



# BLACK LIBRARY

---

TALES FROM THE  
WORLDS OF WARHAMMER

# WELCOME TO THE BLACK LIBRARY SAMPLER

## WHO ARE BLACK LIBRARY?

Welcome to Black Library, the publishing division of Games Workshop. We are devoted to publishing novels, novellas, short stories, audiobooks and audio dramas set in the wonderful and hugely popular worlds of Warhammer Age of Sigmar, Warhammer 40,000 and The Horus Heresy.

Based on tabletop strategy games that have been entertaining people for decades, these diverse and richly imagined universes are a unique take on science fiction and fantasy. Blending high-octane action with strong character drama and a twist of bleak nihilism and dark humour, Black Library stories are enjoyed by millions of readers worldwide.

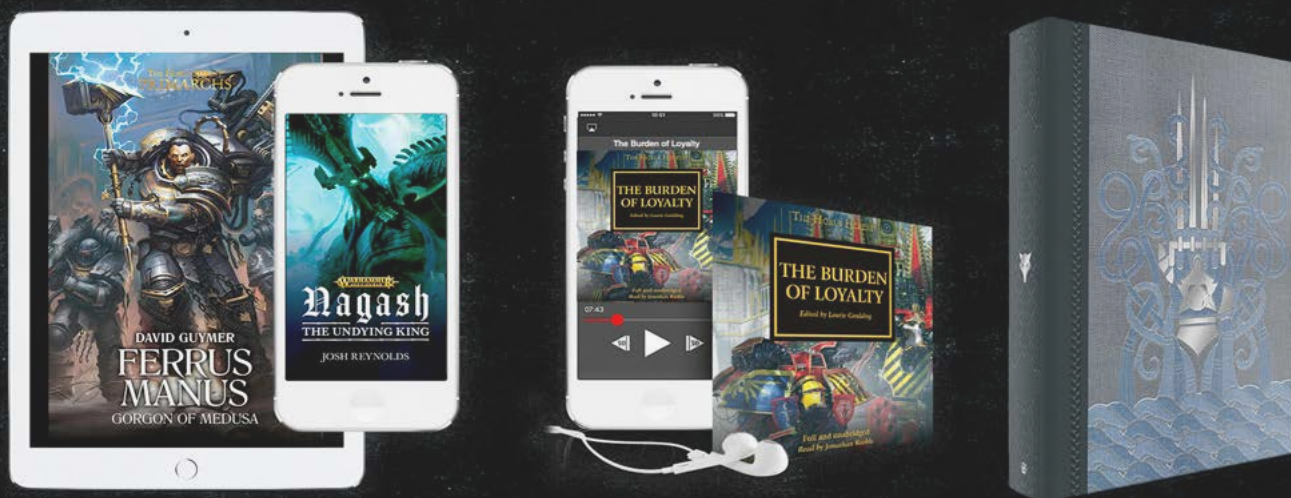
Whatever type of story you're looking for, there's something for everyone within Black Library. Our products are available in both digital and

physical formats, and can be found on sale on [games-workshop.com](http://games-workshop.com), [blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com), Amazon and iBooks, as well as in Games Workshop retail stores, all good book shops and many independent Games Workshop stockists around the world.

## WHAT'S IN THIS SAMPLER?

Within this sampler, you'll find extracts from nine Black Library novels and novellas, each representing the first book in a series or a great starting point for your Black Library journey. Each extract also includes a short introduction to the book or the series, providing an insight as to what the story is about.

So, strap on your armour and draw your sword as you prepare to take your first steps into the worlds of Warhammer Age of Sigmar, Warhammer 40,000, The Horus Heresy and Warhammer Chronicles...



**WARHAMMER**  
CHRONICLES

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

**WARHAMMER**  
AGE OF SIGMAR

THE HORUS HERESY™



# WHAT ARE THE SETTINGS?



War rages across the galaxy. The fragile Imperium of Man is beset on all sides by aliens, daemons and traitors. This is our most expansive setting, with hundreds of action-packed titles to choose from.

## THE HORUS HERESY™

If you're after tales of epic, galaxy-spanning conflict filled with betrayal, treachery and sundered brotherhoods, look no further. The *New York Times* bestselling Horus Heresy series is for you.



After centuries of darkness, light has returned to the Mortal Realms. The God-King Sigmar has sent his lightning-forged warriors to strike against the forces of Chaos and salvage hope from the shattered remnants of war.

## WARHAMMER® CHRONICLES

Return to the World-That-Was and discover tales of heroism and adventure, treachery and triumph. From the Time of Legends to the End Times, there are hundreds of stories to choose from.





**Darkness has fallen on the galaxy, but with it comes a light;  
a primarch has returned to lead mankind in its time of need.**

An extract from

# **DARK IMPERIUM**

GUY HALEY

The void is impossible for the human mind to encompass.

Within the galaxy mankind calls home there are three hundred billion stars. Around these revolve hundreds of billions of worlds, and the spaces between are crowded by a diversity of objects which defy enumeration. Mankind's galaxy is but one of trillions of galaxies in a universe of unguessable size. The distances between even proximate astronomical bodies are inconceivable to creatures evolved to walk the warmer regions of single small world.

This is why the void cannot be understood. Not by men, nor by their machines.

The magi of Mars insist on their understanding, but their apprehension can only ever be an abstraction, dead numbers modelled by dead-flesh cogitators. No matter how brutally expanded their minds, men cannot comprehend the majesty of the void.

And when one considers the warp, that nightmare realm skulking behind that of touch, sound and sight, well... any being who claims understanding of that is either deluded or insane, and is in both cases dangerous.

Among the higher races there are those better equipped to grasp their own limitations. They understand that the cosmos is ultimately unknowable; they accept their lack of insight. By comparison, the creatures of Terra are so crude in thought that – in the opinion of these more enlightened civilisations – it is a wonder humanity can understand anything at all.

Humans are beings of short reach. Give them voidships, change their shape by geneforge and augmetic, provide them with weapons of sufficient power to break a star, and the children of Old Earth are still but apes removed from the savannah. And just as an ape's mind cannot hold an ocean, and the notion of a whole world is inexplicable to it, so a man's mind cannot hold the void, and the layered infinities of the warp are beyond him entirely.

The Imperium claims a million worlds as its own. It is an empire spread gossamer-thin across the run of stars, its worlds so far removed from one another that it requires the bloody effort of countless men and women to sustain. In the grand flow of history, the Imperium is the greatest galactic empire of its day. To the people who populate it, it is the most powerful ever to have existed.

However, to the uncaring universe, it is nothing, the latest in a line of such realms that stretches back to the days of the first thinking beings, when the stars were young and the warp was calm, and horror had yet to uncoil its tendrils into the material realm.

There are philosophers that argue war is man's natural state, and to the inhabitants of this era of blood it is a proven hypothesis. War is everywhere. Peace is the dream of a silent Emperor, broken by His treacherous sons.

Those sons continued to fight.

Over the green gas giant of Thessala, two great battlefleets engaged. Titanic energies snapped and blinked in the eternal night of space.

The total efforts of star systems went into the construction of these fleets. Neither was free of the taint of blood, not in their construction – for tens of thousands of lives had been expended in their making – nor in their usage. The resources of planets had been poured entire into the forging of their frames, and the secrets of ancient sciences plundered to bring them to murderous life. Both had been responsible for the levelling of civilisations.

The fleets differed in only two regards. First was in their appearance. One was a gaudy assault on the senses, the other a motley collection of sober liveries. The second and more fundamental difference was in their allegiance. The sober fleet fought for the continuation of humanity's great stellar empire; the gaudy one was dedicated to its extinction.

The battlefleets pursued each other in a slow dance that broke through Thessala's rings, hundreds of vessels ploughing gaps through the dust that would take centuries to close. The voiceless lightning of their guns filled the skies of Thessala's inhabited moons. The lives of millions below depended on the outcome of the battle, but the consequences would ripple much further.

At the centre of this iron storm there was no calm, no eye in which respite might be found. Instead, there was a pair of leviathans: the Ultramarines battle-barge *Gauntlet of Power* and the Emperor's Children battleship *Pride of the Emperor*. Two vessels, forged in a common cause but now implacable enemies, locked together in mortal combat only thirty kilometres apart – no distance at all in void war.

Each was the flagship of a primarch, genetically engineered demigods crafted by the Emperor of Mankind. Aboard the *Gauntlet of Power* stood Roboute Guilliman, the foundling of Ultramar, the Avenging Son. The *Pride of the Emperor* was home to Fulgrim – the traitor, the fallen exemplar, the blighted phoenix. Once covered in his Emperor's blessings, Fulgrim had followed the arch-traitor Horus and pledged his allegiance to ancient dark gods, becoming the herald of perversity.

In fighting for their father, both primarchs were made fathers themselves, though not of princes or strong daughters; through the application of arcane science, they were the sires of two of the Space Marine Legions, mankind's greatest warriors. The Space Marines were lords of the galaxy, designed to reunite the human race and shepherd it to a glorious future. Instead, they had failed and turned upon one another, and their war had nearly destroyed the Imperium.

Such fury a battlefleet can unleash!

It can cow a world without a shot. It can extinguish the life of a species. Battlefleets are the tools of tyrants, whomever they fight for. Whether their admirals espouse salvation or damnation matters not to the execution of their purpose. Death follows in their wake.

To those participating, a void war seems a terrifying, roiling chaos of violence, but it is the pinnacle of mankind's destructive ingenuity, a whirl of gigantic explosions where lives are snuffed out by the hundred. In such combat, a single man is nothing; he is but part of the machine of the ship he serves, as essential or otherwise as a steel cog or an indicator lumen. He can do nothing but work his appointed task and pray his life will not end, or if it must end, that it does so in painless disintegration. A single crewman's task dominates everything, even his fear of death. There is no escape from service. War and his part in it are the totality of his existence.

Yet what is a void war to the timeless deeps of the blackness that envelops all these footling motes of light that sentient creatures battle so earnestly over? A void war is twinkles in the distance. It is silence. It is infinitesimals of matter sparking and dying, scintillas of metal and flesh consumed by transient fires. The detonation of a battleship kilometres long is insignificant to a cosmos where the death of a sun atomises worlds. On a galactic scale, the loss of a warship and ten thousand lives is a nugatory flash outshone by the billion-year candles of the stars.

The inverse is true to a single man. His life is all that matters, for one life is all a man has, and he fears to lose it. Yet he must blindly serve in terror. The universe gives meagre gifts, and it does not care how they are spent.

Over Thessala, mankind fought in a civil war already centuries old. The Emperor of Mankind, a human with the power of a god, had tried and failed to unite humanity's scattered worlds so that the species might survive the supernatural threat of Chaos. His sons, the primarchs, godlike beings He had created to complete this task, had themselves been corrupted, and half had turned against Him. The Horus Heresy, that war was called. It had ended the Emperor's dream.

The Heresy was part of a war that had continued for aeons and would continue for aeons still.

To the beings of this galaxy, the war was everything; to the blank gaze of time, it was nothing. And yet, for all humanity's seeming inconsequence, the children of its greatest son held the fates of two realities in their careless grasp.

Roboute Guilliman remained loyal to Terra. His ship was sternly decorated in gold, so much so that it rivalled that of Fulgrim's vessel in ornamentation, but whereas the *Gauntlet of Power* was ornate, the *Pride of the Emperor* appeared vulgar. Its decoration had been applied with abandon – everything that could be adorned had been adorned. Back when the two ships had fought side by side, its extravagance had not been to the taste of the Ultramarines, who were born of more solemn worlds. Now it was an affront to decency, added to and added to again until tawdry obscured all trace of art. Neglect went hand in hand with this ostentation, and it made the *Pride of the Emperor* appear ugly. It was a decayed relic from a bygone age, like a theatre from a decadent century left to rot in the rain.

However, the *Pride of the Emperor's* ability to mete out destruction remained undiminished. At point-blank range, it traded punishing blows with the *Gauntlet of Power* as the ships passed slowly alongside each other. Huge cannons flared, exchanging projectiles the size of transit containers. The space between became a deadly thicket of lance beams and laser light. Void shields blurred and sparked with the dissipation of mighty energies. Multi-hued lightning silenced communications and burst sub-systems with their feedback for thousands of miles around. Weaponry capable of leveling cities blinked and flashed on both sides.

Around these metal behemoths, dozens of other ships struggled in cosmic silence, some approaching the size and power of the flagships in their own right. Without exception, those on Fulgrim's side were the damned ships of the Emperor's Children. Though Fulgrim had lost his war and his humanity, his Legion yet held some cohesion. On Guilliman's side fought half a dozen successor Chapters of the proud XIII Legion: the Ultramarines. Dissolution had been the price of faithfulness for the Legion of Ultramar, and though there were strengths in the smaller formations Guilliman had forced upon the Space Marines after the Great Heresy War, there were weaknesses also.

For all their primarch's famed strategical genius, the loyalists had been out-manoeuvred and caught. Their pursuit of the fallen primarch had become a fight for survival. Three fleet elements of Emperor's Children had pinned the loyalists into place above Thessala; Fulgrim had turned his flight from Xolco into a devastating trap.

Once, Roboute Guilliman would not have made such an error. Perhaps the dire situation over the emerald skies of Thessala was simple misfortune, and Fulgrim was no ordinary opponent, after all. Should Guilliman fail, history would surely be forgiving, if there were any good men left to write it.

Or perhaps the truth was that rage had clouded the Avenging Son's judgement. Perhaps, some dared whisper, Roboute Guilliman had allowed his desire for revenge to overtake his reason.

Roboute Guilliman was stretched. Although several other primarchs still stood as champions of humanity, the wounded Imperium looked to Guilliman to save it. Every man has a limit, demigod or peasant, and Guilliman's burden was the heaviest of all. He was the saviour of humanity.

The *Pride of the Emperor* heeled over, bringing its portside weapons batteries into better firing arcs. In response, the *Gauntlet of Power* intensified its barrage, and the void shield covering the *Pride of the Emperor's* ventral towers winked out.

Explosions bloomed suddenly across hull plating encrusted with gold and filth.

An opening had been made.

On board the *Gauntlet of Power*, one hundred of Ultramar's finest warriors waited on teleport blocks surrounded by buzzing machinery. They comprised fifty of the First Company and fifty of the Second, all garbed in the deep blue of the Ultramarines Chapter. The white helmets of the First Company's veteran Space Marines, recessed under the cowls of Terminator armour, looked out at hundreds of tech-adepts and mortal crewmen labouring to prepare the Ultramarines' way through the warp.

The Space Marines of the Second Company were in standard power armour, and were being equipped with tall breaching shields by arming servitors. Their battleplate lacked the sheer thickness of Terminator armour, and the

shields, though bulky, would increase their survivability in the close-quarter fighting of the coming boarding.

Ammunition trains rumbled across the deck on plasteel wheels. Smartly uniformed Ultramarines Chapter menials handed out munitions to their masters while the enhanced warriors performed last-minute armour checks on themselves and their brothers. Chaplains strode from platform to platform, hearing oaths and affixing papers to armour with wax that hissed as they were impressed with sacred iron seals. Whether human or transhuman, every member of the Chapter worked with perfect efficiency. Even so, as invested as they were in their preparations, all of them had half an eye on the grand archway leading onto the deck.

The ship shook violently. Alarms blared. Lumens spat sparks and went dark. A section of gantry clanged down from the tangle of struts and pipes that clogged the ceiling high above. The crew continued upon its business with unhurried purpose. Orders were given to reroute power. Emergency teams of armoured voidsmen and specialised servitors began clearing the wreckage. All was restored to order.

Such calm made it easy to forget the punishing fire the ship was under. But there was no doubt that they were losing. This was not how the battle was supposed to have gone.

From voxmitters studded into the columns and walls, a clipped voice sounded.

'Shields down on the *Pride of the Emperor*. Prepare for assault.' The words were swallowed by the clatter of preparation and tumult of war beating at the ship. They were not repeated, for the superior hearing of the Space Marines caught them all.

A clarion followed shortly, sharp and loud enough to be heard by mortal and transhuman alike. The servants of Ultramar stopped what they were doing and stood to attention.

A towering figure clad in the famous Armour of Reason strode through the archway. On his left hand he wore the Hand of Dominion. Belted at his waist was the Gladius Incandor. The bearer of these weapons was taller by far than the Invictarus Suzerain guard escorting him. He exuded a power and purpose that halted the breath of mortals in their throats.

'First Captain Andros! Second Captain Thiel! Are your companies ready?' the giant called.

The two captains crossed the floor to meet their lord. Second Captain Thiel was helmetless in power armour heavy with honours, while First Captain Andros was completely enclosed in a hulking suit of Terminator battleplate. They saluted their father the Ultramarine way, one fist across their chests – the old symbol of unity.

'My Lord Guilliman! Your veterans await your command,' said Andros, his voice ringing from the voxmitter set below his helm.

'We stand prepared, my primarch,' said Aeonid Thiel. His voice, rich and soft, was unmoderated by machinery. It was not so very long after the Heresy, and Thiel was still young for a Space Marine, though his face was lined with cares.

Guilliman looked down upon his captains resolutely. The primarch overtopped even Andros in his massive Terminator armour. He was a living god, humanity's might captured and moulded as flesh.

Thiel gazed back, seemingly unable to take his eyes from the face of his gene-sire. Thiel was a good warrior, tested in battle many times, unafraid to voice his mind and modest enough to hide the love he had for his lord, but it shone in his face like a light.

*Such devotion they bear me, thought Guilliman, even as I fail them.*

There were so few of his original Legion left alive, and their replacements were born of a different, less certain era. Thiel's regard was tempered by long friendship, and he had never lost his rebellious streak. The younger Space Marines were another matter. Guilliman remembered when his warriors had been less reverent. They had been better times.

'We depart immediately,' he said, his voice uncompromising. 'The traitor will not escape again. The warriors of six Chapters stand ready to aid us. We shall not fail. To your stations – prepare for mass teleport.'

'My lord, we are prepared,' said Andros carefully. 'But the enemy will outnumber us greatly. I am concerned for our chances of success. What is the practical action should resistance prove overwhelming? It is Second Captain Thiel's and my opinion that you should remain here. We shall occupy the enemy, while the *Gauntlet of Power* withdraws. We cannot—'

The Avenging Son cut Andros dead with a look.

'Too much blood has been shed on my behalf. I will not shy from this fight,' Guilliman said, and his tone would brook no disagreement. 'There can be no retreat until the *Pride of the Emperor* is crippled. I must face my brother and occupy

him while these tasks are done. And if I must fight him, I will kill him, or I will die in the attempt. I cannot let him escape unpunished again. My sons,' he added, his voice softening, 'it is the only way to escape this trap.'

Andros bowed his helmeted head. Thiel paused a moment, uncertain, before doing the same. Sure of their agreement, Guilliman took his own helm from a grav-platform pushed by two mortal men. He mounted the teleport platform – stepping directly onto it with no need of the steps that led from the deck – and turned to address his sons.

'Now, my warriors, let us show my brother the consequences of turning upon the Imperium of Terra!'

'We march for Macragge!' they bellowed, and their combined voices were enough to drown out the thunder of battle.

Guilliman's Invictus Suzerain guard followed him onto the teleport pad. They formed a protective ring around him, their shields and power axes held up in a shield wall in preparation for teleportation directly into the jaws of battle.

To those around him, Guilliman was an infallible leader, his abilities supernatural. Even to the rational Ultramarines, who believed the Emperor of Mankind to be a man and not a god, and likewise His primarch sons, a sense of near-religious awe had crept into their attitude towards him. It had only become more pronounced since the last days of the Heresy.

But Roboute Guilliman was not infallible.

He knew this course of action to be fraught with risk. Andros had been right to raise the possibility of defeat. The primarch only wished he could praise his son for his insight rather than dismissing his concerns. His campaign against the Emperor's Children had, to all purposes, failed. Fulgrim had the initiative. Guilliman's choices had been made for him. The pieces were set on the board, there was only one option: they had to withdraw.

Currently, withdrawal was impossible. If the *Gauntlet of Power* broke off from the fight, then the *Pride of the Emperor* would inflict massive damage upon the battle-barge. Fulgrim would then most likely attempt a boarding assault of his own once their defences were shattered. Guilliman could not allow his brother to do that at a time of his choosing.

The primarch's powerful mind had examined all possibilities. His own strategic treatises would have him retreat quickly, forming a fighting rearguard so that he might withdraw those of his ships that he could, minimising the damage to his flagship by sacrificing many of his others. Expending the lives of other men to save his own was not to Guilliman's liking, especially when he saw a slim chance for true victory. He could not ignore this opportunity to slay his treacherous sibling. Guilliman had come to the conclusion that by defying his own tactical orthodoxies, he might surprise Fulgrim.

It was a slender chance. Fulgrim might well have dropped his ship's shields on purpose, a mocking re-enactment of Horus' last gambit to lure the Emperor aboard his ship at the end of the siege of Terra.

Guilliman had his own plans. Several boarding forces with independent but mutually supportive objectives would teleport in simultaneously with his own force. Teams drawn from multiple Chapters were tasked to head for the engine room, the command deck, the navigatorium, the magazine, the subsidiary command deck and the main gunnery control. If only half of his strike teams were successful, they had a good chance of crippling the *Pride of the Emperor* from within. His warriors had orders to withdraw immediately once their objectives had been achieved. He would make sure as many survived as possible; he would not let his sons pay the price for his mistakes.

He had to settle the reckoning for his own errors.

Guilliman could not deny he had been hooked and played like a fish. All he could do was struggle free and bite the one who had snared him.

'Make ready! We go to war!' he called.

