







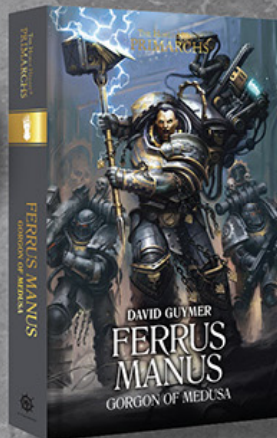
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Blood and Bone – Robbie MacNiven

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# BLOOD AND BONE

By Robbie MacNiven

*Before...*

Mystas was lost, and the only thing left for Kastor to do was fight and die.

'They come here to be purged!' the Chaplain shouted, his words amplified by his skull helm's vox-vocalisers. 'End their vile existence, my brothers! Extend these shores with their xenos dead! Dam the rivers with their corpses! Swell the seas with their foul ichor!'

From atop the ramparts of Pelegron Bay's command bunker, Kastor could see the world ending. The distance, once a beautiful oceanic vista of clear waters and cloudless skies, was now choked with a reddish haze of spores, the heavens black and broiling, riven with purple lightning. Great tendrils were just visible through the haze, questing down ponderously from the torn skies towards the ocean's surface, their vast maws beginning to drain Mystas dry.

The shoreline was even bleaker. The defensive works, bunkers and redoubts that had once bristled atop the dune banks and shingle, were now overrun, lost beneath a chittering tide of seething alien beasts, the rockcrete and flesh of defences and defenders now indiscriminate fodder for the ripper swarms beginning to emerge from the discoloured ocean brine.

'*Salve, I am inbound,*' crackled the voice of Captain Demeter over the vox. '*Hold your position.*'

'Leave me, brother-captain,' Kastor snarled as he reloaded his Absolver bolt pistol. 'Extract the rest of the company.'

*'That is not your decision to make, Chaplain,' Demeter barked 'Hold firm.'*

Any further exchange was lost as another wave of tyrannids hit the bunker's base. They came crashing like the rising tide up and over the outer breastworks, trampling the bodies of their own slaughtered kindred and the Mystas Guard who had held so bravely for so long. They slammed into the ramp of mangled xenos dead that had built up over the last few hours, and began to scale the slope of carapace and leathery, ichor-stained flesh. They were a formless, indistinguishable mass of organic blades and bio-weaponry, hundreds of rows of fangs and black eyes glittering in the early twilight, an irresistible alien triumph.

'Cleanse and burn!' Kastor roared, opening fire. A combat team from Squad Valorous, Brothers Cassians, Vito, Albanus, Dynator and Cypran, were with him, the crash-click of their bolt rifles joining that of his Absolver. They were all that was left of the Imperial resistance at Pelegon Bay, the only ones not yet dead or evacuated.

'More kills for Valorous,' Albanus growled over the vox. 'More than any other in the brotherhood now!'

'Think not of your own glory,' Kastor admonished with a snarl, firing without thinking, letting his visor's targeting reticules pick individual creatures from the morass and link via his auto-senses to the servos in his arm and gauntlet. Every round from the Ultramarines Primaris struck home, yet with the enemy at such a rapidly closing range, and with so many to hit, the need for marksmanship was non-existent. Kastor's spirit soared as he saw alien carapaces and flesh-sacs burst amidst gristly splatters of verdant green ichor, those killed or maimed by the explosive bolts crushed immediately in the feral stampede.

How quickly he had come to despise these creatures, these pathetic bio-slaves. Even without the hypno-induction and mind shearing, the combat lectures and the Reclusiam's sermon-briefings on the Chapter's glorious legacy, he was convinced he would despise them anyway. They were flesh-eating puppets, bent to devour everything that was good and clean and holy by the will of their unknowable master. Kastor would not simply deny them. He would butcher every single one of them.

Suddenly, his bolt pistol clicked empty. He mag-locked it and quickly ignited his crozius arcanum, Salve Imperator, as the xenos closed the last few yards and leapt the corpse-strewn parapets through the bolt-fire of the

Intercessors.

'Courage and honour!' Kastor roared. 'By the time darkness falls here we shall be with the Emperor in His glory!' Lightning wreathed the spiked golden skull of his war mace, the crozius thundering down like a righteous judgement on the skull of the first xeniform to reach the bunker's rooftop. The hormagaunt's distended cranium crumpled in a shower of stinking grey matter and splintered chitin. He reversed the stroke even as the beast went down, its momentum sending it clattering off the Chaplain's bone-plated breastplate.

Beside him, Squad Valorous had also been reduced to their close combat weapons, having no time to reload. Kastor realised he was instinctively snarling the Oath of Retribution as he led them in the killing, great swings of Salve Imperator launching the broken remains of the xenos swarm-beasts back off the parapets into the morass crowding below.

But their advantage did not last for long. Soon, the colossal leader-creatures were upon them. Kastor mounted the corpse-littered parapet and met them as the beasts scaled their minions' eviscerated remains. The tyranid warriors towered over the Primaris, their ululating shrieks and the skull-itching invasion of their hive-presence coordinating the smaller creatures around them.

It had started to rain, a deluge mixed in with vile alien spore-pods that clogged and choked the Ultramarines' vent tabs and armour grilles. Kastor knocked aside the claws of the first alien warrior to crack his crozius against its exoskeleton, splitting the torso. The creature showed no sign of pain or injury, raking the claws of its secondary limbs against Kastor's gorget and breastplate, gouging the ceramite down to its plasteel under-layer.

'Die, Slave-beast,' Kastor spat. He slammed his right pauldron forwards inside the creature's guard, unbalancing it. It jabbed down with its chitin blades, scoring deep grooves in his backpack and shoulder plate, but Kastor struck the wound in its side with a clenched gauntlet, further splintering its carapace amidst a flood of stinking green ichor. The thing went back further, lost its footing and tumbled down into its kindred with a sickening crunch.

The Ultramarine had no time to recover. Another tyranid warrior lunged for him, moving faster than seemed possible for a beast of such size.

Kastor brushed aside the first of its talon-limbs, but couldn't avoid the second. It struck him between two of the stylised ribs encasing his black breastplate. He grunted at the sudden pain that spiked through his torso as it crunched through the ceramite and plasteel, then flesh and bone.

'Brother-Chaplain!' The shout came from Brother Cassians, the closest Intercessor. The blood-splattered Ultramarine had drawn his gladius and now he came barrelling in from Kastor's left. His short sword slashed a silver arc through the air and into the xenos' limb, slicing bone and shattering the chitin blade that was lodged in Kastor's breastplate. More ichor sprayed the two Primaris as Cassians grappled with the thing's secondary limbs, the alien's serrated maw yawning as it tried to rip open the Ultramarine's helmet.

Kastor smashed down Salve once more, breaking the warrior's skull. He swallowed, and realised there was blood in his mouth. Warning signs burst across his visor, and his vitae markers started blinking. The pain in his chest was a dull, deep ache. Cassians was bellowing something over the external vox, but his Lyman's Ear appeared to be malfunctioning. All he could hear was a keening shriek.

Another xenos had mounted the breach, and this one bore different bio-weapons. Cassians was just turning to face it when he was struck head-on by a thick gout of acid, sprayed from the contracting orifice of its organic mesh-rifle. The Ultramarine stumbled back, dripping helm to boot in thick, viscous alien liquid that steamed as it ate relentlessly through his blue armour. Kastor tried to shout a warning, but blood choked him, splattering the inside of his helm and making him gasp painfully for breath.

