

# GATHERING OF ANGELS

Narrative Storyline of the  
Unforgiven World Wide Campaign

By The Shadow Guard

## **Gather Ye Angels!**

**Long we prepared for war this day, to hold the despoiler well at bay  
In the fires of hell he plans and plots, where evil lurks and shadows play!**

**Imperial legions corrupted by decay, emperor's sons led astray,  
God machines, foul daemons, billions of heretics under his sway!**

**Onward he marches death at his feet, plague and famine follow to greet  
Fiery skies, roiling oceans, burning air and rotting meat!**

**Innocence defiled, honour destroyed, murder and mayhem forever repeat  
In his vision he feels like god for who may dare blockade his fleet!**

**In this hour of darkness and despair, all would question who would dare  
As this daemon leaves its lair to destroy all that is pure and fair.**

**Defiler of worlds, death incarnate, daemons throng by the score  
Valiant warriors we go to war, defy him we shall forever and more!**

**With sword in hand we shall remove that sore  
Our feats of might shall become fabled lore!**

**Powerfists raised, bolters ready, to slay the villain our aim so true  
In space or land, on sea or sand we shall stain this land with the daemons gore!**

**Sons of Jonson the true first born, prepare your souls for battle reborn,  
Strike the enemy where hope forlorn, you shall not falter until the new dawn!**

**Stand by me with warrior's pride, the son of darkness shall not pass  
Let them try for woe betide, the emperors angels are here en masse!**

**Imperial guard and battle fleets together,  
Emperor's legions they be birds of feather  
A force of might unseen hither  
With terrible power Ye Angels Gather!**

**By the Shadow Guard  
Keeper of the Fortress**

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# Foreword

## Welcome to the Gathering of Angels!

In the summer of the year 2003 Games Workshop launched their most ambitious world wide campaign in the form of the Eye of terror campaign. The build up to this campaign was highly electric and the design efforts by the GW Web Team was second to none. The campaign would depict Abaddon's thirteenth crusade which was culmination of all his previous efforts. He would strike in to the Cadian sector with the aim of destroying the pylons of Cadia, expanding the eye of terror and controlling the real space in the region of the Cadian Gate.

The campaign would be fought by players and hobbyists from all over the world, and the results be allowed to be input via the web. Intricacies, which late revealed themselves, were incorporated to enhance the experience. Much back ground was created and many armies commissioned during this period.

As the build up for the campaign gained momentum I had a unique and rare opportunity to do something for the unforgiven forces on the side of the imperium. The activity of the fallen and sightings of Cypher had increased out of all proportions within the region of the Cadian sector, and the involvement of the unforgiven chapters a foregone conclusion.

A group of like minded individuals had already congregated sometime ago, under the auspices of GW Dark Angels guru Owen Rees, who created the organisation that we call the INNER CIRCLE. At that time this mostly included a handful of members, mostly from the Dark Angels forum of the Bolter + Chainsword Space Marine chat board. The members of the inner circle are listed below:

Owen Rees - webmaster of the Outpost site and creator of the inner circle.  
Grandmaster ZeussS - B+C moderator and webmaster of the Gods of War web site  
Brother Bish – B+C Adeptus Domus and Webmaster of the Angelicus Mortis web site  
Vet Sergeant Malyr - Moderator at the DA B+C forum  
Project XXVIII - Moderator at the DA B+C forum  
Shadow Guard - B+C moderator and webmaster of the Fortress of the Unforgiven site.

The purpose of the inner circle was largely to develop the Dark Angels chapter and legion further, create opportunities for the gamers and hobbyists to be involved through the auspices of the B+C board and generally be at the forefront of anything that was related to Dark Angels. Having four of the more comprehensive Dark Angels websites under our purview and four amongst us being moderators at the Dark Angels forum gave us the opportunity of seriously working on the Dark Angels back ground.

We came up with the idea of creating a background for the involvement of the unforgiven forces in the EOT campaign. That gradually underwent metamorphosis in to the Gathering of Angels EOT campaign, which consisted of a series of missions that would be released to the gaming public, who could register with our own web site and send us the results. The results of each segment would affect the missions in the next. This was designed in a linear fashion simply because we would only be using input from Dark Angels players, on the results of their battles. The participants could choose which of the five missions they wanted to be involved in and send in their results. Missions for EPIC and BFG were also included.

It was the web mastering genius of Owen Rees which allowed the successful creation of the GoA web site. Every member of the inner circle contributed their precious time and much effort. The campaign missions were matched to the events occurring in the EOT campaign and modified as the war see sawed from victory to defeat. We launched the GoA campaign three weeks ahead of the EOT to get the preliminary missions under way, and as each segment was completed I would have the narrative story for that segment ready to be released. Such was the beginning of the GoA narrative story.

Sadly real life involvement and the burn out caused by the EOT campaign meant that the final segment of the story, including the outcomes and the end of the plot lines were not completed until late January 2004. My humble apologies to the patient masses of the Unforgiven.

This piece of fiction is written in a fashion to try and depict the massive width and scale of the conflict. Most characters make appearances in single chapters and often end falling to the enemy. Such was the carnage in the EOT that I wanted to capture the feel that no hero or villain was beyond the clutches of death. A few supremely gifted characters are seen to direct the fate of their followers in these desperate times.

This is seriously the first full length piece of fiction I have written. (previously they have been either short stories or backgrounds for armies and strike forces) I am but a simple amateur trying to put in words my imagination and my creative thoughts. I have lived the campaign in my mind, trying to capture the feeling of impending doom that most characters faced in this awesome event. I have tried my best to weave a web of intrigue in this storyline, while keeping true to everything in GW history. I hope that the end result keeps up with the expectation I had for it.

I am most grateful to the members of the Inner Circle, for the support and creative help they provided and mostly for the feedback and direction on the chapters I had written. Much thanks also to the members of Games Workshop Development Team, especially Andy Hoare, who never ceases to encourage the hobbyists. Lastly, but most importantly, I wish to thanks the gaming public, the fanatic Dark Angel players, whose enthusiasm and support was instrumental not only in the successful culmination of the Gathering Angels campaign and story but also the continued growth of the Fortress of the Unforgiven.

Thanks You

*The Shadow Guard*

# Gathering of Angels

## Volume I

Chapter I: Prophecy of Doom

Chapter II: Council of War

Chapter III: Exile of an exodite

Chapter IV: Ta'neer's Last Hunt

Chapter V: Revelation



## Chapter I: Prophecy of Doom

Interstellar space! There is little in the material universe that overawes the human imagination and seizes a human heart like the vastness of interstellar space. Dark, cold and dreary, it lies motionless in deathly stillness yet be the home to a millions terrors that stalk the void. In this sea of deathly solitude, there lie the occasional beacons. These are the star systems that are the light houses of the interstellar sea. Some are young, others old, yet more millennia in age and then there are those that are dying. Many are the scattered remains of once proud star systems now claimed by the cold hand of cosmic death, silently floating for millennia. Ravaged by the greed of sentient races and the cosmic forces of nature, broken in to a thousand fragments but somehow keeping in close proximity as if refusing to loose its identity, these stellar carcasses are known to humans as asteroid fields.

Scattered amongst many such asteroid fields, lies the flotsam of space. The dust of star systems born and now dead intermingled with the remnants of mighty civilizations now long forgotten and the debris of the ever present conflicts that seemed to accompany all sentient races. Such asteroid fields are too numerous to catalogue or document even by the most advanced species. Some such fields gain transient recognition due to their rich mineral content before being rapidly scavenged and then forgotten. Others gain notoriety for harbouring unlawful elements of the closest civilizations, pirate raiders and alien terrors. A few are catalogued due to their proximity to trade navigation routes and thus play their part in astro-navigation. Most are simply ignored.

The Absalom asteroid field was one such region. Its only recognition was its close proximity to a long and rarely used trader route, which had long been superseded by other, safer passages. Larger than most such fields it contained a large number of massive asteroids, some larger than the moon orbiting old terra. The stability of the field made it an ideal location for pirate raider fleets if not for its distance from any inhabited system or important trade routes. Darkness pervaded the entire field, with the star that provided illumination having died millennia ago. Only the rare flash of a lonely trader vessel transiting the warp space to gain its navigational bearings before rapidly entering warp space again provided the occasional illumination.

Erdan Vitelgo looked out through his personal view-port. He had been a space farer for most of his adult life, following his father's footsteps to the stars as a rogue trader. In his long and highly eventful life he had seen many things that had piqued his curiosity and most of them had either resulted in a tidy sum of wealth or had nearly cost the lives of his crew and himself. Now, he was a lot more careful and preferred the quiet voyage of transporting exotic goods for the aristocracy

of various planet systems. He had taken this route many times in the past, its isolation being ideal for his purpose. Once again he looked at the Absalom asteroid field. Something in that field always beckoned to him, and each time he had resisted the urge. Now, that feeling was back again with a vengeance. He pondered once again, balancing the opportunity to once again investigate something shunned by most humans, while balancing it with the loss of revenue that his delay would surely cost.

“Astro-navigation is complete captain! Destination co-ordinates punched in and ready. We must make the warp jump within the next ten minutes to keep to schedule”

His navigator had been with him for most of his career as a rogue trader and captain of this vessel. He had ample trust in the old man’s capabilities. He must decide now.

“Energy spike in the asteroid field captain” Young Jedar shouted from the sensorium console. “It was there for a fleeting moment and gone now”

“Warp engines on line and ready captain!” The metallic voice of the technomagos came through the vox-caster.

He must decide now. The energy spike meant that his suspicions of all these years were correct, but perhaps this was not the time. He had to deliver his cargo or forfeit his license and likely have a price on his head. Taking a last look at the field, he reached down and punched the console signalling the disciple of the machine god to activate the warp engines. A flash followed by a great panoply of colours and the ship disappeared in to the immaterium, leaving the cold darkness of space to once again blanket the asteroid field.

Despite his misgivings, Erdan Vitelgo was far closer to the truth than he could ever have known. Had he allowed his curiosity to overcome his better judgement and pointed his vessel towards the asteroid field things may have turned out different. He would have first noticed that the details of the largest asteroids in the navigation chart he had bartered from an elder corsair and the readings from his sensorium array did not match. Then he would have noticed the multitude of minor energy signatures and recognized them for what they were, spaceships in powered down mode. The sheer number of the signatures of would certainly have intrigued him enough to bring him silently for a closer look. As he rounded the far side of the asteroid field he would have seen a sight few in the Imperium would have had the privilege of seeing. Then he would have died, along with his ship and crew, suddenly, violently and unknown to anyone but his executioners.

If one were to travel around the far side of the dark asteroid field, Absalom's new secret would hit them with a vengeance. Floating majestically in space, with engines silent and lights off, was a veritable armada of spaceships. Scattered in tactically proficient positions amongst the largest of the asteroids these massive ships hung in space with their engines silent and their cabins darkened. A ring of smaller picket ships remained in place with their prows pointing outwards, ready to question any intrusion. Deeper within the ring lay larger ships. Experienced naval crewmen would identify these as Imperial strike cruisers. They were fast ships with a heavy punch. Closest to the largest of asteroids lay a number of large vessels that dwarfed all others. The close observer would be amazed to find the presence of not one but eight such behemoths arrayed in close order. Space marine battle barges were a rare sighting. To see eight in the same location, especially when they sported two different chapter insignias, was unprecedented. Beyond this awe inspiring might of the Astartes lay the largest of the asteroids. Yet, it was not simply an asteroid, but one with a great citadel built within its core. Docking bays, over-sized warp engines, defensive gun emplacements and landing pads become evident as one got a closer look. The sheer size of its mass dwarfed even the largest of the battle barges. The tallest tower in the edifice of the asteroid sported a magnificent statue of a winged angel brandishing a massive two handed sword. It was the Tower of Angels, the last remaining piece of the planet Caliban. Home to the first legion and now the first chapter of the Astartes! Headquarters of the Dark Angels and the nerve centre for the battle for redemption!

The vast array of space marine vessels constituted the combined strength of two complete chapters of the Unforgiven. The white twin-winged dagger of the Dark Angels chapter and the single black wing and skull motif of the Angels of Absolution adorned the vessels. The dexterity with which the vessels were stationed in space in such proximity to the asteroid field was a reflection of the experience and the expert spacemanship of the space marine crews. Strike cruisers lay berthed in space alongside the battle barges. Destroyers of the Hunter class, and frigates of both Gladius and Nova class ringed the capital ships of the armada in a tight defensive circle. Flights of thunderhawk gunships were deployed in holding patterns guarding all possible approaches, gliding with their engines powered down and using minimum thrusters for course changes. This was an armada gathering in supreme secrecy.

## Chapter III: Council of War

The massive asteroid that was the sole remaining evidence of the existence of the planet Caliban remained immobile. The activity of the ships and patrol craft around it dwarfed in to insignificance by its gargantuan mass, it lay like a berthed whale in slumber. Its upper surface was nearly completely taken up by the vast gothic monastery that had been the home of the Dark Angels when they were based on Caliban. Although outwardly unchanged, the whole structure had been modified with a vast array of offensive and defensive weaponry that would equal it to a Ramillies class star fort. The massive warp engines embedded within its bedrock was beyond imagination. Its origin unknown and its acquisition unprecedented, it had been the source of much interest by the disciples of the machine god. Their constant inquisitiveness balanced only by the failure of virtually all their observer ships despatched to study the engines at close quarters. The hangar bays and docks of the Tower of Angels were large enough to berth even the massive battle barges though such activity was a rare event. The fortress-monastery itself easily accommodated the entire chapter, its command structure and its armoury with much space to spare for more.

Deep beneath its surface untouched by outside eyes were hidden many secrets. Dungeons, interrogation-rooms and libraria adorned the halls within the structure. Some deep caverns were accessible only to the highest authority of the chapter. The Conclavium Angelus is such a chamber with two separate entrances. Entry from the main monastery is through a long corridor guarded by the Deathwing and accessible only to members of the innermost circle. Behind the massive blast doors lay the chamber, the simple but unusual furniture disguising the magnitude of decisions taken within its walls. In the centre lay an oval shaped table. Thick, strong and deep magenta in colour it was made from the trees of the native woods of Caliban. Attached to the table and hanging from its edge were individual consoles with vid-link and input points. The chairs around the table were arranged in threes, all exactly the same except for the motifs on them. They too were massive affairs, able to seat and carry the weight of the superhuman frame of a space marine in full power armour. At the head of the oval were the three chairs with the white winged dagger motif, the seats of the Dark Angels. To its right were three more seats, which were occupied. The black wing and white skull of the Angels of Absolution adorned the heads of those chairs. The three occupants remained unflinching, looking through their consoles. Each was clad in power armour in the colour of bleached bone. Each wore a robe of the same colour.

Without warning the massive blast door at the other end of the room hissed open, the weight of the structure easily taken up by the finely crafted pneumatic hinges. The large figures stepped in before the door hissed shut again. Dark green power armour shone in the subdued light of the

room. Bleached bone coloured robes fluttered intermittently showing off the Dark Angel emblems and Deathwing insignias etched on their auto-reactive shoulder pads. None wore helmets. Without any formalities the three took their assigned seats. The leader looked at the others seated around the table and then slowly eyed the empty seats. Strong but noble features were reflected in his face. The sturdy look of the space marine physique intermingled with his original cimmerician genetics. Stress lines could be seen momentarily in the flicker of his eyes. Without further delay, the supreme commander of the Dark Angels chapter, holder of the honorific title “Keeper of the Truth” and the proud caretaker of the Sword of Secrets spoke.

“The oracle has spoken. The great enemy is moving rapidly and we must keep pace. Abaddon will move openly against Cadia very soon. Much discord has already been accomplished within the nearby systems. But there is much more at stake” Azrael continued “Our brothers of the Angels of vengeance and Redemption remain far away. Their arrival may well be too late to prevent catastrophic events in the near future. The fates of our chapters hang in balance at this present moment.”

The silent visitors looked up. The leader, chapter master of the Angels of Absolution, replied in a similar deep monotone. “The entire fleet and chapter strength of my chapter has been mobilised and is at your disposal. Our combined fleets can accomplish much if we had more intelligence on the activities of fallen 1-0-0. I fear that Abaddon’s plans for the Imperium may hide an ulterior objective either by the despoiler himself or by our fallen brethren. We must move quickly but cautiously. Our brothers in the Angels of Redemption remain in the gothic sector while those of the Angels of Vengeance are in full strength in the Ultima Segmentum. Their immediate return is imperative. The Angels of Vigilance remain in full strength on Pervigilium and should remain so”

“Interrogator-chaplain Phaleg and his strike force have performed admirably so far. There is a strong concentration of the fallen in the Agripinaa sector. I have dispatched the supreme commander’s orders to our strike forces on the systems of Lelithar and Amistel. We will gain more information on the activities of the cult know as the ‘Voice of the Emperor’ and their warplans” commented Grandmaster of chaplains Saphon.

Ezekiel, grandmaster of librarians for the Dark Angels, looked on solemnly. “The coming storm will be calamitous to many. The bloodbath required to stop the despoiler is unprecedented. But we must not fail. The fate of not only the Unforgiven, but also the entire Imperium of man is at stake. But I fear that there is more to this activity by the cult than meets the eye. Their underhand modus operandi was evident in piscine IV, where only the noble sacrifice of chaplain Boreas and his squad saved the world. The loss of our holy geneseed was a tremendous blow but we must

expect more such attempts.” Lowering his voice to a whisper he said “It is almost as if they are inviting us to arrive in full strength. I expect a trap but cannot define what their target is”

“Time is a luxury we do not have!” replied Azrael. I have passed on information to our far flung brethren, which if applied correctly, will result in their rapid journey to join forces with us in time. If not we face the enemy with our own forces. The enemy may have many faces and many objectives. They may even wish the destruction of this Tower of Angels as a major accomplishment. They may spend their devious ways plotting on acquiring our honour bound artefacts born in to battle by the lion himself. They may wish to steal more of the precious leonine gene seed. Whatever his aim, whatever his plan he will find the Unforgiven ready and waiting!”

Tapping the console in front of him to bring up a display of the galactic charts, he pointed to the locations of the battle fleets of the unforgiven chapters. Our combined fleet will move immediately to the Agripinaa sector along with the Tower of Angels. We will ascertain further movement based on intelligence and other developments. Final destination is at grid reference alpha-dextus-omega for convergence of all forces!”

**For the Lion and the emperor!**

**Let the Gathering of Angels begin!**

## Chapter III: Exile of an exodite

Elfarion looked around calmly, his mind's eye seeing his surroundings well before his physical one. The cockpit of the viper jet bike was serenely quiet as the elegant vehicle glided silently inches above the craggy landscape. Multiple panels of warning sigils flashed intermittently on the control panel, confirming what he already knew courtesy of his considerable mind power. A touch of sadness wafted through the cabin as his thoughts waded back to the events of the past hours, strengthening the knowledge that he could never return home. Danger in the form of his fellow elder lurked close behind, men whom he had fought alongside for many hundred years. Yet fate was such that they would hunt him today. His was mission that must be accomplished at all costs. He couldn't reveal it to anyone, least of all his own kinfolk, and for that he was damned.

Elfarion had been the fifth generation descendant El'Daroon, a farseer of immense wisdom and power. El'Daroon had lived in the days prior to the great fall and had foreseen the coming calamity. His warnings ignored and his teachings scoffed at by the elder at the height of their blasphemous ecstasy, he had gathered his most loyal followers and embarked on their fleet to exile. Avoiding human fleets and aliens they finally settled in the ultima segmentum, forming hidden settlements in the Malaarch system. This exodite conclave had survived and flourished with little contact from the outside except for the occasional harlequin visitors. It was within this background that Elfarion found his way in to this world. At four hundred years of age, he was perhaps one of the younger warlocks within his society, but the strength of his mind, his keen intellect and his ample combat experience had elevated him to the level of farseer. His was the unique ability to define the strands of fate with such distinction that it was rumoured that the famous Ulthwe seer, Eldra Ulthran himself had had a keen eye on his accomplishments. However, the ways of the cosmos is such, that great power such as his is usually accompanied by the need for great thought and much sacrifice. It was little solace that the great Eldrad himself might be the cause of his demise.

Elfarion smiled as he acknowledged the inner voice of his mind. He had indeed sacrificed much for his people. Now he must sacrifice even more! His life would be of little consequence in the stakes that were being played, but his name, his wisdom, his achievements may all die with him in to anonymity at the least. At worst his name would be caste as a pariah amongst his people and his soul lost forever. Yet he knew that his mission was for the survival of all sentient species, their freedom and their one chance prevent the great enemy's designs yet again.

Elfarion's mind replayed the events of the past week for the hundredth time. His keen intellect refused to acknowledge defeat and was trying to define if any other course of action had been available to him. He remembered the arrival of the monkeigh spacecraft a week ago. The boisterous leader of the group was revealed to be a powerful psyker belonging to the shadowy organisation of the inquisition. That the inquisitor in question was a potent psychic and a powerful enemy was evident by his ability to conceal his arrival in orbit, made easier by the strong psychic shielding of his strike craft. Elfarion's own considerably psychic ability was no laughing matter, and within minutes of the intruding force making planetfall he was not only aware of their arrival but also of their location, strengths, weaknesses and motives. He had evaded capture in the past and this monkeigh, powerful as he may be, was to be no different.

Rapidly mobilising the full force of his exodite settlement he met the inquisitorial force after leading them in to a trap. He waged the battle more in the psychic realms than the physical though his accompanying warriors visited death and destruction amongst the inquisitorial troops in the physical realm. The inquisitor however had an ace up his sleeve. He had brought with him a daemon host which he had shielded carefully and remained dormant. That force was now unleashed in its full fury aimed at Elfarion. A lesser farseer or any mere warlock would have succumbed to the terrifying assault of the daemon bound within the host, but Elfarion was no mere farseer. He was the vanquisher of the hordes of Slaanesh. His power was greater, his constitution even stronger. His indomitable will bound his physical presence to his own bewildering array of psychic powers. As the dumb-founded inquisitor watched in awe, Elfarion met the daemon host in single combat, brushing aside its attempts to harm him and subduing it within minutes. Powerless to face such a foe, the inquisitor turned to flee and died in agony as his mortal brain was desiccated by a casual flick of Elfarion's mind. The still form of the daemon host caught his attention, the power of the bound daemon within still palpably present. Elfarion considered the host carefully and reeled in disgust as he realised that the lithe body of the host was soon revealed to be that of a warlock. That the monkeigh would defile such a venerated being was accepted, but to use such a host to bind the daemon was beyond comprehension. His rage was unfathomable as his full psychic might flared up to destroy the host utterly. Ignoring the platitudes of the bound daemon spirit he unleashed the full might of his mind at the host and for a mere second made contact with the spirit within.

In an instant of both sudden exhilaration and terror, with clarity beyond description and knowledge beyond belief, his mind made contact with that of the daemon. Knowledge of millennia wafted through his mind in that instant. The energies released by the contact would have incinerated the brains of a lesser being, but Elfarion was no such weakling. Yet, only the complete and utter destruction of the material body of the host broke the psychic link and saved



the farseer from near certain death. In that instant he realised that he had learned of great knowledge and with it much power, and that he was indeed doomed in more ways than one. Of all that he had been made aware of a few events repeatedly recycled in his mind. "Sons of Jonson", "Betrayal and Heresy", "Death of Angels", "Fallen Dragon", "Oracle's path", "Second Eye". These images flitted within his powerful mind with increasing frequency. His study of the strands of fate compelled him to reach but one decision. He must warn, advice, direct or even command the "monkeigh", particularly those who call themselves the unforgiven, for much depended upon their hands. His time was limited as the cataclysmic meeting of his mind with the daemon would have been felt by the most powerful farseers of the elder race as well as the more predatory powers of the warp. The one thing he could be certain was that there would be more than one strike force racing to capture him and that he must flee. He could only hope that the monkeigh had responded to his urgent call truce.

## Chapter III: Ta'neer's Last Hunt

Jet black jet bikes streaked through the early morning mists, startling hundreds of fauna in their morning reverie. The urgency of their mission portrayed by their speed and near reckless pursuit of the single vyper in the distance. Theirs was a grim mission. The man in control of the vyper jet was known to them and revered by them. However, destiny was not to be cheated, and their orders were from the highest office. Delivered by none other than their phoenix lord, the command came directly from the great seer Eldrad himself. The mission was simple. "Bring back Elfarion dead or alive before he contacted the monkeigh!" The gravity of their situation was made clear when their seer council had leaped in to the webway to reach Malaarch rapidly. On their arrival they found Elfarion already making his escape, and called in the strike force immediately through the webway portal. Now they were hunting one of their own, and he was very good indeed. If not for the presence of the seer council in their command vipers, the strike force would have lost their quarry within mere minutes. Although the members of the seer council were individually no match for the famed Elfarion, they had the advantage of numbers. Each hunting group being led by a seer in a vyper jet had allowed them to devise and elaborate chase pattern aimed at slowly encircling their quarry. Their aim was to capture him alive and save themselves the distress of having to kill their own kin. Yet the hunted refused to remain as the quarry. A sudden eldritch storm had blasted the first team that had tried to cut him off, leaving lithe bodies and gracious machines smashed asunder. Two more hunter groups had been confused in to tracking each other for hours before realising their mistake. One group suddenly surprised similar jet bikes armed with vicious scythes. The ulthwe' guardians were just as surprised as their dark kin but reacted faster, resulting in a complete and overwhelming victory for the strike force. The Dark Eldar force was no doubt after the same quarry. Despite the welcome success, it seemed to Ta'neer that they had lost the elusive seer. He had been an exarch for more time than his memory could serve but never had he been so eluded by his quarry. Such was his fate, he thought to himself, that he would return in dishonour and shame after a failed mission.

Fate however had other plans. Fate is a convenient excuse for most species to explain the unexplainable and justify the unjustifiable. The elder were no exception, though their species had elevated the defining of such strands of fate to a fine art. There were similar counterparts within each species, the psykers of the humans, the weirdboyz of the orks and so on and so forth. Yet once in a while the strands of fate choose take a completely incomprehensible turn unseen by all. On this day it appeared in the form of vaul-birds, the native birds of Malaarch. These predatory birds normally accustomed to the noises and machinery of bipedal species became aroused as if a giant hand had grabbed them and thrown them in the air. The early morning mists were

suddenly filled with thousands of such birds, awoken from their slumber and driven by some unseen force to fly in to the air. In their half dazed leap for the sky many smashed in to one another. Some lost their sense of direction and crashed in to the ground. A few unfortunates smashed on to the oncoming vyper jet bikes.

Elfarion cursed as his engine shuddered with multiple bird strikes and his controls came alive in his hands. Behind him he could sense the sudden awareness of danger as his pursuers also tried to avoid the vast cloud of birds. Elfarion quickly glanced at the chronometer and the moving map sigils. He was a mere ten minutes away from his rendezvous point. He knew he would never make it. As the ground rushed up only his supreme skill and psychic presence allowed the vyper to crash land in a controlled fashion. The advanced design of the elder warmachine, constructed with the aim of maximum survivability for their precious lives, preserved the form of Elfarion. As he stumbled from the wreckage, spitting sand and grime, fumbling for his singing spear he saw the tell tale signs of approaching jet bikes. He couldn't focus his mind enough to read the strands of fate. Perhaps this is how he will die, at the hands of his own kin. He looked towards the direction of his meeting point and saw nothing. He was too far away. The leading jet bike was mere minutes away and there was little left within the great seer to give. He stood there watching the jet black bike skim victoriously towards him, wondering if he should destroy it with a swift psychic blast or spare his kin. He wondered if he would be able to destroy all of them rapidly enough to reach his rendezvous. Such precious elder life, yet the stakes were high. Then his decision was removed from him as a bright ray of light struck the leading jet bike and an instant later turning it in to an inferno. Ta'neer died without knowing his executioner, only realising that he had indeed failed in his mission.

All mayhem broke loose as the staccato bark of heavy bolter fire interspersed with the hissing of missiles and the silent beams of lascannons. A perfectly sprung trap using the farseer as bait had been only possible by pure chance, or fate as the elder would put it. Black power armoured space marines appeared from over the sand encrusted ridge line, blasting the speeding jet bikes at will. A full scale assault developed as forces of both sides came in to join this meeting engagement, both sides trying their best to reach the stumbling farseer. As the few surviving members of the seer council rapidly disembarked and activated yet more webway portals more black guardians poured through, their weapons barking monomolecular death at the black armoured angels of vengeance. Try as the elder may the Angels of Vengeance would not be moved. A counter attack by their assault squad led by interrogator-chaplain Zaphel reached the farseer and despite horrendous casualties managed to bring him back to their lines. Elfarion knew his fate was sealed and looked about trying to identify the one he had seen in his visions. Through the dust and smoke of the battle, and through his newly found bodyguards, he suddenly saw the man he

sought. Librarian Adonis was just as astonished as the farseer called to him by name and clasped his hands around elbows. "Take my knowledge and close the second eye" were the only words the lonely elder would speak as his mind linked with that of the librarian. The librarian's psychic hood lit up with a warning as it attempted to protect the human brain from psychic overload, yet the information passed by the farseer entered the mind of the young codicier with such force that it nearly incinerated that organ. The psychic force was such that a force bubble built around them preventing the space marine companions from aiding the librarian until the whole process was cut short in a flurry of shuriken and starcannon fire. As the dying farseer looked at the librarians face, he realised that he had accomplished his mission. "The eye must close" was his last urgent words to Adonis, who was struggling to comprehend the gift he had been given. Seeing the death of their quarry the black guardian strike force rapidly withdrew, leaving behind half their number as a testimony to the ferocious assault by the Angels of Vengeance.

## Chapter II: Revelation

The mood was grim. Any sign of elation at the news of recent successes were absent on the stoic faces of the inner circle. The general situation facing the imperium in the region of the Cadian gate was not encouraging at all. Once again in the Conclavium Angelus, supreme grandmaster of the Dark Angels, Azrael faced his counterpart from the Angels of Absolution. Their immediate confidants, the grandmasters of the librarium and chaplaincy were present as usual for the strategy session. Despite the widely scattered nature of their forces their preliminary moves had gone beyond expectation. Their initial covert missions on Amistel and Lelithar had netted a vast bounty of intelligence including numerous prisoners. Small victories they may be, dwarfed by the overwhelming defeats and betrayals suffered by imperial forces in recent times, but their significance to the sons of Jonson was not lost on those gathered on this day.

“Lion be praised, we have gathered much intelligence on the activities of our fallen brethren. Vigorous efforts by our interrogator-chaplains have produced ample evidence to suggest the presence of two major bases of operations for these heretics on Lelithar. More disturbing is the evidence that an orbital dockyard on Malin’s reach is also being used for supporting these forces. These are not simple operations but have the appearance of a complex and devious plan. How these fallen fit in with the despoiler’s plans is as yet unclear.”

“We must act with speed tempered by caution. It is very likely that we may discover some clue to the ulterior motive of the activity of the fallen in this sector. The forces of the despoiler and his masters do not simply plot and plan. They have plots within plans and plans within quests and so on ad infinitum.” responded his counterpart. “However what news of battle fleets vengeance and redemption?”

Grandmaster of chaplains Saphon drew back his cowl to answer the query. His face a mask of stone, he grimly replied “We have conceded for long that the alien elder had a better understanding of warp travel particularly with their ancient devices. That this knowledge could be used by humans was amply proved during the gothic war, when admiral Ravensburg’s battle fleet gothic was supported by these aliens and taken along previously unknown warp routes making rapid progress. Our brethren in the Angels of Redemption have secured an ancient castellum in the planet of Cyclops Majoris. Their lightning assault capturing the librarium intact and using the ancient manuscripts captured, the chapter librarians have divined the location of a warp route entry point. We expect that the use of this route will allow battle fleet redemption to reach its exit

point near the Dorsia system in the Scelus subsector in a matter of weeks.” A wry smile played on his face for a fleeting moment.

A more disturbing piece of news is the presence of yet another unnamed blasphemous tome which was found within the depths of the libararium. Such was the corruption emanating from it our brother librarians were forced to enclose it within a stasis field. After much prayer and warding the pages were interrogated using a psychic medium. The most astounding revelation was the reference to the leonine gene seed preserved within the wreckage of a space borne vessel for centuries. This reference is no doubt related to the Angelus Lionus. If such knowledge were to be found here then we must assume that the dark powers and thereby the fallen will also have access to this. In the light of the recent occurrences in Piscina IV we must assume that the wreckage of the Angelus Lionus may well be a focus of search by the fallen. We must view this with deep concern as the possibility of the revelation of the Knights of the order becomes a distinct possibility.”

As he paused the chief librarian of the angels of absolution spoke. “This is grim news indeed and we need the full might of the unforgiven to bear. What of our brethren in the Angels of Vengeance? We have had no further communications from them”

In answer Sapphon looked towards Ezekiel. The holder of the keys and keeper of the book of salvation looked lost in reverie. After a moment of silence he spoke, every word weighted and measured. “The angels of vengeance have accomplished their assigned task well. Their rapid action resulted in the brief capture of the elder farseer, who had requested a meeting”

“Brief capture?”

“Yes! He died shortly thereafter, by the shuriken fire of his own brethren. Our brothers stated that they had indeed identified the warp route entry point and would arrive near Dorsia in the Scelus sector within weeks” The sense of relief and accomplishment was palpable in the room as Ezekiel continued. “However the brother librarian stated that librarian Adonis had first hand information that was level Omega Magna pertaining to the coming conflict and our own affairs”

The keen observer of the proceedings would have noted that the normally stoic and unemotional attitude of these high ranking space marine commanders was for a fleeting moment lost their composure. The slight increase in the depth of their inhalation that they demonstrated was the equivalent of a sharp indrawn breath of surprise in a normal human. Status Omega Magna meant that the message or information was so sensitive that it could not be transmitted psychically

through the warp for fear of interception or loss at the hands of the warp creatures. It would be delivered in person and that person would be in mortal danger during any passage through the warp.

Azrael took the lead once again. "We will launch surgical strikes at the two bases on Lelithar to capture what information we may and disrupt the enemy's plans. The space docks on Malin's reach are maintained in orbit by a ground station. A small strike force will destroy that station. This will effectively send the docks out of orbit and destroy any ships docked within it. Minimizing the forces used in these operations will allow us to concentrate considerable forces to worlds of Subiaco Diablo in the Bellis Corona sector and Dorsia in the Scelus sector.

We know that the enemy intends to assault these worlds and intervene with the arrival of battle fleets redemption and vengeance. We shall ambush the ambushers. Detailed plans and fleet movements have been drawn up. Let us honour our primarch with yet another victory that will see the unforgiven chapters united as a legion!"

As simply as it had begun the meeting ended without formalities, as each commander departed to commence yet another undertaking in the name of the lion.

# Gathering of Angels

## Volume III

Chapter III: Chariots of Fire

Chapter IIII: Web of Deceit

Chapter IIIII: Requiem for an Angel

Chapter IX: Nest of Vipers



## Chapter III: Chariots of Fire

The dew drops slid gently from the tip of the banar tree leaves, their muffled landing heralding the first rays of sunshine. The morning mist lazily began its daily ritual of fading before the oncoming warmth of Lelithar's sun. The occasional rustle in the fallen leaves indicated that a few restless local fauna were stirring from their reverie. The settlement of Mirad's Folly slept in peaceful oblivion, protected on three sides by tall lush mountains. The northern most perimeter of the vast agri-settlement continued in to a rolling plain, providing the only easy access to the rest of the planet Lelithar, the planetary capital of its namesake system. Standard construct living quarters were scattered indiscriminately, any semblance at organised planning long lost, separated by narrow streets and the occasional public house. Large brooding grain silos were concentrated in the northern reaches of the vast settlement, watching the inhabitants like titans on guard duty. To the west, large warehouses took up the space, likely containing machine shops, store houses and other repair facilities, supporting the general productivity of the inhabitants. A few wisps of smoke began to emanate from scattered households, indicating the awakening of those inhabitants. To all intents and purposes this was no different than millions of similar agri-settlements scattered around the galaxy.