At his signal, the machines of the teleport deck hummed into life. Giant reaction columns crackled with immense power, feeding the focusing arrays that would tear open the veil between realspace and the warp. They glowed with painful light. As they shone brighter, curls of materialising corpuscles were leached from initiation prongs and fed into containment flasks, where it twisted as if alive.

*So many of my brothers are dead, fallen to Chaos or lost,* thought Guilliman. *We assumed we were immortal. We are not. My time must come, but not today. Not at the hands of Fulgrim.*

The arcane machineries of teleportation whooped and hummed, the deck vibrating with their activity. The tumult built to a crescendo.

A booming crack and flash of actinic light whited out the teleport deck. Suppressant vapours gushed from wide-mouthed tubes in anticipation of fires from over-stressed machinery. Human armsmen raised their shotguns in case of warp breach and daemoniac incursion.



None came. Signal strobes blinked: red, red, red, then blue.

‘Teleport success, teleport success,’ droned a mechanical voice.

The lumens came back on. Corposant flasks emptied to the sounds of half-formed screams. Atmospheric vents drew smoke away, revealing empty pads. Adepts consulted vid screens and paper cogitator strips, and relief crossed their faces at the readouts.

Roboute Guilliman and his warriors were aboard the *Pride of the Emperor*.



**For ten thousand years Space Marines have defended the Imperium.  
Here are the stories of some of their most iconic battles.**

*An extract from*

# THE DEVASTATION OF BAAL

**GUY HALEY**

Already the morning gongs were ringing when Uigui the water seller roused himself for another day of thankless toil.

Uigui rose fully clothed, and went to empty his bladder into the home-made purification unit in the corner. Every drop of water was precious on Baal Secundus, whatever the source.

His single-roomed home held three cots, a table, the recyc unit and precious little else. Old transit pallets heaped with threadbare blankets against the cold of desert night were their beds. On the way to the recyc unit, Uigui passed his great burden, his idiot son. The boy had gone away to the Chapter trials full of hope, and come back minus his wits.

‘Get up! Up! Up, you little fool!’ Uigui kicked at his son’s booted feet. The boy thrashed awake and threw up his hands in alarm. A frightened face peeped out between filthy fingers.

‘Get up!’ growled Uigui. ‘Dawn’s coming – can’t you hear the Angel’s gongs?’ He looked out of a window of low-grade alabaster set into the wall of unpainted adobe. Daybreak should have shone pink through the stone. Instead a red darkness lingered outside.

Most mornings were cold but beautiful, the sky flawlessly smooth and tinted a deep rose by the light of the Red Scar. Sometimes, the colours were enough to stop Uigui and make him forget how much he hated his life. ‘Not that you can tell,’ grunted Uigui. ‘Red mist. A thick one too.’

‘D-d-d-d-do we-e-e have to, Da?’ said the boy.

Uigui looked at the boy with clear hatred as he urinated into the recyc funnel. ‘Y-y-yes!’ he spat back, mocking the boy’s stutter. ‘Now, up! I need help to fill the flasks, age be cursed, or I’d turn you over to the Emperor’s mercy and be rid of you!’

Uigui adjusted his filthy clothes and stamped, bow backed and swaying, to the door of gappy wood that separated the single room of his home from the goods yard outside. He clutched at his lower back as he reached for the door handle and rubbed fruitlessly at the pain in his bones, his mood souring further.

‘Be kinder to the boy. He is my daughter’s son,’ croaked the aged voice of the room’s final occupant. The coverings on the third bed shifted, the lump beneath them growing thin arms and knotted hands as a woman even more wasted and

hunched than Uigui emerged. 'You owe him some love for her memory, if you can't summon some for the boy himself.'

The old woman coughed hard. Phlegm rattled around her throat. Uigui looked at her in disgust. Her face was as deeply lined as the pit of a fruit, as if time had rotted away the pleasant outer flesh, leaving the bitter, craggy interior of her soul exposed for all to see.

'Where's your daughter now, you old witch?' he said. 'Dead. Dead and gone, leaving me with a fool and a crone for company.'

'You are cruel,' said the old woman. Clustered carcinomas blighted her face. She had only a few more months of life in her, but her eyes were bright and shrewd. Uigui hated her eyes most of all. 'The Emperor will punish you.'

Uigui snarled. 'We'll all starve long before the Emperor notices if you and your precious grandson don't rouse yourselves. We must be at the gates before they open for the day.'

The woman shrank back into her blankets. 'The Red Mist is here. You will have no customers.'

Uigui rested his hand on the piece of scrap he had fashioned into the door handle. It was worn almost featureless. He had unearthed the metal in his youth from one of the moon's ruined cities. An unidentifiable artefact of the system's lost paradisaal past, it could once have been a piece of art, it could have been a component from a wondrous machine. It could have been anything. Now it was old, ugly and broken, suitable only for the coarsest work. Just like Uigui.

'Then we will starve. Get up. We go to work.' He flipped the door open, letting it bang into the wall to show his anger.

The Red Mist was the worst he'd ever seen: a choking, thick vapour laden with sand particles. Only on a low gravity lunar body like Baal Secundus was such a phenomenon possible, though Uigui didn't know that. His worldview was necessarily limited. What he saw was a day's business ruined. Red Mist was iron sharp in smell and texture, a soupy brume that lacerated the nostrils. He coughed and pulled up his scarf to cover his mouth and nose. He had no clip to hold it in place, so he pressed it to the contours of his face with his left hand.

Though his home was modest, his stockyard contained a fortune. Four huge terracotta urns, taller than men and too wide for the embrace of two people to meet around, lined the wall. With such wealth to protect, the courtyard was better built than the house. The walls were of stone, not mud brick, and high, the tops studded with rusty spikes and broken glass. The gate was deliberately small, triple-barred, plated in scavenged metal, upon whose pocked surfaces the marks of the ancients were still visible, when the light was right.

There was no sun. The early day was tainted a bloody murk. The urns were looming shapes, the wall invisible. The yard was little over twenty feet side to side, but the Red Mist was so dense that day Uigui could not see across.

He paused. At the very least the fog would be full of toxins given off by Baal Secundus' poisoned seas. If the sands in the mist had been picked up over one of the old cities, the rad levels would be high. Uigui supposed he should fetch his rad-ticker from inside. Frankly, he could not motivate himself to retrieve it. He was old. A dose of radiation from the badlands could not shorten his life by much, and if it did, what of it? He was tired of life. It was hard and unforgiving.

Sometimes he thought of ending it all, the misery, the graft, the wearing company of his son and mother-in-law. He had no illusions death would bring a happy afterlife in the Emperor's care; all he wanted was peace. He could not bring himself to do it. The mindless will of genes forced him to continue living, which he did begrudgingly.

Blinking gritty moisture from his eyes, he headed for the lean-to where he kept his cart. A pair of tall wheels bracketed two cargo beds, one above the other. Three dozen clay flasks were on each level. He fetched the first and took it to the tap attached to the nearest urn. To fill it he had to let his scarf drop. The dust in the mist tickled his nose and he swore. Rusty water ran into the bottle, making him want to piss again. His bladder was another thing that was failing him.

'Boy! Boy! Get out here and help me!'

The door creaked. Out came the old woman instead, her face veiled in the ridiculous manner of her desert tribe. Uigui should never have married out of town.

'Where's that damn boy?' growled Uigui.

'Let him breakfast, you old miser, he'll be out in a moment.'

'He's a waste of food and water,' said Uigui. He shut off the tap, pressed the cap closed on the bottle and fetched another flask.

'It's not his fault,' said the old woman.

'I think we all know that it's the Angel's fault,' said Uigui quietly.

'Hsst!' she said. 'That is heresy. Would you leave him without a father as well as his mind?'

'He went to their trials a strong youth, and was returned to me a fool. Who else should I blame?'

'Fate,' she said. 'He was not meant to join them, and he is getting better.'

'He is not,' said Uigui sourly. He set the full flask into his cart, and fetched a third.

The crone shuffled across the courtyard to the cart, her long skirts disturbing the moist sand of the ground. There she stopped, but she did not help, only watched him, a judgemental phantom in the fog. Uigui gave her a filthy look.

In her gnarled hands a small auto-tarot deck made its tooth-grinding clicks. She pushed the button at the side. The tiles behind its scratched viewing pane clattered into place. She studied the little pictures on them a moment, then pressed the button again. Then again. Uigui fought the urge to strike her, to knock the tarot from her hand and cast her out. The tarot was the instrument of the Emperor. Even he balked at such blasphemy.

'Help me, then,' he said. He squinted at the sky. 'The sun is rising.' The fog remained as thick as ever, but the light behind it was getting stronger. 'We are late.'

The old woman hooked her tarot deck to her rope belt, took a flask up and went to the second urn.

'Today is a day of great portents,' she said.

'You say that every day,' said Uigui.

The woman shrugged. 'Today it is true.'

'Nonsense,' he said, but he was wary of what she said. She had a knack for reading the tarot. He half believed she was a witch. In truth, he was frightened of her. He slammed the latest filled flask into the cart hard, making the others rattle. 'Where is that boy?'

The boy pushed the cart. At least he was good for that. Uigui and the old woman walked behind. The flasks knocked and clinked in their trays, warning others they were coming. It was a good advertisement, but under the cover of the fog the noise made Uigui nervous. For all that Angel's Fall was under the direct administration of the Blood Angels, there was always the possibility of robbery on a day of mist.

They met no misfortune as they walked the street from Waterer's Row towards the Sanguinian Way, the small city's main street. There were precious few people about. Those figures that appeared suddenly out of the murk were swaddled head to foot, and just as quickly disappeared.

'Quicker, boy,' grumbled Uigui. 'We want a good spot. I want to get there before they are all gone.'

They turned onto the Sanguinian Way. At its far end was the Place of Choosing, where the giant statue of the Great Angel spread his arms and wings to face the eastern sky. Immense though Sanguinius' effigy was, the fog obscured it totally. With the majestic statue hidden, the cramped, low buildings that made up Angel's Fall seemed rudier than ever. It did not look like a holy city. The fog forced attention onto its inadequacies. Even the Sanguinian Way was meanly proportioned, and crooked. Without Sanguinius, Angel's Fall could have been any town on any backward, arid world in the galaxy.

Gongs boomed from unseen towers, signifying the start of the Peaceday markets. Only a handful of stalls had been set up at the roadside, and foot traffic on the way was low. Uigui reckoned visitors to Angel's Fall would be fewer than usual, though there were always some. The Red Mist discouraged travel. Not only was it toxic, but Baal's violent wild-life hunted under its cover. He cursed his luck. Water was expensive to both the buyer and the seller. The price he'd get for his stock barely covered the cost, and he owed a lot of money to Anton the reguliser. Anton took prompt payment of debts very seriously. Uigui rubbed at the stump of his left little finger, a reminder of the last time he'd been late with a payment. Anton had been nothing but apologetic; he had said he had no choice.

Uigui thought they would have to stay out late, selling to people exiting the city to travel in the cool of the night. *Assuming the mist lifts today at all*, he fretted. Such a fog was rare. Baal Secundus' principal weathers were wind and dust storms, but there was not a breath of a breeze today.

'This weather is unnatural,' he said.

'A day of portents,' said his mother-in-law in satisfaction.

'Shut up,' he said. 'It's just a day. Boy. Here.' Uigui pointed out a patch of ground in the lee of the Temple of the Emperor. The temple occupied a whole block by itself, and another of Angel's Fall's major streets intersected the Sanguinian Way there.

'This will do.' The gongs continued to ring. 'Why all this racket?' Uigui said.

'Happenings. Baalfora has much in store for us today,' said the old woman, using the local name for Baal Secundus. She settled herself down. Her joints grumbled, and she grumbled back at them, forcing her old legs to cross. Upon skirts held taut between her knees she set her tarot deck and began repetitively clicking at the workings. Uigui bared his teeth at her. He took out his irritation on the boy.

'Come on, boy, set out the table! Where are the cups? By the Emperor, we'd all die if you were in charge here!'

'S-s-s-orry, father,' said the boy.

'Don't call me that,' he said. 'My son is dead. Stolen by angels. There is no one to inherit my business once I am gone. Do not presume your place.'

The boy bowed his head to hide his tears, showing the ugly scar running across the top of his head. Uigui hated the sight of that most of all. He was sure had his boy not fallen he would be up there on Baal as a warrior of the Emperor. He stared at it as the boy set up the little table that folded out from the side of the cart and put out a set of small bronze cups. Something like grief hurt him. He responded with anger.

'Quicker!' he snapped.

The gongs were still booming long after they should have stopped. He squinted into the dim morning. There was another sound, a distant rumbling, under the clamour of the gongs.

'What is that?' he whispered.

'V-v-void ships?' ventured the boy.

'Silence!' snapped Uigui. But even as his anger flew out of his mouth, he thought the boy might be right. Angel's Fall was no stranger to the ships of the Angels. There were offworlders too, who came to pay their respects to the place where Sanguinius, purest of the Emperor's progeny, was discovered. But rarely did they arrive in such numbers that the sound of their descent was so constant.

Uigui heard the crunch of heavy feet on sand coming down the way. He swore at himself. Angels. They would have no use for his water.

'Bow! Bow!' he hissed. He dropped his head, and forced his idiot son to kneel.

A huge armoured figure emerged from the murk. Armour black, his helm cast in the shape of a skull. A Space Marine priest, death incarnate. Uigui trembled. He dropped to his knees in fright, waiting for the figure to pass by.

He did not. The footsteps stopped by the little cart. Uigui felt the Angel's regard upon him. His bladder twinged yet again.

'Be at peace, blessed son of Baal Secundus,' said the warrior. His voice was inhumanly deep and thickly accented.

Uigui looked up. The grimacing skull glared down at him. Breathing hoses were clamped between its stylised teeth, and eye-lenses of glowing green set below the angry brow. The armour hissed and whined in response to microshifts in the Space Marine's posture, making Uigui more afraid.

The warrior looked down both streets of the crossroads.

'The great square. Where is it?'

Though made hollow and booming by its projection machinery, the warrior's voice was kindly. Still Uigui could not see past the terrible visage glowering at him. He stared dumbly back.

'Waterseller, I mean you no harm,' said the Angel. 'I come to pay my respects to my lord. Where is his statue?'

Uigui trembled and flung up his arm. He intended to say 'That way, my lord!' A strangled mewl came out of his mouth instead.

'My thanks, and my blessings,' said the Chaplain. 'The Emperor keep you.'

He glanced up at the great temple, then strode away.

'W-w-why does he not know?' said the boy stupidly.

'I do not know,' said Uigui. Still upon his knees he gazed fearfully at the departing giant.

'M-m-m-more!' said the boy, and shrank back behind the cart.

Uigui followed his son's wavering finger. More Space Marines, dozens of them. Uigui had never seen so many at one time and his body shook in terror. They walked past, armour dull in the foggy daylight. Uigui could see clearly enough to know they were not Blood Angels. Their armour was adorned in a similar manner to that of the masters of Baal. The heavy plates were beautifully formed, covered in scrollwork and delicate embellishments, and decked with blood-stone drips cased in gold, but the red of their armour was an unfamiliar hue, their helms and trim were white, and their



markings were strange.

Uigui watched, amazed, as the column of warriors moved by in solemn silence, voiceless but for the growls and hum of their armour. It was not unusual to see other angels claiming descent from the Great Angel in Angel's Fall, but only in ones or twos. When a second group in yet different colours marched by, these armoured half in black and half in bloody red, Uigui's mouth fell open. The gongs boomed. Outside the wall, the roaring of braking jets grew louder.

'Th-th-there's hundreds of them!' stuttered the boy.

For a moment, Uigui forgot his anger, and put his arm around his broken son.

'W-w-w-why so many?' the boy said.

'They come to pay respect to their father. They come to pray,' said Uigui. 'It is a marvel.'

The old woman chuckled, a low growling sound like a felid about to bite. The tarot tiles rattled.

'What is it?' Uigui said.

The old woman's smile was evident in her voice. 'The burning tower, the bloody angel, the falling star, the foundered void ship – these are fell signs.'

Uigui looked sharply back at her. 'What do you mean?'

The old woman regarded him through the cloth of her veil. 'They are not coming here to worship, you foolish man,' she said. 'They have come here to die.'



From the death of their world to glory on a crusade's front line, this is the tale of the Tanith First from Black Library's longest running series.

An extract from

# FIRST AND ONLY

A GAUNT'S GHOSTS NOVEL

DAN ABNETT

*'The High Lords of Terra, lauding the great Warmaster Slaydo's efforts on Khulen, tasked him with raising a crusade force to liberate the Sabbat Worlds, a cluster of nearly one hundred inhabited systems along the edge of the Segmentum Pacificus. From a massive fleet deployment, nearly a billion Imperial Guard advanced into the Sabbat Worlds, supported by forces of the Adeptus Astartes and the Adeptus Mechanicus, with whom Slaydo had formed cooperative pacts.*

*'After ten hard-fought years of dogged advance, Slaydo's great victory came at Balhaut, where he opened the way to drive a wedge into the heart of the Sabbat Worlds.*

*'But there Slaydo fell. Bickering and rivalry then beset his officers as they vied to take his place. Lord High Militant General Hechtor Dravere was an obvious successor, but Slaydo himself had chosen the younger commander, Macaroth.*

*'With Macaroth as warmaster, the Crusade force pushed on, into its second decade, and deeper into the Sabbat Worlds, facing theatres of war that began to make Balhaut seem like a mere opening skirmish...'*

— from *A History of the Later Imperial Crusades*



## Part One

### Nubila Reach

The two Faustus-class Interceptors swept in low over a thousand slowly spinning tonnes of jade asteroid and decelerated to coasting velocity. Striated blurs of shift-speed light flickered off their gunmetal hulls. The saffron haze of the nebula called the Nubila Reach hung as a spread backdrop for them, a thousand light years wide, a hazy curtain which enfolded the edges of the Sabbat Worlds.

Each of these patrol Interceptors was an elegant barb about one hundred paces from jutting nose to raked tail. The Faustus were lean, powerful warships that looked like serrated cathedral spires with splayed flying buttresses at the rear to house the main thrusters. Their armoured flanks bore the Imperial eagle, together with the green markings and insignia of the Segmentum Pacificus Fleet.

Locked in the hydraulic arrestor struts of the command seat in the lead ship, Wing Captain Torten LaHain forced down his heart rate as the ship decelerated. Synchronous mind-impulse links bequeathed by the Adeptus Mechanicus hooked his meta-bolism to the ship's ancient systems, and he lived and breathed every nuance of its motion, power-output and response.

LaHain was a twenty-year veteran. He'd piloted Faustus Interceptors for so long, they seemed an extension of his body. He glanced down into the flight annex directly below and behind the command seat, where his observation officer was at work at the navigation station.

'Well?' he asked over the intercom.

The observer checked off his calculations against several glowing runes on the board. 'Steer five points starboard. The astropath's instructions are to sweep down the edge of the gas clouds for a final look, and then it's back to the fleet.'

Behind him, there was a murmur. The astropath, hunched in his small throne-cradle, stirred. Hundreds of filament leads linked the astropath's socket-encrusted skull to the massive sensory apparatus in the Faustus's belly. Each one was marked with a small, yellowing parchment label, inscribed with words LaHain didn't want to have to read. There was the cloying smell of incense and unguents.

'What did he say?' LaHain asked.

The observer shrugged. 'Who knows? Who wants to?' he said.

The astropath's brain was constantly surveying and processing the vast wave of astronomical data which the ship's sensors pumped into it, and psychically probing the warp beyond. Small patrol ships like this, with their astropathic cargo, were the early warning arm of the fleet. The work was hard on the psyker's mind, and the odd moan or grimace was commonplace. There had been worse. They'd gone through a nickel-rich asteroid field the previous week and the psyker had gone into spasms.

'Flight check,' LaHain said into the intercom.

'Tail turret, aye!' crackled back the servitor at the rear of the ship.

'Flight engineer ready, by the Emperor!' fuzzed the voice of the engine chamber.

LaHain signalled his wingman. 'Moselle... you run forward and begin the sweep. We'll lag a way behind you as a double-check. Then we'll pull for home.'

'Mark that,' the pilot of the other ship replied and his craft gunned forward, a sudden blur that left twinkling pearls in its wake.

LaHain was about to kick in behind when the voice of the astropath came over the link. It was rare for the man to speak to the rest of the crew.

'Captain... move to the following co-ordinates and hold. I am receiving a signal. A message... source unknown.'

LaHain did as he was instructed and the ship banked around, motors flaring in quick, white bursts. The observer

swung all the sensor arrays to bear.

'What is this?' LaHain asked, impatient. Unscheduled manoeuvres off a carefully set patrol sweep did not sit comfortably with him.

The astropath took a moment to respond, clearing his throat. 'It is an astropathic communiqué, struggling to get through the warp. It is coming from extreme long range. I must gather it and relay it to Fleet Command.'

'Why?' LaHain asked. This was all too irregular.

'I sense it is secret. It is primary level intelligence. It is Vermilion level.'

There was a long pause, a silence aboard the small, slim craft broken only by the hum of the drive, the chatter of the displays and the whirr of the air-scrubbers.

'Vermilion...' LaHain breathed.

Vermilion was the highest clearance level used by the Crusade's cryptographers. It was unheard of, mythical. Even main battle schemes usually only warranted a Magenta. He felt an icy tightness in his wrists, a tremor in his heart.

Sympathetically, the Interceptor's reactor fibrillated. LaHain swallowed.

A routine day had just become very un-routine. He knew he had to commit everything to the correct and efficient recovery of this data.

'How long do you need?' he asked over the link.

