The End of All Things

The Blood Angels defend the Imperial Palace from Abaddon's final Black Crusade

By Samuel Fenwick

Chapter I

A request

Judging the true beginning of a tale is an imprecise and clumsy affair. I could begin with how I came to be one of the Angels of Blood or how I was taught to use senses beyond the five enjoyed by normal men – but I will not.

I could give you a scholarly precise of how we came to such a state – an abridged history of the slights and slurs that sowed the seed for one conflict and through doing so ensured another – but I will not. I will begin from when I first had an inkling of what was to come.

My brothers know me as Barachiel. In an ancient tongue it means the Angel of lightning. As I walk past a mirror, I catch a glimpse of my reflection. An aged face stares back at me with pale sapphire eyes and a close-cut battleground of a beard. Its blond hairs are giving way to salt and pepper silver.

I walk into the chamber. My Commander is there, deep in conference with Brother Corbulo. Their faces are grave, as if in contemplation of some great tragedy.

"Barachiel, I trust you are well?" Lord Dante's voice is as smooth as silk, despite the deep lines the years have cut into his noble face. I don't need my gift to know that his concern for me is genuine.

"I am, Lord. How may I serve you this day?

"I will get to that in time. First, tell me – is true that the history of our Father's legion is something of an obsession of yours?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Specifically the events leading up to the Primarch's sacrifice?"

I nod. Even though this is merely a conversation, my awareness has shifted to that strange state when time's eye dilates and everything moves at treacle-speed. My hearts race.

"Good. I and Corbulo wish to know a great deal. Not of the angel's final moments. All of us have relived those in our dreams and even in our waking hours. We need to know what it was like for battle-brother and line officer, both. Give us as much detail as you can, battle tactics, logistics, morale – we need it all."

"I shall do so, Lord."

It takes all my training to steady my mind and body. It is not the question that bothers me. Long have I pondered the ancient days when the Angel still walked among us. No, the thing that has

pulled me bow-tight is the reason behind my lord's request. Even with my gift, I cannot presume to know the mind of one who was fighting the Emperor's foes more than a millennium before my birth. But still... This comes so soon after an avalanche of woe.

Mighty Cadia has fallen before what doomsayers are calling Abaddon's final Black Crusade. The Astronomicon is now a flickering candle against the darkness when once it was a burning tower, bringing the Emperor's light to the furthest reaches of the empyrean. The massed hive fleets of the Tyranid have turned countless once-fertile worlds to barren rocks, while the xenos native to our galaxy sense mankind's faltering strength, reaving and plundering with wild abandon. We repelled the might of Hive Fleet Leviathan when it set its all-hungering gaze on Baal, but only just. Sanguinius' bloodline was never as prolific as his brothers' and for good reasons. The Knights of Blood are gone and the Fleshtearers' struggle against the red thirst is finally at an end.

Mankind recently knew hope with the founding of the Indomitus Crusade, but Guilliman's attempt to emulate his father's ambitions for the species he surpassed and failed in equal measure has been bludgeoned by blow after blow. Scores of fleets have been lost to the sea of souls, while the creation of the Primaris marines, proved to be hubris and nothing more. Corbulo will not speak of the eventual fate of the vat-matured titans we received from Mars, but I still see pain-daemons gnawing on the edge of reality every time I visit the apothecarion – their numbers and size swollen to grotesque levels by the feast of agony prepared by Cawl's imperfect handiwork.

My mind caresses the edges of a thought so terrible that I am nearly unmanned, reduced to the boy who once walked trembling, shiv in hand, into a nest of fire-scorpions.

Dante looks at me as if my inner turmoil is laid bare for all to see. "Do all that you can – I ask nothing more."

Corbulo speaks. It is difficult for me to concentrate on his words. He is too close to our genetic sire in aspect and the blood in his veins sings to me.

"Keep this task a secret – if it became common knowledge among Sanguinius' sons it would blunt their killing edge and that simply would not do." His smile is dazzling, but doesn't quite reach his eyes.

I nod. "My only regret is that you did not come to me sooner, before Raguel the Sufferer fell for a second time. I spoke with him often, but not enough I fear for the task at hand."

Dante and Corbulo exchange glances. Corbulo speaks; as he does so a shadow seems to fall across his perfect features.

"There is another."

Chapter II

journey into darkness/red thirst/knowledge gained

I am no fool. From the little my Lord has told me I will soon face a foe the equal to any I've fought over my long years of service and the ties of blood will not stay his hand. I shall meet him crimson-clad. As I approach the arming chamber set aside for the Librarius, a familiar mind is waiting for me. I resist the urge to smile. It would not do for the lad to have an inkling of just how fond I am of him.

Octavian, my apprentice, is unusually solemn. His face, which usually holds a wry grin, seems taut with tension. I will not ask him why. Foreknowledge is a two-edged sword. Again, I briefly marvel at the likeness between us. It is beyond the reshaping that invariably occurs during ascension, as if we shared blood long before we drank of the Angel's. It is hard not to think of him sometimes as the son I will never have.

We begin a dance of sorts. His prescience and my telepathy can result in strained conversation – he is not supposed to know the council of his superiors or indeed where I will be going.

"Have I missed the mustering call, Master?" He asks, knowing full well that he hasn't.

"No. It is simply that I have spent too long out of armour. I do not wish for its machine-spirit to resent me on the eve of battle."

Octavian nods – not fooled in the slightest by my dissembling. I idly wonder how many times he's heard me say these words in his visions.

As Octavian moves through the arming rituals with practiced ease, I find myself wondering if I ever viewed the world as simply as he. Probably not, I conclude. His potential, great as it is, runs along different lines to my own. Just as a man who does not read has but a single point of reference, so is the viewpoint of one who cannot read another's thoughts restricted.

It is perhaps for this reason that my Lord has often called for my council on matters of diplomacy. The web that is the Imperium is one of countless alliances, egos and petty rivalries and sometimes although we Astartes are mighty, we find it difficult to recall how simple men think and feel. I have the reverse problem. I have spent so long submerged in their thoughts and desires, that I sometimes wonder how much of my original conditioning remains. How can I say that I know no fear, when I have felt it vicariously for centuries? As for desire, I feel its shadow – nothing more. Or is that what I tell myself?

I am jolted from my thoughts by my Mk VII plate going live, filling the room with its teeth-tingling hum. I nod my thanks to Octavian as he hands me *Oakenstorm,* my force staff. Once again I marvel at its craftsmanship and the chemically-treated iron-hard wood that chapter legend claims to be from Terra, before its seas boiled and its skies choked.

"Master." Octavian speaks the word with an authority that stands in stark relief to his usual submissive tones.

"Yes?" I ask.

"When you face the kin-slayer, as you enter his lair… duck."

I nod my thanks as I leave.

The impression of darkness deepens as I make my descent deep within the depths of the Reclusiam. I have already passed beyond the halls most commonly visited by our solemn chaplains and have entered a shadow realm choked dry by desiccating secrets. The acoustics of this place are strange; the echoes from the sound my armoured boots make as they ring upon the stone steps are inconsistent things, some seem to be swallowed up by the blackness. I am resplendent in my full battle-regalia. I will have need of its protection before this night's work is done. Below me, a beast of iron stirs. My suit's autosenses pass on the iron salt-tang of blood, both fresh and old. The thirst stirs, made worse by the ghost-touch of half-forgotten fear that plays up and down my spine like a virtuoso at the keys of some long-forgotten instrument.

Machine roars echo up from the dark. I let my will flow through my force-staff, replacing the guttering faint light of the torches on the walls with pallid radiance.

