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40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

# STEEL BLOOD

CL WERNER



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# STEEL BLOOD

C. L. Werner

Valax dropped behind the thick metal shell of a slag-cart, crouching close to the floor as a sheet of burning promethium seared the air above him. Beads of molten steel dripped from the top of the cart, pooling on the ceramite pauldrons and vambraces of his power armour. Warning lights flickered across the displays within his helmet, alerting him that the liquefied metal was eating its way into his armoured shell. Valax ignored the winking lights. He had fought on a million battlefields. He knew his armour's limits better than its own built-in cogitator. It could take more, much more. Otherwise it would be unworthy of an Iron Warrior.

The Space Marine snapped a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. Even as he evaded the blast of white-hot promethium, part of Valax's brain had started a countdown. A standard pattern flamer would take five seconds to cool after expelling a blast of such intensity. There was neither standard nor pattern to the war gear of the barbarous orks. Valax could only trust that such filthy aliens hadn't improved upon human engineering.

With two seconds of safety remaining to him, Valax sprang out from behind the slag-cart, smoke rising from his scarred armour. Across the smelt-hall, he saw his adversary's leathery face pull back in a sadistic leer, a thick stump of cigar falling to the floor. It was a big brute of an ork, its squat, apish body even more massive than Valax's two metres and two hundred kilos. The thing had a crude metal helmet squashed over its head, a simple visor of plasteel protecting its eyes. A network of straps and chains fastened an enormous fuel tank to its back, a series of cables and hoses connecting the cylinder to the broad-mouthed fire-thrower the ork gripped in its massive paws. A pair of human jawbones framed the nozzle of the weapon, testament to the alien's morbid humour.

Valax opened fire the moment he had a clear view of the ork, bolt shells shrieking across the hall to smash into the alien's grotesque frame. The ork lurched back, blood slobbering from each impact, fragments of bone and flesh

spraying from the wounds as the bolt shells detonated inside its body.

Incredibly, the ork kept standing, defying the havoc Valax's fire had inflicted upon it. The alien grunted in its debased language and pressed the trigger of its weapon.

A standard pattern flamer would have refused to activate under such conditions, failsafes built into the weapons causing them to cut out. The very concept of a failsafe was beyond an ork's comprehension. Valax's enemy paid the price for that deficiency of xenos mentality. Damaged by the Iron Warrior's shots, the ork's flamethrower was spraying fuel from a rent in its side and a tear in one of its hoses. The moment the ork pressed the trigger, a blast of flame spurted from the nozzle of his weapon. Valax rolled back behind cover before the burst of promethium could reach him.

No sooner was he back behind cover than the smelt-hall was shaken by a tremendous explosion. The blast of flame the ork had sent flickering after him was insignificant beside the bright ball of fire that engulfed it and the dozen other greenskins around it. A momentary blaze of hellish light flickered across the chamber, as though a tiny sun had winked into existence and then been snuffed out.

The moans of mutilated aliens filled the room as Valax stepped out from cover. Ruthlessly, the Iron Warrior stepped from one ork to another, pumping a shell into each leathery green face, making no distinction between the dead and the dying. If any of his comrades came upon this scene of carnage later, they would know the Faceless had been here, the assault marines of the Third Grand Company.

Sounds of gunfire from across the chamber drew Valax's attention. He watched as the other survivors of his squad finished off a cluster of some twenty orks. They had allowed the aliens to take shelter behind a blast-furnace and were finding it hard to displace them. Valax scowled inside his helmet. He might expect such sloppiness from Uhlán, the cur was after all only a half-breed cobbled together from the gene-seed of other Legions, but Gressil was a proper Iron Warrior. He expected better from one of his own. Brother Gressil would have much to atone for when this operation was over.

Valax reached to his belt and thumbed three small coin-like objects from a pneumatic discharger. Pressing his finger against each in turn, he flung the discs towards the blast-furnace. They clattered across the floor, landing to rest at the base of the furnace. A second later, the smelt-hall was again shaken by a tremendous explosion, even more savage than the first. Beams hurtled from the

ceiling, cracks snaked up the walls, dust showered down from the roof.