The apparent tranquillity of Mirad's Folly would no doubt easily deceive the casual traveller and the unwary. However the astute observer would not easily mistake the tell tale oil streaks that were evident on the walls of the silos and warehouses. Dripping down from the roofs of these buildings were dark streaks of oil mixed with slime and dirt which would not stand close scrutiny. The unusually high position of the oil streaks, suggested the presence of mechanical equipment high upon the walls and roofs. The roads themselves, dirt tracks to be more accurate, were cleaved deeply with heavy ruts, a testimony to the regular arrival of heavy vehicles. The broken windows and makeshift tarpaulin covers, while adding to the sense of dilapidation, also served to hide the presence of the hidden watchmen. Perhaps this was not necessarily the tranquil settlement, or perhaps the locals were simply being careful in these perilous times. One such man, his face hidden behind a dark hood watched the skies through an ocular device that was well out of place within the confines of the outdated equipment scattered about. His vision, enhanced by the technological wizardry of the device in his hand, revealed the presence of four comets streaking down through the atmosphere. The objects were falling rapidly, their speed and atmospheric friction raising the surrounding temperature to thousands of degrees, causing condensation to vaporise as they descended. Majestically, maintaining their distance from one another, like birds of prey with a singular purpose, like chariots of fire, they descended through the upper atmosphere. Smiling wryly, the observer muttered to himself "So it begins".

Four thunderhawk gunships thundered at supersonic speeds through the atmosphere of the planet Lelithar. They were performing a powered atmospheric re-entry at full speed, having exited the hangar bays of the strike cruiser "Sanctus Mortis". Sporting the battle colours of the Angels of Absolution chapter, the strike cruiser had entered the outer atmosphere of the planet to release the thunderhawks, reducing the time of their exposure within the thick atmosphere. Two were coloured in deep green livery with large white winged swords proudly emblazoned upon their adamantium hulls. The other two were coloured bone white, and wore the white skull on a single black wing insignia with equal pride. Anyone who saw these four beasts of prey descending towards their targets would have been in no doubt that the Unforgiven had arrived to do the emperor's bidding.

The leading gunship buffeted about slightly as the pilot made corrections to compensate for the heat induced vapour trail. Code named Angelus I, it was the command gunship of the flight of four. The pilot called out as a matter of fact, "Two minutes to touch down, honoured Grandmaster"

In the back of every thunderhawk there lie a number of facilities. Highly regarded amongst these is the emperor's shrine, where each member of the accompanying force would meditate and give their thanks to the emperor and the primarch on the eve of battle. A figure arose from its kneeling position at the shrine. The rise was accompanied by the almost silent rise of thirty more men. The tall man, imposing even by the standards of the enhanced physique of space marines, was covered in a robe. The bone white robe extended up to his head and covered it as a hood. A flash of deep blue armour could be seen underneath the swirling robes. A large, rune encrusted sword lay by his side, sheathed in an antiquated scabbard. Complex wires and tubes lead from the force weapon to the librarian's armour and ended in inserts on his head and face plate. The face plate covered half his face, though no one present knew or dared ask the events that lead to it being there. The man, doubtlessly the leader of this group, slowly opened his eyes, and spoke to another by his side.

"Are the men prepared, Master Sheol?"

"The men are honoured for being chosen for this task. They are ready to do their duty, for the lion and the emperor!"

"Sixty seconds to touch down" the pilot interrupted calmly. "Arm weapons, suppression fire on demand, pattern delta-four"

“Then you may tell them that this day may bring us that much closer to redemption” continued the librarian. “Confirm combat status of angelus two, three and four! Specify confirmation of potential class fortitude magna interference.” he directed the pilot, who activated the communications runes to confirm with the other three thunderhawks.

“Grandmaster Azadael confirms! The lion be praised!”

Class fortitude interference was the coded signal for potential intrusion by friendly forces during Dark Angel operations. The Magna adjective meant the presence of loyalist space marine contingents. They had received intelligence reports of a contingent of the space marines belonging to the Relictors chapter deployed to the north of Mirad’s Folly. They were in an ideal position to cover the only exit from the valley, and therefore protect the rear of the Angels of Absolution. Yet, combined operations was not possible in this case, the stakes were too high. They had hoped that the Relictors contingent would remain where they were, though what their mission was, no one seemed to know.

“Thirty seconds to touch down! Brace for impact landing!”

Master Sheol looked over the thirty men of his beloved fourth company. Resplendent in the deep green armour of the Dark Angels chapter, he had with him a squad each of tactical, assault and devastator marines. Each squad lead by a veteran sergeant with the emblem of Deathwing on his person. He knew that they were eager with anticipation. This would be a different mission. He turned to face the librarian and said

“The men are ready! May the lion watch over you, Grandmaster Ezekiel!”

The verdant tranquillity of Mirad’s Folly was shattered with an apocalyptic suddenness as the four thunderhawks re-entered subsonic speed and brought themselves to land within a matter of seconds, accompanied by the protesting high pitched whine of retro-thrusters. The skill of the pilots was evidenced by the ease with which they landed the two green thunderhawks squarely within a stones throw of the southern most building. Hardly had the gunship touched down, with the ramps open, the thirty men contained within had disembarked and fanned out. The tactical squad fanning out to form a firing line, while the assault squad triggered their jump packs to move eastwards and create interlocking fields of fire. The devastators remained where they were, aiming their lethal weapons at potential targets. A rhino armoured carrier rolled out from the second gunship followed closely by two more tactical squads and then both lifted off, their guns swivelling towards the settlement in anticipation.

A few seconds later both bone white gunships landed to the north of the settlement, blocking the access to the plains beyond. The rapid exit of the fifty, bone-white power armour clad space marines was just as impressive and disciplined as their counter parts on the other side. Three tactical squads and two assault squads disembarked rapidly. The absence of devastators compensated by the appearance of a massive war machine, a living dreadnought, an ancient warrior encased in adamantium to serve the emperor despite being close to physical death. The assault cannon on the ancient dreadnought whirled in anticipation as it flexed the massive power claw on the other arm. Barely thirty seconds had elapsed since the first touch down and the strike force was completely deployed and converging in two semi circles towards the settlements.

Grandmaster of librarians, the venerable Ezekiel looked around the settlement with eyes that had seen battle experience for centuries. The most powerful librarian within the Dark Angel chapter, he was well known for his mental fortitude and psychic prowess. His capacity to predict the enemy's actions were legendary and one which had made him insist on leading this mission. The value attached to this mission was evidenced by the presence of his counter part in the Angels of Vengeance, grandmaster of librarians Azadael. Ezekiel expected foul play, involvement of the dark powers and something quite unexpected. That much he was convinced. But there also lay grey and unpredictable future that neither he nor the emperor's tarot could not divine. He had taken multiple precautions, because of the underlying feeling of dread that had been with him ever since they learned of this settlement and its likely function. This was very likely the headquarters of the 'Cult of the Voice', that impostor and traitor, *Fallen 100*, had very likely used this as the base for his blasphemous actions. Ezekiel looked around once again. Master Sammael was leading his men, who were moving like a well oiled machine, nary a word spoken between them. The command rhino advanced along side the devastators, the twin storm bolters covering the advance menacingly. Interrogator-chaplain Hanan kept in step with the librarian. His right hand held the ancient Crozius Arcanum lightly, his index finger close to the activation button. The bolt pistol hung loosely at his waist while his left hand unconsciously played with the sharp blade that was his trademark tool. Ezekiel once again reached out with his mind, his powers enhanced by his psychic hood, to feel the presence of danger, of the enemy, of any threat. Try as he might, the disturbing fact was that he recognised no such threat, yet his inner mind warned him of impending doom. That feeling slowly continued to build up, reaching fever pitch, just as the leading marines entered the outer perimeter. Azadael felt his colleague's unease, and concurred with him the same nauseating sensation of impending death. Both men, giants in the realms of the psychic, desperately and vainly scanned the region with their combined powers to seek out the lurking danger.

The dark powers were at play here, and they were shielding something. Whatever was within the settlement it was being shielded psychically. The danger bells were ringing within both their minds and the sensation was being transmitted palpably to their comrades in arms. The space marines tensed, awaiting the expected attack. One hundred and twenty seconds had passed since the first gunship had touched down. The final gunship was just lifting off when a bright beam of light struck its starboard engine. A flash, a thundering crash and smoke poured out from the vaporise engine, the pilot struggling to control the gunship. Like a whiplash, the veil was lifted and Ezekiel saw everything. The weapons platforms secreted within the roof tops of the silos and warehouses. The men taking positions within the buildings and the weapons being loaded for firing all became visible to the two librarians in an instant. It took mere milliseconds for the enhanced sense of the space marines to track the weapon, noticing that the roofs of the silos and warehouses were opening on oiled pistons, displaying automated weapons platforms. The knowledge gained by the librarians was in an instant transmitted to the battle brothers. The response from the emperor's angels swift as it was deadly as the weapons of the ground force and the airborne gunships spoke in unison. The battle for Myrad's Folly had been joined in earnest. Hanan had activated his jump pack and joined the assault squad in the eastern perimeter of the settlement, seeking to outflank the enemy. The weapons platforms on the roof tops were gradually being silenced, by the combined fire of devastators and precision attack runs by the gun ships. He was in constant contact with Azadael, who seemed to be making rapid progress from the northern perimeter, the presence of the venerable dreadnought allowing them to lay down suppressive fire while advancing.

The Angels of Absolution had penetrated deep in to the northern buildings, clearing out each one in turn. Conducting themselves as precisely as if they were on a practice drill, the tactical squads provided enveloping fire while the assault squads waded in to each building, preceded by fragmentation grenades. They few terrified survivors blindly running out in to the withering bolter fire of the waiting squads. Azadael continued to exert his will to insert tendrils of fear in to their enemies' minds, weakening their resolve and creating panic. However up to now, they had mowed down heretics by the score, but these were ordinary humans. Neither a single mutant nor traitor marine had been sighted. Yet there was something within the midst of the settlement that he couldn't see clearly in his mind. Whatever it was they, the emperor's angels would discover in the end. Resolutely he urged his men around the next corner as the advance continued.

## Chapter III: Web of Deceit

Ezekiel scanned the battlefield. Thick smoke wafted through the streets. Debris was strewn everywhere and the clamour of battle rang in his ears. Master Sammael's men had expertly advanced, tactical squads leap-frogging each other while the devastators and the rhino lay down a curtain of covering fire. But, now they were pinned down. A heavy stream of heavy weapons fire streamed down towards his force. Heavy bolter shells smashed masonry in to fine dust, the red dust mingling with the black smoke to make the whole scene look surreal. Hidden but previously silent weapons platforms would suddenly activate. These were not controlled by humans, and thus not easily discernible in the psychic realm. Ezekiel's psychic powers were stretched to the maximum as he tried to discern the enemy dispositions and interfere with the psyche of the opposition. Centuries of battle experience warned him of some anomaly, his inner mind constantly aware of some potential catastrophe. Azadael had made rapid progress towards the centre of the settlement, while his own force was being slowed down drastically by the sheer volume of heavy fire. He reassessed the situation in his ocular display, a single thought activating the tactical dispositions in it. Azadael's force was somewhat exposed, especially in their rear, though that region was under control of their brother marines from the Relictors. Although the Relictors were not aware of the Dark Angels objectives, they were certainly informed of their presence and would keep the northern corridor clear. Azadael himself had nearly reached the centre of the settlement accompanied by an assault squad. The tactical squads were slowly following suit. The centre of the settlement had an emptiness that he could not fathom. He reached out with his mind once again, touching and weakening those who faced Azadael. Suddenly with a sickening sensation he withdrew as realisation hit him. A sharp warning flashed from Ezekiel's mind with instantaneous speed towards Azadael's mind.

Azadael was fast approaching the central silo that seemed to have a sense of deep foreboding in its vicinity. The tactical squad covering his advance had just demolished the entrance with an accurate krak missile strike. The assault squad was keeping pace with him, when he received Ezekiel's warning. The gravity of his position struck him like a hammer, as he willed his brothers to stop in their tracks. The entire silo exploded outwards an instant later, flinging the assault troopers and Azadael to the ground so much like rag dolls. The explosion was no ordinary one. The accompanying psychic blast hit Azadael with such force that the librarian dropped his force sword and nearly passed out. A high pitched ululating scream, unnatural and despondent, emanated from within the debris. An overwhelming wave of nausea and revulsion passed over the members of Azadael's strike force. Ezekiel felt it at the other end of the settlement instantaneously. Striding forth from within the crumbling ruins of the silo was a foul being, clad in

exposed sinews and taut muscles with a ram's head and hooved feet. Four muscular limbs protruded from its torso, two ending in vicious claws and a massive sword held in the other. The horrifying yet enticing aberration that was a greater daemon of Slaanesh stood imposingly in the middle of the settlement, and let out a screech of wanton pleasure as it spied the fallen librarian. Fighting back waves of rolling revulsion and realising the danger, the tactical squads at the perimeter began to advance to support the assault squads, bracing themselves to meet the foul abomination. The venerable dreadnought, roaring in defiance at the presence of such chaos filth began to charge towards the centre, the massive power fist flexing expectantly. A staccato of shells roared towards the abomination as the assault cannon went on continuous fire, the massive reactive shells impacting on the daemon and tearing chunks of its physical self away. Two krak missiles streaked from the tactical squads imploding within the substance of the entity, sending the daemon staggering backwards. The constant impact of bolter and assault cannon fire was momentarily forcing it back slowly, allowing precious seconds for the librarian and his squad to recover their composure. Ezekiel saw all this happen in his minds eye, silently berating himself for not having foreseen the events unfolding. There was hope as the unflinching devotion to the emperor seemed to be forcing the greater daemon back for a moment. As he barked out orders, while throwing caution to the wind and charging forward, he felt the presence of yet another danger.

Their attention focussed on protecting Azadael, the first inclination of danger that struck the Angels of Absolution was a storm of bolter fire from the northern plains. Half of the rear most tactical squad went down, treacherously attacked from their rear, exploding bolter rounds throwing them face down in the ground. A missile exploded in the rear of the venerable dreadnought, smashing the power supply and crippling the right leg. Unable to move and turn, the ancient warrior screamed in rage, realising the treachery from their rear. Any other force would have been caught off-balance by the assault from their rear. But these were space marines, born from the gene seed of Jonson. Reacting with remarkable speed the bone colour armoured warriors formed a defensive circle. The heavy weapons continued to pour fire in to the raging daemon while the rest returned fire towards their unseen attackers.

Anger nearly overwhelming his battle sense, Ezekiel charged, calling for desperate strikes from the gunships. This was a desperate hour and the heretics had cleverly shielded their invocation of the daemon. More could easily penetrate the ether and appear. The gunships came screaming down, flying recklessly close to the ground and laying a carpet of flying projectiles and exploding ordnance. Heretics, weapons platforms and buildings vaporised in the inferno as the dark Angels charged through the explosions.

As the attention of the tactical squads split between the attack in their rear and the danger up front, it provided respite to the foul being. The greater daemon slowly and menacingly advanced towards Azadael, hissing in deviant pleasure as each bolter strike caused a wound. The assault squad, recovering from the original explosion threw themselves at the abomination. However their valour and strength were no match for the horrendously powerful entity powered by the pure substance of the warp. As Azadael watched in disbelief the horrendous scream of the daemon of Slaanesh ripped through the air, the air around the creature visibly altering between realities. The assault marines charge slowed by the magic of the daemon, their reactions slowed to a stand still, the entire squad were wiped out in a mist of blood and flurry of shorn limbs. As daemon stood upright and hissed again in pleasure at the sight of the devastation, receiving another krak missile in to its mid rift for its troubles,

Azadael focussed his mind. Drawing the energies of the warp and channelling his pure faith in to his force sword, he charged for the emperor. Time slowed as the battle focussed in the centre of the settlement. He felt Ezekiel nearby. He saw the daemon beckon to him, awaiting his rush. He saw interrogator-chaplain Hanan and his assault squad arrive over the roofs of the eastern building, power weapons at the ready. He saw the venerable dreadnought immobilised on the battle field and the damaged gunship plough in to the ground with an earth shattering shudder. He saw his men suppress the attack from the rear. He saw the blue arcs of lightning appear in response to Ezekiel's call as the Deathwing teleported from the strike cruiser..... and he saw his destiny! The daemon lashed out with an arcing swipe, calculated to decapitate the librarian and he rolled underneath the blow. He had one chance and only one. No one but a primarch had bested such a beast in single combat. Channelling all his hatred and his purity of mind in to the force sword he thrust it with all his might in to the belly of the beast. The light of purity and the darkness of chaos met with an audible thunder. The scream of the daemon was even louder. This was not one of pleasure but of agony. Azadael focussed hard and released every iota of his psychic energy through the sword in to the beast.

A cavalcade of cannon shells impacted on the daemon, dissolving its physical form faster than it could re-knit it. The scream of agony continued in to a wail. Smoke and unnatural clouds emanated from it as black ichor oozed from the belly. The foul being lashed out blindly as the five Deathwing terminators poured a veritable avalanche of fire in to its head, targeting the vital areas. Azadael was exhausted beyond belief, every drop of his strength had been channelled in to the force sword and the daemon was beaten. It was just a matter of time. He couldn't see for the clouds of dust yet he held the weapon lodged within the being, avoiding the blind swings of the beast. Ezekiel was close, and would lend his considerable powers to defeat this enemy. Then suddenly there was a blinding flash, an explosion of smoke and ichor outwards which swirled



back towards its centre. Everyone stood rooted to the ground as the firing died down. Ezekiel suddenly felt the disappearance of the entity. The firing from the north ceased and an eerie quietness descended upon the settlement. In the centre as the smoke cleared, there lay a single force sword. Of Azadael there was no sign.

## Chapter III: Requiem for an Angel

The mood was grim within the conclavium angelus, the silence almost physically palpable. The great hall of the inner circle had seen much activity in the past weeks, such as it had not seen since the creation of that chamber, yet everything remained deathly still. Some things had not changed since the beginning of the campaign. The thick, oval magenta coloured conference table remained unmoved. The thick blast doors stood defiantly upright. The banners of unforgiven chapters hung proudly from the walls. The empty seats relegated to the members of the Angels of Vengeance and Redemption remained empty, eagerly awaiting their arrival. The three great heroes of the Dark Angels chapter remained on their seats as did the chapter master and grandmaster of chaplains of their bone white armoured brethren. Their eyes however converged at the empty seat next to them. The position belonging to the grandmaster of librarians of the angels of absolution remained empty. The solitary, finely engraved force sword that lay on the seat was the only reminder of his previous service to his chapter.

Data sets appeared on the personal displays, tentatively attempting to break the uneasy mood. The keeper of the truth, Azrael looked up with a stern face. Anger and determination flared in those fiery eyes. But before he could speak, the revered Ezekiel spoke, "The ways of the dark powers are intricately woven like a vipers nest. The trap was as intricate as was the bait. We were led in to a trap, which was in some measure our own fault! I shall pay penance every day until the completion of this campaign!"

"You are harsh on yourself, guardian of the book of salvation. The decision to attack without ground reconnaissance was a collective one, made necessary by the presence of imperial and space marine forces and the rapidly changing nature of the intelligence we receive these days. A scout recce would have been valuable, but it is unlikely they would have uncovered the presence of the summoning!" said Azrael. "A more worrying phenomenon is the complete silence from our brothers, the Relictors, who were expected to be in position in the north. Future operations in their vicinity should consider them hostile until proven otherwise." He continued as a matter of fact. Being forced to take arms against loyalist troops on rare occasions was no new experience for the Unforgiven in their quest for redemption.

"The death of our brother weighs heavily on all our minds." began his counterpart, "Azadael was more than our chief librarian. He was a close and trusted friend and had been an icon of strength to our battle brothers. He would be sadly missed and his death remembered by all today"

"I hope you are correct grandmaster" replied Ezekiel "for I too wish deeply, even pray to the emperor, that he is indeed dead!" Four pairs of eyes with enhanced vision fixed him in a cross fire, trying to discern the direction of his conversation, to fathom his meaning. He continued slowly "I believe that the trap was laid not for our strike force. This was no mere tactical ambush. The preliminary data deciphered from data crystals and analyzed in depth reveal that this was indeed a major staging post for the cult of the voice. *Fallen 100* had indeed passed through here." If anyone else apart from the five space marine commander were present they would have testified later, that at that moment time, motion and air all seem to freeze. One would have heard the fall of a single atom. Then the moment passed and the old librarian continued. "I am convinced that this trap was set for my own capture! Yet by the grace of the lion, I am here and Azadael there. There is a very strong possibility that this somehow fits in to the machinations of the leader of the cult of the voice!"

"It was not him!" the massive blast door opened and in walked Asmodai, blood stained blades of reason hanging limply by his waist. The urgency was palpable, so urgent that he had not bothered cleaning his revered tool of his trade. "The leader of this particular group of renegades is named Dragien! It was he who plotted this ambush. What their ultimate plan is, none of the pathetic specimens you brought back knows. But one of them has been to what we can determine to be the tactical headquarters of Dragien himself." He looked around the table and slowly composed himself, "Forgive my intrusion grandmasters, but this is grave news indeed!"

Anticipation sliced through the previously gloomy atmosphere. Azrael spoke calmly "Honoured Asmodai, our undying gratitude for your efforts. I am saddened that there were no one worthy amongst our prisoners for you to earn another black pearl, but before this campaign is over, we shall have our vengeance!" Asmodai bowed his head graciously, and slowly returned to his chambers, as Azrael once again addressed the gathering.

Our rapid assaults on the other suspected bases have also brought us much knowledge of the many covens and cults of the voice. Much of this information has been thoroughly analyzed. I must commend the tenth company of our brothers of absolution for their quiet dismissal of the ground control station on Malin's reach, and making it appear to be an accident. The death of a few loyal servants of the emperor is a very small price to pay for their accomplishment. The small docking facility ripped apart taking with it three freighters which were supplying the cult. It is also fortunate that our absent brother librarian insisted on a covert approach as it will have not alerted Dragien's command centre to our presence on the same system. It will also make our assault there that much easier."

“The battle fleets vengeance and redemption have confirmed that they are beginning warp entry through the specified warp routes. Our forces are in control in Dorsia and Subiaco Diablo awaiting their imminent arrival. It is imperative that these forces arrive rapidly and deploy secretly. Our enemy has eyes and ears every where.” Azrael activated a three dimensional display of the region of the Cadian Gate. The tactical dispositions were not encouraging. The imperial fleets were on the defensive. Many worlds had fallen to the despoiler’s assault. Here and there a few gold flashes indicated the few naval actions that had swayed to the imperial side. “The battle goes badly for the emperor’s servants in the Agripinaa Cadian and Nemesis Tessera sectors. Our battle brothers have acquitted themselves extremely well despite heavy casualties. The arrival of two further battle fleets will give us an edge and allow us to take the battle to the enemy fleets. In the coming days apart from the force which shall strike at the viper’s nest the rest will support imperial operations in this region. The Battle Fleet Absolution will assist with the defence of St Josmane’s Hope while our own fleet will remain in system with the Tower of Angels as we approach the Cadian sector.” Azrael paused, allowing his companions to voice their concerns.

Ezekiel considered the audience, “I humbly request... even demand... that I be given command of the strike force. I have much to repent for but more importantly we must be prepared for greater horrors than that we faced in the recent battle. The name of Dragien shall be moved to the blasphemed second position in the book of salvation. We shall bring the emperor’s justice to him and we shall find our brother Azadael!” A slight barely discernible nod was all the response from the others, cementing their complete agreement and sympathy for the librarian.

“Then, by the emperor and the lion, let the angels prepare, let them spread their wings, and let them bring the emperor’s justice to the unholy! Until the sword is reforged!”

## Chapter IX: Nest of Hipers

The granite and adamantium fortress had been in existence for more millennia than it cared to remember. It had a soul, a spirit, and it watched the lesser beings in the galaxy rise and fall. Its creators were long gone, but its systems functioned as if constructed only yesterday. It had been the home to a million different species throughout its long and exciting existence. It had survived them all, conquerors, despots, kings and scavengers. Earthquakes and volcanoes, the construction of massive edifices and their subsequent destruction; All events occurring around it, yet it had endured, its purpose never divined, its function only to provide sanctuary to those who needed it, its strength was its longevity. Now it remained mostly in the subterranean level, millennia of monolithic construction by the empire of man had buried it underground. Above it stood the massive production facilities that were so characteristic of a forge world. Nearly forgotten it remained dormant until its most recent discovery by the current occupant.

A brooding figure looked up from underneath his hood, at his prisoner. The low level of lighting and the flickering flames from a few exposed fires causing shadows to dance on his face menacingly. The man was spread eagled on a rack, which was placed nearly vertically. His eyes were closed and he was stripped naked. Massive titanium bonds held him firmly to the rack. The thick black carapace covering his torso immediately identified him as a space marine. The entry ports on his temple suggesting the possibility of previous psychic attachments. The hooded figure scanned the scene. The room was a large hollow chamber with many entrances. Large pyres were being stoked at various sections. Minions and underlings scattered about their business, trying hard not to draw the attention of their vicious master. A group of five red power armoured space marines stood in a circle, chanting unintelligible but powerful phrases in unison. Their magnificent armour blasphemed by icons and liturgies depicting their alliance with the dark powers, these were once loyal warriors to the emperor. The horned daemonic face on their shoulder pads and the presence of a demagogue identified these as word bearers, champions of the pantheon of chaos gods.

Three men stood next to the hooded figure, which was undoubtedly their leader, and watched the word bearers' invocation with disdain. They were all hooded and robed, black armour just visible underneath. The imperial insignias had been forcibly removed from their armour many millennia ago. They wore no signs or sigils. Tension was evident on their faces as they observed the group of word bearers give thanks to their patron gods, for the days' victory.

"How long must this alliance last?" spat one of the hooded men, looking at the leader expectantly.

“We would not have our prisoner without their help” the leader replied his voice a barely audible growl “but they now know too much. You know the drill”

The three men slowly produced three ancient weapons from within their robes. The blue white coils on their dorsum and the rounded design of the plasma pistols were unmistakably imperial in design, but from an era ten thousand years ago. They could punch through power armour like a bolt round through rotting wood. The gentle whine of the plasma coils charging was lost in the clatter of daily activities within the chamber.

The demagogue completed the chanting ritual in thanks to their patron powers, an evil smile playing on his face as he cast his eyes over the captured librarian. He was quite satisfied with the days’ events, even though he had to work with these men whom he considered renegades and thieves, not worthy of being true followers of the might that was chaos. They fought for some long lost cause of vengeance, while the whole universe was there for the taking if only they embraced the pantheon of chaos as he, his primarch Logar, and his men had done ten thousand years ago. It was that weakling Horus, who lost the war, but now Abaddon was on the ascendancy. Their time would come. He looked enviously at the librarian on the rack. He had wished to indoctrinate this space marine, in keeping with his legions’ doctrines. It would be a true challenge, a combination of the stubbornness of the sons of Jonson combined with the mental fortitude of a space marine librarian. To turn such a man from the false emperor’s light would indeed be a great achievement, perhaps worthy of daemon hood. But he would first rid himself of these renegades. He would take this hidden subterranean fortress in the name of his daemon primarch. Hidden as it was deep within imperial territory, he would launch his assault from here, but first he would turn the librarian to the dark powers. But for now, he would settle for demanding his payment from the renegades before his men wiped them out. He turned slowly to demand from his counterpart the cost for their involvement in this alliance. The last thing he saw was the blue white flare of pure plasma, as it hit him squarely in the face burning his surprised expression in to his skull and dissolving the whole in to sludge. The screams of his companions, as they met with a similar fate was the last sound he heard before his black souls was sucked in to the warp to await judgement by the entities that lurked there.

Something in the warp, chuckled approvingly.

# Gathering of Angels

## Volume III

Chapter X: Death of Hope

Chapter XI: Strike Hard! Strike Fast!

Chapter XII: Blood! The Price of Battle.

Chapter XIII: The Grand Circle

## Chapter X: Death of Hope

Barradon the reviler sat in his command chair with an authority that could only be derived from pure unadulterated terror. His bloated and bulky form, deformed over the millennia from the innumerable gifts bestowed upon him by his patron lord, the lord of decay, lazily filled every inch of space in the massive structure that served both as his throne as well as his command seat. His armour was corroded beyond recognition, fusing with his body and pock marked just as badly as his own flesh. His deathly grey skin was puckered with bulging bubo constantly erupting and exuding a steady stream of pus that accumulated at the base of his chair. Masses of small fleshy beings sloshed around within the pool of purulent decay, rejoicing in whatever way their tiny minds could in the splendour of their lord. His right arm ended in an iron gauntlet, a testament to his victory over a weakling warrior of the carrion god. It bore the emblem of the Iron Hands space marine chapter, the bionic gauntlet wrenched from its still living owner on the death fields of Demardere. His victory over the Iron Hands had availed him of not only the bionic hand, but a myriad of pestilent gifts, the greatest of which was the plague sword which remained at his side at all times. His most recent advancement, received in the midst of battle in the space surrounding this doomed imperial planet were the five tentacles that arose from his fingers in the left hand. Dripping vile putrescence, they allowed him to link directly with the ships machine mind by locking his tentacles within data ports and command consoles.

Slowly he opened his eyes, awakening from his reverie, as those unfortunate enough to be stationed in his command bridge, cringed in anticipation as the aura of decay washed over them. He had been linking his senses to that of the ship, allowing him to see and feel everything the ships auguries could detect. His patron lord had also gifted him with warp vision, which also allowed him to see in to the empyrean with some effect. He didn't understand a lot of the changes that his enhanced body had undergone in the past few centuries, but he adored every gift that had been lavished upon him. He was a chosen warrior. He was a true follower of the lord of pestilence, chosen for his devotion. A warrior gifted with a force beyond comparison. A fervent devotee who had been entrusted a mighty armada which would help bring the followers of the emperor to their knees. His gifts were unique. They allowed him to feel like the battleship he commanded. He could sense the cold emptiness of space touching the adamantium sheath of his ship as if it were his own skin. He could sense the death agonies of his enemies as their ships became fiery graves marking the demise of the weakling emperor. Every time a torpedo hit or an energy beam struck his ship he suffered with it, but that was the price for greatness. It was the kind of greatness that his former emperor sadly lacked even though it had been thrust upon him.



It was certainly the kind of greatness that he was ever willing to reach out and grab, regardless of the price, and regardless of his soul.

So it came to pass that, such a vile excuse for a man, little of his humanity visible under the constantly seeping ooze of pustulent decay, was destined to lead one of the invasion fleets of the ruinous powers. Enconced in the massive adamantium clad leviathan that was his flagship, this warmaster, Barradon the reviler, led his fleet once more to battle. "Death of Hope" was the pride of the nurgle fleet of decay. A Repulsive class grand cruiser from the days of the great crusade it had lost all outward semblance of human construction, the rotting decay so characteristic of the bloated god of chaos had completely transformed the ship's hull in to a morass of disease. In appearance she may resemble a disease ridden gangrene soaked limb, but in function she remained at her youth. Designed at a time when technology was capable of creating engines powerful enough to propel these behemoths to combat speeds, only a dozen or so remained functional within the chaos fleets. In firepower she could almost match the giant battleships, the rows of weapon batteries and lance turrets proudly awaiting their next call to action. In line behind her were two pairs of heavy cruisers, of the Styx and Hades classes. A squadron of three slaughter class cruisers floated majestically to the left flank while three carnage class vessels mirrored them on the right. The flanking cruisers were arrayed in a vertical plane so that they formed a protective layer in all three dimensions. The path of the battle fleet was heralded by numerous small escort vessels, mostly infidel class raiders. Iconoclast destroyers prowled menacingly ahead to seek out the enemy and bring them to battle with their torpedoes. The entire fleet was arrayed in a cone shaped arrowhead formation. Lumbering within the central space of the cone was the grand prize that they guarded so jealously. Fifteen massive, heavily bloated and decaying super transports laboriously struggled to keep up with the sleek warships that guarded them.

Barradon took a deep breath in and slowly closed his eyes again. He stretched his sense around him, through the adamantine bulkheads and the layer upon layer of compartments of his flagship, through its outer hull and outwards in to the cold dark space. He felt the sensation of desperate fear and abject terror seeping in the universe. The final agonies of the dying, the nightmare horrors of the living, the sweat, the blood, they all felt sweet to him. The sweet taste of victory mingled with his purulent saliva. His tentacles slithered in to the consoles as he took in the augury readings from the flagship's sensor array. To their right in the distance he could see the world of Solar Mariatus. In the distance in the opposing direction he could feel the fear in Kasr Partox. The space between those two planets, particularly that surrounding St Josmane's Hope, was littered with space debris. The burnt out hulks of unfortunate battleships and transports, the flotsam of space battles. But what endeared to him most was the sense of desperation that emanated

across the empyrean like a beacon in a storm. Its source was none other than his prize, St Josmane's Hope. He smiled inwardly at the irony of his flag ships name, "Death of Hope" He had followed the events on this planet closely during his long journey. He had looked on joyously as the Imperium fell back under the relentless chaos onslaught from within and without. He was disturbed at the surprise counter attack by the false emperor's servants. He didn't think they had it in them for a good fight. He felt satisfied that the planet would not fall until his arrival. He licked his lips with relish at the thought of initiating a planetary bombardment on this prison world, he didn't particularly care who he killed, imperial lackeys or the hordes of the lost and the damned. He would then follow it with a glorious space borne assault from his ships. St Josmane's Hope was the stepping stone, and he would deliver it to the despoiler. It was like a ripe fruit, ready for the picking. He could see the planet on the huge vid-display screens as the bridge staff hurried along completing preparations for the imminent action. The visual display of the gaol planet further enhanced his already amorous psyche, lusting for the death and destruction he was about to unleash. He could see the distant flashes of intermittent space battles as the imperial ships contested the space with his allies. His brothers in the Deathguard may have found glory on planets like Amistel, but here he was, about to take the first planet of the Cadian system. "Glory to father nurgle and blessed be the gifts he bestows upon his true servants!" mused Barradon to himself.

Then he felt the first sensations. Long before any of the ships augers had registered it his warp attuned senses had detected an imbalance. Suddenly alert and actively probing for this disturbance, seeking out the source of the emanation, he pondered his feelings. His tentacles desperately coaxed the ships consoles for an answer. His guttural voice boomed over the bridge vox-caster, demanding answers. The messages were relayed in an instant to the captains of the other capital ships. Yet the answer eluded him. Something was amiss, but he could not finger it. He looked through the sensor augers once again and satisfied that there was nothing in the physical realm to threaten them looked again at the vid-display of the planet. It was at that moment, with a sickening sensation the full impact of the unfolding event hit his senses, as the planet itself seemed to flare momentarily. Circuits exploded on the bridge and consoles went up in smoke burning their unfortunate operators in an instant. The vid-display screen blew in to a thousand fragments, the shards decapitating those nearby. Everywhere in the warship, emergency klaxons wailed as electrical systems malfunctioned and shut down. The whine of emergency power starting up was just reaching his ears when a psychic explosion of utter and absolute terror of millions of souls suddenly hit his minds like a sledgehammer. Perversely enjoying the sheer terror and at the same time desperately struggling to determine the cause for this event he pulled himself off his command chair. With a sickening realisation in the pit of his

stomach, he rushed with a speed previously never attributed to him, towards the nearest view port to see the planet, already knowing what to expect.

There, majestically and in slow motion the entire planet of St Josmane's Hope was breaking up. Seismic shock waves large enough to tear the continents apart were sending massive stellar shock waves that could be felt by the closest warships. Barradon looked on in utter disbelief. His prize, his path to fame, his stepping stone to greatness, was slowly tearing itself apart. He could not comprehend that the cowardly followers of that carcass on terra had somehow set in motion events that were destroying the planet, killing millions of prisoner-cultists and invading troops in the process. Deaths in their millions accompanied by solid palpable terror hit his minds like a thunderstorm, causing him to stagger and sending his pet nurglings scattering. Struggling to stand, stunned beyond belief, he screamed in rage. A long drawn out wailing scream of frustrated anger echoed throughout the ship drowning out all other noises and chilling the bones of those who heard it. Amidst the panoply of desperate sensations emanating from the planet in the throes of a violent death, the first inclination Barradon had of danger was the seven fireballs erupted in empty space. He swirled around in time to see two of his cruisers and five transports explode in to millions of fragments.

