

THE UNSUNG WAR

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David Annandale is well known for his macabre and sinister writing. He has explored both the universes of Warhammer 40,000 and Age of Sigmar with a highly lyrical and evocative style of storytelling.

In 'The Unsung War', Primaris Ultramarines Aetius and Calenius face impossible odds against two of the Imperium's deadliest foes. This is a tragedy of duty, honour and sacrifice as the brothers take a stand against the ruin of humanity.

The Rat crawled over metal and between shadows. She was, she thought, moving towards death. She hoped it would be a good one. There wasn't much else left to hope.

The Rat had fled when the gods and monsters invaded her world. She had burrowed underground, as far and as fast as she could go. Only, in truth, there was no underground, and she was not truly a rat. She was a human, doing her best to disappear into the metal embrace of the freighter *Summons of Faith*. The gods and monsters, though, were real. They had torn apart her conception of reality, and she had run in terror. She had become the best Rat she could be, and she was a good one, because she was still alive.

Sebastia Hoven had thought of herself as the Rat for almost twenty years now. She had come by the name honestly, and it was more than a name. It was a calling. It was also a kind of revenge. She had been born to a life aboard voidships but fated to serfdom. From her earliest childhood she had served on the lowest decks, the most insignificant menial but the fastest student. She had come to know the bodies and veins of freighters with absolute certainty. She did not think of them as extensions of her own form; rather she was a parasite, infecting a host for her own benefit. She moved through their corridors and shafts like a ghost. Her skills grew with her knowledge. She saw everything. She observed officers. With awed envy, she witnessed the power and the agency of the merchant captains who commanded the destinies of the ships and everyone aboard. In their lives, she saw what she most desired, but could never have.

But there were some things the Rat could have. Scavenger, smuggler, thief, she moved from ship to ship, rarely seen and never noticed. Her

targets were modest, more important to those who bought her services than missed by her victims. It was a life that was good enough that she did not want to part with it.

She had boarded the *Summons of Faith* at its last port of call. It was a target of convenience. It was bound for the Skopos System, and there was a commission waiting for her there. The *Summons* was in the right place at the right time for her, and she had seized the chance. While aboard, she thought, she would see what her host had to offer her by way of further scavenging.

She had seen much more than she had expected. She had seen the crew. She had seen the officers, and their faces had troubled her. Their eyes had been too fervid. They did not behave like merchants. As she observed them, she had moved from puzzlement to deep anxiety and revulsion. And there were noises coming from the cargo holds. Noises she was too frightened to investigate.

Then the gods had come, fearsome in their righteousness, raining fire upon their foes and terrible to behold. She had heard stories of the Adeptus Astartes, but she had never seen them before. The colossi in blue armour marched through the corridors of the freighter like the embodiments of war itself, and the Rat wanted no part of war. She was frightened of the gods, and her first instinct had been to stay hidden from their sight as they brought it to the *Summons*. She feared their judgement.

She feared the monsters who had come next even more. These were monsters of beauty and grace and cruelty, monsters whose weapons flayed the flesh with storms of crystals.

She had fled. She hid. She could hide for a long time in the bowels of a voidship.

But not forever. If the monsters wanted to find her, they would. So, finally, she had decided to face the gods.

The crawlspace wasn't even a shaft. It was a thin, winding vein formed by the gaps between giant conduits. It was the space between the lines of a schematic, a region of the ship that was not forgotten because no one except her thought of it as existing. But if the monsters decided to look for her, they would find her even here. She had faith in their terrible abilities. She had seen what they could do. They had come to the *Summons of Faith* with beauty and terror, elegance and cruelty. There were clearly no limits

to what they were willing to do. She dared not hope there were any limits on what they could do.

The Rat felt the space through which she moved narrow. Metal brushed her hair, its caress no more than a whisper, but a whisper with the threat of millions of tonnes that would crush her to nothing if it ever moved. She thumbed her glowstick on, and its faint light pushed back the darkness. The Rat was on her stomach, on top of a coolant pipe. Above her was a ventilation conduit ten feet wide. Ahead, the two pipes drew near to each other, the space between them vanishingly small. She had travelled this way before, though. She knew that if she sucked her breath in, the width would be just enough for her to squeeze through.