The blast-furnace lurched to one side with a titanic groan, the floor at its base evaporated by the destructive force of Valax's melta-bombs. In the space of a few breaths, the shifting weight of the furnace finished the job the explosion had started. With a final metallic scream, the furnace tore loose from its fastenings and smashed through the damaged floor. The floor around it fragmented and shattered, crashing down into the expanding crater. Valax could hear the furnace pounding its way through the lower floors, thirty tons of runaway ruin hurtling through each level of the blockhouse like the fist of an angry god.

If the foe had been something worthy of killing, Valax could have savoured the moment. Instead, he aimed his pistol at the few orks clinging to the edges of the pit. After each shot, another alien was sent plunging into the chasm. Soon, Gressil and Uhlan were beside him, helping him finish off the survivors.

'There is no refuge from an Iron Warrior,' Valax growled at the other Marines. Though their faces were hidden behind their grey helmets, Valax knew the reprimand had cut them like a vibro-blade. The words of Perturabo were things no Iron Warrior wanted turned against him.

'My Lord Captain,' Gressil said, slapping his fist against his breast in salute. 'We did not wish to alert more of the foul xenos to our presence.'

Valax's hand clenched into a fist, straying towards the chainsword lashed to his wrist. He stared hard at Gressil, wondering if that had been meant as some sort of accusation. After a moment, Valax relaxed. Gressil wasn't so bold or daring as that. If he had been, he should have received his own command by now.

Or gone the way of upstarts like Traegus and Amon. The Lords of the Warp were always hungry for the souls of ambitious fools.

'The greenskins already know we're here,' Valax said, turning away from the crater. 'Nothing we do now can stir them up more than they already are.'

As he spoke the words, Valax thought about their meaning and wondered where it had all gone wrong.

Over-captain Valax marched along the deserted corridor, the sensors in his helmet stifling the drone of sirens and the thunder of shells. It was a testament to the enormous calibre of the enemy guns that any sound at all could penetrate far enough to reach the bunker. Valax wasn't certain if such an achievement was impressive or absurd. Anything of such size would be almost immobile. When the time came for the guns to be dealt with, the enemy wouldn't be able to move

them somewhere safe.

The thought brought a curl to Valax's scarred lip. As though anywhere was safe for an enemy of the Iron Warriors.

For ten thousand years the Iron Warriors had stormed the galaxy's great strongholds, broken down their walls, breeched their defences and slaughtered all who dared stand in their way. Ten thousand years of war and carnage, an unending litany of destruction. Valax had been there from the first; the echo of the Warmaster's voice yet lingered in his ears, the image of Terra in flames glowed in his eyes and the taste of Olympia's acrid atmosphere was still in his lungs. He had risen from lowly aspirant to a full battle-brother. His ferocity and initiative had brought him to the forefront of every conflict, in time becoming over-captain of the Third Grand Company's assault marines. In that capacity, he had been one of the first Iron Warriors to descend upon the jungles of Castellax and bring death to its amphibian natives.

Great had been the honours of that campaign, but foolish was the Space Marine who was content with past glories. Fools did not survive long among the Iron Warriors. There was never any shortage of ambitious subordinates eager to exploit the complacencies of their superiors.

Valax's hair shifted colour as raw hate crackled through his brain, a peculiar psycho-reactive mutation inflicted upon him by the baleful emanations of the Warp and its denizens. The very thought of Rhodaaan was enough to turn his head from shock white to a muddy crimson. Valax rarely suffered such an irritant for long, but Rhodaaan had proven himself not without a certain aptitude. He had not maintained his rank of over-captain for two thousand years by disposing of irritants while they were still useful to him. Still, Captain Rhodaaan's usefulness was no longer equal to the menace he represented. Rhodaaan had acquired quite a reputation of his own in the recent campaign against the hrud. Valax didn't like subordinates who possessed too much renown.

The Iron Warrior glared at the ferrocrete walls, then fixed his gaze on the pseudo-mechanical flesh-drone acting as his guide. The thing was enough to nauseate even an Iron Warrior; a loathsome hodge-podge of skin and steel, cable and bone. Fabricator Oriax never assembled two of his flesh-drones quite the same way, but there was one thing the techmarine never failed to implement. Each flesh-drone still had a recognizable face stitched onto it somewhere, a face that continually writhed in silent screams. It was said that Oriax never completely lobotomized the subjects of the conversion process, that he left just enough self-awareness in the flesh-drones for them to experience the full horror

of their new existence, while their mechanical programming made it impossible for them to end that existence.