Cassians' screams filled the vox as the acid found flesh, then bone. Dynator and Vito came together to try to shield him, gladius and chainsword drawn, but Kastor knew it was all pointless. His own signs were fluctuating rapidly now as aliens pressed in from every side, and he realised the chitin blade wedged in his chest had likely scored and lodged up against one of his twin hearts.

He also realised that the keening sound wasn't a hearing malfunction. It was the noise of vectored flight engines. A hail of bolt-rounds followed, distracting him from thoughts of his own mortality. The xenos immediately around him went down with hideous shrieks and crunching

noises, and the Chaplain became aware of a heavy vibration shaking through the sodden air. He half turned in the press of twitching, dying tyranids, as a great shadow fell across the last defenders of Pelegron Bay.

*Sicarius* had arrived. The Overlord gunship was vast, a glorious example of the power of the Primaris, a lord of the skies. It descended like a cruciform fortress, the alien rain pouring harmlessly from its great, sloped plates and sizzling around its engine block. Its cannons and servitor-manned close protection systems were laying down a curtain of fire around the Ultramarines beneath, clearing the roof of the bunker and turning the xenos swarming towards them into a carpet of churned meat. The prow entrance hatch, set beneath the glassy, aquiline cockpit section, dropped forwards amidst the jagged mass of alien dead.

'Recover Cassians! Get him to safety,' Kastor barked at the rest of the combat squad, swallowing blood. Cassians himself was on his knees, trying to claw away the pervasive acid that had pockmarked most of his upper body. Kastor turned back to the swarm as Dynator began to haul the Intercessor towards *Sicarius'* waiting hold.

'You will all burn, xenos scum,' the Chaplain snarled, spitting blood at the tyranids as they came on amidst the rain and bolter fire, heedless of their own butchered dead. 'If not on this world, then the next.'

His crozius smashed aside another hormagaunt, its blades rebounding impotently from his power armour. The tyranid warrior behind it used its twitching body for a shield as its powerful hind legs drove it into Kastor. Before the Chaplain could recover it brought its claw-limbs raking across his helmet. His head was slammed to one side, and fresh pain shot through his skull. He tasted blood again, thick and cloying, and realised his visor display had blinked from existence.

Primaris, like all Adeptus Astartes, were almost impossible to stun. The Chaplain recovered immediately from what would have been a death blow for a mortal, swinging his mace up in a cracking underarm strike that slammed into the jaw of the tyranid and nearly ripped its head from its body. It was only as Kastor made to follow up that he stumbled.

The thing was still alive. Its neck was bent horribly to one side, but as the sudden pain of his injuries struck him it snatched his head with its lower limbs. The tyranid warrior dug its talons into the gouges already ripped in Kastor's skull helm. He screamed as the helmet cracked and split, and the

talons raked into the flesh of the right side of his face, barely missing his eye. Blood was blinding him and clogging in the back of his throat as he lashed out instinctively, the motion sending fresh pain through his chest. The shattered talon was still embedded there. With every passing second he felt more as though his primary heart was on the verge of rupturing. His breathing quickened, and he felt fresh, frenzied energy fill his limbs as his body, built only for war, flooded with another dose of combat stimms, driving him to keep on killing even as his vital signs began to fail.

He was going to die. The realisation made him angrier. There were still xenos to kill.

His blows broke the xenos trying to gouge and tear his head off. Though half-blinded by blood, he split its head and shattered its broken neck, Salve pounding down repeatedly as Kastor was driven into a bloodied, pain-fuelled frenzy.

*'Brother-Chaplain, back,'* commanded a voice in his ear. It was Captain Demeter. The order was accompanied by a gout of heat as flames washed past him, coming close to igniting his drenched vestments. The burning promethium caught more onrushing xenos in its spill, and the reek of sizzling alien meat filled the rain slashed air as they ignited, their shrieks lost in the thunder of bolters and the scream of *Sicarius'* engines.

'Cassians,' Kastor managed to grunt, hoping his helmet's vox was still functioning.

'He is within the hold. Now back, before I drag you myself.'

The Chaplain realised that there were battle-brothers either side of him now, not the Intercessors of Squad Valorius but new heavily armoured Aggressors of Squad Tiro, clad in their thick Gravis plates. Their flamestorm gauntlets created an inferno across the bunker's roof, immolating the xenos attempting to get at the retreating Ultramarines. Still they came on though, even with their chitin splitting and their flesh sloughing off in the heat. Pain and death meant nothing to them. Their only desire was to feed.

Kastor's wrath redoubled, and he took a step back towards the swarm. A fist on his pauldron arrested the motion, and he half turned to find Captain Demeter beside him, expression inscrutable behind his white helm.

'On board the Overlord, now,' the captain snapped. Finally, Kastor obeyed, the blood choking in his throat stifling any retort. The sudden change in

pace made him stumble. Strength abandoned him as he tried to pass the captain, and his legs buckled, only his armour's servos keeping him partially upright. He felt ceramic scrape against ceramic as one of Squad Valorous, he didn't know who, caught him. His vision was all red now, red with hatred, red with blood, the two the only constants as his thoughts started to wander.

Someone mag-locked something to his armour as he was half dragged on board *Sicarius*. He realised it was an apothecarion priority tag.

'Say your prayers and hold fast, Chaplain,' he heard Demeter shout over the hydraulics of the door hatch. 'You will be with Helix again soon.'

Polixis' duty demanded that he leave his blood-brother to die.

The Apothecary's diagnostic helmet linked with the vitae signs of half a dozen of his battle-brothers was currently reading Kastor as only the second highest-risk patient within the *Spear of Macragge's* medicae bay. The first was Brother Cassians. The Intercessor had been struck head on by a great gout of xenos bio-acid. It had seared away the holy plasteel and ceramic of his Mark X power armour, and eaten its way through his flesh and into the very circuits of his black carapace. The skin of his torso was now a grey, liquid slurry, clinging to his fused ribcage, bubbling like some vile daemon's brew.

'The mark three,' Polixis said, voice clicking crisply from helmet's vocaliser grille. He extended one gauntlet without looking and received the scalpel he'd requested from one of the white shift-clad medicae serfs manning the bay.

During his studies, when he had first joined the apothecarion Polixis had read that it was common for human combat medics to refuse treatment for more fatally injured patients when there were those who could more readily be saved. Such a luxury was rare for a Space Marine, especially a Primaris. There was very little that, if not immediately fatal, could not be recovered from. That meant treating all equally. And that meant that Chaplain Kastor, with one heart scarred by a chitin blade still embedded in his torso, and most of the right side of his face laid open by a set of talons, would have to wait.

Polixis gripped his surgical blades a little tighter, freeing Cassians' melted flesh from the muscle and bone beneath with long, practised slices.

The patient was clearly trying to be silent, but a low, agonised moan escaped from between his clenched teeth. Polixis worked with expert speed and precision, the stink of liquidised meat enough to make several of the human serfs stumble into one of the ancillary blocks to vomit. He had to be fast, for everyone's sakes.

'Pieter scope,' he demanded, taking the tool without looking and sliding it into one of the black carapace ports he'd cleared of dead tissue. Around him, the *Spear of Macragge's* medicae bay reflected its master: spartan, sterile, ordered, rows of surgical slabs beneath moveable clusters of operating lumens ranked alongside tool trays, stimm and salve cabinets, washing plinths and blinking vitae monitors. There were four other Adeptus Astartes arrayed on operating tables besides Cassians and Kastor, all of them less seriously injured, all being seen to by Polixis' human medicae assistants.

Most of the humans were experienced practitioners in their own right, but none could match the genhanced speed and precision of a fully inducted member of the Chapter's apothecarion.

