

WARHAMMER
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A SPACE MARINE BATTLES SHORT

THE ASCENSION OF BALTHASAR

C Z DUNN



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PROLOGUE

Though the message was only brief, its cost in human life was expensive.

The sender, under great duress, was the first to die, a bolt shell put cleanly through the back of his head the instant his captor had confirmation of its release into the warp.

His corpse had not yet begun to cool when mere minutes later it reached the first of many relay stations it would pass through on its way to its intended recipient. In unison, the astropathic choir screamed out in terror, as the complex array of images and emotions passed through their minds before being diverted onwards. Those who did not die instantly through their exertions, turned upon their fellow psykers, clawing at each other in a frenzied orgy of warp-induced psychosis until not a single one of them was left breathing; their pinpricks of light forever extinguished in the Astronomican.

A pilgrim ship believed the glow emanating from their young, blind astropath was a sign from the Emperor himself - that He had delivered unto them a new saint in recognition of their piety. But, when her being turned to pure warp energy engulfed every living thing on board, all that was delivered were fresh souls to the entities lurking at the edge of reality and the cursed missive to its next destination.

Yet more lives burned out; fuelling the message as it travelled halfway across a segmentum. Drinking wells turned to poison. Beasts of burden and livestock became feral in their pens, turning on their keepers. Hitherto unknown diseases ran rife across an untold number of worlds, millions dying in agony before cures and vaccinations could be discovered.

A small agricultural world, though it did not suffer the ill-effects immediately, became the source of Inquisitorial attention and ultimately sanction. For several years after the message passed through a latent psyker in an outlying farming community, those children that were not stillborn were horribly mutated. The few that did make it beyond infancy were purged along with the rest of the population.

The penultimate victim was the only being of any note to have acted as a conduit for the message. Epistolary Arkan Karnasha of the Executioners Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, being in his one hundred and eighty-third year of service to the Emperor, was engaged in personal combat with an archon of the Kabal of the Sundered Veil. The dark eldar had been a threat to trade routes in the Galactic South for centuries. And while the Imperial Navy had done an admirable job of containment in that time, the addition of several Space Marine Chapters to the patrols had finally put the xenos to rout.

There, on the bridge of the Archon's flagship, his force axe poised to deliver the killing blow, the message bounced off Epistolary Karnasha's psyche to travel the final few light years to its recipient. Despite his shields and defensive training being great, the psychic momentum unbalanced the Librarian. Sensing an opportunity, the Archon ran his blade through the Executioner's torso dropping the bulky figure to his knees. As the dark eldar hefted his blade ready to strike down and decapitate Karnasha, the psychic communication had already reached its final destination and was poised to claim its final life.

Jolina Forneau was in the process of deciphering her previous message when the new one hit with astonishing force. It physically lifted her from her feet and slammed her against the bulkhead of the chamber. The chapter serfs, charged with guarding the Astropathic Choir, could only watch on helplessly as she burned with an incandescent green flame. Her screams echoed through the corridors of the *Pride of Caliban* and only ceased when one of the serfs was able to recover from his shock sufficiently to roll her to the ground and douse the unnatural flame.

Her breathing ragged and sharp she glared at the serf with long-dead eyes. 'I need Lord Zadakiel. Right now.'

THE WAR ROOM, *PRIDE OF CALIBAN*

‘She will only deliver the message directly to me?’

‘That is correct, my lord. She claims the contents are for you and you only.’

The giant figure of Company Master Zadakiel towered over Captain Selenaz, her slight, wiry frame making her look like a child in comparison. He looked to the five other figures in the war room, each clad in the bone-white Terminator armour of the Deathwing and then back at the woman bowing before him.

‘Very well, Captain Selenaz. The Deathwing and I will grant her audience here in the war room.’

She bowed lower before taking her leave, her almond-shaped eyes never making contact with any of the Space Marines. If such inter-species breeding were possible, Zadakiel would have sworn the woman was half-eldar, such was the alienness of her features. Once she was out of the room, he turned to his battle-brothers, ‘What do you make of that?’

‘A poor omen. The ship is abuzz with talk of what happened to the woman. They say she burned green and with such a heat that it melted the bulkhead of the Astropathic Choir’s chamber. Throw her out of an airlock and be done with it, I say,’ Dardariel was usually the most taciturn of Squad Balthasar but his distaste for matters of the warp often made him the most vocal of the five, a hangover from the superstitions of his primitive, tribal homeworld.

Since the destruction of Caliban at the tail-end of the Horus Heresy, the Dark Angels had become a nomadic Chapter, traversing the galaxy in their asteroid-bound fortress, the Rock, and their fleet of battle-barges and strike cruisers. Rather than recruiting fresh battle-brothers from a single world, the Dark Angels now drew upon all of the planets of the Imperium for potential inheritors of their gene-seed.

‘Stay your tongue, Dardariel.’ Sergeant of the Deathwing Squad and second only in years of service to Zadakiel, Balthasar had learned a measure of pragmatism during his time as part of his Chapter’s inner circle. While he was still a Scout he had honed his dislike and distrust of psykers, which like Dardariel was due to the attitudes and bearing of his homeworld. Even when he became a full-fledged battle-brother and took his place in Fifth Company, fighting alongside the Chapter’s Librarians, this did little to temper his ill-feelings. At that time would have quite happily held the airlock open while Dardariel jettisoned the helpless astropath.

‘I have no more fondness for the psyker than you but the nature of the message’s arrival means somebody was trying to get our attention.’

‘Then I would say they’ve got it, wouldn’t you?’ Zadakiel motioned to the robed newcomer entering the room, somewhat redundant as the stench of seared flesh had already heralded her arrival. Though her garb obscured the worst of them, her blackened face bore all the evidence of how grievous her injuries were. In places, the flesh and muscle had burned away to bone and strips of skin hung from her cheeks, resting on blisters and open sores. Two Chapter serfs assisted her to the centre of the circle formed by the armoured figures. Captain Selenaz walked behind her. When she spoke, it was with the voice and deportment of a dying woman.

‘Three messages have I for you, my lord, though a fourth was received but intended solely for me.’

Zadakiel dismissed the captain and the two serfs. Once they had gone he bid the astropath continue.

‘The first was the simplest to decipher and its meaning is clear: a world is dead.’

Dardariel scoffed but the other members of his squad castigated him silently.

‘The message was not more specific?’

‘No, my lord. Sometimes parts are lost in transit or their meanings altered and confused, but I believe this message only travelled a relatively short distance and its integrity is sound.’

Despite her milky-white eyes being useless they were transfixed on the company

master.

‘That in itself is something. Perhaps the world in question is close by,’ noted Balthasar. Zadakiel nodded.

‘And the second?’

‘Considerably more difficult, lord, as it was a mixture of metaphoric imagery, complex emotion and currents that already flowed within the warp. I believe my interpretation to be accurate but there are gaps in my knowledge that may have allowed misunderstanding to creep in.’

She paused, taking a moment for her scorched lungs to gather breath, ‘The Black Angel. He descends, no falls, from the sky on broken wings. The metal from which he is made as cold as his soul. Though he is no beast he is still uncaged or untamed.’

All five Deathwing tensed. Narcariel, standing directly behind the astropath, was about to strike her down when Zadakiel gestured for him to halt.

‘This is very important. Was there anything else? Any imagery that you discounted or could not decipher?’

‘None, my lord. Though there was a faint reverberation that I couldn’t quite distinguish. A clanging sound like metal on metal. An anvil being struck, possibly a bell.’

‘There are several Forge Worlds in the neighbouring sectors. What if this was a distress call sent by one under attack?’ The buzz in the Deathwing Terminator’s voice was common to all natives of Mendrion’s world. Zadakiel looked thoughtful for a moment.

‘Possible, but why would the message be meant directly for me?’

None of the Deathwing could offer an answer.

‘Your final message needed neither divination nor study. It was quite blunt.’

The astropath pulled her robe from her shoulders allowing the garment to drop to the cold metal floor of the war room. She turned her burnt body around so that

her back was facing the Company Master.

There, among the crisp charred flesh that clung to her back were several patches of entirely unburned skin, the black punctuated by patterns of pale pink to form High Gothic numerals.

‘Throne! What is that?’ Barachiel was a seasoned campaigner and had served the Dark Angels during his time in both Seventh and Fifth Companies as well as his half-century in the Deathwing. He had never witnessed anything like this.

‘They’re coordinates. Somebody is attempting to lead us somewhere.’ The Chapter Master’s hulking green figure moved nearer the husk of the astropath. He picked her robe from the floor and returned it.

