellow. A second later, the clipped tones of Tarquin, leader of the five-man detachment, crackled over the vox-link.

‘More cultists entering from the west. At least a platoon in strength, including heavy stubbers. Still no sign of the girl. Another minute and we’ll be intersected.’

‘Withdraw,’ Nerva ordered. ‘We are out of time.’

Even as the automatic confirmation blinked over the visor, the vox was chopped by the furious thudding noise of a heavy weapon, playing counterpoint to the beat echoing through the manor. The mark representing Tulio’s life feed turned red.

‘Brother Tulio has been hit,’ Tarquin said, words barked over the crashing sounds of a close-range firefight. *‘His Belisarian Furnace triggered but he has been cut off.’*

‘Withdraw,’ Nerva reiterated. ‘I am not returning to the Fulminata having lost half of my squad.’

‘His progenoids must be recovered,’ Polixis interjected.

‘If they attempt to retrieve his body, they will suffer more casualties. The Codex is clear on this matter. There is too much to lose for too little gain.’

‘I was not suggesting your Intercessors retrieve him,’ Polixis said. ‘It is my duty to retain his legacy for the Chapter.’

‘With all respect, Brother-Apothecary, I could not countenance losing you either. This building is too large and complex to secure, and cultists are flocking here every second we delay. The more of us that fall, the more emboldened they will become.’

‘Tarquin will be drawing the main body of the Tchari after him. I can use the tactical display to outflank them and get to Tulio. The speed of the cultists’ assault ensures they won’t have time to mount a static defence.’

Nerva was silent for a moment before speaking again, his tone reluctant.

‘You know I cannot stop you, Brother-Apothecary, but we will be gone from this accursed place in under ten minutes. If you are not on board the extraction, there will be angrier brothers among the Fulminata than just Captain Demetrius.’

‘I will see you aboard the extraction, Sergeant Nerva,’ Polixis promised, already moving towards the hall’s main doors.

Polixis strode out of the dining hall, bolt pistol raised. Data bursts transmitted between the withdrawing Intercessors’ autosenses had mapped out much of the manor on the heads-up display, but presented no information about the location

of the Tchari supplicators. There were half a dozen corridors and rooms between the Apothecary and the withdrawing combat squad, but the cultists in their leering silver masks were flooding into the estate grounds from all directions. Tarquin and his brethren could already be cut off.

The Apothecary passed down a narrow, bare service corridor and into the kitchen block. Gleaming work surfaces, stoves and ovens stretched away from him. He entered through the swing doors just as armed cultists, with eye-achingly blasphemous sigils painted onto their bare breasts and arms, emerged at the opposite end.

Polixis fired first. One of the Tchari went down, his left shoulder reduced to a bloody ruin. The other briefly hesitated, frozen between fight and flight. He chose fight.

A single las-bolt blew a cluster of hanging herbs to dust and ricocheted from a spread of cutlery laid out beside one of the kitchen drainage units. The man did not have a chance to release another shot before Polixis ended his existence. The Apothecary passed through the kitchen, bolt pistol tracking behind the counters and meat cryo blocks for targets. Yet there were none.

He stepped over the two bodies, scanning them as he passed through the doorway and into the corridor. One cultist's vitae signs still showed, but were close to flat-lining – he was unconscious and would be dead from blood loss in just over a minute.

The Apothecary didn't pause. He moved down the secondary service passageway and up a short flight of steps into a storage locker, stepping between barrels of salted meats, dried fruits and heavy sacks of flour.

Beyond, he met the remains of Tarquin's combat team.

'Apothecary,' the Intercessor said as Polixis emerged into a small annex connecting to the manor's librarius. Four members of the team were present – Sergius, Valent and Tarquin standing over the prone form of Scaevola. He'd clearly been dragged from their last contact zone. His breastplate had been split by three heavy-calibre hard round impacts, and numerous small arms shots perforated the scarred ceramite.

'We were caught in crossfire as we retreated from the foyer,' Tarquin said as Polixis knelt beside Scaevola, a hint of bitterness creeping into his clipped report. 'We tried to reach the governor, but there were too many. Well over a hundred contacts. They used their own bodies as shields so they could get him away from us.'

Polixis didn't answer as his diagnostor helmet scanned the patient, linking with

the output of his armour's autosenses via the black carapace interface. The rune representing Scaevola on the vitae display blinked red. Still, he ran a diagnostic over the body anyway, plugging his prognosticator into Scaevola's tasset node. The secondary readout confirmed the first – he was beyond the Apothecary's skill.

