



WARHAMMER
40,000

TWO KINDS OF FOOL

AN ULTRAMARINES TERMINATORS STORY
BY GRAHAM McNEILL



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Practical. That was how they'd once done things. Back in the days of the Legion. He'd read the pictis of the most ancient pages of the Codex Astartes in the timbered Arcanium, looking back to a time when the kinds of missions he was known for were the norm. Back when the Ultramarines had, so the flickering image of yellowed parchment claimed, ruled hundreds of worlds.

There were few among the Chapter who would ever describe him or his methods as practical. Reckless, perhaps. Successful, certainly, but practical? Unlikely.

Yet with the ending of the war against the Bloodborn, the Chapter was renewing itself. Why shouldn't he?

A faded aphorism within the pages of the Codex Astartes spoke of two kinds of fool, those who *could* not change and those who *would* not change.

Cato Sicarius would be neither.

Final Absolution was an inhuman agglomeration of void-wrecks and spatial debris. A ghost ship passing down through the galactic plane, it had breached Ultramarian space fifteen days ago. Its mass and residual bio-signs had triggered the deep augurs of the Kryptman line, bringing *Valin's Revenge* and its escorts surging from the graving docks over Talassar on an intercept course.

Even without the Kryptman line, the presence of tyrannic organisms within *Final Absolution* was clear. Vast resinous plates crusted its hull armour and mucus-like accretions enveloped its dorsal surfaces like cancerous blooms of coral.

Three loathsomely organic bio-ships accompanied *Final Absolution*, smaller than the hulk, but still vast and grotesque in their resemblance to the nautilus beasts of Talassar's deep ocean. Waving tentacles, kilometres-long, probed the

void from cavernous maws and frills of undulant flesh rippled upon their cliff-like flanks.

Another ten days would bring this splinter fleet within striking distance of Talassarian system space. Sicarius's birthworld had suffered the touch of the Thrice-Born's daemon-wrought. He had sworn a mighty oath upon his Tempest Blade that its people would not know the horror of the Great Devourer.

Valin's Revenge was a ship of the Second Company, but Severus Agemman had named the hulk, as was his right as senior captain. Three squads drawn from First Company's finest warriors had been added to Sicarius's order of battle. Their inclusion came at the behest of Lord Calgar, but Sicarius sensed the hand of Varro Tigurius in its origin. The mind of the Chapter's Chief Librarian was an ever-shifting labyrinth that looked in a thousand directions for threats to the Chapter and the means to counter them. If he and Lord Calgar had decided the warriors of the First were needed, then Sicarius was not about to gainsay them.

Killing tyranids aboard space hulks was what Terminators did best, but the warriors of the Second would be first in the fight.

The lightless axial corridor was thick with beasts, scores of leaping, screeching killers of the *hormagaunt* genus. Sicarius's command squad cut them down with disciplined volleys of mass-reactives. Explosions lit the way onward with strobing muzzle flare.

At the head of the Lions of Macragge, Sicarius met the tyranid charge head on. He went low, ducking under a slashing claw the length of a scythe, and he thrust his Tempest Blade into the creature's thorax and twisted its energised edge. Molten flesh and black-red ichor frothed over his gauntlet.

He kicked the dying beast clear and shoulder-barged the press of aliens behind it. Bodies broke before his bulk. He stamped down on chitinous limbs, breaking arcs of bone and crushing hard shells. A jaw snapped on his left wrist, razored fangs scoring the artificer-forged plate.

Gaius Prabian took the creature's head with a decapitating sweep of his power blade as Malcian unleashed a roaring blast of promethium from his flamer. A dozen monsters shrieked as superheated gel compounds burned them to bloody vapour.

Sicarius moved into the gap, the jaws of the disembodied head still gnawing at his wrist. The black orbs of its skull rolled over to white. Sicarius smashed it to bony splinters against the bulkhead and fired his plasma pistol. The searing beam burned out the chest of a dead-eyed horror of talons and teeth, penetrating

a molten core through half a dozen more.