Another pause. 'The ritual will take a few moments. Do not disturb me as I concentrate. I need as long as possible,' the astropath said. There was a phlegmy, strained edge to his voice. In a moment, that voice was murmuring a prayer. The air temperature in the cabin dropped perceptibly. Something, somewhere, sighed.

LaHain flexed his grip on the rudder stick, his skin turning to gooseflesh. He hated the witchcraft of the psykers. He could taste it in his mouth, bitter, sharp. Cold sweat beaded under his flight-mask. Hurry up! he thought... It was taking too long, they were idling and vulnerable; and he wanted his skin to stop crawling.

The astropath's murmured prayer continued. LaHain looked out of the canopy at the swathe of pinkish mist that folded away from him into the heart of the nebula a billion kilometres away. The cold, stabbing light of ancient suns slanted and shafted through it like dawn light on gossamer. Dark-bellied clouds swirled in slow, silent blossoms.

'Contacts!' the observer yelled suddenly. 'Three! No, four! Fast as hell and coming straight in!'

LaHain snapped to attention. 'Angle and lead time?'

The observer rattled out a set of co-ordinates and LaHain steered the nose towards them. 'They're coming in fast!' the observer repeated. 'Throne of Earth, but they're moving!'

LaHain looked across his over-sweep board and saw the runic cursors flashing as they edged into the tactical grid.

'Defence system activated! Weapons to ready!' he barked. Drum autoloaders chattered in the chin turret forward of him as he armed the autocannons, and energy reservoirs whined as they powered up the main forward-firing plasma guns.

'Wing Two to Wing One!' Moselle's voice rasped over the long-range vox-caster. 'They're all over me! Break and run! Break and run in the name of the Emperor!'

The other Interceptor was coming at him at close to full thrust. LaHain's enhanced optics, amplified and linked via the canopy's systems, saw Moselle's ship while it was still a thousand kilometres away. Behind it, lazy and slow, came the vampiric shapes, the predatory ships of Chaos. Fire patterns winked in the russet darkness. Yellow traceries of venomous death.

Moselle's scream, abruptly ended, tore through the vox-cast.

The racing Interceptor disappeared in a rapidly expanding, superheated fireball. The three attackers thundered on through the fire wash.

'They're coming for us! Bring her about!' LaHain yelled and threw the Faustus round, gunning the engines. 'How much longer?' he bellowed at the astropath.

'The communiqué is received. I am now... relaying...' the astropath gasped, at the edge of his limits.

'Fast as you can! We have no time!' LaHain said.

The sleek fighting ship blinked forward, thrust-drive roaring blue heat. LaHain rejoiced at the singing of the engine in his blood. He was pushing the threshold tolerances of the ship. Amber alert sigils were lighting his display. LaHain was slowly being crushed into the cracked, ancient leather of his command chair.

In the tail turret, the gunner servitor traversed the twin auto-cannons, hunting for a target. He didn't see the attackers, but he saw their absence – the flickering darkness against the stars.

The turret guns screamed into life, blitzing out a scarlet-tinged, boiling stream of hypervelocity fire.

Indicators screamed shrill warnings in the cockpit. The enemy had obtained multiple target lock. Down below, the observer was bawling up at LaHain, demanding evasion procedures. Over the link, Flight Engineer Manus was yelling something about a stress-injection leak.

LaHain was serene. 'Is it done?' he asked the astropath calmly.

There was another long pause. The astropath was lolling weakly in his cradle. Near to death, his brain ruined by the trauma of the act, he murmured, 'It is finished.'

LaHain wrenched the Interceptor in a savage loop and presented himself to the pursuers with the massive forward plasma array and the nose guns blasting. He couldn't outrun them or outfight them, but by the Emperor he'd take at least one with him before he went.

The chin turret spat a thousand heavy bolter rounds a second. The plasma guns howled phosphorescent death into the void. One of the shadow-shapes exploded in a bright blister of flame, its shredded fuselage and mainframe splitting out, carried along by the burning, incandescent bow-wave of igniting propellant.

LaHain scored a second kill too. He ripped open the belly of another attacker, spilling its pressurised guts into the void. It burst like a swollen balloon, spinning round under the shuddering impact and spewing its contents in a fire trail behind itself.

A second later, a rain of toxic and corrosive warheads, each a sliver of metal like a dirty needle, raked the Faustus end to end. They detonated the astropath's head and explosively atomised the observer out through the punctured hull. Another killed the flight engineer outright and destroyed the reactor interlock.

Two billiseconds after that, stress fractures shattered the Faustus class Interceptor like a glass bottle. A super-dense explosion boiled out from the core, vaporising the ship and LaHain with it.

The corona of the blast rippled out for eighty kilometres until it vanished in the nebula's haze.



## A Memory

**Darendara,  
Twenty Years Earlier**

The winter palace was besieged. In the woods on the north shore of the frozen lake, the field guns of the Imperial Guard thumped and rumbled. Snow fluttered down on them, and each shuddering retort brought heavier falls slumping down from the tree limbs. Brass shell-cases clanked as they spun out of the returning breeches and fell, smoking, into snow cover that was quickly becoming trampled slush.

Over the lake, the palace crumbled. One wing was now ablaze, and shell holes were appearing in the high walls or impacting in the vast arches of the steep roofs beyond them. Each blast threw up tiles and fragments of beams, and puffs of snow like icing sugar. Some shots fell short, bursting the ice skin of the lake and sending up cold geysers of water, mud, and sharp chunks that looked like broken glass.

Commissar-General Delane Oktar, chief political officer of the Hyrkan Regiments, stood in the back of his winter-camouflage painted halftrack and watched the demolition through his field scope. When Fleet Command had sent the Hyrkans in to quell the uprising on Darendara, he had known it would come to this. A bloody, bitter end. How many



opportunities had they given the Secessionists to surrender?

Too many, according to that rat-turd Colonel Dravere, who commanded the armoured brigades in support of the Hyrkan infantry. That would be a matter Dravere would gleefully report in his despatches, Oktar knew. Dravere was a career soldier with the pedigree of noble blood who was gripping the ladder of advancement so tightly with both hands that his feet were free to kick out at those on lower rungs.

Oktar didn't care. The victory mattered, not the glory. As a commissar-general, his authority was well liked, and no one doubted his loyalty to the Imperium, his resolute adherence to the primary dictates, or the rousing fury of his speeches to the men. But he believed war was a simple thing, where caution and restraint could win far more for less cost.

He had seen the reverse too many times before. The command echelons generally believed in the theory of attrition when it came to the Imperial Guard. Any foe could be ground into pulp if you threw enough at them, and the Guard was, to them, a limitless supply of cannon fodder for just such a purpose.

That was not Oktar's way. He had schooled the officer cadre of the Hyrkans to believe it too. He had taught General Caernavar and his staff to value every man, and knew the majority of the six thousand Hyrkans, many by name. Oktar had been with them from the start, from the First Founding on the high plateaux of Hyrkan, those vast, gale-wracked industrial deserts of granite and grassland. Six regiments they had founded there, six proud regiments, and just the first of what Oktar hoped would be a long line of Hyrkan soldiers, who would set the name of their planet high on the honour roll of the Imperial Guard, from Founding to Founding.

They were brave boys. He would not waste them, and he would not have the officers waste them. He glanced down from his half-track into the tree-lines where the gun teams serviced their thumping limbers. The Hyrkan were a strong breed, drawn and pale, with almost colourless hair which they preferred to wear short and severe. They wore dark grey battledress with beige webbing and short-billed forage caps of the same pale hue. In this cold theatre, they also had woven gloves and long greatcoats. Those labouring at the guns, though, were stripped down to their beige undershirts, their webbing hanging loosely around their hips as they bent and carried shells, and braced for firing in the close heat of the concussions. It looked odd, in these snowy wastes, with breath steaming the air, to see men moving through gun-smoke in thin shirts, hot and ruddy with sweat.

He knew their strengths and weaknesses to a man, knew exactly who best to send forward to reconnoitre, to snipe, to lead a charge offensive, to scout for mines, to cut wire, to interrogate prisoners. He valued each and every man for his abilities in the field of war. He would not waste them. He and General Caernavar would use them, each one in his particular way, and they would win and win and win again, a hundred times more than any who used his regiments like bullet-soaks in the bloody frontline.

Men like Dravere. Oktar dreaded to think what that beast might do when finally given field command of an action like this. Let the little piping runt in his starched collar sound off to the high brass about him. Let him make a fool of himself. This wasn't his victory to win.

Oktar jumped down from the vehicle's flatbed and handed his scope to his sergeant. 'Where's the Boy?' he asked, in his soft, penetrating tones.

The sergeant smiled to himself, knowing the Boy hated to be known as 'The Boy'.

'Supervising the batteries on the rise, commissar-general,' he said in a faultless Low Gothic, flavoured with the clipped, guttural intonations of the Hyrkan home world accent.

'Send him to me,' Oktar said, rubbing his hands gently to encourage circulation. 'I think it's time he got a chance to advance himself.'

The sergeant turned to go, then paused. 'Advance himself, commissar – or advance, himself?'

Oktar grinned like a wolf. 'Both, naturally.'

The Hyrkan sergeant bounded up the ridge to the field guns at the top, where the trees had been stripped a week before by a Secessionist airstrike. The splintered trunks were denuded back to their pale bark, and the ground under the snow was thick with wood pulp, twigs and uncountable fragrant needles.

There would be no more airstrikes, of course. Not now. The Secessionist airforce had been operating out of two airstrips south of the winter palace which had been rendered useless by Colonel Dravere's armoured units. Not that they'd

had much to begin with – maybe sixty ancient-pattern slamjets with cycling cannons in the armpits of the wings and struts on the wingtips for the few bombs they could muster.

The sergeant had cherished a sneaking admiration for the Secessionist fliers, though. They'd tried damn hard, taking huge risks to drop their payloads where it counted, and without the advantage of good air-to-ground instrumentation. He would never forget the slamjet which took out their communication bunker in the snow lines of the mountain a fortnight before. It had passed low twice to get a fix, bouncing through the frag-bursts which the anti-air batteries threw up all around it. He could still see the faces of the pilot and the gunner as they passed, plainly visible because the canopy was hauled back so they could get a target by sight alone.

Brave... desperate. Not a whole lot of difference in the sergeant's book. Determined, too – that was the commissar-general's view. They knew they were going to lose this war before it even started, but still they tried to break loose from the Imperium. The sergeant knew that Oktar admired them; and, in turn, he admired the way Oktar had urged the chief of staff to give the rebels every chance to surrender. What was the point of killing for no purpose?

Still, the sergeant had shuddered when the three thousand pounder had fishtailed down into the communications bunker and flattened it. Just as he had cheered when the thumping, traversing quad-barrels of the Hydra anti-air batteries had pegged the slamjet as it pulled away. It looked like it had been kicked from behind, jerking up at the tail and then tumbling, end over end, as it exploded and burned in a long, dying fall into the distant trees.

The sergeant reached the hilltop and caught sight of the Boy. He was standing amidst the batteries, hefting fresh shells into the arms of the gunners from the stockpiles half-buried under blast curtains. Tall, pale, lean and powerful, the Boy intimidated the sergeant. Unless death claimed him first, the Boy would one day become a commissar in his own right. Until then, he enjoyed the rank of cadet commissar, and served his tutor Oktar with enthusiasm and boundless energy. Like the commissar-general, the Boy wasn't Hyrkan. The sergeant thought then, for the first time, that he didn't even know where the Boy was from – and the Boy probably didn't know either.

'The commissar-general wants you,' he told the Boy as he reached him.

The Boy grabbed another shell from the pile and swung it round to the waiting gunner.

'Did you hear me?' the sergeant asked.

'I heard,' said Cadet Commissar Ibram Gaunt.

He knew he was being tested. He knew that this was responsibility and that he'd better not mess it up. Gaunt also knew that it was his moment to prove to his mentor Oktar that he had the makings of a commissar.

There was no set duration for the training of a cadet. After education at the Schola Progenium and Guard basic training, a cadet received the rest of his training in the field, and the promotion to full commissarial level was a judgement matter for his commanding officer. Oktar, and Oktar alone, could make him or break him. His career as an Imperial commissar, to dispense discipline, inspiration and the love of the God-Emperor of Terra to the greatest fighting force in creation, hinged upon his performance.

Gaunt was an intense, quiet young man, and a commissarial post had been his dearest ambition since his earliest days in the Schola Progenium. But he trusted Oktar to be fair. The commissar-general had personally selected him for service from the cadet honour class, and had become in the last eighteen months almost a father to Gaunt. A stern, ruthless father, perhaps. The father he had never really known.

'See that burning wing?' Oktar had said. 'That's a way in. The Secessionists must be falling back into their inner chambers by now. General Caernavar and I propose putting a few squads in through that hole and cutting out their centre. Are you up to it?'

Gaunt had paused, his heart in his throat. 'Sir... you want me to...'

'Lead them in. Yes. Don't look so shocked, Ibram. You're always asking me for a chance to prove your leadership. Who do you want?'

'My choice?'

'Your choice.'

'Men from the fourth brigade. Tanhause is a good squad leader and his men are specialists in room to room fighting. Give me them, and Rychlind's heavy weapons team.'

'Good choices, Ibram. Prove me right.'

They moved past the fire and into long halls decorated with tapestries where the wind moaned and light fell slantwise from the high windows. Cadet Gaunt led the men personally, as Oktar would have done, the lasgun held tightly in his hands, his blue-trimmed cadet commissar uniform perfectly turned out.

In the fifth hallway, the Secessionists began their last-ditch counter-attack.

Las-fire cracked and blasted at them. Cadet Gaunt ducked behind an antique sofa that swiftly became a pile of antique matchwood. Tanhause moved up behind him.

‘What now?’ the lean, corded Hyrkan major asked.

‘Give me grenades,’ Gaunt said.

They were provided. Gaunt took the webbing belt and set the timers on all twenty grenades. ‘Call up Walthem,’ he told Tanhause.

Trooper Walthem moved up. Gaunt knew he was famous in the regiment for the power of his throw. He’d been a javelin champion back home on Hyrkan.

‘Put this where it counts,’ Gaunt said.

Walthem hefted the belt of grenades with a tiny grunt. Sixty paces down, the corridor disintegrated.

They moved in, through the drifting smoke and masonry dust. The spirit had left the Secessionist defence. They found Degredd, the rebel leader, lying dead with his mouth fused around the barrel of his lasgun.

Gaunt signalled to General Caernavar and Commissar-General Oktar that the fight was over. He marshalled the prisoners out with their hands on their heads as Hyrkan troops set about disabling gun emplacements and munitions stores.

‘What do we do with her?’ Tanhause asked him.

Gaunt turned from the assault cannon he had been stripping of its firing pin.

The girl was lovely, white-skinned and black haired, as was the pedigree of the Darendarans. She clawed at the clenching hands of the Hyrkan troops hustling her and other prisoners down the draughty hallway.

When she saw Gaunt, she stopped dead. He expected vitriol, anger, the verbal abuse so common in the defeated and imprisoned whose beliefs and cause had been crushed. But what he saw in her face froze him in surprise. Her eyes were glassy, deep, like polished marble. There was a look in her face as she stared back at him. Gaunt shivered when he realised the look was recognition.

‘There will be seven,’ she said suddenly, speaking surprisingly perfect High Gothic with no trace of the local accent. The voice didn’t seem to be her own. It was guttural, and its words did not match the movement of her lips. ‘Seven stones of power. Cut them and you will be free. Do not kill them. But first you must find your ghosts.’

‘Enough of your madness!’ Tanhause snapped, then ordered the men to take her away. The girl was vacant-eyed by now and froth dribbled down her chin. She was plainly sliding into the throes of a trance. The men were wary of her, and pushed her along at arm’s length, scared of her magic. The temperature in the hallway itself seemed to drop. At once, the breaths of all of the men steamed the air. It smelled heavy, burnt and metallic, the way it did before a storm. Gaunt felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He could not take his eyes off the murmuring girl as the men hustled her away gingerly.

‘The Inquisition will deal with her,’ Tanhause shivered. ‘Another untrained psyker witch working for the enemy.’

‘Wait!’ Gaunt said and strode over to her. He tensed, scared of the supernaturally-touched being he confronted. ‘What do you mean? “Seven stones”? “Ghosts”?’

Her eyes rolled back, pupilless. The cracked old voice bubbled out of her quivering lips. ‘The warp knows you, Ibram.’

He stepped back as if he had been stung. ‘How did you know my name?’

She didn’t answer. Not coherently, anyway. She began to thrash, gibber and spit. Nonsense words and animal sounds issued from her shuddering throat.

‘Take her away!’ Tanhause barked.

One man stepped in, then spun to his knees, flailing, blood streaming from his nose. She had done nothing but glance at him. Snarling oaths and protective charms, the others laid in with the butts of their lasguns.

Gaunt watched the corridor for five full minutes after the girl had been dragged away. The air remained cold long after she had disappeared. He looked around at the drawn, anxious face of Tanhause.

‘Pay it no heed,’ the Hyrkan veteran said, trying to sound confident. He could see the cadet was spooked. Just

inexperience, he was sure. Once the Boy had seen a few years, a few campaigns, he'd learn to shut out the mad ravings of the foe and their tainted, insane rants. It was the only way to sleep at night.

Gaunt was still tense. 'What was that about?' he asked, as if he hoped that Tanhause could explain the girl's words.

'Rubbish is what. Forget it, sir.'

'Right. Forget it. Right.'

But Gaunt never did.



**Witness the rise and fall of a loyal inquisitor as he deals with daemons  
and becomes the very thing he fights.**

An extract from

# EISENHORN XENOS

DAN ABNETT

Hunting the recidivist Murdin Eyclone, I came to Hubris in the Dormant of 240.M41, as the Imperial sidereal calendar has it.

Dormant lasted eleven months of Hubris's twenty-nine month lunar year, and the only signs of life were the custodians with their lighted poles and heat-gowns, patrolling the precincts of the hibernation tombs.

Within those sulking basalt and ceramite vaults, the grandees of Hubris slept, dreaming in crypts of aching ice, awaiting Thaw, the middle season between Dormant and Vital.

Even the air was frigid. Frost encrusted the tombs, and a thick cake of ice covered the featureless land. Above, star patterns twinkled in the curious, permanent night. One of them was Hubris's sun, so far away now. Come Thaw, Hubris would spin into the warm embrace of its star again.

Then it would become a blazing globe. Now it was just a fuzz of light.

As my gun-cutter set down on the landing cross at Tomb Point, I had pulled on an internally heated bodyskin and swathes of sturdy, insulated foul weather gear, but still the perilous cold cut through me now. My eyes watered, and the tears froze on my lashes and cheeks. I remembered the details of the cultural brief my savant had prepared, and quickly lowered my frost visor, trembling as warm air began to circulate under the plastic mask.

Custodians, alerted to my arrival by astropathic hails, stood waiting for me at the base of the landing cross. Their lighted poles dipped in obeisance in the frozen night and the air steamed with the heat that bled from their cloaks. I nodded to them, showing their leader my badge of office. An ice-car awaited: a rust-coloured arrowhead twenty metres long, mounted on ski-blade runners and spiked tracks.

It carried me away from the landing cross and I left the winking signal lights and the serrated dagger-shape of my gun-cutter behind in the perpetual winter night.

The spiked tracks kicked up blizzards of rime behind us. Ahead, despite the lamps, the landscape was black and impenetrable. I rode with Lores Vibben and three custodians in a cabin lit only by the amber glow of the craft's control panel. Heating vents recessed in the leather seats breathed out warm, stale air.

A custodian handed back a data-slate to Vibben. She looked at it cursorily and passed it on to me. I realised my frost visor was still down. I raised it and began to search my pockets for my eye glasses.



With a smile, Vibben produced them from within her own swaddled, insulated garb. I nodded thanks, put them on my nose and began to read.

I was just calling up the last plates of text when the ice-car halted.

'Processional Two-Twelve,' announced one of the custodians.

We dismounted, sliding our visors down into place.

Jewels of frost-flakes fluttered in the blackness about us, sparkling as they crossed through the ice-car's lamp beams. I've heard of bitter cold. Emperor grace me I never feel it again. Biting, crippling, actually bitter to taste on the tongue. Every joint in my frame protested and creaked.

My hands and my mind were numb.

That was not good.

Processional Two-Twelve was a hibernation tomb at the west end of the great Imperial Avenue. It housed twelve thousand, one hundred and forty-two members of the Hubris ruling elite.

We approached the great monument, crunching up the black, frost-coated steps.

I halted. 'Where are the tomb's custodians?'

'Making their rounds,' I was told.

I glanced at Vibben and shook my head. She slid her hand into her fur-edged robes.

'Knowing we approach?' I urged, addressing the custodian again. 'Knowing we expect to meet them?'

'I will check,' said the custodian, the one who had circulated the slate. He pushed on up the steps, the phosphor light on his pole bobbing.

The other two seemed ill at ease.

I beckoned to Vibben, so she would follow me up after the leader.

We found him on a lower terrace, gazing at the strewn bodies of four custodians, their light poles fizzling out around them.

'H-how?' he stammered.

'Stay back,' Vibben told him and drew her weapon. Its tiny amber Armed rune glowed in the darkness.

I took out my blade, igniting it. It hummed.

The south entry of the tombs was open. Shafts of golden light shone out. All my fears were rapidly being confirmed.

We entered, Vibben sweeping the place from side to side with her handgun. The hall was narrow and high, lit by chemical glow-globes. Intruding frost was beginning to mark the polished basalt walls.

A few metres inside, another custodian lay dead in a stiffening mirror of blood. We stepped over him. To each side, hallways opened up, admitting us to the hibernation stacks. In every direction, rows and rows of ice-berths ranged down the smoothed basalt chambers.