'He is slain,' Polixis said simply, indicating his narthecium. 'I must remove his progenoids immediately.'

While Tarquin checked the tactical updates, Polixis blink-triggered his reductor. The tool, built into the gauntlet of his narthecium, came in two parts – a fine-toothed carbon alloy chainblade extractor, and an adamantium drill bit. It was the latter that he activated first, placing it firmly against the centre of Scaevola's breastplate. There was a familiar shriek of cracking plasteel, and Polixis gritted his teeth as the drill bored its way through first blue-painted ceramite, then the plasteel beneath. After an exact depth of penetration readout on the Apothecary's modified helmet display, he removed and deactivated the bit, placing the reductor's extractor tube in the perfectly circular hole now in Scaevola's armour.

Polixis pressed down. The sharpened edges of the reductor pierced the toughened flesh, penetrating the durametallic sinew coil-cables all Primaris Marines were blessed with. He grunted as he carried on through bone, the full weight of the modified gauntlet required to pierce the fused abdomen.

There was a hideous crunching sound. Polixis twisted his fist and activated the reductor's flesh-clamps to keep the wound open as he burrowed into the split chest cavity.

His visor display had linked with the thumbnail-sized pict responder fixed to the top of the tube's end. With it, he was able to see the reductor as it penetrated Scaevola once more. Before him was a grey glob of fleshy tissue – the very life force of the Chapter made manifest. He pressed the tube's end over the progenoid and activated the suction valve. There was a whirring noise as it ripped the precious gland from the flesh, shunting it into one of the cryo-receptacle vials fixed to the narthecium's rear.

As he removed the tube, there was a screech of las-bolt against ceramite behind him, followed by rapid return fire. Polixis looked over his shoulder and saw Sergius and Valent loose shots into the horde of cultists that swelled from between the librarius' bookshelves.

Polixis knew he needed to hurry. He triggered the reductor's small chainblade. Normally what he was about to do would be considered sacrilege, but under the pressures of a field operation it was necessary. He tilted Scaevola's helmet back,

exposing the gorget's neck seal. With a precise, sharp slashing motion, he cut open the Space Marine's throat. As blood flooded the gorget, he inserted the reductor's flesh clamps to keep the wound from automatically sealing, then buried his fingers in the incision. A few seconds of probing located the fallen warrior's second progenoid, secreted in the neck. He cupped it and applied a slow but firm pressure, ripping away the connective tissue and dragging the gland, undamaged, from its spot nestled against the trachea. With the bloody grey matter in one gauntlet, he slipped it into the reductor's tube and triggered the suction valve once more. The second extracted gene-seed joined the first.

The chrono display that had triggered on his diagnostor's visor froze as the secondary progenoid thumped into the small cryo-receptacle. The entire operation had taken just fifty-six seconds.

'He is recovered,' Polixis said, intoning the rite of the fallen. 'His legacy endures.'

'We will take his body and battleplate with us,' Tarquin said, motioning for Valent to heft Scaevola's remains. 'Come, Brother-Apothecary. Sergius and Valent will provide cover.'

'No,' Polixis replied. 'I must extract brother Tulio's progenoids.'

'He cannot be reached.'

'Perhaps from the route you have taken.'

'Trying to locate Tulio in these conditions is unwise,' Tarquin countered.

'It is unorthodox,' Polixis corrected. 'But war is rarely an orthodox matter, Brother Tarquin.'

A colossal explosion rocked the manor house, shattering its glass windows and doors. The brothers fell silent, and the unmistakable stench of burning flesh filled the air. Static crackled across the vox-channel.

'Aerial strike successful. The Governor has been terminated.'

Polixis' mouth set in a grim line. 'Link up with Sergeant Nerva. I will see you during the extraction.'

As the second combat team fell back towards the dining hall, Polixis took the third door out of the annex corridor, avoiding the Tchari cultists that had flooded the librarius. Following the tactical map, he broke down a door leading to a small study room then turned north once more, into the stately entrance corridor leading from the manor's western entrance foyer into the building. It was there that he found Brother Tulio.

Neither the artificial miracle of Mk X power armour nor the organic miracle of

a fused ribcage and Primaris sinew coils had been enough to save him from the fist-sized wounds caused by the point-blank discharge of a heavy stubber. He was slumped against one of the walls halfway down the corridor, the bloody remains of supplicator corpses scattered around him. The Ultramarine's Belisarian Furnace, the so-called Revitaliser, had allowed him to endure far longer than was normal for a Space Marine. He had continued crushing skulls and snapping necks in a frenzied close-quarter melee that had bought enough time for the rest of his brothers to withdraw deeper into the sprawling manor.