The sound of the ship's inner workings filled her ears. It was an almost-physical wall of metallic throbbing. Grace notes of escaping steam, the grind of metal and the flare of electrical sparks cut jagged slashes through the deeper rumble of the freighter's heartbeat. The ship was wounded, bleeding from a hundred injuries, but it was not dead yet. It was still heading for Skopos.

Either the ship, or the beings aboard it, had to be stopped. She had seen enough to know that. She had seen the horrors. 'Do this,' she whispered to herself. 'You have to. Do this, and earn a good death.'

That would be her greatest theft. Her greatest victory.

'I wonder why the drukhari are keeping us alive,' Calenus said.

Sergeant Aetius raised an eyebrow. 'That's hardly a mystery,' he said.

'I know what they would like to do, but I question the tactical decision.'

'They will subordinate strategy to cruelty whenever they can. They think they can.' He stopped himself from saying, *Are they wrong?* That would have been his shame speaking. The shame of having failed his command. The shame of seeing all but one of the battle-brothers of his Intercessor squad killed, surprised by one enemy as they battled another. The shame was made manifest by the scars on his armour. Its emblems were scorched by fire damage and the ceramite sliced and chipped by the drukhari rifles' withering hail of neurotoxic crystal shards.

Aetius scanned the confines of the cell again, searching for the means of escape that he and Calenus had already determined did not exist. The drukhari had taken their weapons and sealed them in a cargo tank. The

walls were smooth, the locked door a yard thick, and the hatch in the ceiling, at least twenty feet up, was unreachable. Aetius and Calenus had tried punching their way through the metal. They had dented it, but it was too thick.

No way out, Aetius thought, but held his tongue. To let his shame control his words would be to compound his failure. And Calenus was right. By keeping the Primaris Space Marines alive, the drukhari had erred. Somehow, Aetius would teach them the cost of their mistake.

With a faint grind, the hatch in the ceiling turned. Aetius nodded at Calenus, and they took up combat stances facing each other, ready to seize whatever foe dropped into the tank. The hatch opened, and a mortal face appeared.

‘My lords...’ The woman croaked when she spoke, as if her voice had rusted with disuse. She cleared her throat and tried again, still rasping. ‘Come to free you. Going to try.’

Aetius exchanged a look with Calenus. He scrutinised the woman. ‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘I am the Ra– Sebastia Hoven, my lord.’

‘Are you part of the crew?’

‘*No!*’ The tank echoed with her horrified whisper. Her terror was a positive sign. Her features, dark with grease and oil, were entirely human.

Aetius shared another look with Calenus. The other Intercessor’s shrug, so minute it was undetectable to mortal eyes, was expressive: *What choice do we have?*

‘Can you reach the door to our prison?’ Aetius asked.

Hoven shook her head.

‘Guarded.’

‘Do you know where our weapons are?’ Calenus asked.

She nodded.

‘You are very well informed,’ said Aetius.

‘I know the ship. No secrets from me. I can be your eyes where you cannot go.’

‘Do you know what is in the lower hold?’

Hoven shuddered. ‘Some secrets not for me. I don’t look.’

‘What has happened to the... *crew?*’ Aetius asked, spitting the last word.

‘Imprisoned. Lower hold still sealed.’

‘How well guarded is the crew?’

‘Not heavily. The...’ She hesitated.

‘They are called the drukhari,’ Aetius told her.

‘They watch you. Much more interested in you. Enough for them to lock the crew away. No escape for them.’

‘Can you free them?’

‘Some.’ She did not sound happy at the prospect. ‘Enough for them to free the others if they move quickly.’

‘They will,’ said Aetius. ‘Do it, then. Free them. And when the guard responds, come for us.’

‘Yes, my lord.’ She pulled back into the darkness beyond the hatch.

‘Is she part of the genestealer cult?’ Calenus asked.

‘I don’t think so. Her fear of the crew seems genuine. She seems entirely human.’ He grimaced, acknowledging the impressions meant little. ‘If she isn’t, we will be no worse off than we are now. If she does what I asked, the advantage of surprise swings back to us from the drukhari.’

‘We’ll need it.’

Aetius nodded. The odds were not in their favour. The genestealer cult his squad had tracked to the *Summons of Faith* was a large one. The Ultramarines had made good progress in the battle, but the cultists had pressed them hard.