It was like walking into the Imperium's grandest morgue.

Vibben swept soundlessly to the right and I went left.

I admit I was excited by now, eager to close and conclude a business that had lasted six years. Eyclone had evaded me for six whole years! I studied his methods every day and dreamed of him every night.

Now I could smell him.

I raised my visor.

Water was pattering from the roof. Thaw water. It was growing warmer in here. In their ice-berths, some of the dim figures were stirring.

Too early! Far too early!

Eyclone's first man came at me from the west as I crossed a trunk-junction corridor. I spun, the power sword in my hand, and cut through his neck before his ice-axe could land.

The second came from the south, the third from the east. And then more. More.

A blur.

As I fought, I heard furious shooting from the vaults away to my right. Vibben was in trouble.

I could hear her over the vox-link in our hoods: 'Eisenhorn! Eisenhorn!'

I wheeled and cut. My opponents were all dressed in heat-gowns, and carried ice-tools that made proficient weapons. Their eyes were dark and unforthcoming. Though they were fast, there was something in them that suggested they

were doing this mindlessly, by order.

The power sword, an antique and graceful weapon, blessed by the Provost of Inx himself, spun in my hand. With five abrupt moves I made corpses out of them and left their blood vapour drifting in the air.

‘Eisenhorn!’

I turned and ran. I splashed heavily down a corridor sluiced with melt water. More shots from ahead. A sucking cry.

I found Vibben face down across a freezer tube, frozen blood gluing her to the sub-zero plastic. Eight of Eyclone’s servants lay sprawled around her. Her weapon lay just out of reach of her clawing hand, the spent cell ejected from the grip.

I am forty-two standard years old, in my prime by Imperial standards, young by those of the Inquisition. All my life, I have had a reputation for being cold, unfeeling. Some have called me heartless, ruthless, even cruel. I am not. I am not beyond emotional response or compassion. But I possess – and my masters count this as perhaps my paramount virtue – a singular force of will. Throughout my career it has served me well to draw on this facility and steel myself, unflinching, at all that this wretched galaxy can throw at me. To feel pain or fear or grief is to allow myself a luxury I cannot afford.

Lores Vibben had served with me for five and a half years. In that period she had saved my life twice. She saw herself as my aide and my bodyguard, yet in truth she was more a companion and a fellow warrior. When I recruited her from the clan-slums of Tornish, it was for her combat skills and brutal vigour. But I came to value her just as much for her sharp mind, soft wit and clear head.

I stared down at her body for a moment. I believe I may have uttered her name.

I extinguished my power sword and, sliding it into its scabbard, moved back into the shadows on the far side of the hibernation gallery. I could hear nothing except the increasingly persistent thaw-drip. Freeing my sidearm from its leather rig under my left armpit, I checked its load and opened a vox link. Eyclone was undoubtedly monitoring all traffic in and out of Processional Two-Twelve, so I used Glossia, an informal verbal cipher known only to myself and my immediate colleagues. Most inquisitors develop their own private languages for confidential communication, some more sophisticated than others. Glossia, the basics of which I had designed ten years before, was reasonably complex and had evolved, organically, with use.

‘Thorn wishes aegis, rapturous beasts below.’

‘Aegis, arising, the colours of space,’ Betancore responded immediately and correctly.

‘Rose thorn, abundant, by flame light crescent.’

A pause. ‘By flame light crescent? Confirm.’

‘Confirm.’

‘Razor delphus pathway! Pattern ivory!’

‘Pattern denied. Pattern crucible.’

‘Aegis, arising.’

The link broke. He was on his way. He had taken the news of Vibben’s death as hard as I expected. I trusted that would not affect his performance. Midas Betancore was a hot-blooded, impetuous man, which was partly why I liked him. And used him.

I moved out of the shadows again, my sidearm raised. A Scipio-pattern naval pistol, finished in dull chrome with inlaid ivory grips, it felt reassuringly heavy in my gloved hand. Ten rounds, every one a fat, blunt man-stopper, were spring-loaded into the slide inside the grip. I had four more armed slides just like it in my hip pocket.

I forget where I acquired the Scipio. It had been mine for a few years. One night, three years before, Vibben had prised off the ceramite grip plates with their touch-worn, machined-stamped engravings of the Imperial aquila and the Navy motto, and replaced them with ivory grips she had etched herself. A common practice on Tornish, she informed me, handing the weapon back the next day. The new grips were like crude scrimshaw, showing on each side a poorly executed human skull through which a thorny rose entwined, emerging through an eye socket, shedding cartoon droplets of blood. She’d inlaid carmine gems into the droplets to emphasise their nature. Below the skull, my name was scratched in a clumsy scroll.

I had laughed. There had been times when I’d almost been too embarrassed to draw the gang-marked weapon in a

fight.

Now, now she was dead, I realise what an honour had been paid to me through that devoted work.

I made a promise to myself: I would kill Eyclone with this gun.

As a devoted member of his high majesty the God-Emperor's Inquisition, I find my philosophy bends towards that of the Amalathians. To the outside galaxy, members of our orders appear much alike: an inquisitor is an inquisitor, a being of fear and persecution. It surprises many that internally, we are riven with clashing ideologies.

I know it surprised Vibben. I spent one long afternoon trying to explain the differences. I failed.

To express it in simple terms, some inquisitors are puritans and some are radicals. Puritans believe in and enforce the traditional station of the Inquisition, working to purge our galactic community of any criminal or malevolent element: the triumvirate of evil – alien, mutant and daemon. Anything that clashes with the pure rule of mankind, the preachings of the Ministorum and the letter of Imperial Law is subject to a puritan inquisitor's attention. Hard-line, traditional, merciless... that is the puritan way.

Radicals believe that any methods are allowable if they accomplish the Inquisitorial task. Some, as I understand it, actually embrace and use forbidden resources, such as the Warp itself, as weapons against the enemies of mankind.

I have heard the arguments often enough. They appal me. Radical belief is heretical.

I am a puritan by calling and an Amalathian by choice. The ferociously strict ways of the monodominant philosophy oft-times entices me, but there is precious little subtlety in their ways and thus it is not for me.

Amalathians take our name from the conclave at Mount Amalath. Our endeavour is to maintain the status quo of the Imperium, and we work to identify and destroy any persons or agencies that might destabilise the power of the Imperium from without or within. We believe in strength through unity. Change is the greatest enemy. We believe the God-Emperor has a divine plan, and we work to sustain the Imperium in stability until that plan is made known. We deplore factions and in-fighting... Indeed, it is sometimes a painful irony that our beliefs mark us as a faction within the political helix of the Inquisition.

We are the steadfast spine of the Imperium, its antibodies, fighting disease, insanity, injury, invasion.

I can think of no better way to serve, no better way to be an inquisitor.

So you have me then, pictured. Gregor Eisenhorn, inquisitor, puritan, Amalathian, forty-two years old standard, an inquisitor for the past eighteen years. I am tall and broad at the shoulders, strong, resolute. I have already told you of my force of will, and you will have noted my prowess with a blade.

What else is there? Am I clean-shaven? Yes! My eyes are dark, my hair darker and thick. These things matter little.

Come and let me show you how I killed Eyclone.

# THE HORUS HERESY™

Experience the epic scope and sweeping grandeur of  
mankind's civil war in the *New York Times* bestselling series.

An extract from

## HORUS RISING

*Dan Abnett*

'I was there,' he would say afterwards, until afterwards became a time quite devoid of laughter. 'I was there, the day Horus slew the Emperor.' It was a delicious conceit, and his comrades would chuckle at the sheer treason of it.

The story was a good one. Torgaddon would usually be the one to cajole him into telling it, for Torgaddon was the joker, a man of mighty laughter and idiot tricks. And Loken would tell it again, a tale rehearsed through so many retellings, it almost told itself.

Loken was always careful to make sure his audience properly understood the irony in his story. It was likely that he felt some shame about his complicity in the matter itself, for it was a case of blood spilled from misunderstanding. There was a great tragedy implicit in the tale of the Emperor's murder, a tragedy that Loken always wanted his listeners to appreciate. But the death of Sejanus was usually all that fixed their attentions.

That, and the punchline.

It had been, as far as the warp-dilated horologs could attest, the two hundred and third year of the Great Crusade. Loken always set his story in its proper time and place. The commander had been Warmaster for about a year, since the triumphant conclusion of the Ullanor campaign, and he was anxious to prove his new-found status, particularly in the eyes of his brothers.

Warmaster. Such a title. The fit was still new and unnatural, not yet worn in.

It was a strange time to be abroad amongst stars. They had been doing what they had been doing for two centuries, but now it felt unfamiliar. It was a start of things. And an ending too.

The ships of the 63rd Expedition came upon the Imperium by chance. A sudden etheric storm, later declared providential by Maloghurst, forced a route alteration, and they translated into the edges of a system comprising nine worlds.

Nine worlds, circling a yellow sun.

Detecting the shoal of rugged expedition warships on station at the out-system edges, the Emperor first demanded to know their occupation and agenda. Then he painstakingly corrected what he saw as the multifarious errors in their response.

Then he demanded fealty.

He was, he explained, the Emperor of Mankind. He had stoically shepherded his people through the miserable epoch

of warp storms, through the Age of Strife, staunchly maintaining the rule and law of man. This had been expected of him, he declared. He had kept the flame of human culture alight through the aching isolation of Old Night. He had sustained this precious, vital fragment, and kept it intact, until such time as the scattered diaspora of humanity re-established contact. He rejoiced that such a time was now at hand. His soul leapt to see the orphan ships returning to the heart of the Imperium. Everything was ready and waiting. Everything had been preserved. The orphans would be embraced to his bosom, and then the Great Scheme of rebuilding would begin, and the Imperium of Mankind would stretch itself out again across the stars, as was its birthright.

As soon as they showed him proper fealty. As Emperor. Of mankind.

The commander, quite entertained by all accounts, sent Hastur Sejanus to meet with the Emperor and deliver greeting.

Sejanus was the commander's favourite. Not as proud or irascible as Abaddon, nor as ruthless as Sedirae, nor even as solid and venerable as Iacton Qruze, Sejanus was the perfect captain, tempered evenly in all respects. A warrior and a diplomat in equal measure, Sejanus's martial record, second only to Abaddon's, was easily forgotten when in company with the man himself. A beautiful man, Loken would say, building his tale, a beautiful man adored by all. 'No finer figure in Mark IV plate than Hastur Sejanus. That he is remembered, and his deeds celebrated, even here amongst us, speaks of Sejanus's qualities. The noblest hero of the Great Crusade.' That was how Loken would describe him to the eager listeners. 'In future times, he will be recalled with such fondness that men will name their sons after him.'

Sejanus, with a squad of his finest warriors from the Fourth Company, travelled in-system in a gilded barge, and was received for audience by the Emperor at his palace on the third planet.

And killed.

Murdered. Hacked down on the onyx floor of the palace even as he stood before the Emperor's golden throne. Sejanus and his glory squad – Dymos, Malsandar, Gorthoi and the rest – all slaughtered by the Emperor's elite guard, the so-called Invisibles.

Apparently, Sejanus had not offered the correct fealty. Indelicately, he had suggested there might actually be *another* Emperor.

The commander's grief was absolute. He had loved Sejanus like a son. They had warred side by side to affect compliance on a hundred worlds. But the commander, always sanguine and wise in such matters, told his signal men to offer the Emperor another chance. The commander detested resorting to war, and always sought alternative paths away from violence, where such were workable. This was a mistake, he reasoned, a terrible, terrible mistake. Peace could be salvaged. This 'Emperor' could be made to understand.

It was about then, Loken liked to add, that a suggestion of quote marks began to appear around the 'Emperor's' name.

It was determined that a second embassy would be despatched. Maloghurst volunteered at once. The commander agreed, but ordered the speartip forwards into assault range. The intent was clear: one hand extended open, in peace, the other held ready as a fist. If the second embassy failed, or was similarly met with violence, then the fist would already be in position to strike. That sombre day, Loken said, the honour of the speartip had fallen, by the customary drawing of lots, to the strengths of Abaddon, Torgaddon, 'Little Horus' Aximand. And Loken himself.

At the order, battle musters began. The ships of the speartip slipped forward, running under obscurity. On board, stormbirds were hauled onto their launch carriages. Weapons were issued and certified. Oaths of moment were sworn and witnessed. Armour was machined into place around the anointed bodies of the chosen.

In silence, tensed and ready to be unleashed, the speartip watched as the shuttle convoy bearing Maloghurst and his envoys arced down towards the third planet. Surface batteries smashed them out of the heavens. As the burning scads of debris from Maloghurst's flotilla billowed away into the atmosphere, the 'Emperor's' fleet elements rose up out of the oceans, out of the high cloud, out of the gravity wells of nearby moons. Six hundred warships, revealed and armed for war.

Abaddon broke obscurity and made a final, personal plea to the 'Emperor', beseeching him to see sense. The warships began to fire on Abaddon's speartip.

'My commander,' Abaddon relayed to the heart of the waiting fleet, 'there is no dealing here. This fool imposter will not listen.'

And the commander replied, 'Illuminate him, my son, but spare all you can. That order notwithstanding, avenge the blood of my noble Sejanus. Decimate this "Emperor's" elite murderers, and bring the imposter to me.'

‘And so,’ Loken would sigh, ‘we made war upon our brethren, so lost in ignorance.’

It was late evening, but the sky was saturated with light. The phototropic towers of the High City, built to turn and follow the sun with their windows during the day, shifted uneasily at the pulsating radiance in the heavens. Spectral shapes swam high in the upper atmosphere: ships engaging in a swirling mass, charting brief, nonsensical zodiacs with the beams of their battery weapons.

At ground level, around the wide, basalt platforms that formed the skirts of the palace, gunfire streamed through the air like horizontal rain, hosing coils of tracer fire that dipped and slithered heavily like snakes, die-straight zips of energy that vanished as fast as they appeared, and flurries of bolt shells like blizzarding hail. Downed stormbirds, many of them crippled and burning, littered twenty square kilometres of the landscape.

Black, humanoid figures paced slowly in across the limits of the palace sprawl. They were shaped like armoured men, and they trudged like men, but they were giants, each one hundred and forty metres tall. The Mechanicum had deployed a half-dozen of its Titan war engines. Around the Titans’ soot-black ankles, troops flooded forward in a breaking wave three kilometres wide.

The Luna Wolves surged like the surf of the wave, thousands of gleaming white figures bobbing and running forward across the skirt platforms, detonations bursting amongst them, lifting rippling fireballs and trees of dark brown smoke. Each blast juddered the ground with a gritty thump, and showered down dirt as an after-curse. Assault craft swept in over their heads, low, between the shambling frames of the wide-spaced Titans, fanning the slowly lifting smoke clouds into sudden, energetic vortices.

Every Astartes helmet was filled with vox-chatter: snapping voices, chopping back and forth, their tonal edges roughened by the transmission quality.

It was Loken’s first taste of mass war since Ullanor. Tenth Company’s first taste too. There had been skirmishes and scraps, but nothing testing. Loken was glad to see that his cohort hadn’t grown rusty. The unapologetic regimen of live drills and punishing exercises he’d maintained had kept them whetted as sharp and serious as the terms of the oaths of moment they had taken just hours before.

Ullanor had been glorious, a hard, unstinting slog to dislodge and overthrow a bestial empire. The greenskin had been a pernicious and resilient foe, but they had broken his back and kicked over the embers of his revel fires. The commander had won the field through the employment of his favourite, practiced strategy: the speartip thrust to tear out the throat. Ignoring the greenskin masses, which had outnumbered the crusaders five to one, the commander had struck directly at the Overlord and his command coterie, leaving the enemy headless and without direction.

The same philosophy operated here. Tear out the throat and let the body spasm and die. Loken and his men, and the war engines that supported them, were the edge of the blade unsheathed for that purpose.

But this was not like Ullanor at all. No thickets of mud and clay-built ramparts, no ramshackle fortresses of bare metal and wire, no black powder air bursts or howling ogre-foes. This was not a barbaric brawl determined by blades and upper body strength.

This was modern warfare in a civilised place. This was man against man, inside the monolithic precincts of a cultured people. The enemy possessed ordnance and firearms every bit the technological match of the Legio forces, and the skill and training to use them. Through the green imaging of his visor, Loken saw armoured men with energy weapons ranged against them in the lower courses of the palace. He saw tracked weapon carriages, automated artillery; nests of four or even eight automatic cannons shackled together on cart platforms that lumbered forward on hydraulic legs.

Not like Ullanor at all. That had been an ordeal. This would be a test. Equal against equal. Like against like.

Except that for all its martial technologies, the enemy lacked one essential quality, and that quality was locked within each and every case of Mark IV power armour: the genetically enhanced flesh and blood of the Imperial Astartes. Modified, refined, post-human, the Astartes were superior to anything they had met or would ever meet. No fighting force in the galaxy could ever hope to match the Legions, unless the stars went out, and madness ruled, and lawful sense turned upside down. For, as Sedirae had once said, ‘The only thing that can beat an Astartes is another Astartes’, and they had all laughed at that. The impossible was nothing to be scared of.

The enemy – their armour a polished magenta trimmed in silver, as Loken later discovered when he viewed them with

his helmet off – firmly held the induction gates into the inner palace. They were big men, tall, thick through the chest and shoulders, and at the peak of fitness. Not one of them, not even the tallest, came up to the chin of one of the Luna Wolves. It was like fighting children.

Well-armed children, it had to be said.

Through the billowing smoke and the jarring detonations, Loken led the veteran First Squad up the steps at a run, the plasteel soles of their boots grating on the stone: First Squad, Tenth Company, Hellebore Tactical Squad, gleaming giants in pearl-white armour, the wolf head insignia stark black on their auto-responsive shoulder plates. Crossfire zig-zagged around them from the defended gates ahead. The night air shimmered with the heat distortion of weapons discharge. Some kind of upright, automated mortar was casting a sluggish, flaccid stream of fat munition charges over their heads.

‘Kill it!’ Loken heard Brother-sergeant Jubal instruct over the link. Jubal’s order was given in the curt argot of Cthonia, their derivation world, a language that the Luna Wolves had preserved as their battle-tongue.

The battle-brother carrying the squad’s plasma cannon obeyed without hesitation. For a dazzling half-second, a twenty-metre ribbon of light linked the muzzle of his weapon to the auto-mortar, and then the device engulfed the facade of the palace in a roasting wash of yellow flame.

Dozens of enemy soldiers were cast down by the blast. Several were thrown up into the air, landing crumpled and boneless on the flight of steps.

‘Into them!’ Jubal barked.

Wildfire chipped and pattered off their armour. Loken felt the distant sting of it. Brother Calends stumbled and fell, but righted himself again, almost at once.

Loken saw the enemy scatter away from their charge. He swung his bolter up. His weapon had a gash in the metal of the foregrip, the legacy of a greenskin’s axe during Ullanor, a cosmetic mark Loken had told the armourers not to finish out. He began to fire, not on burst, but on single shot, feeling the weapon buck and kick against his palms. Bolter rounds were explosive penetrators. The men he hit popped like blisters, or shredded like bursting fruit. Pink mist fumed off every ruptured figure as it fell.

‘Tenth Company!’ Loken shouted. ‘For the Warmaster!’

The warcry was still unfamiliar, just another aspect of the newness. It was the first time Loken had declaimed it in war, the first chance he’d had since the honour had been bestowed by the Emperor after Ullanor.

By the Emperor. The true Emperor.

‘Lupercal! Lupercal!’ the Wolves yelled back as they streamed in, choosing to answer with the old cry, the Legion’s pet-name for their beloved commander. The warhorns of the Titans boomed.

They stormed the palace. Loken paused by one of the induction gates, urging his frontrunners in, carefully reviewing the advance of his company main force. Hellish fire continued to rake them from the upper balconies and towers. In the far distance, a brilliant dome of light suddenly lifted into the sky, astonishingly bright and vivid. Loken’s visor automatically dimmed. The ground trembled and a noise like a thunderclap reached him. A capital ship of some size, stricken and ablaze, had fallen out of the sky and impacted in the outskirts of the High City. Drawn by the flash, the phototropic towers above him fidgeted and rotated.

Reports flooded in. Aximand’s force, Fifth Company, had secured the Regency and the pavilions on the ornamental lakes to the west of the High City. Torgaddon’s men were driving up through the lower town, slaying the armour sent to block them.

Loken looked east. Three kilometres away, across the flat plain of the basalt platforms, across the tide of charging men and striding Titans and stitching fire, Abaddon’s company, First Company, was crossing the bulwarks into the far flank of the palace. Loken magnified his view, resolving hundreds of white-armoured figures pouring through the smoke and chop-fire. At the front of them, the dark figures of First Company’s foremost Terminator squad, the Justaerin. They wore polished black armour, dark as night, as if they belonged to some other, black Legion.

‘Loken to First,’ he sent. ‘Tenth has entry.’

There was a pause, a brief distort, then Abaddon’s voice answered. ‘Loken, Loken... are you trying to shame me with your diligence?’

‘Not for a moment, first captain,’ Loken replied. There was a strict hierarchy of respect within the Legion, and though

he was a senior officer, Loken regarded the peerless first captain with awe. All of the Mournival, in fact, though Torgaddon had always favoured Loken with genuine shows of friendship.

Now Sejanus was gone, Loken thought. The aspect of the Mournival would soon change.

'I'm playing with you, Loken,' Abaddon sent, his voice so deep that some vowel sounds were blurred by the vox. 'I'll meet you at the feet of this false Emperor. First one there gets to illuminate him.'