Vandius, Daceus and Venatio advanced with him, bolters locked to their shoulders. With flawless target prioritisation, they pumped shot after shot into the heaving mass of alien flesh.

Sicarius and Prabian led the charge, both warriors supremely gifted champions of the blade. Sicarius fought with the skill of a duellist, his sword arm trained since birth by the greatest fencing masters of Talassar. Prabian owned no such finesse. His blade arm was a killing tool, his shield a battering ram.

Malcian's flamer unleashed another burning stream, lighting the axial with the glow of a furnace. Alien bodies burned with a curious snapping sound, like fresh kindling on a bonfire. Bolter shells detonated hormagaunts like chitinous bladders, their noxious blood splattering the wall in vast quantities.

Sicarius saw something larger than a gaunt lope down the corridor, wreathed in the play of fire and shadow. Even hunched over, its bulk was impressive, ridged and bony, with sharp chitin-hooks running the length of its spine. Its skull was a bulbous horror of ridged, overlapping plates.

'Warrior genus,' said Prabian. 'A big one too.'

'Too big?' said Sicarius.

'Big enough that we ought to take it together.'

'Agreed.'

The tyrannid warrior's alien lips peeled back from its elongated jaw to reveal long, yellowed fangs. Hissing saliva drooled, and a black tongue coiled from its red-raw gullet. The creature barrelled forward on monstrously powerful legs, trampling its smaller kin in its hunger to reach Sicarius.

Twin blades of acid-edged bone unfurled from folds in its upper limbs.

Sicarius pressed himself against the shielding protrusion of a corroded stanchion and said, 'Brother Malcian, give me some light.'

Malcian took a braced stance and a stream of liquid fire played over the creature. Its flesh ignited and it screeched in pain. Bolter shells detonated against its armour.

It left chunks of corpse-white flesh in its wake.

Prabian stepped from cover and swung his power sword in his favoured decapitating strike. A killing move, but one that could leave a warrior dangerously exposed. A flesh-wrought sword flashed up to block the blow, a second thrusting for the champion's midriff.

Prabian rammed his shield into the bonesword, cracking the bio-weapon in two. At the sound of the blade snapping, Sicarius swung low and rammed his

plasma pistol into the side of the alien's reverse-jointed leg.

He pulled the trigger and the creature's knee vanished in an explosion of molten bone and flesh. The monster crashed to the metallated deck and Sicarius spun, reversing his Tempest Blade to ram it down, one-handed through the back of the fallen beast's skull.

Its agonised thrashing ceased instantly.

Sicarius left the sword embedded as the hormagaunts screeched in sudden abandonment, reeling in animal confusion. Sicarius knew the signs well enough; until another brood-leader imposed its dominance the tyrannids were easy prey.

'Kill them all,' he said.

The Lions of Macragge advanced in a line to carry out their captain's orders.

Leaving the slaughter of the 'gaunts behind, Sicarius and his command squad pushed towards the bridge. In a normal boarding action, that location would be heavily defended, but the swarm creatures counted no particular region of the ship – save for the nests of the hive lords – as more important than another.

Sicarius climbed the processional steps towards the bridge. The walls were a mixture of resinous excretions and scorched metal. Glossy veneers of pulsing organic tubes pierced acid-burned bulkheads.

'Sergeant Ixion,' said Sicarius. 'Report.'

'Moving up sub-deck seven-six-alpha. Heavy resistance.'

Sicarius nodded; he'd planned for this. The larger, more aggressive forces of Ixion and Manorian were drawing the greater concentrations of tyrannic warrior creatures.

Leaving the path to the bridge relatively undefended.

Relatively. Already he heard scratching claws behind the walls and beneath the deck plates. The grunts, brays and screeches of incoming ravager-packs were getting louder.