'The primarch and the Emperor have blessed you, Brother Cassians,' Polixis said as he checked the scope, linked now with diagnostor display. 'The xenos acid was not able to work its way through your bone marrow. If the shock of your wound does not kill you, you will live to fight once more.'

'You have my thanks, brother,' Cassians managed to snarl from between clenched teeth, and Polixis noticed the Primaris' huge fists had bent the metal edge of the operating slab with a shaking, white-knuckle hold. 'But I pray, see to Salve now.'

'Not until my work here is done,' Polixis answered brusquely. He received a canister of synthskin from one of the serfs, Juris, and applied it to the area of raw muscle that had once been Cassians upper torso. After a few tense moments it took, bonding with the flesh of the Ultramarine, providing a first protective layer while the tissue healed and recovered from the depredations of the xenos acid.

'Outer dermal layer,' the Apothecary ordered, receiving another canister, this one a tougher exo-application. He applied it to the initial raw coating, noting as he did that Cassians' vitae signs were slowly stabilising. His pained moans had ceased and his grip on the slab was no longer the

crushing death-grasp of a Primaris whose Belisarian Furnace was in danger of being triggered by imminent death.

It was time to move on.

'Juris, take over here,' he ordered, making way for the medicae serf. 'Once the outer dermal plast hardens sufficiently, keep it clean and attend to any blistering. Maintain two doses of revotal, and a shot of ambulum if you deem it necessary. I leave it to your discretion. Clear?'

'Yes, Apothecary,' Juris said, hurrying to ready the heavy syringes Polixis had specified.

He moved to the nearest ambulatory stand and ran his white gauntlets beneath the flow of counterseptic water, trying not to rush, trying to maintain his usual detachment, watching as the foamy spray clawed away thick, grey globules of Cassians' melted flesh. Normally a thorough cleansing between emergency treatments would not have been necessary. Primaris were untroubled by the dangers of common infections and dirtied wounds but dealing with those injured by the Great Devourer was another matter. The primarch alone knew what microscopic horrors tyrannid bio-acid contained.

He finished the washing cycle and moved along the ward to the next bay, drawing back the operating screen. Artema, the *Spear of Macragge's* primary chirurgon-serf, had been monitoring the Chaplain while his blood brother worked on the other patients. She had already removed his broken skull helm and undone the clasps of his breastplate, before administering stabilising stimm shots through his armour's injection ports. Polixis acknowledged her as he moved past the rigged lumens and vitae monitor, coming to stand beside his brother.

There he lay, Chaplain Kastor of the Dioskuri. He had been placed atop the surgical slab like a funerary statue, still armoured bar his helm, a snapped length of chitin protruding from his chest. His face was as bone-white as the stylised ribcage encasing his breastplate. The features, so familiar to Polixis, were now marred by three great, bloody slashes, thick with congealed blood, that ran down the right side of his head, raw and glistening.

The Chaplain's eyes were open but unseeing. He looked like a corpse, until they moved, fixing on Polixis. Though the Apothecary's own eyes were hidden behind the ruby lenses of his white helm, he knew the

Chaplain was recalling their similarities. Both brothers shared the same pallid gaze, soft grey, like a sea fog. Kastor told him their mother had claimed his were harder, more like stone. Polixis, apparently, had the kinder eyes of the two. He could only take his word for it.

'Cassians?' the Chaplain said as Polixis moved to his side. 'Stabilising,' the Apothecary replied, his voice terse. 'I believe he will live, though his suffering is great.'

'Pain is a path to righteousness,' Kastor replied, the words coming by rote. There was no pain in them, despite the mangling of his face or the length of chitin still embedded in his chest. Polixis inserted a prognosticator into his left tasset port, taking a more detailed reading of his vitae signs. They weren't good.

'Remain still, Salve,' he said as he triggered the small chainblade attached the narthecium encasing his left wrist. The surgical buzz filled the ward, and Kastor grunted, rolling his eyes in an exasperated fashion.

'Wise as ever, dear Helix. I was just about to rise up and return to the front line.'

'There isn't a front line, not any more,' Polixis said without a hint of humor, his tone bitter. 'Mystas is lost, and the *Spear of Macragge* is bound for a jump into warp space. We are expected to translate within the hour.'

To his surprise the Chaplain didn't greet the ill news with zealous anger. Polixis applied the chainblade to the base of the chitin spike in his chest, where it had punched through Kastor's buckled breastplate. The alien blade had nicked the Chaplain's primary heart and was still wedged up against it. Simply ripping it free would likely rupture a carotid, at the very least. Instead, Polixis severed the alien material, the chainblade's carbon alloy sawing through the bony substance. He deactivated it when the final piece came away, and passed the severed length to Artema for incineration.

'There are five giants in the collective square,' Kastor said abruptly. Polixis, reaching for his plasma node as the Chaplain spoke, paused.

'Five giants in the square,' Kastor repeated. His eyes had glazed over, and he was no longer looking at Polixis but up into the brilliant light of the medicae lumen above the operating slab. 'All armoured in blue.'

Polixis finished uncoupling the plasma node latched to his back pack and linked it through the port in Kastor's left vambrace. He triggered the inbuilt transfusion pack, the plastek of the node turning crimson as it

injected fresh blood flow into the wounded Primaris.

'I am not afraid of them, though I know I should be,' Kastor went on, as though no longer aware of his surroundings. Polixis realised that he had probably entered the semi-catatonica, an early phase of the sus-an membrane's regenerative state. It was not a good sign. Beyond the triggering of his Belisarian Furnace, there was no surer indication that he was slipping away. He had to operate faster.

'Are they brothers of the Chapter?' he asked as he injected a coag-stimm via his multisyringe in through the Chaplain's tasset. It was always best to engage a speaker on the edge of a sus-an reaction, to keep their mental state engaged. As he spoke, he noticed his own heartbeats being monitored on his visor. They were reaching a rate more commonly associated with a combat situation, rather than performing surgery. He grimaced.

'They are Ultramarines,' Kastor confirmed. 'The champions from the stories.'

Polixis carefully levered Kastor's unclasped breastplate away, murmuring the Rite of Contrition to the armour's spirit as he did so. There was no time for further benedictions. He exposed his brother's black carapace, and the shard of chitin embedded in the Chaplain's chest.

'Mark three, and have the mark two ready,' the Apothecary ordered, taking the scalpel Artema offered him. He made incisions around the puncture wound, then exchanged the scalpel for a broad-bladed surgical knife. Grip firm, he cut through the thick musculature and sinew-cables of his brother's chest on either side of the chitin shard, piercing the black carapace after applying his servo-enhanced strength to it.

He was about to call for a pair of flesh hooks when he realised Artema was already proffering them to him. That was why she was the Fulminata's chief human surgeon. He took them with a wordless nod and dug them into the deep incisions he had carved, keeping the skin and muscle peeled away from the Chaplains bone-plate.

'They try to stop me from seeing them,' Kastor said. It was surreal, hearing his voice speaking slowly and calmly, even as blades and hooks carved him open. The Apothecary forced the uncomfortable dissonance from his mind, taking a bone saw from Artema and speaking once more to his brother.

'Why?'

'They say they need me here.'

Polixis triggered the saw. Its buzz, not unlike that of the narthecium's chainblade, rose shrilly as the Apothecary applied it to the bared bone either side of the stub of chitin. It scythed through the remaining scraps of Kastor's muscle and bit deep, its adamantium teeth slowly but surely chewing through the fused ribs of the Primaris.

'I'm going anyway,' Kastor said, a hint of anger colouring his voice. 'You can't stop me.'