‘Thank you. You have done a great service to the Chapter, astropath, and for that you have our gratitude.’

‘I live only to serve, lord.’

‘But please, tell me this. What was the fourth message? The one intended solely for you?’

‘I...’

‘Please, you’ve just told me you live to serve. Serve me now by telling me.’

For the first time since she entered the chamber, the fear Jolina felt became evident on her face and in the language of her ruined body, ‘Its meaning was entirely clear, clearer even than these marks on my back. It told me that now that you think I know your secret you won’t allow me to live.’

Zadakiel placed his gauntleted hand on the back of Jolina’s neck. She winced as the cold ceramite touched her burned flesh.

‘Some secrets are just too big.’

Zadakiel snapped the astropath’s neck like a twig, her lifeless form collapsing to the deck with a morbid grace. None of the ivory Terminators did so much as flinch at her cold-blooded murder.

‘Captain Selenaz,’ The company master called to the captain who had been waiting a respectful distance from the entrance to the war room. Several seconds later, the lithe woman entered and bowed.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Fifth Company are to transfer to the *Salvation*. Master Boaz will lead both Fifth and Fourth Companies to rendezvous with the Executioners and Doom Eagles to fulfil our obligation to patrol the Draconis system trade routes. Squad Balthasar and I will need the *Pride of Caliban* warp-ready as soon as they’ve transferred and new co-ordinates will be issued.’

‘Understood, lord.’

‘That is all. Dismissed.’

The captain turned to make her exit but halted upon noticing Jolina’s body. She turned back to Zadakiel, this time making eye contact with him and said, ‘A great mercy, my lord. The girl would not have survived much longer anyway.’

Before continuing on her way to carry out the company master’s orders. Once she was beyond the threshold of the chamber, Zadakiel addressed the Deathwing squad.

‘It would seem fate has intervened and presented us with a new mission, brothers. Once again we have the honour of meting out retribution on those who betrayed us so long ago.’



THUNDERHAWK EN ROUTE TO PLANET

<<‘This is a mistake.’>> Balthasar barked across the vox, the Thunderhawk's engines audible even over the closed channel.

The Thunderhawk gunship sped towards the ground, its six passengers checking and double checking their equipment in readiness for whatever awaited them below. Mendrion spoke prayers and litanies to bless his weapons while Narcariel applied purity seals to their armour. Dardariel spun the mechanism of his assault cannon to check the smoothness of its motion before spreading unguent along the barrel. Barachiel was stock still, staring at the blank wall of the craft to sharpen his battle focus.

Master Zadakiel responded, <<‘That’s a chance I’m prepared to take. You heard what the astropath said. “Untamed”. You’ve studied the ancient texts, pored over the Rosters of Caliban the same as I have. Tell me you don’t think it’s him.’>>

<<‘I have no doubt who it refers to but if he is here then it’s likely he sent the message and is lying in wait for us.’>>

<<‘Three times Attias the Untamed has escaped from us just as our net was closing, twice from right under both our noses. Are you prepared to let him escape again?’>>

The memories flared at the back of Balthasar’s mind like an itch. His first action after being inducted into the Dark Angels inner circle was as part of a mission to capture Attias the Untamed, one of the most notorious of the Fallen and rumoured to have been by Luther’s side during Caliban’s destruction.

Ten thousand years ago, the Imperium had been torn asunder by galactic civil war, formerly loyal Space Marine Legions turning on their brothers in defiance of the Emperor. For years, worlds burned as the traitors moved slowly towards Terra, before laying siege to the galactic capital. Though the traitors were ultimately defeated, the Emperor was placed in a catatonic state, existing

somewhere between life and death entombed in The Golden Throne.

The Dark Angels primarch, the Lion, led half of the Legion to Terra but arrived too late. With little to do other than chase down the remaining turncoats, who were fleeing towards the Eye of Terror, he opted to return to Caliban which he had left under the stewardship of his most trusted lieutenant, Luther. Years of isolation, and the warping influence of the planet itself, had changed Luther and he attacked his primarch. While the loyal Dark Angels bombarded Caliban from orbit, Luther slew the Lion in personal combat. Devastated by his actions, Luther's psychic primal scream was heard by the Chaos gods who, cheated of one of their agents, wracked the cradle of the Dark Angels with violent warp storms. Those traitors who still remained on the planet either perished in its destruction or were flung through time and space.

For millennia, the Dark Angels had believed Attias dead in the cataclysm. But less than a century ago he had resurfaced and, upon learning his whereabouts, almost the entirety of the Deathwing had been dispatched to capture him. Neither Balthasar nor Zadakiel had yet ascended to the Deathwing, at that point, but had learned of the mission's failure during one of the many initiation rites. They were eager participants in the next attempt to bring the traitor to heel and secure his repentance.

Like the first mission, the second was a failure but one that cost the lives of a dozen Space Marines that both Balthasar and Zadakiel had called brothers. Relentlessly pursuing Attias from system to system, the Deathwing again cornered the Fallen only to be denied vengeance, at the very last, as he and his warband made warp translation just as three Dark Angels strike cruisers and a battle-barge were bringing their combined firepower to bear.

That was twenty years ago. And in that time Zadakiel had become Master of the Fifth Company - the fabled Guardian of the Inner Sanctum; while Balthasar had reached the rank of sergeant within the Deathwing and was earmarked for masterhood of a company of his own, as and when that time should come. In those two decades no member of the Dark Angels had even heard mention of Attias' name.

Balthasar snorted in derision, <<'I still don't like it.'>>

The Deathwing sergeant turned his attention back to his equipment, activating

both his lightning claws in turn and checking their power levels. Satisfied that they were functioning correctly he addressed the other four members of his squad.

<<‘Though the treachery and barbarism of Attias the Untamed are familiar to us all, we step now into the unknown. The coordinates etched into the psyker’s back have indeed led us to a dead world, and in the hours since we arrived in-system not a single life sign has been returned by any of the *Pride of Caliban*’s sensor arrays. We have to assume that whatever put paid to life on this world is long gone.’>>

All remained silent as their sergeant spoke, <<‘Even so, exercise extreme caution. Though we may well be walking into a trap, let us not do so blindly.’>>

The Deathwing were not only unique within the Dark Angels but nothing approaching them existed in any other Adeptus Astartes Chapter. Entrusted with the deepest and darkest secrets of the Legion that spawned them, the Deathwing exclusively took to the field of battle in Terminator armour; and these dual boons elevated their position. Whereas the First Company of other Space Marine Chapters were comprised of its greatest warriors, the Deathwing were an elite in the truest sense of the word and though rank existed among them, frank discourse was encouraged in operational matters. Balthasar’s comments were not a barb aimed at Master Zadakiel, merely a reminder that though a threat may remain unseen, it is still a threat nonetheless.

Red lights flared in the troop hold and the pitch of the engine noise changed to indicate they were approaching the landing zone. Still several metres off the ground, the rear hatch began to open and harsh sunlight invaded the dark confines of the Thunderhawk. As the craft touched down, Balthasar turned to his squad, <<‘Today we bear the honour of bringing to heel one of those who stain the legacy of our Chapter and sully our primarch’s name. We do so with sadness; sadness that he turned away from the light of our father, and of our father’s father. But also with hope, hope that he can be made to see the folly of his treachery and repent like so many others before him.’>>

He made the sign of the Aquila across his chest. Every other occupant of the crew hold returned the salute, <<‘Good hunting.’>>



DESERTED CITY

<<'Not what I was expecting.'>>

Barachiel's words summed up what the other five Dark Angels were thinking. Countless times had Space Marines inserted via Thunderhawk onto previously inhabited worlds now devoid of lifesigns and countless times what they'd found there had been the same.

Bodies.

Everywhere they looked, there should have been corpses, possibly even destruction and other evidence of battle but instead there was... nothing. No blood, no sign of struggle, just the huge stone edifices of buildings that lined all four sides of the plaza where the Thunderhawk had put down. Statuary and Imperial insignia were all about and the Dark Angels could not turn in any direction without having an aquila or replica of some Imperial saint or another in their line of sight.

<<'Ecclesiarchy world from the looks of it.'>> Narcariel stood in front of a statue depicting a sister of the Adepta Sororitas. The likeness was astounding, crafted by a true artisan, but any semblance of realism was lost by the sheer size of the thing.