Loken fought back a smile. Ezekyle Abaddon had seldom sported with him before. He felt blessed, elevated. To be a chosen man was enough, but to be in with the favoured elite, that was every captain's dream.

Reloading, Loken entered the palace through the induction gate, stepping over the tangled corpses of the enemy dead. The plaster facings of the inner walls had been cracked and blown down, and loose crumbs, like dry sand, crunched under his feet. The air was full of smoke, and his visor display kept jumping from one register to another as it attempted to compensate and get a clean reading.

He moved down the inner hall, hearing the echo of gunfire from deeper in the palace compound. The body of a brother lay slumped in a doorway to his left, the large, white-armoured corpse odd and out of place amongst the smaller enemy bodies. Marjex, one of the Legion's apothecaries, was bending over him. He glanced up as Loken approached, and shook his head.

'Who is it?' Loken asked.

'Tibor, of Second Squad,' Marjex replied. Loken frowned as he saw the devastating head wound that had stopped Tibor.

'The Emperor knows his name,' Loken said.

Marjex nodded, and reached into his narthecium to get the reductor tool. He was about to remove Tibor's precious gene-seed, so that it might be returned to the Legion banks.

Loken left the apothecary to his work, and pushed on down the hall. In a wide colonnade ahead, the towering walls were decorated with frescoes, showing familiar scenes of a haloed Emperor upon a golden throne. How blind these people are, Loken thought, how sad this is. One day, one single day with the iterators, and they would understand. We are not the enemy. We are the same, and we bring with us a glorious message of redemption. Old Night is done. Man walks the stars again, and the might of the Astartes walks at his side to keep him safe.

In a broad, sloping tunnel of etched silver, Loken caught up with elements of Third Squad. Of all the units in his company, Third Squad – Locasta Tactical Squad – was his favourite and his favoured. Its commander, Brother-sergeant Nero Vipus, was his oldest and truest friend.

'How's your humour, captain?' Vipus asked. His pearl-white plate was smudged with soot and streaked with blood.

'Phlegmatic, Nero. You?'

'Choleric. Red-raged, in fact. I've just lost a man, and two more of mine are injured. There's something covering the junction ahead. Something heavy. Rate of fire like you wouldn't believe.'

'Tried fragging it?'

'Two or three grenades. No effect. And there's nothing to see. Garvi, we've all heard about these so-called Invisibles. The ones that butchered Sejanus. I was wondering—'

'Leave the wondering to me,' Loken said. 'Who's down?'

Vipus shrugged. He was a little taller than Loken, and his shrug made the heavy ribbing and plates of his armour clunk together. 'Zakias.'

'Zakias? No...'

'Torn into shreds before my very eyes. Oh, I feel the hand of the ship on me, Garvi.'

The hand of the ship. An old saying. The commander's flagship was called the *Vengeful Spirit*, and in times of duress or loss, the Wolves liked to draw upon all that implied as a charm, a totem of retribution.

'In Zakias's name,' Vipus growled, 'I'll find this bastard Invisible and—'

'Sooth your choler, brother. I've no use for it,' Loken said. 'See to your wounded while I take a look.'

Vipus nodded and redirected his men. Loken pushed up past them to the disputed junction.

It was a vault-roofed crossways where four hallways met. The area read cold and still to his imaging. Fading smoke wisped up into the rafters. The ouslite floor had been chewed and peppered with thousands of impact craters. Brother Zakias, his body as yet unretrieved, lay in pieces at the centre of the crossway, a steaming pile of shattered white plasteel



and bloody meat.

Vipus had been right. There was no sign of an enemy present. No heat-trace, not even a flicker of movement. But studying the area, Loken saw a heap of empty shell cases, glittering brass, that had spilled out from behind a bulkhead across from him. Was that where the killer was hiding?

Loken bent down and picked up a chunk of fallen plasterwork. He lobbed it into the open. There was a click, and then a hammering deluge of autofire raked across the junction. It lasted five seconds, and in that time over a thousand rounds were expended. Loken saw the fuming shell cases spitting out from behind the bulkhead as they were ejected.

The firing stopped. Fycelene vapour fogged the junction. The gunfire had scored a mottled gouge across the stone floor, pummelling Zakias's corpse in the process. Spots of blood and scraps of tissue had been spattered out.

Loken waited. He heard a whine and the metallic clunk of an autoloader system. He read weapon heat, fading, but no body warmth.

'Won a medal yet?' Vipus asked, approaching.

'It's just an automatic sentry gun,' Loken replied.

'Well, that's a small relief at least,' Vipus said. 'After the grenades we've pitched in that direction, I was beginning to wonder if these vaunted Invisibles might be "Invulnerables" too. I'll call up Devastator support to—'

'Just give me a light flare,' Loken said.

Vipus stripped one off his leg plate and handed it to his captain. Loken ignited it with a twist of his hand, and threw it down the hallway opposite. It bounced, fizzling, glaring white hot, past the hidden killer.

There was a grind of servos. The implacable gunfire began to roar down the corridor at the flare, kicking it and bouncing it, ripping into the floor.

'Garvi—' Vipus began.

Loken was running. He crossed the junction, thumped his back against the bulkhead. The gun was still blazing. He wheeled round the bulkhead and saw the sentry gun, built into an alcove. A squat machine, set on four pad feet and heavily plated, it had turned its short, fat, pumping cannons away from him to fire on the distant, flickering flare.

Loken reached over and tore out a handful of its servo flexes. The guns stuttered and died.

'We're clear!' Loken called out. Locasta moved up.

'That's generally called showing off,' Vipus remarked.

Loken led Locasta up the corridor, and they entered a fine state apartment. Other apartment chambers, similarly regal, beckoned beyond. It was oddly still and quiet.

'Which way now?' Vipus asked.

'We go find this "Emperor",' Loken said.

Vipus snorted. 'Just like that?'

'The first captain bet me I couldn't reach him first.'

'The first captain, eh? Since when was Garviel Loken on pally terms with him?'

'Since Tenth breached the palace ahead of First. Don't worry, Nero, I'll remember you little people when I'm famous.'

Nero Vipus laughed, the sound snuffling out of his helmet mask like the cough of a consumptive bull.

What happened next didn't make either of them laugh at all.



**Fall in with the Valhallans as self-styled hero Commissar Cain battles for the Imperium in this legendary Astra Militarum series.**

An extract from

# **FOR THE EMPEROR**

**A CIAPHAS CAIN NOVEL**

SANDY MITCHELL

One of the first things you learn as a commissar is that people are never pleased to see you; something that's no longer the case where I'm concerned, of course, now that my glorious and undeserved reputation precedes me wherever I go. A good rule of thumb in my younger days, but I'd never found myself staring down death in the eyes of the troopers I was supposed to be inspiring with loyalty to the Emperor before. In my early years as an occasionally loyal minion of his Glorious Majesty, I'd faced, or to be more accurate, ran away screaming from, orks, necrons, tyranids, and a severely hacked off daemonhost, just to pick out some of the highlights of my ignominious career. But standing in that mess room, a heartbeat away from being ripped apart by mutinous Guardsmen, was a unique experience, and one that I have no wish to repeat.

I should have realised how bad the situation was when the commanding officer of my new regiment actually smiled at me as I stepped off the shuttle. I already had every reason to fear the worst, of course, but by that time I was out of options. Paradoxical as it might seem, taking this miserable assignment had looked uncomfortably like the best chance I had of keeping my precious skin in one piece.

The problem, of course, was my undeserved reputation for heroism, which by that time had grown to such ludicrous proportions that the Commissariat had finally noticed me and decided that my talents were being wasted in the artillery unit I'd picked as the safest place to sit out my lifetime of service to the Emperor, a long way away from the sharp end of combat. Accordingly, I'd found myself plucked from a position of relative obscurity and attached directly to Brigade headquarters.

That hadn't seemed too bad at first, as I'd had little to do except shuffle datafiles and organise the occasional firing squad, which had suited me fine, but the trouble with everybody thinking you're a hero is that they tend to assume you like being in mortal danger and go out of their way to provide some. In the half-dozen years since my arrival, I'd been temporarily seconded to units assigned, among other things, to assault fixed positions, clear out a space hulk, and run recon deep behind enemy lines. And every time I'd made it back alive, due in no small part to my natural talent for diving for cover and waiting for the noise to stop, the general staff had patted me on the head, given me another commendation, and tried to find an even more inventive way of getting me killed.

Something obviously had to be done, and done fast, before my luck ran out altogether. So, as I often had before, I let

my reputation do the work for me and put in a request for a transfer back to a regiment. Any regiment. By that time I just didn't care. Long experience had taught me that the opportunities for taking care of my own neck were much higher when I could pull rank on every officer around me.

'I just don't think I'm cut out for data shuffling,' I said apologetically to the weasel-faced little runt from the lord general's office. He nodded judiciously, and made a show of paging through my file.

'I can't say I'm surprised,' he said, in a slightly nasal whine. Although he tried to look cool and composed, his body language betrayed his excitement at being in the presence of a living legend; at least that's what some damn fool pict-cast commentator had called me after the Siege of Perlia, and the appellation stuck. The next thing I know my own face is grinning at me from recruiting posters all over the sector, and I couldn't even grab a mug of recaf without having a piece of paper shoved under my nose with a request to autograph it. 'It doesn't suit everybody.'

'It's a shame we can't all have your dedication to the smooth running of the Imperium,' I said. He looked sharply at me for a moment, wondering if I was taking the frak, which of course I was, then decided I was simply being civil. I decided to ladle it on a bit. 'But I'm afraid I've been a soldier too long to start changing my habits now.'

That was the sort of thing Cain the Hero was supposed to say, of course, and weasel-face lapped it up. He took my transfer request from me as though it was a relic from one of the blessed saints.

'I'll handle it personally,' he said, practically bowing as he showed me out.

And so it was, a month or so later, I found myself in a shuttle approaching the hangar bay of the *Righteous Wrath*, a battered old troopship identical to thousands in Imperial service, almost all of which I sometimes think I've travelled on over the years. The familiar smell of shipboard air, stale, recycled, inextricably intertwined with rancid sweat, machine oil and boiled cabbage, hissed into the passenger compartment as the hatch seals opened. I inhaled it gratefully, as it displaced the no less familiar odour of Gunner Jurgen, my aide almost since the outset of my commissarial career nearly twenty years before.

Short for a Valhallan, Jurgen somehow managed to look awkward and out of place wherever he was, and in all our time together, I couldn't recall a single occasion on which he'd ever worn anything that appeared to fit properly. Though amiable enough in temperament, he seemed ill at ease with people, and, in turn, most preferred to avoid his company; a tendency no doubt exacerbated by the perpetual psoriasis that afflicted him, as well as his body odour, which, in all honesty, took quite a bit of getting used to.

Nevertheless he'd proven an able and valued aide, due in no small part to his peculiar mentality. Not overly bright, but eager to please and doggedly literal in his approach to following orders, he'd become a useful buffer between me and some of the more onerous aspects of my job. He never questioned anything I said or did, apparently convinced that it must be for the good of the Imperium in some way, which, given the occasionally discreditable activities I'd been known to indulge in, was a great deal more than I could have hoped for from any other trooper. Even after all this time I still find myself missing him on occasion.

So he was right there at my side, half-hidden by our combined luggage, which he'd somehow contrived to gather up and hold despite the weight, as my boot heels first rang on the deck plating beneath the shuttle. I didn't object; experience had taught me that it was a good idea for people meeting him for the first time to get the full picture in increments.

I paused fractionally for dramatic effect before striding forward to meet the small knot of Guard officers drawn up to greet me by the main cargo doors, the clang of my footsteps on the metal sounding as crisp and authoritative as I could contrive; an effect undercut slightly by the pops and clangs from the scorched area under the shuttle engines as it cooled, and Jurgen's tottering gait behind me.

'Welcome, commissar. This is a great honour.' A surprisingly young woman with red hair and blue eyes stepped forward and snapped a crisp salute with parade ground efficiency. I thought for a moment that I was being subtly snubbed with only the junior officers present, before I reconciled her face with the file picture in the briefing slate. I returned the salute.

'Colonel Kasteen.' I nodded an acknowledgement. Despite having no objection to being fawned over by young women in the normal course of events, I found such a transparent attempt at ingratiation a little nauseating. Then I got a good look at her hopeful expression and felt as though I'd stepped on a non-existent final stair. She was absolutely sincere. Emperor help me, they really were pleased to see me. Things must be even worse here than I'd imagined.

Just how bad they actually were I had yet to discover, but I already had some presentiment. For one thing, the palms of my hands were tingling, which always means there's trouble hanging in the air like the static before a storm, and for another, I'd broken with the habit of a lifetime and actually read the briefing slate carefully on the tedious voyage out here to meet the ship.

To cut a long story short, morale in the Valhallan 296th/301st was at rock bottom, and the root cause of it all was obvious from the regiment's title. Combining below-strength regiments was standard practice among the Imperial Guard, a sensible way of consolidating after combat losses to keep units up to strength and of further use in the field. What hadn't been sensible was combining what was left of the 301st, a crack planetary assault unit with fifteen hundred years of traditional belief in their innate superiority over every other unit in the Guard, particularly the other Valhallan ones, with the 296th; a rear echelon garrison command, which, just to throw promethium on the flames, was one of the few all-women regiments raised and maintained by that desolate iceball. And just to put the cherry on it, Kasteen had been given overall command by virtue of three days' seniority over her new immediate subordinate, a man with far more combat experience.

Not that any of them truly lacked that now, after the battle for Corania. The tyranids had attacked without warning, and every Guard regiment on the planet had been forced to resist ferociously for nearly a year before the navy and a couple of Astartes Chapters had arrived to turn the tide. By that time, every surviving unit had sustained at least fifty per cent casualties, many of them a great deal more, and the bureaucrats of the Munitorium had begun the process of consolidating the battered survivors into useful units once again.

On paper, at least. No one with any practical military experience would have been so half-witted as to ignore the morale effects of their decisions. But that's bureaucrats for you. Maybe if a few more Administratum drones were given lasguns and told to soldier alongside the troopers for a month or two it would shake their ideas up a bit. Assuming by some miracle they weren't shot in the back on the first day, of course.

But I'm digressing. I returned Kasteen's salute, noting as I did so the faint discolouration of the fabric beneath her rank insignia where her captain's studs had been before her recent unanticipated elevation to colonel. There had been few officers left in either regiment by the time the 'nids had got through with them, and they'd been lucky at that. At least one of the newly consolidated units was being led by a former corporal, or so I'd heard.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, neither of their commissars had survived so, thanks to my fortuitously timed transfer request, I'd been handed the job of sorting out the mess. Lucky me.

'Major Broklaw, my second-in-command.' Kasteen introduced the man next to her, his own insignia equally new. His face flushed almost imperceptibly, but he stepped forward to shake my hand with a firm grip. His eyes were flint grey beneath his dark fringe of hair, and he closed his hand a little too tightly, trying to gauge my strength. Two could play at that game, of course, and I had the advantage of a couple of augmetic fingers, so I returned the favour, smiling blandly as the colour drained from his face.

'Major.' I let him go before anything was damaged except his pride, and turned to the next officer in line. Kasteen had rounded up pretty much her entire senior command staff, as protocol demanded, but it was clear most of them weren't too sure about having me around. Only a few met my eyes, but the legend of Cain the Hero had arrived here before me, and the ones that did were obviously hoping I'd be able to turn round a situation they all patently felt had gone way beyond their own ability to deal with.

I don't know what the rest were thinking; they were probably just relieved I wasn't talking about shooting the lot of them and bringing in somebody competent. Of course, if that had been a realistic option I might have considered it, but I had an unwanted reputation for honesty and fairness to live up to, so that was that.

The introductions over I turned back to Kasteen, and indicated the tottering pile of kitbags behind me. Her eyes widened fractionally as she caught a glimpse of Jurgen's face behind the barricade, but I suppose anyone who'd gone hand to hand with tyranids would have found the experience relatively unperturbing, and she masked it quickly. Most of the assembled officers, I noted with well-concealed amusement, were now breathing shallowly through their mouths.

'My aide, Gunner First Class Ferik Jurgen,' I said. In truth there was only one grade of gunner, but I didn't expect they'd know that, and the small unofficial promotion would add to whatever kudos he got from being the aide of a commissar. Which in turn would reflect well on me. 'Perhaps you could assign him some quarters?'

'Of course.' She turned to one of the youngest lieutenants, a blonde girl of vaguely equine appearance who looked as if

she'd be more at home on a farm somewhere than in uniform, and nodded. 'Sulla. Get the quartermaster to sort it out.'

'I'll do it myself,' she replied, slightly overdoing the eager young officer routine. 'Magil's doing his best, but he's not quite on top of the system yet.' Kasteen nodded blandly, unaware of any problem, but I could see Broklaw's jaw tighten, and noticed that most of the men present failed to mask their displeasure.

'Sulla was our quartermaster sergeant until the last round of promotions,' Kasteen explained. 'She knows the ship's resources better than anyone.'

'I'm sure she does,' I said diplomatically. 'And I'm sure she has far more pressing duties to perform than finding a bunk for Jurgen. We'll liaise with your Sergeant Magil ourselves, if you have no objection.'

'None at all.' Kasteen looked slightly puzzled for a moment, then dismissed it. Broklaw, I noticed from the corner of my eye, was looking at me with something approaching respect now. Well, that was something at least. But it was pretty clear I was going to have my work cut out to turn this divided and demoralised rabble into anything resembling a fighting unit.

Well, up to a point anyway. If they were a long way from being ready to fight the enemies of the Emperor, they were certainly in good enough shape to fight among themselves, as I was shortly to discover.

I haven't reached my second century by ignoring the little presentiments of trouble which sometimes appear out of nowhere, like those itching palms of mine, or the little voice in the back of my head which tells me something seems too good to be true. But in my first few days aboard the *Righteous Wrath* I had no need of such subtle promptings from my subconscious. Tension hung in the air of the corridors assigned to us like ozone around a daemonhost, all but striking sparks from the bulkheads. And I wasn't the only one to feel it. None of the other regiments on board would venture into our part of the ship, either for social interaction or the time-honoured tradition of perpetrating practical jokes against the members of another unit. The naval provosts patrolled in tense, wary groups. Desperate for some kind of respite, I even made courtesy calls on the other commissars aboard, but these were far from convivial; humourless Emperor-botherers to a man, the younger ones were too overwhelmed by respect for my reputation to be good company, and most of the older ones were quietly resentful of what they saw as a glory-hogging young upstart. Tedious as these interludes were, though, I was to be grateful for them sooner than I thought.

The one bright spot was Captain Parjita, who'd commanded the vessel for the past thirty years, and with whom I hit it off from our first dinner together. I'm sure he only invited me the first time because protocol demanded it, and perhaps out of curiosity to see what a Hero of the Imperium actually looked like in the flesh, but by the time we were halfway through the first course we were chatting away like old friends. I told a few outrageous lies about my past adventures, and he reciprocated with some anecdotes of his own, and by the time we'd got onto the amasec I felt more relaxed than I had in months. For one thing, he really appreciated the problems I was facing with Kasteen and her rabble.

'You need to reassert some discipline,' he told me unnecessarily. 'Before the rot spreads any further. Shoot a few, that'll buck their ideas up.'

Easy to say, of course, but not so easy in practice. That's what most commissars would have done, admittedly, but getting a regiment united because they're terrified of you and hate your guts has its own drawbacks, particularly as you're going to find yourself in the middle of a battlefield with these people before very long, and they'll all have guns. And, as I've already said, I had a reputation to maintain, and a good part of that was keeping up the pretence that I actually gave a damn about the troopers under my command. So, not an option, unfortunately.

It was while I was on my way back to my quarters from one such pleasant evening that my hand was forced, and in a way I could well have done without.

It was the noise that alerted me at first, a gradually swelling babble of voices from the corridors leading to our section of the ship. My pleasantly reflective mood, enhanced by Parjita's amasec and a comfortable win over the regicide board, evaporated in an instant. I knew that sound all too well, and the clatter of boots on the deck behind me as a squad of provosts double-timed towards the disturbance with shock batons drawn was enough to confirm it. I picked up my pace to join them, falling in beside the section leader.

'Sounds like a riot,' I said. The blank-visored head nodded.

'Quite right, sir.'

‘Any idea what sparked it?’ Not that it mattered. The simmering resentment among the Valhallans was almost cause enough on its own. Any excuse would have done. If he did have a clue, I never got to hear it; as we arrived at the door of the mess hall a ceramic cup bearing the regimental crest of the 296th shattered against his helmet.

‘Emperor’s blood!’ I ducked reflexively, taking cover behind the nearest piece of furniture to assess the situation while the provosts waded in ahead of me, striking out with their shock batons at any target that presented itself. The room was a heaving mass of angry men and women punching, kicking and flailing at one another, all semblance of discipline shot to hell. Several were down already, bleeding, screaming, being trampled on by the still active combatants, and the casualties were rising all the time.

The fiercest fighting was going on in the centre of the room, a small knot of brawlers clearly intent on actual murder unless someone intervened. Fine by me, that’s what the provosts were for. I hunkered down behind an overturned table, scanning the room as I voxed a situation report to Kasteen, and watched them battle their way forward. The two fighters at the centre of the mêlée seemed evenly matched to me; a shaven-headed man, muscled like a Catachan, who towered over a wiry young woman with short-cropped raven black hair. Whatever advantage he had in strength she could match in agility, striking hard and leaping back out of range, reducing most of his strikes to glancing blows, which is just as well, as a clean hit from those ham-like fists would likely have stove her ribcage in. As I watched he spun, launching a lethal roundhouse kick to her temple; she ducked just a fraction slow, and went sprawling as his foot grazed the top of her head, but twisted upright again with a knife from one of the tables in her hand. The blow came up towards his sternum, but he blocked it, opening up a livid red gash along his right arm.