Polixis took it all in with a split-second assessment. He also noted the masked cult members advancing cautiously down the far end of the corridor. A burst of bolt rounds sent them scrambling back to where they had set up their heavy stubber. Polixis stepped back around the corridor's corner as las-bolts snapped past, reviewing what his memory had recorded from the several seconds of unobstructed sight.

For a moment, beyond trying to delay the cultist rush, he couldn't see why Tulio had chosen this particular corridor to make his stand, but then he noticed a twitch of frightened movement in one of the alcoves dispersed intermittently down the walls. There was someone between the Tchari at the far end and Polixis' position – a small girl, pressed into one of the corridor's bust niches, cowering behind a likeness of one of her ancestors. It was Governor de la Sario's missing daughter.

Polixis assessed the situation. To attempt to reach Tulio, who had fallen so close to the cultist's hastily assembled weapon emplacement, would be difficult. There were also Scaevola's remains to consider. If Polixis fell invading the Tchari's position, not only would the Chapter lose Scaevola's genetic inheritance, but his own and Tulio's too. Yet Polixis could not simply abandon his fallen brother. In his mind's eye, he saw once again the Intercessor he had shared over a decade of combat operations with, in the heat of battle, at prayer, servicing his arms and armour. That he had fallen was not what tore at the Apothecary, for they would all fall some day in the Emperor's service. It was the possibility of losing his legacy, forever cutting off his inheritance by failing to retrieve his gene-seed that made Polixis hesitate.

Then there was the girl. It would be impossible to reach Tulio while keeping her from the crossfire. He could neutralise her to ensure she did not fall into the hands of the cult, and instead retrieve Tulio's gene-seed, but doing so would mean sacrificing access to the vault.

'Brother Tarquin has re-joined us and the Thunderhawk is circling,' clicked

Nerva's voice over the vox. *'Hurry, Apothecary.'*

In that instant, the decision was made. He swung out from his cover, bolt pistol thundering. Blood blossomed and las-fire returned as the clutch of separatists responded. Breaking down the corridor, Polixis was exposed for barely three seconds, but to his heightened senses, it felt like long minutes. He saw each las-bolt as it arced down the narrow space, glittering crimson lances that flared and burned as they punched holes through wallpaper and wooden panels. He felt the impact of three hits against his power armour, warning runes winking across his visor as the bolts seared black holes into white ceramite. He felt the sudden jolt of pain as a fourth, set to its maximum megathule range, drew blood from his thigh. The sensation was gone in an instant, smothered by the potent mix of combat stimms pumping through his body.

The Tchari supplicators were still struggling to reload the stubber's belt feed as he slammed into the alcove the girl was sheltering in. He knocked the bust aside to make space in the niche, the pale marble thumping across the carpeted floor. The child stared up at him, and screamed.

'Be still,' Polixis said, trying not to snap.

The child pressed herself against the wall, tears streaming down her face. Polixis bit back a curse and leant back into the corridor, loosing off a shot to keep the supplicator's heads down. Another flurry of las cracked back at him, searing holes in the woodwork.

He knelt before her, reached up to his gorget and unclamped his diagnostor helmet.

'My name is Polixis,' he said, hoping speaking to her face to face would calm her long enough to convince her not to try and flee out into the shot-lashed corridor. 'We must leave. *Now.*'

She stared at him with wide eyes, apparently stunned to find the great, battle-plated automaton was actually flesh and blood, albeit with the broad, solid features of a giant. Finally, she nodded.

'Hold onto my arm,' he said, offering his left gauntlet. She looked at the wicked, bloody blades of his reductor and the pulsing, fleshy gene-seed locked in the narthecium's cryo-receptacle. Another flurry of las-bolts cracked past their hiding place. She took his arm, wrapping her skinny limbs around the ceramite.

Polixis lifted her easily and cradled her against his broad breastplate. He keyed his vox.

'Sergeant Nerva, I have the governor's daughter.'

Without waiting for a response, he stepped out into the corridor, back facing the

supplicators, and began to run.

Almost immediately, his body registered penetrating shots to the rear joint of his left knee, thigh and the lower-right side of his back. The injuries didn't slow him – thankfully, none had found vital organs or struck bone. He kept going, as more crimson bolts arced over and past him, keeping his unarmoured head bowed and the girl cradled in front of him.