## Chapter XI: Strike Hard! Strike Fast!

The ubiquitous naval weapon known as the torpedo was originally invented in old terra long before man reached for the stars. The original weapons were just a little taller than a human, and were used merely against nautical warships, progressively becoming more sophisticated with guidance systems and advanced explosive warheads. The nomenclature was then transposed to its equivalent weapon arming the spaceships of nearly every space faring race. The name itself is a misnomer which becomes readily apparent when they are compared. The imperial version is far more a massive rocket than a slender torpedo. Usually the size of a tall building, about twenty stories in height, these massive torpedoes arm a variety of ships in the imperial navy and space marine fleets. The nose of the torpedo is filled with sensor probes and control sensors for auto-detection of targets as well as for the final guidance. Just behind this lies the armour penetrating explosive directional warhead which fills the forward third of the weapon. Close behind this lies the plasma reactor which fills the aft two thirds along with its fuel supply. The plasma reactor is designed to go critical seconds prior to impact, and forms part of the explosive warhead. These were capable of gouging great chunks off a battleship's hull or penetrating deep before exploding within the vitals of the ship. It was one such torpedo, of a salvo of more than two hundred, which detonated first in the engine compartment of one of the slaughter class cruisers. That was the initial explosion that broke Barradon's incredulous look as his mind registered the death of St Josmane's Hope.

Pandemonium broke loose within the tight chaos fleet formation as explosion after explosion rocked their warships. The transports were not so lucky, each one being struck by a salvo of three or four torpedoes, exploding and breaking apart, spilling terror stricken hordes in to the icy black vacuum of space. Temporarily blinded by the explosive break up of the planet, the augers and sensors in the chaos fleet were slowly coming back on line. Incredulous bridge officers watched on, dumb founded, as the space behind their fleet suddenly revealed the presence of a vast array of war ships. They were imperial war ships to be more accurate. In reality they were space marine ships of the unforgiven chapters to be exact. Mere seconds had passed from the first explosions, and the warmaster's bridge command staff was just recovering enough to attempt a response when the massive projectiles from the mass drivers of the bombardment cannons struck the bridge. In an instant, Barradon, his throne and his staff along with his traitorous dreams were pulverized by the sheer mass of the oncoming projectiles. Anyone who dared look to the rear of the chaos fleet would have been greeted with the terrifying sight of the combined battle fleets of two space marine chapters bearing upon them at flank speed.

On the bridge of the Sword of Redemption, battle barge and flagship of the Battle fleet redemption, master of the fleet Amardiel looked on with grim satisfaction. In stark contrast to the pandemonium aboard the bridge of the Death of Hope, Amardiel was surrounded by the calm and quietness so characteristic of a space marine command bridge. The gunnery officer calmly set about picking the most demanding targets and assigning the most devastating combination of firepower to each in turn. The command staff set about their delicate task of dissecting the chaos fleet caught completely of guard with virtually no ordnance deployed, ship by blasphemous ship. Amardiel allowed himself a quick smile as he voiced his thanks to the emperor. He had been the master of the battle fleet redemption for more than three centuries. In that time he had despatched strike fleets to the many quadrants of the emperor's domain. He had studied the enemy and learned of new tactics. Incessantly training his crew and commanders in fleet battle doctrine, in direct contradiction to the Codex Astartes, he had honed his battle fleet in the various aspects of space warfare. That all the unforgiven chapters did so was consolation enough, especially given their need to protect the floating bedrock that was the only remaining evidence of their home planet. He had particularly relished the new tactics developed by another space borne chapter, the Black templars, during the third war for Armageddon. The silent running techniques along with their constant practice at simultaneous mass ordnance release by all ships of the fleet, had certainly paid great dividends.

Reflecting through the events of the past few weeks, he realised that never had he experienced such diverse events occurring within such a short time period. He was proud of what his chapter had accomplished so far. In a short span of time, they had mobilised their entire chapter from the Gothic sector, identified an ancient elder warp gate in the Cyclops sub-sector and travelled the empyrean to the region of the eye. It was a testament to the quality and experience of the navigators from the Navis Nobilite and the stability of the ancient warp gates, that they had arrived as scheduled and without losses. Re-entering real space in the vicinity of Subiaco Diablo in the Bellis Corona sector, orders from the inner circle directing them to surreptitiously move past the Cadian system en route to their home system of Caliban. He remembered the pride swelling in him, despite the mental control instilled in all space marines, when the entire battle fleets of his own chapter and that of their brothers on the Angels of vengeance had rendezvoused just outside of the Cadian system. It was a heart wrenching journey, having been sworn to secrecy, and being unable to lend a hand to the numerous calls for help in the region. Tendrils of doubt washed momentarily as he questioned the orders of the inner circle in his own mind. As they had neared the Cadian system, the situation was noted to be critical in the tiny planet of St Josmane's Hope. His belief in the chapter high command was finally restored as he received his orders. He had been given overall command of both battle fleets for a passing strike at the chaos fleets in the vicinity of St Josmane's Hope. They were not to be engaged in extended fleet actions. Despite his

misgivings of avoiding action when all around them the imperial forces required assistance, he was confident in the actions of the inner circle. For the first time in more than two millennia the highest echelons of the inner circles of every unforgiven chapter were present in full strength at the Tower of Angels. The events and their consequences must indeed be of extreme importance for such a gathering to take place, and that knowledge steeled his resolve as they headed towards their rendezvous.

The emperor had guided their hand, as they floated in their powered down mode, along the path of Solar Mariatus. They had identified the numerous fleets and convoys, intercepted transmissions, located hidden ambushes and finally heard the imperial code for the destruction of Hope. They had identified Barradon's fleet just as the events were becoming critical on St Josmane's Hope. Acting rapidly, and timing their action to perfection every capable vessel launched a spread of torpedoes at the chaos fleet just as the explosive back blast blinded the sensors of the chaos fleet. They had practiced the technique of slaving the targeting system of all ships of the fleet to that of the battle barges, which linked their own information. Mechanically ejecting their torpedoes and allowing their momentum to carry them forwards for a distance before all were activated by a single command was another new technique they had developed. When coupled with their silent running mode, the first inclination of an attack the enemy had was often when the massed torpedoes ignited their power sources and accelerated to attack speed. The warships would do the same and follow in with their devastating batteries and bombardment cannons. Their orders had been to strike hard and strike fast, and they had carried it to the letter.

As the massive fleet armada swept past the crumbling remnants of St Josmane's Hope, Barradon's fleet lay crippled. The transports had blown up immediately, regurgitating their contents in to empty space to join their dark lords. Every chaos cruiser had suffered critical hits, some had already broken up. Others were drifting helplessly, laying a trail of space debris to mark their passing. A few lay burning fiercely as their plasma reactors and warp engines underwent critical meltdown, taking the surrounding escorts with them. As the massive battle barges and strike cruisers of both chapters swept past the debris, Barradon glanced at his executioners, his face contorted with evil, he vowed vengeance. His bridge was open to space, only his space marine constitution and the gifts of nurgle keeping him alive. His body was buried within the rubble that was once his command post. He looked with his minds eye at the scale of destruction that had been visited upon his fleet. His life energy was seeping away slowly. He looked to the stars and called out to his erstwhile patrons. They did not answer. He swore oaths of allegiance, and yet they remained silent. In desperation he did something that he had very cleverly avoided all these millennia. He offered up his soul to the lord of decay in the hope that he would be allowed to survive. Momentarily he felt the pestilent god accept his offering and then realised in

horror that he would not be forgiven. As the last breath of his life slipped away Barradon cursed the unforgiven for a moment and then began to scream as the fickle gods of chaos abandoned him and delivered his soul to the empyrean to be feasted upon by the predators of the warp for all eternity.

“Master of the fleet to all battle brothers! Course Caliban system. Brothers we are going home! Engage warp engines!”

With that simple command the combined fleet activated their warp engines and disappeared in to the empyrean. A moment later the fleets were gone, en route to Caliban, towards their destiny

*Months later, imperial cartographic survey teams would find the site of the battle and the attendant debris. Much debate later, the destruction of the chaos fleet would be attributed to unknown natural events, little knowing the role played by the Unforgiven. The unforgiven chapters, for their part were quite content to remain incognito, believing firmly that the outcome was far more important than public recognition.*

## Chapter XIII: Blood! The price of Battle.

Grandmaster Menelaius stood unmoving as the last thunderhawk gunship entered the cavernous landing bay heralded by the high pitched whine of retro-thrusters. The hangar bay was one of the numerous structures that had been cored out of the bedrock that was the remnant of Caliban. These were relatively small landing bays, where gunships and small intra-system shuttles could be despatched, serviced and retrieved. Relatively small was the key phrase, since even these small bays could house enough thunderhawk gunships to embark an entire company of space marines along with their heavy equipment, including their transport vehicles. He knew of the massive docking facilities which were many levels deeper, closer to the under surface of the massive asteroid which would dwarf these hangars. Those were where the chapter's space fleet were serviced. He followed the imposing form of the gunship as it flew nimbly through the massive blast doors and force fields, and made a three point landing without breaking stride. He saw the deep gouges and the many pock marks made by enemy fire on the wings and the fuselage. He marvelled at the precision landing, knowing fully that he could expect nothing less from the gunship that was piloted by the supreme grandmaster's personal pilot.

The front ramp descended with the characteristic hiss followed by a muffled thud as it made contact with the ground. Servitors and chapter serfs moved rapidly to their assigned service positions to immediately commence inspection and ready the aircraft for another mission. A single techmarine supervised the staff while two apothecaries, accompanied by a few initiates and servo-meds met those who descended from the interior of the gunship. The wounded and the dead were rapidly moved to the main apothecarium. Yet, Menelaius stood unmoving by the exit doors, his eyes fixed on the loading ramp. Finally, after all the wounded had been transferred two figures emerged slowly from the gunship. Accompanied by an unmistakable aura of determination and authority, of purity and honour, the supreme grandmaster of the Dark Angels chapter descended the ramp. He was preceded by the master of the fifth company, Sammael, and followed by the enigmatic being that seemed to glide effortlessly behind him. Half as tall as Azrael, the hooded being, one of the watchers in the dark, held within its arms the sacred relic of their primarch, the Lion Helm. Menelaius closed his eyes momentarily in respect and brought his right fist up to his heart in a combatants salute. He marvelled at these two commanders and their honourable demeanour, leading from the front, first to land and last to leave. His stout heart felt a tinge of sorrow at the numerous casualties they had sustained in Xersia, but his heart swelled with pride at the same time. They had stood their ground against the despoiler. Led by their supreme grandmaster, the fifth company had stood fast on the battlefields of Xersia and battled their way in to the honoured annals of history. Assaulted by horrors that would normally drive any



human insane, they had stood fast in harms way! Mutant hordes, daemonic entities, traitor marines and the despoiler in person, all had come to desecrate the Basilica Defaux on Xersia, and yet not one single Dark Angel had faltered. They fought, they bled, they died and they beat back the son of the arch traitor, and now they were preparing to face the enemy once again. He was indeed proud to call these men his battle brothers. He would be proud to administer to their healing and the emperor's peace if needed. He greeted the supreme grandmaster and performed a rapid survey to ensure that no battle wounds that required his attention were present and then did the same to Master Sammael. He then took their leave and began to walk rapidly back to the main apothecarion where he would join grandmaster of the librarians, Ezekeil. He had much work to do!

As he walked along the long dark corridors towards the elevators that would take him to his appointed work place, he had time to rethink events of the past. His life as a space marine had begun nearly five hundred years ago. The compassion and caring that he had always had within him made him a natural choice as an apothecary. Although eschewing the suffering brought about by wars, Menelaius was stout hearted on the field of battle and all but unstoppable when his battle brothers were in need of his expertise. His courage and devotion had not only earned him the title of grandmaster helix primus, commander of the apothecarium but a century ago earned him the right to enter the honoured ranks of the Deathwing. That he had lost his younger brother Nestor on Piscina IV under circumstances that were not transparent had only made him more determined. He had long surmised that those events on Piscina IV were closely related somehow to the coming of the despoiler. Events had moved extremely fast in the past weeks. The arrival of the other unforgiven chapters had resulted in a build up of the Lion's descendants unprecedented since the tumultuous days of the heresy. His command had expanded their capabilities to cope with the expected influx of casualties. They had developed techniques for the rapid insertion of bionics in conjunction with the disciples of the machine god, in order to return the battle brothers to the frontline rapidly. Inter-chapter liaison between the apothecaries had resulted in further advances all of which increased the battle field efficacy of the chapter's fighting strength. Yet there was always the unknown, always the diseases and injuries that were different. Injuries to the physical being he could repair. Those to the spirit would be assuaged by the chapter's chaplains. However, determining the intricacies of conflict that took part within the minds of those capable of harnessing the raw power of the warp, the librarians of the chapter, was hazardous in the best of times. It was one of those times.

He reached the main chambers of the apothecarion. The place was a hive of activity. The scouts and assault troopers of the fifth company had paid a tremendous price on Xersia. Victory had been theirs and strong had been their faith, proud the hearts of the survivors. Yet the losses were

felt deeply. They will mourn their losses along with their victory songs when the despoiler was finally banished back to his realm. He continued along the various chambers housing the wounded and passed to another entry portal. The security and surveillance mechanisms at the gateway to this chamber signified the extreme importance of whatever that lay behind. Retinal scans, DNA wipes and speech recognition were all part and parcel of the stringent identification methods required to open the thick adamantine blast doors. As he entered through the blast doors, the first emblem that was visible was the red winged sword with the broken sword, signifying the area to be the exclusive realm of the Deathwing. If the outer chambers had been a flurry of controlled activity the chambers within this restricted area were calm like the eye of a storm. Individual alcoves were built in along each wall, each one capable of tending to a space marine, in or out of armour. A few alcoves were occupied, the honoured members of the Deathwing would be tended to in the same secrecy they lived their lives. He continued on, not breaking pace, nodding his acknowledgements to his subordinates until he came upon the last entry portal. Passing through these doors, he entered a chamber with a stillness that clawed at his heart. There, in an isolated alcove, guarded behind stasis fields and psychic wards, strapped on to the recovery bed, lay the still form of Adonis, Codicier librarian of the Angels of Redemption chapter. Three men stood by him. One was the indomitable Ezekiel, grandmaster of librarians of the Dark Angels chapter. The man next to him he also recognised as the chief librarian of the Angels of Redemption. The third was a member of his own apothecarium. The battle fleets redemption and vengeance had transited through secret elder warp gates arriving in the region of the eye long before anyone expected them to. The events which had led to the dying farseer touching the mind of codicier Adonis had been known to them for sometime, but he had been in a coma since that event. They had worked ceaselessly to revive the librarian or at the least to unlock the terrible secrets that lay within, secrets of such enormous consequences, that a venerable elder farseer had elected to give his life to pass it on to the angels. It must have grave implications for the war raging in the eye, yet they were nowhere close to retrieving the information. They had no choice but to endeavour. The combined intellectual talents and millennia long experiences of all four chapter apothecaries had been harnessed to resolve the brave codicier's injuries. Physically he was unharmed. It was assumed to be the psychic force of contact with an elder mind that had caused this effect. The revered librarian and keeper of the book of salvation, Ezekiel, was renowned for his ability to insinuate himself within the minds of even the staunchest allies of the ruinous powers. Yet he had had the slightest of successes in entering Adonis' mind. His persistence had enabled them to understand the events leading up to the mind touch, but beyond that was a cacophony of information that still eluded the ancient librarian. They will persevere in to the coming days, events within the region lending urgency to their efforts, and he, would stand guard lest, the patients or their guardians required tending. His would be a long vigil.

## Chapter XIII: The Grand Circle

Few amongst the numerous caverns and dungeons that populated the bedrock of the Tower of Angels were as old as the Conclavium Angelus. It had been built at a time when the Tower of Angels was still part of the world of Caliban and long before the coming of the primarch. It had been the council room of the group of knights who had been simply known as the "Order". Here was where their grandmaster gathered his most learned nobles, the bravest knights and the cleverest ministers for regular counsel on all matter pertaining to their organisation. This was the exact chamber where the great primarch of the Dark Angels and his erstwhile brother in arms, Luther, argued their case for the campaign that cleansed their blighted world. It was here that the Lion subsequently held his great war council and where the "Order" decided to join the Dark Angels legion after the arrival of the emperor of man. The chamber was more than ten thousand years old as was some of the furniture within the room. The massive magenta coloured central table was older than anyone who sat at it. It had seen sparse activity over those years as the chamber was now relegated towards meetings of inner circle on matters of the highest magnitude. It had never seen the numbers of people that now attended the chambers. In ten thousand years there were few occasions when the council table had been as crowded as it was this day.

Imposing men sat at each of the large solid wooden chairs, clad in full power armour, their physical bulk matched by their strong personalities. They were divided in groups of three, each one with the colour and insignias of their own chapter. As was the norm, the seats were taken up by the chapter masters flanked by the chief librarian and the grandmaster of chaplaincy of each chapter the command trinity of each chapter. What was unusual was the number of unforgiven chapters that were present in full strength. The bone white armour of the angels of absolution contrasted starkly with that of the Dark Angels, with whom they had battled side by side. The Angels of Vengeance, their black armour a reminder of the old days next to those of the Angels of Redemption with their two tone armour, both chapters having made the perilous warp journey in time. Then there were the golden yellow armour of the Angels of Vigilance, guardians of Pervigilium with a sworn oath to guard the gates of the eye, the Angels of Retribution and many others from subsequent foundings. Notable by their absence were the grandmasters of librarians from the Dark Angels and Redemption chapters. Supreme Grandmaster Azrael looked around the table, bright eyes shining with determination, holding each member in his eyes for a mere moment. Never before had such a force gathered within these halls. He was the unquestioned leader of the Unforgiven. As the guardians of the Tower of Angels the Dark Angels chapter were considered first amongst equals and the chapter master the accepted leader in their search for

redemption. Azrael completed his scrutiny of the brother commanders there and momentarily glanced at the second exit door from the chamber, subconsciously hoping for the arrival of the two librarians. Then Azrael addressed the gathering.

“The emperor watches over us, and the Lion protects!”

“Hail the emperor! In the Lions eyes we are judged!” responded the gathered grandmasters.

“Brothers! Sons of the Lion! It is indeed fortunate to have been able to witness a gathering of angels so large and powerful in my lifetime.” Azrael continued “I extend my warmest greetings and gratitude on behalf of my chapter and our inner circle for your presence here. The situation on the warfront is critical to say the least, despite our many victories and accomplishments. The sons of Johnson have been extremely committed in many of the war zones, yet the constant calls for relief and pleas for help echo in our ears incessantly. The fallen have further behaved with their usual tenacity in attempting to avoid us, though we have indeed met with greater success than ever before, yet failed significantly in others. I will now summarise the situation in detail for our newly arrived brethren. We have little time and much to accomplish.”

With a flick of his wrist a holographic three dimensional vid-display appeared in the centre of the massive oval table, providing the same image regardless of the direction it was viewed from. The entire region of the eye of terror was displayed, the holo-map updating force dispositions and events in real time. The librarians of the various chapters were transferring data of their force dispositions directly in to the personal display panels set on the chairs, and these were up-linked to the holo-map.

“The emperor has been kind. He has allowed our brothers in the Redemption and Vengeance chapters to learn, locate and then use the two ancient warp gates, which has enabled us to build this unforgiven strike force of unprecedented strength. My warm compliments are extended to them in their successful journey across the empyrean.”

Interrupting the supreme grandmaster as he paused for effect, his counterpart from the Angels of Vengeance said “Our combined chapters have much to thank your forces stationed here. Their extremely successful assaults provided us with a safe and secret exit through the two warp gates. Our fleets have been deployed in this region for weeks and yet few are aware of our strength. I humbly pass the gratitude of our chapters to you.”

“You will thank us by joining the battle” smiled Azrael, always the consummate diplomat, taking the opportunity to lighten the moment and break the tension. A momentary burst of restrained laughter passed through the room, before all quietened again in expectation of Azrael’s strategy.

“The major focus of the war remains within the Cadian, Agripinaa and Caliban system as far as we are concerned. On the main tactical battle front, the timely arrival of the combined battle fleets vengeance and Redemption were able to annihilate a strong chaos fleet in the vicinity of St Josmane’s Hope. Though it was little consolation against the fall of Hope and its subsequent exterminatus, the victory against the warmaster Barradon will relinquish some pressure upon the brave defenders of the Cadian system. The combined fleets are even now en route to our home system for further deployment. Their development of new fleet tactics has proven to be devastating, and will become standard practice amongst all our naval assets.” A nod of approval was directed by all gathered there towards the relevant chapter masters. “We have conducted lightning raids in many of the systems of Agripinaa which has resulted not only the accumulation of massive amounts of data on the activities of the fallen, but also has disrupted the enemy’s plans to the extent that our imperial brethren have been able to claw back large amounts of lost ground. Sadly we suffered a major setback in the loss of grandmaster of librarians Azadael. Ezekiel believes him to be alive and that the trap itself was in fact set for his own capture. Our efforts at present have been aimed at disrupting the activities of the fallen and gathering information as to his whereabouts and the designs of the fallen for his capture. We are close to locating the nest of vipers.”

“Brave Cadia endures, but is thoroughly weakened and embattled. In the Basilica Defaux on Xersia, the fifth company sacrificed themselves but stood resolutely against the despoiler, splendid proof that the angels shall not let the son of darkness pass! We will face him and we shall stop him!” A rustle of approval spread around the table.

“You have proven beyond doubt that your leadership shall lead us to victory supreme grandmaster!” voiced a golden armoured member of the Angels of Vigilance.

“I can but lead, the victory was obtained with the blood of our battle brothers” said Azrael humbly. The gathered commanders nodded again in approval, marvelling at the humble Azrael, who at this present time wielded in the combined unforgiven chapters, a force that was nearly comparable to the legions of old.

We have fought bitter battles in the space around our most venerated Caliban system. The escalation of chaos incursions are no doubt a precursor to a major invasion of the planet.

Following the pattern of insidious infiltration within the prisons of St Josmane's Hope, we expect a similar pattern in the prison system of Terraq. However our incessant pursuit of every lead on the fallen has provided some damning evidence. They know of the Keep!"

That single sentence caused the immediate silence as the gathered angels held their breath in unison. The usually indefatigable composure of space marine commanders was visibly shaken as he let his words sink in. The Keep was a highly classified secret known only to the inner most circle of each unforgiven chapter. The keep was the remnants of the warship "Angelus Lionus", the flagship of Jonson during his crusades, it was destroyed during Luther's betrayal, and the remnants were found fused to a massive asteroid in the aftermath of Caliban's demise. Miraculously the large consignment of Dark Angel geneseed, secreted within its vaults were found intact, and an outpost established to protect it. In time a very secretive organisation was created from the ranks of the Deathwing and Inner Circles of all unforgiven chapters, called the Knights of the Order. These were tasked with the search for the fallen and protection of the gene seed banks. No one outside the inner most circles would ever learn of this information and live to tell the tale.

"Yes! We have ascertained beyond doubt that they know of the keep and the gene seed stored within. Following the recent events in the Piscina system, we know of the fallen's quest for the gene seed. Whether this is in conjunction with the only other traitor who has a similar agenda, namely Fabius Bile, we know not. But time is indeed short and we do not have the resources for a complete evacuation. The Knights of the Order have been ordered to prepare to repel boarders. Battle fleets Vengeance and Redemption are tasked with the destruction of any invasion fleet. We expect an assault in the coming days. Strike Force Vengeance will accompany the combined fleets and deploy by assault in the rear of the enemy's invasion forces. Our brothers of the order will defend the keep to the end!"

The grandmaster of the Angels of Redemption requested to address the gathering and was given the floor. "Honoured Azrael, keeper of the truth, should we not further reinforce the Caliban system and completely annihilate the enemy there? A strong victory in Caliban may well attract the despoiler there, away from the critical Cadian systems!"

"A strategy worthy of consideration" added Azrael, "However, the Cadian system is on the verge of collapse. The time is critical at present to the extent that we have delayed any further action against suspected bases of the traitorous fallen angels, until the situation has been stabilized. Battle fleets Absolution and Dark Angels will deploy directly to the Cadian system and we will intervene in strength. Strike forces of both chapters will deploy to target Kasr Sonnen and take

the battle to the enemy. Battle fleets Retribution and Vigilance will remain with the Tower of Angels as a ready reserve. The operational details will be downloaded to your commanders within the hour. Are there any questions?”

Before anyone could answer, the massive blast door guarding the entrance swung silently open, the Deathwing terminator guarding it stepping aside. In walked Ezekiel accompanied by his counterpart in the Vengeance chapter and followed by Menalaius. Without formality, Ezekiel addressed the gathering, as within the inner circle they were all equals.

“Codicier Adonis has yet to recover but I have gathered a smidgeon of formation that was transferred to his mind by the elder farseer. For a farseer to take such risks and give his life for this mission, it must have been information of supreme magnitude. I have but gathered a few words, phrases and events spread within his minds but the relevance is so great I felt that we must share it now.”

Everyone looked up at the ancient librarians. They showed no sign of tiredness or exhaustion, but all knew that the two of them had been at their tedious task for weeks. Ezekiel’s eyes shone with defiance as he spoke.

“They do know of the gene seed repository in the keep and will attack it! As real as it may be it is a diversionary assault. Their main target is the Tower of Angels. There is a connection between our missing brother, the oracle and the Tower of Angels! The warning I see is the destruction of this hallowed fortress! The warning is one about the birth of a second eye!”

Time froze, hearts stopped, and breaths stilled as the most experienced and devout angels, sons of the lion and descendants of the emperor’s personal guard digested the information. They realised with finality that the war for the eye had indeed been raging in earnest for weeks. The battle for their souls was about to begin.

# Gathering of Angels

## Volume III

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## Chapter XIII: Knights of the Order

The low monotonous chant slowly wafted across the huge open spaces of the great hall. The sounds echoed off the walls and pillars of the chamber, gradually losing their individuality and merging in to a low rumble that soothed the human heart. Each pillar and wall had a different sonorous quality that altered the sound waves, enriching them with a musical quality of their own and adding to the chorus. Such was the craftsmanship of the creators of the great hall millennia ago, its purpose one of artistic creativity and relaxation of the soul. A gentle aura of golden light descended like a warm blanket from above, its sources hidden amongst the finely crafted sculptures that adorned vaulted ceiling. The calmness of the light was broken only by the individual flicker of the ceremonial torches, whose flames seem to dance to the motion of some unseen force. The tranquillity of the atmosphere washed over all those present like the warm embrace of a loving mother or a proud father. Memories flickered, events recalled and emotions soothed as the low chant continued to emanate from the head of the chamber.

Brother-captain Apollyon slowly opened his eyes, his lips subconsciously mouthing the words of the invocatum maleficum in synchrony with the audible chant. The sweet smell of incense helped calm his supernatural senses. The chants slowly swept his thoughts from the present to the distant past. He allowed his memories to flood back from eons ago, remembering with pride his first steps in to the service of the emperor. He had been recruited in to the Angels of Redemption chapter from his home world. Katris III was a feral world, where the phrase survival of the fittest was given meaning everyday of one's life. His utter belief in individuality had nearly cost him his life. His initial inability to work as a member of a team, during his days as a novice in the tenth company, almost forfeited his career as a space marine. Only the careful selection process and rigorous indoctrination of space marine training had earned him the right to accept the honoured gene-seed of the lion. He savoured the memories of battle, as he rose from a scout to a veteran space marine, his natural ability to lead ensuing in his dynamic rise to the command of a company. It was, however, the time before he became the master of the fourth company, which he repeatedly visualised in his mind. Despite showing much promise in battle and superb leadership under fire, his impetuous nature had always remained in the way of his advancement. He had remained so until the keen eyes of the chapter's training officers had sought him out as one of the ideal candidates for service under a little known and shadowy organization. Highly skilled, dedicated, individualistic and extremely innovative individuals were chosen for secondment. Under the watchful eyes and tutelage of the highly secretive training program, Apollyon learned of scientific marvels, technological wizardry and alien horrors. It was as a member of the little known sub-organization, that he truly blossomed in to his full potential. He

had been accepted as a serving member in the kill team of the Death Watch, the chambers militant of the Ordo Xenos arm of the emperor's holy inquisition.

Arrogant in the belief of the superiority of the human race and the supernatural capabilities of the space marine, particularly of the unforgiven chapters, Apollyon quickly learned to respect the other members of the Death Watch teams. He even spent time learning from other individuals such as the occasional member of the Officio Assassinorum, Adeptus Mechanicus and Xeno biologists. One hundred and twenty years of service in the Death Watch had exposed him to alien horrors beyond compare. He had worked closely with similarly capable individuals from various space marine chapters, befriending some and even taking a blood oath with a brother marine from the Space Wolves chapter. It was as a very different individual that Apollyon finally returned to the service of his chapter. Inquisitor Barraphos awarded Apollyon greatly with finely crafted personal weaponry and equipment as his appreciation for the extensive service. Once again supremely confident in his own abilities, and his knowledge of the universe, he was to be humbled yet again. This time it was with the revelation of the dark secrets of the chapters' history. Following a long series of gruelling tests both physical and psychic, Apollyon had proved himself to be worthy of entry to the first company. Rigorous as the criteria are for entry to this exalted formation, they were even more stringent on those individuals who had been exposed to outside influence, particularly those of the inquisition. Deep mind scans, psychic stability tests and long hours of prayer and self deprivation finally culminated in his ascension in to the inner circle.

Once more he was to be surprised and once again the veil dropped from his eyes. Once more, he realised that knowledge was the true power in the universe. At each step of his progression, he had realised that there was more unknown. Now, finally, he had realised his purpose. Under the strictest of secrecy, he remembered being teleported off the battle fields of Qartaran, on to a fast strike cruiser. He had left without any word to neither his company nor his battle brothers. For all intents and purposes he had died on the battle field, his gene seed apparently unclaimed. Yet, he was very much alive and speeding on his way to his destiny. He remembered the pride swell in his chest as the strike cruiser approached their destination. He remembered the solemn ceremony, where he swore allegiance once again to their primarch, but also to the cause of redemption, dedicating the rest of his life to the hunt for the fallen. He visualised the scene as he had stood side by side with honoured veterans from every unforgiven chapter, gathered in the Lion's own personal star ship. He had indeed joined the ranks of the Knights of the Order.

It was as a member of one of the small teams of the Knights of the Order, that he truly found his purpose. Acting in small groups, the Knights had the capacity and the freedom to follow each and every lead on the fallen, hunting them with singular purpose. The knights were made up of like

minded individuals from each and every unforgiven chapter. Their existence was known only to the few highest ranking individuals of the inner circle of each of those chapters. The organization allowed the pooling of all intelligence on the fallen and actions to be taken without compromising the integrity of the chapter organizations. Their primary role was in the tracking down of leads, tracing potential sources of information and on occasions calling in chapter support for assaults on identified bases of operations of the fallen. It was on very rare occasions that the Knights had to deploy in battle strength. The past weeks had been extremely hectic. Their strike teams had been surreptitiously moving in and out of the systems of the Cadian gate, ever since they received Interrogator-Chaplain Phaleg's coded transmission. Many informants and heretics had been captured and they had been working their noose around the cult of the voice, slowly but surely. Apollyon marvelled at the gathered strength of the Knights. He had never before witnessed the full cumulative strength of the organization gathered in one place. He subconsciously thanked the primarch for allowing him to be the nominal head of this enigmatic organization during the time of its greatest trial. The soothing chants of the interrogator-chaplain Sartrardon continued to reverberate through the great hall as the Knights prepared for battle.

Gathered in their full strength, the great hall filled with proud warriors scarred with the experience of constant conflict, the Knights represented an awesome strength of arms. This day would go down in the long and proud history of their as one that was utterly unique. Most space marine chapters are planetary based which provides a recruitment base for them. The Knights of the Order, being constantly supplied by experienced individuals from each and every one of the unforgiven chapters have the advantage of being allowed a frugal existence, free from the need for extensive logistics. It was truly appropriate that one force totally dedicated to the eradication of the treachery of 10,000 years past was based on the first warship to fall in that battle. The Angelus Lionus was the primarch's personal command ship, gifted to him none other than the emperor of man himself. After the defeat of the arch traitor Horus, Johnson returned to Caliban. Grief stricken at the loss of his father and the treachery of his brothers, he had deemed himself unfit to travel aboard his father's gift and refused to travel in that ship. That decision had saved not only the primarch but also his legacy. The Angelus Lionus, commanded by Admiral Llicheu and containing the Lion's Master of the guard Lamoroch, was destroyed in the opening salvoes of the treachery that had beset Caliban. What was unknown to most, was that the admiral Llechau had self destructed his stricken ship and destroyed the orbital defences of Caliban, to allow the safe entry of the main Dark Angel fleet. The explosion had blown out the rear of the gigantic warship, but the great artisan's who had created the unique space ship had done their work well. The entire forward section of the ship separated at the time of the explosion, protected by its own void shields, a design intended to add to the survivability of its most important complement. In the aftermath of the destruction of Caliban, the surviving Dark Angels discovered the remnants of the

of the Angelus Lionus, fused to a massive piece of asteroid. Separated from the main continent sized plate of Caliban on which the Tower of Angels stood, this discovery was hidden by the then chapter master of the dark angels. With the creation of the Knights of the Order, the Angelus Lionus, was renamed the Keep in honour of the second largest fortress monastery on Caliban and made in to their base of operations.

From the sacred ground that had been their primarch's flagship, the Knights had set out for ten thousand years, on a crusade that battled for the very soul of their legion. Knight Commanders were appointed in rotation from each of the unforgiven chapters in turn. Each commander had etched his name in honour, great deeds and superfluous achievements being written on the walls of the hall. Now, it was Apollyon's time to lead. He too had followed in the hallowed tradition of his fore bearer's, reaching in to the legions past to bring to justice the traitors of eons before. The coming of the depoiler's assault had brought out the fallen like a pack of vultures and the Knights had reaped a bitter harvest. But today was different. The hunted were coming for the hunt. The greatest defence of the keep and the knights was their secrecy. That anonymity had now been compromised and the enemy knew their location. They would come, for the gene seed secreted within the massive vaults, and for the sheer pleasure of revenge. The hunted were coming as the hunters, accompanied by the most vile forces humanity had ever faced.

Aplollyon stood up, resplendent in his green and bone coloured armour. The cloak of his knighthood fluttered in the gentle wind blown by the artificial environment. The chanting had ceased. His men stood at the ready. Apollyon looked at them, slowly meeting each knight's gaze in turn, saluting each with his eyes as unspoken words of respect passed between the emperor's warriors.

In the periphery of the Caliban system lay many small asteroids and space debris, a testament to the infamy of ten millennia ago. Hidden amongst the debris were minute satellites and remote sensing augers, floating innocuously for eons. One such satellite suddenly sprang to life, its automated sensor array detecting a surge in real space. The minor energy spikes that its probes detected were analyzed rapidly within its computer matrices, its patterns being recognized by the cogitator banks. A single rapid sequence message was discharged from the sensor array in a moment before the array was destroyed as reality turned in to turmoil and the empyreran regurgitated out a massive armada of warships. The signal that had escaped sped across the space of Caliban, and in an instant was received, decoded and analysed by the massive receptor banks in the keep. A final warning was activated by the master of the watch and a single sentence transmitted to Apollyon's receiver.

“They are here!”

Apollyon smiled. It was the time of reckoning. The time for action was upon them as was the time for proving his capacity to command. His men knew what to do, yet awaited his command, not one man flinching in anticipation of the coming battle. This was not the time for speeches or complex stratagems. Apollyon unsheathed his power sword, activating its power supply. The gesture was not lost upon his men.

“To the walls brothers! To the battlements! Today we battle for the soul of our legion and the memory of the Lion!”

“For the Lion” An almighty chorus erupted within the great hall as then men dispersed for battle.

## Chapter XII: Dalamere's Command

Dalamere looked at the main view screen at the empty space ahead. They had just exited from their long journey through the empyrean. She was always glad to return to real space, even though she had been a ship's captain for more than six decades. The tactical display next to her flickered in to life revealing the position of her grand cruiser at the head of her small fleet. Icons came alive behind the position of her ship as more and more vessels exited the warp on schedule. The bridge of the "Renegade Death", her flagship was quite different to most renegade ships. It was maintained similar to any other warship, few signs or icons depicting her allegiance. She stood at attention, as she had always done whenever they exited the warp space, alert eyes flitting around view screens and bridge personnel alike, always wary of danger both internal and external.