'You're going *nowhere*,' Polixis said with a grunt as he finished carving through his younger brother's chest. He withdrew the saw blade carefully and spoke to Artema.

'I am going to remove the shard. Take it to the incineration crucible immediately.'

'Yes, Apothecary,' Artema said, expression unreadable behind her surgical mask. Polixis reached towards the remains of the chitin blade, now at the centre of the incisions he had made. He would have preferred to use a pictor scope to assess the exact angle, and just how flush it was with his brother's main heart, but there was no time. The Chaplain had gone silent.

Polixis grasped the shard with the bloodied tips of his gauntlet and pulled. The chitin, loosened in the bone by his earlier work, came away cleanly. Blood welled and jetted from the wound as he passed the wicked shard to Artema, who placed it immediately onto the surgical tray of a chrome-plated medicae servitor, to be taken for incineration in the bay's crucible unit.

'Auto-cauteriser,' Polixis said urgently, taking the tool and leaning forwards over the now-gaping chest wound. He probed it carefully, letting his diagnostor array assist in his assessment. The flesh of Kastor's main heart pulsed before his eyes, labouring as it haemorrhaged from a wound to the right ventricle. The carotids were intact, however. The alien blade had nicked the heart's tough musculature, but not completely ruptured it.

Polixis set to work with the cauteriser nub, the air abruptly filling with the stink of burning flesh. The vitae monitor next to the operating slab and the prognosticator still inserted into Kastor's leg had both begun to chime and flash with warnings, and more danger indicators burst across Polixis' visor display. He blink-deleted them, focusing on his work. He was doing everything he could.

Throughout it all, Kastor had remained still and silent. His eyes were still open. For a few seconds, as he checked that the cauterisation was clean and leaned back from his bloody work, Polixis was afraid the monitor signs were incorrect, and that his brother had passed. But then Kastor spoke again.

'Sometimes I think about how I forced you to be here, brother. I do not regret it. But I wonder what life you would have had on Iax without me.'

'What are you talking about?' Polixis asked, glancing at the monitor, then once more at the wound, watching for the telltale signs of cardiac arrest or failure. The Chaplain's secondary heart was beating at an unsustainable rate, working to account for the near-failure of its twin.

'Was I not just speaking of it?' Kastor replied. Polixis realised that his younger brother's eyes had refocused, and he was looking at him once more. The realisation startled the Apothecary.

'You were speaking from memory?' he said uncertainly.

'You must remember when the Chapter first came to our home. Those giants from legend, leading the trials of the Iaxian summer, seeking new recruits for the glory of Guilliman and the Emperor.'

'You know I do not recall things as readily as you, little brother,' Polixis said quietly, glad that his helmet was hiding his scowl. He had misdiagnosed him, he now realised. He hadn't been on the edge of the sus-an regression, hadn't even been in a state of semi-catatonia. He'd simply been recalling memories of their shared childhood on Iax, memories Polixis' indoctrination had long ago erased. For whatever reason, Kastor's mind hadn't shared the same fate during the induction processes.

'You held me back,' Kastor said, voice incredulous as Polixis lack of recollection became apparent. 'You and father. Then, when I swore I would go no matter what, you said you would go with me. You swore an oath to father you would keep me safe.'

Polixis realised that, despite the wounds still disfiguring his face, Kastor was smiling. The expression sent a chill through the Apothecary.

'I... do not remember,' he repeated quietly. 'That time is lost to me, Salve. As is Iax.'

'It should not be,' Kastor said firmly, the smile melting away. 'Not while one of us still lives.'

To that, Polixis did not have an answer. He checked the monitor again,

noting the stabilisation of Kastor's vitals. The surgery was holding.

'Stitch and bind the main wound,' he said to Artema, who had stood silent throughout the exchange. 'And attend to the Brother-Chaplain's facial injuries. I fear they will mark you permanently, brother.'

'They will remind me of my duty,' the Chaplain said. 'Of my limitations and my failings. They will teach me humility. Those are valuable lessons.'

As Artema set to work on Kastor's bared chest, Polixis turned towards the ambulatory stand once more, eager to wash his brother's blood from his hands. He paused, however, looking back down at Kastor.

'You know an Apothecary takes his oaths seriously, little brother. Regardless of when they were made.'

'I would expect nothing less.'

'I will protect you.'

'You still think I need protecting?' Kastor asked, his smile returning, even as Artema removed the flesh hooks and began to sew the Primaris' tough muscle tissue back together.

'From where I'm standing, yes, it looks like you do.'

Kastor snorted, failing to disguise a wince as the movement jarred his open wound. 'Still trying to hold me back, brother.'

'Still at your side, for as long as either of us draws breath,' Polixis answered. 'Now rest, brother. And when I return, perhaps you can tell me more of home.'

'I should like that, Helix.'

Polixis cleaned his gauntlets and moved on to the next battle-brother.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

An extract from *Blood of Iax*.



## **KASTOR**

The Fulminata had come to Shebat Alpha, and none could stand before them.

Kastor, Chaplain of the Dioskuri, roared. It was an expression of pure rage, fuelled by piety and stoked by righteous hatred. The noise, amplified by his vox-vocaliser, made the bellows and grunts of the greenskins surrounding him sound pitiable by comparison.

Salve Imperator shattered an ork's skull. It then snapped the neck of a second, hurling the beast back into its kindred. Energy crackled around the skull-topped crozius arcanum, blackened blood evaporating from it with every searing strike of the power mace. Bones cracked and flesh was pulverised. The towering Primaris Chaplain was a whirlwind of furious judgement, his leather cassock and vestments snapping around him, his pitch-black power armour splattered with a patina of alien viscera.

He had moved too far ahead. He was cut off. The realisation made him smile.

An ork attempted to headbutt him. It rammed itself impotently against the stylised ribcage that encased his breastplate. Kastor snatched the beast by the throat with his free hand, hauling it from its feet so that its piggy eyes were level with the deep ruby lenses of his skull helm. The beast bellowed at him, spittle spraying from its maw, but the Chaplain silenced it with a headbutt of his own, bone cracking and tusks snapping as he caved in the alien's face.

He dropped the ork, his armour registering the strikes of crude cleavers and fists from all sides. None penetrated. He spun in a tight arc, vestment

scrolls whipping around him, and cleared a semicircle of space with a single swing of *Salve Imperator*.

‘See how easily the alien falls before the weaponry of the righteous,’ the Chaplain boomed. ‘Praise the Emperor for giving us this chance to enact His will!’

His slaughterous euphoria was interrupted by the familiar, battering thunder of bolter fire. Blood and sinew burst around him as a hail of mass-reactive bolts shredded the mob attacking him, their remains splattering his armour. Already the runtier greenskins at the rear of the melee had turned tail and were fleeing back up the street, perhaps unwilling to engage something that could bellow louder than one of their warbosses. Kastor let them go, the battle fury draining abruptly from his genhanced body.

‘Too far again, *Salve*,’ said Captain Demeter. The commander of the *Fulminata* was clad in his *Gravis* plate, the proud heraldry of the Ultramarines befouled by blood and grime. Behind him was Intercessor Squad *Nerva* and Ancient Mars *Skyrus*, who bore the lightning standard of *Fulminata*. Its blue-and-white silk rippled in the smoke shrouding the embattled street, the weak sunlight glinting from the wings of the golden bolt-and-aquila that tipped its crosspiece.

‘The xenos exist to be purged,’ Kastor responded. ‘And *I* exist to perform that purging.’