Mendrion snorted, <<'Or somebody is trying desperately to get the Emperor's attention.'>>

The sense of scale was imposing and the near three metre-tall figures were dwarfed in comparison to the monuments surrounding them. The plaza itself covered an area large enough to parade an entire Imperial Guard regiment and still have room left over for their troop transports and equipment.

<<'Captain Selenaz?'>> Master Zadakiel activated his vox and established a link to the orbiting strike cruiser.

<<'Yes, lord.'>>

<<'Have you turned anything up regarding the planet?'>>

<<'Negative, lord. I've cancelled all downtime and have every available member of the crew looking through the ship's records.'>>

<<'Concentrate their search on Ecclesiarchy worlds. I want to know everything about this planet within the hour.'>>

<<'Acknowledged, lord.'>>

Zadakiel cut the link with the *Pride of Caliban*.

Balthasar turned to the Chapter Master, <<'What now?'>>

Zadakiel peered about the plaza, <<'If this world is truly dead, I want to know what killed it.'>>



DESERTED CITY

<<'It must have been some kind of chemical or biological attack. Nothing else could have wiped out the population so completely without damaging infrastructure.'>> Dardariel reasoned aloud as the Dark Angels had made their way out of the plaza and were slowly walking two abreast down a wide street, weapons training on windows and doorways lest some attacker invisible to their auto-senses ambush them.

Narcariel retorted, <<'There'd still be survivors or at the very least evidence. Even the servants of the plague god don't have a toxin powerful enough to remove all traces of its victim. Likewise the dark eldar. The Officio Assassinorum perhaps, but why assassinate an entire population when you can just as easily bombard it from orbit? It's not like an Ecclesiarchy world is strategically important. A few statues and monuments may nourish the spiritual appetite of the Imperium but they don't win wars.'>>

<<'It was xenos then. Carried the people off into slavery. Wouldn't be the first time it's happened.'>> Mendrion's guess showed a surety none of them truly felt.

<<'There'd still be signs of battle. No population would willingly enter into servitude with the alien and even if they did, there'd be dissenters and those who managed to avoid being taken. Something much darker has occurred here.'>>

Sergeant Balthasar had heard enough, <<'Agreed, Brother Barachiel. And until we have proof of what happened here, can we leave the speculation to prognosticators and rune-casters?'>>

The rest of the Deathwing squad laughed. While some other Chapters placed their faith in false science and pseudo-magick, the Dark Angels were driven by reason, reason that fuelled vengeance. Obeying their sergeant's order, they followed the company master through the deserted streets in silence.

The planet's sun grew lower in the sky and the shadows cast by the high-fronted

buildings and towering memorials lengthened across the wide streets. With the hour almost up, Captain Selenaz's voice cut across the general vox channel, <<'My lords, we've just identified the world as Stern's Remembrance. You were correct in your assessment that it is an Ecclesiarchy world, though we found the record of it in a more recent archive as it was only settled earlier this century.'>>

<<'Any idea of population? There must have been a census carried out at foundation.'>>

<<'It's a relatively small world. Two billion pilgrims formed the initial settlers, including Ecclesiarchy and Administratum officials and staff.'>>

The six figures stopped short. It took a lot to surprise a Space Marine but informing him that two billions souls had just vanished without a trace from a world under the protection of the Imperium was a good start.

<<'Have the crew keep looking over the records to see if there's any more information that may be of use to us. And have the sensorium increase the range of their scans. If anything arrives in-system I want us to know about it immediately.'>>

Zadakiel broke the link and switched back to the squad channel, <<'Stay alert. Anything that can wipe out two billion-'>>

The company master never finished his sentence as the peal of bells and a harsh High Gothic voice crashed alarmingly across the eerie silence. The Dark Angels pointed their weapons all about, mindful to any potential danger. Storm bolters targeted shadowy doorways and alcoves while Zadakiel's own combi-bolter traced an imaginary line across the top floor windows of the highest buildings. His aim lingered on an object positioned on the corner of a particularly tall building further down the street and he relaxed his trigger finger and brought the gun down.

<<'Of course, this is an Ecclesiarchy world.'>>

The Deathwing, confident they faced no immediate peril also relaxed. Mendrion put voice to the question at hand, <<'And? What of it?'>>

<<'Listen.'>> Master Zadakiel lifted a hand towards the skyline. The Terminators filtered out the noise of the bells so that only the voice speaking in

High Gothic was audible. <<'It's a call to prayer.'>>

The company master's gaze strayed from the vox-array he'd spotted on the top of the building as he surveyed the skyline, <<'And where do the faithful go to pray?'>>

Balthasar and his squad mimicked Zadakiel and noted the same three structures dominating the horizon, <<'Cathedra.'>>



DESERTED CITY, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

<< 'You should not have split our number like that. If this is a trap then far better we face it as one.'>>

Balthasar walked side-by-side with the company master, their pace quickened by the urgency of reaching the cathedral.

<<'There must be dozens of cathedra in this city alone, not taking into account the rest of the planet. We cover more ground this way.'>>

Balthasar had no answer. The company master's logic was sound but he would have felt more comfortable with four of his heavily-armed Deathwing brothers at his back.

The labyrinthine streets wound, seemingly, randomly towards their objective. A world built for commemoration and worship was concerned primarily by ostentation rather than practicality. More than once, the two Dark Angels found themselves turning a corner only to find that the spire of the cathedral was now behind them, before the street snaked around once more and put them back on the correct bearing.

<<'Dardariel, Barachiel. Report. How close are you?'>>

Dardariel's voice came over the vox, <<'No more than a kilometre in a straight line, but with these streets? Hard to tell. We should have reached it by now but this city must have been designed by a lunatic.'>>

Barachiel chimed in, <<'A lunatic with an aversion to straight lines. My report is likewise, Master Zadakiel, though I'm concerned that we're rapidly losing daylight. The dark is a perfect place from which to spring an ambush.'>>

<<'Acknowledged. Report back in when you reach your objectives.'>>

Zadakiel cut the vox-link but the faint buzzing sound in his ear persisted. He

blink-clicked the deactivation rune but to no effect, so tapped the side of his helm to kill the feed. But the noise wasn't being generated by his armour's vox-unit.

It was coming from somewhere in the city.

Balthasar had stopped in the middle of the street, turning his head to locate the sound and let his armour's superior technology process it.

<<'You hear it too. Where's it coming from? '>>

<<'There. Straight ahead.' '>>

The sergeant raised his arm and pointed in the direction of the cathedral. Without instruction he set off at pace towards the source of the noise, Zadakiel following close behind.

The deserted lanes and promenades twisted sharply this way and that, crazing like cracks upon ice; leading the two Dark Angels ever closer to the cathedral. The closer they got the louder the sound became until they were able to distinguish the buzzing as insect noise. The streets began to widen and straighten until they opened out into another broad plaza. The cathedral sat majestically at its far end. Upon catching sight of the complete structure for the first time, Balthasar opened the vox-link.

<<'What in the name of Caliban is that? '>>

The Deathwing sergeant did not need to be any more specific as it was obvious what he was referring to. Though the spire remained visible, the enormous baroque structure of the cathedral was occluded by a swirling black cloud, clinging to the building's outline and writhing with an unnatural motion. The buzzing noise emanated from the dark mass.

Zadakiel realized aloud, <<'Flies. It's a cloud of flies.' '>>

Decades of service and experience came to the fore. This was a sight he'd seen too many times before on far-flung battlefields, the wrecks of drifting sub-warp craft and worlds given over to the debased worship of dark gods, <<'And flies in that number usually mean one thing... '>>

Balthasar picked up speed to match the company master, sensing the mystery of the population's fate was about to be unravelled, <<'Corpses.'>>



CATHEDRAL, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

The Terminator's lightning claws shattered the ornate wooden doors of the cathedral to reveal the horror within.

<<'Throne... '>>

The scale of the massacre that had occurred on Stern's Remembrance was readily apparent to the Dark Angels. The cathedral, at least four times larger than the plaza they'd landed in, and with a vaulted roof barely visible from ground level, was filled from floor to ceiling with bodies. Just as it had been impossible to look anywhere within that plaza without seeing facsimiles of the Imperium's dead, a similar scene played out within this house of worship, though the dead here were no simulacra, no visages cast in bronze or chiselled stone. The material from which they were wrought was once living flesh and no artistry had been applied in their unmaking.