'Do you require assistance, sergeant?'

'Macragge's Avengers need no help to kill tyrannids, sire,' replied Ixion, with the precise mix of arrogance and respect Sicarius cultivated in all his warriors.

'Good work, sergeant. Keep pushing them hard, draw in as many as you can. And be ready for the withdrawal order.'

'Understood. Ixion out.'

Sicarius switched vox-channels.

'Manorian,' he said. 'Time to objective?'

'Current rate of advance puts us at sub-junction sigma-three-three in four'

minutes.'

Bolter fire, muted by the vox, and the wet smack of cold steel into alien flesh echoed in Sicarius's helm. The tactical overlay on his visor put the sub-junction five hundred metres from the sergeant's current position. Hard to believe Praxor Manorian would take so long to reach an objective.

'Make it three, and the company banner's yours to lift when we return to Macragge.'

'*We'll be there in two,*' promised Manorian.

Severus Agemman's eyes darted over the updating engagement sigils on the battle-logisters of *Valin's Revenge*. The Lions of Macragge had secured the location the Techmarines had divined to be main engine control. Already the *Revenge's* augurs showed heat blooms in *Final Absolution's* engineering decks.

Within the hour, the corrupted hulk would be diverted from its current path, taking it and the hideous xenos threat within beyond the eastern fringe.

'Your plan is working, Cato,' said Agemman, hating the grating, artificial wheeze he now heard in his voice.

An all but mortal wound sustained at the claws of the thrice-born daemon lord had almost ended him on in the keep of Castra Tanagra. Only a cybernetically rebuilt chest cavity and an indomitable will to survive had kept his name from being added to the Temple of Correction's walls.

'Are you surprised?' asked Librarian Felix Carthalo, a brooding presence at his side. 'Did you expect it to fail?'

Agemman shook his head, wondering if the prescient powers of the Librarian read more than just his tone. In any engagement with tyrannic foes, the psychic might of a Librarian was a boon, but Agemman never relished fighting alongside the Chapter's warrior mystics.

'Far from it, Brother Carthalo,' said Agemman. 'That Cato's plan is working surprises me not in the least.'

'Your tone suggests otherwise,' replied Carthalo. 'Did you hope it might falter, necessitating a combat deployment for the First?'

Hearing the echo of his own desire to be unleashed in the Librarian's voice, Agemman said, 'The First Company live for war, Brother Carthalo. It is what we are bred for, but Captain Sicarius's strategy is a good one. If all goes to plan, our strength will not be needed.'

'Then perhaps the fates will present us an opportunity even amid Cato's success,' said the Librarian with the ghost of a smile playing around his thin lips.

Agemman turned from the battle-logister to face his senior squad sergeants, Tirusus, Gaius and Solinas. The three warriors were encased in bulked plates of tactical Dreadnought armour painted the cobalt-blue and pearlescent white of First Company.

Each was a hero of the Chapter, warriors whose names were known throughout Ultramar and beyond. Their faces were patchwork tapestries of scars earned in the thousand years of service to the Emperor shared between them and carved into their skin. These men had carried his mortally wounded body from Castra Tanagra in the dying moments of the battle against the daemon lord's host.

Brothers was too small a word for the bond they shared.

Sicarius's plan cast Agemman's warriors in the role of a quick-reaction force, a teleport reserve to smash any enemy counter-attack.

A vital role, certainly, but not one that suited First Company temperaments. Despite his diplomatic words, Agemman saw the hope in each sergeant's eye that he had seen a flaw in Sicarius's plan.

'Don't let Cato's past reputation fool you,' said Agemman, wincing as the cybernetics grafted to his chest sent a spasm of pain through him. 'Yes, some past stratagems of my brother-captain may have appeared reckless at face value, but they were never without a sound tactical basis.'

'Even though they might have taken victory to see it,' said Solinas, ever the quickest to find fault with Second Company's captain.