The deafening report of a battle cannon interrupted Demeter before he could respond, the shell shrieking over the heads of the *Primaris*. It detonated further up the street in a great storm of broken masonry and ork remains. Kastor turned to survey the Imperial forces behind the Ultramarines – a squadron of *Voitekan Leman Russ* battle tanks grinding forwards in single file, supported by a platoon of *Astra Militarum* infantry from the same world. They paused, crouched on the pavement as they stared up in undisguised awe at the *Primaris* who had broken the ork mob. Kastor raised *Salve Imperator*, the *crozius* still wreathed with lightning.

‘See how the beasts run, soldiers of the Throne,’ he said, his voice booming over the growl of engines and rattle of nearby gunfire. ‘This is *our* city, the *Emperor’s* city, and we will reclaim it one step at a time. Press on. Crush these alien remains beneath your boots and the treads of your mighty tanks. The Emperor protects!’

The advance continued.

‘Watch the manufactorum colonnades to the right,’ Demeter ordered over the vox, highlighting a series of towering industrial pillars on the shared tactical display. The huge rockcrete structures had once been testimony to Shebat’s productivity but now lay cast down in rubble and ruin, a metaphor for the city’s fall. It had been great once – the foremost manufactorum of Ikara IX’s Adamantium Belt, a refinery for the vast deposits of ore mined in the Tombstones, the mountain range within whose barren flanks the city nestled. Four millennia of industry had created a sprawling hive of smokestacks and smelter-scrapes, surrounded by a thicket of prefabricated habitation blocks and a further sprawl of slums and shack dwellings.

Then the green menace had come to the Ikara System, and Shebat’s productivity had ended.

Kastor blink-acknowledged Demeter’s directive via the visor display and drew his Absolver bolt pistol. Its heavy-calibre rounds made a mockery of even the tough hides and thick bones of the orks, each detonating shell bursting apart chests and skulls in gouts of blood and pulverised organs. He forced himself to check his pace so he didn’t begin to outdistance his battle-brothers once more.

‘With the support of the Astra Militarum, we’ve already succeeded in pushing the greenskins back,’ Demeter continued. ‘The xenos currently fester in a refinery square overlooked by the industrial plants’ ruins.’

The map of Shebat overlaid on Kastor’s visor display showed that they were less than a mile from the day’s primary objective – the Excelsior Arch.

It had been more than a Terran year since war had engulfed Shebat. For a while, when the port city of Melu burned and the greenskin forces had reached the outskirts of Ikara IX’s capital city, Kroten, it had seemed as though the planet would fall to the alien invasion.

Then the Fulminata, a Primaris demi-company of the Ultramarines Chapter, had been despatched, alongside the primary Imperial Navy subsector battlefleet, three Astra Militarum army groups and a *conroi* of Imperial Knights from House du Frain. Within five days, Kastor and his brothers had driven the xenos from the capital’s outskirts, then followed up by breaking the greenskin siege lines encircling Merkoro.

Two weeks ago the brotherhood had arrived outside Shebat. The Astra Militarum's Third Army, commanded by Field Marshal Stefan Klos, had secured the slum sprawl and established three beachheads into the city proper. Now the drive to the Gorgon was underway.

'Maintain fire protocols,' Demeter said over the vox, his voice as calm and measured as it was during the company's firing rites on board the *Spear of Macragge*. Intercessor squad Nerva had secured the main-thoroughfare leading into the square, laying down bolt rifle fire as the orks charged them from all four corners. The open space allowed the trio of Voitekan battle tanks to spread out, their heavy bolters and battle cannons hammering shells point-blank into the oncoming mobs.

'See how the Emperor's wrath cuts them down!' Kastor bellowed to the Astra Militarum infantry squads advancing out between their tanks, adding their las-fire to the barrage. 'Keep firing! Not a single greenskin is to leave this place alive!'

'Kastor,' Demeter said, his tone full of warning. The Chaplain had begun to advance again.

'They will not stand, brother-captain,' he said.

'And you will not present them with an easy target,' the captain responded. Return fire broke out from the ruins around the square's edges, more mobs of greenskins armed with crude sidearms flocking to join the battle spreading through the refineries. Their shooting was worse than inaccurate, but there was enough of it for Kastor to take two hits to his breastplate and another to his left greave in quick succession.

'Lieutenant, bring your weaponry to bear on the refineries,' Demeter said, the order routed to the commander of the Voitekan armour. A clipped affirmation coincided with the whine of turret hydraulics as the battle tanks switched targets.

They never got a chance to fire. The enhanced aural units of Kastor's armour detected a high-pitched whistle, growing rapidly louder.

*'Incoming!'*

Sergeant Nerva was the first to shout the warning, issuing it over his external vocaliser for the benefit of the Guard infantry.

The first shell hit the space between the leftmost and centremost of the three Leman Russ battle tanks. The Voitekan infantry squad there simply vanished in a hail of metal and rubble that battered the sides of their tanks,

spattering the vehicles with tattered human remains.

Another five shells struck the square within three seconds of the first. Fire blossomed, the detonations ripping indiscriminately into greenskins and Imperial soldiers alike. One hit the ground barely a dozen yards to Kastor's right. He felt his auto-stabilisers lock as the blast wave struck, accompanied by a storm of rubble and dirt. His armour blared with alarms, the auto-senses indicating shrapnel damage to his right pauldron and knee joint. When the smoke settled, however, he stood unmoved, his crozius-shining bright with destructive energies amidst the haze.

'Xenos artillery,' Demeter voxed. 'Coming from across the river. I'm routing the coordinates to Serxis, but it will be at least twenty minutes before the bombardment cannon is locked.'

'Priscor and Quintillius have been hit,' Sergeant Nerva added. 'If we stay here, we die. We either go back or we go into them.'

'Into them then,' Kastor snarled, feeling his battle fury surging to life once more.

'As the Brother-Chaplain says,' Demeter responded calmly, as the air filled with the shriek of more incoming shells. 'Primaris, advance.'

## **POLIXIS**

'Medicae!'

Polixis was already moving up along the street's left-hand pavement when he heard the scream. Ahead, he could see a platoon of Namarian Imperial Guardsmen caught in a barrage of crudely aimed ork firepower, coming from a bombed-out residential block. He watched as the Namarian's colonel went down.

Polixis kept to the side of the street, instinctively knowing that it was unlikely any of the orks' shots would be coming his way when there were so many targets out of cover ahead of him. In just a few seconds, the Namarians had taken a slew of casualties. He saw the platoon's medic – caught sprinting towards the fallen colonel – collapse in a burst of blood as he in turn was hit in the side of the head.

'Medicae!' came the scream again.

Polixis cursed. He considered carrying on through the haulage work yards to his left, to link back up with Squad Valorious. But with the Namarian

colonel down, their entire advance was stalling, and the wider spearhead couldn't afford that. Against his better judgement, Polixis cursed and broke from cover.

He ran from the street's edge and crossed to the downed colonel, using his bulk to shield the man. Shots came cracking his way, but he was too busy assessing the Namarian's injury to even notice. The man had taken a hit to the leg, probably an artery shot. Polixis spent precious moments slicing away his blood-drenched fatigues, trying to decide how to deal with the wound. His own equipment was far superior to anything carried by the Guard, but he had forgotten just how incredibly fragile humans were. It was only at times such as these, kneeling over the wounded soldier, that he properly appreciated the gulf between the Imperium's fighting forces.

Arterial spray painted Polixis' white gauntlets red. The Primaris Apothecary let out a slow breath as he tied off the torn femoral artery, applying a coating of counterseptic powder to the bloody gash in the colonel's thigh. The Namarian screamed.