Even among the Iron Warriors, Fabricator Oriax was regarded with a measure of caution, a wariness that stopped just short of being outright fear. The techmarine was an enigma to the rest of the Third Grand Company and had been so for millennia. Maimed in the crystal-swamps of Tarsis 9, Oriax was more machine than flesh, his mind driven by the strange impulses of steel, not the demands of honour and pride. Since the conquest of Castellax, the Fabricator had rarely stirred from the bunker complex beneath the Iron Bastion, and then only at the command of Warsmith Andraaz. Visitors to the bunker were even more rare.

Valax, however, was a special case. If not for him, Oriax would never have left the crystal-swamps. The techmarine owed his life to the over-captain, a fact which Valax had exploited to his benefit many times in the past. Now it was time for him to do so again.

The flesh-drone hesitated outside a massive titanium bulkhead, the voxcaster built into its chest spitting and crackling as it transmitted a steady stream of binary. Valax knew the bunker was rife with traps to safeguard Oriax's seclusion. Without the flesh-drone's transmissions, nothing alive could penetrate the Fabricator's sanctum.

With a growled rumble, the bulkhead door retreated into the floor, allowing Valax and his guide to enter a vast inner chamber, its most prominent feature being the forest-like confusion of pipes rising from its floor and vanishing into the ceiling far overhead. A riotous array of pict-slates flickered from every corner of the room, presenting a thousand different views of Castellax, from the dark depths of the promethium mines, to the jagged spires of the Iron Bastion and the decayed sprawl of Vorago, the city's outskirts now further despoiled by the marauding orks.

Valax's hand shifted to his pistol holster as he saw his own visage fill one of the monitors. His hypno-trained senses immediately estimated from what location such a view of himself would be afforded. Spinning around, he found himself staring into the skeletal face of one of Oriax's grisly spies, the floating skulls he called his 'Steel Blood'. The followers of the False Emperor employed similar constructs, but Valax doubted they had the dedication to craft them the way Oriax did. There was the stink of the Warp about the Steel Blood, a daemonic taint that no mortal could experience without a twinge of uneasiness. It was a sensation too elusive for understanding, like something that could be

seen only out of the corner of the eye but which hid itself when viewed straight-on.

While he glared at the Steel Blood, the metal jaw of the floating skull snapped open, exposing the metal meshwork of a voxcaster. ‘Salutation and honour to Over-captain Valax. Deathsmith of the Faceless. Scourge of the Pox-pits. Brother Iron Warrior.’

The Iron Warrior brushed past the floating skull, ignoring the Steel Blood’s synthesized praises. ‘Show yourself, Oriax!’ Valax’s voice boomed through the forest of cables and pipes. ‘I did not descend twenty levels and forsake the call of battle to waste words with your mindless tinker-toys.’ The Space Marine marched deeper into the tangle of machinery and monitors. ‘I am not the Warsmith, Oriax. I do not suffer proxies.’

In a single fluid motion, Valax swung about, drew his pistol and sent a single shot slamming into the centre of the Steel Blood’s cranium. The floating skull exploded in a burst of sparks, shards of metal and shreds of organics flying in every direction.

‘Your marksmanship is as good as when you patrolled the citadels of Olympia,’ a shrill, mechanical voice reverberated from the darkness.

‘It is better,’ Valax said, his armoured thumb rubbing across the smoking barrel of his weapon. The optics of his helmet adjusted to filter away the chemical haze that filled Oriax’s sanctum, but the compounds were so complex as to baffle even the engineering of the Legion’s artificers. His anger rising, Valax marched in the direction of the voice. ‘Reveal yourself, Oriax. I want to look at what I’m speaking to.’

The chamber shuddered as fans suddenly churned into life, drawing away the obscuring gases and chemicals that enabled the sanctum to retain its preternatural darkness. Valax’s optics immediately adjusted to the natural gloom, but there was no sign of anyone where the voice had spoken.