'Victory requires no explanation,' quoted Gaius.

That gave them a smile.

Agemman nodded, 'Very true, Gaius, but my surprise stems from seeing this plan's roots so firmly entrenched in the teachings of the Codex Astartes.'

Tirusus nodded. 'Perhaps the fighting on Espandor has given Sicarius—'

'*Captain* Sicarius,' Agemman reminded him.

'Apologies,' said Tirusus. 'Perhaps the fighting on Espandor has given Captain Sicarius a newfound respect for the primarch's teachings.'

'Or that he scents change in the wind,' said Solinas.

Agemman chose to ignore this last comment, seeing a flurry of intense bio-sign appear in the hulk's engine spaces. He had fought the swarms of the Great Devourer often enough to recognise the spoor of high-function synapse beasts when he saw it.

'The masters of the hive awaken,' said Carthalo, a shimmer-sheen of light hazing the crystalline hood of his armour.

Agemman instantly processed this new information.

Thus far, the xenos had fought in a purely reactive manner, like white blood cells attacking an invading bacteria. Simplistic, territorial behaviour, their instinctual patterns were what had allowed Sicarius's strike to penetrate so far and so quickly.

The awakening of the Overmind negated that advantage.

'Sergeants, muster your squads at the teleporter arrays,' said Agemman, turning to Librarian Carthalo. 'It appears the fates have provided. First Company is going to war.'

What was left of the bridge was a smashed ruin of machinery torn apart by solid rounds, hacking talons and bio-acids. But just enough remained of its control mechanisms to fire the engines.

'How long?' asked Sicarius, looming over Techmarine Orian, whose servitors interfaced with a dozen opened terminals.

'The reactors buried in the depths of this hulk are still functional, but their hearts are cold,' explained Orian, his servo-harness working in the exposed guts of three nearby banks of machinery. 'The rites of awakening are long and intricate, but I believe I may be able to coax their wrath sooner rather than later.'

'Give me something specific, Orian.'

'The spirits of dormant reactors don't do specific, captain,' said Orian. 'Best guess is that I'll have them at a level to push the hulk from Ultramar in around two hours.'

'Hard to believe they're functional at all,' said Daceus, his augmented eye blink-clicking the damage.

'The resilience of blessed standard template constructs,' said Orian.

'Can't you just overload the reactors?' said Daceus. 'Blow this whole hulk and its escorts to debris?'

Orian chuckled. 'Hark at him,' he said. 'Spends a month detailed to forge protection and thinks he's an adept of Mars now.'

'Don't mock me, Orian,' warned Daceus.

'Then don't ask foolish questions,' snapped the Techmarine.

'Give him an answer, Orian,' said Sicarius, forestalling Daceus's anger. 'The question was honestly asked.'

Orian sighed and said, 'These reactors have been stilled for centuries and the power of any explosion will be insufficient to reach more than a few hundred kilometres from its outer limits. Not enough to be do more than scrape a layer of

chitin from those escorts unless they pull in close.'

'Then why didn't you just say that?' grumbled Dacean.

Sicarius left the Techmarine to his labours, making a circuit of the bridge. Its bulkheads and supports were bare iron, encrusted with ice and hung with fleshy stalactites. It groaned as deep structures shifted in the temperature differentials, the noise a mournful, drawn-out prayer for an end to its suffering.

Numerous holes punctured the walls of the bridge, ancient ingress points ripped by attacking bio-organisms. Sicarius had gunners stationed at each one, together with a warrior trained in void-hulk auspex reading.

He inspected each defence point, passing words with each man and lauding their conduct. His words were sincere and they knew it.

Sicarius moved to where Gaius Prabian stood at the head of the processional stairs. The vast doors to the bridge were jammed open, their mechanisms choked with resinous secretions harder than quick-setting plascrete.

'What does Orian say?' asked the champion.

'Around two hours until the reactors are ready to fire.'

'While we are static, we are vulnerable.'