It was the harsh nature of the imperial creed and the rigid application of its law that had been the principal driving force behind Dalamere. Born to a middle class apothecary on the world of Nadatoumb III, she frequently witness the civic riots caused by poverty. Mismanagement by the ruling junta deprived the majority of the populace of the barest of comforts. Both her parents had been kind and loving towards her, her three brothers and anyone who sought medical attention. Their capacity to look beyond the political causes in their endeavour towards alleviating human suffering was their undoing in the final analysis. Following the mass food riots that devastated the entire planet, the local defence forces and the arbites were unleashed in force. Their home overcrowded with wounded and starving civilians and rioters requiring medical attention, it was only a matter of time before the arbites discovered their services. Blasting their way in to the overcrowded home in a manner typical of the iron fist of the imperium, civilians and rioters, convicts and innocents, patients and apothecary all became casualties. Dalamere was the only survivor, standing on a small hillock, tears streaming down her young face, as she saw the inferno engulf all that was dear to her. That event changed her life for ever, her faith in the imperium shattered, her belief not to rely on others strengthened, she found her way to the stars. Her alluring beauty and razor sharp mind, quickly assuring her meteoric rise to power within the local pirate fleets. She returned to her planet of birth twenty years later at the head of three vengeance class cruisers to wreak revenge on the killers of her family. The governor's palace and the junta's sanatorium were levelled by orbital bombardment while she delivered a deadly virus to the precincts of the adeptus arbites. The judges died a terrible death but the horrendous wave of plague that spread throughout the planet ensured that she would never again set foot on imperial soil as a free woman.

Dalamere ruled her rogue fleet with an iron fist. She had climbed in to power by the alluring beauty of her body and the seductive nature of her mind, quietly and efficiently disposing each of the captains of the vengeance class cruisers in turn. The occasional display of callous cruelty in the face of opposition along with the appropriate leeway for personal achievement had endeared her to her crew. Caring for her crew in ways that others wouldn't but nevertheless being intolerant of any sign of disobedience, the crew members of all three cruisers would follow her without question. Loyalty, such a rare commodity in the universe, and bought usually through fear, was lavished at her feet by a grateful crew. Having accrued her powerful fleet, she set about planning their long term survival. She was wise enough not to align herself with the malign gods of chaos overtly, but simply acted as a renegade pirate captain. The coming of any conflict, regardless of the adversaries, always provided great opportunities for pirate captains. However, Dalamere didn't simply prey on helpless victims. She relished the tactical challenge of defeating a well armed opponent through guile just as much. Her modus operandi was usually one of taking on the role of a mercenary, selling her services to the highest bidder, even doing deals with imperial forces at times. The onset of Abaddon's thirteenth crusade had brought a huge cascade of opportunities, from running supplies to beleaguered imperial worlds to supporting local chaos cultist invasions. Her three ships of the line, venerable Vengeance class cruisers from another era were well suited for the varied missions required of them. Today, she was leading a veritable invasion fleet, guarding the slow transport ships and supply dhows as they made their way towards a most unusual target, the asteroid fields within the Caliban system.

She had been approached by mysterious, cloaked but giant warriors. She had recognised them as rogue space marines. She had come in to contact with these giants of humanity on previous occasions, barely escaping with her life on each such encounter. The ones that approached her were different. They were soft spoken, and lacked the arrogant brashness in their attitude. Yet, she fully realised that they were rogue elements as she spied the crude attempts at defacing the imperial eagle off their armour. The black armour that lay beneath the dark cloaks brooded ominously. Her mission had been simple. Transport the invasion force to a specified cluster of asteroids and protect the transports while they disgorged their cargo in drop pods and landing vessels. She had vehemently refused to have any of the giant warriors aboard her vessel. She had had to compromise by allowing them to accompany her fleet in a vessel of their own, a devastation class cruiser, "Eviscerator". The accompanying fighters and bombs would provide welcome protection to her warships. Trusting no one, she had instructed her crew to track all such spacecraft with their close in weapons turrets, whenever they were launched. They had been joined by three squadrons of infidel class raiders, each captain responding to her invitation and the promise of much bounty. They formed a screen totalling nine such small ships. The squadron that she had known longest had been allocated to cover the rear of the convoy,

positioned behind the Devastation class cruiser, ostensibly to protect its vulnerable rear, but with direct orders to target its engines on Dalamere's command. The other two raider squadrons fanned out ahead as forward scouts. Her own cruisers were arrayed in arrow head formation, with the devastation bringing up the rear of the convoy. Even with the distance created by their dispositions, an unbalancing feeling of dread emanated from that vessel. Herded within this tight circle were ten troop transports and two captured imperial super transports. There was enough carrying capacity to transport three entire regiments of the renegade troops and their support vehicles. She realised that this was not a simple mission of capturing imperial outposts. This was a fully fledged invasion of the entire sector, while imperial forces were distracted in the distant Cadian gate.

Dalamere looked at the astro-chart displays. Their final destination was close but something worried her. Beckoning to her navigation officer to approach, she pointed at the astro-charts. Understanding the question before it was spoken, the experienced renegade spoke softly.

"We are heading in to the cluster of asteroid formation. The ancient charts relate this region to the Caliban system, supposedly the home world of one of the space marine chapters. Yet none of the newer charts document this. There is nothing but asteroids here"

Dalamere looked at the astrogater for a long time and called out to the sensor-auger operator. "I want active and passive scans on all frequencies all fields. Focus narrow band beam search patterns through the asteroids. I need to know if there are any ships or orbital defences hidden over there.

The communications officer called out as the holo-vid display on the bridge activated itself. "Incoming transmission from the Eviscerator"

The view screen filled with the image of a massive, black armoured figure, cloak and cowl casting a menacing shadow over the deep dark armour. The metallic voice oozed malicious intent as he spoke. "Do not concern yourself with navigation or targeting priorities. The path to follow will be revealed in a moment. Detach group secundus to Terraq and prepare to dispatch assault teams. Co-ordinates for bombardment will be transmitted in due course"

The screen flickered off without awaiting an answer. She looked at Gregor, here deputy on the bridge. A fearsome man, tall and muscle bound, his physical appearance belied a sharp mind and decades of experience. "We follow their orders, and soon after the assault drop, we leave as planned!" He smiled. The crew of the troop transport ships had been infiltrated by members of her



own rogue gang. She fully intended to appropriate them as additional payment after their content had been dropped on the target area. She would sell or dispose of the ships and other valuables rather than expand her fleet. That way they remained small for all appearances, highly mobile and motivated and their wealth grew gradually. The three commanders of the infidel squadrons would settle for part of the bounty. The desolator cruiser with the space marines might be a problem, but she intended not to make it in to a confrontation.

“Helmsman, maintain current speed. Adjust heading to the received co-ordinates. All decks report status!” thundered Gregor’s voice. Vox-casters began to transmit responses from each compartment and deck, starting with the gunnery decks. The crew was ready. They would have made any imperial navy commander proud. The right mix of opportunity, bounty and fear was all that was required for everyone to function well. Dalamere had no illusion about this mission and fully expected to suffer casualties. Nothing was ever straight forward when renegade space marines were involved. She strained her memory to try and identify the origin of these marines. The dark armour covered by robes was not easily visible. Their speech did not offer any clues. She would have to ascertain their back ground at a later stage. For now, the asteroid belt was drawing near and their ships were ploughing forward at flank speed.

Gregor glanced sideways with a nervous flicker of his eyes. Dalamere almost felt the unspoken question. How much did they trust their employers? Very little indeed was the answer.

The lead captain of the infidel raider reduced speed as he neared the edge of the field. Within seconds a single beam of lance energy struck the vessel collapsing its single void shield.

An all-fleet broadcast came over the vid-screens. The space marine who had previously addressed Dalamere was there, his helmet removed and the cowl drawn back. Fearsome in appearance, scarred beyond recognition, the former defender of humanity spoke slowly. “Disobey orders and you will die!” palpable evil emanated even through the inorganic vid-log sequences, terrifying all the complement of the war cruisers.

A moment passed and silently the infidel raiders picked up speed, speeding to their apparent destruction.

“Unidentified weapons systems coming online!” shouted the sensor-auger operator, “Multiple contacts! Massed weapons batteries hidden within the asteroids. Targeting resolutions transferred to weapons matrices”

“Battle stations” shouted Dalamere, the adrenalin rush of combat overcoming her concerns about her employers for the present moment. The targeting display was rapidly filling up with potential targets, each identified by different icons. All were immobile, mostly multiple torpedo launchers, mine dispensers and weapons batteries.

“Eviscerator is launching attack craft”

“Gregor, have the secondary batteries follow the attack craft until they have passed us” Dalamere was certainly not taking any chances.

“Massed torpedo launchers detected. Space mine launchers have activated within the asteroid fields. Laser weapons systems powering up”

Whatever was hidden within the asteroid field of Caliban, some one was going to great lengths to guard it. What was more suspicious was that the space marines in the Eviscerator seemed to have full knowledge of this. She had wondered as to why the equivalent of three complete imperial guard regiments were being brought in to assault the three lightly guarded systems in the Caliban sector. Terraq was a prison system with little defences against an outside assault and Orphia was forlorn and shunned by most. Perhaps she should have listened to Gregor and dropped this assignment. On the other hand, once the troops were landed and the space marines away from the bridge of the Eviscerator, it would take little effort to commandeer the transports, disable the Eviscerator’s engines and make good their escape. All she had to hope for was that the renegade marines did not intend her fleet to be the physical shield against the formidable but hidden defences in the region.

Suddenly the forward view screens dimmed as the sensors automatically protected the holo-vids. A string of explosions blossomed in the distance, followed by multiple detonations as ordnance, mines and torpedoes were engulfed in the primary explosions. On the targeting display, Dalamere noticed that the weapons systems that had been displayed were rapidly disappearing. She also noted that no weapon had been fired from either the fleet or the attack craft.

## Chapter XIII: Lords of the Night

Gravad the chosen looked on with grim satisfaction at the string of explosions. It was the culmination of weeks of stealthy work. A worthy accomplishment indeed, for a disciple of the greatest advocate of terror by stealth. He looked around slowly, his movements slow and purposeful, his eyes easily seeing in the low levels of reflected light of the explosions. His four accomplices were all accounted for, their life signs flickering in one corner of his helmet mounted display. They had arrived in a dilapidated old explorer vessel, not fit for the likes of Gravad. But the mission required stealth and there was none better at it than the Chosen of Night Hunter. He had walked in the shadow of the pale skinned primarch with the gift of prescience. Ten millennia ago he had been trained by the emperor's son who had been haunted by visions of the future. From the darkness ridden alleys of Nostromo to the blood drenched fields of battle across the universe, he had followed his primarch without question. He had been gifted with one of the earliest versions of the jump pack, leading each assault with increasingly effective stratagems. He had perfected the techniques for infiltration while encumbered by the massive power armoured suits, and for the sudden lightning assaults using the jump packs. He had celebrated in glee on hearing of Night Hunters victory in single combat against the snobbish Dorn. He had remained ready at the head of the legions space ships while the brotherhood of the primarchs met to debate the problem that was Konrad Curze. He had then fled with his primarch at the head of the space fleet back to Nostromo, laying waste to all that lay before them. He had stood with his leader as the guns of the primarch's flagship commenced the bombardment of their home planet which culminated in its complete and utter destruction. He had accompanied Night Hunter as he fled to the eastern fringes and stood by him as he established their base on Tsagualsa. It was then, at the latter stages of the Horus heresy, he had left the side of his primarch to lead yet another expedition of terror and death. He could never forgive himself for not being present when the cowardly attack by the callidus assassin M'Shen took his primarch's life. He still struggled to understand the ease with which the assassin had penetrated their stronghold, the reason for the absence of the honour guard, and above all the reason for his primarch accepting his fate.

News of the death of Night Hunter had sent Gravad in to a spiral of unmitigated terror and an orgy of destruction not seen in the eastern fringes of the galaxy. He had progressively gravitated towards the powers of chaos, although he had remained firm in the conviction that chaos was a power to be manipulated and not an immortal or divine entity. Such firm conviction was very much the inbuilt belief amongst his kith and kin of the Night Lords legion. As the years became decades and decades evolved in to millennia, the Chosen of Night Hunter, continued the spree of wanton destruction. Gradually gaining control of most of the dispersed bands of his legion he

formed them in to a loose conglomeration within the eye of terror. As they spent more and more time within the eye, the influence of the raw energy of the warp gradually transformed them in to composite beings, their armour and raptor jump packs being fused to their bodies. From their hidden bases within the eye, under his leadership, their strike groups ranged far and wide. At times selling their services to any of the enemies of the emperor, and at other times simply attacking targets of as they presented themselves, Gravad wasted no opportunity to take the battle to the Imperium. The revenge for his lord's demise would be long lasting and utterly terrifying to the citizens of the Imperium. He had commenced planning for his current operation decades ago, ever since the enigmatic renegade from the Dark Angels legion had approached him. The reward for the success would be many, least of which would be to see one of the carrion god's lackey legions humbled. That in itself may have been reward enough for him, but he had made other pacts, other deals by himself, that would reap a bitter harvest of the emperor's finest. The ambitious renegade pirate who was willing to escort his invasion fleet, and her cohorts would certainly plan to double cross him after the event. By then it wouldn't matter, for he would have in his possession a much sought after commodity, space marine gene seed of the highest calibre. Then he could command more power and alliances.

He and his command squad had arrived in a dilapidated transport that had made a transient warp drop just outside the system. Transmitting distress signals and requesting help for repairs to their warp drives, they had been totally ignored. The ship had been manipulated to drift towards the asteroid field and at the opportune moment, the five scions of darkness had activated their raptor packs and departed in to the cold void of open space. The completely sealed power armour protected them from the hazards of the vacuum of space as they drifted slowly towards one of the asteroids. Each space marine had a large supply container attached to him by a long tether. The packs contained additional weapons, explosives, implosion devices, communications relays, intercept equipment, sensor augers and much more. They had spent almost a lunar month moving from asteroid to asteroid, hiding and infiltrating, listening and planning. They had discovered a most elaborate set of inter locking sensors and defences, none that were beyond the expertise of the masters of stealth. They had slowly but surely worked their way, forming a safe path for their invasion fleet, carefully laid explosives ready to destroy sensors and weapons platforms as well as the asteroids themselves. They had reached their final destination approximately a week ago. Once again the five lords moved so much like shadows, invisible to the automated sensors of the complex hidden in the centre of the asteroid field. He had been mesmerised momentarily by the cunning and guile of their quarry, the remnants of a battleship, from his own era, fused with a massive asteroid, and converted to a base of operations. They then spent the rest of the time evaluating the defences and planning their strategy as his invasion fleet entered the system on his command. Despite all his efforts, he could not divine the purpose

or the affiliation of the facility. That it was likely related to the Dark Angels chapter was obvious, since the renegade space marines who approached him had all the hallmarks of those who were hunted by the Dark Angels. He also had come to know that this may be a repository for the much sought after gene seed. That mere possibility had rewarded him with a visit from the arch alchemist Fabius Bile, and yet another infamous pact had been sealed. His devious mind had further ascertained that the renegade popularly known as "The Voice", spreading discord within the Agripinaa sector had been accorded a high priority by the Dark Angels chapter. Utilising vox recordings of the broadcasts of "The Voice" he had deployed automated systems that repeatedly broadcast a challenge to the sons of Johnson. He relished the opportunity to trap the young lap dogs of the carrion god. As his plan grew from its inception as a lightning strike to one of grand strategic thrust at the heart of a space marine chapter, he had wavered between reality and delusion. Now the pieces were all in place and the time was near. With a single flick of his finger, he had triggered the cascade of explosions and implosions that would clear a path through the asteroid field and its defences. Hidden by the explosions was the activation of communications jamming cogitators, sensor auger interference projectors and direct vox-caster emitters all of which were attuned to the frequencies used by this imperial outpost. All of these were hallmarks of the modus operandi of the Night Lords, to strike fear and confusion in to the enemy before taking the battle field.

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Deep in the swirling whirlpool of raw energy that was the empyrean, the massive armada of warships continued their holding pattern. A difficult manoeuvre at the best of times, it required an act of sheer genius to accomplish it near the cascading effects of the eye of terror. Luchas looked through the protected view screens, each one covered in protective sigils and wards, supposedly to add to the efficacy of the Geller field which enabled ships to transit the warp space. He stood at the bridge of the small vessel, dwarfed by the mighty battleships he was accompanying. He had come a long way, since the heady days of the great crusade. He looked through the etched plas-glass window, his vision locked in to the distant past as his mind filtered through old memories. Memories held back over the millennia now rushing back like a monsoon flood. It was a sort of home coming for him after such a long life time. All that would end today and he would become righteous. Born in to the knight hood of Caliban's feudal society, Luchas had considered himself blessed as he had had the opportunity to witness the cleansing of Caliban. He was but a young teenager, but had become a squire to one of the knights through his dedication. Much had happened since, the discovery of the Lion, the cleansing of the forests, the coming of immortal emperor of man and his own ascension to the ranks of the sky warriors. The victories of the great crusade and the defeats at the hands of the aliens, the injuries caused by a giant ork warlord and

the resultant confinement to the apothecarium back on Caliban were all but vague memories now. He tried hard to remember the great civil war that broke up Caliban, much of his knowledge of such events being long lost. He did however remember the meeting with his saviour on an unknown planet, a dark hooded man, who commanded respect and one who bore the lion's sword. He had since stood by his side, never faltering, always understanding the damnation they had earned ten thousand years ago. Hunted all their subsequent lives, much of the deeds he was asked to perform were meaningless taken in their own perspective. But he knew in his heart that the enigmatic man with the capacity to rouse the population of a world simply through his oratory had a grand plan. He had given them purpose in life and they would stand by him to the end. Luchas marvelled at his mentor's foresight and ability to plan strategically. It had taken many years of convoluted planning to have him at the bridge of the Cobra class destroyer, captured from the imperial navy in the Gothic war and now crewed by renegade pirates. It had taken even more cunning to have his ship join the large battle fleet that flexed its talons in readiness for battle.

Luchas looked at the astrogation displays. The massive cogitator banks were struggling to keep abreast of the positions of the fleet as they entire fleet struggled to maintain the holding patterns within the empyrean. The display indicated that the fleet was composed mostly of cruisers. Nine massive cruisers formed a protective ring around the three capital ships of the fleet. A diabolical warship in the shape of a desolator class battleship held sway in the middle. Ahead of it floated two repulsive class grand cruisers. They were surrounded by a shoal of idolator and infidel class raiders as well as many iconoclast destroyers. There were no transport ships within this fleet. This was a hunting fleet and they were awaiting their quarry. A feeling of dread emanated from the fleet that was quite palpable even through the vid-logs. He knew that the command crews of the fleet were composed of men from the Night Lords legion. Debased excuses for humanity, who excelled at stealth but also relished the terror and indiscriminate death they dealt to all and sundry. These were men without principles, who made war for its own sake and killed for the pure and simple pleasure of the terror it sowed. Why they were headed in to the Caliban system he did not know, but the size of the fleet and the deviousness of his own mentor pointed to an event of mega proportions. Luchas once again thumbed through the various fire controls, considering the tactical dispositions repeatedly until he was satisfied. He was pleased that he had managed to form a pact with a number of the smaller iconoclast destroyers. These were all commanded by rogue and renegade pirate captains. They were mere humans, who balked at the massive frame of the space marine and unquestioningly agreed to join him in a loose confederation. Through a mix of convincing tactical discussions and terrifying display of his own power he had forced them to slave their targeting cogitators and sensor augers to his own ship, giving his vessel an extended range for sensor sweeps and complete control of the combined firepower of the smaller

ships. He had played the role of the outcast for long enough and had been relegated to the rear of the formation, ostensibly to guard the vulnerable rear of the main ships of the line. He remembered every fallen commander he had served with. Great names such as Dragien came to the forefront. But now he served only one man, and he remembered the last words of command that had emanated from the lips of his mentor. His mentor was right and he, Luchas, was ready to face his destiny.

On the bridge of the “Renegades Death” pirate captain Dalamere received a single command from the “Eviscerator”. *“Advance at flank speed and begin orbital bombardment of the target coordinates!”* On an isolated asteroid Gravad heard his subordinates transmitted command and five raptors synchronously activated their jump packs in eager anticipation. The real battle for Caliban was about to begin in earnest.

## Chapter XIII: Battle for Caliban

Apollyon stood at the middle of the sanctum internus, the command centre of the keep. It had been the bridge of the "Angelus Lionus" when it was the primarch's flag ship. It had been the ideal chamber to be converted in to a command centre. Its high position allowing a direct field of vision across the asteroid belt in addition to the numerous sensor displays that filled each wall. Digital astrogation charts and targeting cogitators lined every spare vertical surface. The centrepiece of attention was the three dimensional tactical display, revealing the positions of all known threats within the system. A much larger display was positioned on one corner of the chamber, once again sporting a three dimensional display, but this time encompassing the entire galaxy. Multiple icons flickered on them identifying various degrees of information and potential leads regarding the fallen including sightings and attack co-ordinates. It was from this chamber that the Knights of the Order had planned and carried out their campaign of redemption for ten thousand years. Now the sanctity of this ultra secret redoubt was about to be violated by the heretics who had betrayed the emperor all those years ago. Apollyon promised to himself that those same men will pay dearly for this sacrilege.

They had tracked the progress of the invasion fleet from the moment it entered real space. They had been expecting the invasion for days now, thanks to the constant flow of intelligence coming their way from the Tower of Angels, all of it earned with the blood of their brethren on the battlefield. He had personally overseen the implementation of multiple layers of defensive sensor grids and weapon stations. Their numbers were small but they had many surprises for any uninvited intruders. He had raised an eyebrow as the chaos fleet continued at flank speed directly towards the co-ordinates of the keep, ostensibly towards their doom at the hands of the massive asteroids in their path. His suspicions of enemy infiltrators was very quickly confirmed as a string of explosions and advanced implosion devices disrupted every sensor, weapon array and asteroid in the path of the advancing fleet. The symbols indicating the enemy fleet flickered and disappeared momentarily, along with a large number of icons denoting the defensive systems. A wide and long path of undefended and clear space now lay aimed directly at the position of the keep. Apollyon silently admired the efforts of the enemy infiltrators. They had indeed done their work very well, but they had to contend with the grit and determination of the unforgiven. At a single spoken command one of the techmarines at the console activated a series of runes. In response numerous dormant sensor augers activated themselves from across the other quadrants, criss-crossing the entire system with their passive systems. The dark swathe on Apollyon's tactical display came alive again with icons demarcating the enemy ships. He would



not be blinded so easily. He smiled quietly, noting that the path of safety could easily be converted in to an alley of death. He prepared to unleash his wrath at the oncoming enemy. Gravad adjusted the thrusters of the massive raptor jump packs with a deftness that belied his massive form. Gentle thrusts were all that were needed to direct his silent journey across the void towards the massive bedrock that contained the keep. There he would make history. There, his skills and battle lust would buy him infamous accord. On his command his four companions had deployed similarly but to other, pre determined points. He silently saluted the defenders of the keep for their foresight as the extensive array of sensor augers he had deployed detected the activation of the dormant systems. He smiled, knowing that here he would find a worthy adversary. Two of his men were deploying to asteroids on either flank of the cleared path, to intercede against any last minute interferences. The other two followed him at a distance, quietly deploying to the surface of the bedrock that held the fused remains of the ancient space ship.

On the bridge of the “Renegade’s Death” Dalamere concentrated anxiously. A path had been blown clear for them. Gregor was right she thought to herself, perhaps she should not have undertaken this mission. It was escalating in to a major conflict by the minute. She put aside her misgivings and concentrated on the mission at hand. Success was the only chance for survival. She had ordered the raiders to lead in spearhead formations of three and her cruisers were entering the space in line astern. The “Eviscerator” deployed a little behind them, keeping the troop transports between her squadron and itself. The attack craft from the Eviscerator screamed past the Dalamere’s squadron of cruisers, oblivious the fact that they were in the sights of Dalamere’s close in weapons until they had passed. She had stood mesmerised at their intended target. The remnants of a massive ancient battleship fused to a large mass of asteroid. The magnificence of the battleship’s construction hadn’t diminished with time or its partial destruction. Whatever was within this ancient wreck, going by the defences they had had to overcome so far, she could expect it to be no easy fight. She uttered a brief order and the massed batteries of her fleet began their age old occupation of unleash death and destruction. Slowing down to take synchronous orbit within range of the target asteroid, the ships lights dimmed and vibrations increased as the mass gun batteries began their unholy task.

The command centre which occupied the “Eviscerator’s” bridge was dark and wreaked of fear. The light levels were extremely low and the vid-logs and display screens were almost invisible to the human eye. Dragnarth looked around, wary of danger at every passing moment. His enhanced senses were able to see and feel his surroundings but only with a superhuman effort. He was surprised at the ease with which the band of space marines who commanded the bridge functioned in this near invisible level of lighting. He had heard much about them, members of the Night Lords legion. They had no firm allegiance to any one faith, much like himself, but where

they differed was in their unremitting urge for wanton destruction of human life. He himself had allowed first his pride and then his anger to cloud his judgement. Ten millennia ago he had taken the path that had given him the chance to live beyond any human life span but had damned him irredeemably in the process. Yet he now fought on, in his own way, despite being betrayed on numerous occasions. First it was the emperor, then it was their primarch and now even the man whom he had begun to believe was the last best hope, Cypher, had all betrayed him. He had expected their hunters to suffer a hammer blow, when Cypher had made his pacts with the despoiler. Yet nothing had happened. They had run rings around their younger brethren in the Cadian and Agripinaa systems but slowly the imperial lackeys were closing in. Only one man had the will to take the fight to the hunters. Only one man now held his allegiance. It was on his bidding that he, Dragnarth, commander of the first company, the fourth chapter of the first legion, put his life at risk in the company of these abominable lords of the night. He would personally lead the main strike in to the keep. His two companions stood ready for any danger as the Night Lords went about their preparations. Through the vid-screens he could see the battle being joined as the invasion fleet began to deliver a veritable storm of fire power on their target. Flaring of void shields and tiny trails of fiery comets representing return fire could be seen even at this distance.

In one corner of the Eviscerator's command centre, Bowdane the Stalker looked on with suspicion and contempt at the three renegade Dark Angels on his bridge. He did not like space marines of any ilk, unless they were of the gene seed of Night Haunter. His hate for everything that represented the Imperium was even greater, which was the only reason that these men had been allowed to enter his command centre and yet live. He assimilated all the tactical data from the ongoing battle. His attack craft were forming up to strike at the void shield generators of the out post. He knew that his overlord, Gravada, would be even now moving to interdict more of the defensive grid. That was one warrior he had much respect for. As mutated serfs cowered next to him, making their last minute adjustments to his blasphemed terminator armour, he spared a moment to accept that even he did not know the overall plan. His sensor-augers had detected a mass displacement within the warp space close to them, and this could only be a follow up force. Why such a force was required, he had not been told, nevertheless, being the paranoid tactician he had with held two flights of bombers for an emergency. On his command his assault troops were loading in to the boarding torpedoes. His attack wings were staring their bombing runs on the out post. His body guard of terminator armoured giants stood ready next to him. They would deploy in two separate groups as planned. Gravada's own raptor squads were ready for direct deployment from the Eviscerator's launch bays. As soon as Gravada gave the command they would let loose mayhem in yet another imperial outpost. Anticipation subconsciously caused him to flex his lightning claws, inadvertently decapitating one of the mutated slaves who was connecting the power generator inputs to the terminator armour's teleportation mechanism. The

rest of the band of slave workers scurried off in to the darkness. No one noticed the power input leads that had slipped from the dead slave's hands. His men were ready, and so was he! Apollyon calmly assessed the situation, transmitting his orders to his battle squads with the clarity and composure that comes with decades of service in the legion Astartes and the Deathwatch. He was the conductor of the massive orchestra that was the battle for Caliban. Pride swelled in him as he thanked the lion and the emperor for this opportunity to serve them. Yet, his training prevented that pride interfering with his command. He had more surprises for the trespassers and he planned not to let any one of them live to tell the tale. His alert senses eagerly scanned the displays and sensor readings for the much anticipated infiltrator force, that was surely present in their vicinity. Who ever had created the explosive introduction to this battle by clearing the path for the invasion fleet, would most certainly attempt to distract the defences by further actions. He observed the positions of the enemy vessels, marvelling at the three vengeance class cruisers from the days of old, their sleek lines hiding the infamy of their actions. The powerful lance weaponry of the vengeance class cruisers and the single desolation class cruiser were focuses on the void shields overlying the command centre. Their intention was clear. He expected a large drop ship assault on the outer perimeter, mainly to be led by rebel guardsmen and mutant rabble. The main strikes would be surgical in nature, attempting to decapitate the command structure. For that to occur the shields would have to be disabled, which is where he expected the infiltrators to intervene. The enemy raiders added their weapons batteries and torpedoes to the ordnance carried by the attack craft. Hidden defence turrets revealed themselves suddenly, laying a curtain of steel, disintegrating the entire first attack wave. The follow on waves pulled up desperately, trying the fathom the newly emerged threat.

Another nodded command, more runes activated in the sanctum internus and more events began to occur. Three small asteroids lying abreast of the clear path began to vibrate. A small embedded sensor raised its head at the receipt of a previously coded signal. It's receptor array deciphering the co-ordinates at lightning speed. Buried deep within it, man made mechanisms activated. A sudden explosion on one side of the asteroid flung the mass of rock in a linear direction. An implosive impeller drive activated, providing directional thrusts and intermittently boosting the speeding asteroids velocity. One of Gravad's raptors, tasked with surveillance of the cleared path had just enough time to shout a warning before he was caught in the hail of rock debris that hit him like a meteor shower. The asteroid continued on its projected path, sparing not a single moment to consider the first heretic casualty of today's battle. Sensor screens on the invasion fleet suddenly filled with warnings and proximity alerts. Three asteroids were approaching like runaway space ships. Despite their experience in space, the crew of these ships were after all mere humans, with all the instincts for survival and self preservation that the species is renown for. The smaller raiders began to speed up to try and avoid the oncoming

behemoths, while the cruisers also attempted to manoeuvre while their gunner officers targeted the rocks. Pandemonium broke loose within the invasion fleet as the first rock whizzed past, missing every warship but showering them with a massive hail of destructive mineral debris, blinding their sensors and damaging augers. The second asteroid smashed directly in to the middle of one of the raiders, pulverising it in to atoms within the blink of an eye. Roiling plasma from its warp drives created an expanding cloud of inferno that set alight three troop transports, the conflagration wiping out the equivalent of an entire imperial guard regiment. The third asteroid struck a glancing blow on the last vengeance class cruiser, shattering its engines. The rock itself broke in to a large number of smaller fragments, speeding at increasing velocities, peppering virtually every vessel in the vicinity with armour penetrating hits.

Bowdane screamed in anger. In a matter of seconds the vengeful attack fleet had been struck a decisive blow. The invasion fleet now resembled leaderless cattle, with the various ships trying to maximise their survival by separation for the shower of asteroid debris that was following each asteroid. The enemy had been very cunning indeed. He cursed his warlord Gravad for his over confidence. This battle would have to be won by nothing but direct assault. He barked an order to launch the boarding torpedoes. The mutated specimen that functioned as his operations officer croaked a warning that the defence turrets were yet to be over whelmed, and died a moment later. Bowdane was in no mood for discussions. He would assault the out post now! He saw the display of the out post's void screens, ordering all the lance batteries of all ships to concentrate at a specified spot. He saw the shields buckle underneath the combined might of the high energy beams. Then they flickered and momentarily the segment of the out post surrounding the command centre lost its shields. This was the moment Bowdane had waited for so long. He screamed at the ten terminators positioned ready to teleport. Arcane blue lightning erupted around them, and the first squad disappeared in to the immaterium. The second squad was just beginning to disappear, Bowdane amongst them when he heard a warning.

Gravad had sensed the change in the battle. Using the asteroids as in ready made weaponry, with the simple additions of explosive propellants and directional sensors was a stroke of genius, and now the carefully choreographed invasion plan was in tatters. But it would not delay the inevitable. He had identified the site of the most powerful void shield generators and was already winging his way to destroy them. Two of his men still accompanied him as he stealthily penetrated the outer bastions of the out post. The few automated sensors and servitor sentinels were easy prey to his martial skills. He knew very well, that the enemy would be aware of his presence and the general area by the simple expedience of following the de-activated sensors. He expected his speed and agility to achieve his purpose and his battle prowess to see them though any unforeseen difficulties. He had noted the flickering of the void screens in response to

the concentrated lance fire, and recognised the failure of just one of the shields for what it was. A trap! He momentarily admired the cunning of the defenders, making a mental note to make their deaths particularly painful, as he shouted a warning to Bowdane through his helmet mounted vox caster. In his heart he knew that it would be too late. The battle lusting Bowdane would find it too much of a temptation not to assault. Gravad clenched his fists in anger and began to run in great bounds, assisted by his raptor pack, along the corridor. The main void shield generators his one focus.

Apollyon concentrated hard on the tactical displays, while keeping a close eye on the progress of the infiltrators. They had breached the outer defences and the few servitor sentinels that had been encountered had been deactivated. They were heading towards the shield generators as he had expected. Outside, the battle had been joined in earnest. Propelled by blood lust or fear of their masters, the surviving renegade imperial guard regiments had begun to deploy from their transports. Like a swarm of locusts the assault craft fell from the transports while massed weapons battery fire and concentrated lance fire was taking its toll on the defences. Here and there a defence turret blew up or went silent. The void shields were still up apart from the one which he had allowed to falter. He was satisfied with the defensive strategy for the moment. The gun emplacements for the ground battle were all manned within fortified turrets by servitors with pre-programmed fire arcs or by chapter serfs. His own battle brothers had been formed in to strike teams and he fully intended to take the battle to their enemy. The Knights of the order shall not wait to be assaulted. He had fire teams positioned strategically within their complex for the expected breaches, ready for counter attack. He noticed the “Eviscerator” fire a string of torpedoes. These would be boarding torpedoes filled with his heretic brethren, of what legion or affiliation remained to be seen. Whoever it was, they were ready to meet them.

It was at that moment an alarm sounded on the overlay screen. The techmarine adjusted a few runes and looked to Apollyon. “Multiple contacts emerging from the warp Brother Captain” Apollyon saw the icons of warships small and large emerging from the immaterium. On the “Renegade’s Death” Dalamere also saw the icons, a tight knot forming in the pit of her stomach. On the “Eviscerator” Bowdane was too frenzied to notice the new comers, while Gravad continued to charge through the outer defences of the Keep, completely oblivious to the situation.

## Chapter XIII: Vengeance is our watchword

The alternate realm that is commonly known as the warp is very mysterious realm. While physical order is the rule in real space all known laws of physics known to man disappear within the maelstrom of raw energy within the immaterium. One of the greatest achievements by human science was the discovery of warp engines and the creation of the Geller field which allow ships to travel through this roiling sea of energy, dramatically reducing the duration of travel. The discovery of such technology would have been useless if not for the mysterious but significant development of the navigator gene within the human race which allowed the great families of the Navis Nobilite to provide the much sought after navigators for each and every warp capable ship. Even such extraordinary developments would have not counted for much if not for the sacrifice of the emperor of humanity and the psychic beacon created by him, the ubiquitous astronomicon. Hundreds upon hundreds psykers, soul bound to the emperor add their life force to the astronomicon to maintain the beacon that allows the safe navigation of the warp and maintain the posterity of the imperium of man.

The coming of the thirteenth black crusade had been accompanied by anomalies in the warp space of extraordinary proportions. Localised warp storms cut off entire systems at will, resolving inexplicably to allow the heretical hordes to pour forth. That the powers of the warp were aiding and abetting Abaddon was without question. That the magnitude of their interference was not more dramatic than witnessed at present was unexplainable. Perhaps it indicated an inner posturing for power within the pantheon of the chaos gods themselves, each one undermining the others champions. As war raged across the sectors guarding the cadian gate and the death toll rose in to the billions on both sides, fuelled by the emotions of war and the released souls of the dead and the dying, the warp space in the region began to react. Blasphemous actions by bands of chaos sorcerers may have acted as a catalyst to these changes which were gradually engulfing the whole region around the eye.