‘How much of the cult is still alive, do you think?’ said Calenus.

‘At least half.’ And the drukhari had lost little of their complement in the attack.

‘Enough for our purposes? For us to use the foes against each other?’

Aetius ran through strategies based on his incomplete knowledge of the battlefield. The calculations were difficult. There were so many variables, and so much chance in play. ‘We will have to make sure they are strong enough,’ he said.

‘The balance will be a delicate one,’ said Calenus.

Aetius nodded. He compared what he knew of the two xenos forces. ‘The genestealer cult is not strong enough as it stands,’ he said.

‘Desperate measures, then.’

‘Yes. We will have to undo some of our earlier good work.’

‘If we get out.’

‘Yes.’ Aetius moved to the door. He stood just to its left, ready to spring,

listening, feeling the vibrations in the ship, waiting for change.

He did not have to wait long. The changes came, and he read the new sounds. He felt the distant grind of opening doors, followed quickly by several more. Then shouts, coming closer. There were snarls and guttural cries, more bestial than human, the hybrid cultists losing their humanity in answer to the call of the Great Devourer. The other voices spoke a language utterly inhuman and musical, lilting and beautiful, yet these were also voices that were utterly corrupt and cruel. And there were the snaps of energy weapons, and the impacts of bullets.

‘The battle has been joined,’ said Calenus, listening too.

‘It will not be properly joined until we are there as well,’ Aetius said.

Time was short. They could not afford to let the drukhari gain the upper hand and wipe out the cultists.

About to put his helmet on, Aetius paused and looked at Calenus. He saw his own frustration and purpose mirrored back at him. His battle-brother was clean-shaven, his features hewn from granite and noble as marble. His eyes glittered with the need to avenge fallen comrades.

Aetius and Calenus’ role in the Imperium’s great struggle had come down to this single ship. This was their war.

‘Two against hundreds,’ Calenus said.

‘A worthy fight.’ Aetius grinned. ‘Worthy of song.’

Calenus shrugged. ‘I will leave the songs to the Space Wolves.’

‘Agreed. I will be satisfied with the poetry of victory.’

They waited with growing impatience and growing confidence. Hoven had freed the genestealer cultists. She was a good judge of what she could do. She would come and free them too.

After another few minutes, there was the hard clank of unlocking latches, a hiss of hydraulic pistons, and the door to the cargo tank opened. Aetius and Calenus lunged through. The short corridor beyond was clear. The sounds of combat came from their right, towards the stern, and from the upper decks. The air of the freighter was still smoky with the smouldering fires of the earlier battle. Now too there was the sharp sting of freshly burned fyceline and the ozone stab of energy beams.

Hoven, her face a rigid mask of fright barely suppressed by determination, stood on the other side of the corridor a short distance down from the tank. Beside her was the open door to a utility passage. It

was barely a hall, the sort of space that was forgotten by all aboard except the serfs who would use it to reach rarely serviced corners of the ship. Hoven slipped through the door. The two Primaris Space Marines followed.

Hoven's route was just barely wide enough for the Intercessors to pass through. Walking sideways, they were able to avoid scraping their Mark X armour against the walls and signalling their presence. The journey was a short one. Hoven took branches to the left, then to the right, and then kicked open a grille to drop down into a storage chamber. The Intercessors' weapons were here, placed on top of cargo pallets like the war trophies they were.

Aetius murmured litanies of praise and war as he claimed his bolt rifle and its chainblade bayonet. He ran a gauntlet over the barrel, frowning at the marks that defaced the artistry of the gun. Every blemish was an insult he vowed to avenge. He checked his bolter's clip and slammed it home, then he turned to Calenus, who saluted, forearm against chest, ready for their impossible war.

'How far are we from the Skopos System?' Aetius asked Hoven. 'I believe the ship translated into the warp shortly after we boarded?'

Hoven nodded, and Aetius grimaced. That explained why the squad had lost contact with the frigate *Avenger's Wrath* early into the battle. *Another failure*, he thought. The Intercessors had fought towards the bridge, but had been just a bit too slow.

'We came through the nearest Mandeville point to Skopos just before the drukhari attacked,' Hoven said. 'At the ship's current speed, we should reach the system in perhaps two standard days.'

'Not long enough,' said Calenus.