He was nearly at the corner when the heavy stubber opened fire. Its battering discharge filled the narrow space and the air swarmed with splinters and glass shards as a storm of high-calibre rounds ripped up the woodwork and wallpaper around the Apothecary. A trio of shots clanged and scored from his backpack before one punched a hole into the small of his back. He grunted but kept going, servos whirring, boots pounding the carpet underfoot.

A side door ahead of him swung open and two more cultists with guns began to emerge, eyes wide in their black masks. Polixis hit the door shoulder-first without pause, the pauldron banging the wood back into the men's faces and throwing them into the room they had emerged from.

Another stubber round slammed into the back of his right thigh. He stumbled, his right hand hitting the wall as his armour's stabilisers kicked in and he found his balance. A few steps more. Another injury to his right leg, the calf this time. The wounds ached and blood stained his pristine armour red in half a dozen places as the damaged tissue clotted with ugly black scabs. But he was close, so close.

A further round hit his right pauldron, ricocheting up into the ceiling and raining plaster down on them. The girl's eyes were screwed tight shut, her whole body tense. A bust to their left disintegrated in a hail of shattered marble as it was hit.

Polixis rounded the corner as the storm of gunfire riddled the wall ahead. He paused for the briefest second, letting out a slow, shuddering breath as he scanned the girl and his own injuries. She was unharmed, though her vitae signs – heightened blood pressure and heart rate – showed extreme stress. At least three of his own wounds would require immediate treatment upon extraction, but they weren't yet debilitating. The pain was turning to a familiar, dull throb. He mag-locked his bolt pistol, twisted the primer on a frag grenade to ten seconds and dropped it on the floor next to the corridor's corner.

'Nearly there,' he said. The girl whimpered. With a grunt of pained exertion, he began to run again, dodging into a study just as the grenade's blast thumped through the building, followed by the screams of their pursuers.

The sound of bolt rifle fire filled Polixis with relief as he raced back into the dining hall. Squad Nerva were still in position. The Intercessors were firing out of the windows, pinning the Tchari trying to rush in on them from outside, while keeping the rolling lawn clear as the vast, armoured bulk of the Thunderhawk gunship *Dromidas* came in to land, ground-plates extended. Shots sparked from the Space Marine flier, and its bolters answered, thundering as they swung back and forth on their pintles, shredding the carefully arranged shrubbery and hedgerows that bordered the lawn.

‘Not a moment too soon, brother,’ Nerva said over the cacophony.

Behind the sergeant, the Thunderhawk’s prow ramp had started to lower, revealing the hold interior. The fire from the circling Tchari was intensifying.

‘Squad, embark,’ Nerva barked. Valent and Plinus laid down covering fire as the Ultramarines broke out across the short, grassy space towards the flier, using their heavily armoured bulk to shield the human carried by Polixis from the hard rounds and las-bolts that whipped and cracked from all sides. A rocket-propelled grenade corkscrewed up from the ruined remains of a nearby garden pagoda, barely missing the gunship’s flank.

‘Quintillius, Priscor,’ Nerva shouted to the last of his Intercessors covering the hall. While the two Primaris Marines stood and dropped back towards the flier, Polixis reached the Thunderhawk’s hold, carrying the girl to one of the transport benches. As the Intercessors came in after him, Nerva glanced down at his narthecium, and saw that only one of the gene-seed vials was full.

‘Tulio?’ he asked.

Polixis looked up from the restraint harness he was securing around the wide-eyed girl’s shoulders. He shook his head.

‘I could not reach him. If I had tried, I would not be here now with Scaevola’s legacy intact.’

Nerva said nothing, expression inscrutable behind his red-and-white helm. He placed one gauntlet on Polixis’ pauldron.

‘I know that you will have done everything in your power to bring him back, Brother-Apothecary,’ he said, as the deck of the *Dromidas* lurched with lifter thrust. ‘That you went back for him shows your dedication to the Chapter, and to my squad. We thank you for your efforts.’

Polixis inclined his head, not trusting himself to speak. Possessing the governor’s daughter would grant them access to the vault, and through it, victory. That was enough, he told himself. It would have to be enough. As he locked himself into his own harness, the gunship shuddered with a powerful

discharge. Its spine-mounted battle cannon had sent a fire-primed infurnace shell hammering into the manor house, through the hall's broken windows.

Amidst the sudden, violent fury of flames and smoke, the *Dromidas* pulled away.

The Chapel of the Dioskuri was silent. Polixis' head had been bowed as he related his confession, but he raised it now to meet the red visor lenses of Kastor's skull helm.