Mordinian looked up from the strategic display, his concentration broken by the arrival of Epistolery Vardis. Vardis handed over a data slate containing the latest astropathic transmission from their brethren at the keep. The plan was indeed working but they would have to move soon. Mordinian had been a grandmaster in the Angels of Vengeance chapter for more than one hundred and fifty human years. In that time he had commanded not only whole companies but also the bulk of the chapter's fleet in major space actions. He was indeed the chapter's most experienced space commander. The current campaign that the unforgiven had undertaken in the background of Abaddon's assault was unlike any of their previous battles. They had had to ignore

some leads about the fallen to strengthen the imperial defences, actions never before taken by the Inner circle. His trust in their overall commander, supreme grandmaster of the Dark Angels chapter was all the more secure, as he understood the strength of resolve required to make such decisions. Now such a decision awaited him, not as immense in magnitude, but with major repercussions to the entire unforgiven. His task ahead would be even more difficult than that entrusted to Brother-Captain Apollyon, of whose command he had only recently been appraised of. Such deep secrets of the unforgiven were being forced to be revealed to more of their brethren, and he could only wonder what long term sequelae awaited them at the end of the black crusade. Thanking the epistolary, he returned to the strategic display. The librarians who accompanied him in the command battle barge of the chapter had warned him of increasing warp storm activity. The navigators were finding it difficult to retain their current holding position, particularly maintaining the fleet's relative coherency. He had to be precise in his exit from the warp but at the same time timing was extra-ordinarily important for his main mission. Nothing in this campaign had been straight forward.

Beginning from their action to recover an elder farseer, that in itself a most unusual mission, to their use of ancient elder warp routes and their rapid arrival in the Scelus sector, and finally their surreptitious deployment to Caliban, every action reeked of mystery. That his current mission was of utmost importance was without question. The accompanying battle fleet redemption had been called back midway on the authority of the inner circle. At first he had flared up in a controlled rage, angry at the halving of his force for a mission of such importance. They were after all tasked with the protection of the sacred region of space where their primarch had first grown up amongst men. That the inner circle would make such a drastic decision must reflect the grievous situation at the cadian gate was not lost on him. He had bidden his brothers in the battle fleet redemption farewell as they turned back midway and with a stout heart redrawn every plan for each and every conceivable engagement. The recent warnings of the librarians had been about other warp shadows. The gathering warp storms were clouding their sensors but there were other energy and displacement signals in the region. It could only be foes as they hardly expected friendly fleets in this remote region, but their purpose, direction and intention were all but conjecture.

The time was nearly upon them. He activated the helmet mounted communicator with a mind impulse. "Master Palidor, you are ready I assume?"

"Lion be praised we are ready! It does feel extremely unusual to be without our sacred armour, but we shall overcome!" Palidor continued "Strages wishes to thank you personally for entrusting the most sacred standard with him"

“He can thank me by returning victoriously. Supreme grandmaster Azrael would not have released it to our possession if he did not consider this a mission of absolute urgency. We defend our home land! Angels prepare for vengeance!”

“Vengeance is our watchword!” rang out a chorus of stout voices.

They were unusual times, particularly considering that he was deploying the warriors of their first company in power armour. The uncertainty of the warp storms had brought about a change of plans, making the timing of their exit ever more important. He was confident that Palidor accompanied by Strages and interrogator-chaplain Taboden would be more than capable of the enormous task set before them. Passing a glance at epistolary Vardis, their eyes locking in mutual agreement he gave the long awaited command.

“Battle fleet Vengeance! All hands to battle stations! Prepare for warp exit in ten seconds! The emperor protects. For the Lion and for Caliban! Vengeance is our watchword!”

Tactical displays on the dozens of warships encircling the keep suddenly lit up with warp breach warnings. Alarm klaxons automatically sounded across each and every corridor over the clamour of battle. Dalamere screamed at her bridge crew. A vast fleet was emerging in close proximity, in battle formation. As the icons flickered on the screen, she realised with dread that this was an entire battle fleet of a space marine chapter. The feeling of impending doom that she felt was further strengthened by the all channel broadcast that emanated from the newly emerged fleet.

“Vengeance is our watchword!”

On the bridge of the “Eviscerator” Bowdane the Stalker blinked in disbelief. He had expected to be teleported in to the heart of the imperial outpost, to emerge in battle frenzy, yet he was still standing on his own bridge. He looked at the techmagos at the teleport controls. The warped disciple of the machine god cowered in abject fear, screaming a protest before he forfeited his life. “It was a trap! The shields came up during the transport” he shouted, taking credit for the mechanical disruption to the power flow which prevented the champion of the Night Lords meeting the same fate as his terminator armoured companions. The first squad had successfully teleported in to the narrow window where the shield had failed, straight in to the waiting muzzles of plasma cannon armed servitor battery. Only the puddle of molten slag of human and armour remained of the fearsome warriors. The second squad was being teleported when the shields came up to full strength, scattering their physical structure to atoms and leaving their souls screaming in the warp to the waiting predators. Perhaps the gods of chaos were indeed with him,



thought Bowdane, as he noticed Dalamere's cruisers and the accompanying raiders begin to break formation and turn about. In an instant, always expecting treachery from every quarter and without considering the tactical situation he barked out the command that he had been itching to give. High energy lances fired instantly, targeting the engines of the two intact cruisers and dealing a similar fate to half a dozen raiders. The cowards will have no choice but to stand a fight. It was then that he noticed the blaring klaxons and the urgent flashing of icons depicting the newly arrived fleet. Bowdane may be prone to blood lust and battle hunger, but millennia of experience was not lost on him. He realised that the situation was indeed changing with the hunter becoming the hunted. Ordering the mutant at the communications console to inform Gravad of the situation he activated the vox-caster and addressed the renegade crew of his warship, his booming voice thundering down every compartment of his grand cruiser..

"Prepare to repel boarders"

Battle fleet vengeance had arrived precisely at the correct co-ordinates. Positioned at the head of the clear path through the asteroid field, they blocked any escape for the trapped enemy fleet. Hunter destroyers and strike cruisers entered the cleared path aiming for the heart of the chaos fleet in disarray. A veritable swarm of torpedoes preceded their charge, every ship capable of launching the ordnance had done so. There was little the renegade fleet could do to out manoeuvre the oncoming rush of death. Explosions blossomed from each and every enemy warship the raiders being blown apart by multiple hits from the massive rocket boosted space torpedoes. But mixed within the swarm of torpedoes was another greater threat to the forces of evil. Ten boarding torpedoes were swinging their way deftly through the hail of ordnance, hidden within the safety of massed torpedoes. They contained the entire first company of the angels of vengeance chapter, clad in their black power armour, an extremely rare occasion. Fully half of the boarding torpedoes targeted the command bridge of the eviscerator. The others smashed in to various critical sectors namely the generatorium and engine drive sections.

With a massive clang the torpedo burrowed its nose in to the adamantium hull of the bridge, the melta cutters automatically activating and burning their way through the hull. Explosive charges then blew the rest of the wall away and the nose cone opened disgorging black armoured space marines. With practiced drill the men of the first company deployed, methodically surveying the chamber of their arrival. Strages activated his auspex and stated "we are two chambers north of our destination" and pointed towards the tail of the ship. Palidor and Taboden led the way as the strike team of half company strength quickly advanced towards the next chamber. As they entered the massive auditorium which led to the bridge they met the first resistance. The enemy was not prepared for their arrival and died not knowing who their attackers were. Controlled burst

of bolter fire painted the floor with the red of heretic gore. Bodies were torn apart by the fusillade as the angels advanced with precision. Strages warned of the oncoming rush just as the mutant and renegade horde burst through from the opposite end. In the spacious auditorium they faced each other from the ends of the chamber for a moment. Then the horde charged with an inhuman howl. Palidor and Taboden calmed their men though the men of the first company required no such effort. At his command, the elite warriors of the angles of vengeance let loose a volley which ripped through the front ranks of the oncoming horde. The impact of the heavy projectiles lifting those struck bodily off the floor and flung them in to the second wave. For a moment time slowed as the ranks smashed in to each other, then the horde continued again, the sheer momentum of their charge carrying them forward. A second volley and then a third continued. The men were not firing on automatic, but with precise single shots, each one finding a target. The volume of fire was so great that the horde was brought to a stand still midway across the hall. That was the moment when lexicanium Ramden issued a warning. No sooner had his words been uttered the end of the corridor shimmered and fell beasts emerged.

“Chaos furies! Fire at will!” screamed Palidor, unsheathing his anointed power sword in expectation of the coming close-quarters battle. As the fire power of the strike force changed directions towards the chaos beasts, the mutant horde recovered and began their advance. The beasts were riddled with a veritable shower of steel and their physical forms began to dissolve. The squads formed in to two lines without any orders being passed, the rear ones targeting the chaos beasts while the front row re-directed their fire on the mutants. Grenades burst shredding the mutants in to fleshy giblets. Then a few of the furies were upon them. Taboden leaped to meet them the holy Crozius Arcanum swinging in a wide arc despatching the first one back to its place in hell. Palidor decapitated the second one even as the rest of the pack fell upon the front row. Unnatural talons decapitated veteran warriors with single strokes. Many fell, cut in to pieces but the rest held. They had a mission. They would fulfil it. Palidor and Taboden leaped in to the fray their mighty power weapons despatching the fell beasts with every stroke. Ramden stood resolute, eldritch fire erupting from his staff and burning two of the beasts to cinders. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared the rest dissolved in to the immaterium, banished by the resolution of the defenders. Yet they had no time for respite, for the renegade horde, reinforced from the bridge was almost upon them. Strages unfurled the banner that he had held in his arms.

“Angels of vengeance, behold the sacred standard of retribution!”

Every angel who could hold a weapon aloft felt rejuvenated. An eerie feeling of strength and determination permeated their surroundings. With stoicism so renowned in the unforgiven every bolter opened fire. Firing so rapidly but single shots at each time, the sudden increase in their

firepower completely overawed the assaulting heretics. Plasma blasts seared the floor incinerating the attackers where they stood. More grenades fragmented limbs and decapitated heads. A massive blast wracked the whole ship as Palidor received confirmation from the other teams. The ship was dead in space and powerless to defend itself.

“Vengeance is our watchword!” he screamed at the top of his voice, his men echoing the sentiment through their external vox-casters. Swinging his blood encrusted power sword he charged in to the wallowing mutant horde, cleaving his way through to the entrance that led to the bridge. There was no pause at the entrance. In one fluid motion the Angels of Vengeance charged through, close behind their commander. As they poured in to the dark and dreary centre to the blasphemous warship, they came face to face with a massive figure. Clad in deep dark blue terminator armour, lightning talons flexing expectantly stood the enormous figure of Bowdane. In the back ground stood three men with robes, armed with power weapons and plasma weaponry.

“Retribution is at hand, traitors” Palidor growled at the enemy. “prepare to face the emperor’s wrath”

Bowdane scowled. His plans shattered, his ship dead in space, he had little to celebrate. But he would make the emperor’s young puppies pay for their folly. The chamber thundered to the sounds of gunfire, of plasma blasts, or flesh burning, mutant screams and the roar of martial courage. Metal clashed on metal as power weapons cleaved limbs clean off their sockets. Bowdane lay a flurry of blows on Palidor, the master of the vengeance chapter barely able to counter the unnatural force of the traitor. Taboden swung his mighty Crozius, clearing a bloody path towards the robed men who slowly retreated towards the end of the chamber, seeking an exit. The warriors of the first company waded in to the battle dealing death at every stroke, manoeuvring through the confused fighting to cut off any escape. They saw their battle brothers fall, some apart by blasts from the archaic plasma pistols in the hands of the heretics, others pulled down by the sheer weight of the gibbering horde. Palidor felt his leg give as the full weight of a misdirected energy blast seared through his knees. At the same moment the air in the chamber crackled with energy. Bowdane needed no invitation, always ready to exploit any weakness he swung a vicious blow aimed at cutting Palidor in two. His blow never landed as the form of epistolary Vardis appeared, clad in terminator armour, his power fist clenched over the taloned arm of Bowdane. The surprised Bowdane turned around just in time to see his nemesis thrust the sanctified force staff with all his might in to his face. As the purity of the force weapon collided with the rank corruption of Bowdane’s soul it imploded with an unbelievable force. As the smoke cleared and the dust settled, few men remained standing in the chamber.

## Chapter XIX: The Liberation of Luchas

Apollyon considered the tactical displays with interest. He had orchestrated a battle for their honour that had lasted the best part of a terran day. The enemy had been devious and had even penetrated the outer defences of his keep. They had countered with ingenuous actions of their own. They had fought a defensive battle while acting offensively. The invasion fleet lay crippled, the elderly vengeance class cruisers were immobilised, partly due to the treachery of their own commander. Many of the raiders were blown apart or were flaming wrecks. The transports had been decimated. What survivors of the hordes of mutant and renegade guardsmen that made landfall had been engaged in determined counter attack by his strike teams. Few were left alive to be taken prisoner. The enemy infiltrators had indeed managed to strike a grievous blow, the generatorium being devastated by fusion bombs. At the closing moments of the battle, the entire void shield protection had dwindled to nothing. Only the intervention of battle fleet vengeance had turned the tide in their favour.

The arrival of the battle fleet vengeance had been superbly timed, trapping the invaders against the anvil of the keep and the asteroid remnants of Caliban. The planet's remains were still venting their revenge against the traitors of eons ago. Mordinian stood at head of the command consoles on his bridge. The casualty reports had yet to be filed by his apothecaries, but he knew that the price was high. The three battle barges of the battle fleet were positioned at the mouth of the clear path while nova and gladius class frigates formed secondary rings to prevent attack from within or without. Swarms of hunter destroyers were patrolling the cleared path for enemy activity accompanied by squadrons of thunderhawks. Thunderhawk gunships were returning from the "Eviscerator" filled with the victorious warriors of the first company. With a sad heart he learned that fully two thirds of those brave men had perished in their endeavour, their captain mortally wounded by the traitors. Interrogator chaplain Taboden had also been badly wounded but there was glee in his normally stoic voice. They had a prisoner. Of the three robed men on the bridge, all of whom turned out to their fallen brothers, one had survived the psychic explosion and was now a much sought after prisoner in the hands of Taboden. Perhaps the greatest prize, apart from the successful defence of the keep, was to be what had been retrieved by the unflinching librarian Vardis. Realising the tactical situation within the "Eviscerator" he had donned his terminator suit and without a single word for caution, teleported across in the midst of a developing warp storm. His timely intervention had turned the tables on the bridge and brought within their grasp the entire cogitator banks of a chaos command ship. That would be the greatest windfall.

Just as he was determining the immediate course of action, alarm klaxons began to blare. Once again the view screens and tactical displays began their incessant flashes.

“Anomalous warp signatures! Multiple contacts! Warp breach imminent! High probability of large battle fleet exit on vector two-seven-nine-four!” The techmarine at the sensor-auger station read out. Mordinian realised that the warp vectors would place the exiting fleet in a position to trap his own fleet against the asteroid belt. Their battle barges and strike cruisers could fly through the asteroid belt with little to fear but the smaller ships couldn't do that. Besides, the sanctity of the remnants of their home world and the keep were at stake. The information within their grasp was even more significant. They would fight here and they had to win. The course of the war and the future of the unforgiven chapters depended on it.

On his command the battle fleet redeployed like a well oiled machine. Even as the enemy fleet began to appear in to real space the battle barges were already targeting specific ships. Every strike cruiser had returned from their battle in the clear path and deployed in to squadrons. The smaller escorts had formed up on the flanks and up front, the swarms of hunter destroyers preparing their deadly salvoes of torpedoes. Every available thunderhawk gunship was made ready for naval attack. The indomitable survivors from the first company once again insisted on returning to duty, preferring to risk the perils of the warp in their terminator suits this time. Interrogator-chaplain Taboden had refused Mordinian's order to return with his prisoner on board a fast strike cruiser. He now stood by Mordinian's side. The tactical display began to identify the enemy contacts. A massive swarm of escorts came in to view on the display, easily numbering at least a hundred such vessels of all types. Some were captured imperial vessels like the cobra class destroyer while others were purpose built chaos vessels. An escort fleet of this size would have a significant capital ship presence. As they watched in awe a desolator class battle ship and two repulsive class grand cruisers appeared accompanied by nine cruisers of varying types. A massive swarm of attack craft were seen launching from the maws of the cruisers. He knew in his heart that this would be a one-sided battle. Not even the complete battle fleet of a space marine chapter could take on such a war fleet in an equal footing. There was but one way to equalise the odds and he set about preparations for such an action. He ordered the remnants of the first company to accompany him on the bridge. His flagship would plunge in to the centre of the chaos war fleet, the terminators teleporting in to the bridge of the first capital ship that proved practical. The battle barge would continue in to the midst of the enemy fleet and over load its warp core. The resultant explosion would trigger the ordnance aboard the barge including the stock of cyclonic torpedoes. That should create a massive tear in the reality barrier sucking the core of the enemy warfleet in to the immaterium. It was a wild plan developed in an instant under the most

difficult of situations, but one that might just work. Vardis and Taboden agreed. The two fleets moved closer as the chaplain began to chant the glory of the gathered angels.

*“Defiler of worlds, death incarnate, daemons throng by the score  
Valiant warriors we go to war, defy him we shall forever and more!”*

Apollyon too saw the coming battle. Methodically he prepared his contingency plans for the next assault. It was likely that battle fleet vengeance would indeed lose this battle. If that happened the massive heretic fleet would have the capacity and man power to overwhelm the defenses of the keep. The revered gene seed of the lion and the knowledge contained within the keep must never fall in the hands of the despoiler. He began to prepare self destruct sequences if that eventuality arose. His faith in the lion and the emperor however remained staunch. There will be a way. We shall indeed overcome.

*“Powerfists raised, bolters ready, to slay the villain our aim so true  
In space or land, on sea or sand we shall stain this land with the daemons gore!”*

On board the last of the escorts in the vile heretical fleet, Luchas looked on in awe. He was back in the space around Caliban after ten thousand years. He had been an out cast for ten millennia. He was coming home for the last time. What he saw vindicated his beliefs. He had served under many fallen comrades. Some were on the path to damnation others not so. Some sought personal glory while others toiled for their redemption.

*“Sons of Jonson the true first born, prepare your souls for battle reborn,  
Strike the enemy where hope forlorn, you shall not falter until the new dawn!”*

He saw the debris of the battle that had occurred hours before. He saw the brave warriors of the battle fleet vengeance move to face the over whelming force bearing upon them. He heard the broadcast of the chaplain’s sermon, defying the heretics till the last moment.

*“Stand by me with warrior’s pride, the son of darkness shall not pass  
Let them try for woe betide, the emperors angels are here en masse!”*

At that moment he knew he had chosen the right path. He felt the weight of his responsibility lift as he punched in the targeting co-ordinates for his weapons array. He input the final automated steering instructions and set in motion his final act of vindication. He then drew his bolt pistol and power sword and with a swiftness born of utter conviction, killed every one on board his bridge.

A moment later pandemonium broke loose amongst the twenty Cobra and infidel class vessels at the rear of the enemy fleet. Their targeting cogitators, slaved to the single vessel commanded by Luchas came alive automatically. As the individual captains frantically tried to figure out what had happened, forty torpedoes launched in unison, every one of them headed straight towards the engines of the Desolator class battle ship lumbering ahead of them. Luchas' flagship lurched forward at flank speed, its warp engines tuned for maximum speed and on a count down for over load.

*“Imperial guard and battle fleets together,  
Emperor's legions they be birds of feather  
A force of might unseen hither  
With terrible power Ye Angels Gather!*

As the torpedoes exploded in unison, they triggered a chain reaction within the massive chaos battleship. Luchas' destroyer smashed in to the conflagration a moment later. The explosive force of the twin eruptions resulted in a gargantuan fireball which expanded at an exponential rate from its epicenter. The blast wave rippled through the empty space smashing in to the distant vessels of the battle fleet vengeance. Displays shattered, cogitator terminals over loaded and the smaller ships buffeted like leaves in a winter storm. When the shock wave had passed all that was left of the once terrifying fleet were a few smoking husks and a handful of escorts rapidly trying to escape. Luchas was free!

On board his flagship, Modinian silently gave thanks to the emperor, having witnessed what he felt was nothing short of a miracle. Exhausted beyond even his superhuman endurance he turned his attention to preparing his fleet ready for more action. They may just be able to beat the gathering warp storm and return to reinforce the Cadian sector once again. Apollyon said his prayers to the lion as he began the arduous task of rebuilding the fortifications of the keep once again. In the distant space Gravad closed his eyes consciously sending his body in to hibernation mode. As his raptor pack shut down and his power armour sealed him in protective custody, he knew that his grand plan had failed and that the anger of the thirsting gods would indeed be terrible. Dragnarh, the sole surviving fallen angel from the command deck of the “Eviscerator” struggled feebly against the chains that bound him, contemplating the dark future that he faced at the hands of the interrogator-chaplains of the unforgiven chapters.

# Gathering of Angels

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## Chapter XX: Meeting of Minds

Thick palls of smoke hung eerily in the atmosphere blocking the rays of the Cadian sun. The stench of death was omnipresent. In the skies, the land and in the sea, it was all pervasive. Weeks of relentless assault by the forces of the despoiler had imparted a constant gloom to each and every world in the Cadian system. Death lurked just a moment away. It fell from the skies and it reached out from behind the trees. Proud buildings, once reaching for the sky like giants, lay toppled and dismembered. Majestic parklands and forests of splendour lay defaced. Beauty was an image of the long past. It had been replaced by death and destruction on a scale that few minds could comprehend. The prolonged blockade in space by his war fleet, the wildly spreading epidemics of plague and disease and the depredations of the enemy shock troops, the feared chaos space marines had slowly brought home the futility of opposition to vast numbers of defenders and civilians alike. Despair spread its tendrils through the souls of the populace like wildfire. Yet many endured the agony. The iron steady discipline of the Cadian shock troops endured the agony. More so because they knew that they fought for justice and righteousness. Everyman knew that they could not afford to fail, for to do so would be not only to lose their freedom, their lives and their very souls but also the gateway to the emperor's realms. Foremost amongst those who resisted were the avenging angels of the divine emperor, the imperial space marines. Eternal warriors and guardians of the Imperium, they fought in space and they fought on land, and in every planet and every theatre of the thirteenth crusade they were in the thick of battle. Durgar Stromwolf was one such warrior.

Watchful eyes scanned the horizon, slowly absorbing every piece of detail that came in to view. The auto sensors of the powerful suit of armour were linked directly to the sensory cortex of his brain and the display within the visor of his helmet. Decades of experience had taught him to note even the minute details of his surroundings at every opportunity. The skies were dark and dreary, with the dust of battle, the smoke of industry and the early morning dew of nature mixing in to a rolling sheet of impenetrable foam that hung low in the sky. His ears strained to identify the tell tale shriek of aircraft engines. Within seconds he had an imprint of the entire surrounding etched in his mind. He could just see the slab sides of a Hyperios anti-air support vehicle and smiled inwardly at the effectiveness of its camouflage. Until recently he would not have thought it likely that his great company of space wolves would resort to remaining camouflaged for extended periods. That was until he accompanied his chapter master on an assault drop on to the most sought after planet in the entire sector. He remembered the battle lust which filled him and his great company as they accompanied the great wolf lord Grimnar. He remembered fondly the exhilaration as they landed and set about despatching the emperor's justice to the heretical horde

that had gathered to oppose their landings. While his lord had set about coordinating the entire strength of the Adeptus Astartes in the sector, he himself had been granted the command of the Spacewolf forces on Cadia. Much had been learned from the bitter battles that had raged against the despoiler's forces on the planet's surface. Many surprises had been unveiled at devastating cost and much more experience gained in the past weeks. Yet, when he has given the current orders, Durgar could not help but stare open jawed at his chapter master. Despite his disbelief and misgivings, he had moved rapidly to the assigned coordinates and set up this ambush. A squadron of four Hyperios anti aircraft launcher vehicles lay spread out under cover, completely grid locking the surrounding airspace. Assault cannons on the crusader variants of landraiders further stood guard against low flyers. His command company was deployed in well entrenched positions to receive anything that the enemy may throw at them. He went over his orders once more in his mind and shook his head yet again in amazement. The crackle of the vox link erupting in his ears drew his attention to the present. Sergeant Thurgar was rapidly barking in the vox caster from within the Damocles command vehicle. The superior communications ability of that vehicle made it the ideal choice for such a co-ordinated defence.

"I am picking up intermittent activity in the air at present! No specific directional movement." As distant sonic booms rumbled across the air and dissipated in the atmosphere. Aerial vehicles were constantly re-entering the atmosphere and causing havoc with communications due to their sonic booms.

"They are late!" thought Durgar to himself and shifted ever so uneasily. "He had known of these warriors for a long time, though he had had little physical contact with them in recent times. It was very uncharacteristic for them to be late." He suppressed a momentary rise of concern that their plans had been uncovered by the enemy.

"Wait! There is an occasional anomaly we cannot track. It keeps appearing just above the horizon at co-ordinates seven-twenty two-sigma!" Thurgar reported, frustration at not being able to acquire the incoming target evident in his voice.

"All units, eyes front! Enveloping cover fire pattern. Wait for my signal!" Thundered Durgar, his hand instinctively moving to grip the handle of the power axe he had planted in the ground next to him. The whine of hydraulics moving turrets and the expectant swivel assault cannons joined the background noise. Durgar kept his watch all round not completely trusting the early warning auguries. The woods they had deployed in provided ample cover for vehicles and his strike force. The stumpy hills that were in abundance in the area actually shielded them from three directions. Any airborne assault would usually arrive from the direction of these hills as they would provide

ground cover for the air assault vehicles until the last moment. Despite the obvious, Durgar had also covered the open frontage to the south, where the woods merged with rolling plains. He hated to be surprised by his foes. His ground force had fanned out, deploying to cover the only clearing in the woods, one that merged with the southern plains. This was the only safe place for landing. The turrets of the Hyperios launchers were moving in expectation guided by Thurgar's constantly changing directions. Anger now intermingled with frustration in his voice as he struggled to lock on to an almost invisible enemy.

With an unearthly bang that shattered the morning calm a massive sonic blast hit the ears of the deployed space wolves. The blast was so swift and sudden it even caught the veteran wolf lord Durgar completely off guard. The massive barrage of sound rolled from the southern edge, from the region of the rolling plains and was almost immediately replaced by the high pitched whine of familiar fusion engines. Auto reactive sensors within the power armour of the space wolf contingent immediately reacted to protect their occupants. The battle hardened veterans reacted with instinctual speed, despite their surprise. Hyperios turrets were swinging around to track their threat. Durgar could hear Thurgar admonishing himself for having not tracked the target as it had approached the. He had to suppress the tendrils of admiration for the pilot who had obviously negotiated the landscape at tree top level and at hypersonic speeds. The confidence and expertise of the pilot was such that he had re-entered normal sonic speed just as he neared the clearing and with extreme dexterity landed the flyer in the clearing. It had happened so suddenly that even with the swiftness of the space wolves, their guns were only just coming to bear on the intruder, when it's engines shut down and the rear ramp descended. Durgar stood upright, picking up his wolf axe in one hand and stepped in to the clearing, a mixture of anger and admiration swelling within him. There, in the clearing stood a majestic bird of prey. Deep green paintwork covered its entire body. An intricate emblem, one which he recognised without effort was carved on the wings and fuselage. The winged sword of his battle brothers looked down upon him as if sizing him up. The Dark Angels had landed on Cadia!

The front ramp of the deep green thunderhawk descended with a controlled thud. Durgar found himself slightly uneasy and realised it was because the fuselage mounted heavy bolters were pointing directly at his head. No sooner had the ramp descended a group of spacemarines clad in dark green armour exited the flyer. Dark green armour shone beneath the bleached bone robes fluttering in the breeze. White winged dagger emblems proudly displayed on their shoulder pads. The face of battle was etched in their armour, the results of millennia of combat and repair of the suits of armour showed subtly from underneath the polished sheen. The leader of the group, an imposing man even by space marine standards walked towards Durgar. The strength of character and sheer presence of personality were visible in his confident strides. His commanding presence

permeated the surroundings, touching even Durgar's battle hardened soul. He stood before Durgar, his brilliant eyes piercing fixing on Durgars, piercing them as if looking in to his soul. This would be a man he would feel honoured to fight alongside, thought Durgar observing his retinue of bodyguard. The diminutive figure, half the height of the space marines and clad entirely in a hooded robe stood a step behind the newcomer. In its arms lay a magnificent winged helmet helmet. The rest of the retinue of Dark Angels stood another step behind him, their chapter standard proudly waving in the morning breeze.

"Greetings Son of Russ, Wolf Lord Durgar Stormwolf!" Boomed the voice of the supreme grandmaster of the Dark Angels chapter.

"Greetings indeed Son of Johnson! Welcome to Cadia! Lord Grimnar regrets his absence in person to greet you but he awaits you in his command centre!" said Durgar, waving a welcoming right arm towards the awaiting landraider. "We will take you to him."

The Dark Angel contingent embarked in to the land raider without another word and the massive battle tank moved off escorted by a veritable armada of spacewolf armoured vehicles.

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Durgar stood unmoving, his long golden hair flapping defiantly in the gentle breeze. His eyes remained fixed on the green armoured giant standing opposite to him. They had held each other in their eyes unflinchingly for the past three hours, each seizing up their opposite number, assessing, wondering and imagining the possibilities. There was much Durgar had experienced in his four hundred year existence as a wolf lord of one of the great companies in the Spacewolves chapter. He had charged in to battle at the side of his lord, Grimnar on so many occasions that he had begun to forget their number. He had come to expect the unknown and there was little in this galaxy that would have surprised him. However, he had been completely taken aback by the recent arrival of the supreme grandmaster of the Dark Angels chapter. He could not but help admire their audacity in arriving in a solitary thunderhawk, no doubt to maintain the secrecy of the mission. The reason for the visit was not known to him, but the fact that the commanders of the two chapters had locked themselves away in confidential conference, alone and for more than three hours left little to be said. The situation must indeed be grim. The man who had accompanied, and who now stood opposite him outside the camouflaged doors of the command bunker had been introduced to him as Master Belial. Durgar had heard of this man, from his exploits against the ork horde in the Piscina system when their brothers in the Dark Angels had faced off with Ghazkull Thraka. He was an imposing man, even for an angel thought Durgar, and

wondered if he would get the honour to face him in the blood feud tonight. Little had been said between the two as they stood guard for their primarchs. If Master Belial knew anything about the reason for their visit, he didn't show any evidence of that knowledge in his face or speech. His expression remained set in stone.

Durgar remembered with pride when he had been informed that Logan Grimnar had been chosen unanimously as the overall commander of the space marine forces in the Cadian sector. That dour spacewolf had seen battle for centuries. He had been at the forefront of the imperial defence on occasions too numerous to recollect. The victorious defender of Armageddon during its first war, one that many had forgotten, when Angron and his hordes were defeated and banished was one of the many celebrated achievements. The guile and cunning of the great wolf lord were as necessary as the raw battle prowess he had demonstrated, if they were to beat the son of Darkness. He was overwhelmed with honour when he was ordered to accompany Grimnar with his great company as they assaulted landed on Cadia before the chaos blockade set in. He remembered with frustrated anger when all the so called unforgiven chapters refused to accept Grimnar's authority, nor even to follow the imperial battle plan. However, he knew enough from the constant flow of intelligence reports and individual sightings that the Angels were indeed very active in all sectors, striking hard and moving on but with no apparent pattern. It did not matter because the near complete strength of Fenris had been mobilised for this war and they would face the enemy with or without their brother angels. However, it did seem that now the unforgiven may just be on the verge of joining forces with the rest of the Imperium. As he stood there in honour bound duty to guard his chapter master, his mind raced, formulating and assessing battle plans and strategies and considering the possibilities of offensive action of the unforgiven forces joined the fray in coordination with the rest of the Imperium.

Durgar's thoughts were rudely interrupted as the massive blast doors suddenly began to open with no warning. The multi-ton adamantium doors moved smoothly without any sound except for the low hiss of hydraulics as they moved on delicately balanced hinges. Without announcement out strode the two chapter masters. Two giants amongst superhuman battle brothers, for a moment Durgar could see in them the embodiment of Russ and Johnson. Obviously Master Belial may have had similar thoughts as the two battle hardened veteran commanders stood gaping momentarily at their masters in awe. Then that unique moment passed as Grimnar spoke to Durgar. He could see the tension and concern in the faces of both masters, but he also noted the gleam of hope in their eyes.

“Wolflord Durgar, have your great company prepare for extrication from Cadia. The supreme grandmaster has assured us escort for your company. Your target is Kasr Sonnen. Your mission is to hold it at all cost. Prepare to depart within the day.!”

Simple, straight forward instructions, as usual Durgar thought. The great wolf was one to never waste words. The implications of those few commands were enormous. He was to gather his great company, embark out system through the chaos festered blockade, apparently escorted by a dark Angel fleet and make landfall on Kasr Sonnen for its defence. Sonnen had been relatively spared in the war so far, but it formed the inner defensive ring of the Cadian system. The imperial attempts to reinforce Cadia surreptitiously since the chaos fleet blockade began was using in system space lanes flying close to the Cadian sun and dropping in close to Sonnen, which afforded some measure of protection. The strategic importance of Sonnen to Cadia’s survival was not lost upon him.

Azrael spoke in turn to Belial. “The third company will accompany our brothers to Kasr Sonnen. The orders are the same. Hold the Kasr until relieved!”

Belial nodded, clasped his right fist across his heart in respectful salutation to Durgar who returned the gesture. The next words uttered by the great wolf nearly sent Durgar stumbling backwards.

“There will be no more blood feuds! By the name of Russ it ends today!”

“In the name of Johnson so say the unforgiven!” thundered Azrael.

Time froze as the two company commanders assimilated the enormity of this historical moment. It took Durgar a few seconds to notice that both Azrael and Grimnar had their gauntlets removed from their right hands. A thin line of blood could be seen on both hands, immediately identified as a ritual incision. The larraman’s cells in their blood had already begun to coagulate the site of the wound and begin to form a protective membrane, but the injury itself and the smear of blood on both their hands indicated the age old ritual of bonding between battle brothers.

“We fight as battle brother today and the future. The son of darkness must not pass!”

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Durgar stood on the rolling plains of Kasr Sonnen outside its largest city. The fortress world had indeed been spared the brunt of the fighting. He was impressed by the Cadians' readiness for war and sacrifice. As he surveyed the potential field of battle he reflected upon the recent events. Despite the suddenness of his deployment away from Cadia itself he sensed the urgency of his mission. The great wolf himself had spoken to him in private. Oath-bound to Azrael, he was unable to divulge the details of the conversation between the two chapter masters. He had however revealed that while the unforgiven were acting outside his immediate command, he now understood the reason, and the danger that they sought to dispel. It was obvious that the chapter master of the Dark Angels and the de facto commander of the forces of the unforgiven chapters had confided in the great wolf mighty secrets that had never before left the sanctity of their inner circle. The gravity of the situation was evident in Grimnar's eyes as he bid goodbye to Durgar. They could not fail in Kasr Sonnen, they must not!

His entire great company had moved like a well oiled machine, despite weeks of desperate fighting. Surreptitiously they boarded their thunderhawks and in-system transports at night fall and rendezvoused with the small Dark Angel fleet on the sunward side of Cadia. He was impressed by the sudden appearance of the fleet of the angels, the importance of the mission signified by the presence of a battle barge accompanied by three strike cruisers and attending destroyers. They had fought running battle with packs of hunter-killer chaos strike groups and had landed with minimal casualties on Kasr Sonnen under the eclipse shadow of Korolis. The third company of the Dark Angel chapter had already secured landing zones for their arrival. They had deployed, planned their strategy and discussed the identity of their enemy. With the Cadian planetary defence forces and regular shock troop regiments already deployed in strength, the space marines deployed and awaited the onslaught that was sure to come. Durgar slowly pulled his gauntlet off his right hand and studied it, deep in thought. The incision on his hand was already healing as would the one on Belial's hand. He had never taken a blood oath with a battle brother from another chapter, but now he wondered if things would change. He wondered if this was the emperor's way of testing the worth of his children, of uniting his progeny, of continuing the great task he had set about those ten thousand years ago.