'No,' Aetius agreed. Not with the odds they were facing. 'We need contingencies.' He turned to Hoven. 'You can travel through a voidship. What can you *do* with one?'

'I'm not sure. I've never tried to do anything.'

'You may have to. Head for the bridge, but remain hidden until I call.' He explained what he would need her to do.

'As you will, lord,' said Hoven, and she disappeared back up into the vent.

'I've been evaluating probable outcomes based on the odds against us,'

Calenus said.

‘As have I.’

‘There are too many variables to gauge the chances of victory.’

‘But you have one certainty, the same one I do, regarding our fate.’

Calenus nodded.

‘If my legacy is the record that my squad was lost under my command, then that is only justice,’ Aetius said. ‘It will be enough for me if I can know, in the end, that I redeemed that shame.’

‘If you need redemption, brother-sergeant, then so do I. If no one knows of our victory but ourselves, I can still ask for no greater boon.’

Aetius clapped him on the pauldron in solidarity, and they marched out of the chamber, the pounding of ceramite boots booming against the walls of the corridor. The sounds of war called to them from above, from the freighter’s superstructure. The distant vibrations of conflict were a summons as powerful as a clarion blast, but they resisted. There was work to be done first.

‘I would never have conceived of knowingly taking this action,’ Calenus said as they reached a stairwell and started down, taking the steps three at a time.

‘Nor I,’ said Aetius. ‘I hesitate to call this strategy sound. But I will call the risk necessary.’

They descended to the lowest level of the holds. They had come to undo the first action they had taken after the squad’s boarding torpedo had breached the hull of the *Summons of Faith*.

On the lowest deck, they ran a few hundred yards to stern, where the passage ended in a crumpled barrier of collapsed metal. Everything beyond this point was sealed, the lower reaches of the ship completely quarantined. Before anything else, before even attempting to seize the bridge, this area had been the highest priority of the Intercessor squad. Now it was again.

Aetius leaned against the crumpled wreckage, trying to hear beyond the barrier.

‘Anything?’ Calenus asked.

‘The faint sound of clawing.’

‘We knew we hadn’t killed them all.’

‘No, just that we had them contained.’ Undoing that victory left a sour

taste in Aetius' mouth. He nodded to Calenus and stepped away.

The Intercessor fixed a melta bomb to the barricade, then they retreated back up the corridor to observe the burn. The charge melted deep into the barrier, leaving a crater glowing white-hot, and the entire barricade began to crack. The breach was not complete, but the clawing from the other side became frenzied. The sound of tearing metal reached the Ultramarines.

'Another?' Calenus asked.

'No. We gave them enough to work with. They'll get through. We could use a bit of a delay.'

They took the stairwell up again, grimly eager as they ran. They had already begun to fight back, but now they would truly join the battle.

The *Summons of Faith* was an ancient ship, indifferently maintained. It had been gnawed by time, turned into an old and porous bone. It was not built to withstand battle, especially not within its own corridors. Klaxons wailed across its length as Aetius and Calenus made their way up the decks of the superstructure. A weak vessel to begin with, fractured in the initial combat against the genestealer cult, wounded again by the arrival of the drukhari, now it moaned in terminal pain as another war tore at its integrity. Secondary fires spread unchecked. Broken pipes hissed steam and flame into the corridors, and lighting wavered as power fluctuated. Crosswinds at intersections, the sign of a fracturing hull, fanned the fires, and in the moments of relative quiet, Aetius could hear the high-pitched whistle of escaping atmosphere.

Whenever the Ultramarines crossed paths with a servitor attempting to repair the damage, they cut the monotasked cyborg down. They undercut the ship's ability to staunch its wounds, and so pushed it closer to death.

'Why have the drukhari stayed with the ship?' Calenus wondered.

'I think they plan to use it for a larger prize,' said Aetius. 'They need it, like the genestealer cult, to reach Skopos. There are much richer hunting grounds for them there. This freighter is not much of a trophy in its own right.'

'They simply need it to hold together long enough to reach Skopos.'

'Exactly.' Aetius put his fist through the skull of another servitor that sought to douse the flames roaring through the corridor.

They reached the top decks of the superstructure. The region adjacent to the bridge had become an abyss of war.