'I know,' said Sicarius, 'but it is what it is, Gaius.'

The sub-deck was knee deep in reeking bio-excretions, digestive acids and liquefied metal. Its high vaulted ceiling was a pulsing network of peristaltic motion. Coiled intestinal tracts secreted waste products from the glacially slow digestion process that was slowly devouring the hulk from within.

Grub-like creatures wriggled in the ooze, and packs of larger, hunched things hung from the walls, drooling ropes of viscous slime. Submerged things with glossed and bulbous skulls sifted the waste for any residual traces of useable bio-matter.

A whipcrack of blue lightning arced between the sagging spars of a corroded gantry and fretwork-carved pilasters that depicted hooded tech-priests and eroded icons of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The creatures within the chamber looked up, hissing at this unknown intrusion.

The web of teleport energies coalesced in the heart of the chamber and exploded outward with a thunderous bang of displaced air.

The pool boiled in the sudden eruption of energy and a circular bow wave surged from the circle of warriors who now stood in the centre of the chamber.

Seven Terminators in the livery of the Ultramarines stood in an outward-facing circle, wreathed in flickering corpusant. Agemman stood at the head of the First

Company veterans, flanked by Sergeant Tirusus and Librarian Carthalo.

Agemman blinked as his sensorium realigned with the physical world. He processed his surroundings in an instant, marking targets and registering the squad's route of advance.

A monster erupted from the pool, a worm-like beast with serrated fangs and a rippling underbelly of sucking tubes. Agemman's storm bolter roared and the thing exploded into wet scraps of meat and chitinous exo-armour.

The walls erupted with movement as the hunched creatures reacted to the threat in their midst. Scores of screeching beasts dropped to the pool or simply hurled themselves at the Terminators from the chamber's upper reaches.

Agemman waded through the filth towards a raised area of deck, blowing apart targets with every step. Squad Tirusus and Carthalo moved with him in perfect synchrony, their weapons reaping a fearsome tally among the aliens.

Deadly accurate storm bolter fire blazed. The squad assault cannon detonated dozens of creatures in midair. Forking blasts of elemental energies from Carthalo's obsidian-bladed force sword burned countless others to ash. A rain of burning blood and ruptured chitin splashed into the pool.

'Chamber is secure,' said Sergeant Tirusus as Agemman stepped onto the raised deck, his armour awash with stinking fluids.

'That won't last,' said Agemman, consulting the tactical overlay on his visor. 'All squads, report.'

'Squad Gaius insertion on target point. Advancing to hive-nest objective.'

'Squad Solinas insertion point one hundred metres aft of target. Assuming battle pace to objective.'

'The swarms are already converging on our position,' said Carthalo, his voice strained with effort and his crystalline hood pulsing with psychic resonance.

'Motile bio-sign increasing at exponential rates. Genestealers.'

'Then let's get moving,' said Agemman.

The information on his sensorium was undeniable, yet Sicarius still found it hard to credit. It showed incoming teleport signatures on three separate vectors of attack within the engineering deck.

'Severus?' said Sicarius. 'What are you doing?'

'Reacting to a developing situation.'

'What situation?' asked Sicarius, hearing the roar of assault cannon fire mixed with the thudding, echoing bangs of massed bolter fire.

'Check your auspex feed from the Revenge.'

Sicarius did so and instantly saw what Agemman meant. All three hive ships were drawing closer to the *Final Absolution*. The void glittered with tens of thousands of tyrannic organisms ejected from the bio-ships and swimming through space towards the hulk. Hundreds were already cutting their way in, like scavenger ants on the carcass of a land leviathan.

‘Why did you board?’

‘*The masters of the swarm are wakening in the deeps,*’ said Agemman. ‘*I saw a chance to stir the pot and draw the swarm together.*’

‘That wasn’t part of the plan.’