## Chapter XXI: Desperate Hours

Silence reigned supreme within the four walls of the Conclavium Angelus, the ancient and most secretive gathering place of the inner most circle of the unforgiven. It weighed on the minds of those gathered like the adamantine blast door which stood guard at its entrance. The thick oval table in the centre, almost as old as the great crusade itself, stood host to the most experienced and determined members of all the unforgiven chapters. Its deep magenta colour stood as a reminder of the blood and sacrifice that was such an integral part of the history of the unforgiven chapters. For the second time in millennia, virtually all the heads of the unforgiven chapters were once again gathered in this venerated hall. The sombre mood and deep thoughts of those present a testament to the losses of the recent conflict and the absence of comrades who were not so long ago present at the first gathering of angels. Their armour was no longer smooth and polished. That the leaders of these chapters led their men from the frontline was amply evident from the battle scars on their bodies as well as their armour. Weapons of men and of daemon, made of wizardry and of science gone mad, had all made their mark on their protective suits. Yet they had endured the assaults and led their forces to victory after victory tempered only by the loss of comrades and the destruction of their war machines. Now they gathered once more to heed the call of their supreme grandmaster. They traversed the dangers of the warp storms and of real space to once more return to their home of old. They expected dire news and steadied themselves to endure missions near impossible. They said their thanks to the emperor and praised their primarchs, and they waited.

Azrael sat with an impassionate expression at the head of the long oval table. He had borne the heavy burden of being the supreme grandmaster of the Dark Angels and the uncrowned leader of the unforgiven through a long period of imperial history. The recent conflict was unlike any previously experienced, and he alone had borne the burden of the unforgiven in making the critical and costly decisions. High command is indeed a lonely position. He looked around the table acknowledging each of the superhuman men seated at their assigned places. Giants of humanity, the commanders of the unforgiven space marine chapters, they had led their men to battle unflinchingly obeying his overall command. They had achieved major victories, stood in the path of harm, bled for the Imperium and lost close brothers in arms. Yet unlike the battles being waged every where else in the sector, their own activities were mostly unknown to the imperial command. Imperial forces were usually unaware of the arrival, intervention or the departure of the unforgiven forces. The effects of the battle strategy of the unforgiven forces were therefore being attributed to strategic mistakes by the despoiler, to emperor's divine blessings or to simple luck. It did not matter, as the unforgiven were never one to be swayed or even bothered by the opinions



of others as long as they knew that they served the greater good of the Imperium and that of their primarch.

Azrael continued to look each commander seated at the table in his eyesight, one by one, acknowledging their presence and saluting their efforts with nary a spoken word. It was an eerie coincidence that this gathering, the second during the thirteenth black crusade also coincided with the destruction of the second imperial world within the sector. This time it was not the work of imperial strategy, like that of St Josmane's Hope. It was a deliberate and callously planned destruction of one of the populated worlds of the Cadian system. Macharia had died at the hands of the planet killer, just as the unforgiven leaders gathered in the Conclavium Angelus. The death agony and rampant terror of billions had been amplified by the warp storms and had been felt by even those not gifted with psychic abilities. The emotional, tactical and strategic implications of that event had just hit home to those around the oval table. Two entire companies, one each from the Angels of Vigilance and Retribution had been all but decimated while attempting to disengage from Macharia. Their rearguard action had allowed the evacuation of millions of essential civilians and technical personnel from the doomed planet. The fifth company of the Angels of Retribution had refused to retreat despite certain death and the fourth company of the Angels of Vigilance had been caught in the destructive weaponry of the Planet Killer as their thunderhawks desperately raced to gain altitude. The grievous losses taken by the younger unforgiven chapters were felt deeply even by their older comrades.

"Brothers of the unforgiven! I am grateful to you for heeding the call for this gathering. The Lion has indeed watched over you during your perilous journeys to attend this meeting. The situation is as grave as it could ever be, and we must act decisively if the despoiler is to be stopped." Azrael was as direct to the point as ever, his voice as steady and as sharp as the obsidian sword of office he carried.

"Macharia has died by the vengeance of the despoiler. Our hearts are heavy for the loss of our battle brothers. Yet, this is neither the time for grief, nor solace. It is the time for decisive action. Whatever is said of our actions, we have learned much and achieved even more. The events of recent times and our knowledge gained so far all lead towards two major conclusions!"

Everyone was paying absolute attention, not a word spoken, as a strategic display once again activated itself over the oval table. Azrael continued "We know of the twisted strategy of some of the fallen, especially that of Dragien, that somehow involves the Tower of Angels and the eye of terror. That we must continue to relentlessly pursue and unfold. To that end the the third company of the Dark Angels have deployed on Kasr Sonnen alongside our battle brothers from the 11<sup>th</sup>

great company of the Spacewolves.” He let the words sink in for a moment. “I have just returned from Cadia itself and conferred with Grimnar. Kasr Sonnen will be hit soon and it must not fall. Amongst the enemy there is another one whom we seek, and must capture at all costs. That is our primary task at present.”

“Belial would have all the fun with the Spacewolves” a wide grin appeared on the face of Grandmaster Thammuz, chapter master of the Angels of Redemption. A giant of a man, loud, brash, outspoken and ever ready for battle, he was quite an unlikely character to hold office within the halls of the angels. “I trust Belial to uphold our honour.” He continued, referring to the honour fight and blood feud between the two legions.

“There will be no more blood feud” A palpable silence descended within the room as Azrael raised his right hand, displaying the rapidly healing incision, indicating the blood oath. “I have sworn on behalf of the unforgiven that our feud be over until the despoiler is defeated and so has Grimnar. Such is the gravity of the situation that we face right now.”

As silent minutes passed the gathered angels assimilated the words so spoken. It was Grandmaster Valerius, the quiet humble and unflinchingly brave chapter master of the Angels of Absolution who broke the reverie. “Supreme grandmaster Azrael, we respect your decision and none gathered here would seek to question it. We had decided to station the Tower of Angels within reach of Cadia despite the dangers we had suspected. As the planet killer is likely to approach Cadia, may we assume that is where you would wish the Tower to be?” the quiet wisdom in his voice ringing through to everyone present.

“I could not expect anything less from you, wise Valerius.” Azrael smiled wryly, he had known Valerius for centuries and had always admired the quiet demeanour and wise assessment his mind was capable of producing. “As we all know, Cadia is the key. Its pylons somehow have a limiting effect on the eye of terror and thus help stabilise the size of the Cadian gate. Destroy them and the effects could be catastrophic, leading to the expansion of the gate and the eye to such an extent that we may never be able to control the egress of the despoiler’s forces. Kasr Sonnen guards the sunward side of the Cadian space and is the only avenue for relief. Its reduction would weaken Cadia immeasurably and that is why the lion and the wolf must stand together. Kasr Sonnen must not fall!”

“I have stood against Abaddon on Xersia and have seen his measure. He fights this war on many fronts, psychological as well as physical. That he lost the battle on Xersia, yet aimed only to defile the Basilica Defaux is good evidence of his debased thinking. There was no strategic reason for

using the planet killer on Macharia, they were very nearly overrunning the planet. Yet he perseveres with his genocide on a scale never before seen. He wishes to crush us in spirit before the physical blow falls. There is no doubt that the planet killer will head towards Cadia, to destroy the planet and the great pylons within. That must never be allowed to happen!.

“Creed and Quarren will have contingencies to deal with that threat no doubt, as will the Inquisition, but we cannot rely on them! Let us face the might of the planet killer with the combined fleets of the unforgiven!” The booming voice belonged to none other than chapter master of the Angels of Vengeance, Grandmaster Furion. Clad in midnight black armour, his face was an aura of unadulterated anger. “We must face the despoiler directly! Honour demands it!”

“Then we are of the same mind!” Azrael continued, nodding in agreement towards the last speaker. “I have directed the Grandmaster of the Fleet, Apollyon, Seeker of the Stars to make preparations for the passage of the Tower of Angels to Cadia. This is the only space vehicle capable of facing the fire power of the planet killer. If necessary we will stand in the path of the planet killer, our defences and shields would buy our fleet the time to come to grips with that abomination.” He continued without pause “From this day forth all first company forces will be formed in to rapid reaction strike forces and deployed in fast strike cruisers. Where ever and whenever the planet killer is sighted they will attempt to teleport aboard and disable it as the situation permits. The rest of the strike forces will rendezvous once it has been sighted.”

Stunned to near disbelief the gathered angels sought to clarify their commander’s intentions. To place the last vestige of their home planet, and their millennia old symbol of redemption in such a manner must sometime be seen as the last gambit of desperate men. But the hour was late and the situation dire. Azrael calmly continued to explain at length the preparations that had been made in the past weeks. He detailed the diverse and hidden bases set up by the Dark Angels and the various repositories for the ancient relics, revered gene seed and all the equipment and supplies that a chapter would need for continued function. The unforgiven would relinquish their hunt for the fallen temporarily apart for a few selected fallen. The combined might of the unforgiven fleet, would gather in-system in Cadia followed by the Tower of Angels. Battlefleet Vengeance was already arriving in the Cadian system while parts of battle fleet Redemption would also arrive in time. Battle fleets Angelus Mortis and Absolution would continue to support the operations on Kasr Sonnen until the last possible moment and then move to join the rest. Battle fleets Vigilance, Retribution and Revenant would continue to perform fleet operations with the Tower of Angels.

*“Guns of the guard thirst; proud battle fleets stir;  
The emperor’s praetorians, the angels of death  
To face the coming test they come from afar  
To stand in harms way with the shield of their faith”*

As the hours passed and the final plans were laid amongst these guardians of humanity, a new resolution gripped them. Singularity of purpose and the exhilaration of the gathering of the unforgiven fleets fuelled their enthusiasm. Gone were the weariness of battle and defeat. They were to deploy once again as a legion, such was the strength of the unforgiven that would gather in the space surrounding Cadia. One by one each chapter’s command contingent left the Conclavium Angelus, bidding farewell to their brothers in arms, knowing full well that they may not see each other again. Soon Azrael stood alone, except for his trusted friend Ezekiel. They looked at each other determination written in their faces.

“It will begin at Kasr Sonnen.” said Ezekiel in a low voice.

“So it shall my friend so it shall, but it will certainly not end there.” Azrael observed.

“You were right in ordering Gideon to head there and in keeping it from the others. They will need his experience. I hope he can regroup and reach them in time. It will require all his expertise to achieve our objective.”

“Emperor knows how finely we hang in the balance. Gideon will be on time, he has never failed us. Ezekiel my friend, much blood is yet to be spilled even more destroyed. We will mourn others along with your close friend Azadael, but with the might of the unforgiven gathered in one place, we may just be able to disrupt the despoiler’s plans. His hold on his forces and the strategic situation is far more tenuous than most would realise. He needs a big victory now because he wishes to crush our spirit. When he tries we shall be there to deny him that. Even at the cost of our chapter’s venerated home.”

“That would indeed be high price grandmaster, but I am forced to agree with you. The hour is indeed dark”

“May the emperor and the primarch bless our brothers and forgive me for what I am about to lead them in to.”

## Chapter XXII: Traitors in our midst

The ghostly stillness of the Sonnen night enveloped the landscape in an all consuming blanket of darkness. Not a flicker of light was visible as far as the eyes could see. The darkness was complete and unforgiving. The stars themselves obscured by the thick layers of smoke and debris strewn cloud that was the inevitable result of a prolonged conflict of the kind that was being waged at the present time. It enveloped the citadels and fortifications of the world just as effectively as it did the forests and plains. This was a fortress world on full military alert and primed for total war. There were no illusions amongst the populace about the war being waged across the heavens. There was no hope amongst them that their world might be spared the brutality of total war. They had trained all their lives within this fortress world and now they faced their foes with determination. The world was dotted with fortress cities, each one a marvel of modern science and military genius. Each city was a self contained citadel able to support its population while conducting a solid defence, while mobile formations would venture out to conduct aggressive offensive operation. Each city was ringed by consecutive defence line, each line defended by a separate regiment, which prevented the betrayal or cowardice of one from compromising a sector of the perimeter. Betrayal and cowardice were alien to the population of Kasr Sonnen, for in the long ten thousand year history of the Imperium no regiment from the world of Sonnen had ever betrayed their faith in the emperor or turned tail in the face of the enemy.

Kasr Badden was one of the major fortress cities of Kasr Sonnen. Like all major cities in that world it was self sustained in almost everything from power to production facilities. There was little beauty and aesthetic value in the sprawling metropolitan, which was nothing more than a gargantuan production facility. One factor that made it a city of extreme strategic value was that it was also the home to the largest and most modern spaceport on that world. That fact alone had garnered it the attention of the major elements of two full imperial guard regiments to its defence. The Detrosian XXVIII "Death Hounds" were a mechanised regiment supplied with ample armour and artillery. Renowned for their fast sweeping mechanized tactics with vast formations of Leman Russ tanks and Chimera carriers, they were assigned the guardianship of the inner defence ring and entrusted with maintaining a ready reserve of mobile formations to sally forth and spearhead any counter attack against invading forces. Martial pride similar to the holy orders of crusading knights in old terra was the hallmark of this particular imperial guard regiment. The middle and outer defence rings were the responsibility of the Venturi-Argosi LV regiment, from the twin worlds of Venturi and Argosi. The mainly foot borne regiment was one in a long line of regiments from their twin worlds which continued to deliver a constant stream of non-descript but hardy

regiments. The officer command was neither particularly creative nor flexible and the troops generally found suitable for static defence duties or a general plodding advance. They were the ideal troops to soak up the effects of the initial onslaught of a crazed invader. The central districts of the fortress city including the space port and production facilities were under the purview of the city's planetary defence militia upon whom the judges of the Adeptus Arbites kept a very close observation. The defence of the city was divided into eight demi-quadrants. The commander of each had complete and unmitigated command of all three defence rings within his purview. This allowed a dynamic defence in depth while the central city command would maintain overall command as well as that of the city itself. The high command of each regiment was located with the central city command to facilitate interaction between the hundreds of sub units.

The various elements of each regiment allocated to the demi-quadrants incessantly practiced falling back from one defence line to the next and counter assaulting to regain the lost ground. They understood the concept that a dynamic defence was the only practical method of a successful defence. Despite the wide differences in origin, fighting tactics and general concept of life, the two regiments had exercised for months together and had developed a close working relationship, each realising that they needed the other to support them on the road to victory. They were backed up by some of the most formidable defence emplacements on that world. Each defence ring was made up of innumerable fortifications, automated weapons sites and kill zones filled with booby traps which could withstand a prolonged aerial bombardment. There were self contained miniature fortresses and bunkers connected by covered communications trenches. Interlocking fields of fire lay in wait for the unsuspecting enemy. Layered mine fields containing mixed varieties of the deadly devices including time delayed mines would channel the advancing enemy into waiting fire traps. Layered defence with widely deployed counter assault teams would slow down and throw back the hordes. Pre-planned artillery kill zones would wreak havoc amongst the follow on forces. Any attacking force would suffer casualties in the tens of thousands in a single engagement only to face the powerful counter stroke of the mobile reserves. Such impressive defence lines are usually the source of much noise, even in the depth of the Sonnen nights. The clatter of life and the flickers of intermittent light that were usually present despite the strict implementation of black out rules by the military authority seemed to be absent this night.

The slow measured crunch of ceramite armour on the soggy wet ground was the only sound to be heard for miles. Distinctive foot steps, they advertised the passage of a warrior advancing with supreme confidence. The lone figure slowly approached the first line of ringed defences surrounding Kasr Badden. There was no sense of urgency or disquiet in the movement of the figure. It moved with the confidence of a person who knew that there was no danger. Every step was measured in its stride, no mine nor trap activating to harm it. No challenge was issued from

the ever vigilante sentries and no storm of fire greeted it from the automated defence turrets. The figure reached the barricades that protected the first defence line, and without pausing to reflect or changing its pace continued forth, barricades and razor wire being crushed under the heavy march of the ceramite boots. Less than an hour later the lone figure emerged at the rear of the third ring of defences, having continued its lone deathly pace through the entire demi-quadrant which resembled an airless moon. The oppressive silence remained unbroken. Not a single defender could be seen, the trenches and fortifications bore all the signs of a frantic withdrawal. The lone figure stood for a moment and looked at the flat rolling land that stood before it. Almost one hundred terran miles stood between the inner defence ring and the outskirts of the city itself. The outer suburbs of the city themselves formed another ring of steel, originally housing the counter assault forces and city militia. The flat rolling land between the two formed a vast space that allowed rapid lateral movement to the vast array of armoured might coiled in reserve, but also formed a killing zone where an advancing enemy could be blown to shreds by concentrated artillery fire. At this point the lone figure stood still and allowed itself a few moments to reflect, a luxury it hadn't enjoyed for a very long time.

The figure stood still like a statue made of stone. To the casual observer who might have been insane enough to be there and risk a glance, the ceramite armour of deep night blue would have meant little. In places, where the battle scars had scrapped away the deep blue paint, flashes of purple could be seen, relics of a previous era. A closer look would have revealed that the ceramite greaves that arose above the boots were a twisted parody of their former selves. Hastily added iconography writhed life like near the knee guards. Symbols of destruction adorned the chest plates of the armoured giant, some of which were crafted elegantly while others indicated a more heavy handed approach. The shoulder pads rose automatically as his head swivelled left and right, to allow unobstructed vision while shielding the back of the head. On the shoulder pads were the insignia of his origin, the multi faceted head of the beast of terran mythology, the hydra. The helmet remained locked in place, unholy horns protruding through the head piece in such a way that there was no distinction between the living and the dead anymore. The armour itself seemed to have a life of its own while the being inside resembled the cold hard hand of death itself. Memories flashed by rapidly as he stood like a statue. These were memories of a lifetime of righteous conquests, of glorious battle and unmitigated carnage. He remembered worlds conquered, planets devastated and entire civilizations subjugated in the name of his gods and his father. He flourished in the memories of those moments when his brothers had turned on him and his fellow warriors. He rejoiced in the recollections of the battles and massacres where he led his men to victory after bloody victory against his erstwhile brothers, outmanoeuvring his opponents, deceiving them, entrapping them and waging war on all fronts until they were utterly destroyed. Such was the kind of total war that was waged by the Alpha Legion. A painful grimace

momentarily flickered across his face as he remembered the grim day on the world of Eskrador. There before his own eyes, his father was struck down by the arrogant and aristocratic Guilliman, primarch of the Ultramarines legion. His anger seethed as he relived the events in his own mind on how he had launched a vicious counter attack, using every tactic and strategy known to him, finally throwing the Ultramarines off the planet in disorder, only to find that the cowards had decided to bombard the planet from the safety of their space fleets. The major part of his command had escaped the bombardments by gaining the shelter of the deep ravines of Eskrador and in their deep underground vaults. He had woven his own intricate plan of battle over the past ten millennia. His plans had slowly come to fruition and one of its major achievements would be gained today, on this planet in the heart of the Imperium.

Only a single minute had passed since he reached the end of the third defence ring and had stood still. With a single thought he activated his integrated display built in to the visor of his battle helmet. The ancient suit of armour, warped and changed by the baleful influence of the powers of the warp, responded instantly activating the relevant displays as an overlay on to the view screen. Unit dispositions, tactical data, strategic deployments and troop movement plans, all forming a massive collection of sensitive data fed on to the visor and was instantly absorbed by his super human brain. Another impulse of thought caused the tactical map to be displayed on his view screen, showing in detail disposition of all friendly and enemy troops and their combat effectiveness. It had taken much strategic foresight and long arduous years of tedious perseverance to achieve the tactical situation he was faced with. That was his primach's way of waging war. His agents had been infiltrating the world of Kasr Sonnen, and in particular the fortress city of Kasr Badden for decades. They had arrived there and lived on as law abiding imperial citizens. Some had perished due to natural causes while awaiting his arrival. Others had died violently at the hands of imperial authorities while more had succumbed to the effects of the underworld. Yet many survived and rejoiced when they had received word of his coming. They had activated their cells and groups and activity long planned and left quiescent was initiated with renewed vigour.

Men whom were ready to follow him unquestioningly to battle and face death if necessary were present in number at every level of the Detrosian XVIII regiment. These hardened men had been subverted to his own purpose, a thought which brought a wry smile to his lips. It was indeed an achievement, turning an entire imperial guard regiment to his cause.

He read the information arriving in to his visor display with delight as reports rapidly cascaded. City central command buildings had mysteriously exploded, the entire command staff being wiped out. The Detrosian XXVIII command staff had somehow survived. Worker revolts and civilian riots



had begun in earnest within the city. Streets were blockaded causing massive traffic hold-ups slowing down the daily supply columns to the defence rings. The space port had been shut down due to worker unrest. The foreboding thuds were heard in the distance as artillery fire commenced its unholy activity. He could also hear the intercepted vox caster messages as the ancient systems built in to his armour rapidly deciphered the messages. Frantic calls from the command staff of the Venturi-Argosi LV regiment emanated towards the non-existent central command. Anger and desperation were written in their messages as the Venturi-Argosi units questioned the orders that had relocated them in the open ground. This was ostensibly to allow an apparent outbreak of pestilence within the defence rings which were to be controlled by incinerator bombardment. Imperial aircraft were expected to drop incineration blast bombs on the defence rings which would kill any living organism while preserving all structures including weapons and munitions. Their terror was even more pleasant to his ears as the concentrated artillery fire of the Detrosian XXVIII and apparently allied aircraft dropping incinerator bombs targeted the extremely exposed and highly concentrated units of the Venturi-Argosi LV regiment. Three hours later the regiment would cease to exist as a fighting formation.

His long laid plans were in motion. The Detrosian XXVIII remained entrenched within the city limits. He had even more important missions for them. He knew his enemy, his tendrils were within their midst, and he knew how they would react. He could almost hear the advance of the brethren behind him. They had gathered upon his command, and had born arms with no questions asked. These were no rambling hordes of deviants and mutants. These were serious minded men with serious minded mission within them. They were well armed and had been well trained. He knew of the arrival of a company each of Spacewolves and Dark Angels. He knew that they would react to the sudden collapse of a sector by rushing to meet the danger. He knew that even as he stood there the servants of the false emperor were deploying in his path. He would face them with his devout brethren, armed and dangerous. The space marines were said to be the equal of ten normal men. He had plenty with which to face them. In fact the six million souls who now marched through the three successive defence rings were armed well enough to take care of two space marine companies. He would exploit their weakness and their in built animosity by focussing his attack between the two forces. He knew all he needed to know about the tenacious Dark Angels and the spacewoles from the man who stood beside him now. Braynor, wreathed in a swirling black robe which concealed dusty and dated black armour greeted his leader. There was no concealing the look of excited anticipation in the fallen angel's eyes. The gleam in those vengeful eyes did not diminish the cold and calculating confidence which also dwelt in them. This would be the opportunity that he had sought out, the death of a city, the opening of a gateway to the world and the humiliating defeat of two of the emperor's foremost legions. But, if his plans were to be unhinged, he had the Detrosian XXVIII positioned to

target them from their rear, and if they failed he had other plans. For he was the ultimate planner, conceiver of innumerable plans and counter plans, of subterfuge and of martial prowess. In the end he would face any and each situation with a well rehearsed strategy. He was Ikrare-Kormordan the manipulator, the chosen of Alpharius, chapter commander of the Alpha Legion, and commander of the forces of disorder about to storm Kasr Badden.

## Chapter XXIII: Shades of Green! Shades of Grey!

The early morning mist laid a thick carpet low over the surrounding land. The usual waking melodies of the resident fauna were absent on this day. A few rays of sunshine struggled to penetrate the dark overlay of smog. A low rumble could be heard in the distance. A rumble created by the constant chanting of blasted slogans by a vast horde of humanity as they made their way towards the outskirts of Kasr Badden. The low rumble grew in volume, rising to a high pitched cacophony as the massive war host arrived by foot to the position of their leader. He had advanced alone against the three rings of the Kasr defences and not a single shot was fired. The psychological impact on the advancing sycophants was immense. It appeared to them that their gods favoured the purple armoured giant of a warrior, and they would look upon them with favour too.

Ikrare-Kormodan had not moved from the position he had taken up on his lone arrival at the rear of the defence rings, nearly three hours ago. The massive tremor caused by the advance of six million cultists could be felt all the way to the outskirts of the city itself. He continued to receive and relay information to his various sub-commands, simply by his thought processes which controlled the functions of the armoured suit he wore. The many headed monster of terran mythology which he wore on his shoulder pad represented not only the insignia of his legion but also their modus operandi. His command was split in to numerous self-contained units, each of which was capable of self-sustained operations over a long period. Some of these command units were assigned to take control of the milling mass of debased humanity that even now trudged passed him towards the open gates of the Kasr. Others had taken control of various traitor regiments within the city itself, and even more blocked the routes by which potential reinforcements may arrive. Most powerful of all his efforts was that which was aimed at deception and subterfuge. He had managed to have many valiant imperial units re-deploying in the wrong places, firing on their own units and in general cause a complete breakdown of coordination within the region of Kasr Badden. He had kept many of his plans in reserve for potential surprises and the fluid events that would always occur after battle commences. He noted with satisfaction that the last of the traitor horde were well on their way towards the Kasr. These hordes were extremely well trained and his agents who had arrived in the world over the past millennia had indeed exceeded his expectations. Secret covens had been in existence for hundreds of years, training, planning and generally infiltrating every level of society on this one city. He looked at Braynor with some distaste. Ikrare himself was a traitor, but he considered the imperial lackeys to be the true traitors and the carrion god to be the great betrayer of humanity. However, Braynor was actually a traitor to his own legion and by his own admission had fought against his own

primarch. That was one thing that Ikrare was incapable of. His warrior code would never allow him to battle against his own primarch and battle brothers. Why that black robed angel chose to offer him his services, Ikrare would never know, but for that he could never truly be trusted. Such were the tangible differences between those who fought against the lord of humanity.

Messages from his Alpha Legion units began to roll in as the enemy responded to the sudden collapse of an entire section of the front. Many imperial units continued to find themselves in the wrong place or assigned completely contradicting orders. Command and control had nearly collapsed in the city. Then came the expected reports of space marine reinforcements arriving within the city. Despite the closure of the spaceport within the city, the largest on Kasr Sonnen, space marines had deployed there in force by assault, and were even now racing to face him. He smiled as he initiated yet another of his integrated plans. The Detrosian XVIII regiment had already redeployed to face the arrival of the space marine contingent. They had prepared defences in depth in the outskirts of the city. The cityscape would limit the much vaunted manoeuvrability of space marine formations and drag them in to a war of attrition. Once caught within the molasses of city fighting, they would be surrounded on all sides by the traitor units within the city while the overwhelming mass of his advancing army would simply flood over them. He continued directing the movement of his units with confidence as reports reached them of the identity of the new arrivals. An entire company of Spacewolves and another of the Dark Angels were on their way to meet him in battle and meet their destruction. More trophies for his war room, he smiled inwardly.

He was so deeply mesmerised in conducting the command of the myriad units that obeyed him, that he nearly missed a warning sign. One of his observation teams within city had failed to report. There were hundreds of such teams, mostly humans but some traitor marines, scattered about in each and every city on Kasr Sonnen. The constant stream of information that was relayed to his command consoles built in to his armour would have overwhelmed even a space marine let alone a normal human. But he was Ikrare the manipulator, chosen of the chaos gods and blessed by them. He and his armour were one and the entity that dwelt within the armour enhanced him to the state of demi-god. In an instant he had interrogated and questioned a number of relevant units and the waiting Detrosian XVIII combat teams. The answers were unanimous. The space marine reinforcements had left the spaceport but had not arrived at the expected point of contact. The imperial dictum stated in no uncertain terms that in such situations, the reinforcing units must move to consolidate the weakened defences, and he had set his trap appropriately. Yet the recently arrived space marine reinforcements had failed to make contact with the waiting Detrosian XVIII units. As he frantically tried to ascertain the whereabouts of those missing enemy formations, alert warnings began to stream in.

There was a space marine armoured column smashing its way around the right flank, completely ignoring any damage to civilian and military structures. They were cleaving a path through the cityscape outflanking the Detrosians on the right while another was coming along the left in a similar pattern. The points of thrust of both those columns would bring them together in a pincer movement on the plains of Kasr Badden, where the Venturi-Argosi LV had been annihilated. The only difference was that their arrival would have been timed at catching his advancing hordes in that open field. The results would have been disastrous if allowed to occur. It was indeed a bold plan by the space marine commander, who had not only divided his force in to two, but also chosen to launch simultaneous flank assaults with no frontal attack. He was putting his force at risk from flanking counter thrusts from the Detrosians and was obviously relying on his heavy armour, high mobility and the shock effects of his tactics to shatter the advancing enemy force. Amused by the tactical flair of his opponent, he set in motion a counter plan, as always being prepared with pre-planned strategies for every contingency. The leading elements of his war host immediately halted, forming in to tactical dispositions and delaying their advance. The Detrosian XVIII immediately began to redeploy to face the open fields again, ranging their long range artillery on the killing ground, ready to mete out the same treatment to the space marines that they had done to the Venturi-Argosi. Their mobile armoured units moved to the edge of the city to reform for an armoured counter thrust in to the flanks of the loyalist forces. Intelligence reported that the vehicles of the flanking force on his left bore the insignias of the Dark Angels and those on the right that of Spacewolves. Accordingly he deployed his massive horde, with long range anti armour weaponry concentrated on the right, and much of his heavy firepower aimed at the same flank. He would annihilate the feral warrior sons of Russ with his firepower, avoiding close combat at which they obviously excelled. On the other hand his mobile troops would advance directly in to the path of the Dark Angels, aiming to assault them before they could deploy from their vehicles and bring their formidable firepower to bear. For this task he had within his command, with oaths of loyalty and fealty sworn a large formation of World Eaters, or more commonly known by their feared name of Khorne Berserkers. With these blood thirsty madmen as the cutting edge he would shatter the angels in a furious charge and then envelop the Spacewolves while the Detrosians pummelled them in to oblivion.

He now concentrated on observing the grand view of the battle taking form. His tactical display built within his suit of armour was somewhat limited for this purpose, and so he signalled his personal command centre to be brought forward. A massive war machine, a mutated parody of an ancient land raider lurched forward with a will of its own. Like a pet animal obeying his master, it arrived next to him and opened the massive ramp. Inside, the foul stench that was the aroma of the ruinous powers wafted freely. Twisting and writhing machinery and consoles displayed the

tactical situation with millions of icons. Where inert machine started and where sentient beings ended remained impossible to see. Body parts and even complete bodies were fused to the various panels and functioned as one. With an air of supreme confidence Ikrare stepped in to his command vehicle to review the battle that was about to commence. Braynor stood just outside the vehicle, obviously finding the stench of the interior distasteful. Ikrare cared none for that fallen angel. He had more pressing matters to attend. He spent a few minutes viewing the grand dispositions of the forces arrayed for battle and rapidly barked out a few orders to numerous other units and teams. His eyes narrowed sharply as his displays showed that each of the flanking space marine forces had split in to two, with one half of each continuing to charge forward, while the rear half of each were speeding to join forces in the middle. With practiced ease the two forces joined in the centre, amongst the recent debris that marked the passage of the Venturi-Argosi LV regiment, the embarked marines rapidly deploying to take up fire positions. What did surprise him was the fact that both forces had sent fully half of their complement charging forward within easy reach of his waiting hordes who even as he watched restlessly began to move forward to meet the enemy.

The battle lust in him was starting to make itself felt. He was eager to release the leash on his troops, yet slightly intrigued by the unorthodox approach by the enemy commander. He would have liked to have waited a little longer to see what his counterpart might do, but the tactical situation required immediate action. With a curt order, he ordered the teeming mass of unholy warriors to charge the advancing elements. With an unnatural roar they charged forward, armed with a variety of weapons from small arms to heavy weapons teams, from flame weapons to modified fusion bombs. The advancing space marine vehicles spat death as the vehicle mounted weapons opened fire, ripping massive gouges in to the advancing army. Heads were blown away, bodies thrown back by the physical force and limbs scattered in all directions as the explosive tipped projectiles from the bolt guns began the emperor's retribution. Ikrare's war host cared not for their fallen, as their chanting rose to a cacophony accompanying their unstoppable charge. They looked as if they were ready to rip the enemy vehicles apart with their bare hands. The unit of Khornate warriors had been directed to face the deep green coloured vehicles of the Dark Angels with the explicit aim of defeating them in close combat and collapsing one arm of the advance. Ikrare held his breath abruptly as the holo-vid display screens suddenly revealed that all the advancing rhinos and razorbacks had screeched to a halt, slewing around and dropping their ramps to disgorge grey armoured warriors. Armed with massive close combat weapons and howling the war cry of their chapter master, feral warriors of the spacewolves chapter spilled forth, from their own as well as the Dark Angel rhinos. The Khornate warriors were well ahead of the rest of the force, their blood lust driving them onwards towards the enemy. The spacewolves met them with a charge of their own. Blood curdling war cries emanated above the clamour of

battle and with a mighty roar the two forces clashed. In a focussed fury of violence the two space marine forces smashed in to each other, the blood lust and millennia long experience of the berserkers being matched by the unmitigated ferocity and tactical cunning of the spacewolf warriors.

Taken aback momentarily by the sudden unforeseen event, Ikrare rapped out further orders, making changes to this rapidly evolving opera for which he was, and intended to be the choreographer. The enemy commander was impressive indeed, having been able to out think Ikrare himself, though only momentarily. He noticed that the rear forces of the both space marine flanks had joined in the middle, spilling forth green armoured giants who took up tactical dispositions. Slowly and methodically the Dark Angel firebase started its deadly task of dealing with advance of their enemies. Accurate and concentrated fire ripped in to the advancing enemy. Superb mastery of fire control was demonstrated by their commander as the volume of fire kept the enemy force from interfering with the bloody combat between the spacewolves and khornate warriors. Ikrare realized just how well the imperial lackeys were employing their fire support to channel his advance. The rain of fire corralled his advance elements in such a way that the spacewolf assault was able to concentrate at focal points, achieving local superiority and destroying one group before moving on to the next. In a brilliant display of coordination between fire power and assault the warriors of the two chapters were effectively eroding the numerical advantage of the chaos war host. To Ikrare this came as a shock. Here was an enemy commander of some worth, using numerically inferior forces in a tactically disadvantageous situation and yet was deftly out manoeuvring his every move. This was a worthy opponent indeed, but he, Ikrare was not known as the manipulator for no reason. He barked out a host of orders to his command thralls who relayed them immediately. Despite the rude surprises caused by the enemy, their main battle line was now in the killing fields of the plains of Kasr Badden. The big guns of the Detrosian XVIII had already ranged in to that killing field once this morning. He had ordered a firestorm which would bracket the enemy's fire base as well as the close combat taking place. He was prepared to loose a substantial portion of his advance elements to remove this space marine blocking force.

Time moved rapidly on the battle field as the combined space marine forces of the two chapters demolished the first wave of advancing cultists and wiped out the khornate detachment in bloody fighting. The spacewolves had paid dearly in the close combat against the frothing, blood thirsty madmen but had finally prevailed. Now, the two flank forces were advancing in alternate leaps while the fire base held the rest of the enemy force at bay. The space marine artillery was continued to reap horrendous casualties, massive gouges being created by their ordnance weapons. Yet, the maddened cultists advanced. Where there were six million before now there

were four. Distant explosions were once again heard from behind the space marine fire base. Ikrare expectantly looked up at the field of battle, waiting to see the firestorm engulf the Dark Angel and Spacewolf forces from their rear. The armoured elements of the Detrosians would then smash in to their rear like a steel wedge. His eager anticipation turned to surprised anger as no explosions blossomed amongst the enemy, who was now making a determined advance. There was a troubled look on Braynor's face as he quickly assimilated the tactical situation. Urgent vox messages were now suddenly arriving from the Detrosian XVIII. Black coloured space marines on bikes were assaulting their artillery positions. The intensity and frequency of the explosions in the back ground increased rapidly culminating in a massive rolling explosion which denoted the demise of the Detrosian's main weapons magazine. The vox messages were becoming more and more desperate. The armoured spearheads had been attacked from the rear by fast moving bikes and attack bikes. He frantically tried to assess the identity of the newcomer. He wondered if another chapter lent its hand to the assaulting force. He tried to comprehend as to how his intelligence could have failed in such a manner. His battlefield surveillance systems were gradually being destroyed, the icons marking his units on his command displays slowly fading as each unit failed to report in. He cursed the false emperor and stepped outside his command vehicle. He stepped outside just in time to see a swarm of black land speeders racing in from both flanks and enveloping the rear of his assault force. The speeders weaved a delicate pattern through the incoming fire, dexterously avoiding the harm. They opened fire at long range yet their fire was as accurate as the ground elements of the enemy. Armour blew up, cultists died screaming by the droves and panic set in to the teeming mass of humanity that had been the pride of Ikrare' achievements. Frank terror now played on Braynor's face as he replaced his helmet and drew his arms for combat. The advancing space marine forces were now rolling forward with increasing momentum. The combined close combat skills of the wolves and the tactical discipline of the Dark Angels had over powered a massive enemy war host and reduced it to a mass of terror stricken rabble.