As I enter the chamber, I'm greeted by an animal purr and the whine of servos. I duck, forewarned, as half a tonne of plasteel, ceramite and adamantium rushes towards my face. I feel another coming at me from behind. I drop prone and see the crackle of disruption fields miss my helmet by scant inches. A roll takes me into the centre of the chamber and I have scant seconds to assess the murder-machine I would make my mentor.

His ironform is contemptor-pattern, sable-black and most assuredly weapons-live.

"I hear your heart-beats, little one." The dreadnought's voice is almost soft, a sibilant purring hiss that speaks of technology so old, that our techmarines struggle to keep it functional.

"Blood. I want blood. Gnnn… The thirst…" The beast's monologue terminates in a deafening roar. I wait until the last possible instant before diving between its stocky legs. It slams into the wall with sickening force. It staggers, seemingly dazed. I bring my will to bear, witch-light flaring from my staff.

"You who were once Adriel, be so again." I cry.

It is one of the hardest things I have ever done. Millennia of madness have gorged deep tracks into the fallen one's mind, while the pathways of reason and memory are silted up things, overgrown with psychotic thought-forms, their thorns dripping psychic venom. I draw more power from the warp and with a scream of effort use its strength to shunt Adriel's thoughts down long-forgotten sidings.

A roar of pain echoes through the chamber. The dreadnought rights himself and slowly turns, as if seeing me for the first time. Sapphire blue eye-lens set into a skull-like helm regard me with unsettling intensity. As Adriel does so, I am astonished to see something that has no place being on any Baalian ironform: he bears the winged skull of the VIIIth legion.

The sheer incongruity of the sigil gives me pause, but eventually I take the other details, ones that my auto-senses have been trying to tell me for the past few minutes. The chamber is both a tomb and a resting place for my Chapter's darkest sins. Broken desiccated corpses line the chamber's circumference. Some are mere bones, others are still clad in the clothes they died in. I see the symbol of the Inquisition hanging from a chain on one of the corpses. Others seem to be malformed

stunted mockeries of my battle-brothers, recognizable only by dint of their fangs and the reinforced bulk of their post-human frames.

“You have my attention, little one. What do you want of me?”

“I need to know what you know of the time when we fought on Terra’s walls.”

“You and I are going to be here a long while then. I may get thirsty. In fact, I already am. Let me know you before we speak on this.”

I slowly unclip my vambrace and doff my helmet, drawing my wrist closer to my fangs with considerable reluctance; unsettled by the thought of so intimate a bond with something out of my Chapter’s shadowed past. I tear open a vein, taking care to leave enough spittle around the wound to slow the ultra-fast clotting from my Larraman's Organ, and thrust it towards the nightmare assemblage of syringes and tubes on Adriel’s ironform. As they pump away, I try to look on dispassionately as my blood goes to sake the ancient’s thirst. The speed at which it leaves me takes me by surprise. Stars reel across my vision and I pull my wrist away. It takes a disturbing amount of effort. A thought occurs to me – if I had done nothing, would Adriel have left me as dry as the husks carpeting the chamber?

“Ah… “, he sighs, “a rich vintage for one so young. All the usual notes are there, honour, duty, faith; but I like the dash of mortal shame, it adds a certain… poignancy. Now, where shall we begin?”

I have a dozen questions on my lips. The one that spills from them is a stranger to me.

“How did you come to be here?”

“Didn’t they tell you? I was the first of us to find our fallen Father. An experience like that leaves a mark. I took issue with Azkaellon and his followers’ ultimate failure and the red thirst stopped me from staying my hand. I have been here in the darkness ever since.”

I swallow. This is far from Raguel’s laboured tales and I feel the great weight of responsibility on my shoulders.

I steel myself for further revelations and say: “Start from the beginning – I would know it all.”

Chapter III

Descent

I now know why my Lord tasked me with compiling an account of the last days of The Heresy. The past months have been agony. At least three companies have been lost, dead at the hands of traitors or swallowed by warp storms in our mad race to return to humanity's birthplace. But we are here at last.

I look upon humanity's birthplace. It is less a planet and more an ugly wound in the night sky. Even as I watch, another detonation flare from a mass-driver or bombardment cannon appears pain-bright and fades away. Holy Terra's surface is the colour of a bruise, all sickly purples and yellows. Our Thunderhawk banks sharply, the g-force ramming me back against the support restraints and replacing the sight of the Throneworld with the armada laying siege to it. Even from this distance I think I can make out the black splinter of cursed iron that serves as Abaddon's flagship. After 10,000 years, the Vengeful Spirit has returned to finish the job it started. As I focus on it, a kaleidoscope of images and sensations hit me in quick succession. A mewling abomination fused to the ship's hull striking out at us even as it begs for death. The disgust as pristine feathers collide with dark iron walls all too eager to share the suffering they have witnessed with fresh minds. The sight of a brother-god so swollen with god-given might that reality bleeds and cries around him. I tear my gaze away, reciting the five Angelic Graces as I do.

Freed from a ten millennia old nightmare and with the Thunderhawk rolling in the black, I can take in the sight of humanity's birthworld. The sight will stay with me forever. I had expected to see a world swallowed by cancerous monuments and hives, their vast bulk accreted over generations and nourished by riches tithed from a million worlds. Instead, I see a smoky sphere with rich veins of rubble and ash peeking out from choking clouds made of equal parts burnt promethium and aerosolised human flesh. Only one place remains intact, its vast squatting bulk a continent in its own right. Even as I watch, migrane-bright flashes from macro-weapons exchange bounce back and forth between the Imperial Palace's walls and the Titan Legions that now answer only to the Despoiler.

The Thunderhawk bucks like a skittish steed – a prelude to a torrent of impacts, each more deafening than the next. My brothers and I don our helms, the plate hissing as void-seals are formed. Moments after, the hull is breached. The temperature rises, flashing from void-cold to oven-hot in an eye-blink. I glance outside, the wings are red-hot. The arrival of the gaping hole in our vessel's skin must have coincided with the first burning kiss of Terra's atmosphere. No matter, as long as we get down in one piece. To die in a metal shell on the eve of all battles would be a spectacularly disappointing way to die.

I say as much over the vox-link to Decimus Venator, Captain of the eighth company and Solonius, his half-brother and company champion. Their laughter, even distorted by interference, raises my spirits. I still haven't got used to Decimus' elevation or the sight of the ornate gun-metal shoulderpad and vambrance that serves as physical proof of his time spent in the Deathwatch. However, I can't fault his tactics or his zeal. In the battle against Leviathan, I lost count of the times his hard-won knowledge of the xenos saved my life and those of his men. My gaze lingers on his lightning claws, remembering the sight of them burrowing into a carnifex's chest before impaling both its primary hearts.

Solonius shakes his head as though reading my mind. Keeping Decimus out of harm's way is a thankless task made all the more frustrating for the champion by the captain's seemingly charmed life. The risks Decimus takes should have resulted in a score of vicious injuries, but I know that underneath his helm, the man's visage is as unscarred and perfect as that of the rawest initiate.

Even as I dwell on my brothers and their foibles, my mind hasn't stopped taking in the situation. Mercifully, the hail of anti-aircraft fire seems to have receded or rather reversed, with the bulk of it now coming from the palace's own batteries and aimed at the wings of Heldrakes and the other sky-bound daemons lusting for our blood. For an instant, my twin hearts skip a beat. I've just seen what we're up against. A horde beyond counting, swollen not with humanity's dregs, but so many traitor Astartes, that the Eye of Terror must have emptied as though squeezed and rung out by an invisible hand.