‘*Plans change, Cato,*’ said Agemman. ‘*You know that better than anyone.*’

The vox crackled as Agemman’s signal cut off.

‘Orlan!’ yelled Sicarius. ‘Change of plan.’

Beyond the vaulted digestion chamber, the route through the lightless depths of the hulk grew narrower and ever more constrictive. The way forward twisted like the path through a maze, lit by constant flashes of gunfire.

This deep, the vessel was unrecognisable as something wrought by the hands of man. Every wall was glutinous with secretions and ribbed chitin, the floor a spongy mass of cloying tissue. The temperature was searing, furnace heat escaping from spore vents and the nearby reactors as their molten hearts were roused to wakefulness.

Agemman led the way, his storm bolter blasting a path through hundreds of beetle-carapaced creatures. Genestealers, lethally fast killers with claws easily capable of tearing through even the thickest armour plates. They screeched and hissed, jamming the corridor with their bodies. He fought through them, crushing broken alien limbs like refuse beneath his boot.

‘A righteous tide of alien blood!’ yelled Carthalo, sweeping his sword through four beasts at once. His hood crackled with lambent energies, and his blade was a beacon of flaming illumination.

‘These are vanguard organisms,’ said Agemman, ripping a leaping genestealer from his chest with his powerfist and smashing it into the wall. ‘The larger monsters will be waking and gathering around the master of the hive.’

Attacks came from every single vector: in front, the sides, above and behind. Even below. Sucking orifices opened in the floor, gurgling organic chasms descending to Emperor-alone knew where.

Hundreds of genestealers retched from their brood pits. They dropped from sphincter openings in the ceiling or rushed along the passageway at their rear.

Carthalo's prescient warnings alerted the Terminators to every danger.

Storm bolters fired never-ending hails of mass-reactives as Agemman led them deeper into the sickeningly organic heart of the hulk. They followed constricting passageways hung with frond-like growths that quested for their necks like living hangman's rope, and traversed chambers filled with hissing acid pools that stripped the paint from their armour. They waded through rivers of frothed matter, and burned clutches of leathery ovoid egg-sacs with flamers. Every step of their advance felt like plunging deeper into the rancid guts of a diseased plague-carrier.

They took their first casualty when a portion of the ceiling collapsed in a deluge of acids. Brother Meridax staggered, and a flailing creature erupted from a floor pit to envelop him. Its body was a segmented snake-like horror of rending claws and snapping fangs. Twin chitin hooks carved open his armour as the beast's weight drove him to the deck. Secondary limbs tore into Meridax's exposed flesh like the blades of a threshing machine. Its enormous jaws snapped shut on his helmet, swallowing it whole.

With a flick of its coiled tail, the creature sprang at Carthalo. It moved with blinding speed, but the Librarian made a quarter turn and cut it in half at the thorax with a mighty two-handed blow. The remains fell in a hissing, spitting heap before him. Carthalo stamped down on the fringed plates of its armoured skull and its thrashing ceased instantly.

'Mark our fallen brother,' said Agemman. 'We press on.'

What had once been a space devoted to the ritual circulation of coolant fluids had been transformed into a vast gestation chamber. Hundreds of metres high and a full kilometre in length, the walls were curved, rib-like vaults of bio-organic polymers, the floor a cratered wasteland of digestion pools, birthing pods and flesh-sculpting.

Innumerable swarm organisms filled the vast chamber, some still dormant in hibernation, but increasing numbers were tearing through membranous cauls of hibernation sacs. Packs of genestealers and hormagaunts moved in flocking patterns through the chamber, but now Agemman saw the larger brood strains – tyrannic warriors in all their myriad weaponised bio-forms.

'Guilliman's Oath,' said Sergeant Tirusus.

The pattern of their distribution was immediately obvious.

A towering beast, easily the equal of an Imperial Knight in scale, squatted in a pool of viscous bio-matter. The tyrant of this fleet was a gnarled leviathan, slick

with drizzled fluids and bowed by monstrously thick plates of chitinous armour. Its body was ancient, a primordial creature birthed centuries, perhaps even millennia, ago in a far distant galaxy.