'I have nothing for your pain,' Polixis said gruffly. 'Everything that will fortify my brothers would kill your kind.' Polixis bound the wound tightly with a bandage pad taken from the man's supplies and looked across at the Namarian platoon's corpsman. He was kneeling on the pavement, hands and forearms as red and soaking as the Space Marine's. His expression was an all-too-familiar rictus of concentration as he fought to tourniquet a leg torn almost in half by an ork slug round.

More hard rounds cracked past, one grazing Polixis' shoulder. Namarian infantry were supporting a combat team from Intercessor Squad Valorious as they secured the haulage work yards of the refinery district, a slow, grinding battle that had been going on since dawn. It had put their sector of the assault behind schedule. Polixis had been drawn from the main spearhead by two injuries to Valorious, Brothers Vespasior and Gallus. Neither were fatal, but the same could not be said of the wounds the Namarians were sustaining.

The Apothecary's heads-up tactical display lit with new information. The spearhead of the Primaris assault, driving directly for the Excelsior Arch, had suffered three casualties. The log scrolling past identified heavy shelling, and the guns' thumping reports were audible from where he

stood. He blink-clicked the company command channel.

‘This is Helix. Do you have need of me, captain?’

‘*If not now then we will soon, Brother-Apothecary,*’ crackled Demeter’s voice, overlaid by the crash of detonations. ‘*Redeploy to our coordinates with all haste.*’

Polixis sent an affirmation and moved to the side of the Guard corpsman struggling nearby. He bent down and grasped the bloody limb in one hand, yanking the tourniquet into place with the other. The wounded man wailed, slick with sweat, his face a wretched mask. He had the white eyes of a beast in pain, stripped of the intelligence and dignity of the human race. It was difficult to resist an impulsive sense of disgust at such a display. He is only a man, Polixis found himself thinking. Now was no time to consider the contrast between the Guardsman’s desperate, agonised expression and his own stark white battleplate and helm. He wondered whether the man’s terror was magnified by his presence. It would not surprise him.

‘I must go now,’ he said to the corpsman, who was looking at him with wide eyes. ‘Check to make sure it’s tight enough and tie off the popliteal. As far as I can judge your kind, the colonel is stable, but you must get him to cover. Remember your training and you will save lives here today.’

The man visibly struggled to find a response, staring at the giant, white-armoured warrior, but Polixis was already moving off, breaking into a run as he left the humans behind and headed south.

He checked the visor display again as he went. One of the three wounded sigils – Ovido’s – had flashed from yellow to red. He was flatlining rapidly, the vitae signs on Polixis’ diagnostor helm fading. The Apothecary picked up speed, servos whirring, boots pounding debris-strewn streets as he used the burst map uploaded to the shared tac-display to navigate along the rear of the ground taken in the morning’s assault. The orks had been driven from their positions across the city, yielding four miles in barely an hour and a half.

The Gorgon was almost within touching distance.

Polixis’ map turned him westwards, back onto the leading edge of the assault. Staying behind the immediate front line would take too long – he would have to skirt through it. Passing a trail of injured Astra Militarum troopers and stretcher-bearers in the pelts of the Tmaran Scalp-takers, he headed down a side street away from a gunfight that appeared to have

broken out in the smelter work yard of a refinery primus. The tribal warriors cringed back at the Space Marine's passing, averting their eyes from a being Polixis knew they likely deified. He barely even acknowledged their presence, instead activating the vox.

'Prime Tertiary, be advised, I am inbound on the rear of your position.'

'*Acknowledged, Helix,*' came the reply from Lieutenant Samson. Polixis pounded into the work yard, taking a sharp right into cover behind a conveyance belt for mega smeltry blocks. Terrified-looking Tmarans scrambled to make way for him as heavy slugs cracked overhead. As he entered, he saw that the far wall had been demolished and appeared to be acting as a strongpoint for a greenskin mob that had entrenched itself in the neighbouring ore warehouse.

There were two other Primaris in cover behind the heavy conveyance belt, Brothers Cypran and Caius.

'The lieutenant?' Polixis asked over the external vox. Caius gestured towards the doorway of the main manufactorum building. Outside it a haulage lifter had toppled over, providing a length of reinforced plasteel that sheltered more Guardsmen. Samson was among them.

Polixis broke from behind the conveyance belt and vaulted the lifter's fallen crane, slamming into the gravel beside Samson. The lieutenant didn't look up from the fresh ammunition drum he was clipping into his auto bolt rifle.

'Just passing through, Helix?' he asked, using the Apothecary's battle cant signifier.

'Yes. Your situation is stable, lieutenant?'

'Keeping the beasts' attention on us,' Samson said, nodding to Cypran and Caius, the latter of whom leant over the conveyance belt to ease off a burst of bolt rifle fire. 'Faustus is taking a combat team north around their flank. We should be moving on within the next ten minutes.'

'I'm needed with the captain,' Polixis said, glancing once more at the tactical display. Brother Ovido's vitae signs were crashing.

'Fastest way is to the right,' Samson said, nodding to the work yard's north wall. 'Covering fire on my mark.'

Polixis broke from behind the crane as the thunder of bolters filled the work yard. The sudden fury seemed to only encourage the orks, who returned fire with a chorus of howls and roars. Shots sparked around

Polixis, but none touched him as he hammered pauldron-first into the red brick wall. The masonry gave way with a crash. He carried on through the broken rubble and dust, finding himself in an alley running parallel to the work yard, presumably the same one taken from the manufactorium by Faustus en route to the greenskin's flank.

He took the first right, into a grimy, deserted inner-city hab street. An ork scrap-truck lay at the far end, burning, surrounded by an indiscriminate litter of greenskin and Guard dead. The bodies were brutalised, the full savagery of the two races' antagonism clear in eviscerating blows and point-blank weapon blasts.

The air filled with a familiar, furious shriek as a cruciform shape shot overhead, dangerously close to the jagged tops of the ruined refinery stacks. The Imperial Navy Lightning fighter was pursued by a crude ork aircraft, its autocannons blazing. The contrast between the two races could not have been clearer – the sleek, war-ready Imperial machine and the brute, ramshackle xenos engine, its ugly form riveted and bolted together in haphazard fashion. The mere sight of it stirred Polixis' disgust. Both flyers were out of sight again in an instant, a scattering of hot brass falling around Polixis as ejected cartridges sprayed across the street. The Apothecary paused briefly to assess his map, continuously updated with feedback from the linked auto-senses of the rest of the company spread across the city. The distant shellfire was now altogether closer, and he could see a haze of smoke rising above the hab units directly ahead.

He sped down a side alley, over a carpet of blackened, shrivelled bodies that had been caught in the promethium gout of a flamer. Ahead of him, the refinery square opened up. It had been reduced to a wasteland, pockmarked with craters and the strewn wreckage of human and alien corpses. He passed over a female Voitekan with her ribcage split open by shrapnel, side by side with a greenskin whose head had been half-demolished by a bolt-round. Beyond them, another human and alien lay intertwined, a Voitekan's bayonet impaled through the beast's eye while its fists remained clamped around the dead man's throat, both bodies frozen in their death throes.

The battle had swept through the open space and continued now on its western side – Polixis could see Ultramarines and Voitekan infantry to his left fighting together, engaged in a close-quarters firefight with greenskin

mobs that had spilled over into a violent melee on the corners of adjoining streets. To his right, a Leman Russ battle tank lay near the start of a street leading off to the east, gutted by what looked to have been a direct shell strike, flames blazing from the twisted wreckage. Another had made it halfway across the square before a further hit had thrown one of its treads, leaving it slewed to one side and immobilised.