It was about then that things really started to go wrong. The provosts had made it almost halfway to the brawl I was watching when the two sides finally realised they had an enemy in common. A young woman, blood pouring from a broken nose, was unceremoniously yanked away from the man whose groin she’d been aiming a kick at, and rounded on the provost attempting to restrain her. Her elbow strike bounced harmlessly off his torso armour, but her erstwhile opponent leapt to her defence, swinging a broken plate in a short, clinical arc which impacted precisely on the neck joint where helmet met flak; a bright crimson spurt of arterial blood sprayed the surrounding bystanders as the stricken provost dropped to his knees, trying to stem the bleeding.

‘Emperor’s bowels!’ I began to edge my way back towards the door, to wait for the reinforcements Kasteen had promised; if they hadn’t been before, the mob was in a killing mood now, and anyone who looked like a symbol of authority would become an obvious target. Even as I watched, both factions turned on the provosts in their midst, who disappeared under a swarm of bodies. The troopers barely seemed human any more. I’d seen tyranids move like that in response to a perceived threat, but this was even worse. Your average ‘nid swarm has purpose and intelligence behind everything it does, even though it’s hard to remember that when a tidal wave of chitin is bearing down on you with every intention of reducing you to mincemeat, but it was clear that there was no intelligence working here, just sheer brute bloodlust. Emperor damn it, I’ve seen Khornate cults with more self-restraint than those supposedly disciplined Guard troopers displayed in that mess hall.

At least while they were ripping the provosts apart they weren’t likely to notice me, so I made what progress I could towards the door, ready to take command of the reinforcements as soon as they arrived. And I would have made it too, if the squad leader hadn’t surfaced long enough to scream, ‘Commissar! Help!’

Oh great. Every pair of eyes in the room suddenly swung in my direction. I thought I could see my reflection in every pupil, tracking me like an auspex.

If you take one more step towards that door, I told myself, you’re a dead man. They’d be on me in seconds. The only way to survive was to take them by surprise. So I stepped forward instead, as though I’d just entered the room.

‘You.’ I pointed at a random trooper. ‘Get a broom.’

Whatever they’d been expecting me to say or do, this definitely wasn’t it. The room hung suspended in confused anticipation, the silence stretching for an infinite second. No one moved.

‘That was not a request,’ I said, raising my voice a little, and taking another step forward. ‘This mess hall is an absolute disgrace. And no one is leaving until it’s been tidied up.’ My boot skidded in a slowly congealing pool of blood. ‘You, you, and you, go with him. Buckets and mops. Make sure you get enough to go round.’

Confusion and uncertainty began to spread, troopers flicking nervous glances at one other, as it gradually began to dawn on them that the situation had got well out of hand and that consequences had to be faced. The Guardsmen I’d

pointed out, two of them women, began to edge nervously towards the door.

‘At the double!’ I barked suddenly, with my best parade-ground snap; the designated troopers scurried out, ingrained patterns of discipline reasserting themselves.

And that was enough. The thunderstorm crackle of violence dissipated from the room as though suddenly earthed.

After that it was easy; now that I’d asserted my authority the rest fell into line as meek as you please, and by the time Kasteen arrived with another squad of provosts in tow I’d already detailed a few more to escort the wounded and worse to the infirmary. A surprising number were able to walk, but there were still far too many stretcher cases for my liking.

‘You did well, I hear.’ Kasteen was at my elbow, her face pale as she surveyed the damage. I shrugged, knowing from long experience that credit snowballs all the faster the less you seem to want it.

‘Not well enough for some of these poor souls,’ I said.

‘Bravest thing I ever saw,’ I heard from behind me, as one of the injured provosts was helped away by a couple of his shipmates. ‘He just stood there and faced them down, the whole damn lot...’ His voice faded, adding another small increment to my heroic reputation, which I knew would be all round the ship by this time tomorrow.

‘There’ll have to be an investigation.’ Kasteen looked stunned, still not quite capable of taking in the full enormity of what had happened. ‘We need to know who started it, what happened...’

‘Who’s to blame?’ Broklaw cut in from the door. It was obvious from the direction of his gaze where he thought the responsibility should lie. Kasteen flushed.

‘I’ve no doubt we’ll discover the men responsible,’ she said, a faint but perceptible stress on the pronoun. Broklaw refused to rise to the bait.

‘We can all thank the Emperor we have an impartial adjudicator in the commissar here,’ he said smoothly. ‘I’m sure we can rely on him to sort it out.’

Thanks a lot, I thought. But he was right. And how I handled it was to determine the rest of my future with the regiment. Not to mention leaving me running for my life yet again, beginning a long and unwelcome association with the Emperor’s pet psychopaths, and an encounter with the most fascinating woman I’ve ever met.



**In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war. Mankind's Imperium battles countless foes, and death awaits.**

*An extract from*

# **CRUSADE + OTHER STORIES**

*CRUSADE BY ANDY CLARK*

The augur probe Kalides-Gamma-19-8\_6 floated in the void. It was an Imperial monitor satellite, a bulky mass of machinery and bio-reliquaric components slaved to a deep-space Mandeville point. Kalides-Gamma-19-8\_6 had a single purpose: to monitor activity around the Kalides System's last stable warp translation point.

From here interstellar warships could break through from the strange dimension of the warp and begin their journey in-system. It fell to the augur probe, and several dozen more like it, to monitor all new arrivals and send word of their coming to the inhabited worlds deeper in-system.

Kalides-Gamma-19-8\_6 had hung in place for decades. In that time, precisely twenty-seven starships had translated into real space beneath its watchful ocular receptors.

Now, came the twenty-eighth.

Auto-scriptoral data feeds scrolled through the probe's artificial cortex. Auto-inquisitions answered auspicious sweep readings, but as its machine-spirit prepared to catalogue another uneventful sweep, the probe's cogitations were broken as a priority signum-interdiction signal flared within its empyric augurs.

The augur probe's void-hardened lenses refocused. Its empyric signums whirled to life, drinking in data on every spectrum as reality buckled. The starfield warped and rippled in a patch a hundred miles across. Light bent in the probe's staring fisheye-lens as though contorting in the grip of a black hole. Witchfires sparked and died in the darkness, each flare scorching the skin of reality.

Rents appeared, matter peeling away in strips like flesh from a leper's face, and ectoplasm spilled through, billowing in geysers and glowing with an eerie light.

Real space convulsed, crumpling and stretching all at once before ripping open like a fractal wound.

From within burst a starship.

It tumbled, engines firing as it fought to right itself. The ship's Geller field tattered amidst dancing corposants, revealing a craft almost a mile long, a buttressed Imperial warship whose battered hull plates were scorched and dented. Behind it, the tear in reality writhed madly, tendrils of dirty light groping blindly as if seeking to snatch back their prize before it could escape.

As the warp anomaly collapsed in upon itself and the starship sailed free, Kalides-Gamma-19-8\_6 worked furiously



to codify and categorise, to scan and transmit. Info-spools whirled within its armoured carapace, preparing a package of intelligence ready to be beamed through its aquila-carved macro-array. Machine-spirit interrogations determined the ship's designation as a strike cruiser – a Space Marine vessel. Further rapid auto-scans detected and classified the heraldry of the Ultramarines Chapter, from the noble world of Macragge.

The probe worked diligently, still attempting choriistry with the on-board machine-spirits of the Ultramarines strike cruiser even as the warship bore down upon it. Retro-thrusters fired in the probe's flanks, trying to shunt it out of the starship's path, and Kalides-Gamma-19-8\_6 was still busily compiling its vox-package when it was annihilated by the impact of the onrushing craft. The probe exploded, a brief starburst of fire against the armoured flank of the vessel.

It left a slight scorch mark upon the strike cruiser's starboard prow plating, directly below the ship's name: *Primarch's Sword*.

Within the armoured hull of the strike cruiser, a robed helot hastened along a corridor lit by strobing emergency lumens. He gripped the guide rails with one hand, ignoring the canted angle of the corridor and the shuddering gravity fluctuations. In his other hand, he clutched a freshly scribed data-parchment, intended for the eyes of the most important warriors on the ship.

He passed beneath the watchful eye-lenses of gothic gargoyles. He hurried across a gantry above a gun deck where servitors fought to extinguish fires and medicae teams saw to the wounded. He brushed past other helots, each hurrying along on their own missions; many of his fellow servants were wounded, or hollow-eyed from lack of sleep.

The helot halted for a moment as the *Primarch's Sword* gave an especially violent jolt, and a groan of stressed metal rolled through the air. His eyes darted to the dark corners, whites shrinking around his pupils. He recalled the unnatural entities that had attempted to manifest during the strike cruiser's violent trip through warp space. The ship's Geller field had kept the warp-things at bay, but all the same the helot's thoughts turned to the reassuring weight of the bolt pistol holstered at his hip. No servant of the Ultramarines was defenceless...

'Emperor give your servant strength,' he muttered, 'and protect this unworthy soul from the terrors of the outer dark.'

Slowly the shuddering beneath his feet subsided, and the corridor righted itself as the *Primarch's Sword* restabilised its internal gravity. The helot made the sign of the aquila over the stylised white U emblazoned on his chest, then hurried on.

The helot arrived at the gold-embossed doors to the ship's strategium. Two Primaris Space Marines stood guard outside, bolt rifles held across their armoured chests. The warriors were demi-gods in the helot's eyes. Their fully enclosing suits of blue power armour, their proud helms with the faintly glowing eye-lenses, their thrumming back-mounted power packs – all of this filled him with a near-religious awe.

He approached with his eyes cast respectfully downwards, and one of the Ultramarines nodded in acknowledgement.

'Proceed,' said the warrior, his vox-amplified voice a deep rumble.

The doors slid aside, and the helot passed into the strategium. The chamber was high-ceilinged and decorated with marble statuary. A huge hololithic table squatted at its centre, and banks of cogitators and strategic auspex shrines lined its walls. The strategium was large enough to hold twenty armoured Adeptus Astartes, but for now it contained just three Primaris Space Marines, the noble lords who led this strike force.

They were stood around the holotable, and their eyes turned to the helot as he entered. The gravity of their combined gaze almost pinned him in place.

He approached Lieutenant Cassian, holding out the data-parchment to the strike force's commanding officer.

'Missive from Shipmaster Aethor, my lord,' said the helot. 'He deemed it too urgent to await restoration of ship-wide vox.'

The Primaris lieutenant took the illuminated plastek printout, his noble features set in a stern frown.

'My thanks...'

'Kallem, my lord,' said the helot.

'My thanks, Kallem,' said Cassian. He unfurled the parchment, his eyes scanning its contents with inhuman speed.

'What is the word?' asked Librarian Keritraeus. The helot's eyes flicked involuntarily towards the psyker, drawn to the nest of cabling that punctured his scalp, and his dark eyes like wells of secrets.

'The shipmaster is pleased to inform us that, with the aid of Navigator X'gol, we have escaped the empyric storm that

has gripped the ship these past days,' said Cassian.

'That much was obvious,' grunted Chaplain Dematris. The Chaplain's black armour and skull helm stood out in dark contrast to his comrades' blue armour. Dematris' mace-like crozius was laid on the holotable before him, a symbol of both his spiritual authority and his martial might.

'He goes on,' said Cassian dryly. 'The initial damage report from the tech-magi estimates the *Primarch's Sword* to be operating at fifty-two per cent combat effectiveness. We've lost several gun decks to fires and munitions detonations, and the aft void shield generators are inactive. Ship-wide vox is down, and we've lost more than half of the hull auspex.'

'And our warp drive?' asked Keritraeus.

'Magos Lamdaxh has been forced to render it quiescent for fear of empyric feedback or malefic overspill.'

'Then we are crippled,' said Dematris angrily. 'Without the power of our warp drive to pierce the veil, we are reduced to conventional drives. A journey that would take us days in warp space would require years under such conventional power. We have no way of rejoining the Indomitus Crusade, or even of letting our comrades know that we still live.'

'Does the honoured magos suggest how long it will take him to effect repairs?' asked Librarian Keritraeus.

'He does not,' replied Cassian. 'But let us assume for now that the gates of the warp are closed to us.'

'Then what is our course of action?' asked Dematris. 'We surely haven't succeeded in the pacification of Knossa only to be cast adrift in the interstellar darkness – that would not serve the Emperor's will.'

Lieutenant Cassian punched a runic sequence into the holotable, muttering the rites of awakening as he did so. The device flickered to life, crafting a three-dimensional map of local space in the air from light and shadow. The *Primarch's Sword* sat at its centre, a blue-and-gold rune, and around it the map slowly expanded as the ship's remaining auspicators wove a data-fresco of its surroundings.

'There are machine-spirit acknowledgements from deep-void satellites,' said Cassian. 'That would put us on the fringes of a star system, at least.'

'There,' said Keritraeus, pointing as further runes flickered into life. 'An asteroid belt. A gas giant. A death world.'

'More planets,' said Cassian, 'and with Imperial designators. By the Emperor's grace, we have come to a settled system, my brothers.'

Astrogation data scrolled down one side of the map. Names began to appear in flickering, High Gothic script as the bridge crew worked to triangulate their position.

'The Kalides System,' Cassian read aloud. 'And there, the capital world – Kalides Prime. Tithe-grade secundus, which would suggest sufficient orbital docks to hasten our repairs.'

'Even better...' said Keritraeus, tapping commands into the holotable's runic keys. The display focused on Kalides Prime, expanding the world into a slowly spinning orb and projecting additional information in a halo around it.

'An astropathic relay,' said Cassian, allowing himself a tight smile. 'This is good news. Not only can we repair the *Primarch's Sword*, but with the mind-choir of that planet's astropaths we can pierce the veil and send word to the Indomitus Crusade. We will let them know of our success on Knossa, and coordinate our rendezvous with the crusade fleet. We will return to the primarch's side.'

'Perhaps,' said Dematris. 'But let us take Knossa as a warning. According to this feed, the last confirmed contact with any world of the Kalides System was almost two years ago.'

'Not so unusual,' observed Keritraeus. 'The Imperium is a vast realm, and since the opening of the Great Rift it has been harder than ever to travel safely between the stars. This would hardly be the first isolated-yet-loyal system the Indomitus Crusade has brought back into the fold.'

'True,' said Dematris. 'But the corrupting influence of Chaos pervades the galaxy. Before the flesh-cults rose from the shadows to seize power, I don't doubt that Knossa was loyal also. Following the teachings of the primarch, I suggest the theoretical that we find ourselves in a hostile system until it is proven otherwise.'

'Wise counsel, Brother-Chaplain,' said Cassian. 'I will order Shipmaster Aethor to proceed under combat conditions, and have all battle-brothers stand ready for an engagement. Should the people of this system prove to be traitors, we will wrest control of Kalides Prime by force. We must be bellicose in this. Until we can achieve a true sidereal fix, it is impossible to know how much time we lost within the jaws of the warp. And we have our orders.'

Cassian keyed a sequence of runes, and the image of Kalides Prime was replaced by a towering warrior clad in magnificently ornamented armour. All but forgotten by the three Space Marines, Kallam gasped at the imposing sight of

the Ultramarines' primarch, Roboute Guilliman. Even rendered in a grainy hololithic recording, the Lord of Ultramar exuded such a god-like presence that the helot was driven to his knees in awe.

'My sons,' said Guilliman, his voice rich, deep and utterly commanding. 'As the Indomitus Crusade gathers pace, we drive like a spear into the heartlands of my father's Imperium. So the dangers to our flanks grow manifold, and must be addressed. Captain Adrastean has already given you your orders, but allow me to say this to you. You are all newforged, all Primaris battle-brothers. You are the product of my will and Archmagos Cawl's labours. You are the ultimate warriors of the Imperium of Mankind, the torchbearers who will drive back the shadows in this darkest of hours. Know that you have my absolute faith. Let that knowledge strengthen your arms and gird your souls. Prevail, gloriously, swiftly, then return to my side. There are always more foes to be fought. The crusade must continue.'

The holorecording came to an end, and was replaced again by the image of Kalides Prime. Cassian, Keritraeus and Dematris looked at one another.

'We have a duty to perform, and no time to waste,' said Cassian. 'We will not shame Captain Adrastean, and we will not fail our gene-sire.'

The lieutenant turned to face Kallem, who tried to control his shaking body and rose unsteadily to his feet.

'Kallem,' said Cassian. 'You will bear these orders to the shipmaster. He is to make all speed for Kalides Prime, and to stop for nothing. The magi and Techmarines are to make what repairs they can while en route. It will take us sixteen hours to reach the planet from this position, and I expect the *Primarch Sword's* combat effectiveness to be increased at least twenty per cent by the time we do. External vox is to remain shrouded unless we receive Imperial hails first – the shipmaster should assume that we are in hostile space until it is proven otherwise.'

Kallem nodded, saluting the lieutenant with the sign of the aquila.

'At once, my lord.'

He turned and marched away, the image of the primarch's features still burned into his mind.

'Wise,' said Dematris as the doors slid shut behind the helot. 'Replaying that holorecording. It stoked the fires of that man's faith, and those flames will spread.'

Cassian smiled. 'It was for our benefit as much as his, Dematris.'

'Sixteen hours, then,' said Keritraeus. 'Ample time to prepare ourselves for whatever lies ahead. I will meditate, and focus my powers. Passage through the warp storm was... unpleasant. I need to refortify my mind.'

'I will look to matters spiritual,' said Dematris, hefting his crozius. 'There will be those who wish to make their devotions in the Reclusiam. Besides which, duty requires reconsecration.'

'It will be good to wield that blade again,' said Cassian. 'Almost enough to make me hope that Kalides *does* play host to heretics.'

'Always hope for enemies to slay,' quoted Dematris. 'For in their spilled blood will the Imperium be washed clean.'

Keritraeus raised one eyebrow, but made no comment.

'Very good, brothers,' said Cassian. 'Muster will commence when we are six hours out.'

'Until then,' said Keritraeus.

The Librarian and the Chaplain departed, leaving Lieutenant Cassian standing alone before the slowly revolving image of Kalides Prime. He stared hard at the hololith, as though he could force it to give up its secrets. There was much to be done, he thought. Strategic inloads of the planet's topography, settlement maps, last-known military strengths and the like. Then construction of likely battlefield theoreticals and the practical solutions to them, as the primarch taught. A tour of the ship for the sake of morale, and then his own personal preparations: the rites of arming over his wargear, and meditations to centre himself.

'But first,' he murmured, 'to stoke those fires of faith.'

The ship-wide vox might still be crippled, but Space Marine armour was a marvel of arcane technology. Alongside the suites of auto-senses that sharpened their battlefield perceptions, and the servo-bundles that augmented their already prodigious strength, every Primaris battle-brother's Mark X armour incorporated a hardened vox-emitter keyed to a set of coded command channels. This vox-net was impervious to all but the most devastating forms of disruption, and so as Cassian keyed his vox-bead to channel ultima, he knew that his address would reach every one of the seventy-two other Ultramarines aboard the *Primarch's Sword*.

'My brothers,' began Cassian. Throughout the vessel, Primaris Space Marines ceased what they were doing and attended to their lieutenant's words.

'My brothers, on Knossa we crushed the heretic foe,' he said. 'We threw down the twisted idols of Chaos and we purged the degenerates that had fallen to their worship. We brought the light of the Indomitus Crusade to those benighted by heresy. We won victory in the primarch's name.'

Upon the ship's firing ranges, Intercessor battle-brothers held up their bolt rifles in salute, while heavily armoured Aggressors clenched their power fists and raised them triumphantly.

'Upon our departure from that system, the foul powers of the empyrean attempted to punish us for our victory,' continued Cassian. 'Yet even the fury of a warp storm could not hold us back from our duty. We escaped. We endured.'

Knelt in meditation in the ship's Reclusiam, the brothers of Sergeant Marcus' Reiver squad let the lieutenant's words echo through their minds, even as they prepared to don their sinister wargear and the terrifying personas that went with it.

'Now, the Emperor has provided us with the means to contact the crusade forces again, and to repair our craft that we might rejoin our battle-brothers all the sooner. But the greatest gifts are not given freely. The Emperor's beneficence must be earned, and there is every chance that we will find a world turned to madness and heresy by the malign influence of the Great Rift.'

Upon the arming deck, the brothers of Sergeant Gallen's Hellblaster squad looked up from their prayers over the bellicose machine-spirits of their plasma incinerators. They shared stern, stoic glances, the looks of warriors committed to giving everything – even their lives – if victory demanded it.

'Perhaps we will find a world of faithful Imperial servants, ready to aid our cause,' said Cassian. 'But if not, then know this – we will crush anyone foolish enough to oppose us. We will lay low any heretic who dares stand between us and our return to the primarch's side. We are the gene-sons of Roboute Guilliman, and we will prevail. For the Emperor!'

'For the Emperor!' cried Cassian's warriors, their booming voices carrying along the ship's corridors and through its cavernous chambers, filling their helot servants with pride and courage.

'Muster begins at seventeen hundred hours shiptime,' said Cassian. 'Look to your wargear and ready yourselves for battle. If enemies await us, we shall make them rue their folly...'



**The Mortal Realms echo to the sound of war as  
Order, Chaos, Death and Destruction struggle for supremacy.**

*An extract from*

# **HAMMERHAL & OTHER STORIES**

*HAMMERHAL BY JOSH REYNOLDS*

The rat chittered, exposing yellow incisors in warning. Belloc growled and tossed his knife. The rat fled as the narrow blade thudded into the side of a mould-encrusted crate. The dock-warden cursed and ambled to retrieve his weapon. As he did so, he saw the flash of eyes in the nearby shadows. The rat wasn't alone. They never were. Where there was one, there were a dozen – these days, at least. The sacks of grain that were stacked along the causeway of the aether-dock were irresistible to hungry vermin.