Animalistic titans clad in blackened adamantium and weeping sores bray and roar as if trying to break the walls with sound alone, while the numbing cacophony is made all the worse by the presence of the Emperor's Children. Even from this distance, the noise makes my teeth itch and my brow twitch. Just as we begin our final descent, I think I can make out the banners of the Black Legion. I smile, my eye-teeth feeling sharp against my lips. The roar of the god-pleasing hordes cuts off sharply as the thunderhawk touches down, the hot corpse-stink replaced by cool fresh air mingled with the scent of incense, dust and a gentle hum.

Decimus is the first to disembark, kneeling with his first step onto the soil of Holy Terra. I and the others follow. For a moment, we try to ignore the massive golden guardians that sweep us with sensors or the myriad turrets trained on us. We are here, ready to defend our Emperor just as our ancestors did 10 millennia ago and that is worth the indignities of inspection and suspicion.

Chapter IV

Oratory/practical/hubris

It has been days since we arrived and I still can't quite believe that I'm here, treading the walls of the Imperial Palace. Despite all the defeats and deaths that have driven us back to the birthplace of mankind, the atmosphere is almost giddy with excitement. Hardened battle-brothers greet each other like aspirants celebrating their ascension. It is something of a grand reunion for us all. I clasp vambraces with Morthrax of the Mortifactors – surprised to see the ghost of a smile breaking out across his usually deathly visage. We don't have to exchange words to know what we're all feeling. Glory – such glory awaits us as we'd never imagined – to die with our bodies acting as the shield between our Emperor and the arch-enemy. I resist the urge to give thanks for the Primarch and Emperor for choosing my brothers and me, out of all the generations of my kin to fight this war on their behalf.

The traitors say that they have been fighting "The Long War". The same is true for us. We dance together, they and we, the steps well known by both partners. Not for us the horror of fresh betrayal or the fear of the unknown. Daemons, sorcery and the darkest horrors brought forth from the twisted minds of the Dark Mechanicus – we have faced them all and over 10,000 years have learnt how to respond in kind. The Grey Knights of Titan cause the neverborn to wail, thrash and wither with their mere presence. My fellow librarians and I counter the spells of the Thousand Sons, while the Titans of Legio Ignatum, their manifolds proof against scrap code, slay daemon engines beyond counting.

Abaddon is no fool. He knows that unlike the first time he was here, this siege is but one note in a symphony of suffering. Our species is dying to traitors, witches and xenos across the stars. He addresses us, saying that his is the only way that will ensure humanity's survival, that we have already lost and our defiance is doing nothing save wasting ammunition that could be better spent on the Tyranid, the Ork and the Necron. He may be right. But my brothers and I owe him and his mongrel Black Legion. There are other, higher, more noble reasons that come sluggishly to my mind, but vengeance is a powerful motivator. Even from this distance, the blasphemy that encases his right hand calls to us, the dried blood of our murdered primarch on its blades. By the time Abaddon has finished speaking, my fangs are bared. It takes more effort than I would admit to force the power my subconscious has called back into the warp.

It is Guilliman's turn to speak to us. He is not our primarch, he is not our Emperor, but I and my brothers listen to his words nonetheless. Diminished as he, the sheer force of his personality beats against my mind in overlapping waves of psychic might, flavoured and made dark by bitterest gall and grief. Grief at a species' squandered potential, sorrow at seeing his sons fallen so low, at seeing the builder of empires, the slayers of kings reduced to this last stand. It makes it difficult to concentrate on his speech, noble as it is.

"We Ultramarines have always espoused an analytical approach to war: the theoretical and the practical. I know that some of you, my more hot-blooded nephews hold little stock with this approach, but it served us well before the galaxy turned sour thanks to one man's envy. Theoretical: We are out-numbered and out-gunned, with no hope of relief. What then is our practical?" He turns to face the sons of Dorn, now the VIIth legion reborn in defiance of the tome penned by his own hand. "You would have us stay within these walls so that we might break our sorry foes upon them.

But it is we who would be broken. If there is hope left at all, we cannot sit and wait for the enemy to throw itself at our guns. We must disrupt their supply lines, that delicate dance that so painstakingly snakes from the Great Eye to our Father's palace." Guilliman turns again, this time to face the sons of Corax, of the great Khan. "You know of what I speak. Our foes' strength is great, but his grasp is not so firm that it cannot be peeled away. Cut away at that which gives him the might to tear down these walls and there may be a moment when we can take away his ability to land more troops. Do this and victory might yet be ours."

As he speaks those last words, I feel uneasy. His mind, once too open for comfort has curled in upon itself. For one of the Emperor's sons, the lord of the thirteenth legion's defences are curiously ill-defined. Still their sudden presence bothers me. Is he lying to us – giving us the merest speck of hope so that we might fight all the harder? I lock eyes with Ezekiel of the Dark Angels and my Lord Mephiston. They too have noticed it. We could know the truth but do we want to? Both almost imperceptibly shake their heads. I let my attention return to the primarch's oratory, hoping that his words will banish the sour taste curdling in my mouth.

"We have no hope of relief, nor their numbers or the favour of their Dark Gods," Guilliman practically spits those last words, instilling them with more contempt than I thought possible. "But we have something they lack. Discipline. Discipline and honour. Without those, without the cohesion born of brotherhood, they are brawlers, not soldiers. Trust in my command and we will bleed them dry."

I wish it were that straightforward. They are debased and wretched, but too many of them have learnt to play on our prejudices. My mind replays a score of clashes, the memories blubbing up to the surface of an ocean made deep by perfect recall and centuries spent in the Emperor's name. Tsaulex, Rohkla, Garsabsah Point. Each time, we thought the enemy reduced to mindlessness, lulled into complacency by the way they spend their lives and those of their servants, only for us to slam against what as well might have been a wall of dark iron. Our 4th and 5th companies still bear the scars from those grievous errors.

Could Guilliman be making one now? His contempt is pure, but it is coloured by a Primarch's superiority. I fear that for all our restraint and walls into which the wealth of entire star systems have been poured, we will struggle to achieve the kill ratios he requires. I feel uneasy. Yes, Guilliman has the full measure of the Emperor's strategic genius, but his experience is measured in mere centuries, while the Despoiler's is counted in millennia.

Chapter V

Shadows of the past/ fever dream/to fall so far

Time passes, as we do the Ultramarine's bidding. Whooping cries tell me that the scouts have returned from yet another sortie. They make me feel my years. I know that I was once like them and my memories of that time are strong, yet they capture nothing of what I felt at that time. They are part-way through their transformation from desert scavengers to angels of death and it shows. One particularly fierce band, led by the long-suffering Sergeant Telios still cake their skin white and smear black face paint around their eyes. They tell me it puts the fear of the Emperor into their enemies. This I understand. The chrome paint around their lips and their shared cant, less so. Their tribe is unknown to me and when I speak to them of my own, their hesitancy tells me all I need to know. Old guilt stabs at me.

The scouts are doing what they do best: raiding supply lines, sabotaging ammo dumps and culling the worthless dregs of humanity that account for so much of the arch-enemy's fighting strength. I applaud their enthusiasm, even as I secretly fear that it is futile.

It is harder for us. The other Astartes do not fight this battle from two perspectives. For my brethren and me, past and present are superimposed. Already too many of us have succumbed to the Black Rage. Astorath tries to make light of it, saying that at least his axe is not needed, but I see in his eyes the fear that we will all fall to it before this siege is done. I don't think it would be so bad. The thought of being one with our Primarch here at the end of all things is more comforting than it should be.