Three levels of decking had collapsed. The space before the bridge doors was a canyon of jagged metal and flame. Genestealer cultists swarmed over the ruins while their drukhari foe seemed to dance. From where she hid in the ceiling above the threshold of the bridge, it was as if the drukhari flickered before the Rat's eyes, never still, their way of war one continuous movement, one never-ending death blow. Their weapons sent a murderous wind of black projectiles across the canyon from the bridge, slicing cultists open, pouring their blood over the shattered slopes of the decks. The cultists died, but there were many of them, and every few seconds their numbers managed to overwhelm a drukhari, catching the pale, beautiful monsters in the crossfire of lasrifles, or smashing their elegant dance with shotgun blasts.

There was no order to the battlefield, but there were patterns of movement. The deadly vortex of the drukhari cut back and forth across the mass of the cultists, and the cultists hurled themselves into a pursuit of the attackers.

The Rat hid in the ductwork of the ceiling, watching the monsters tear each other apart. Seeing them now in battle, she wondered how she had ever thought the cultists were human. Their skin clung too closely to misshapen skulls. Many had fangs and clawed limbs. Some had too many arms. In all of them, there was the sense of horrors about to erupt from within the weak disguise they wore. The Rat gave thanks to the Emperor that they had never known she was aboard. She had never made contact, but she had heard them speak, and felt now that if they had addressed her, she, in some way, would have been tainted by the mere sound of their words.

The bridge doors had been breached. They hung open, and the fringes of the battle moved back and forth across the threshold. Both sides wanted control of the bridge, and neither wanted to destroy it, but the ferocity of the struggle meant that damage was occurring. From the Rat's hiding place, she could move easily to a position on the other side of the bulkhead and track its condition. She could see the workstation she needed to reach, but she could not act just yet. She would be seen and stopped.

Though there were variations in the tides of battle from moment to moment, the drukhari were gradually gaining the upper hand. They were too skilled, too swift. Numbers would not be enough to defeat them. The

cultists needed something more.

Then something more arrived. Aetius and Calenus appeared at the torn end of a corridor midway up the pit. They hit the battlefield with the force of a lightning strike, and their bolter fire ripped the drukhari apart.

The moment of surprise was brief, but it mattered. Aetius killed two drukhari before either force knew what was happening. He caught them in mid-leap, the graceful arcs of their movement turning into broken tumbles. A drukhari wych to his right was just beginning to turn his way when he swung the bolter around, and his stream of shells cut her in half.

He saw two other wyches come at Calenus. The Intercessor blocked the first's initial strike, but the second slashed under his raised arms, the blade cutting through his chest-plate and plunging into his lungs. Aetius came to his battle-brother's aid and fired, his bolter rounds blasting one attacker away. The other leapt from the stream of fire, and from the left and right came volleys from splinter rifles. The minute crystals hit Aetius' armour like a sandstorm, their barbs pockmarking his ceramite, the concentrated bursts punching deeper, bringing the neurotoxins closer to contact with his flesh.

Aetius and Calenus leapt forward, off the ragged edge of the hall decking and into the crater. They moved at a run, firing back at the kabalite warriors. They did not shoot at the cultists. At first, the xenos hybrids attacked them as well as the drukhari. Many were armed with rocket launchers, and the missiles they loosed exploded against the weakening walls of the ship. The power fluctuations wracking the vessel became more violent, its systems cutting out completely for fractions of a second. Calenus threw himself to the left as a rocket slammed into the deck a few yards from him. He and Aetius charged through the wash of flame and rubble, and instead of firing back at the cultist, they brought down the drukhari that had closed in on him. Aetius saw the look of surprise on the abomination's misshapen features.

'I think they're beginning to notice what we're doing,' he said.

As the Primaris Space Marines made their way up the bridgeside slope of the crater, the cultists that had been shooting at them redirected their fire. Their savage bursts joined with the precision shots of the Ultramarines, and the balance of the struggle began to change. The drukhari evaded most

of what the cultists could throw at them, but Aetius and Calenus tracked their manoeuvres and blew them apart.

The drukhari turned their wrath on the Space Marines. They recognised the greater threat and the tactics that were turning the battlefield against them. Aetius saw rage in their movements and in their pallid faces. When the drukhari had first boarded the *Summons of Faith*, they had caught the Ultramarines by surprise, trapping the squad between two hostile forces. That these two lone survivors had dared turn the tables on the drukhari and catch them in the same manner was an insult too much to bear.