The docks rose high over Hammerhal's warehouse district, one ring of berths and warehouses stacked atop the next, almost all the way up its length. From each ring, an ever-spreading canopy of high-altitude berths and quays extended out over the tangled streets below, like branches stretching from a tree of immense size.

Belloc had heard that it was, in fact, just that – that much of the city had been grown rather than built. He didn't know whether he believed that or not, though there were stranger things in this realm, to be sure.

Hammerhal itself, for instance. The Twin-tailed City stretched across two of the eight Mortal Realms, separated by untold infinities thanks to the Stormrift Realmgate. Like all realmgates, it was a portal through which one could pass into another realm entirely. Countless numbers of these apertures in reality were scattered about the Mortal Realms, and all of the great cities were built about one or more realmgates.

Hammerhal spread outwards from the twinned thresholds of the Stormrift Realmgate into both Ghyran, the Realm of Life, and Aqshy, the Realm of Fire. Belloc had only been to Hammerhal Aqsha once, and the experience hadn't been a pleasant one. The air had tasted of cinders and smoke, and he'd been covered in sweat from sunup to sundown. Ghyran was better, but not by much – it was too wet here, too humid. He missed Azyr. The Celestial Realm had its problems, but at least the weather was pleasant.

He plucked his knife free of the crate and spun it lightly between his fingers, careful not to cut himself.

'Well,' he said, glaring at the rats, 'anything to say for yourselves?'

When no reply was forthcoming, he kicked the mouldering crate towards them. It came apart as his boot touched it, and he yelped in disgust. Bits and pieces clattered across the ground, and the rats took the hint, scattering into the shadows.

Belloc hopped back, scraping at the sludge on his boot with the edge of his knife. If it got into the leather, he would

have to get new boots, and he'd only just managed to break these ones in. He looked around as he dislodged the last of it. There was mould everywhere, growing on every warehouse and berth that occupied the vast wooden platform of the docks. And vines. And weeds, even. It seemed inconceivable that anything should be growing this high above the city proper, but life found a way. Especially in Hammerhal Ghyra.

This side of the bifurcated city was awash in unwelcome growth. The heat from the Fire-Bastions could only do so much; no matter how much lava was channelled into the immense stone runnels from Hammerhal Aqsha, the city's spires and golden domes were under eternal siege from Ghyran's excessively exuberant plant life.

And the rats. Always the rats.

'Vermin,' Belloc muttered, thrusting his knife back into its sheath.

That was all this job was, at times. The dock-warden scratched at his unshaven chin. He was burly, but not especially brave, even with a sword on his hip. He wasn't ashamed. Bravery cost extra, and the owners of the docks were notoriously cheap. You got what you paid for, and they had paid for Belloc. Luckily, no one was stupid enough to climb all the way up here, just to filch grain – or worse, try and steal an airship. So it was just him and the rats.

He wondered if Delph and the others were as bored as he was. Probably. Things were either boring or terrifying this high up, but they had drawn the short straws and been forced to patrol the uppermost ring.

He didn't like it up here. The Kharadron vessels smelled of strange chemicals and the vibrations of their buoyancy endrins shook the entire dock. The sky-duardin were a stand-offish folk who kept to themselves, unless they had business to attend to. He'd heard from Delph that they lived in flying cities, but didn't know how much credence there was in that.

Then again, Delph was a duardin herself, so perhaps she'd know, if anyone did. She said the Kharadron were duardin who had retreated to the skies when the armies of the Dark Gods had swept over the Mortal Realms. She didn't seem to like them very much. Granted, she didn't like anyone.

Belloc stared at one of the Kharadron vessels. It was oddly shaped. Too many curves. The bulbous aether-endrins that held the ship aloft glowed dimly, even when at anchor. If you stared at them for too long, you got dizzy. Belloc blinked and looked away.

There were sounds up here too, sometimes. Not the usual creaking and groaning you'd expect, but something else. Smells, too – acrid and unpleasant. Once, he thought he'd seen something watching him from the roof of a warehouse.

Suddenly uneasy, he glanced at the unfamiliar stars above. The sky was green here, even now at night, with the faintest tinge of azure. Sometimes it was so pale it was almost white, and sometimes it was so dark as to be black, but it was always a shade of green. The stars were the worst. They were the same as in Azyr, he was certain, but somehow different, as if he were looking at them from the wrong angle.

He blinked and tore his eyes away from the unforgiving sky. Beyond the obscuring wall of anchored airships and sky-cutters, Hammerhal Ghyra stretched across the horizon. It was almost beautiful from up here. Parts of the city were given over to vast groves of trees, and amongst the green he could see golden domes and white towers rising over a sea of smaller buildings.

A constant flow of molten rock poured down through immense stone and crystal runnels that emerged from the city's heart, where the Stormrift Realmgate was located. The glowing lines stretched like veins through the tangled streets towards the distant defensive canals which marked the outer districts. He could just make out the faint reddish glow of the Fire-Bastions on the horizon.

Each time the city extended its borders, the Fire-Bastions were duly redirected by teams of human and duardin artisans. The engineers of the Ironweld Arsenal were capable of great feats of artifice. They bent the wisdom of two races towards devising weapons and mechanisms for the reconquest of the Mortal Realms.

The Fire-Bastions were one such mechanism. Fed by the runnels of molten rock, they served to burn back the ravenous flora of the realm, keeping the outer districts of the city from being overwhelmed by fast-growing plant life.

The hollow, ashen network of tunnels that were left behind when the Fire-Bastions were redirected were then gradually built over and hidden from sight. Belloc sometimes wondered how many of those tunnels were repurposed rather than filled in, and how many still ran beneath the winding streets of Hammerhal Ghyra.

'And probably rats in all of them,' he muttered.

The city was full of rats. And worse things. No one talked about it, but that didn't mean it wasn't so. He'd left Azyrheim

one step ahead of the thief-takers, but a stretch in the sky-cages didn't seem so bad now compared to some of the things he'd seen.

Delph and the others swore blind that the mystic wards around the city prevented anything too horrible from getting in. They said the magic kept the monsters out, but Belloc wasn't concerned about the ones outside. He was more worried about the ones that might already be in the city somewhere. Hiding. *Waiting*.

There were stories. There were always stories, even in Azyrheim. About rats that walked on two legs, and men with the heads of goats and wolf's teeth. Belloc was no child. He knew that monsters were real, and their gods too. And he knew that nothing could keep them out for long, if they were truly of a mind to get in.

As he gazed at the horizon, he found his eyes drawn towards the Nevergreen Mountains. He'd never seen them up close, but he'd heard about the great forest that covered their broken slopes and the things that lurked within it. Lightning flashed, arcing between the distant peaks and the night sky. He shivered. The lightning reminded him that the Stormcast Eternals had marched west, towards the mountains, two days before.

He shivered again, thinking of those massive, silver-clad warriors as they passed through the steaming gates of the Fire-Bastions. Delph said they'd been human once, before Sigmar had blessed them with divine strength and holy armour, but what would a duardin know about such things? She didn't even worship Sigmar. Like most duardin – at least those he knew – she worshipped Grungni, the god of her folk.

Something clattered. Belloc froze. Then, slowly, he turned.

It was probably a rat. It was almost certainly a rat. But sometimes it wasn't. He'd heard stories that sometimes things crawled down out of the green sky, looking for food. It was the same in Azyrheim, but it was somehow worse here. He reached for the hilt of his sword as he took a step towards where the sound had originated from – an alleyway between two warehouses.

Belloc didn't call for help. Delph had gotten angry the last time he'd called for help and there hadn't been any need. He needed this job. Besides, if it was something other than a rat, calling for help would only attract its attention all the quicker.

He took a step towards the alleyway. For a moment, he heard only the creak of rigging and the whistle of the wind blowing between the buildings. Warehouses of all sizes clustered thick here, near the edge of the ring, and they collected shadows.

Another clatter, and a rat ran out of the alleyway, squealing.

Belloc sighed in relief. He nearly choked on that sigh as something pounced on the rat. The rodent died instantly as four dun paws crushed it flat. A tawny, feathered skull dipped, and a hooked beak tore at its kill. Belloc took a step back. The thing turned, golden eyes fixed on him.

'Gryph-hound,' he muttered as a chill raced along his spine. The creature resembled a small lion, only with the head of a bird of prey. It was no larger than a wolf, but it was far more lethal. Its tail lashed as it crouched over its kill. He held out his hands and began to back away slowly. 'Easy there. No harm done. Enjoy your meal.'

It might have come off one of the airships, but there was no way to tell. Just as he was about to call out for help, he bumped into someone. An instant later, something very sharp was resting against his neck.

'Hello, friend,' said a voice. 'No, don't move. Especially don't try to draw that sword you're wearing. Things might take an unfortunate turn.'

Belloc kept his hands from his blade. *Thieves*, he thought. Or worse. He made to speak, but the pressure of the blade against his throat increased slightly.

'Quietly, friend. Quietly. No need to speak.'

Belloc quickly closed his mouth.

'Good,' continued the voice. 'Good. Now, I need you to point out the berth belonging to the sky-merchant Rollo Tarn. Remember, don't reach for the sword.'

Tarn? Why did they want Tarn? He didn't ship anything valuable. Just wood. Belloc's mind spun in confusion. No one could expect him to die for wood, could they? He gestured slowly, hesitantly. The pressure of the knife was removed, and he sucked in a breath.

'There now. Excellent. That wasn't so difficult, was it?'

Belloc swallowed, but didn't reply. He was too busy praying.

‘You can turn around, now.’

Belloc did. The man before him was tall, and dressed like someone with more sense than to be creeping around the aether-docks at night. He wore a heavy, triple-caped overcoat over something that might have once been the uniform of a Freeguild warrior. A basket-hilted rapier was sheathed on one hip, and he had a brace of pistols on the other. On the lapel of his coat was pinned a symbol that Belloc recognised all too well from his time in Azyrheim: the hammer and comet of the Order of Azyr.

Belloc drew back in fear.

‘Witch hunter!’



# WARHAMMER® CHRONICLES

**Return to the World-That-Was with classic novels that reveal  
the hidden stories behind the gods of the Mortal Realms.**

An extract from

---

## THE LEGEND OF SIGMAR

---

GRAHAM McNEILL

The faint sound of songs and proud boasts guided the two boys as they scampered across the hard earth of the darkened settlement towards the longhouse at its centre. Their movements were furtive and cautious as they negotiated their way between high, timber walled buildings, and past the fish drying racks and the warm walls of the smithy. Neither boy wanted to be discovered, especially now that guards had been set on the walls and night had fallen.

Despite the threat of a beating at this trespass, the excitement of their intrepid raid into the heart of Reikdorf threatened to give both of them away.

‘Be quiet!’ hissed Cuthwin as Wenyld clattered against a previously unseen pile of planed timber, stacked against the woodworking store.

‘Quiet yourself,’ returned his friend, catching the timber before it could fall as both boys pressed their bodies flat against the wall. ‘There’s no stars or moon. I can’t see a thing.’

That at least was true, allowed Cuthwin. The night was utterly dark, the hooded braziers on the settlement’s walls casting a crackling orange light out into the forests beyond Reikdorf. Sentries circled the settlement within the ring of light, their bows and spears trained on the thick forests and darkened shoreline of the Reik.

‘Hey,’ said Wenyld, ‘did you hear what I said?’

‘I heard,’ said Cuthwin. ‘It’s dark, yes. So use your ears. Warriors aren’t quiet the night before riding to war.’

Both boys stood as still as the statue of Ulric above Reikdorf’s gate, and let the sounds and smells of the night wash over them, each one telling a story of the village they lived in: the groan of settling iron as Beorthyn’s forge cooled and creaked from a day’s work, producing iron swords and axe blades; the sounds of wives speaking with low, worried voices as they wove new cloaks for their sons, who rode to battle at daybreak; the whinny of stabled horses; the sweet smell of burning peat, and the mouth-watering aroma of cooking meat.

Over it all, Cuthwin could hear the open wash of the river as a constant rustle of water against the mud flats, the creak of wooden fishing boats as they moved with the tide, and the low moan of wind through the hung nets. It sounded sad to him, but night in the land west of the mountains was often a time of sadness, a time when the monsters came from the forests to kill and devour.

Cuthwin’s parents had been killed last summer by the greenskins, cut down as they fought to defend their farmstead

from the blood-hungry raiders. The thought made him pause, and he felt his hands curl into fists as he pictured the vengeance he would one day take on the savage race that had taken his father from him, and had seen him eventually brought to Reikdorf to live with his uncle.

As though feelings of anger concentrated his hearing, he heard a muted sound of laughter and song from behind thick timbers and heavy, fortified doors. Firelight reflected on the walls of the grain store at the settlement's heart as though a door or shutter had been opened, and from which spilled raucous sounds of merriment.

For a brief moment, the market-place at the centre of Reikdorf was illuminated, but no sooner had the light come than it was gone. Both boys shared a look of excitement at the thought of spying on King Björn's warriors before they rode out to do battle with the greenskins. Only those who had reached the age of manhood were permitted within the walls of the king's longhouse before battle, and the mystery of such a thing simply had to be explored.

'Did you see that?' asked Wenyld, pointing towards the centre of the village.

'Of course I did,' replied Cuthwin, pulling Wenyld's arm down. 'I'm not blind.'

Though Cuthwin had lived in Reikdorf for less than a week, he knew the secrets of the town as well as any young child did, but in such complete darkness, without any visual landmarks beyond knowing where they stood, the village was suddenly unfamiliar and strange, all its geography unknown.

He fixed the brief image the light had given him, and took Wenyld's hand.

'I'll follow the sounds of the warriors,' he said. 'Hold on to me and I'll get us there.'

'But it's so dark,' said Wenyld.

'Doesn't matter,' said Cuthwin. 'I'll find a way around in the dark. Just don't let go.'

'I won't,' promised Wenyld, but Cuthwin could hear the fear that crept into his friend's voice. He felt a little of it too, for his uncle was no slouch with the birch when punishment was to be meted out. He pushed the fear aside, for he was an Unberogen, the fiercest tribe of warriors north of the Grey Mountains, and his heart was strong and true.

He took a deep breath, and set off at a jog towards where the light had reflected on the walls of the grain store, following a remembered path where there was nothing to trip him or make a noise. Cuthwin's heart was in his mouth as he crossed the open market-place, avoiding spots where the light had shown him pitfalls or broken pottery that might crunch underfoot. Though he had only the briefest glimpse of the route he had to take, the image was imprinted on his memory as firmly as the wolves on one of King Björn's war banners.

His father's teachings in the dark of the woods returned to him, and he moved like a ghost, silently weaving through the market square, counting his strides and pulling Wenyld after him. Cuthwin pulled up and slowed his steps as he closed his eyes and let his ears gather information on his surroundings. The sound of merrymaking was louder, and the echoes of it on the walls were forming a map in his head.

Cuthwin reached out, and he smiled as he felt his fingers brush the stone wall of the longhouse. The stones were square-cut and carved, hewn by dwarf miners from the rock of the Worlds Edge Mountains, and brought to Reikdorf as a gift to King Björn when spring had broken.

He remembered watching the dwarfs with a mixture of awe and trepidation, for they had been frightening, squat figures in gleaming armour, who paid little heed to the people around them, speaking to one another in gruff voices as they built the longhouse for the king in less than a day. The dwarfs had stayed no longer than necessary, and had refused all offers of help in their labours, all but one marching into the east as soon as the work was complete.

'Are we here?' whispered Wenyld.

Cuthwin nodded before remembering that Wenyld wouldn't be able to see him.

'Yes,' he said, his voice low, 'but be quiet. It'll be a week emptying the privies if we're caught.'

Cuthwin paused to let his breathing even out, and then began edging along the length of the wall, feeling ahead of him for the corner. When it came, it was as smooth and as sharp as an axe blade, and he eased himself around it, glancing up as the clouds parted and a bright glitter of stars sparkled in the heavens above him.

The extra light glistened on the walls of the dwarf-cut stone as though they were filled with stars, and he took a moment to admire the incredible craftsmanship that had gone into their making.

Along the length of the wall of the longhouse, Cuthwin could see a wide doorway fashioned from thick beams of timber, and embellished with angular bands of dark iron and carvings of hammers and lightning bolts. Shutters above them were fastened tightly to their frames, not so much as a gap wide enough for a knife blade between the timber and the

stone.

Through the shutters, Cuthwin could hear the muted sounds of carousing warriors, the clatter of ale pots, the sound of rousing war songs and the banging of swords upon shield bosses.

‘Here,’ he said, pointing to the shutter above him. ‘We’ll see if we can get a look in here.’

Wenyld nodded and said, ‘Me first.’

‘Why should you go first?’ asked Cuthwin. ‘I got us here.’

‘Because I’m the oldest,’ said Wenyld, and Cuthwin couldn’t fault his logic, so, he laced his fingers together to form a stirrup like those used by the horsemen of the Taleuten.

He braced his back against the stone wall and said, ‘Very well, climb up and see if you can work the shutter open far enough to see something.’

Wenyld nodded eagerly and set his foot in Cuthwin’s hands, placing his hands on his friend’s shoulders. With a grunt, Cuthwin boosted Wenyld up, turning his head to avoid a knee in the face.

He opened his stance a little to spread Wenyld’s weight, and craned his neck to see what his friend was doing. The shutter was wedged firmly within its frame, and Wenyld had his face pressed against the wood as he squinted along the joints.

‘Well?’ asked Cuthwin, closing his eyes as he strained to hold Wenyld. ‘What do you see?’

‘Nothing,’ replied Wenyld. ‘I can’t see anything, the wood’s fitted too closely together.’

‘That’s dwarf craft for you,’ said a strong voice beside them, and both boys froze.

Cuthwin turned his head slowly, and opened his eyes to see a powerful warrior, outlined by starlight, and as solid as if he was carved from the same stone as the longhouse.

The sheer physical presence of the warrior took Cuthwin’s breath away, and he released his grip on Wenyld’s foot. His friend scrambled for a handhold at the edge of the shutter, but there was none to be had, and he fell, knocking the pair of them to the ground in a pile of acute embarrassment. Cuthwin shook free of his cursing friend, knowing that he was to be punished, but determined to face the warrior without fear.

He rolled quickly to his feet, and stood before their discoverer, his defiance turning to awe as he stared into the open, handsome face. Blond hair shone like silver in the starlight, kept from the warrior’s face by a headband of twisted copper wire, and his thick arms were bound by iron torques. A long bearskin cloak flowed from his shoulders, and Cuthwin saw that beneath it the warrior was clad in shimmering mail, bound at the waist by a great belt of thick leather.

A long-bladed hunting knife was sheathed at his belt, but it was the weapon hanging beside it that captured Cuthwin’s full attention.

The warrior bore a mighty warhammer, and Cuthwin’s eyes were drawn to the wide, flat head of the weapon, its surface etched with strange carvings that shimmered in the starlight.

The warhammer was a magnificent weapon, its haft forged from some unknown metal and worked by hands older than imagining. No man had ever forged such a perfect weapon of destruction, nor had any smith ever borne such a fearsome tool of creation.

Wenyld sprang to his feet, ready to flee from their discovery, but he too was held rooted to the spot at the sight of the awesome warrior.

The warrior leaned down, and Cuthwin saw that he was still young, perhaps around fifteen summers, and had a look of wry amusement glittering in the depths of his cold eyes, one of which was a pale blue, the other a deep green.

‘You did well getting across that market square in the dark, boy,’ said the warrior.

‘My name is Cuthwin,’ he said. ‘I’m nearly twelve, almost a man.’

‘Almost,’ said the warrior, ‘but not yet, Cuthwin. This place is for warriors who may soon face death in battle. This night is for them and them alone. Do not be in too much of a rush to be part of such things. Enjoy your childhood while you can. Now go, be off with you.’

‘You’re not going to punish us?’ asked Wenyld, and Cuthwin dug an elbow into his ribs.

The warrior smiled and said, ‘I should, but it took great skill to get this far without being seen, and I like that.’

Despite himself, Cuthwin felt inordinately pleased to have earned the warrior’s praise and said, ‘My father taught me how to move without being seen.’

‘Then he taught you well. What is his name?’

'He was called Gethwer,' said Cuthwin. 'The greenskins killed him.'

'I am sorry for that, Cuthwin,' said the warrior. 'We ride to do battle with the greenskins, and many of them will die by our hand. Now, do not tarry, or others with less mercy than I will discover you, and you'll be in for a beating.'

Cuthwin needed no second telling and turned from the warrior, sprinting back across the market square with his arms pumping at his side. The stars were out, and he followed a direct route from the longhouse towards the storehouse at the edge of the market square. He heard running steps behind him and risked a glance over his shoulder to see Wenyld swiftly following. The older boy quickly overtook him, a look of frantic relief plastered across his face as they rounded the corner of a timber-framed storehouse.

The boys pressed their bodies against the building, lungs heaving, and wild laughter bursting from their throats as they relived the thrill of capture and the relief of escape.

Cuthwin darted his head around the storehouse, remembering the fierce strength of the warrior who had sent them on their way. There was a man who feared nothing, a man who would stand up to any threat and meet it with his war-hammer held high.

'When I am a man I want to be like him,' said Cuthwin when he had got his breath back.

Wenyld doubled up, the breath heaving in his chest. 'Don't you know who that was?'

'No,' said Cuthwin, 'who was it?'