The Chaplain reached up and disengaged the sealant lock, removing the grim piece of armour and setting it on the altar with a thud. The face revealed was the same as Polixis' – firmly set, dark-eyed, with hair the colour of a golden harvest. The similarities went beyond the changes wrought by a primarch's shared genetics.

'Do you remember when I saved the pup from the waters of the Icaldon?' the Chaplain asked. Polixis remained looking up at him, processing the question. The fact that Kastor had removed his helmet broke with the protocol of the confessional.

'I do not,' the Apothecary admitted eventually. 'You know my memories of those days are less complete than yours.'

'Morik the agri-master's flock-hound had plunged into the river and its pup had followed,' Kastor said. 'Both were swept away. I pursued them, and you would have followed had father not dragged you back. I managed to reach the pup, but its mother was gone. I could not save them both.'

'A pup is a different matter to a brother of the Fulminata–' Polixis began to say, but Kastor raised his hand for silence.

'I have only one question for you,' he said. 'Have you come here to confess your guilt to the Chaplain of the Fulminata, or have you come to confess it to your blood-brother?'

Polixis said nothing.

'Your silence is an answer in and of itself,' Kastor said. 'You have committed no crime worthy of a confession. The tactical situation was clear and the Codex supports your actions. Tulio was lost, and the fact that you recovered the daughter of the de la Sarios was an achievement that you should look back on with pride. With her gene-lock we were able to access the weapons vault and turn the orbital defences on the heretics. Had it been the other way round, this entire strike force would have been decimated, and the world of Atari lost.'

'But could I not have recovered both her and Tulio?' Polixis said. 'The

Imperium needs warriors, now more than ever. The loss of even a single battle-brother's legacy is a grievous failing. I alone am accountable for that.'

'The Imperium needs humanity,' Kastor corrected. 'That is the very reason that we exist – to preserve mankind and all of its great works. You are right to speak of legacy. You preserved a legacy when you saved that girl. She will never forget that her life was paid for by one of the Emperor's warriors. In all likelihood, she will grow up to be a firm and righteous leader, one ever-mindful of the dangers that threaten the Imperium and the warriors that stand ready should she have need.'

Polixis said nothing as he considered his brother's words. Kastor went on.

'You are right – a pup cannot be compared to the memory of Brother Tulio. But Agri-master Morik rejoiced when I emerged from the swell with the dog in my arms. He knew that the future of his flock was secure. And the Imperium's future will be secure too, so long as we make the sacrifices required for victory. Atari still stands because you completed the mission. If some of our number are lost – even you or I – in doing so, that is not something to mourn. It is both our duty and our privilege. You should not hold it against yourself either. That we must suffer on occasion is inevitable. We are warriors.'

'It is a difficult lesson,' Polixis admitted. 'One that I fear I must relearn every time. It still hurts.'

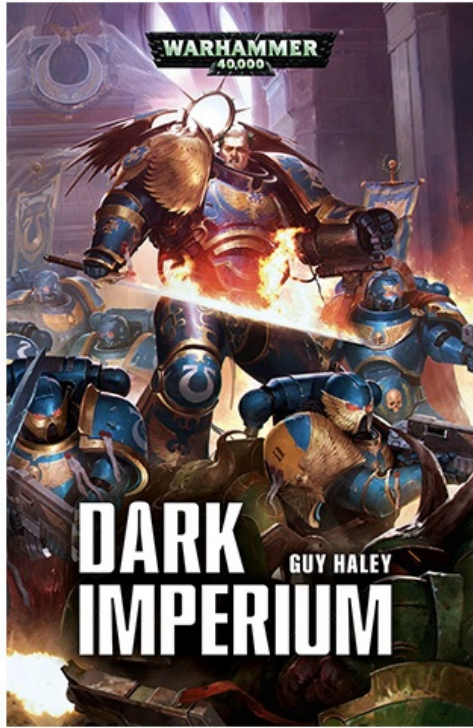
'And that is to your credit,' Kastor said, extending one gleaming, black-armoured hand. Polixis grasped it, the white gauntlet meeting the black, thumb-to-thumb, the brother's grip rather than the warrior's. He stood.

'We are a torch, set aside for mankind's darkest hour,' Kastor said. 'That hour is upon us now. May we burn brightly, you and I, and never waver. We owe that to Tulio's memory, and the future lives of those we save.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robbie MacNiven is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. He has written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *The Last Hunt*, *Carcharodons: Red Tithes* and *Legacy of Russ* as well as the short stories 'Redblade', 'A Song for the Lost' and 'Blood and Iron' for Black Library. His hobbies include re-enacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000.

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