‘Is this better?’ Oriax’s voice came from the same place, rising from a voxcaster fitted to one of the pict-slates. A moment later, the same words echoed from a spot some fifteen metres to Valax’s left. The Iron Warrior spun around, glaring through the darkness. This time there was something to reward his gaze. Nestled amidst a jumble of machinery and cogitator cabinets, their blinking lights and flashing diodes casting a diabolic glow about his body, was Fabricator Oriax.

The techmarine presented a ghastly shape, devoid of the symmetry of rational design. His body was a mass of cables and gears fused about the remnants of a

man. A confusion of spidery steel arms jutted from his figure at every angle, scrabbling at the consoles arrayed about him with dazzling speed. A massive metal claw arced upwards from his back and leered above his head, fiddling with an array of rune-boards suspended from the ceiling. A set of pincers, electricity crackling between the steel talons, projected from his right shoulder, hovering about a table resting at the techmarine's side. Valax felt a moment of shock when he saw that the pincers appeared to be assembling another Steel Blood – possibly to replace the one he had so noisily destroyed. Efficiency, or anticipation? Valax wasn't sure which answer was more disturbing.

'You should count yourself favoured, over-captain,' Oriax's distorted metal voice declared. 'There are few I allow to see me as I am.' The techmarine's limbs paused in their assorted duties, each curling back to point for a moment at the body to which they were attached. At the core of that trash-heap of cables and gears was a cuirass of ancient armour from the time of the Great Crusade, the skull-helm symbol of the Iron Warriors engraved across the breast. Staring from above the symbol was an iron visage every bit as inhuman and forbidding, a clutch of pale, scarred flesh surrounding a lipless gash of mouth and a torn stump of nose. A brace of mechanical eyes burned with crimson light from the pits of Oriax's mangled face.

Valax felt no horror at Oriax's condition, only a sneering contempt. There was a good reason why the techmarine hid himself away and tried to guard himself with a cloak of mystery. The brutal fact was there hadn't been much left of him after the crystal-swamps, less than even a normal man, much less a Space Marine.

'I did not come here to waste time gawking at freaks,' Valax growled. 'Your surrogate convinced the Warsmith to allow me to lead the assault.'

'You find that prospect daunting?' The synthesized voice made it impossible to tell if there was a mocking tone behind the words.

Valax hesitated before answering. Since the greenskin invasion of Castellax, the xenos had captured much territory and resources while the Iron Warriors withdrew and plotted their campaign. Now, however, the need to regain air superiority was the most important of their concerns. The ork warlord was cagey enough to husband his fuel stores and prevent his fliers from burning through their supplies on pointless sorties and piece-meal assaults. However, the warlord's craft presented the Iron Warriors with an opportunity. Andraaz wanted a precision strike against the ork fuel reserves. Without fuel, the ork fliers would be grounded and the Iron Warriors would regain command of the skies.

The honour of staging the crucial assault had been bestowed upon Valax, largely on Oriax's recommendation, however much the over-captain resented the fact. The assurance Oriax had made regarding how quickly Valax could capture his objective was the aspect that caused him the most concern.

'I worry only that Sergeant Rhodaan will betray his own duty,' Valax snarled at the Fabricator. 'The success of my mission depends upon his diversion against the ork headquarters. The vermin must believe that their command centre is our target, not the fuel dump.'

The techmarine's claw lowered so that it could point at Valax, shaking at him like the reproving finger of an Olympian combat instructor. 'Rhodaan won't know his is a diversion unless *you* tell him. Lead the upstart to believe his is the real attack. Provide him with enough janissaries to cover his assault. Enough serf-meat to keep the orks occupied.'

Under his helmet, Valax's lips pulled back in a cunning smile. 'Leave him ignorant of the true purpose of the mission,' he mused. 'But Rhodaan is no fool. He will question the deployment of my own squad as a diversionary force. He may guess the deception and undermine me.' Valax's hand tightened into a fist as unpleasant memories recurred to him. 'He has done it before,' the over-captain admitted, thinking of Rhodaan's ambush of the hrud.