Its jaws could swallow a Rhino whole. Its claws could carve the leg from a Titan. It bared its fangs, dripping yellow tusks the thickness of a Dreadnought's fist.

'That's the beast,' said Agemman. 'Courage and honour!'

'For Macragge!' bellowed Carthalo.

They advanced in the wake of interlocking mass-reactives and assault cannon fire. Pinpoint volleys cleared a route through the chamber. Tyranid organisms surrounded them, hurling themselves at the Terminators with furious abandon. Heedless of pain, the implacable will of the Overmind drove them into the teeth of the Terminators' guns without fear of death.

Only genestealers weathered the storm of explosive rounds, but even they were pulped by powerfists or carved asunder by chainfists as the Terminators advanced with relentless, unstoppable hatred of their kind.

Yet even as the Ultramarines advance began to slow, squads Gaius and Solinas breached the chamber. A three-pronged assault now pushed into the nest, and the guarding swarms were forced to divide.

Agemman took heart from the sight of his warriors and drove himself into the fray with ever-greater resolve.

The pace of the assault renewed.

The lord of the broods loosed a bellow that shook the walls of the chamber, and Agemman met its alien gaze. Its eyes were ancient, marbled orbs the size of his fist, and Agemman saw the silence between the galaxies in their empty, soulless voids. He felt sudden, agonising pressure within his skull, the presence of something invasive and hideously alien pressing against the surface of his mind.

And in that instant of connection he was once again in Castra Tanagra as the daemon lord towering above him, its warp-sheathed claws poised to end his life. He felt the numbing horror of that moment again, paralysed by knowing there was absolutely nothing he could do to save himself.

Fear was alien to Severus Agemman, but the psychic scarring of the instant he had faced death was all too real. The hive lord's inhumanly powerful mind dredged deeply and amplified that pain and horror a thousandfold.

A hulking tyrannic warrior charged him, but Agemman lowered his powerfist and relaxed his trigger finger. The beast screeched in triumph and fibrous whips

of muscle tendon lashed from cavities in its exoskeletal structure. They entangled his arms and pulled him off-balance. With him pulled in close, the beast vomited a spray of bio-plasmic fluids onto his helmet. Agemman's vision fogged with static.

The corrosive slime ate into his helm's grille and Agemman gagged at its foulness. The neuroglottis at the back of his throat rebelled at the stench, somewhere between a greenskin midden and necrotic flesh.

Mantis-blade arms scythed towards his head. A black-bladed sword intercepted them and a return stroke clove the creature's forelimbs from its body.

'Fight it, Severus!' yelled Carthalo, and Agemman felt the blistering heat radiating from the Librarian's psychic hood.

He felt the hive lord's fury as its hold was broken, and let out a shuddering breath as the nightmare of Castra Tanagra bled from his thoughts like a sickness.

Carthalo thrust his gauntlet at Agemman's attacker. A blaze of blue fire shrieked from his splayed fingers, instantly searing the meat from the creature's unnatural skeleton.

Agemman could barely see. The bio-acid had dissolved most of the front of his helmet. He ripped it clear, and the heat and stench of the cavern struck him like a physical assault. Memory made his chest a knot of agony where the organic scraps of his heart and lungs meshed with his internal augmetics.

Sergeant Tirusus's squad formed a wedge around him as Carthalo swept the torrent of his psychic fire over the alien host. That fire burned hotter and brighter than any natural blaze and the creatures shrieked as the Librarian burned a path towards the hive lord.

'Are you wounded, brother-captain?' asked Sergeant Tirusus.

Agemman shook his head, swallowing back a bilious mouthful of revulsion. Without the insulation of his helmet, the foulness of this alien nest was almost too much to bear.