The black land speeders came in waves, flitting in and out, each pass leaving death and destruction in their wake. It was they who had smashed the advance of the Detrosian XVIII in their tracks and their bike mounted comrades finished it off. An archaic looking speeder could be seen leading the assault accompanied by three others. Ikrare's battle lust was now at fever pitch, yet he forgot none of his training and experience. He accepted the loss of this battle, but there would be others. He relayed orders to his command units scattered within the now retreating force to disperse and activated numerous contingency plans. As he turned to enter his vehicle he was thrown to the ground by a massive explosion which transformed the front of the massive war machine to molten slag. Cursing blasphemous words and calling out to his patron gods he saw Braynor also pick himself up and attempt to flee, terror oozing in his every move. Ikrare stood up,



and drew his archaic sword that dangled at his side with both hands. The daemonic entity trapped within cooed in anticipation of the coming blood bath. He saw the massive land speeder turn rapidly towards him, with an agility that would shame an elder jet bike. He noticed that speeder which bore down on him was an ancient one, armed differently and containing the apparel of command. He noticed the crew also wore jet black. The gunner was on the far side, and stitched a stream of fiery death using twin linked weaponry on board. The pilot leaned out from his side, a massive sword in his arm, poised to strike. Ikrare raised his own daemon sword in anticipation of the coming thrust. He remembered the speeder approaching in slow motion, the noise of the surrounding battle disappearing to his senses. The white winged dagger painted on the speeder was now very evident. The opponent's sword swung in slow motion and Ikrare raised his own to meet his swing.

The last thing Ikrare saw was his headless torso standing up right, held aloft by the ancient daemon encrusted armour. As his life blood rapidly washed away in to the plains of Kasr Badden he saw his nemesis swinging away in victory. His entire war host had been annihilated and the breach in the defences of Kasr Badden secured. His pain staking plans had come to naught and now he screamed his frustration. The weak scream from his decapitated head quickly faded in to nothing as darkness set in.

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Interrogator chaplain Sarpedon leaned over inside the command rhino transport. Apothecary Beremial was tending to the prisoner. The wounded warrior had had his left leg and right arm blown away by assault cannon fire. They had been lucky to get to him before he had died. The super human space marine anatomy and physiology had allowed him to survive these near fatal wounds. "Beremial! He must live. Much depends on that."

"He will live, but only just. We must evacuate him immediately to the apothecarium aboard the Sword of Retribution."

"Agreed! I will accompany him. Grandor! Open secure link to the Sword of Retribution. Emergency code Omega Sigma Nine! Code encryption Crimson Lilac Blue! Message reads as follows: Mission accomplished. Fallen 179 in custody. Immediate apothecarium required. Transmit confirmation and forward to the Tower of Angels. We will evacuate immediately."

## Chapter XXIII: In Harm's Way

Drenexar opened his eyes slowly, struggling to focus his vision. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious. His body ached as if he had been dropped from the walls of the imperial palace on terra, not that he had ever even been to holy terra. His body remained strapped to his command chair as he inhaled slowly trying to shake the stupor from his mind. Everywhere around him lay the twisted remains of what was once his command post. He couldn't feel his legs and could barely move his right arm. Where his left had been, there remained only a charred stump. The pain was excruciating to the degree, but the stims injected by the medi-port in his command console made it just bearable, enough to allow him to come to terms with his surroundings. As his mind swirled back with memories, he slowly brought the view screen in to focus.

Captain Drenexar remembered the day when he had been given his first space command, a lowly in-system patrol craft, almost fifty five years ago. He had no rights attached to his birth, being of a non-aristocratic decent, and had struggled hard to advancement within the imperial navy. Slowly, through sheer will power and stubbornness in never accepting failure, he had made a slow but steady rise up the ranks. His start however only began to rise when he was finally given command of a Cobra class destroyer. That would never have occurred if not for fate and a malicious ambush by Eldar pirates. The death of most of those on the bridge of their destroyer in the first few minutes of the engagement sounded the death knell for the three civilian transports that they were escorting, the fate of those on board left to the delights of the vicious marauders. What transpired on board the "Imperial Vendetta" was the sudden coming of age of a young captain who had been sorely underestimated by not only his superiors but also the attacking pirates. Taking command of the destroyer and keeping their energy emissions to minimal to maintain the deception that they were dead in space, he gathered the crew and quickly made his tactical plans. The two elder pirate vessels had slowed down and closed with the transports, disabling them first and then preparing to board them. The first inclination of something amiss was when the "Imperial Vendetta" suddenly activated its power grid and fired a salvo of torpedoes at point blank range. Drenexar had ordered the torpedoes loaded manually, the torpedo bay doors also to be opened manually and had slowly aligned the targeting computer manually using minimal auxiliary power. Too slow to maneuver and too close to avoid the two torpedoes one corsair class escort vessel disintegrated in a blossom of energy, their shadow fields and mimic engines failing completely. The second vessel reacted with admirable speed, turning on the spot to face the attacker, knowing that the destroyer would need time to reload the torpedoes and that its weapons batteries would be of little effect, as the shadow fields came in to action. What the pirate captain did not expect was to see the cobra destroyer charge ahead at full speed through

the expanding fireball of its sister ship on a course for ramming. A desperate evasive maneuver prevented head on collision, but the "Imperial Vendetta", true to its name smashed the engines of the enemy vessel.

Drenexar had made a meteoric rise within the ranks of destroyer fleets, to command the famed "Wolf Packs" squadron. His love of destroyer tactics resulted in him turning down promotions to larger commands and he became the foremost expert on destroyer fleet tactics, particularly in their use for covert surveillance, ambush and hit and run attacks. He was the proponent of large destroyer flotillas to better control of the space lane and had been the ideal choice for his latest assignment. Tasked with finding, following and if at all possible distracting or interfering with the progress of Abaddon's planet killer, he had thrown his entire flotilla to the task. Such was his brilliance that his mission had exceeded beyond his own expectations. They had detected the planet killer and its massive armada of escorts and had followed it without being detected for nearly three days. He had detached individual ships to move away and transmit their findings, each one of them being destroyed by marauding enemy formations within minutes of them breaking their communications black out, such was the strength of the invading armada. Yet he had continued his vigil, planning and plotting ways of slowing the enemy. It was too good to last and the last of his destroyers had finally been set upon by a more numerical enemy and destroyed in detail. His own ship blown in two, and most of his crew dead, he had elected to die with his powerless ship. His only regret was not being able to die in the fury of battle, ramming an enemy ship to death. He knew in his heart that he had accomplished much more than anyone in the fleet could have hoped for and he prayed that his final signals identifying the location and direction of the Planet Killer Fleet had been picked up by some friendly ship. He looked at the flickering view screen as the lifeless hulk of his ship slowly rotated away from the scene of the ambush. The screams of the crew members still rang in his ears as the enemy targeted the drop pods, firing at them just enough to vent the atmosphere and condemning them to a horrible death in the vacuum of space. He longed to see the shape of an imperial ship, in the hope that some of the crew may be rescued. Hours went by and as his life force ebbed away he looked one last time at his view screen. How his mortally wounded ship managed to maintain power to his consoles he would never know, but what he saw made his heart leap. There in the deep darkness of inter stellar space, slowly gliding in to view was a veritable armada of space ship. An entire fleet of snub nosed and bulky vessels with blocky outlines that could not be anything other than a loyalist space marine fleet. With the last vestiges of his strength he punched the release button for the data buoy containing all the recordings of their mission including details of the predators that had wiped out his flotilla, praying to the emperor that the passing ships were indeed friendly and would retrieve the data. With his dying breath he saw what most would never imagine, a floating fortress monastery in the epicenter of the massive armada, and they were heading in the

direction between Cadia and Abaddon's fleet. Then, with a wry smile full of hope and satisfaction, his soul passed to the embrace of the emperor.

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Aradiel looked intently at the three dimensional star map flitting in front of him, absorbing the massive amounts of data displayed on it. He noted that Apollyon was listening carefully to the communications in put as the data capsule was deciphered in real time. He had been in the service of the emperor for almost five hundred years now but the weight of responsibility always seemed to get worse. He was after all the commander of the watch, accorded the command title of Grandmaster of the Watch and the more sought after honorific title of Keeper of the Fortress, and his was the immense responsibility of the safety of the Tower of Angels. His command centre was buried deep within the bedrock of the asteroid that had been their home for a hundred centuries. It was completely separated from the chapter's tactical headquarters, where the supreme grandmaster performed his command duties in order to ensure the safety and survivability of their functions. Apollyon was the grandmaster of the Dark Angel fleet, honorifically called the Seeker of Stars. It was a long standing source of amusement between the two of them to call each other by the abbreviated honorific titles, seeker and keeper, and no doubt had caused the occasional chuckle amongst their command staff, despite being dour space marines. The Tower of Angels had never been attacked by external forces in the ten millennia of its existence, but that was about to change with a vengeance. They were heading in to the mouth of the dragon. The supreme commander had made an extremely difficult tactical choice, one that he was sure the Lion would approve. The chapter had hidden reserve bases to conduct operations from, and it had been part of his duty to ensure that such a redundancy was created over the millennia. The unforgiven chapters had gathered together in unprecedented numbers and their fleet strength was approaching that of their original legion. Together with Apollyon he had devised their tactical battle plans for the coming battle. He was confident that his techmarines would provide enough manoeuvrability to the floating asteroid to be able to ram the planet killer if the need arose.

Apollyon had voiced his misgivings about the strength of their escorting fleet, mostly made up of elements from the battle fleets vigilance and retribution. The main battle fleets of the Dark Angels and Absolution chapters had already deployed in strength to Cadia. Battle fleet Redemption had turned back to Cadia from their transit to Caliban. Battle fleet vengeance had successfully held the Caliban system against enemy assault and had placed a blockade in the system and had also redirected all available assets to Cadia. In ten hours the combined strengths of the unforgiven fleets would rendezvous as they neared the outer planets of the Cadian system. More fleets from

other unforgiven chapters would continue to join them battle fleets Retribution, Revenant and so on the list went. He had worked closely with Apollyon for the past few centuries as the younger Apollyon had taken command of the fleet. He was responsible for the close in defence of the Tower while Apollyon managed the strategic and tactical defences. More often than not, the two conceived their brilliantly convoluted and complicated plans together to such effect that the chapter's grandmaster rarely interfered in the process.

When the ambush was sprung it was as deadly and as fearsome as they had expected. Despite centuries of service to the emperor Aradiel was still amazed at how the emperor protected his own. The data slab that had activated itself and then been retrieved by them had contained the energy signatures, mimic engine silhouettes and combat strengths of the predatory chaos fleets that had wiped out the famous commodore Drenexar's destroyer flotilla. Drenexar had indeed served the emperor well, and had been afforded a formal funeral and burial in space as a mark of respect. The data so gleaned had allowed them to specifically attune their sensors to the enemy vessels in the expectation of the ambush. Despite their preparedness, when the ambush came it hit the defenders like a sledgehammer. This was not a mere ambush flotilla that was assaulting them but an entire chaos battle fleet. He looked at Apollyon and admired the calm manner with which he controlled this vast opera that was unfolding around them. Hundreds of space ships crisscrossed the space around them as the enemy pressed home their assault. Small ships exploded while larger ones floated dead in space as a testimony to the fierce nature of the battle. Space marine battle barges are built to withstand massive amounts of punishment as befits their main role of close in bombardment of planets or boarding actions against enemy ships. But most space marine ships are out ranged in a fleet engagement due to their shorter ranged armaments. It was Apollyon's insistence that had resulted in the concentration of all available Nova class frigates from all chapter fleets within the defensive perimeter of the Tower. The best of the fleet assets were deployed in battle groups, taking the battle to the attackers, something that the space marine relished. The massive dorsal bombardment cannons of the battle barges were reaping a massive toll of the chaos heavy and battle cruisers, while the damage to themselves was limited by their hardy construction.

Breaking away from the concepts of the Codex Astartes, Azrael had ordered many changes to their battle tactics. Deathwing terminators were deployed within the smaller ships of the line, some Hunter class destroyers and Gladius class frigates were equipped with teleporters to support these intrepid ship hunters. Already a whole flotilla of chaos raider class vessels lay dead in space on their left flank, their generators blown by the boarding terminators. Amongst the wreckage of that flotilla lay the outlines of at least four slaughter and Murder class cruisers. Deathwing units from the various chapters were indeed reaping a bitter harvest.

In a straight fleet engagement with most fleets space marine battle fleets usually have a significant disadvantage, particularly if the element of surprise was not on their side. This is mostly due to the relative lack of long range lance armament. In this engagement however the unforgiven armada had a number of factors to even the odds. They had at their head, grandmasters Aradiel and Apollyon, some of the most brilliant naval minds of their time. In addition the Tower of Angels was a great equalizing factor. There was a veritable forest of long range weaponry emplaced within the asteroid which was protected by the greatest and most powerful void shields ever devised. These were the same shields that had held the continent sized segment of Caliban together when the rest of the worlds had been ripped apart by the warp storm. The umbrella of protective firepower emanating from the Rock was carefully choreographed by Aradiel to support Apollyons fleet actions and the results were devastating to say the least. The unforgiven armada cut through the opposing chaos fleets so much like hot knife through butter, an old terran delicacy. As the giants battled amongst themselves, smaller firefights were taking place all around them. Flights of thunderhawk gunships faced off against waves of enemy swiftdeath fighters, doomfire bombers and most deadly of all the dreadclaw drop pods that were attempting to make land fall on the asteroid itself. These were not limited by the void shields and could penetrate on to the surface of the Tower of Angels if allowed, but so far not one had made it through the ring of death the unforgiven had created around them. All the time the entire armada continued to head towards the coordinates that would allow them to intercept the planet killer before it reached the planet of Cadia. The time for subtlety was over, the gauntlets were off and the unforgiven were content to use their sheer brute force as abattering ram to reach their objective.

Try as they might, their defence of their base was never expected to be water tight. The occasional torpedo made it through the defensive screens and impacted on the holy bedrock of Caliban, gouging out large chunks of stone and earth. The void shields prevented the debris from reaching the void of space and thus preserved the last remaining parts of their home world intact. Alert as ever the astute Aradiel constantly analyzed the pattern of attacks and the progress of the battle. He could only pray to the emperor that the despoiler had not expected the unforgiven to bring their base of operations in to harms way and that the enemy had not yet gained access to the Imperial Navy's latest torpedoes, the "Rok-Buster". Specifically developed to destroy the orks' Rok fortresses, their effect on the Tower of Angels would be devastating. Mouthing another silent prayer to the emperor and his primarch, he continued assessing the battle. They had been in constant conflict for more than twenty terran hours. The enemy fleets would break off contact and another enter the battle to replace them. Had they attempted this adventure with a fleet of ships they would certainly have been ground down by attrition and the need for re-supply, but this battle

was different. The presence of the massive fortress monastery not only equalised the long range firepower of the fleets but also gave a protective haven for damaged ships as well as those requiring re-supply. Millennia of planning and preparation for such an event had finally paid off handsomely. The long stream of debris, dead ships and blossoming explosions stretched back for thousands of miles like a memorial to the fighting prowess of the unforgiven armada and the sacrifice of the loyalist angels.

Aradiel's brilliantly analytical mind suddenly found the inconsistency that he felt was present. Almost imperceptibly at various intervals in the day long battle, a stream of torpedoes had impacted on one specific point in the bedrock of their fortress. Most would have dismissed it as a vagary of war, but not the Grandmaster of the Tower. Five torpedoes had impacted on the same coordinates and from the same angle of attack but their impacts spaced out in time so that this effort would go unnoticed. The result was that it had gouged out a wide crater of considerable depth on the under surface of the asteroid. Within seconds he had computed the trajectory that future projectiles would need to take to avoid the rim of the crater and impact within its depths. Extending that line, his heart froze for a moment. A soft but sudden exclamation stuck in his throat. Apollyon noticed it and was at his side in an instance, studying the hologram. They looked at each others face as realization seeped in. Activating the secure vox channel to the chapter's command centre Aradiel spoke, his voice strained with anticipation.

"Supreme Grandmaster Azrael! We have a coordinated missile and torpedo attack on sector omega-five-seven-grey. I expect this point to be assaulted imminently. I request permission to activate defence status vermilion-one"

Azrael contemplated the faces of the two grandmasters on his vid display screen. Vermillio-One was a defence condition never before activated and released the authority for self destruction of the Tower of Angels in to the hands of both the supreme grandmaster and the Grandmaster of the Tower. To request this, the situation must indeed be extremely desperate.

"Condition Vermillion-One activated. You have joint control of the destruct sequence, Aradiel!" replied Azrael, trusting his watch commander implicitly

Aradiel continued "The line of the impacts, if extended, would penetrate to chamber 000."

An icy chill penetrated the hearts of the three grandmasters upon hearing this. The dreaded fears of Ezekiel had been realised. Someone knew of their innermost secrets. Someone had obviously planned the space borne ambush and sacrificed the equivalents of three entire battle fleets to

achieve the accurate placement of those torpedoes. No more words needed to be spoken as all three reacted with lightning speed, issuing orders to their own commands as alarm klaxons began to sound within the Tower of Angels once again.

Additional void shields were being brought to bear at the crater by expanding those on the surface and lateral aspects by Aradiel. He re-directed gunnery priorities focussing the data banks to identify and target small fast projectiles such as assault craft and torpedoes. Apollyon had already re-directed droves of thunderhawk flights and Hunter class destroyers to the affected quadrant. These were nimble enough to intercept the expected wave of torpedoes and assault craft. The supreme commander returned to stage managing the tactical battle, and deploying his ground troops as he saw best, in his own inimitable and unhurried fashion. Just as the vast unforgiven armada responded to the rapid succession of orders, another vast flotilla of ships appeared on their left flank. Aradiel and Apollyon made eye contact, realizing the gravity of the situation. These were all Iconoclast destroyers preceded by waves of elder pirate raiders in their fast and nimble Corsair class escorts. How these blasphemous aliens and traitors worked together was beyond Apollyon's comprehension. Even as he redirected his defences to intercept the oncoming enemy with increasing urgency in the pit of his stomach, a wall of blazing plasma and nova flares incinerated the entire first wave of the attackers. The guns of the Tower of Angels were still very much in the fight and Aradiel was never going to let the enemy have a second chance. What followed next was a cat and mouse game as the attackers recklessly pressed home the attack, paying a high price in ships for every step they closed. Finally the back of the assault was broken, broken and exploding ships littering the entire port side of space, the few survivors breaking away to safety. As the last swarm of Iconoclasts launched their torpedoes from near point blank range and turned away, Aradiel focussed his firepower on the oncoming torpedoes, which were aimed with unerring accuracy at the deep crater on the underside of the Rock. It was Apollyon who first saw the danger.

Deploying from one of the Iconoclasts, three small objects were now speeding towards the Rock, while the defences had been distracted by the waves of torpedoes. Immediately recognizing the threat and ordering his defensive thunderhawks to pursue, he alerted Aradiel and Azrael. This was the final assault. He could feel it in his bones. These were three thunderhawks flying towards certain doom and pursued by the best of the chapters' pilots. Yet they evaded every attempt to destroy them by an amazing display of flying skill that could only have come from millennia of expertise. Aradiel was directing the close in defences to put up a veritable wall of exploding ordnance in the path of the attackers. The pursuing thunderhawks, to their credit stayed on their tails, ignoring the friendly fire, their only aim to protect their chapter home. Aradiel could not but look on in admiration at the display of superfluous flying skill displayed by the enemy. Then a



chance explosion sent a piece of shrapnel ripping through the port wing of the third attacking thunderhawk. It careened out of control right in to the sights of the pursuing gunships which without hesitation blasted it to pieces. A massive explosion blossomed where the enemy gunship had been, the blast incinerating the pursuing thunderhawk and overloading many of the view screens on the Tower of Angels. As the screens flickered back in to life Apollyon noted with dread that the blast had thrown the other two thunderhawks well within the defensive shields of the Rock. The pursuers were too far behind to intercept them. They could but observe helplessly as the two ships followed one another in to the crater.

Aradiel ordered damage control servitors to the region where the impact was expected. The gunship which had been destroyed had been carrying a massive quantity of explosives along with plasma reactor cores, which had caused the massive explosion. The other too must be similarly armed he concluded, knowing fully well that this was in fact a suicide attack to destroy the Tower of Angels. With anticipation he waited for the expected explosion.

With a roar the first gunship flew in to the crater and detonated itself in its base, and just as the blossoming explosion began the second gunship joined it. It was a kind of explosion never before witnessed on the soil of the fortress. The void shield held the bulk of the explosion and redirected it back to the bedrock. In his command centre Azrael felt the ground tremble as if an earthquake had occurred. Electrical power and data links shorted and fizzed. Darkness descended within the fortress of the unforgiven. Minutes passed in stupefied silence as Aradiel and Apollyon realised that the worst had not yet come to pass. The rock was still floating. Damaged, bruised but still intact.

The suicide flight was the cue for the rest of the attacking fleet to withdraw, leaving the majority of their number as floating hulks. The unforgiven forces declined to pursue, their mission foremost in the minds. As the angels regrouped after the day long space battle, Azrael met with his grandmasters.

“Supreme grandmaster, we failed to prevent the final assault. It is my failure that the Tower of Angels was so damaged and I take full responsibility. I shall pay any penance you deem to be necessary.” said Aradiel slowly.

Apollyon followed “The blame is mine too, as our fleet defences were unable to prevent the breach!”

Azrael smiled a tired smile “Our forces fought above and beyond the call of duty and I am proud of every one of our forces. No penance is required. What is the damage in strategic terms?”

“The explosions destabilized our plasma reactor cores. We are dead in space for the moment. We will not have real space capability for two terran days. The warp drives are intact but I would advice against their use until the plasma cores are back on line.” Looking at Apollyon, Aradiel continued “Our defensive systems are at 60% capability. We are dependant on the battle fleets for protection now more than ever.”

“That you shall receive my friend” stated Apollyon “However our continued advance towards the planet killer fleet must be halted. Our ships need to refit and we can accomplish that here whiel ensuring that none of the enemy vessels are salvageable.” They had held the space battle field and so everything there was for their taking. “We will salvage any lance weaponry that is still functioning aboard the enemy ships”

Sapphon entered the room and bowed in mutual respect. “The heretics were exactly on target as Ezekiel had warned! The chamber is completely devastated and vented to the outer space. It is truly fortunate that we were able to move the oracle to chamber 777 yesterday.”

“Chamber 777 will be re-designated chamber 000 from now onwards. The access corridors have been relegated to the control of the Deathwing. Are the chamber’s stasis fields functioning adequately?”

“On the recommendations of Ezekiel we have created additional psychic wards, void fields and stasis rings to further strengthen the defences of the chamber. Whoever our nemesis is he will not know of our increased capabilities.”

A vox alarm sounded from the command console and a voice came on line. “Brother captain Validus reporting. Honoured Pluvius requests your presence immediately!” Alarm bells and the sound of Deathwing terminators deploying for action could be heard in the back ground.

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The massive adamantium doors to chamber 000 swung gracefully open on fine exquisitely crafted hinges. Azrael stepped through the doorway followed closely by Sapphon, Aradiel and Apollyon. Pluvius stood there with his back to them, towering even above Azrael, in his ceramite clad terminator armour. Intricate patterns were woven on this terminator armour and the shoulder pad boasted a crest of a horned skull with lightning arcs. A scared tome hung from his waist and another kept within a breast cache. An eerie glow emanated from a net like webbing claigning to

his head. Azrael recognized the active psychic hood for what it was. Pluvius spoke without turning around "Grandmaster Ezekiel's warning was very valid indeed. The oracle has become warp active!" Chilling words indeed, they struck in to the hearts of the new arrivals like a power sword..

As the new arrivals walked in to the chamber they were confronted by a spectacle they had never before seen. Centre in the chamber was a dishevelled cachectic figure that was connected to various cables and sockets. The stature of that being indicated a past warrior hood but now wasted in to skin and bone, kept alive by stasis fields. That figure was the oracle of the tower, the traitor of Caliban and the betrayer of the Lion. Now repented and driven insane by the realization of his own treachery, he was kept alive awaiting the return of their primarch. Luther, in his present state as an oracle had an affinity to the warp that could on occasion be used for their advantage. To do so required the dangerous step of weakening the warp fields and void shields and was something undertaken only under extreme circumstances.

What faced them now was something entirely different. An eerie glow was emanating from Luther's mouth, growing slowly in size. The warp fields and void shields were being stretched to the maximum as the strength of the energy pulsing from his mouth increased. The they saw the ring of diminutive beings standing in a circle around the oracle standing at a third of the height of a space marine. Their bodies covered in robes and their faces unseen, they held their arms aloft. Energy pulsed from their outstretched limbs arcing from each one in turn and forming rings of pure psychic energy. Pluvius allowed the spectacle to sink in for mere seconds and spoke again. "They appeared at the same time as the energy pulse began from the oracle. I believe they are attempting to contain this. This is what the grandmaster of librarians warned about the birth of a second eye. Foul beasts play with the winds of the warp and are channelling it through the oracle. It must be shut down! I have ordered the entire librarium to form up here, we will need the powers of all our brothers from the other chapters too"

A group of dark Angel librarian hurried in to the room forming a second circle outside the watchers, concentrating on combating the growing ball of warp energy, their psychic hoods lit bright to protect them. "I pray that brother Ezekiel is in time or may the primarch and the emperor have mercy on all our souls!" Azrael observed.

## Chapter XII: Oculus Secundus

The pain that wracked his body was excruciating. It was not just the physical pain but also the ingeniously created implements which constantly kept his pain thresholds down. The pain that he had endured in the past few weeks had been so extensive that he no longer remembered much of them. At first he had constantly concentrated his mind on reducing the pain and suppressing the mental effects of the physical damage meted to his body. Gradually they had worn his defences down. His black carapace had been slowly dissected out, day by day, his jailers taking extreme care to maximise the pain that they caused. There seemed to be no reason for the torture, for that was what was being practiced upon him. They seemed to be doing it for the sheer pleasure of watching his agony. It was only much later that he realised that in during his episodes of pain wracked stupor they had invaded his mind. Despite such efforts some of his mental barriers were still intact. He had tried to psychically will his brain to cease function and to stop his heart, but his ever watchful gaolers had intervened psychically, preventing any such event. Powerful indeed they were but not immortal. It had given him a small degree of satisfaction to see the cabal of word bearers that had invoked the daemon on Myrad's Folly be callously gunned down by their erstwhile allies. He prayed to the emperor and Johnson for his redemption. He feared that his mind had been breached so far that the inner secrets of his chapter may be revealed, but he had some degree of confidence that whatever information his captors extracted from him, they would find it so jumbled as to be of no value. It was late in his captivity when a new fear gripped him, as tendrils of an alien mind penetrated his own. It was only when he saw the his nemesis that he realised the full extent of his hopeless situation. There stood surrounding him a ring of space marines with blue and gold armour, their helmets pulled tight from which a slow chant emanated. There could be no mistaking the greatest sorcerer space marines of old, the thousand sons of the cyclopean primarch Magnus.

If the physical pain inflicted upon him to gradually wear his mental fortitude was bearable then what the sorcerers of the Thousand Sons inflicted upon his mind was indescribably unbearable. Azadael, once the grandmaster of librarians of the Angels of Absolution chapter and close friend of Ezekiel was reduced to a whimpering excuse for a human being. His mind penetrated repeatedly, memories torn asunder and replaced with terrors that haunted him at every waking hour and in his sleep, pain centres constantly stimulated without any physical application and the grinding effect of constant verbal abuse. He nearly broke, he very nearly gave in to the temptation to renounce the emperor and the lion, but a spark still remained within his mind. During lucid moments he gathered his strength and hid it in a corner of his mind until the next moment. Yet, hope was nearly lost within his psyche. He had been strapped to the swivelling wheel ever since

he had been brought to this command centre and yet he had no inclination as to what the enemy wanted with him. Just as hope was fading from his much weakened mind, he felt a presence in the warp. It was an essence that he recognized instantly as a friend but was too weak to identify him fully. He wondered if this was yet another trick by the conjurer's of Ahriman, but with his strength fading away fast he had to act now or remain silent forever. Using all his stored mental energy, he lashed out with all his psychic might, crying out to his comrade to end this agony. He would welcome death at the hands of a friend rather than continue to suffer this horrendous torture.

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They had been marching for days now, with little rest and nothing to eat. They had entered forbidden caves and descended through dilapidated flights of stairs and had almost lost track of time. They had been stumbling along for more than a day completely underground, through narrow passage ways. At time knee deep in muddy waters, with swarms of large scavenging animals scuttling away by their presence, they kept their pace, never faltering, for they would lead him to the gates of hell itself. The group was made up of just ten men and they marched with purpose in their gait. Each one a hulking brute by human standards, covered in black robes that covered their faces. The occasional glint of black armour could be seen in the fading light of the tunnels. They used no light sources, their enhanced vision allowing them to see as well at night as the nocturnal predators of the land. One man kept pace far ahead of the others. A scout no doubt, a vicious combat knife in his hand, he was obviously anxious to silence any sentry that they may come across. He moved quickly but silently despite the bulk of his armour. The others followed behind, led by one man. Even in the darkness his charisma lit up like a beacon, the respect the others had for him was more than evident.

He stopped momentarily on a signal from the scout. The group froze in place, becoming immobile statues, hands ready at their close combat weapons. Momentarily he remembered the flashes of the past. It had been so long, so very long, that he had forgotten the desperate moments of that fateful day when everything had changed. He had done his very best, but to no avail. He could momentarily remember the shouted orders and the clamour of the preparation for battle that occurred on the day his world was torn apart. He had learned of the nature of the galaxy by accident. The vanity of men, the emotions of men which made them weak, the capacity for even the most righteous to fall from grace, for brother to turn on brother, he knew them all. After all, had he not witnessed such acts of debased ignominy over the past ten millennia. He remembered the tendrils of doubt that had seeped in to his mind, forcing him to question everything that he had held so dear. He had dared to doubt his brothers, his comrades and even his mentors. He remembered with a heavy heart the day he had discovered the truth and had gathered his closest men together. They were not dissimilar to the ten who followed him now. In fact two of them had

been there with him. He could remember the urgency in his mind, the anxiety in his heart and the fear in the pit of his stomach as they had raced through the tunnels to do their duty. His urgency was for the safety of his home, the anxiety for the well being of his father and the fear for his failure. For his failure would have devastating consequences. He could not fail for he was the foremost of his mentor's lieutenants. He was the eye within the eye. He was the first amongst equals chosen by his father. Yet for all his abilities he could hear the shrill scream of missiles being launched and defence lasers firing. He had been too late. He had been too late to prevent the tragedy that would unfold. He was too late to protect his brothers from the sky. But today would be different. The circumstances were uncannily similar. Today he resolved would be a different outcome. He will be there on time.

Agonizing seconds passed and the scout signalled safe passage once again. They reached the end of the dank passage and he signalled the men to gather around him. In a simple curt voice the last orders were passed. "Zamius take the south tunnels, the defence sensors and grid are yours. Return immediately. Do not hesitate!" There was a sense of urgency in the voice now. "Maddius follow me and then take the route to the northern sector. Come in when you hear us enter. We must not fail!" The final orders were passed by signs and the men split up in to three groups, one heading down a separate passage way. The leader looked at the second group and nodded and they too moved off ahead of the main group.

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Ezekiel focussed his mind deep in meditation. A sense of peaceful calm washed over him as he sat in the small sanctum that had been allocated to him. His left hand stroked the large, heavy tome that he always carried in to battle, the book of salvation. His right lay across his chest in salutation to his father. He prayed for guidance from the lion and from the emperor. They had come a long way from the heady days when the angels had gathered to plan their strategy in this gargantuan conflict. The thirteenth black crusade was hammering away at the imperial defences. Much had been destroyed, the imperial defences were reeling with each hammer blow, the populations of many worlds culled by the depredations of the foul beings from the warp, yet the line was holding. Brave warriors of the imperial guard and navy, along with the super humans of the space marines, the enigmatic elder and apparently even the dreaded metallic warriors of Necrontyr were taking the battle back to the enemy. The sons of Johnson and Russ had fought side by side reliving the past days of the great crusade. Everywhere you turned there was death, disease, wanton destruction and sheer uncompromising misery. But there was hope too, with each battle fought to a stand still and each bloody victory wrested from the despoiler, the beacon of hope shone ever so bright.

The weight of his responsibilities had become heavier by the day. The loss of his close friend Azadael, and the implications of his imprisonment by the forces of evil had been foremost within his mind. Now he was far away from the rest of the unforgiven and his chapter home at a time when they were heading in to mortal danger. The enormity of the decision by the supreme grandmaster to move the Tower of Angels in to the battle zone was not lost on him. He had regretted the fact that he was not on the Tower in this time of great peril. But he had had no choice in the matter as the evidence gathered so far by their interrogator chaplains was far too dangerous to be ignored. For all he knew he may well be heading in to a trap like the one set previously in to which Azadael fell. He reached in to the depths of his psyche, struggling to untwine the strands of fate for a mere glimpse of the possible future. It was to no avail, as the warp storms engulfing the region had limited the ability of most psykers.

He had set out on this mission based on the gathered intelligence and the directions of the imperial tarot. Many had died to collect the tiny morsels of information about the fallen and their loathsome designs. Commensurately the largest number of fallen had been captured or killed within his living memory. Whatever were the ulterior motives of the blasphemed traitors Cypher and Dragien, they had to be stopped. Too much was at stake at the present to allow them uncontested freedom of action. He believed in the emperor and prayed that Johnson would guide him. Thus, after much debate and deliberation, prayers and self denial, the inner circle had agreed to his demands. All that could be spared were the two reserve companies that now accompanied him. One from his own chapter and the other from the Absolution chapter who were given the honour, for the mission may well result in vengeance for the demise of their librarian. He had chosen the assault oriented eighth reserve companies from both chapters. He was surprised to see Asmodai waiting for him within the command bridge of the "Sword of Redemption", a strike cruiser with an appropriate name for the mission. They had mapped out their strategy to the last detail as they all realised that the chances of any of them returning alive was slim indeed. Yet, they had to succeed for the very future of the unforgiven chapters was at stake.

As the vox-caster announced the imminent arrival at their destination Ezekiel said a prayer to his long departed friend, swearing vengeance in his name, and arose to make the final preparations for battle. He rapidly activated and allowed his psychic hood to run its automated self-test mode. Green lights blinked on the tiny display panel under his collar to assure him that all was well. He then went through the ritual of checking each and every weapon including his prized force weapon, the doom of many a daemon. Finally the prized possession, the book of salvation was lifted in to its armoured cover on his chest. With his preparations complete the grandmaster of librarians pulled the hood of his robe to cover his head and left without looking back.

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The massive hall remained as it had always been. Poorly lit and with minimal paraphernalia it exuded a sense of ill omen to anyone who walked in. In the centre of the hall the prisoner remained strapped to the rack. His endurance had been amazing. Despite a slow and constant ritual of physical and mental torture coupled with psychic probing and memory interference he had refused to denounce the false carrion god that sat on terra. Such foolishness can only have one outcome. Every living being has its breaking point. The prisoner was certainly nearing his, as evidenced by his mental efforts to harm himself on numerous occasions. Only with the greatest of struggle had he, Lahorier, sorcerer and commander in the Thousand Sons space marine legion, son of Magnus and mortal enemy of the spacewolves, prevented such suicide attempts. He looked around to once again assess their situation. His cabal of twenty sorcerers was ready, their communing and preparations nearly complete. Huge sacrifices of whining populace, who had been culled so much like farm animals, had been made to bring about the correct ambiance and sensitivity in the warp that surrounded them. They were about to create their greatest magiks, and their lord, Magnus would surely approve. He slowly considered the hooded figure that stood above them on the raised corridor with disdain. The great hall was flanked by two parallel corridors, both at a much higher elevation and open to the hall running along the entire length of the opposing sides. Numerous blast doors were placed along this corridor, which allowed an uninterrupted view of all the proceedings in the hall. Lahorier felt vulnerable, as the black robed marines who were placed on guard duty on both the corridors completely dominated the hall and all his men. If they were to turn on him, he would have to rely on the strength of his magik to protect themselves.