Brother Priscor lay against the tank's flank. Polixis crossed the square at a run, the air around him resounding with the fury of the combat playing out barely fifty yards to his left. Priscor's vitae signs were dropping steadily. The Apothecary saw why as he approached – the Primaris had lost both legs, presumably to a close-range shell strike. They'd been severed just below the knee plates, two nubs of ripped muscle and skin, blood and stubs of bone. A smear of red on the sooty flagstones of the square marked where he'd dragged himself to the battle tank's protective bulk.

Polixis dropped down beside the wounded Ultramarine. Priscor's helmet turned towards him.

'Brother-Apothecary. You're a welcome sight.'

'Remain still, Brother Priscor,' Polixis said, speaking with the brusque tone he fell into automatically during field surgery. 'This will not take long.'

He plugged a prognosticator into Priscor's left tasset dermal node, linking his armour with that of the wounded Primaris. Polixis' visor display blinked as it updated with fresh data, the diagnostor helm providing him with a full readout of Priscor's body readings.

'Your Larraman cells are working to cease the blood flow,' he said as he uncapped the plasma node latched to his backpack and linked it through the port in Priscor's vambrace. 'But you will bleed out before they are able to heal the wound sufficiently. I am providing you with a transfusion, followed by a cell acceleration stimm to hasten the process. That will stabilise you until you can be moved.'

'Bastard greenskins,' Priscor spat, but said nothing more. Polixis noted the strain indicated on his visor display from the Intercessor's left gauntlet, where Priscor was still gripping his bolt rifle.

The Apothecary activated the transfusion pack, the clear plastek of the plasma node turning a deep red. As it pumped fresh blood into the downed Adeptus Astartes, he slipped the multisyringe from his medicae webbing

and flicked the adapter to the coag-stimm. Priscor made no sound as Polixis jabbed the needle into the port in his right tasset and depressed the plunger. Not for the first time the Apothecary wondered at the strange torture entailed in the existence of a Space Marine – while his genhanced metabolism meant that pain was more often than not reduced to little more than a dull ache, the changes wrought also ensured that he would remain fully conscious and coherent except in the direst of circumstances. A human warrior who had suffered similar injuries would have been left barely conscious, but Priscor would be afforded no such respite.

‘Your vitas are stabilising,’ Polixis told him, glancing at the display readings as the stim set to work. The pulse of blood from both stumps had been reduced to a slow ooze, congealing around the great scabs that had begun to blotch the hideously torn muscle tissue.

‘Your secondary heart should provide sufficient circulation,’ he went on. ‘But do not try to move. I have tagged your armour with a retrieval sigil. Provided we do not lose this position you will be evacuated within the next half an hour.’

‘You have my thanks, Helix,’ Priscor said, helm turning to look towards the battle raging along the square’s western side.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ Polixis said. ‘But you will not leave the side of this tank. Consider it under your protection until its crew can refit. I will not lose any more of the Fulminata on this campaign.’

‘I’m no use here,’ Priscor growled.

‘You are,’ Polixis said. ‘You can tell me where Brother Ovido is.’

Priscor pointed towards the melee, his voice shot through with an angry regret.

‘He was still with Nerva when I saw him last. If he has fallen, it will be in amongst that.’

‘Then I am needed elsewhere, brother,’ Polixis said, removing the plasma node and capping it, cutting off the transfusion. ‘A week in the *Spear of Macragge*’s medicae bay and I will have you fully fitted with bionic substitutes. You’ll be back down here with the rest of Nerva before the last of the xenos have been purged.’

‘I’ll take that as an oath, Brother-Apothecary,’ Priscor said sternly as Polixis stood. ‘For Ovido’s sake.’

‘For Ovido,’ Polixis agreed. He turned west, towards the edge of the

square and the battle still raging there, and broke once more into a run.

As he went, he unclamped his Absolver bolt pistol.

It was clear to Polixis that the greenskins were on the verge of breaking. He saw a detonation rip through the rear of the aliens' mob, wicked metal slicing thick green flesh and sending blood and limbs skywards. He realised that their own artillery across the river had attempted to shift its target zone to account for the Imperial push across the square, but with typical orkish inaccuracy, was overcompensating and now hammering the mobs in the rear still trying to force their way to the front. At the same time, Intercessor squad Nerva and the single Lemman Russ that was still fully functional had been reinforced by a company of Voitekan infantry, who were now pouring las-fire down the streets branching from the western side of the square. Faced with the choice of dying beneath their own barrage or throwing themselves at the steadily advancing Imperials, the greenskins had chosen the latter.

As Polixis ran he located the company banner of the Fulminata. Its blue-and-white silk fluttered proudly exactly where he'd expected to see it – at the point where the greenskins had reached the Imperial line on the rubble-choked corner of one of the refinery blocks, unleashing a swirling melee that threatened to drag in the Voitekan platoons on either side. Amidst the flashing blades and churning bodies, the Apothecary caught the actinic flash of power weapons and heard a familiar bellow ring out, audible even over the crash of the nearby shelling.

He very nearly smiled as he ran.

Then the fury of close combat hit, and the honed skills of a warrior bred for nothing but total war took over. Ahead, a greenskin hefted its crude axe to cleave the skull of a wounded Zoitekan Guardsman. Polixis fired, his bolt detonating inside the creature's guts, shredding its lower torso. It went down with a bellow next to the Guardsman, and Polixis finished it with another shot to the skull. Directly ahead, Brother Tarquin grappled with another greenskin, the Primaris' gladius lodged in the beast's chest. Despite this, it tried to grind its own cleaver deeper into the space where the Space Marine's pauldron met breastplate. Polixis shoulder-charged the ork, throwing it back with a grunt and dragging both weapons free. Before it could recover its balance, he fired again, blowing away half its face in a spray of foul alien gore.

‘Brother Ovido?’ he demanded, half turning to grasp Tarquin’s shoulder.

‘The captain,’ he grunted, opening fire with his own bolt pistol, aiming past the Apothecary as another ork rushed at them, bellowing.

Polixis pressed on. All around him men, beasts and the Adeptus Astartes grappled and hacked, stabbed and spat, but it was a blur even to his hyperactive senses. His eyes were fixed on the company banner, grasped high in the fist of Ancient Skyrus, lit by the lightning of Captain Demeter’s power sword and the blazing crozius arcanum of Chaplain Kastor. As he broke through to them, he noticed a crumpled body at Skyrus’ feet.

‘Ovido,’ the standard bearer said.

Polixis didn’t require his prognosticator to know that the Primaris was dead – two heavy slug rounds had punched through his breastplate, cracking the Space Marine’s fused ribcage and almost certainly rupturing both hearts and lungs.

‘Brother-Apothecary,’ said Demeter. The captain was half facing away from him, dragging his power sword from another greenskin corpse. ‘Kindly perform your rites.’

Polixis knelt beside Ovido. He activated his narthecium, the advanced medicae tool that encased his left gauntlet, muttering the Litany of Recovery as he did so. A glance told him the sternal progenoid, the gene-seed buried in Ovido’s chest, had been damaged beyond recovery by the two shots that had killed him. The secondary cervical progenoid, however, was not beyond saving.

He accessed the emergency sealants around Ovido’s gorget, unclamping his helmet with a quiet prayer to the armour’s machine-spirit.

‘Blessed battleplate, yield your fallen brother to me now.’

The fallen Ultramarine’s face was revealed – wrathful in death, pale and stony-eyed, as though still damning the xenos that had shot him. Mag-locking his bolt pistol to his thigh, Polixis used two fingers to close the Ultramarine’s eyelids, before triggering his narthecium’s carbon alloy chainblade.