Their murderers had been indiscriminate and all strata of the Ecclesiarchy world's society had been put to the butcher's blade. The corpse of a poor pilgrim girl, her face streaked with grime, dress no more than rags, lay at an awkward angle over the cadaver of a priest, his once fine robes now stained with blood and viscera. An old, toothless woman, parts of her torso missing from where she'd been hacked to death, clinging to an icon of the Emperor in hands rendered tight by rigor mortis, was draped like a lover over a serene looking clerk or bookkeeper. The only evidence that he was in fact dead and not sleeping was the hole through his head from where a bullet had passed through him.

Balthasar splashed through a thick pool of blood coating the cathedral floor and approached the charnel mound. His armour's systems filtered out the inevitable reek, and he unceremoniously pulled one of the corpses free. Several others surrounding it also came loose and dropped to the bloody ground, threatening to bring the mountain of mortality down upon him but it remained stable. He examined the corpse closely.

<<'Look at this.'>>

Zadakiel was nearby looking the pile of corpses up and down as if tallying the dead, <<'What is it?'>>

<<'These wounds. They were caused by bolter shells.'>>

He held out the corpse, the large aperture through its chest obviously the work of a mass-reactive round. Barachiel's voice made itself heard over the vox, <<'Master Zadakiel, we've reached the cathedral. It's like an abattoir in here. Bodies. Thousands of bodies everywhere, slaughtered like livestock.'>>

<<'We found the same thing here. I imagine we'll find the same in each and every cathedral on this world, all of them turned into tombs of the pious. Be on your guard, some of the dead here fell to bolter fire. If this wasn't the work of the Fallen then I'd hazard some kind of Archenemy involvement.'>>

<<'Acknowledged. We'll complete our assessment and rendezvous back at the Thunderhawk. There is nothing we can do for these people now save avenge them.'>>

Zadakiel was just about to order Dardariel and Mendrion to do the same when he noticed what had been left for them above the hill of the dead.



CATHEDRAL, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

Balthasar sneered, <<'Warp magick.'>>

The coruscating orb of blue energy hung suspended in mid-air, several metres above the piled corpses. Though difficult to make out with the naked eye, the Dark Angels oculobes and enhanced suit optics enabled them to view the incongruous object as if it were right in front of them.

Master Zadakiel peered at the orb, <<'There's something inside it.'>>

The sapphire ball had a dark core, giving it the impression of a vast eye left to stand sentinel over a killer's handiwork.

Balthasar squinted at his helmet's display, <<'What is that?'>>

<<'Only one way to find out.'>> The company master's hand strayed to a finely crafted leather pouch on his belt and popped a brass clasp to open it. He reached inside and produced a shell manufactured from the same brass as the clasp. Unlike a standard bolt round, this one was intricately engraved with runes and script, some of which cast a faint glow.

<<'It would seem somebody is on good terms with the Master of the Forge.'>>

<<'This round was given to me personally by Chaplain Boreas after we fought alongside each other in the liberation of the Kumenar Gap and drove back the arch-daemon Char Gar Kethekon. It is a specially modified seeker round, inscribed with litanies and wards that are anathema to dwellers in the warp. Cast from a metal that can only be found in mines within the shadow of the Imperial Palace on Terra, it has also been blessed by thirteen living Imperial Saints.'>>

Zadakiel removed the clip from his combi-bolter and replaced the topmost shell of the full magazine with the elaborate brass round. He slammed the clip back into place and took aim at the blue globe.

<<‘It had always been my intention that it would be used in the slaying of some daemonic entity, though I imagine it is just as effective against warp-born sorcery. I never thought I’d fire it in an Imperial cathedral, though, considering its provenance, it seems apt.’>>

The Company Master squeezed the trigger and sent the blessed ammunition inexorably towards its target. It impacted against the glowing sphere in a blinding flash causing the two Space Marines to avert their gaze, the sorcerous burst of light being too much for their armours’ visors to compensate for. With the magick undone, the orb dissipated and disgorged its contents, sending a black figure crashing down the heap of corpses.

Bodies became dislodged as the dark form slid over the dead. It tumbled towards the Dark Angels at the toe of a macabre avalanche comprised of limbs and torsos. As abruptly as it began, the wave of cadavers abated as it finally reached the ground and bucked the dark figure from its crest, sending it sprawling through the lake of blood at the feet of the Dark Angels.

The strange newcomer wiped the blood and gore from his black armour to reveal winged dagger icons on each pauldron, before looking up with his augmented eyes to find a combi-bolter and cyclone missile launcher aimed at his metallic head.

The Fallen opened his mouth as if to speak but instead issued forth a long and satisfied laugh.

‘You fools.’

His laughter finally abated, ‘It’s a trap.’



CATHEDRAL, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

‘Explain yourself, traitor. Why have you done this?’

Attias knelt facing a wall of the cathedral, hands on the back of his head. Zadakiel had performed a thorough search of the Fallen and, satisfied that he was not armed, commenced preliminary questioning. The real meat of his interrogation would come later once he was on board the Rock and the Chaplains were able to set to work on him.

‘You give me too much credit, brother. This wasn’t-‘

His answer was rudely interrupted by the butt of the company master’s combi-bolter impacting hard against the back of his neck.

‘Never, ever call me “brother”. You and your kind lost that privilege long ago.’

Though petty emotion had been conditioned out of Zadakiel as it had all Space Marines, the Dark Angel stood on the cusp of something approaching anger. Though ten thousand years had passed, the wounds of treachery were still raw among his Chapter and their successors. They were dubbed ‘the Unforgiven’ and the capture and ultimate repentance of the Fallen was their sole route to benediction.

‘Answer my question. Why did you murder this planet?’

‘I did not do this. I am merely bait in the trap they set for you, a trap that is being sprung even as you waste time questioning me here. Leave this place. Take me with you to your ship and I will answer your questions there. Let us go now while we still have a chance to escape.’

Balthasar circled the prisoner, his cyclone missile launcher’s auto-targeting system compensating and keeping the shoulder mounted weapon constantly aimed at the traitor’s head, ‘You wouldn’t be so keen to go with us if you knew what was in store for you.’

‘Your Chaplains you mean? Their constant quest to have us Calibanites repent for the Schism.’

He turned his head towards Zadakiel to judge his reaction, ‘Oh, don’t look too surprised company master, the current incarnation of the Dark Angels aren’t much better at keeping secrets than they were in my day.’

‘Perhaps, but we know how to remain loyal, how to fulfil an oath.’

The two Dark Angels switched places, Zadakiel taking up position in front of the Fallen.

‘You may be loyal, but that loyalty blinds you as does your dogged determination to see me and my ilk repent. Twice now I have told you that you are in the jaws of a trap and twice you have ignored me. Is capturing me so vital that you’re prepared to risk your own lives and those of your fellow Dark Angels?’

The capture of Attias, the capture of any Fallen took precedence over everything, though the company master had no intention of revealing that to a traitor.

‘Very well, I’ll bite. Who has laid this snare and left you and a murdered population as the lure?’

‘A bloodthirsty bunch of bastards who call themselves the Crimson Slaughter. Though they are not followers of the eightfold path, their bloodlust would put Angron’s dogs to shame. Their leader is the worst of them, Kranon the Relentless, constantly driving them to kill as if murder was like sustenance to him. This...’

He gestured at the dead stacked the entire height of the voluminous cathedral, ‘This is nothing to them. I’ve seen them lay waste to worlds and populations larger than this.’

‘Friends of yours are they, Fallen?’ Balthasar sneered.

‘If they were allies of mine do you think they would have left me suspended above a pile of corpses for you to find?’

‘Alliances are temporary among your kind. No honour among traitors.’

‘I was their prisoner, you fool. After I escaped you the last time, I made it to the Eastern Fringe and disappeared, finding sanctuary. The Imperium forgot me and I forgot it until the night the Crimson Slaughter came. The world I was sheltering on had become the latest target of their genocide and, though I took up arms against them, their numbers were overwhelming and they captured me. Though I did not reveal it, they knew of the Fallen, of the shame the Dark Angels bear and sought to use it to their advantage. To bait a trap in which to ensnare you.’

Attias was once again looking directly at Zadakiel, ‘But why me? This is the first I’ve heard of the Crimson Slaughter and this Kranon the Relentless. What is it they want?’

‘I do not know. They appear to be searching for something, as if the finding of it will release them from a burden that hangs over them.’

A knowing smirk crossed the Fallen’s face and Zadakiel turned away from the traitor, ‘I’ve told you enough. My usefulness to them is at an end and I’m as dead as you are if I’m still here when they arrive.’

Zadakiel looked the Fallen up and down, as if trying to measure the honesty of his words. Replacing the helmet he had removed so that he could look upon the traitor with his own eyes, he turned to the Deathwing sergeant.