Our split perceptions make it easy to see how much and how little has changed in 10,000 years of warfare. This seems to be a smaller, more private affair than the siege before it. I know from my studies that the walls we defend are an order of magnitude greater than those erected when Astartes first knew treachery. Perhaps this is the reason why we appear so few. In contrast to the days of old, we are clad in a great motley of colours. It is the work of the Codex Astartes. I occasionally nod to marines clad in the livery of our successors, the Blood Drinkers, the Angels Encarmine and the Flesh Tearers. Yet they and we are drops of red in an ocean of blue and white. It is hard not to be melancholy in the face of Guilliman's abundance.

Our wargear seems to be a caricature of that worn by our forebears, as if we have compensated for our spiritual loss with the material, replacing our Father's priceless presence with gilt and gold. I wish Raguel was here with us – it would have been good to stand beside one who had stood before and won. I look out across the tide of men, monsters and machines that my brothers and I are attempting to hold back, with our bodies, our hate, our spite. This is not a battle we can win. I fight on.

For a few days, we fight side by side with the Excoriators, Dorn's most solemn children, curiously uneasy in their new yellow and black livery. It doesn't take long before we realise that they share a burden similar to our own. Secrets that have been kept for millennia spill past our lips and I see Corbulo make a solemn pact with Abbondanza, the Excoriators' Chief Apothecary to share knowledge of their efforts to combat the Black Rage and the Darkness.

They say that we are but a pale shadow of our forebearers, that our gene-seed has grown weak and that we are closer to common humanity than the Astartes of old. That may be so, but we are not the only ones who have fallen. Too many of their number are too used to piracy, to butchering the weak and lording it over their slaves. They have come here, not expecting to die or bleed, convinced by the Black Legion that our strength is broke and that the walls of the Imperial Palace will fall like autumn leaves. They are wrong. Three times now, I have seen the ignominy of Astartes turning and running. Each time, I have braced myself, fearing that they do so only to lure us in a trap. But they do not. We cut them down like the dogs they are. My contempt for the traitors is absolute.

The traitors that hail from the Legions that laid siege to these walls once before are equally debased. Strategic thought seems alien to most of them – the berserkers of the World Eaters and the fiends of the Emperor's Children, are lost to insanity. Time and time again, their lust for blood and degradation leads them into traps that would have been obvious to any commander not driven mad by the tides of the warp. Even so, they fight like daemons and the price we pay for their deaths is all too dear.

Bolts take Anpiel in the neck and thighs. There is nothing I can do to save him. Guilt tears at me. We were scouts together and he was the blood-brother I had never had. He'd saved my life twice before we were judged worthy to wear the plate of full battle-brothers. Unbidden, I recall the last time I felt this way. I can almost see the eyes of my mother and my sisters as they looked up at me when I told them that I intended to take the trials, knowing that even if I succeeded, there would be no one left to protect them. They thought my visions crazy, my ambition selfish. They didn't know the strain of defending an untutored mind against the horrors that lie without, the fate in store for them should I falter while still in their care or that such gifts should never be squandered in a universe where war is the only constant. Time has proven my choice to be wise. My deeds have saved mothers and daughters beyond counting, but I will never forget the look they gave me or the shame I felt in that moment.

I snap back to the present. A pack of Emperor's Children advance towards Anpiel's fallen form. They will not have him. I and the rest of Anpiel's tactical squad, give them pause. We fire with perfect control, perfect discipline. The traitors stumble and lose their grace, looking like chastised juves. We cut three down, before the Traitors find cover and start to fight like the Astartes they once were.

As the days pass in a blur of sweat, blood and the guilt that comes from the instants when you can only save yourself or the battle-brother by your side, but not both, none of us are spared from loss. It is only a note in a larger symphony of emotion that assails our post-human minds. Controlled anger, channelled aggression, the instinctive risk/reward processing that replaces fear, these are all well-known to us. More concerning is the increasingly discordant nature of the song. Humours fluctuate wildly in a way that seems even beyond that described by long-dead Theos. The cause is obvious: the touch of Chaos. My mental discipline and my gift strengthen and weaken me in equal measure. I have more fortitude than my brethren, but I am so much more sensitive than they. When I look out over the battlements, the air shimmers in time to some profane beat.

We resort to cannibalism. I am conflicted. Are we fighting the damned, only to become damned in turn? The taste makes me feel homesick and makes me think of the time before my ascension. We eat our dead with reverence, taking it in turns to share insights captured by our omophageas, stories of the great deeds done by the Astartes who now nourish their brothers in death. Each of us asks

themselves, will I be next? How many breaths, how many firefights, will it be before I am food at my brothers' table?

Eating our dead is not the only indignity we must endure. We have no choice but to despoil the Column of Glory. Those tasked with taking down the armour of those who once defended the same walls we stand upon feel judged by the unflinching gaze of long-empty suits, as if their former occupants are condemning us for this final indignity. I tell them that those who had given their lives for the Emperor could hardly object to giving their armour so that others might do so.

Scores of mortals have vanished, massacred their fellows or taken their lives in a myriad of ways. Some have even turned upon us and while they are nothing but a distraction, that matters when fighting our traitor-kin. Many of whom make up for their lack of sanity, discipline and in many cases, anything resembling tactical sense, with god-given strength, speed and fortitude. While chapter serfs seem less inclined to follow their fellow men into madness, they're not immune and to tell the truth, neither are we. We're tiring faster, as things half-seen, half-heard, pursue us into what slumber we can snatch, stealing our rest and impeding the workings of our Catalepsean Nodes.

Our father is sorely missed. Fulgrim, Angron, Mortarion and Magnus are out there, the ground of Holy Terra recoiling at their every step, their tread as deep as Knights'. They are not alone. Perturabo is with them, as is Lorgar. Brother-Captain Tethys of the Grey Knights tells me that they might be able to banish two of them at the cost of every Grey Knight still living. I think he wants to try. I don't know why, but if he could banish one of them, I wish it could be Lorgar. I know it should be Perturabo – without Lord Dorn to lead our defences, we are no match for his mastery of siege warfare, but all my instincts bay for the banishment of the Arch-priest of chaos.

Chapter VI

Return/serpent's ruin/hierophant

20 days into the siege, the walls shake yet the enemies' guns are quiet. I quickly forget it, I'm too busy killing. Two hours later there is… silence or at least as much quiet as could be possible in the middle of an… no, the apocalypse. It is broken by the sound of hundreds of ceramite knees hitting marble in unison. I'm at the wall, too busy raining shafts of crimson light down at the debased wretches below, to turn around and see what has happened. The hairs on my neck bristle and for some reason, I feel like a child among men. I'm in shadow. I finally get a chance to turn my head away from the battle and see the impossible.

Four beings stand by me looking down at the enemy. The enemy greets them with howls of dismay. They shouldn't be here. They were supposed to be dead and gone. Yet here they stand – the Khan, the Lion, the Wolf and the Raven. They let out a roar of challenge that freezes the marrow. How they are here, I do not know. I do not care. It is enough that they stand with us. Their souls are so bright that it hurts to look upon them, yet their faces are lined and worn, their eyes so very far away. They take it in turns to lock vambraces with Guilliman and whisper words that cause his face to lock into a mask – as if he is being told truths so terrible that not even the smallest trace of emotion can be shared with the host that looks to him for leadership.

Oblivious to this, the morale of those around me soars to giddy heights. Some declare that the war is all but won, forgetting that the returned primarchs are outnumbered by their daemon counterparts. The Black Rage bites deeper. Our Lord and Father should be here as well. It is hard for my brothers and me not to deliberately single out those among the Black Legion. The Sanguinary Guard seem to feel it the most. I dare not ask them if it is because they feel the secret shame of their forebears. Their deeds should be the stuff of legend, but I know it will not be so, as there will be none to recount them.