'I am not,' he said, masking his horror at the lingering trace of the hive lord's mind by spitting on the molten bones of the beast Carthalo had slain.

Tirusus nodded and Agemman was grateful he turned away.

The first captain's transhuman body was mighty, but the daemon lord's claws had cut him to the quick of his life. Not even the combined skill of the Chapter's masters of the Forge and apothecarion could undo such mortal hurts entirely.

Agemman swallowed his pain and forged a path to Carthalo's side. Even as the Librarian fired his storm bolter and cut through packs of tyrannid creatures, his hood blazed with the intensity of his unseen battle with the tyrant's mind.

What supreme skill must it take to wage war in both the physical and spiritual realm? To see a warrior fight with such mastery was humbling and inspiring.

Faced with furious assaults from three directions, the hive lord retreated into its pool, loosing a braying screech of animal desperation. Agemman was no psychic, but even he recognised a base creature's cry for help.

The monstrous creature spasmed in the pool, sending a wave of stinking fluids over the undulating deck. Its swollen belly bloated with hideous tumorous growths, like a thousand eggs in pustulant sacs suddenly brought to the surface.

Scores ruptured, spilling a froth of grotesque, foetal scraps onto the chamber's floor. They writhed like unclenching fists and knots of maggot-like termagants scabbled to their clawed feet.

'Too little, too late,' said Agemman.

The First Company Terminators cut through them all, implacable, unstoppable and utterly without mercy as they closed the noose.

Once again, Agemman met the gaze of the hive lord.

This time all he saw was the reflection of his own implacable will to see the beast dead.

'Kill it,' he said.

The first explosion opened a seam along *Final Absolution's* starboard flank. A volcanic flare of light boiled from its pitted surface, spilling out in neon-bright trceries of plasma fire.

The hive ships hung suspended alongside the dying hulk, bound to its doom by a crippling sense of emptiness and confusion. Vast quantities of radiation boiled into space, peeling the leathery void-hides from their bones like cinders in a firestorm.

The slaying of the hive lord had thrown the gestalt xeno-consciousness of the tyranids into a paroxysm of conflicting drives. By the time the most powerful minds achieved dominance of the trillions of other interlinked creatures, it was already too late to escape.

One hive ship had fought its way clear of the doomed hive lord's ship, but its wretched, dying mass was easy prey for the guns of *Valin's Revenge*. Its gutted carcass was already drifting off into wilderness space.

Secondary and tertiary detonations, minutes old, climbed to the hulk's surface and reticulated lines of fire shone through its crazed hull as though it contained a newborn supernova.

Sicarius watched the *Final Absolution's* death with a hollow mix of

satisfaction and victory denied. By any definition, this was a heroic action, one to be entered into the victory rolls with pride and honour.

‘You surprised me today, Severus,’ he said at last.

‘I could say the same thing, Cato,’ replied Agemman.

‘How so?’

‘It’s no secret our interpretations of the Codex Astartes have always differed.’

‘True. Diplomatic of you, but true. What’s your point?’

‘Today you cleaved to the teachings of the Codex Astartes as I have always done.’

‘So why do I feel second guessed?’

‘I saw the opportunity and I took it,’ said Agemman. ‘There is little else to say. Had our roles been reversed, you would have done the same.’

‘Perhaps,’ allowed Sicarius.

Agemman was correct in his assessment, but for one critical fact. Only Terminators could have fought their way through to the hive lord’s nest.

‘There is no *perhaps*, Cato,’ said Agemman. ‘You are a great warrior, perhaps one of the greatest Ultramar has seen in millennia, but I am not yet too old to surprise you.’

Sicarius smiled. ‘Evidently not.’

‘I am the master of First Company, the Regent of Ultramar and I’m not too set in my ways to change when I need to.’

‘Nor am I,’ said Sicarius.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes *Vengeful Spirit* and his *New York Times* bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award, and the anthology *Elves*. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.

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