One of the rooms that opened on to the corridor had been converted in to a command centre, with armoured plexi-glass replacing the wall. This allowed the command centre to also observe proceedings without interruption. More black robed figures sat at various consoles, monitoring all that occurred both within and without the fortress. Lahorier brought his mind back to the task at hand. He had already cast warding spells to protect them from harm if their ally were to turn on them. His men had reached the thirtieth invocations of the planned ceremony. Only ten more invocations remained. The rack was spinning at increasing speeds, the dishevelled and disfigured figure strapped to it screaming in agony. A conflagration of warp energy suddenly burst forth wreathing the spinning wrack in a ball of blue and green warp fire. The screams grew louder and his cabal chanted more forcefully. The void shields generators placed around them groaned with the strain of containing such force.

In the command centre, the dark and brooding figure of Dragien motioned to his minions. At his signal a count down was begun and at its culmination the fallen angel activated a series of levers



on the console. Bright light flashed at the other end of the hallway, a shudder running through the entire subterranean fortress. Vibrations were emanating from both the spinning rack and the newly activated device. Lahorier dared a quick glance to his rear, although he knew what had been activated. The bright light spilling out from the device coalesced in to an oval disc of pure light, standing in the vertical plane. Ripples of warp energy were washing upon its other side. This was a gateway to the heavens themselves. How the thrice damned godless mercenary who called himself Dragien had come in to the possession of an elder warp portal Lahorier would never know. He would keep a very close eye on this man indeed, he was far too dangerous to be left to his own devices. At the same time the thousand sons' chants had reached fever pitch as the rack continued to spin so fast that it could not be seen. Somehow the form of the prisoner lying on it was upright, in a cruciform position, arms outstretched and body vertical, his head thrown back. A panoply of colours formed an orb near his wide open mouth, pure warp energy crackled and sparked, The rack kept spinning but the body remained upright.

Dragien smiled wryly, as he manoeuvred more levers and buttons on his console. Slowly the wards around the warp portal were weakened enough and strands of energy could be seen wafting in to the great hall. Lahorier tensed as he saw the event occurring, but held his speech. He would give this cur a little more time to prove himself. Like bees drawn to honey, the tendrils of energy suddenly raced across the room to concentrate on the orb of warp energy playing above Azadael's mouth. With a loud crack the two forces met and a blast wafted across the hall. As the smoke cleared Lahorier pulled himself up from the floor and noticed that three of his men had been incinerated by the blast as had two of those guarding on the corridor. The command centres plexi-glass had shattered in to a thousand fragments. Many of his men had their armour torn in places and some of Dragien's men were in far worse shape. But everyone's attention was concentrated in the middle of the room. A stream of pure warp energy was flowing across the hall from the warp portal and in to the librarians mouth.

Dragien smiled and screamed "Unleash hell!", pointing to the man seated at the main console. The latter began to slowly rotate a dial and in response the warp stream became more pronounced.

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Up in the sky, thousands of kilometres above, reality tore itself apart to disgorge two space marine strike cruisers. Ezekiel felt the weak cry for help from his friend. Anger and hope swelling within him he gave the order. "Angels! This is your moment. To war! To redemption! Launch all craft!"

In unison six thunderhawk gunships dropped out of the ships, moments before the ships themselves were torn apart by the massive electromagnetic and gravitational forces unleashed by their re-entry so close to the planet.

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In the newly designated chamber 000, the choir of Dark Angel librarians were physically thrown to the ground as a blast of warp energy blossomed from the mouth of the oracle. Luther, comrade in arms of the lion, brother and betrayer, now repented may well be the oculus secundus. Layered defences of the chamber activated, with powerful warp shields struggling to contain the growing ball of pure energy. The diminutive watchers were now floating in mid air, their concentration levitating them as they combined their forces to contain the breach. From nowhere more watchers appeared to join the throng. Then with a sudden clang of doors, the combined might of the Librarium of the unforgiven chapters strode in to the massive chamber, force weapons and psychic hoods activated in preparation for the battle of their lives.

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Dragien savoured his moment of victory “Do it very slowly. I want them to see their doom grow before their eyes!”

One of the men at the consoles interrupted hesitantly. “We have lost security sensor relays in sector seven-gamma to twelve sigma. I have no communications possible with any of the external guards either!”

Dragien swirled around. “They were likely the result of this magnificent event here!” he said pointing to the flow of warp in the hall. “But activate the automated defence grid and flood the external tunnels with neuronin. That should stop any interference”

“Aerial contacts! Sector delta-three-seven! Rapidly descending! Defence grid off line!”

Dragien opened his mouth to scream. This was his moment of glory, and no one would interfere with it. The blast door on the opposite corridor opened and Dragien’s eyes widened in terror.

“You!”

## Chapter XXIII: Death by Vengeance

Eight thunderhawk gunships plummeted towards the ground beyond the sound of speed. Their metal carcasses were glowing in vengeance as they entered the atmosphere. The left behind them the disintegrating masses of two strike cruisers, which smashed by the gravitational forces of the planet and that of the warp exit point, were paying the ultimate price for exiting too close to a planet's gravity well. There was no one aboard except for expendable droids and servitors. Every marine had boarded the thunderhawks and they had performed an emergency exit the moment the ships came out of warp space. It was a highly risky manoeuvre, rarely performed in the past, but had been carried out with precision.

Ezekiel braced himself, tuning in to the winds of the warp to try and assess the threat level awaiting them. They were surprised that no defensive fire met their arrival, but the pilots took no chance, flying their thunderhawks in unpredictable evasive patterns while closing in on their targets. The thunderhawk gunships were descending almost in a vertical dive and only the space marines' advanced systems within their suit of armour kept them in balance.

"Ejection point in thirty seconds" The pilot's voice came over the intercom "Auto-pilot initiated."

"Ramp open." shouted the jump master, watching the rear ramp descend. Twenty five marines activated their jump packs to idle settings, testing their systems as the count down clock called out the ejection timing.

"Three! Two! One!... Eject! Eject! Eject!"

Within thirty seconds all twenty five marines had exited the rear of the gunship and had spread eagled themselves to slow their descent. Powered by its engines and synchronised with the other gunships their gunship took up formation as all of the screamed towards the ground.

Ezekiel looked on satisfactorily, puzzled by the lack of opposition to their arrival. The intensity of the warp storms in the region coupled with their close arrival and disintegration of the ships may well have foiled any sensors arrays that were deployed. So far the plan seemed to have gone well. He could only hope that the thunderhawks' automated systems would work as well as they had hoped for.

One after another, the explosive and adamantium filled gunships slammed in to the bedrock of the impact point at pre determined intervals. The first impacted well above ground level, levelling the three hundred story high munitorium. Unexpectedly this resulted in a massive fireball which detonated the second gunship high above the ground, its explosion being wasted. The fifth gunship's sensors malfunctioned and it veered off to explode harmlessly within a large body of water, causing the whole lake to boil in to massive steam clouds. Ezekiel watched on, concerned about these developments, but he needn't have worried. The chapter techmarines had not failed them. Five gunships impacted at pre calculated intervals, each one gouging out a massive crater in to the bedrock of the planet. A massive crevasse three miles wide and at least six miles deep had been formed within seconds. Ezekiel's enhanced senses could just make out the cavity yawning in a man made adamantium and plascrete structure at the base of the crevasse. He thanked the emperor for his beneficent wisdom and activated his vox-com.

"All units prepare for assault landing! Follow plan delta for deployment! Johnson be with us" Ezekiel's voice boomed across the vox-coms of two hundred avenging angels falling from the sky.

Two hundred jump packs ignited simultaneously just before ground fall. The bleached bone armoured men of the absolution chapter formed a perimeter at ground level around the crater while the Dark Angels continued their headlong descent in to the abyss. As they descended there Ezekiel saw that the plascrete roof of the underground fortress had indeed been shattered by the repeated explosions. Before he could adjust his trajectory another Dark Angel fired his thrusters to maximum and flew through the breach, closely followed by another three marines. Master Erinyes, commander of the eighth reserve (assault) company was certainly not going to allow one so venerated as the grandmaster of librarians to take any risks. As Ezekiel slowed his descent in through the roof he unsheathed his trusty sword. Connected to his brain and drawing upon his psychic energy, the force sword was a very potent weapons especially in the hands of an accomplished psyker such he. He landed lightly, noticing that the four who had preceded him had formed a defensive circle to protect him.

"Trust you to show off Erinyes", said Ezekiel in passing evoking a momentary smile in the commander's face. The rest of the company landed in a tight knot and deployed for action but kept their jump packs attached as planned and fanned out in the direction of the four tunnels.

Ezekiel concentrated hard as he sought out the essence of his dear friend. There was a faint trace present, but he also felt the roiling emotions of pure warp energy. With alarm in his voice he charged down the southern corridor, "Follow me!" He could hear the thud of running ceramite

boots on the plascrete floor behind him. The time for subtlety and deception was over. They had run out of time. He had to reach the scene of this blasphemy or the Imperium would suffer catastrophically. This he knew in his heart. Then he rounded a right angled corner and stormed in to a long nearly mile long corridor. At the other end, his enhanced vision identified three men. Three men with space marine physique and covered in black robes were intent on destroying a communications relay. He had little time to think as the three men turned, simultaneously pulling up weapons in their hands. In an instant Ezekiel had launched himself forward in a head long dive, activating the jump pack with a sharp mental command. The thrusters flared and he became a blur, a speeding bullet, closing the distance in an instance. His right arm held his force sword along his body, while he pointed with his left hand at the closest individual. A flicker of thought and his mind entered the mind of the other. Hesitation, doubt, and sheer confusion suddenly wracked the traitor's brain stunning him in to inaction. The effect of this hit the other too as well, such was the force of Ezekiel's mental fortitude. The next instance he was amongst them, swinging his sword in a wide arc and cleaving the first heretic in two as he flew passed him. Deftly controlling the jump pack he swung his body to upright himself, his heels screeching on the plascrete floor sending a shower of spark in his wake. A click and the jump pack detached itself, falling with a thud as Ezekiel charged the other two men. He would dispense the emperor's justice right now and absolve them of their heresy. Not for them the mercy of repentance. Not while his comrade was in dire need. The flare of the force weapon died down and the charred remains of the two men. Behind them, the cloven body seeped blood on to the floor. Darkness closed around Zamius' eyes, and it was only then he saw his slayer. Recognizing Ezekiel he knew that his task had been accomplished, and then darkness claimed his soul.

Ezekiel continued his charge, desperation giving him urgency, the rest of the force struggling to catch up. Only Erinyes and Asmodai kept pace with the grandmaster of librarians. They reached the blast door at the end of the southern tunnel. Without pause Erinyes charged the door, his powerfist swinging in a wide arc. With a screech of tearing metal he lifted the door off its hinges as Ezekiel and Asmodai charged in side. What faced them there stunned even the strongest of them for a moment. Ezekiel recognized his friend immediately and understood what was happening. With pure rage welling within his heart he realized that he was too far away to reach him quickly. Time slowed measurably as he saw the events occurring in slow motion. He cursed himself for having dropped the jump pack. He saw the cabal of sorcerers continuing to chant their foul sorceries, mesmerised by the flow of raw warp energy amongst their midst. He saw the eastern blast door on the raised corridor open and a figure clad in black robes step in. He saw another robed figure step out from the western corridor from what seemed to be a command centre. Both were bringing their weapons to bear. It was then that he saw the sword hanging from

the waist of the heretic who had appeared through the eastern door. Asmodai saw it too as did Erinyes. As one they charged down the corridor trying desperately to reach their comrade in time.

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Dragien saw his nemesis appear through the opposite doorway. What passed for terror in that heretical mind overwhelmed him momentarily. He fumbled for the bolt pistol at his waist while thanking whatever gods he had sold his soul to for the yawning space of the great hall which separated them. The hooded and black robed figure that had appeared through the blast door was accompanied by three others. Their reactions were so fluid that the guards on the eastern corridor died without even knowing their attackers as they were cut down by a volley of bolt shells. Their leader had already moved with superhuman speed, even for a space marine. Dragien looked on in abject terror remembering the last time they had met and their terms of parting. The newcomer was indeed clad in thick black robe, the hood of which covered his features. Without breaking step he vaulted over the safety rails of the corridor, and dropped to the great hall below. As he was falling down two weapons appeared in his hands as if by magic. In his right hand an exquisitely crafted plasma pistol whined as the charge built up and in his left hand another arcane work of art in the form of a bolt pistol. Swinging at his hip was a large sword sheathed in its scabbard. Even before he had hit the ground he had fired off a volley of bolt shells and a single round from his plasma pistol.

A ball of super-heated plasma flew true, smothering the head of Lahorier completely. Taken completely unaware, the sorcerer had no chance to respond as the ball of plasma melted his helmet and then his flesh, bone and his brain in that sequence, all within milliseconds. He was dead before his body hit the ground. The first bolt shell travelled in a straight line, the shell tumbling along, powered by its own rocket and entered the skull of Azadael, grandmaster of librarians of the Angels of Absolution. A micro second after Lahorier's brain melted, what remained of Azadael's brain along with his face and cranium exploded outwards in a thousand fragments. By the time the rogue marine had landed on the ground three more sorcerers had died to his bullets. The plasma pistol whined loudly as it struggled to recharge.

Dragien screamed with all his might. "Damn you Cypher!" The scream echoed across the hallway. The charging angels heard the name, though they had already guessed the identity of the new comer. Cypher swung around to face Dragien on the raised corridor, his hand weapons lining up in an instance. He remembered this man, who had been his pupil in the long years of his station on Caliban. He remembered the heresy of Horus and the betrayal Luther. He also remembered the millennia he had spent in this man's company, and looked upon him as a friend

and compatriot, united by a common purpose. Then had come his betrayal. Their parting last time around had been at the end of weapons fire and this time it shall end right here.

A massive blast blossomed in the centre of the chamber as the flow of pure warp energy had no substance to transmit it. The roiling energy turned within itself, forms of daemons and other predators appearing and disappearing at random. Seeking the only avenue for escape the energy flow re-routed itself on to the warp portal. The immaterium is highly unstable and cannot remain indefinitely in real space. As the outflow and inflow of warp energy met one another, the results were catastrophic to say the least.

Ezekiel fought like a whirlwind, his sword swinging so fast that one could barely see it. One by one the cabal of the thousand sons died on his sword, some decapitated, others shorn in half and yet others burnt by the power of the energy emanating from the sword. He battled like an avenging angel. Asmodai was a man possessed. Matching Ezekiel's battle prowess, he slowly advanced toward the point where Cypher had landed. Minions of Dragien blocked his way, cultists and space marines. None stood a chance in the face of Asmodai's wrath. Bodies were flung in all direction and crushed beyond recognition as Erinyes lent a hand with his crackling powerfist. Finally breaking loose from the throng of cultist rabble, Asmodai had his bolt pistol aimed squarely at Cypher's head as he charged headlong towards him, his Crozius Arcanum swinging in righteous fury. Cypher's guns were pointed at Dragien. The rest were already involved in a fire fight as Dark Angels poured through the southern blast doors and cultist hordes poured through the northern one. The two forces met in the centre with a resounding clash as power armour met flesh and bone. Blood ran thick as the angels fought like avenging furies.

Twin hand guns flared in unison as Cypher became a blur, moving firing and moving again. Every time the weapons in his hands barked Dragien's minions died. As the hordes of Dragien clashed with the charging Dark Angels, their physical number and bulk formed a barrier separating them from the fallen, who were locked in a battle of their own. Dragien laughed and lashed out at Cypher with a sudden release of psychic energy from his outstretched hands. Taken unawares but reacting with tremendous speed, Cypher was no longer at the point where the sorcerous energy landed melting the plascrete floor. The enigmatic man called cypher, the man most sought after by the Dark Angel, performed a dance of death as he weaved through the enemy masses, closing in on Dragien. A second blast of psychic energy released in desperation incinerated some lost souls and immediately cleared the space between the two. Dragien charged in desperation, swinging a massive daemonic sword, trying to get to Cypher before the plasma pistol could recharge. At that very moment a flurry of bolter shells interrupted their battle. Three struck Dragien, one smashing the weapon from his hand, one bouncing off his ancient armour but

cracking his chest plate in the process and the third buried itself in to his right knee and exploded. With a surprised scream of agony, Dragien went down, his knee smashed and his daemonic weapon flying wildly in the air. As he looked up from the ground he saw Cypher standing with both plasma and bolt pistols aimed squarely at his head. He saw the fingers squeeze in slow motion and snarled in defiance. Then there was a blinding flash as the second volley of bolter shells hit Cypher, each shell impacting just millimetres from his armour and evoking a massive flash of protective energy. Asmodai charged with all his might, ancient Crozius swinging above his head, smashing anyone who dared approach him. This was the arch heretic and his soul would be Asmodai's to repent. There was no force, neither physical nor immaterial that would have stopped the chaplain's charge. Ten thousand years of pent of anger of the entire legion was transformed in this one fierce righteous and terrifying figure. The volley of bolter shells continued to emerge from his bolt pistol and land squarely on target, physically throwing the traitor back. As the last of the shells hit Cypher there was a massive flash and a cloud mushroomed where Cypher had been standing. Asmodai reached the spot an instant later and his swinging Crozius sliced through the air and smoke meeting no resistance.

Suddenly with a massive deep throated roar the warp portal imploded, dragging everything close to it in to the warp. This was immediately followed by a massive rolling explosion which blew everyone off their feet, smashing them like rag dolls against the walls and incinerating anything that was not protected by power armour. Men screamed, others died in an instance. Power armour suits activated their automatic protective seals to take the brunt of the explosion. The blast rolled through the corridors and up the crater, rising in to the sky for a hundred miles before falling back to earth. The unnatural geyser of flames was said to have been visible from their neighbouring planet in the system. The company of Absolution standing perimeter guard were physically thrown to the ground at the mouth of the crater. As the dust settled and the howling unnatural winds died down, the marines wearing the bone coloured armour picked themselves up, tentatively looking down in to the wide crater for signs of life.

Then there was silence.

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On the Tower of Angels in chamber 000 the battle for the containment of the oracle was very suddenly cut short. The warp energy that had appeared through the oracles person had vanished with such suddenness that the defending choir of librarians nearly collapsed with the absence of the counter thrust. With the danger now past, the diminutive figures quietly disappeared, leaving the space marines to ponder the immediate future. An eerie silence covered the entire Tower of Angels as brother marines looked at each other and said their prayers to the emperor and the lion and a few brave angels of death.



## Epilogue: Ye Angels Gather!

The Conclavium Angelus was once more bustling with activity. The oval conference table was once again pulsing with activity as each and every seat was occupied. The gathered individuals, the powerful and enigmatic leaders of the unforgiven chapters were there at the behest of their supreme grandmaster, Azrael. The data holo-vid displays that were active in front of each one of them were extremely complex. Each chapter was represented by their supreme grandmaster and the grandmasters of the Librarians and chaplains. The flash of polished armour of contrasting colours gave the meeting a slight air of ceremony. Azrael sat in his customary position at the head of the table, flanked by his trusty lieutenants Saphphon and Ezekiel. Unusually Asmodai too was present as an addition following their latest exploits. Both the latter bore evidence of recent battle on their armour, which had been scarred, scorched and dented to such an extent that they were unable to wear their helmets at all. On their faces played a mix of emotions that are common after a victory, pride in the fighting abilities of their brethren, sorrow for their losses, relief for the survivors and above all satisfaction at having served the chapter once more. Asmodai fingered his collection of black pearls gently, pondering the many possibilities that may have been. He looked at Ezekiel momentarily and could not remove that deep seated feeling that they had failed the lion. They had indeed survived an ordeal but had the fallen 100 within their grasp. He, Asmodai, had put bolter shell after bolter shell in to the heretic and was just milliseconds away from decapitating him with his Crozius Arcanum. The coward had vanished in to thin air by some sorcery or teleport device.

Ezekiel seemed lost in contemplation too. He had lost a good friend and a great brother-in-arms. Azadel and he had spent much time together, particularly since the beginning of the campaign and had been inspirations to each other. His lost would be felt dearly, not least of all the Angels of Absolution. But they were the sons of Johnson and they would carry on with their work until the legion was repented. They would hunt the fallen no matter what and would seek out the truth. They would never flinch from standing in harms way or from taking the battle to the enemy. Despite centuries of experience one thing had been driven home to him in the last few battles. He too had much to learn. He looked up as the young grandmaster of the Angels of Vigilance chapter, clad in his polished golden armour continued with the tactical briefing.

Thadius was the supreme grandmaster of the golden armoured chapter, based around the world of Pervigilium and during the campaign had shown his tactical and strategic brilliance on more than one occasion. He had been appointed to present the tactical briefings, which he was able to perform superbly, his brilliant analytical mind able to comprehend even the slightest event of

tactical value. He continued to explain and bring together all the events of the campaign to date, from the early days of rapid concentration by the unforgiven to the initial forays gathering information. Much had been accomplished and many were the fallen who had been captured during that time. He covered everything in detail including their losses in men and material, ships and vehicles, their impact on individual chapters and the unforgiven as a whole. A moment of silence had been observed for the fallen heroes, especially librarian Azadael before they began the discussions in earnest of more dire events. The discovery of the keep by the foul forces of chaos, the identification of Dragien, the coordinated assault on the Tower of Angels and the final battle with Cypher, and the mysterious disappearance of both those heretics. But most of all they debated the wisdom of using the oracle in the future and the degree to which the fallen had almost succeeded in not only destroying the Tower of Angels but in creating a second eye of terror. As he completed his appointed task Azrael began to speak.

He laid out the strategic direction that the unforgiven would in the near future. “Brother grandmasters! This has been a most harrowing time of our lives. The despoiler has indeed gained a foot hold in the gate. The consequences to the Imperium for his achievements are dire indeed. He now has some degree of access to real space without the constraints that were previously imposed upon him. However, I cannot agree with the Cadian High Command and Creed as they lament this situation. Despite the massive losses in population, industry and war material we now have the unique situation of being able to choose our own time and place to strike. The despoiler now had planets and real space to defend outside the eye of terror. He has to garrison, guard and patrol these worlds. That provides us with the opportunity to go on the offensive and keep his off balance as he will be required to pour resources to hold what he has gained. He would not dare to retreat to the eye once more. That gives us an advantage that we must surely utilise.”

The gathered commanders listened on in abject amazement at this radical view point as Azrael continued. “What would have been disastrous is that had our brethren not sought out the fallen without hesitation and had our esteemed librarian Ezekiel and Interrogator-Chaplain Asmodai not interfered with the fallen’s plot, their sorceries would have released the full strength of the eye of terror through our brother librarian Azadael’s min in to the oracle. The result would have been a warp spawned explosion within the Tower of Angels which would have created and expanding second eye of terror, which would have ultimately coalesced with the present one, expanding Abaddon’s territories and wiping out the entire Cadian sector. That was the tragedy that we as a legion prevented, and that must remain within these walls.

Silence played in the room as the gathered angels absorbed the enormity of their accomplishment and how close they had come to failure.

“We now have complete control of the Caliban sector. I have come to the conclusion that it is time for the angels to once ore gather. The old legion will be reborn in spirit if not in name. The Tower of Angels will move to the Caliban system for the near future. We will not only have the ability to maintain our control of the region but also provide better protection for the keep until other arrangements could be made.

Finally, our position would allow us strategic access to the Despoiler’s rear. Our presence in strength in the Caliban sector would force him to deploy considerable forces to guard against a major thrust from that direction and that is exactly what we will prepare for. I ask that we all pledge for the continued deployment of the angels in full strength. Let the angels who gathered now spread their wings in unison.”

A unanimous roar of approval thundered in the room.

“For the Lion and the legion! Let ye Angels gather once more!”

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The massive continent sized segment of Caliban floated gracefully in to the space that it had belonged to ten millennia ago. It was as if the asteroid cluster of Raquia, where the keep was hidden, was welcoming the return of what was once part of its own. The fortress monastery of the Dark Angels had returned to Caliban space after millennia of wandering the galaxy.

Two solemn figures stood at the highest steeple of the monastery. Looking through the thick protective but intricately designed arched window Azrael spoke.

“Something troubles you my friend! Since your assault on Dragien’s headquarters you have been in deep contemplation.”

“I am after all the grandmaster of librarians, Azrael. It comes to me naturally.” Ezekiel smiled knowing that his friend would not be persuaded so easily.

“Perhaps it is the actions of Cypher that confuses you?” asked the supreme grandmaster.

Ezekiel was constantly amazed at the astuteness of his superior officer. Friend he may be and psyker he may not, but this man was able to read most situations to a degree that was incomprehensible to others. Perhaps it was fitting that he commanded the unforgiven forces as they continued their concentration as a legion.

“Cypher was in fact assaulting Dragien’s fortress. Outnumbered but not out manoeuvred. They knew each other going by their reactions as they confronted each other. The animosity was palpable. I think it was due to his sabotage that we entered the complex unopposed, though I did despatch the sabotage team quickly. I would still do the same in hind sight.”

“You are troubled by the fact that fallen 100 was trying to stop Dragien’s devious plot?”

Ezekiel nodded as Azrael continued, “Reasons abound as the why the fallen fight each other. Whatever they do in their lives, righteous or otherwise, loyal to the emperor or disloyally, whether they fight for the lion or against, it matters not. What matters is that one day, ten millennia ago they stood against the lion, by choice or by default and for that they will forever remain the fallen. We shall never rest until the last of them have been redeemed in the emperor’s eyes.”

Ezekiel smiled at his friend. He would follow this man to the gates of hell and back. “Let the angles spread their wings” he thought to himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

The End

**GATHERING  
OF  
ANGELS**

**Character List by Chapter**

# GATHERING OF ANGELS

## Character List by Chapter

### Chapter I: Prophecy of Doom

***Erdan Vitelgo***

Freight captain who passed by without discovering the first gathering of angels at the Absalom Asteroid field.

### Chapter II: Council of War

***Azrael, Supreme Grandmaster of the Dark Angels  
High Lord of the Unforgiven***

***Ezekiel, Grandmaster of Librarians  
Dark Angels Chapter***

### Chapter III: Exile of an exodite

***Elfarion, Exodite Farseer  
Leader of the Exodite Settlement  
Malaarch Sector, Ultima Segmentum***

### Chapter IV: Ta'neer's Last Hunt

***Ta'neer, Exarch***

***Ulthwe Black Guardian Strike Force***

Hunted Farseer Elfarion and killed in battle against Strike Force Zaphael, of the Angels of Vengeance.

***Zaphael, Interrogator Chaplain.***

***Angels of Vengeance Chapter***

***Commander of Strike Force Zaphael***

Commanded the rapid response strike force sent to contact farseer Elfarion. Destroyed the Ulthwe Strike Team led by Exarch Ta'neer.

***Adonis, Codicier***

***Angels of Vengeance Chapter***

Part of strike force Zaphael. He absorbed the mind transfer from Elfarion on the battlefield of Malaarch. Unconscious, but retained the knowledge to be transferred to the Tower of Angels.

### **Chapter V: Revelation**

***Saphon, Grandmaster of Chaplains***  
***Dark Angels Chapter***

### **Chapter VI: Chariots of Fire**

***Sanctus Mortis***

***Strike Cruiser, Battle Fleet Absolution***

Strike cruiser which took the strike force to Malin's Reach for the attack on Mirad's Folly.

***Master Sheol, Master of the Fourth Battle Company***

***Dark Angels Chapter***

He commanded the Dark Angel contingent on the assault on Mirad's Folly.

***Grandmaster Azadael, Grandmaster of Librarians***

***Angels of Absolution Chapter***

He led the Absolution contingent on the assault on Mirad's Folly. He was taken by the chaos greater daemon even as he banished it and subsequently used as a conduit by dragien.

### **Chapter VII: Web of Deceit**

### **Chapter VIII: Requiem for an Angel**

***Asmodai, Interrogator-Chaplain***

***Dark Angels Chapter***

Interrogates the fallen prisoners from Myrad's folly to find the person behind the plot.

### **Chapter IX: Nest of Vipers**

### **Chapter X: Death of Hope**

***Barradon the Reviler***

***Chaos Warmaster, Death Guard Traitor Legion***

Commanded the ill fated chaos fleet and convoy which was on its way for the final invasion of St Josmane's Hope. His plans were foiled when the planet was self destructed by the imperial defenders. Immediately afterwards his entire fleet was utterly destroyed by battle fleet



**Chapter XI: Strike Hard! Strike Fast!**

***Grandmaster Amardiel, Grandmaster of the Fleet  
Battle Fleet Redemption***

Destroyed Barradon's fleet utterly within the realms of St Josmane's Hope.

***Sword of Redemption, Battle Barge & Flag Ship  
Battle Fleet Redemption***

Flag ship of grandmaster Amardiel.

**Chapter XII: Blood!: The Price of Battle.**

***Grandmaster Menelaius, Grandmaster Helix Primus  
Commander of the Apothecarium  
Dark Angels Chapter***

***Master Sammael, Master of the Fifth Battle Company  
Dark Angels Chapter***

**Chapter XIII: The Grand Circle**

**Chapter XIV: Knights of the Order**

***Brother-Captain Apollyon, Grandmaster of the Knights of the Order  
Defender of the Keep***

Orchestrated the successful defense of the Unforgiven bastion, the keep.

***Sartradon, Interrogator-Chaplain  
Knights of the Order***

**Chapter XV: Dalamere's Command**

***Dalamere, Rogue Pirate Captain  
Captain of the "Renegade's Death"***

She commanded the renegade fleet that escorted the invasion troops for the attempted assault on the keep.

### **Chapter XVI: Lord's of the Night**

***Gravad the Chosen, Champion & Warband leader  
Night Lords Traitor Legion***

Main architect behind the assault on the keep, now floating unconsciously in space awaiting the wrath of the chaos gods for his failure.

***Luchas, Fallen Angel***

Commander of the hunter destroyer that released the torpedo salvo, destroying the emerging Night Lords chaos armada.

### **Chapter XVII: Battle for Caliban**

***Dragnarth, Fallen Angel  
Commander of the First Company, Fourth Chapter  
Dark Angels legion.***

Formed the fallen presence on board the "Eviscerator". Fallen leader of the assault on the keep.

***Bowdane the Stalker, Terminator Champion  
Night Lords Traitor Legion  
Commander of the "Eviscerator"***

### **Chapter XVIII: Vengeance is our Watchword**

***Grandmaster Mordinian, Master of the Fleet  
Battle Fleet Vengeance***

Relief force commander leading the battle fleet vengeance to support the defence of the keep.

***Epistolery Vardis, Librarian  
Angels of Vengeance chapter***

Senior librarian aboard the battle fleet vengeance. Slayer of Bowdane the Stalker.

***Master Palidor, Master of the first company  
Angels of Vengeance chapter***

He led the assault on the "Eviscerator" which culminated in the capture of Dragnarth the fallen angel.

***Taboden, Interrogator Chaplain  
Angels of Vengeance chapter***

Accompanied the assault on the "Eviscerator".

***Strages, Sacred Standard bearer  
Angels of Vengeance chapter***

Honoured by bearing the sacred standard of retribution.

### **Chapter XIX: The Liberation of Luchas**

#### ***Luchas, Fallen Angel***

Commander of the hunter destroyer that released the torpedo salvo, destroying the emerging Night Lords chaos armada.

### **Chapter XX: Meeting of Minds**

#### ***Durgar Stormwolf***

Wolf Lord of the 11<sup>th</sup> Great Company.

#### ***Logan Grimnar***

Great Wolf and Chapter Master of the Spacewolves space marine chapter.

#### ***Master Belial***

Master of the 3<sup>rd</sup> company of the Dark Angels Space marine chapter.

### **Chapter XXI: Desperate Hours**

#### ***Grandmaster Valerius, Chapter Master Angels of Absolution Chapter***

#### ***Grandmaster Furion, Chapter Master Angels of Vengeance***

#### ***Grandmaster Thammuz, Chapter Master Angels of Redemption***

### **Chapter XXII: Traitors in our midst**

#### ***Ikrare-Kormordan***

#### ***Alpha Legion Traitor Legion***

Led the massive hordes of lost and the damned and traitor IG regiments in the bloody assault on Kasr Badden to capture the city.

#### ***Braynor, Fallen Angel***

Traitor Dark Angel who aided Ikrare-Kormordan's assault on Kasr Badden.

### **Chapter XXIII: Shades of Green! Shades of Grey!**

***GM Gideon***

***Master of the Ravenwing***

***Dark Angels Chapter***

Led the deployment of the entire Ravenwing company which decisively turned the tide of battle for Kasr Badden.

### **Chapter XXIV: In Harm's Way**

***Captain Drenexar***

***Commodore, Hunter Flotilla XXVII***

Captain Drenexar led the search and then tracked the planet killer. His data capsule was retrieved by the unforgiven fleet allowing them to first follow and then successfully repel successive waves of chaos fleets.

***Grandmaster Aradiel***

***Commander of the Watch***

***Command Title: Grandmaster of the Tower***

***Honorific Title: Keeper of the Fortress***

***Dark Angels Chapter***

Stage managed the close defence of the Tower of Angels during the battle of the Tower.

***Grandmaster Apollyon***

***Commander of the Fleet***

***Command Title: Grandmaster of Fleet***

***Honorific Title: Seeker of the stars.***

***Dark Angels Chapter***

Commander of the unforgiven armada. He commanded the fleet defence of the Tower of Angels as well as the pursuit of the planet killer.

### **Chapter XXV: Oculus Secundus**

***Zamius***

***Fallen Angel***

Leader of the southern group of three men.

***Maddius***

***Fallen Angel***

Leader of the northern group of three men.

***Lahorier***

***Sorcerer Commander***

***Thousand Sons Traitor Legion***

Commanded the Cabal of sorcerers who attempted to create the second eye.

**Chapter XXVI: Death by Vengeance**

***Master Erinyes***

***Master of the Eight Reserve (Assault) Company***

***Dark Angels Chapter***

Led the eighth assault company and accompanied Ezekiel and Asmodai on the last assault.

**Epilogue: Ye Angels Gather**

***Grandmaster Thadius***

***Supreme Grandmaster and Chapter Master***

***Angels of Vigilance Chapter***

Conducts the tactical debriefing for all the unforgiven chapters during the gathering of the grand circle.

**GATHERING  
OF  
ANGELS**

**Commanders of the Unforgiven**

## Commanders of the Unforgiven

The named senior commanders of the unforgiven forces have been listed here according to their chapter along with their ranks and honorific titles.

### **DARK ANGELS**

**Azrael**, Supreme Grandmaster of the Dark Angels  
High Lord of the Unforgiven

**Ezekiel**, Grandmaster of Librarians

**Sapphon**, Grandmaster of Chaplains

**Grandmaster Gideon**, Master of the Ravenwing

**Grandmaster Menelaius**, Grandmaster Helix Primus  
Commander of the Apothecarium

**Grandmaster Aradiel**, Commander of the Watch  
Command Title: Grandmaster of the Tower  
Honorific Title: Keeper of the Fortress

**Grandmaster Apollyon**, Commander of the Fleet  
Command Title: Grandmaster of Fleet  
Honorific Title: Seeker of the stars.

**Asmodai**, Interrogator-Chaplain

**Master Belial**, Master of the Third Battle Company

**Master Sheol**, Master of the Fourth Battle Company

**Master Sammael**, Master of the Fifth Battle Company

**Master Erinyes**, Master of the Eight Reserve (Assault) Company

### **ANGELS OF ABSOLUTION**

**Grandmaster Valerius**, Chapter Master

**Grandmaster Azadael**, Grandmaster of Librarians

**ANGELS OF VENGEANCE**

**Grandmaster Furion**, Chapter Master

**Grandmaster Mordinian**, Master of the Fleet  
Battle Fleet Vengeance

**Master Palidor**, Master of the first company

**Epistolery Vardis**, Librarian

**Taboden**, Interrogator Chaplain

**Strages**, Sacred Standard bearer

**ANGELS OF REDEMPTION**

**Grandmaster Thammuz**, Chapter Master

**Grandmaster Amardiel**, Grandmaster of the Fleet  
Battle Fleet Redemption

**ANGELS OF VIGILANCE**

**Grandmaster Thadius**, Supreme Grandmaster and Chapter Master

**KNIGHTS OF THE ORDER**

**Brother-Captain Apollyon**, Grandmaster of the Knights of the Order  
Defender of the Keep

**Sartradon**, Interrogator-Chaplain