Oriax's laugh was like a burst of electronic interference. 'You will not deploy anywhere near the blockhouse, or anywhere that might give Rhodaan warning. When the time for action comes, your squad will come to my sanctum.' The entire console around the techmarine shifted with him as he turned to face a particular portion of wall. An unspoken command from the Fabricator caused the entire wall to sink into the floor, exposing a second chamber.

Even through his armour, Valax felt a chill and knew it to be a cold born not of flesh but of spirit, a psychic frost that betokened some great effort of witchery. Warily, he came forwards to peer into the inner room. He gasped at what he saw.

'Each wall possesses thirteen facets, adorned with special psycho-reactive alloys found only within the Eye of Terror,' Oriax boasted as Valax stared at the sharply angled walls. At the base of each facet, arrayed like the spokes of a wheel, were thirteen naked things chained to stout pillars. 'The pillars are of wraithbone plundered from the vanquished craftworld of X'amot,' the Fabricator said, but Valax was more interested in the beings bound to those pillars, rather than the columns themselves. At first glance, the things might be mistaken for humans of the most degenerate and malformed stock, but a second look made it apparent that whatever lurked inside those twisted bodies was anything but

human.

At the centre of the chamber, its surface etched in cabalistic symbols and framed with a ring of psi-circuitry, was a great disc of bloodwood. The black hue of the disc gave evidence that the bloodwood had recently been fed, soaking up the spirit-energy of its victims. For such a mass of bloodwood, Oriax must have had at least a hundred 'donors'. Murder on such a scale didn't impress Valax. What did impress him was the fact that he recognized this apparatus and could guess its purpose.

'You've recreated the Daemonculum,' Valax said, glancing away from the inner chamber to stare at Oriax's corpse-like face.

'I've improved upon it,' Oriax corrected him. 'The sorcerers of the pesedjet are too mired in superstition to truly understand such power.' The Fabricator's claw stretched out, gesturing at the bloodwood platform. 'Bring your squad to me, Valax. Stand at the heart of the Daemonculum. I shall summon the thirteen daemons and harness their energies to transmit you where you need to be.' Again, the static-laughter crackled through the sanctum. 'Unless Rhodaan has developed a warp-eye, he will never guess your purpose or your objective.'

Valax nodded slowly. 'This will bring great glory to both of us,' he said. 'The Warsmith will be impressed and will reward me greatly. You will not find me ungenerous, Oriax.'

The Fabricator's many arms spread outwards in a great spiral, his mechanical eyes glowing in the darkness. 'It is enough that I help the brother who saved my life. That is all the reward I ask.'

'Xenos abomination!' Nazdrav roared, his chainaxe slashing through the arm of an ork big enough to fit a whole grox in its fanged maw. The limb went bouncing down the corridor, its finger still pulling the trigger of the bolter in its hand. The greenskin stared stupidly at the spurting stump, then slumped to the floor as Nazdrav brought the chainaxe churning into its gut.

Shells from Valax's bolt pistol splattered alien blood across the walls as he wrought havoc amongst the greenskin marauders charging down the hall. Already there was such a heap of dead littering the corridor that the optical targeter in his helmet was having problems differentiating between fresh adversaries and those already dying. The Iron Warrior, however, was fully capable of picking his own shots without the aid of the cogitator.

An agonized scream rang through the squad-channel of his helmet's audio relay. A tiny indicator on his optical display winked out, heralding the extinction

of Malfas, the Iron Warrior Valax had designated as rearguard. Spinning around, the over-captain saw the mangled body of Malfas dangling from an immense metal claw affixed to a crude armature. The armature appeared to have punched its way through the exterior wall, seizing the Iron Warrior before he even knew it was there.

With a grisly snap, the claw tightened and sent the bisected parts of Malfas dripping to the floor. Valax shouted a command to the rest of his squad, ordering Gressil and Uhlan to keep the orks charging down the corridor at bay while he and Nazdrav dealt with this new threat.

*New threat?* Almost from the very moment the Iron Warriors had emerged from the Daemonculum's black fog and found themselves within the depths of the blockhouse, they had been under constant attack. Lesser beings would have been ripped apart by the fell energies of the Daemonculum, their shredded bodies devoured by the rapacious malignance of the Warp. The Iron Warriors had emerged alive but bewildered, their senses requiring precious minutes to readjust from their fleeting brush with the immaterium, their flesh stubborn to accept the transition back to physical matter. It was because of this moment of readjustment and vulnerability that the Iron Warriors had been accompanied by two dozen of the soulless Steel Blood.