<<‘Sergeant Balthasar, we will escort-’>>

Captain Selenaz’s voice crashed abruptly across the vox, <<‘My lord, dozens of vessels have just translated in-system and engaged us.’>>

Distant explosions could be heard over the vox transmission.

<<‘There are too many of them. I need to-’>>

The line abruptly went dead.

<<‘Captain Selenaz, move the *Pride of Caliban* out of orbit and commence defensive manoeuvres. Be ready for warp translation as soon as we’re back on board.’>>

The vox returned only static. The company master had no idea whether Captain Selenaz had heard his last communication.

‘On your feet, traitor.’

Attias rose and for the first time it became apparent just how much bigger the Fallen was than the company master, being closer in height to the Terminator armoured figure of Balthasar.

<<‘Dardariel, Barachiel. Immediate extraction. Get back to the Thunderhawk now! ’>>

The Deathwing replied in near unison, <<‘Affirmative.’>>

The sound of large impacts began to resonate from outside the cathedral. Buildings could be heard collapsing.

Zadakiel spun towards the cathedral's entryway, ‘What was that?’

Balthasar approached one of the cyclopean stained glass windows and casually punched through it with a lightning claw, rainbow shards of glass tumbling to the stone floor. Through the broken aperture they saw hundreds of drop-pods falling from the sky, a storm of death raining destruction on a city raised in veneration of the God-Emperor of Mankind.

The Fallen, staring past the Deathwing sergeant at the streaks of flame that marked the pods re-entry, muttered, ‘They’re here.’



CITY, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

Balthasar shouted into the vox, <<'Enemy left! '>>

Heeding the Terminator's warning, Zadakiel swept his combi-bolter around and annihilated the squad of cultists emerging from the newly landed drop pods. The serene city had turned into a vista of wanton destruction, the bulbous craft smashing through the tall buildings on their way to the ground. Where once stood a baroque marvel to the Emperor's glory, now lay rubble over which climbed the footsoldiers of the arch-enemy.

A cultist emerged from behind the cover of what was once a hab-block and took aim at Balthasar with a lasgun. He managed to squeeze off two shots, both of which bounced harmlessly from the Tactical Dreadnought armour, before the Space Marine cut the attacker down with an inhumanly quick swipe of a lightning claw. Several more emerged from the same bolthole but Zadakiel was alert to the danger and felled them with bolter fire before they presented any threat.

'Give me your bolt pistol.' Attias, running alongside the company master, gestured to the holster at Zadakiel's waist. 'There are too many for the two of you to deal with. Let me add some firepower to the battle.'

'You are our prisoner, not our ally.'

'What good am I to your interrogators if I'm dead? These cultists are trying just as hard to kill me as they are you.'

As if to emphasise his point, a shaven-headed cultist, eyes as red as blood and daubed with blasphemous icons, leapt towards the black-armoured Dark Angel, whirring chainsword arcing above his head ready to strike a debilitating blow. With his assailant still mid-leap, Attias struck out a powerful fist and decapitated the cultist. He stopped to kneel down and retrieve the chainsword but had not even placed a finger on it when he felt the muzzle of Zadakiel's combi-bolter press against his face.

‘Traitor...’

‘I know how important it is to you that you get me back to the last remnants of Caliban alive.’

The company master saw his own helmeted visage reflected back at him by Attias’s expressionless metal face, ‘Why don’t you reach for that chainsword and find out?’

The Fallen hesitated for a moment before lifting himself from the ground. More cultists were converging on their position and while Balthasar was so far containing them with lightning claws and cyclone missiles, he needed the support of the company master to clear a path out of the plaza and back to the Thunderhawk.

‘So be it, but I doubt your Chaplains will be able to question my corpse.’

With Zadakiel shooting a path through the mass of cultists, Attias followed in his wake dealing with any that the two Dark Angels didn’t finish off with blows from his gauntleted fists or armoured feet. A gap cleared in the cultists’ ranks, though there was hardly anything organised about their formation, and a route to the street they had used to approach the cathedral opened up before them. Balthasar stepped into the breach, lightning claws slashing at onrushing attackers.

‘Down here, back the way we came!’ Zadakiel loosed off another volley of shots, downing a group of cultists attempting to set up a heavy bolter in the road ahead, and, with Attias in tow, exited the plaza. With the flow of enemies seemingly ceaseless, Balthasar was forced to retreat, lightning claws crackling as he chopped down the pack of cultists who had given chase. Zadakiel shot from the hip, his torso twisted at a forty-five degree angle so as not to impede forward movement but also to allow him to fire backwards.

The street twisted placing ruined buildings between the Dark Angels and the pursuing cultists. Without having to fight a rearguard, the Space Marines were able to pick up pace.

They were almost at the junction that led to the final street before the plaza and the waiting Thunderhawk when a violent tremor shook the ground beneath them. Even in the bulk of their armour, the three Space Marines had to draw to a halt to

keep their balance.

Already damaged buildings shook and threatened to collapse under this new vibrational onslaught.

Balthasar steadied himself, 'Orbital bombardment?'

Zadakiel adjusted his footing, 'Why do that now with their own forces planetside?'

Another tremor.

Their pursuers rounded the corner but upon hearing the clamour, many of them turned and fled in terror. Those few brave enough to remain were easy targets for Zadakiel.

More tremors, gradually growing in speed and magnitude until were nearly continuous.

Some of the more precarious ruins began to deposit masonry from their upper reaches onto the street below. As the source of the tremors grew nearer, keeping their footing became more and more of an effort for the Dark Angels. Even Balthasar in his heavy Terminator armour had to widen his stance.

Then, just as the noise and vibrations were about to bring the street down around them, the source revealed itself.

An immense figure lumbered around the corner and issued forth an ungodly howl that registered somewhere between anger and agony.

Armoured entirely in crimson, the thing stood many metres high, almost as tall as some of the smaller buildings and over double the height of Balthasar. Its face resembled some twisted parody of humanity, contorted as it was with tortured features. The only other vestiges of organic material were the hideous blue tentacles sprouting from one side of its torso and unblinking eyes set into the thing's chest. Its left arm was not unlike that of a power armoured Space Marine, though on a larger scale, but its other had been replaced with a multi-melta which it aimed squarely at the three figures in its path.

'Helbrute!' The company master roared before diving out of the way of the

beast's cannonade.



CITY, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

Drop pods still crashed to the ground, though less frequently than before. The noise of the cultist horde is still audible as Zadakiel hit the rockrete street surface and rolled away as the blast of the Helbrute's weapon vitrified the space he'd just vacated. He sprang back to his feet and instinctively loosed off several shots, all of which bounced harmlessly off the beast's thick armour.

'For the Lion!' Balthasar's battle cry drew the Helbrute's attention as the Deathwing sergeant charged, both crackling lightning claws aloft. He threw himself at the monster and raked the beast's side, gouging its aberrant metal hide and severing the tip of one of its tentacles.

Like a wounded animal, the Helbrute's roaring reaction was to lash out. Its enormous arm flailed wildly, almost striking the Deathwing sergeant who avoided the blow at the last moment before opening up with his cyclone missile launcher. Three missiles screeched across the short distance between the Dark Angel and Helbrute and all of them found their mark. Two impacted against its chest, causing no more than superficial damage, but the third struck it in the face drawing another roar of pain.

Zadakiel yelled over the vox, <<'Aim for its head!>>

The Helbrute swung maniacally, trying to backhand anything within striking distance. More missiles launched from the Terminator's shoulder mount and all hit the beast, though none found their mark at its weak point. The Helbrute's multi-melta powered up again and it twisted its torso to point the weapon directly at Balthasar. Though lacking the manoeuvrability of the more lightly armoured company master, the Deathwing was still able to avoid the blinding beam of super-intense heat. While the Helbrute was still trying to ascertain whether it had hit anything, the Terminator was alongside it and slashed with both lightning claws.

Roaring in pain, the warp-forged metal afforded the beast no small measure of

protection; and though Balthasar's claws marked the Helbrute they did not crack the thick plates.

Zadakiel poured on yet more fire, slowly advancing on the Helbrute who was forced to raise its non-weaponed arm to protect its vulnerable fleshy face. As the company master drew closer, he switched from bolt shells to plasma bursts, his combi-weapon kitted out to fire both.

With the beast cornered by the ministrations of the two Dark Angels, its basest instincts took over and it put its head down and charged, desperate to escape. The Helbrute's guard lowered, Zadakiel held his ground until the last moment directing all fire at the thing's head. Though he was able to remove himself from the beast's path, it caught him with a glancing blow as it careened past him, knocking him from his feet and sending his weapon spinning away down the rubble-strewn street.