Abaddon taunts us – he and what now pass for his Justaerin, drunk on their god-given power, tear into a pack of White Scars already retreating from one of a dozen sorties. White ceramite plate is drizzled, then drenched with Astartes blood as the Black Legion's power fists and lightning claws do their bloody work. The Sanguinor and the remaining Sanguinary Guard try to pursue them, desperate to strike a telling blow on the one who dares wield the Talon that fell our Father, but the tides of battle have other ideas. Not all of our finest make it back.

The Daemon Primarchs are proud and over-confident, having have whored away the Emperor's flesh and blood for immortality. But they have paid a heavy price: bondage to rules that, though esoteric, can be understood and brought to heel. The Primarchs of the Dark Angels and the Vika Fenryka put aside their rivalry and take up blades consecrated in the presence of the God-Emperor and quenched in the blood of Imperial saints beyond counting. Prognosticators whisper the fragments of true names in their ears. It is not enough, not nearly enough. Perturabo and Lorgar are sent back to their jailors, but Russ is no more. Angron fell upon him and the second night of the Wolf had no dawn.

My brothers and I watch in frustrated awe as out across the ruined hive-slums of the Odegana district, the Iron Hands do what we have never done – avenge their father. Fulgrim's lust is overwhelming, his need to further humble and debase the sons of Ferrus Manus's sons so great that

when he sees their banners, he slithers towards them with unholy speed, disdaining in his arrogance the support of his own sons in their eye-watering finery and ragged warbands. He starts killing the Iron Hands, murdering whole squads with sweeps of his swords. Others he swallows whole, his perfect teeth biting through flesh, bone and ceramite with ease. His ire rises when he sees some walk away from his less than gentle ministrations and snarls with frustration as wounds inflicted for agony's sake ring false upon adamantine bionics. He is so caught up in the slaughter that he doesn't realise what they are doing. Slowly, oh so slowly, the Iron Hands bring more of their number to bear, chanting the name of their murdered primarch with each fusillade. The rain of bolter shells, missiles and las-beams swells at glacial speed, until each instant crashes down upon the twisted mockery of one of the Emperor's brightest sons with atomizing force.

Fulgrim eventually realises that he is encircled, but by that time, it is too late. Enraged beyond mortal reckoning, his last few swings cost the chapter its terminator elite, while desperate syllables snarled from his painted lips turn yet more battle-brothers into a protean mass of quivering flesh. The final blow falls to Kardan Stronos, first among equals, his thunder hammer turning the daemon primarch's perversely perfect features into bloody ruin. The survivors roar in triumph, despite their losses.

The traitors have lost many. We have lost far less, but we are already too few and soon we will be too weak to hold the walls. I lead another sortie out between the Imperial Palace and the now-ruined Citadel of Justice. We are beset by the Bearers of the Word, their crazed followers and the daemons that surround them like cold travellers around a fire. The crimson lightning from my hands splutters and dies as I stare into the face of one whose accursed presence is so ripe with corruption that I feel my gorge rise. Countless symbols of what I assume to be Colchisan, are etched into a face eroded by 10,000 years of heading the whispers of thirsting gods. It is Erebus who stands before me and has used his dark arts to strip me of my power. He forgets that I am more than a psyker. This I think as I trigger my jump-pack, my momentum and ire building as I scream towards him. Raguel and Theos had heard only whisper and rumour, but I got the sense from their writings that the man I'm going to kill is more responsible than even his Primarch for the Heresy and by extension, the loss of my Father. In the shadow of a broken fortress once given over to the sentencing of the guilty, I will deliver justice by my own hand.

I telegraph my intention to bring Oakenstorm down in meteoric descent upon his cursed skull and at the last possible instant, send the staff's other end up into Erebus's groin. It doesn't connect. The arch-heretic's own weapon, a dark mace that pollutes the space around it with a sickly green shimmer like the light of cancerous stars, is in the way as if our conflict is a vid-reel and it has been somehow inserted after the fact, by some technician who has decreed that it must be so. I am not fazed. Countless drills and the harsh lessons taught on Baal when every meal was a battle have taught me to chain my blows, to give my adversary too much to process, until their mind and their guard are defeated. Erebus seems to have no limit – each blow is countered smoothly, almost languidly, like he can sense it coming in the milliseconds before the frantic commands from my brain reach my muscles.

The dance shifts minutely, then I am sent flying. I crash heavily, flooring several of my brothers. My hand reaches down. I feel the gaping hole where most of my abdomen used to be and raised my gauntlet to my dimming eyes. It glistens blackly. My nose takes in the salt-iron tang of my own

blood. The wound is crusting, but I know that it is beyond even an Astartes' ability to survive. I look back to my slayer. An unkind smile threatens to break out across his palid, sunken features, but it vanishes with the roar of engines. Golden figures move into view, their beyond-Astartes bulk blocking my view of my slayer. As kaleidoscopic dots dance across my vision, I hear them speak names I've never heard with the tones of those who have been appointed judge, jury and executioner. "Aquillon, Vendatha, Kalhin, Nirllus, Sythran."

After those words, blows are exchanged. I see no more.

Chapter VII

Rebirth/loss/vengeance denied

Vision returns to me, but it is not the vision I once knew. Everything is faintly pixelated and overlaid with a heads-up display that is similar, but not quite that of my MKVII plate. It seems configured for something a great deal more robust. The sense of perspective is also different, as if I am seeing the floor of an arming chamber from a great height. The whisperings of ghosts prickle at my mind – they are here with me, though I do not where "here" is. Two figures walk into view. Both are known to me. Nathanael looks up, the servos in his artificer armour whining as he does so, while Octavian's gaze wanders everywhere, his countenance devoid of its usual optimism, his plate scorched and blackened by the conflict waging on the Emperor's doorstep.

"I have given you a second chance to spend your life for the Emperor, Barachiel," he says, his voice aching with fatigue. "All I ask is that you spend it more wisely than you did your first."

"Am I dreadnought?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"You are, and a fortunate one at that."

"How so?" My new voice is a booming bass. It contrasts unpleasantly with my original tenor.

"We got to you before the essential functions of your brain were damaged and those that were lost, should make the transition easier for you."

"What do you mean?"

"You have completely lost your sense of touch."

I laugh. Like so many dreadnoughts before me, I am initially surprised at the way my ironform responds to this by cycling my autoloaders. Not for me it would seem the constant reminders of being nothing more than a ruined body in an armoured shell. Then again, unlike the previous occupants of this metal coffin, my second life is measured in days, not centuries. I see the ghost of a smile on Octavian's face and it gives me more comfort than I care to admit.

Once I recover my composure, I ask: "Am I free to move?"

Nathanael nods his head. I bring up my left arm, seeing a blade of psi-conductive crystal enter my view. I channel my will through it and it ignites with blue fire. This will do. I stomp forward and once I am clear of Nathanael, I test the articulation of my joints and my new range of movement. It is bizarre, to be so free and so confined at the same time. Gyroscopic mechanisms prevent me from inclining my torso below a certain point, yet there is nothing to stop me from turning my ironform's upper body through a complete circle. Already the novelty of my new existence is fading and my thoughts return to the battle from whence I came.

"What of Erebus, did the Custodes lay him low?"

Nathanael looks even more tired. "Yes, but the bastard took two of them with him to the afterlife."

If I still had lungs and lips I would have let out a low whistle. There are few among the Astartes who could have made such an end. Thoughts of my defeat and the pain of the wounds the first Chaplain

of the Bearers of the Word gifted to me swim into my mind's eye. The strings of my emotions seem tuned to a different key than the one I had known while I was still of flesh and blood. But my will is unchanged and it forces them into obedience. Another thought crosses my mind.

"Who I have replaced?"