The Steel Blood Oriax had sent to accompany them as scouts had proven useless, alerting the strike force about the mustering orks only after the fact. Again and again, at every room and hallway, the Iron Warriors had been confronted by howling aliens, forced to carve their way through snarling greenskins. Their armour was clotted with ork blood, their swords spattered with alien flesh, and still there was no end in sight. At least two hundred of the monsters were lying dead in the rooms they had put behind them and still they seemed no closer to their objective.

The rest of the wall crumbled inwards, rebar stabbing out like the broken fingers of a corpse, concrete dust ballooning through the hall. Through the rupture, a mastodon of scrap metal and pounding pistons lumbered into view, black smoke belching from the ramshackle power-plant fitted to its back. The machine pulled back its clawed armature and brought one piston-driven leg smashing down into the carcass of Malfas. Bestial laughter croaked from the loudspeakers fitted to the machine's hull.

Valax felt his stomach boil at sight of the scrap-metal behemoth. An ork dreadnought, a primitive's parody of the venerable war-machines of the Legiones Astartes. Locked inside a cockpit buried deep inside the war-machine

was one of the greenskin invaders, secure within its mechanical shell. For all the crudity of its shape, Valax knew destroying the dreadnought wouldn't be easy or quick. Not without some sacrifices.

The over-captain thought of the timetable Oriax had promised Warsmith Andraaz. He had already chosen the brother most suited to destroying the dreadnought quickly.

'Nazdrav! Flank the abomination! Disable its legs with your chainaxe!' Valax started directing a steady stream of shots at the narrow viewport stretching across the front of the dreadnought's hull. From the corner of his eye, he could see Nazdrav rush towards the ork machine.

If it was simply a question of eliminating the dreadnought, Nazdrav and his axe might be enough. But Valax could see other orks on the other side of the wall, struggling to squeeze past the hulking war-machine and charge into the corridor. The Iron Warriors didn't have the time to fend off attacks from both front and rear. The breeched wall had to be closed off and quickly.

Valax waited until Nazdrav closed upon the dreadnought, then he quickly shifted his aim. Nazdrav was a simple but vicious Space Marine, always ready to glut himself on havoc and carnage. He had the endearing habit of always carrying extra ammunition and grenades into battle, frightened that he might expend his reserves while there was something still standing. Aside from the normal compliment of grenades fitted to his belt, he wore an improvised bandolier strung across his chest. Much more vulnerable to an enemy who knew what he was looking for.

'Inferno,' Valax hissed, commanding his bolt pistol to shift ammunition. The normal rounds retreated back into the clip, allowing the specialized Inferno Bolt to enter the chamber from a side magazine. The specialized ammunition was designed to immolate a softer target than a Space Marine in power armour, but against the armaplas of Nazdrav's bandolier, it was more than adequate.

'Laugh at this!' Nazdrav roared at the dreadnought as he began his assault. The moment the Iron Warrior was directly beneath the machine's hull, Valax opened fire. The Inferno Bolt slammed into Nazdrav's side in a burst of flame, the promethium burning into the bandolier. The betrayed Space Marine didn't even have time to cry out before the ruptured grenades detonated. Nazdrav, ork dreadnought and a ten metre swath of hallway vanished in a burst of flame and smoke. A quaking rumble swept through the blockhouse, a cloud of dust exploding down the corridor. When it cleared, the only trace of the combatants was one of the dreadnought's torn claws protruding from the immense pile of

rubble that choked off the corridor behind the Iron Warriors.

Valax turned his back on the ruins, focusing his fire on the orks still trickling into the hallway ahead. Gressil and Uhlan glanced back at their captain, but knew better than to ask what had happened to Nazdrav.

Above the heads of the lurching orks, one of the metallic skulls came flying, its vox-caster braying an alarm. Valax exploded the automaton with a single round. The Steel Blood was late with its warning. The Iron Warriors had already engaged the orks.

When he returned to the Iron Bastion, Valax would have a serious discussion with Oriax about the deficiencies in his synthetic scouts.