Regaining his bearings as he rose, Zadakiel looked for his weapon but found only Attias, combi-bolter in hand. He hefted it to his shoulder and looked out over the barrel as if aiming a hunting rifle.

Closing one augmented eye to sight his target, he exhaled and made his shot.

Time slowed for Zadakiel. All noise became indistinct, as if underwater. He could hear his own dual heartbeat distinctly.



CITY, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

The bolt shell glided past Zadakiel so closely that its passing caused his cloak to billow slightly, before finding its intended target.

The mass-reactive exploded against the Helbrute's cheek, gouging out chunks of its face and eliciting another pained dirge.

'At least now we stand a chance, "brother".'

Zadakiel drew his sword, the ebony pail of his Heavenfall Blade a match for the shade of the Fallen's armour, 'This changes nothing. Before this day is out, there will be a reckoning.'

'Of that, I have no doubt, but for now let me fight shoulder-to-shoulder with a Dark Angel for the first time in 10,000 years.'

Attias raised the combi-bolter again, Zadakiel did likewise with his sword and both Space Marines charged the rampaging Helbrute.

The combined firepower of Balthasar's missiles and Attias' gunfire forced the Helbrute onto the back foot and Zadakiel was able to get close enough to the beast for his blade to be effective. Ducking and weaving under the thrashing power fist, the company master opened rents in its armour, exposing the warped and mutated organics protected by its crimson shell. Its multi-melta swung around ready to make another shot but a well-placed cyclone missile forced it wide.

Then, just when it looked like the Dark Angels had gained the advantage, everything fell apart.

The wild melta blast struck the base of a nearby building, fusing the ferrocrete and weakening its integrity. No longer able to support the intense weight of the floors above it, the front portion of the ground floor shattered like glass, allowing gravity to do its work. With concussive thuds, the building

concertinaed, throwing up a cloud of dust as it collapsed.



CITY, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

Grit and debris still raining down, the dust hung like smoke over the street and even with the Space Marines' enhanced senses it was difficult to see through the pall. As the motes of dust began to settle to the ground, a figure resolved, clad in green power armour.

<<'Balthasar? Report. Balthasar. Come in. Where are you?''>>

The vox returned only static. The Helbrute's footfalls vibrated the ground. Somewhere within the swirl of dust the beast still lived.

<<'Balthasar? Come in.'''>>

A long burst of static was interrupted, <<'I am unhurt. I was on the other side of the structure when it came down. The street is completely blocked though. I can't make it back to your position.'''>>

<<'Did the Fallen survive? Is he with you?''>>

<<'Affirmative.'''>>

<<'Get him to the Thunderhawk and back to the *Pride of Caliban*.'''>>

<<'But master, I cannot leave you to face that beast alone.'''>>

<<'Returning the traitor to The Rock is the only thing that matters. Leave me and deliver our prisoner to the Interrogator-Chaplains.'''>>

Another long burst of static.

<<'Balthasar?''>>

<<'As you command, Master Zadakiel.'''>>

The dust cloud dispersed and the roaring Helbrute charged the Dark Angels company master.



CITY, STERN'S REMEMBRANCE

Zadakiel swung low with the Heavenfall Blade, sparks flying as it made contact with the Helbrute's armoured leg. Forged from obsidian salvaged from a meteorite that had struck the Rock millennia before, the sword - known as *Fellbane* - was one of a set, all of which were in the possession of the highest ranking officers of the Dark Angels inner circle. It was virtually indestructible and, as both a symbol of office and tool of war, was irreplaceable. The blade came free cleanly and the company master rotated it expertly, waiting for the beast's next move.

A melta-blast scorched the road beside Zadakiel; opening up another crater in an already pockmarked cityscape. A handful of cultists, brave enough to investigate the source of the commotion but too cowardly to get any closer, had taken up position further down the street to witness the duel. Many minutes had passed since he had become separated from Balthasar and the Fallen and, though he had survived the beast's onslaught, that was all he was doing.

Zadakiel feinted to one side at the Helbrute's next charge but could only connect with the flat of his blade rather than inflict any meaningful damage. The thing pulled up short to avoid colliding with the façade of a ruined building and swayed uneasily under the sudden arrest of momentum. Seizing his opportunity, Zadakiel gripped *Fellbane* tight and went in low again, dipping to allow the Helbrute's thrashing arm to sail harmlessly over his head.

'For the Lion and the Emperor!'

The sword found purchase between two armoured plates, and the blade slid up into the meat of the beast's torso, sickly coloured ichor desecrating the heirloom weapon. Roars of pain echoed in Zadakiel's ears.

The Helbrute bucked and the company master withdrew the blade, spinning it ready for another thrust but failed to notice the wriggling tentacles at the thing's side. One of them lashed out with preternatural swiftness, tightly grasping

Zadakiel's ankle and yanking him to the ground.

Bellowing in triumph, and with a speed that seemed impossible for something of its vast bulk, the Helbrute was over the Dark Angel in an instant, a heavy foot poised for the killing blow. Muttering a devotion to his Chapter and primarch, Zadakiel was prepared to face his doom.

But his doom never came.

Telegraphed by the sound of air to ground ordnance, a missile slammed into one of the buildings, exploding outwards in a torrent of debris and driving a violent shockwave along the street. Those cultists not fortunate enough to be knocked from their feet were either buried in a deluge of rubble, or eviscerated by sharp rock-sized shrapnel. Enormous tranches of masonry cascaded down onto the Helbrute, muffling its anguished cries as it was buried under tonnes of rockcrete and steel.

Removing a boulder that had pinned his leg, Zadakiel winced in pain as he lifted himself to his feet. He looked up to see the source of his salvation and there, in the void where the destroyed building once stood was the familiar green nose of a Dark Angels Thunderhawk. The front hatch was lowered and stood in stark contrast to the dark interior of the craft's troop hold was the bone-white figure of Sergeant Balthasar.

'Did you misunderstand my orders, sergeant?'

'The vox-link was poor.'

The Company Master gave an amused snort.

'We need to move now. We spotted Traitor Astartes on our fly over converging on this position. Are you badly wounded?'

Zadakiel glanced down at the dented and split greave of his armour, 'I can still walk.'

With some effort, he made his way up the impromptu boarding ramp formed by the mound of rubble from the ruined building. The Thunderhawk pilot brought the craft down until it was hovering only a couple of metres above it.

The company master reached out and gripped the edge of the hatch but, just as he was about to haul himself up, the debris gave way beneath him.

With a howl of rage, an enormous crimson claw thrust out and seized his damaged leg, followed by the shoulders and upper body of the raging Helbrute. The beast tugged at the stricken Dark Angel seemingly oblivious to the weapons fire poured against it by Balthasar and the other Terminators who had now joined him at the hatch.

One of Zadakiel's hands came free under the strain and he reached down to his scabbard and gripped the hilt of Fellbane. He looked back over his shoulder and saw that the Helbrute had freed its other arm and was slowly bringing the multi-melta to bear on the Thunderhawk. At this range a weapon of such devastating power would bring the craft down.

With only seconds before the Helbrute fired, Zadakiel made his choice.

Drawing the Heavenfall Blade, he lofted it over his head and tossed it into the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk.

<<'Master Zadakiel, no... '>>

<<'For the sake of the mission, Balthasar. Make sure my sacrifice is not in vain and extract that traitor's repentance.' >>

With those final words, Zadakiel relinquished his grip on the hatch and was yanked violently to the ground by the crimson hulk. He made no sound as the Helbrute set about his murder, facing his death with the dignity and courage of a true son of the Lion.

As the Thunderhawk gained altitude and turned to begin its journey back to the Pride of Caliban, the last that Squad Balthasar saw of the Master of Fifth Company was of the Helbrute slamming his limp body to the ground over and over again. Defiant to the last, Zadakiel died with his bolt pistol in hand, futilely blasting away at his heavily-armoured killer.

Even as the ramp slammed shut, the five Terminators remained immobile, eyes transfixed as if staring at the bulkhead could somehow erase the horror they had just witnessed. Attias, suspended from the ceiling of the Thunderhawk by thick chains that bound his arms and legs, made to speak. Before he could utter a

sound, Mendrion's fist lashed out and struck him in the face, rendering the Fallen unconscious, his black armoured form hanging slack in his restraints.

The Deathwing took their places in the troop compartment and continued their journey in silence.