"Ancient Iaoth"

Ah. That explains why one of the ghostly voices is so familiar. When I was first inducted into the mysteries of the Librarius, it was Iaoth who gave me sage counsel. I had hoped to see more of him during the siege, but the sheer scale of the Imperial Palace and our different assignments had frustrated the urge to be reunited with my mentor. I know nothing of the workings of dreadnoughts, but I know my craft. The dreadnought chassis that serves as sarcophagi for my peers and me has to act as a psychic conduit and it is impossible to act as such without layers of ego and emotion, memory and meaning slowly accruing.

Something of Iaoth is in here with me and it makes my grief for his passing easier to bear. He is by no means alone. My mind's eye traverses and relives millennia of righteous conflict. As it does so, I find myself searching for the first impressions within the suit. They are faded and weak, by time and the way in which the march of years have left so few of my ironform's original components intact, but they are still there. His name… is… Marmaroth. As I link with his echoes, something in me seems to be restoring them. As fascinating as this is, it must wait. War calls and I must answer. I stomp off to the practice cages.

I curse myself over and over again for the hours wasted learning how to use my new form. Adriel begrudgingly tears himself away from the walls to spar me. Not all of his lessons are applicable to my squatter, more lumbering shell. On the other hand, it's enough to teach me the basics when it comes to fighting others of my kind and where to best place my blows to sever hydraulics and sacred coolant feeds.

I need to be out there, killing all those that would murder my Emperor and slay my brothers. Days pass before Nathanael judges me combat-ready. His compliments and praise at the speed of my adjustment go unheeded.

As Decimus' men and I venture into the half-light that now passes for the mid-day sun, we behold a scene of utter carnage. So many dead – as I look down my enhanced vision automatically identifies the slain, logging ident-markers and personal heraldry. These are brothers I have known for hundreds of years, the lives of many given freely so that one single being might still live. We're out beyond the walls, just one of the many sorties launched in the hope of sabotaging the enemy guns.

Before my transformation, I never relied on my gift for flight, preferring to reserve it for smiting my foes. Now that I am dreadnought, a jump pack is no longer an option. With an effort of will, ghostly wings burst from my upper torso, a pale echo of our Father's glorious pinions. My ironform was not built for flight and possesses all the aerodynamic grace of a brick. I must look ridiculous, I think, even as I soar into the air. I spy a group of traitors. Even the post-human minds of debased Astartes have a regrettable tendency to not look up. I plummet towards them, a fierce joy in my hearts. They see me eventually but by that point it is far too late.

They call it transhuman shock, when a mortal is overcome with fear when faced by one of the Astartes charging at them. It is the combination of speed and mass that does it. Nothing that big should be able to move that fast. For a split moment, I sense that my victims feel something akin to that sensation before they are pulped by the crushing force of my descent and sliced in twain by my force halberd.

The Night Lords are here. Of our former brethren, we hate the Black Legion more, but the Sons of Sanguinius have always held a special place for Konrad Curze's get in the web of grudges that passes for so much of our inheritance. They are too much like our dark reflection, made to bring fear to the guilty when we were made to bring hope to the innocent. I have my own scores to settle with them. Somewhere out there are Raguel's slayers. There were precious few survivors from the disastrous boarding of the *Covenant of Blood*, but those who returned to us spoke of Raguel's defeat at the hands of Malcharion, the so-called 'War-sage". I know he's out there somewhere, I can feel it. I know that I can avenge my fallen brothers, as my powers give me something of an unfair advantage – if only I could find him. I can't, his distinctive sarcophagus is nowhere to be seen.

My inner awareness tells me that some force, some agency, is working to frustrate my search. The strands of fate here are thin here, as though they have been strummed long and often by a practiced hand. I reach out with my sixth sense, hunting for the one who presumes to play causality like an instrument.

Found you. I stare at a callow youth of an Astartes, clad in the midnight blue of the Night Lords, an arrogant smile upon his lips and a chain of eldar skulls about his waist. I mark his features well and push towards him. The tides of war have other plans. My sensors detect the external temperature dropping by tens of degrees. Psi-frost cakes my ironform and I bellow a warning to my brothers. The Thousand Sons are here. I should not be surprised. It would be only natural for them to work in unison with one whose gifts run in a similar direction to their own. Octavian is with me and together we focus our will to shield our ragged force against the worst that 10,000 years of occult genius can throw at them. The psi-stress is so great that my servos lock in place and the physical world fades away, lost to the migrane-bright flashes as thought-form clash and reel. Just as I reach the limits of my strength, the pressure breaks.

As my mundane vision returns, I see the source of our salvation. Women wielding great swords, bolters and flamers, their archaic armour wreathed with furs, their hair bound in top knots that might give even the Despoiler's pause. Their bizarre appearance is nothing compared to the void that passes for their souls. To my horror, I see that the tumult has separated Octavian from me. I frantically search for his biosign, forced to rely on sluggish technology instead of the speed of thought. It seems like an eternity before I find him. He's trading blows against the young sorcerer of the eighth legion. My hearts nearly stop in my broken chest, when I realise that he's struggling to adjust to fighting without knowing his foe's every action before they make it. What's worse is the fact that he's never fought one like this before. Curze's get are murderers first and always and my young apprentice has yet to learn that vital lesson first-hand.

I curse bitterly as I realise that the sisters' strange aura has stolen my wings. I build what momentum I can, my reactor burning hot as it tries to propel tonnes of adamantium and ceramite from a standing start. I see what Octavian has not. Even as the sorcerer toys with my ward, two of his twisted brothers move round behind the young Blood Angel. I fire my melta-gun in desperation. The

hot blast hits one of the Night Lords in the backpack. It explodes. When my autosenses return, I wish they hadn't. There's a hiss as a discoloured silver and gold blade slides out of my pupil's chest with the crackle of disruption fields, the blood-drop ruby on its winged hilt, yet another insult waiting to be avenged. The explosion must have propelled him straight onto it. I roar in pain and loss and continue my head-long rush. I can feel the women's influence recede and for the last time, I link minds with Octavian.

There's no time for words, just a flicker of emotions and images. Forgiveness, love and something else. My ward's last vision. That of victory. But how, when there is no hope of reinforcement? Unlike the battle waged here ten millennia ago, no-one is coming to save us. My confusion is a fleeting thing compared to the leaden weight of grief that weighs me down more than my iron-form ever could. I failed him. I failed my son. My charge loses momentum, my iron-form's pneumatics wheezing as I come to a halt. For too long I stare at his face. In death, he has never looked more like the father of angels. As I look upon his butchered form, my sorrow turns to wrath.

Power from the immaterium rushes into me, pulled in by my rage. I could, I should stop it, but I won't. I look up. The bastard started running almost before he did the deed. It's his turn to come to a halt as my essence hits his mind like a sledgehammer, blasting through strata of ambition, false pride and the flimsy mental barriers that stand as ignoble testimony to his inexperience. I bundle up all my pain mixed in with my sense of loss and all the memories I have shared with Octavian and dump it straight into his consciousness. I want him to feel what I feel before I kill him.

He turns and starts to laugh.

"I never knew the pitiful remnants of the ninth legion were so weak," his words are sibilant, accented by a tongue more used to Nostramen's bladed, hissing syllables. "You pollute my mind with drivel, you sentimental fool. My true father died before I knew him, on a worthless world at the hands of an Eldar bitch, after he'd had every last colonist flayed and skinned. As for the man who whelped me on my whore of a mother, he died in a futile attempt to keep me as feeble as he."