This was no way to thank a brother who had saved his life.

Valax glared up at the wailing skull, shattering it with a well-placed bolt shell, then returned his attention to the mob of greenskins rushing into the manufactory. He glanced aside to where Gressil's body lay, his armour shredded by the weird ork combi-weapon wielded by his killer. Gressil had probably saved his captain's life by leaping between Valax and the armoured alien. It was just as well the ork had killed him. Valax didn't like the idea of feeling indebted to anyone, even a fellow Iron Warrior.

The remains of Valax's squad had fought their way deeper into the blockhouse, clearing it room by room and hall by hall. At each level, they had expected to find the ork fuel stores, but instead of supplies they had merely encountered more aliens. Valax had wondered if despite Oriax's cunning, Rhodaan had somehow learned of the switch and held back his diversion. Certainly the number of orks opposing them appeared to indicate Valax had the aliens' undivided attention.

Valax whipped out his chainsword and fell upon Gressil's murderer, venting his doubt and anger on the hulking ork. The whirring blade churned into the alien's shoulder, but instead of biting into flesh, it gnawed into a mass of wire and cable, fuel lines and gears. The ork lashed back, its power claw closing about Valax's arm. Warning lights flashed across the over-captain's optics as the pneumatic claw began to compress the ceramite vambrace.

The Iron Warrior brought his legs hammering into the ork's chest, trying to kick it away. For all the good the effort did him, he might as well have kicked the blockhouse itself. Such was the ork's mass that the brute wasn't even jostled. It smirked at him with what little of its face wasn't a metal prosthetic and tightened its grip. Valax squirmed within the alien's clutch. Unable to free

himself, he twisted so that he could bring his bolt pistol towards the brute's face.

His arm became a mangled ruin as the ork's power claw squeezed tight. Valax had been conditioned to block out all magnitudes of pain, the destruction of his arm was something he didn't have time to feel. Instead he focused on lifting his good arm and pumping shell after shell into the cyborg ork's face.

The monster shuddered as the first shell exploded against its metal prosthetic, sending sparks and shrapnel spraying in every direction. The second shell tore through the thick cranium of its organic side and detonated inside whatever remained of its brain. The third simply blew out the back of the creature's skull.

Instead of crumpling to the floor, the cyborg simply froze in place, like a powered-down machine. The power claw continued to tighten, but after a few seconds, even that motion abated. Like some corroded statue, the ork loomed over the conveyor belts and stamping presses of the manufactory, the arm of its killer held fast in its upraised claw.

Other greenskins, the small weedy slavelings of the orks, came scrambling out from cover to finish what their vanquished master had started. Like demented children, they surged about the trapped Valax, peppering his armour with ineffectual shots from slug-throwers and autoguns, swatting at his legs with clubs and axes. The over-captain gunned down those he could, but there were always more gretchin to assault him from behind.

Relief came in the form of Uhlan, the half-breed. The Space Marine's pistol echoed in the vastness of the manufactory, obliterating gretchin with each shot. Unlike their masters, the diminutive slavelings had no stomach for battle. With a wailing shriek, the craven aliens broke and fled back to their hiding spots.

'That is the last of them, My Lord Captain,' Uhlan reported.

Suspicion flared in Valax's mind as he stared at the half-breed. How long had Uhlan waited before intervening? Until he was certain Valax was out of danger?

'Oriax's Steel Blood was late as usual,' Valax grumbled, struggling to free himself. By degrees, he was able to force the cyborg's arm to lower, though the power claw remained closed fast. 'The Fabricator's usefulness to this operation begins to wear thin.'

Uhlan nodded. 'Indeed, over-captain. The failings of his servitors are inexcusable. They should have found the fuel dump for us by now.'

Valax jerked the cyborg's arm still lower. Scrabbling at the floor, he retrieved his chainsword and brought the weapon against the wrist behind the power claw. Uhlan's words gave him pause. What the half-breed said was true. Reacting to the orks might be beyond the abilities of the Steel Blood, but locating the fuel

supplies was another matter. Valax considered the layout of the blockhouse, the blueprint that had been fed into his armour's cogitator. His squad had already covered three quarters of the fortification without any trace of the fuel supplies. Either the initial intelligence had been wrong...