Aetius and Calenus were a spear tip aimed at the bridge, forcing the drukhari into a defensive mode alien to their nature. The xenos cursed the Ultramarines in their lilting tongue. While the wyches still leapt and cut back and forth across the crater, flaying cultists with their blades, most of the kabalites formed up at the entrance to the bridge and set down a wall of suppressive splinter fire. Aetius ducked under an overhang of metal, pushed back by the storm of neurotoxic crystals.

One of the kabalites shouted at the Intercessors, his anger turning the musical language into a vicious snarl.

‘I don’t think he likes our trick of forcing them to fight the genestealers,’ said Calenus.

‘He’ll like the next one even less,’ said Aetius. When the squad had been at full strength, the drukhari had still overcome the Ultramarines and the genestealer cult. Aetius needed something more on the battlefield, something that had not been present in the first engagement. Something that had been locked away. Something that he and Calenus had freed.

It arrived with a feral roar and the scream of tearing metal. The patriarch of the genestealer cult burst up from the bottom of the crater. The monster was huge, multi-armed, with claws that could tear open a Chimera. With it were other purestrain genestealers, monstrosities as distilled and absolute as the foul beauty of the drukhari. When the patriarch roared, every cultist answered in worship and obedience. The cultists attacked the drukhari with renewed frenzy. The kabalite fire pushed them back for another moment, and then the genestealers shot up the sides of the crater and into the drukhari defenders. With one hand, the patriarch tore the head off a kabalite. Its other arms seized another drukhari and gutted him.

The barrier collapsed. The drukhari fell back, inside the bridge, and now

the tide was truly against them.

Aetius climbed to the level of the bridge with Calenus.

‘This battle’s outcome is assured,’ said Calenus.

‘Then it is time to change that certainty again,’ said Aetius.

They opened fire on the genestealers.

Their shells slammed into the spine of the patriarch. The monster reared back and spun around, still holding kabalite corpses. Aetius moved away from Calenus, dividing the monster’s attention while their rounds converged at the centre of the creature’s mass. Viscous alien blood poured from wounds punched through its thick, grey hide. The patriarch lunged at Aetius, while two of its escorts went for Calenus.

Aetius charged at the patriarch, ducked beneath its claws and fired upwards, blasting away its lower jaw. The creature sideswiped him with a staggering blow, its claws punching through a weakened seam in his armour and shattering his fused ribcage, driving shards of bone into his organs. He kept his feet and dragged his chainblade bayonet along the patriarch’s flank as he rounded the foe, then launched a quick volley at one of Calenus’ attackers.

Calenus finished off the second, then joined him, driving back the patriarch again.

‘Moment of truth,’ Aetius told him. The next actions of the drukhari would determine whether he had been wrong to release the monsters.

The question was whether it was anger or self-preservation that would drive the drukhari. Aetius had based his strategy on the latter being true.

It was.

Though Aetius could imagine the reluctance with which they acted, the drukhari turned their fire away from the Ultramarines and concentrated on the purestrain genestealers.

The patriarch raged before the entrance to the bridge. It managed to grab Aetius. He unleashed point-blank fire into its thorax while Calenus severed one of its clawed hands with his chainblade. A wych jumped onto its shoulder and sank her sword into its spine. It snapped an arm back and crushed her before she could leap away.

The patriarch slashed at the Primaris Space Marines again. It was viciously fast, and Calenus, breathing through torn lungs, was slower than he had been. The monster’s strike sent him flying. Aetius caught him at

the last moment and hauled him back from the edge of the crater. He loosed a blast of shells at the monster's face. It recoiled, whipping its skull away from the mass-reactive hell, and its retreat bought the Ultramarines a few more seconds.

Calenus' breathing was a hollow rattle through the grille of his helm. There were deep claw gouges in his chest-plate. The battle was taking its toll on both of them. Aetius' blood burned with the effort of keeping the effects of the drukhari neurotoxins at bay, and his reaction times were more sluggish than they should have been.