I stare at him and in the depths of his all-black, all-pupil eyes, I see the death he has in store for me. I twist sharply, my torso spinning even as I let my force-halberd play out. The blade catches two of my would-be assailants in the gut, the copper-scent of Astartes blood bursting from their bellies as it violates the scant protection afforded by their debased plate. A third rolls aside. He's the dangerous one, his aura faint and pale. The warrior's personality is the faintest of psychic smears over a creature that has only lived for murder – even before it received the genetic legacy of a man who engineered the death of his birth-world for no better reason than wounded pride.

I hear rather than feel the clanging as he scrabbles up my back, his ceramite-clad boots finding purchase in my knee joints and lower torso. My anger is unabated, made worse by the unspeakable yearning triggered by the smell of split blood. Before he can prime his grenade, I strip what passes for his personality away, leaving him less than a drooling babe. He falls in front of me. I take a single deliberate step. The noise his skull makes as it bursts is music to my ears.

For a second time, the sorcerer turns and runs, barrelling towards a twisted pile of gutted tanks and the broken remnants of buildings that once housed and processed the billions of pilgrims, soon to be

crushed by the queues without end and the realisation that even their descendants will never see the sights that they had given their all to see.

I will slay him. I will kill my bastard brother, the blood of my kin staining his black armour. I owe him for their deaths, my Emperor's trust betrayed, Signus Prime and my brother's Guilliman's shattered empire. Thoughts of these are like thermals. My wings ignite, the psychic fallout kicking up the dust around me. Then I charge, slamming the chassis of a burnt-out rhino carcass. Tortured metal squeals, the sudden hot surge of adrenaline through my quarry's veins telling me that he's avoided being crushed by mere inches. A beat of my wings and I'm in the air. I crash down again, my descent arrested by the splintering of rubble. The arch-traitor dives through a blown-out window, his combat roll at odds with the Mars-wrought terminator plate I see before me.

I trigger my melta-gun, vaporising part of the shattered wall that prevents me from reaching my prey. He runs again even as I smash my way towards him. A great leap and Horus is scrabbling up onto the floor above me. I soar upwards only to come crashing back to earth. Something is wrong. I am wrong. My vision swims as it tries to reconcile two images – the clean perfect limbs of an angel and the boxy lumpen fists of a shell of iron. I shake them off. He is getting away. I build momentum again, running underneath him, my prey's vital signs painting him as a crimson shadow imposed on the ceiling above me. Just as he tries to leap once more across a gap I rush upwards, reaching out for his armoured boot, intent on latching hold and slamming his worthless form into the masonry at my feet.

Impossibly, I miss. His foot simply isn't where it should have been. The arch-traitor makes the jump easily, his once-noble face made grotesque as he leers at my dismay. I stare again, finding it impossible to match his cowardice with my prideful brother. My focus comes back. I see Octavian's slayer once more, but never before have I come so close to taking the black.

As I hear his mocking laughter one last time, the vox crackles into life. "Fall back! Fall back!", Decimus cries. My attention returns to the blinking tactical runes that I've been ignoring for minutes that might have well been a life-time given the pace of post-human combat. The numbers are too great.

We retreat. Bile fills my ruined throat at the thought of leaving Octavian unavenged as we make the desperate trudge back to the walls, the enemy nipping at our heels all the way. I drag my pupil's battered corpse with me as we go. Even if harvested his legacy will go to waste – the thought of that causes my ironform to quake with grief. I'll ask to be fed intravenously with his vitae before we mourn him, so that part of him will witness the honour we will do him. The victory he saw feels so very far away.

Chapter VIII

The beginning of the end/sacrifice/loss of faith

It's dusk. Or what passes for it, when the sky is ravaged by fire and the strobing pulses of las- and plasma-fire. We've said our good-byes to the slain. Some busy themselves repairing their plate with tubes of ceramite paste, others are motionless, slumped, exhausted beyond even post-human tolerance. We have 26 minutes, no more, no more less, before we are called back to the walls.

It starts with a ringing in my ears. I glance sharply up at Decimus, seeing the blood already running from his aquiline nose. Even he, ungifted as he is, can sense the immense build-up of psychic might. As the air crackles with corposant and the veil between this world and the next is pulled taut, I look out over the battlements.

Magnus has lost his patience.

His immense lidless crimson eye stares back at me. The cyclopean false god roars as he gives birth to a beam of not-light so intense that my auto-senses white out completely. When my vision returns, there is a kilometre-wide breach in the Outer Palace walls – millions of tonnes of adamantium, plasteel and ferrocrete have simply vanished from existence. The parts of the wall merely clipped by the ray are writhing with false-life and begin to grapple and consume their defenders with skinless tentacles and barbed hooks. Abaddon's host roars in triumph. We cannot hold. The retreat back to the walls of the Inner Palace is done in good order, but our losses are grave.

The enemy's daemon-guns breach a section of the inner walls with vile effluvia. The breach is small and half way up the sheer walls, but the foe sends wave after wave of cultists mad enough to attempt the dizzying climb and debased marines that move and shriek more like warped birds of prey than the once-men we know them to be. They arrive at the breach only to find Squad Zephon waiting for them, resplendent in their honour-suits and locking their storm shields together into a wall of crackling adamantium. From my vantage point, I can hear the whoom-crack of the generator units of their thunder hammers build and discharge. A raptor slams upwards in a graceful arc thanks to a particularly vicious strike from Sergeant Zephon and more follow him down to burst and crack on the ground below. The Adeptus Mechanicus adepts are already moving in with the equipment to seal the breach, but I fear for my brothers below.

I feel the pressure build and watch as fat sparks jump and dance from surface to surface. I reach out with my gift and feel the other Librarians assigned to this section of the walls do the same. Our minds mingle and the gestalt is born. Subsumed within in its newborn, disembodied, perspective I can see the spells of our enemies and the way they burst into bright colours that ebb and fade as the gestalt unmakes them. It is a contest that balances on a knife's edge. A moment of lost focus and Brother Valinus is immolated within his terminator plate. He doesn't drop, his suit becoming an upright tomb for his ashes. Even in death, he still protects his brothers, as the servos power down, locking his storm shield in place. His death galvanizes us and the gestalt pushes back with renewed strength. The psychic pressure ebbs, but there is no relief. Something vast has reached the lip of the breach, hauling itself up with clawed talons and whipping sinuous barbed tendrils. The metronome thunder-clap beat stutters and dies as the daemon-engine's tentacles tangle the terminators. It seems to laugh, the bale-fires roaring from its eyes, mouth and exhausts flaring with malefic glee as it starts to squeeze and drag the veterans towards its massive claws. Sergeant Zephon has a split-

second of opportunity before he too is rendered helpless in the face of the adversary. He takes it, chopping down with his storm shield. The severed tentacle flops on the ground, spewing vicious black ichor as it does so.

He starts building momentum, taking step after step towards the beast while expertly whirling his Thunder Hammer. By the time he gets in striking distance, it is too late for the rest of his squad. Romulo is nothing more than a crushed, oozing mess on the floor, while Jousain and Garruldo have been tossed from the breach like they had the mass of feathers rather than tonnes of ceramite and iron-hard sinew. The way they strike the ground disabuses me of that notion – even through the deafening clamour I can make out the wet crunches as they hit the ground in quick succession. Already, the abused wretches below are fighting over their gilded armour. Much good will it do them.

Zephon's hammer hits the mechanical abomination with meteoric force, turning its head into a shattered ruin. Its balefires cough once before spluttering out and it too begins to fall. My psychic brothers and I let the gestalt die, shielding our minds from its death-throws. I hate the way it seems to welcome death, as though it knows something we do not.