The over-captain cursed as he made the connection. The blockhouses all followed a standard pattern, each identical to the other. The Daemonculum had transported them to the wrong fortress!

As that horrible certainty impressed itself upon his mind, Valax heard the wail of one of Oriax's Steel Blood. He looked towards the sound, watching as the metal skull came flying into the manufactory – a horde of orks rushing after it. The Steel Blood was sounding an alarm alright – but it was an alarm meant for the orks. The damned things had been alerting the aliens and leading them to the Iron Warriors the whole time!

'Shoot the Steel Blood!' Valax snarled at Uhlan. The half-breed stared at him in confusion, then cried out as blood exploded from his ruptured chest. A harpoon of steel protruded from the stricken Iron Warrior's breast. Even as Uhlan turned to fire on his attacker, the cable fitted to the harpoon snapped taut. He was thrown off his feet as the cable began to retract, dragging him across the manufactory towards the gun carriage that had fired on him and a grinning ork with a blowtorch gripped in his oily paw. Other aliens swarmed past the mekanik, loosing a fusillade of bolt shells, solid shot and glowing plasma at the disabled Uhlan.

Valax redoubled his efforts to cut away the cyborg's wrist. Survival was doubtful now, but at least he could die fighting on his feet like a true Iron Warrior, not slaughtered like Uhlan.

Even as he cut away the last string of cables, Valax flattened beneath an impact against the back of his head. As he struck the ground he could see the crumpled wreckage of a metal skull lying on the floor beside him, its cranium caved-in by a high-velocity impact. Valax imagined his helmet must have a similar dent.

The jaw of the damaged Steel Blood dropped open, the vox caster spewing forth the synthesized voice of Fabricator Oriax.

'This is the end, over-captain. Before you die, know that Sergeant Rhodaan even now secures the objective for the Warsmith. It is in another blockhouse, of course. The only thing in this one is death. Your death.'

Valax struggled to rise, but found that his legs refused to respond. Learned in biology as well as mechanics, Oriax had guided his Steel Blood to the precise

location to deliver maximum damage upon the Iron Warrior. The impacted helmet had delivered a paralysing blow to Valax's spine.

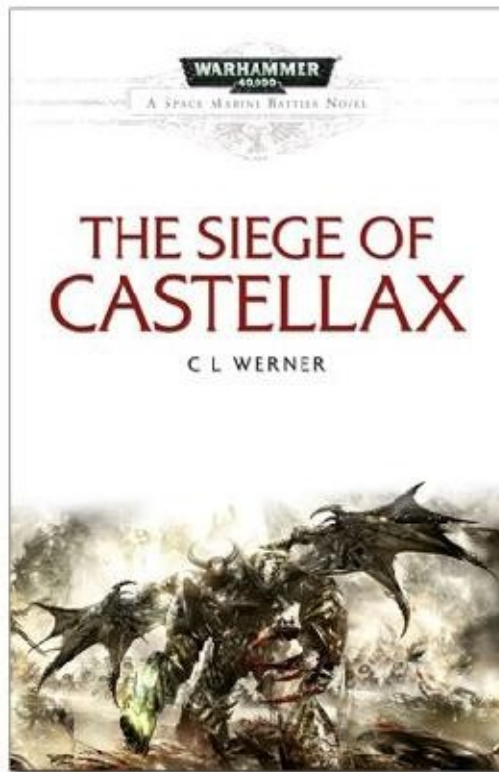
Terror swelled in Valax's hearts as he realized the extent of Oriax's treachery. He could hear the orks rushing into the room, rushing to seize their helpless prey.

'You found me like this in the crystal-swamps,' Oriax's voice droned. 'I should have died, but for you. Now, I avenge that crime.'

'Die, Valax, and may the Chaos Gods show your spirit the same mercy you showed me.'

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

C. L. WERNER's Black Library credits include Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter, Runefang, the Brunner the Bounty Hunter trilogy and the Thanquol and Boneripper series. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He claims that he was a diseased servant of the Horned Rat long before his first story was ever published.



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**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

**Published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

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**ISBN 978-0-85787-777-2**

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