The drukhari killed two more purestrain genestealers, and threw everything they had at the patriarch, even as the cultists took more of them down. The enemies of the Imperium were shredding each other. Aetius looked upon his handiwork. It was pleasing. But it wasn't enough. The entrance to the bridge was still blocked, and the balance of destruction was ephemeral. Either the genestealers or the drukhari would gain the upper hand, or they would both turn on the Ultramarines.

Aetius refused to give them the chance to make that decision.

The ship's power wavered again. The battlefield was plunged into darkness for a moment and Aetius' footing became unstable as the artificial gravity trembled. The patriarch charged Aetius, knocked him into the air over the crater and seized him in a vice-like grip.

'Now, citizen!' Aetius boomed through his vox-speakers, calling to Hoven, trusting her to have reached her position. '*Do it now!*'

The monster had his arms pinned. Bleeding from a dozen wounds, the lower part of its skull mangled, its ferocity was undiminished.

It closed a fist over his head. Aetius' helm began to crack.

The Rat was in position. The workstation was on the port side of the bridge, away from the entrance and the swirl of combat. The Rat was among the predators, and they ignored her. What she had to do was simple. The damage-control runes on the pict screens that surrounded her were screaming for her to take this very action. The ship was burning. There was fire everywhere. Something drastic had to be done, but the remedy was too severe to be performed automatically by a servitor. One stood before the consoles, inert, its function surpassed by events. When she heard Aetius' shout, the Rat shoved the servitor aside and faced the

emergency venting procedure. Two levers to override the fail-safe protocols. A third to open the ship to the void. Or so she thought. She moved the levers one after the other, uttering a prayer to the Emperor that she was not mistaken.

Explosive bolts blew off hatches. Containment fields shut down and cargo bays gaped. A massive blow shook the entire length of the *Summons of Faith*'s hull as its atmosphere erupted into space. A hurricane twisted through its corridors. The sudden shock was too much for the damaged ship. The superstructure, critically damaged by the war waged within, gave away completely. The entire bow-ward side exploded, and the rest of the bulkheads collapsed in the last moments of artificial gravity. Then the power failed.

Just before the dark came down, the Rat dived beneath the console as the ceiling of the bridge fell in.

Aetius' eye-lenses compensated for the sudden night as death came for the *Summons of Faith*. The gravity failed and the patriarch floated upwards. It flailed, reaching for an anchor point, and released Aetius' right arm. He raised his bolter and sent shells blasting through the monster's skull. The creature went limp. Aetius used the mass of the corpse to push himself down, and his boots mag-locked him to the decking. Above him, the hull was open to the void. Flaming gases dissipated into the cold and airless night. Genestealer cultists and drukhari cartwheeled away from the ship, weightless, carried by the gale-force winds.

Their armour clamping them firmly to the ragged deck, Aetius and Calenus riddled the xenos bodies with shells. Behind them, there was only wreckage where the bridge had been.

The calm after the storm descended upon the battlefield like a sarcophagus lid. So much of the vessel's superstructure had torn away that Aetius could look out across the full expanse of the hull.

A faint vibration thrummed in the decking.

'The engines are still running,' said Calenus.

Aetius nodded. 'The ship might yet reach its destination,' he said. 'And so will we, after a fashion.'

His power plant was straining to keep oxygen flowing to his lungs, but

there were too many tears in the seals of his armour and the poisons of the drukhari continued to eat at his blood. He thought he might live for another hour, perhaps two, but no more than that.

‘The war is over, and we stand,’ said Aetius. They would still be standing when they died, locked into position by their armour. The thought pleased him. He and Calenus would be sentinels past the end.

‘No songs for this war,’ said Calenus.

‘What need of song when we have honour?’ Aetius said, and he smiled, knowing he had, in the end, done his duty.

The captain’s saviour pod, accessible from the bridge, had still been in working order. The Rat manoeuvred it over the wreckage of the *Summons of Faith*’s superstructure. She moved away from the ship, and it responded well. She would, she thought, be able to reach Skopos. She didn’t think of any purpose beyond immediate survival.

But as she left the dark tomb behind, she saw the two figures standing guard atop the ruin, motionless and proud. Two warriors had ended two invasions heading for Skopos. The image of the guardians stayed before her mind’s eye as the vessel dropped into night, and the vision gave her purpose.

‘I will bear witness,’ she murmured.

‘I will bear witness,’ she vowed.