Wenyld said, 'That was the king's son. That was Sigmar.'

Sigmar watched the boys run off as though the Ölfhednar themselves were at their heels, smiling as he remembered attempting to sneak up to the old longhouse the night before his father had led the Unberogen warriors into battle against the Thuringians. He had not been as stealthy as the young lad he had just sent on his way, and vividly remembered the thrashing the king had administered.

He heard unsteady footfalls behind him. Without turning, he knew that Wolfgart, his closest friend and sword-brother, approached.

'You were too soft on them, Sigmar,' said Wolfgart. 'I remember the beating *we* got. Why should they not learn the hard way that you don't try to spy on a warriors' Blood Night?'

'We were caught because you couldn't hold me up for long enough,' Sigmar pointed out, turning to see a heavily muscled young man clad in mail and swathed in a great wolfskin cloak. A long-handled sword was sheathed over his shoulders, and unkempt braids of dark hair spilled around his face. Wolfgart was three years older than Sigmar, his features handsome and his skin flushed with heat, rich food and plentiful drink.

'Only because you broke my arm the year before with a smelting hammer.'

Sigmar's gaze fell upon Wolfgart's elbow, where five years previously, his rage had overcome him after the older boy had bested him in a practice bout and he had swung his weapon at the unsuspecting Wolfgart. Though long forgiven, Sigmar had never forgotten the unworthy deed, nor had he quickly forgotten the lesson of control his father had taught him in the aftermath of the bout.

'True enough,' admitted Sigmar, slapping a hand on his friend's shoulder and turning him back towards the longhouse. 'You have never let me forget it.'

'Damn right!' roared Wolfgart, his cheeks red with ale flavoured with hops and bog myrtle. 'I won fair and square, and you hit me from behind!'

'I know, I know,' said Sigmar, leading him back towards the door.

'What are you doing outside anyway? There's more drinking to be done!'

'I just wanted some fresh air,' said Sigmar, 'and haven't you had enough to drink?'

'Fresh air?' slurred Wolfgart, ignoring the latter part of Sigmar's comment. 'Plenty of fresh air to be had on the morn. Tonight is a night for feasting, drinking and giving praise to Ulric. It's bad luck not to sacrifice to the gods before battle.'

'I know that, Wolfgart. My father taught me that.'

'Then come back in,' said Wolfgart. 'He'll be wondering where you are. It's bad luck to be apart from your sword-brothers on a Blood Night.'

'Everything is bad luck to you,' said Sigmar.

'It's true. Look at the world we live in,' said Wolfgart, leaning against the side of the longhouse to vomit down the

dwarf stonework. Glistening ropes of matter drooled from his chin, and he wiped them clear with the back of his hand. 'I mean, think about it. Everywhere a man looks there's something trying to kill him: greenskins from the mountains, the beast-kin in the forests, or the other tribes: Asoborns, Thuringians or Teutogens. Plagues, starvation and sorcery: you name it, it's bad luck. Proves that everything is bad luck, doesn't it?'

'Someone had too much to drink again?' said an amused voice from the doorway to the longhouse.

'Ranald shrivel your staff, Pendrag!' roared Wolfgart, sinking to his haunches, and resting his forehead against the cool stone of the longhouse.

Sigmar looked up from Wolfgart to see two warriors emerge from the warmth and light of the longhouse. Both were of ages with him, and clad in fine hauberks and tunics of dark red. The taller of the pair had hair the colour of the setting sun, and wore a thick cloak of shimmering green scales that threw back the starlight with an iridescent sheen. His companion wore a long wolfskin cloak wrapped tightly around his thin frame, and bore a worried expression upon his face.

The tall warrior with the flame-red hair, addressed by Wolfgart, ignored the insult to his manhood, and said, 'Is he going to be well enough to ride tomorrow?'

Sigmar nodded and said, 'Aye, Pendrag, it's nothing a brew of valerian root won't cure.'

Pendrag looked doubtful, but shrugged, and turned to his companion in the wolfskin cloak. 'Trinovantes here thinks you should come inside, Sigmar.'

'Afraid I'll catch cold, my friend?' asked Sigmar.

'He claims he's seen an omen,' said Pendrag.

'An omen?' asked Sigmar. 'What kind of omen?'

'A bad one,' spat Wolfgart. 'What other kind is there? No one speaks of good omens now.'

'They did of Sigmar's coming,' said Trinovantes.

'Aye, and look how well that went,' groaned Wolfgart. 'Born into blood, and his mother dead at the hands of orcs. Good omens, my arse.'

Sigmar felt a stab of anger and sadness at the mention of his mother's death, but he had never known her and had nothing but his father's words to connect her to him. Wolfgart was right. Whatever omens had been spoken of his birth had come to naught but blood and death.

He leaned down, hooked an arm under Wolfgart's shoulders, and hauled him to his feet. Wolfgart was heavy and his limbs loose, and Sigmar grunted under the weight. Trinovantes took Wolfgart's other arm, and between them they half carried, half dragged their drunken friend towards the warmth of the longhouse.

Sigmar looked over at Trinovantes, the young man's face earnest and aged before its time.

'Tell me,' said Sigmar, 'what omen did you see?'

Trinovantes shook his head. 'It was nothing, Sigmar.'

'Go on, tell him,' said Pendrag. 'You can't see an omen and then not tell him.'

'Very well,' said Trinovantes, taking a deep breath. 'I saw a raven land on the roof of the king's longhouse this morning.'

'And?' asked Sigmar, when Trinovantes did not go on.

'And nothing,' said Trinovantes. 'That was it. A single raven is an omen of sorrow. Remember when one landed on Beithar's home last year? He was dead within the week.'

'Beithar was nearly forty,' said Sigmar. 'He was an old man.'

'You see,' laughed Pendrag. 'Aren't you glad we warned you, Sigmar? You must stay home and let us do the fighting. It's clearly too dangerous for you to venture beyond the confines of Reikdorf.'

'You can laugh,' said Trinovantes, 'but don't say I didn't warn you when you've an orc arrow through your heart!'

'An orc couldn't skewer my heart if I stood right in front of it and let it take a free pull on its bow,' cried Pendrag. 'In any case, if it's the gods' will that I die at the hands of an orc then it will be with its axe buried in my chest and a ring of its dead friends around me. I won't be slain by some poxy arrow!'

'Enough talk of death!' roared Wolfgart, finding new strength, and throwing off the supporting arms of his friends. 'It's bad luck to talk of death before a battle! I need a drink.'

Sigmar smiled as Wolfgart ran his hands through his unruly hair, and spat a glistening mouthful to the earth. No one could go from drunken stupor to demanding more ale as quickly as Wolfgart, and despite Pendrag's worries, Sigmar knew that Wolfgart would ride as hard and skilfully as ever on the morrow.

‘What are we all doing out here?’ demanded Wolfgart. ‘Come on, there’s drinking yet to be done.’

Before any of them could answer, the howling of wolves split the night, a soaring chorus from the depths of the darkened forest that carried the primal joy of wild and ancient days as it echoed through Reikdorf. Yet more howls rose in answer as though every pack of wolves within the Great Forest had united in one great cry of challenge.

‘You want an omen, my brothers,’ said Wolfgart. ‘There’s your omen. Ulric is with us. Now, let’s get inside. This is our Blood Night after all and we’ve blood yet to offer him.’

Sparks flew from the cooking fire like a thousand fireflies as another hunk of wood was hurled into the deep pit at the centre of the great longhouse of the Unberogen tribe. Heat from the fire and the hundreds of warriors gathered in the great hall filled the longhouse, and laughter and song rose to the heavy beams that laced together overhead in complex patterns of support and dependency.

Dwarfs had built this longhouse for the king of the Unberogens in recognition of his son’s courage and the great service he had done their own king, Kurgan Ironbeard, by rescuing him from orcs. Sturdy stone walls that would endure beyond the lives of many kings enclosed the warriors as they gathered to offer praise and blood to Ulric and carouse on what, for many, would be their last night alive in Reikdorf.

Sigmar threaded his way through the crowded hall towards the raised podium at the far end of the longhouse, where his father sat on a carved, oak throne, two men standing at his sides. To his father’s right was Alfgeir, the Marshal of the Reik and king’s champion, while on his left was Eoforth, his trusted counsellor and oldest friend.

The sights, sounds and smells of the great hall overwhelmed Sigmar’s every sense: sweat, songs, blood, meat, ale and smoke. Three enormous boars turned on spits before a tall wooden statue of Taal, the hunter god, their flesh crackling and spitting fat into the fire. Though he had eaten enough to fill his belly for a week, the scent of roasting meat made his mouth water, and he smiled as a mug of beer was thrust into his hand.

Wolfgart immediately found more drink, and began an arm wrestling contest amongst his fellow warriors. Trinovantes fetched a plate of food and some water, watching Wolfgart with studied worry, while Pendrag sought out the squat, bearded dwarf sitting in the corner of the hall, who watched the revelries with unabashed relish.

The dwarf was known as Alaric, and had come down from the mountains with Kurgan Ironbeard in early spring with the cartloads of hewn stone for the new longhouse. When the construction work was complete, the dwarfs had left, but Alaric had remained, teaching the Unberogen smiths secrets of metalworking that had provided them with the finest weapons and armour of the western tribes.

Sigmar left his friends to their diversions, knowing that every man must face his Blood Night in his own way. Hands clapped him on his shoulders as he passed, and roaring warriors wished him well on the journey into battle, or boasted of how many orcs they would slay in his name.

He joined with their boasts, but his heart was heavy as he wondered how many would live to see another day like today. These were hard, sinewy warriors with the hunger of wolves, men who had fought beneath his father’s banner for years, but would now ride beneath his. He looked into their faces as he passed, hearing their words, but not the sense of them.

He knew and loved these warriors as men, as husbands and as fathers, and every one of them would ride into battle by his command.

To lead such men was an honour, an honour he did not know if he was worthy to bear.

Sigmar put aside such melancholy thoughts as he emerged from the throng of armoured warriors to stand before his father. Raised up on his throne, King Björn of the Unberogen tribe sat between two carved statues of snarling wolves, and was as intimidating a figure as ever, despite his advancing years.

A crown of bronze sat upon his brow, and hair the colour of iron was bound in numerous braids that hung about his face and neck. Eyes of flint that had resolutely faced the many horrors of the world stared out with paternal affection at the warriors gathered before him as they offered praise to Ulric that he might grant them courage in the coming battles.

Though his father would not be riding to war with them, he wore a mail shirt fashioned by Alaric. The quality of the shirt was beyond the skill of any human smith, but had taken the dwarf less than a day to make. Across the king’s lap was his feared axe, Soultaker, its twin blades red in the firelight.

As Sigmar approached the throne, Alfgeir gave him a brief nod of acknowledgement, his bronze armour gleaming

gold, and his unsmiling face apparently carved from granite. Eoforth bowed to Sigmar, and took a step back, his long robes singular in a room full of armoured warriors, his sharp intellect making him one of the king's most trusted advisors. His counsel was both noble and fair, and the Unberogens had many times benefited from his foresight and wisdom.

'My son,' said Björn, waving Sigmar to stand beside him. 'Is everything well? You look troubled.'

'I am well,' said Sigmar, taking his place at his father's right hand. 'I'm simply impatient for dawn. I hunger to put the Bonecrusher to the sword and drive his army back into the mountains.'

'Curse his name,' said Björn. 'That damn greenskin warlord has been the scourge of our people for years. The sooner his head is mounted above this throne the better.'

Sigmar followed his father's gaze, feeling the weight of expectation upon him as he saw the many trophies mounted on the wall above the throne. Orcs, beasts and foul horrors with great fangs, curling horns and loathsome scaled skin were rammed onto iron spikes, the wall below stained with the blood of their deaths.

Here was the head of Skarskan Bloodhelm, the orc that had threatened to drive the Endals from their homelands, until Björn had ridden to the aid of King Marbad. There was the flayed hide of the great, nameless beast of the Howling Hills that had terrorised the Cherusens for years, until the king of the Unberogen had tracked it to its hideous lair and taken its head with one mighty blow of Soultaker.

A score of other trophies surrounded them, each one with an accompanying tale of heroism that had thrilled Sigmar as a youth, crouched at his father's feet, and which had stirred mighty, heroic longings in his breast.

'Any word from the riders you sent south?' asked his father, and Sigmar put aside the thought of trying to equal his father's deeds.

'Some,' said Sigmar, 'and none of it good. The orcs have come down from the mountains in great numbers, but it seems they are not going back. Normally they come and they raid and kill, and then they go back to the highlands, but this Bonecrusher keeps them together, and with every slaughter more flock to his banner every day.'

'Then there is no time to waste,' said his father. 'You will do the land a great service as you earn your shield. It is no small thing to reach manhood, boy, and as far as tests of courage go, this is a big one. It is only right that you should feel fear.'

Sigmar squared his shoulders before his father's stern gaze, and said, 'I am not afraid, father. I have killed greenskins before, and death holds no fear for me.'

King Björn leaned close and lowered his voice so that only Sigmar could hear him. 'It is not fear of death that I speak. I already know that you have faced great peril and lived to tell of it. Any fool can swing a sword, but to lead men in battle, to hold their lives in your hands, to put yourself in a position to be judged by your fellow warriors and your king: it is right you should fear these things.'

'The serpent of fear gnaws at your belly, my son. I know this, for it twisted in my gut when Redmane Dregor, your grandfather, sent me out to earn my shield.'

Sigmar looked into his father's eyes, both a misty grey, and saw true understanding there and an empathy with what he felt. The knowledge that a warrior king as mighty as Björn of the Unberogen had once felt the same thing made him smile in relief.

'You always did know what I was thinking,' said Sigmar.

'You are my son,' said Björn simply.

'I am your *only* son. What if I should fail?'

'You will not, for the blood of your ancestors is strong. You will go on to do great things as chieftain of the Unberogen when the grass grows tall on my tomb. Fear is not something to turn away from, my son. Understand that its power over a man comes from his willingness to take the easy course of action, to run away, to hide, and you will defeat it. A true hero never runs when he can fight, never takes the easy course over what he knows is right. Remember that, and you will not falter.'

Sigmar nodded at his father's words, staring out over the warriors, who filled the longhouse with song and raucous merrymaking.

As if sensing his scrutiny, Wolfgart leapt onto a trestle table groaning with mugs of beer and heaped with plates of meat and fruit. The table bent dangerously under his weight as he swept his mighty sword from its sheath and raised it high in one hand. The sword was aimed straight and unwavering towards the roof, an incredible feat of strength, for the

weight of his weapon was enormous.

'Sigmar! Sigmar! Sigmar!' roared Wulfart, and the chant was taken up by every warrior in the longhouse. The walls seemed to shake with the power of their voices, and Sigmar knew he would not let them down. Pendrag joined Wulfart on the table, and even the normally quiet Trinovantes was caught up in the mood of adulation that swept the hall.

'You see,' said his father, 'these men will be your battle-thanes on the morrow, and they are ready to fight and die by your command. They believe in you, so draw strength from that belief, and recognise your own worth.'

As the chant of his name continued around the hall, Sigmar watched as Wulfart lowered his sword and drew the blade across his palm. Blood welled from the cut, and Wulfart smeared it upon his cheeks.

'Ulric, god of battle, on this Blood Night, give me the strength to fight in your name!' he shouted.

Every warrior in the hall followed Wulfart's example, drawing blades across their skin, and offering blood to the harsh, unforgiving god of the winter wolves. Sigmar stepped forward to honour the blood of his warriors, drawing the long-bladed hunting knife from his belt, and slicing the blade across his bare forearm.

His warriors roared in approval, banging the handles of their swords and axes upon their chests. As the cheering continued, the table Wulfart and Pendrag stood upon finally collapsed under their combined weight, and they were buried in splintered timbers and plates of boar meat, and drenched in beer. Roars of laughter pealed from the walls, and yet more mugs of beer were emptied over the fallen warriors, who took Trinovantes's outstretched hands and struggled to their feet with bellows of mirth.

Sigmar laughed along with his warriors as his father said, 'With such stout-hearted men beside you, how can you fail?'

'Wulfart is a scoundrel,' said Sigmar, 'but he has the strength of Ulric in his blood, and Pendrag has a scholar's brain in that thick skull of his.'

'I know both men's virtues and vices,' said his father, 'just as you must learn the hearts of those who will seek to counsel you. Draw worthy men to you, and learn their strengths and their weaknesses. Keep only those who make you stronger, and cut away those who weaken you, for they will drag you down with them. When you find good men, honour them, value them and love them as your dearest brothers, for they will stand shoulder to shoulder with you and hear the cry of the wolf in battle.'

'I will,' promised Sigmar.

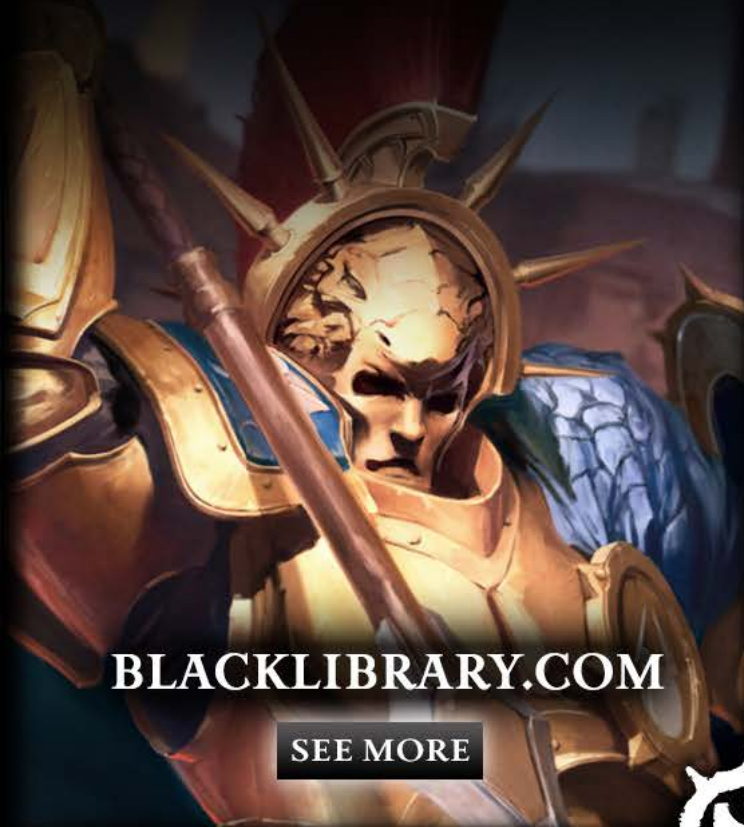
'Together, men are strong, but divided we are weak. Draw your sword-brothers close and stand together in all things. Swear this to me, Sigmar.'

'I swear it, father.'

'Now go and join them,' said his father, 'and come back to me after the fighting is done, either with your shield or upon it.'

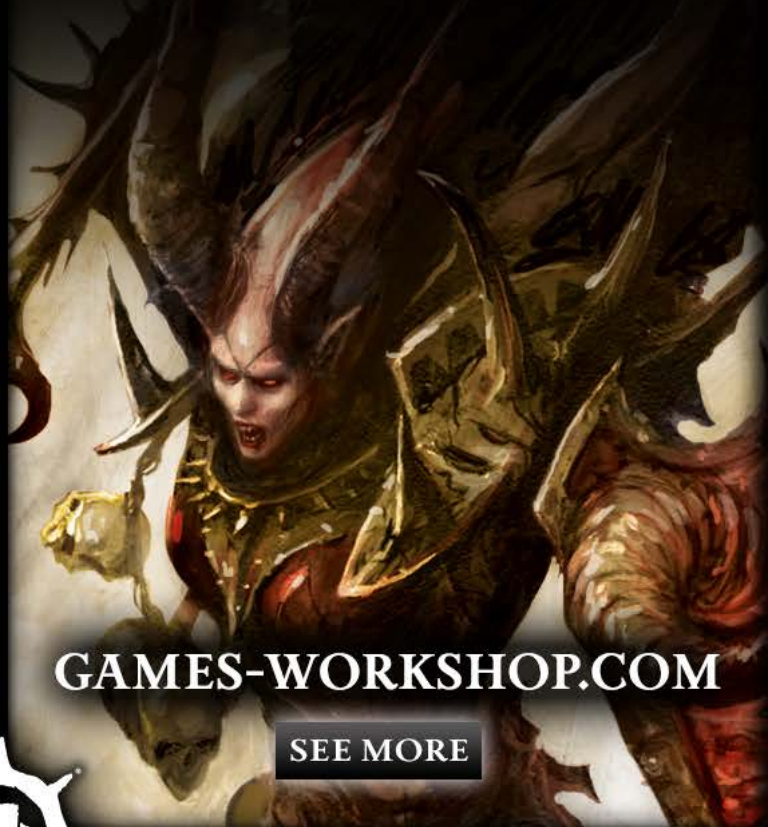


# BLACK LIBRARY TITLES AVAILABLE FROM



[BLACKLIBRARY.COM](http://BLACKLIBRARY.COM)

SEE MORE



[GAMES-WORKSHOP.COM](http://GAMES-WORKSHOP.COM)

SEE MORE



**WARHAMMER &  
GAMES WORKSHOP  
STORES**



Get it on  
**iBooks**

**amazonkindle**

BLACK LIBRARY TITLES AVAILABLE FROM ANY GOOD BOOKSTORE OR AT THE  
THOUSANDS OF GAMES WORKSHOP RETAILERS WORLDWIDE, INCLUDING  
OUR OWN GAMES WORKSHOP AND WARHAMMER STORES



**SIGN UP FOR THE NEWSLETTER**