EPILOGUE

MEDICAE. *PRIDE OF CALIBAN*

Balthasar sat on the edge of the treatment table, chapter serfs tending his wounds as there was no Apothecary on board the *Pride of Caliban*. Though Terminator armour was formidable, it did not make a Space Marine invulnerable and the bruising and cuts to his body were testament to the vicious battle with the Helbrute. The battle that had cost Company Master Zadakiel his life.

The escape from Stern's Remembrance had been perilous and the Thunderhawk had run the gauntlet of fire right up until it touched down in the landing bay, such was the overwhelming number of enemy craft. The fact that there was a *Pride of Caliban* to return to at all was thanks to the unparalleled skill of Selenaz as a ship's captain. After making an emergency warp translation to get the ship out of the combat zone, her battle report indicated that she'd destroyed or crippled seven enemy craft, including a strike cruiser believed to have been looted from the Iron Hands Chapter. Though the destruction of so many enemy vessels and the capture of a notorious Fallen would normally be cause for celebration, because of the loss of Zadakiel, the Deathwing could find little glory in the day's events.

The door to the medicae irised open and Captain Selenaz stepped in, data-slate in hand. The chapter serfs finished their ministrations and took their leave.

'Have we made contact with the Rock yet?'

'Yes, my lord. Warp tides permitting, we should be there within three weeks Terran standard.'

Her sentence seemed somehow unfinished, as if there as more she wouldn't, or couldn't, say. She had been a servant of the Dark Angels long enough to know that they harboured many secrets and would go to any lengths to keep them. Even now, she knew nothing of the black-armoured prisoner shackled in a two metre-square cell deep within the bowels of the ship, at least two members of the Deathwing squad standing guard over him at all times.

‘Is that all?’

She stood nervously in front of the seated Space Marine and, head still bowed, held out the data-slate, ‘We intercepted a subspace transmission from the enemy fleet just before we made the warp translation. At first we took it to be garbled orders or mindless Chaos dogma but one of the lex-savants was able to break the encryption.’

‘And?’

‘It was a message, my lord.’

She raised her head and looked the Dark Angel square in the eyes to deliver the last part of the sentence, eager to reinforce the veracity of her words.

‘Intended for you I believe, though I have not watched it, I assure you.’

‘Leave.’

She nodded a small bow and exited the medicae chamber. Balthasar thumbed the activator stud and the data-slate’s screen flickered to life. A burst of grey static hissed briefly before it was usurped by the grainy image of a Traitor Marine. Only the upper half of his crimson armoured body was in-shot and, just below the horned helmet he wore, a shrunken head sat embedded in his breast plate, just visible under his blue cloak. When the Traitor Marine spoke, the tiny face did too, though whether in mimicry or direction, Balthasar could not tell.

‘Dark Angel, Dark Angel. Such a pity we could not meet face to face. To do battle with a Space Marine descended from the First Legion would have been an honour indeed. Killing you even more so.’

Interference crazed across the screen. When it resolved itself, the background was clearer and Balthasar realised that the message had been broadcast from the surface of Stern’s Remembrance.

‘Did you like my gift? It was supposed to have been an exchange, of course. I give you one of your traitors and take one of you alive in return but things didn’t go quite to plan. Mortis Metallikus never could look after his toys.’

The image panned away to show the dormant Helbrute in the distance. There

was something different though, something had been added to it. A banner of some kind.

‘But he is fond of his new plaything.’

The image zoomed in on the beast’s new adornment and Balthasar bristled in rage when he realised what it was. There, suspended limply from the banner pole, was the battered body of Master Zadakiel, unrecognisable except for the green of his armour and the tattered remnants of his ivory cloak. The data-slate lingered on the image for an uncomfortably long time before focusing back on the Traitor Marine.

‘That just boils your blood, doesn’t it? To see him like that. You’re angry, aren’t you? We’ve killed one of your own and, by giving up one of the Fallen, revealed that we know your dirty little secret. You can’t live with that, can you Dark Angel? You can’t let that rest. It’ll gnaw at you constantly until you’ve hunted us down and extracted your revenge. Tug at the very fibre of your being until we are nothing more than smoking corpses and a footnote in the annals of your Chapter.’

Balthasar could feel his skin reddening as his choler rose.

‘I know we’ll meet some day, Dark Angel. And I know we’ll duel. In fact...’

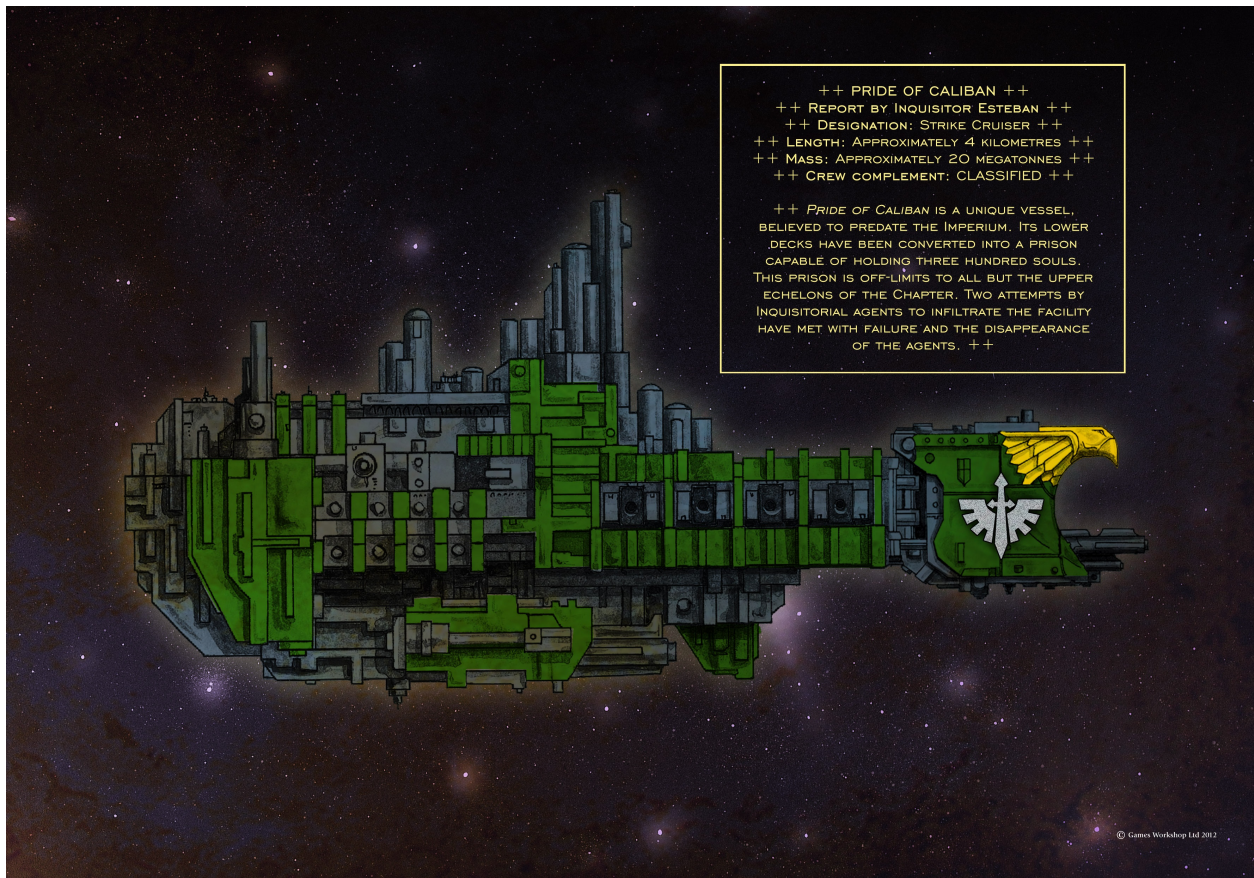
The image zoomed in tight on the gruesome faceplate of the Traitor’s helm.

‘I’m counting on it.’

The screen went blank and Balthasar’s anger ploughed aside all other emotions. He took the data-slate and threw it against the cold steel bulkhead, shattering it into thousands of pieces.