Combat recoveries were unpleasant at the best of times. The reverence and care that the body of any fallen member of the Chapter deserved had to be set aside in favour of measured haste. Polixis sliced the tip of the chainblade along Ovido’s throat, cutting the white flesh with a practised

stroke. Blood welled bright from the small incision as he deactivated the chainblade and extended the narthecium reductor's extractor tube and flesh hooks, sliding it into the cut and keeping the wound from sealing. The thumbnail-sized pict-caster above the tube's tip linked with his helmet display, showing him the grey, fleshy gland he sought in Ovido's neck. With a blink-click he triggered the extractor tube's scissor end after it had slid over the progenoid, neatly severing the gland from the connective tissue embedding it into the larynx.

With the gene-seed disconnected, Polixis activated the reductor's suction valve. There was a whirring noise as the gland was dragged free from Ovido's flesh and shunted up the extractor tube into one of the sealed cryo-receptacle vials at the narthecium's rear.

As Polixis worked, the slaughter around him continued. His transhuman senses were aware of it, capable of splitting focus between the probing of the extractor and the surrounding thump of axes and the clang of steel on ceramite. He pulled a mortis tag from his plastek medicae webbing and inserted it into Ovido's primary breastplate port, just to the left below his fused rib-plate, providing a beacon to locate the body later now that the battle-brother's auto-senses were offline. As Polixis stood, a spray of blood splattered his white armour, a greenskin's severed head flying past him from the direction of Captain Demeter.

'He is recovered,' the Apothecary said, speaking the rite of the fallen. 'His legacy endures.'

'Brother Priscor?' Demeter asked.

'Stable.'

'Then let us press on,' Demeter continued, switching to address both the Primaris and the Guard over the vox. 'The Gorgon lies just ahead, my brothers. Forward!'

## **KASTOR**

An hour since first entering the refinery square, the Fulminata secured the eastern end of the Excelsior Arch. Kastor caught sight of the great bridge ahead, scarred by the bombing runs of Imperial Navy Marauders, craters riddling its broad expanse. Still it stood. Greenskins packed it from span to span, the mobs thrusting individuals through the holes and over the

bridge's sides in their bestial eagerness to reach the east embankment and join the battle raging through Shebat Alpha.

The final phases of the day's objectives were at hand – they were to secure the eastern bank of the river. Demeter led the final drive to the bridge. Kastor strode to his left and Polixis to his right, their bolt pistols thundering, the Intercessors of Squad Nerva forming a wedge around them, while Ancient Skyrus' banner fluttered at the centre of their formation. Voitekans kept their flanks clear with volleys of las-fire, the Guard maintaining their discipline in the white heat of the close-quarter combat that had been grinding on ever since the refinery square.- Reinforcements pressed in from the north and the south – a squadron of Namarian Leman Russ battle tanks and two companies of Kelestan Stormers, relentlessly driving the greenskins towards the banks of the river.

That river was the Gorgon, the great, sluggish expanse of polluted water that curved through the heart of Shebat, two thousand paces from one embankment to the other. The Excelsior was the greatest of six bridges that had once spanned it, from Saint Collum's Crossing in the north to the adamantium mag-lev line in the south. A week of Imperial bombing runs in the build up to the offensive had reduced all but one to broken stubs and rockcrete rubble heaped in the foaming sludge below. Only the Excelsior endured.

The bridge's entrance archway lay before the Primaris. Kastor could tell that it must once have been an ornate affair, a great stone monument engraved with images showing the industriousness and toil of the city of Shebat. It had been scarred by the brutalities of war, and was now further defiled with the crude iconography of the greenskins: huge skull effigies and totemic devices had been bolted to its front and sides, and a rickety-looking ork crane had heaped wrecked battle spoil – weapons, armour, even parts of a burned-out Leman Russ – on top of it. The transformation of humanity's great works into a bestial mockery of their former glory sent fresh fire blazing through Kastor's veins.

'Drive them into the Gorgon, my brothers!' he bellowed, charging forwards into the press. Shells fell from across the river, indiscriminate detonations ripping through the embankment zone. Kastor realised he was grinning with a rictus of frenzied passion as he set about once more with

Salve Imperator, the crozius crushing skulls and cracking shoulders and ribcages. Demeter joined him, both his power sword and his boltstorm gauntlet ignited, a crackling tempest of destruction. Kastor was partially aware of Polixis on the other side of the captain – the Apothecary had drawn gladius and Absolver bolt pistol, medicae tools exchanged for the implements of butchery.

A battle cannon shell pounded into the press of greenskins beneath the archway in front of them, dangerously close to the advancing Primaris. The shock wave battered the Space Marines, accompanied by a hail of shattered rockcrete and body parts. The blast cleared a space ahead, affording the Ultramarines a break in the melee. It was then that word crackled over the captain's earpiece.

'The *Spear* strikes,' he relayed to those around him. The words had barely been uttered when the heavens parted.

A spear of light lanced down from above. Its brightness imprinted itself even on the lumen dampeners of the Ultramarines' visors, searing a perfect circle in the ashen clouds. The light struck the ground directly across the river, the point of impact obscured by the warehouse blocks lining the opposite bank. There was a burst of brilliance, followed by a thunderclap like the closing of the Eternity Gate. The warehouses shuddered, and seconds later the shock wave hit the east side of the river, buffeting man and ork with the fury of a gale. Kastor lowered his head into the storm, stabilisers activating once again. He felt debris striking his armour, ricocheting off his legs, torso and pauldrons and making his vestments whip about him. The rockcrete underfoot shuddered, the city shaken to its very core.

The shock wave passed. The light blinked from existence, replaced now by a great pillar of black smoke that began to rise towards the torn sky. The *Spear of Macragge* had struck, an orbital bombardment that had obliterated the ork artillery positions firing from across the river. The shellfire ceased.

The stunned hush that followed didn't last long. There was a cracking sound, and the ground shook once more. The crack rose to a crash, echoing back from the ruins bordering onto the river and overlaid by the howling of thousands of alien throats. Kastor realised that the Excelsior Arch, battered for days by munition payloads, was finally breaking in the

aftershock of the *Spear of Macragge*'s strike.

He lowered Salve Imperator and watched as the great bridge began to collapse. The arch closest to the west bank gave way first, plunging hundreds of greenskins into the broken rockcrete and toxic slurry of the river below, the xenos struggling and clawing at one another as they were slowly dragged under. The rest of the great bridge followed arch by arch, the air filling with the sound of ruination as the city of Shebat was split in half. The destruction only ended a hundred paces from the east bank's defiled entrance archway, the last of the bridge's masonry crumbling away to leave behind a jagged stub of stonework, the last remnants of Excelsior's majesty.

As the echoes of the collapse began to fade, the Imperial forces redoubled their assault. The surviving greenskins trapped on the east bank were cut down, bolt-rounds and las-bolts bursting apart their toughened hides and crude scrap armour. Kastor strode ahead of the advance, unheeding now of the orks dying around him. He entered the shadow of the archway, the stonework soaring above him, and turned back the way he had come. Before him were his battle-brothers, stained and scarred by the day's fighting, and either side of them the stern-faced men of the Guard, bloodied but with victory gleaming in their eyes.

'Brothers!' the Chaplain bellowed, voice amplified to a thunderous exhortation. 'The day is ours! In the Emperor's name we have purged, and by His will we shall do so again! Today we have reclaimed half of this great city. Tomorrow, we retake the other half! *Ave Imperator!*'

The response, issued from human and transhuman throats alike, was deafening.

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