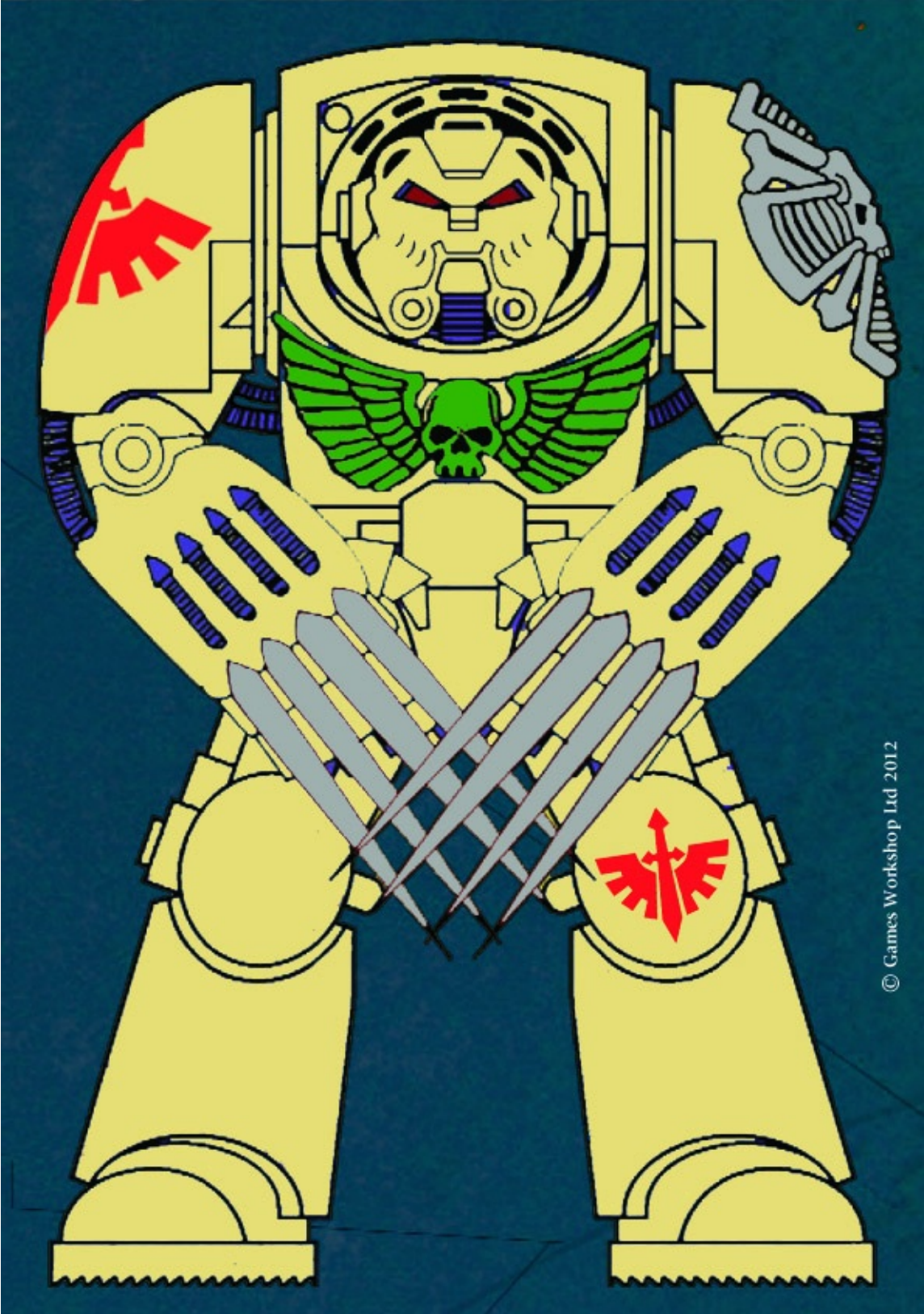
Vaulting down from the treatment table, Balthasar strode determinedly from the medicae chamber, his first steps on the path to dark vengeance.



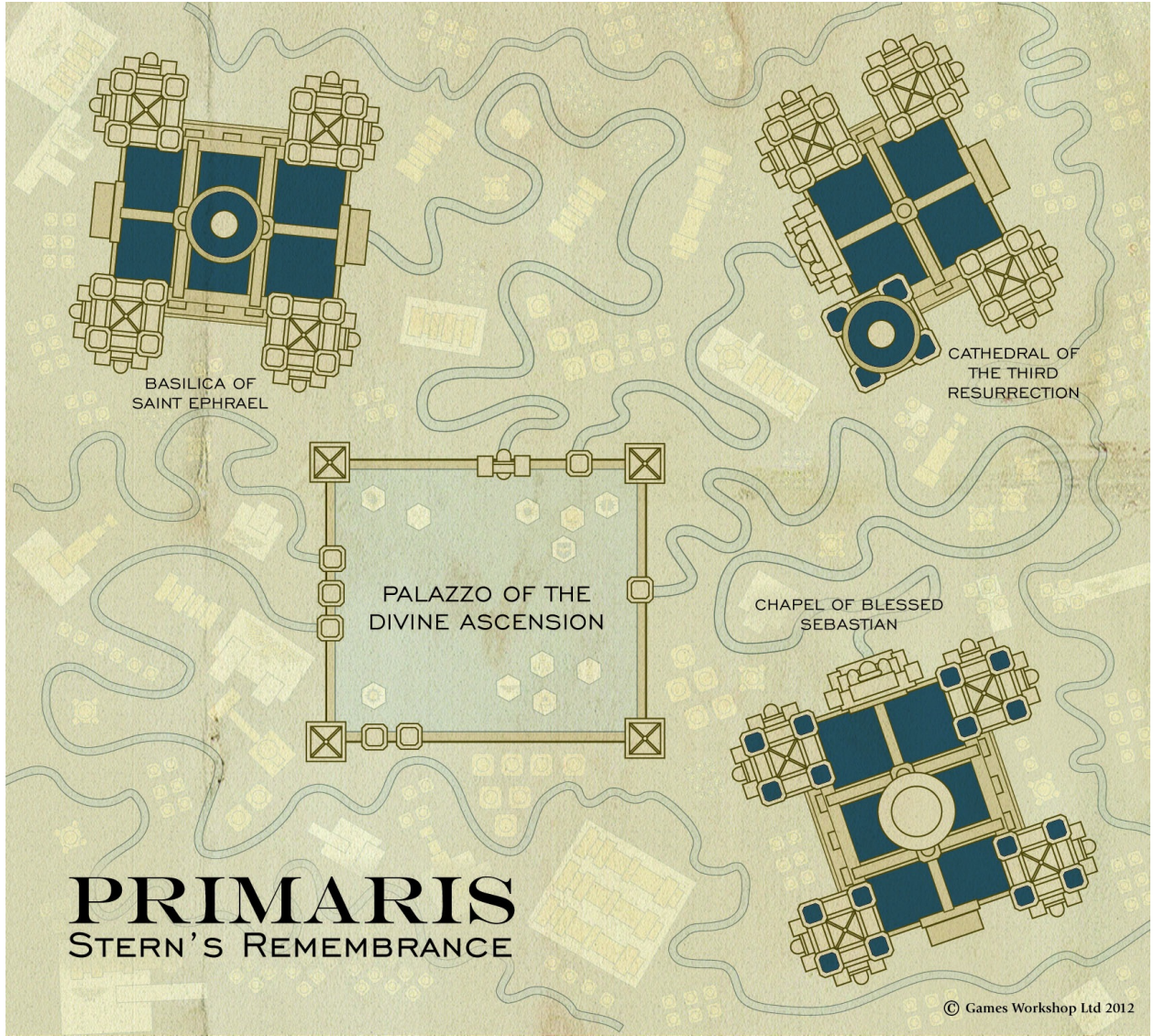


++ PRIDE OF CALIBAN ++
++ REPORT BY INQUISITOR ESTEBAN ++
++ DESIGNATION: STRIKE CRUISER ++
++ LENGTH: APPROXIMATELY 4 KILOMETRES ++
++ MASS: APPROXIMATELY 20 MEGATONNES ++
++ CREW COMPLEMENT: CLASSIFIED ++

++ *PRIDE OF CALIBAN* IS A UNIQUE VESSEL, BELIEVED TO PREDATE THE IMPERIUM. ITS LOWER DECKS HAVE BEEN CONVERTED INTO A PRISON CAPABLE OF HOLDING THREE HUNDRED SOULS. THIS PRISON IS OFF-LIMITS TO ALL BUT THE UPPER ECHELONS OF THE CHAPTER. TWO ATTEMPTS BY INQUISITORIAL AGENTS TO INFILTRATE THE FACILITY HAVE MET WITH FAILURE AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE AGENTS. ++



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PRIMARIS

STERN'S REMEMBRANCE