His armour rent and torn, Zephon drags himself past the construction servitors and slumps to one knee, propping himself up with his Thunder Hammer. It is not his wounds that pain him, though I know them to be deep. It's the loss of his brothers. They had fought side-by-side for centuries and now he is all that remains. His form shakes with absolute grief while his brothers' sacrifice is translated into bricks and mortar. I fear that Zephon's pain will only deepen when words and actions are met with silence instead of familiar, comradely, refrains.

In this I am mistaken. Soundlessly, a dark presence descends behind him. Astorath reaches out and rests a gauntleted hand almost tenderly on Zephon's shoulder-pad, the raven-dark wings of his jump pack curling in as though cradling the stricken sergeant. His pale face is impassive, save the eyes which seem in this instant more like twin oceans of melancholy than the fluid-filled orbs designed by nature. Zephon draws in a shuddering breath and roars with anguish until his lungs are utterly spent. Another sharp inhalation.

"How many more of my sons will you take from me, brother?"

His voice shakes me to the core, genetic memory recognizing a father's grief. My surviving brothers and I chant the moripatris as Astorath leads him away. We fight on – keen to supplant maudlin introspection with the staccato-flicker of strike/parry/strike or the monotonous routine of aim/fire/aim/fire/reload.

Days without sleep or rest pass in a nightmarish procession. The past and future are meaningless here, only the moment has any currency. Over the course of the siege, our ammunition has run like a river cut from its source. At first the flow continues on, but inevitably what was once a mighty current, slows and dwindles. Under the baking sun of necessity, the river that is our lifeline is all but spent. Like men dying of thirst, we seek the few pools and caches that remain, sending out sorties to strip the dead of both sides, but it is not enough. Gangs of ogryn workers assemble piles of rubble for us to throw down at those assaulting the walls. Their brute eyes empty as they work without fatigue and without acknowledging the countless nips of shrapnel and chipped plascrete that abrade

their flesh. The end will not be long now. I'm not the only one who thinks it. Abaddon puts an end to any resemblance of restraint, seeking to drown us in the bodies of the damned. It's working, damn him.

We retreat and retreat until there's nowhere left to withdraw to. If we fail here, there is nothing between Abaddon and the Eternity Gate. The warhorns of Legio Mortis blare out as they stride closer and the sky gleams and shimmers as if the foul beings of the Warp that have inspired this blasphemy are admiring their bloody work.

The lack of fuel grounds our few surviving aircraft and makes our jump packs useless. To my surprise and concern, Decimus seems most affected.

"I can't hear them," he mutters, when he thinks no-one can hear him.

"Hear what?" I ask.

He looks up to me, his eyes empty. "The sound of wings."

This will not do. Decimus has kept this this part of the line together, through his passion and oratory. Without the glue of his inspiring presence, we will die faster, of that I'm sure.

Assault troops bound up the walls of the Inner Palace. Their movements would be almost comical if it were not for their lethal intent. I deactivate my power fist and sprinkle tonnes of masonry onto their heads. The clattering impacts are almost music to my ears. Inevitably, some, then many, make it to the top. Our vanguard veterans and assault terminators give them a warm welcome. Bodies as well as rubble start to rain down on the attackers below.

Knots of heads, legs and arms fly over our heads. They paint the courtyards black and yellow with liquefied remains. Clouds of flies rush overhead. There are so many that the beating of their wings is a sonorous drone that could drive lesser men mad. The few remaining mortals suffer terribly. For Mortarion and his grotesque Death Guard biological warfare is something of an art-form. They have distilled their pestilent concoctions for the perfect blend of virulence and misery. Aellios, the Sanguinary Priest assigned to the few surviving squads of battle-brothers under Decimus' command, tells me that it is The Rot. We are forced to kill and burn every living thing that has but one heart. It has to be done with blades or our bare hands. We do our duty without flinching, but our hearts sink still further. We don't get to all the infected in time. The Lord of Decay turns them into his servants with unseemly haste. For a time, I fight alongside Tethys. The Grey Knight tells me that by virtue of being the only officer still standing he is now Supreme Grand Master of his chapter, if 43 marines could be called such. His burden is heavier. It gets heavier still when a seemingly innocuous box is thrust into his outstretched hands.

Chapter IX

Starvation/a prophecy fulfilled/death and rebirth

The plague and the purge have consequences. Knowledge of what transpires within the Inner Palace gets to us erratically at best, but all of us understand an inescapable truth. The siege has cut the supply of psykers to the Hollow Mountain. The decision to let the light of the Astronomicon go out was made weeks ago and was not made lightly. Regardless of the outcome, we have consigned millions of worlds to fight and die alone. Now, there is no hope of reinforcement. Even experienced Astropaths have taken the journey to the Emperor's table and the Custodes have resorted to using the ungifted. With so much human fuel now dead at our own hands, how long will it be before the Golden Thorne fails and our Emperor starves? I know that my fellow librarians have been drawing lots, sending a tickle of their strength to the banquet, so that our Lord might cling to his half-life for a little longer. I am mercifully exempt – even if I was chosen, Nathanael couldn't spare the time to put me into a form more suited to the journey.

Something drives traitor and loyalist alike to their knees. My hearts constrict under psychic pressure, the likes of which I have never know.

A voice, no – His voice speaks, the words so loud that for long moments after, nothing else registers in my mind, as though there is not enough space in my skull to hold both the words and my sense of self.

"YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU DO. YET WE STILL WISH UPON YOU THE AGONY THAT HAS BEEN OURS SINCE WE SLAYED OUR BRIGHTEST, MOST FAVOURED SON. WE GO NOW TO EMBRACE THE SWEET PEACE OF OBLIVION. BUT KNOW THIS, YOU WHO WOULD RULE IN OUR STEAD – DEATH IS ONLY THE BEGINNING."

Before I can recover, Tethys has broken into a desperate run, clasping the box that was given to him mere hours ago. I sense his burning need and lend him my wings. He is reduced to nothing but awareness of the path ahead, his destination and the steps he must take to get there. He lacks the instinctive grace of those blessed with an angel's blood, so I do my best to help him navigate thermals made savage by the planet's tortured atmosphere. It isn't long before my optics are forced to the limit as he rushes towards the Eternity Gate. I see him make his descent towards the Elysian Way and one of the portals that will lead him to the Golden Throne.

My primary heart skips a beat as a thing made of hate and spite casts its shadow over Tethys, before crashing down to block his path. Ferrocrete splinters beneath its cloven hooves and the impact causes him to stumble. The warrior regains his balance, swiftly rallying even in the face of war-given-form. It roars, drenching his consecrated plate with daemon-spittle. I sense Tethys' dilemma even from this distance. He has spent centuries sending the denizens of the warp back to the hell that spawned them and there's a chance that even against this, a neverborn of Khorne's greatest choir, he might prevail. But the beast has already cost him seconds, seconds that might mean the different between a species' damnation or its salvation.

As I stare, helpless to intervene – all my will focused on maintaining Tethys' wings – I realise that I have seen this beast before. It is perhaps fitting that it be here. Too long has Ka'bandha dogged our

bloodline. I wish that Tethys and I could pay it back for the blasphemy it committed when it laid Sanguinius low on the killing fields of Signus Prime, but time and the Emperor's need forbids it.

Ka'bandha raises its fist to swipe the Grey Knight away with an axe-blade twice the length of an Astartes. A bolt of searing heat reaches out from nowhere and transmutes it into a fused lump of burnt flesh. The neverborn screams, its cry a fractured medley of the cries of babes as they are dashed against a wall, the wails of women drenched in liquid fire and the screams of men forced to fight until nothing but purest rage remains.

The source of the shot streaks into view, a golden godling, a nimbus of power crackling across a golden mask, its features pain-perfect in their angelic fury. Ka'bandha roars again, this time in challenge, the burnt meat of its fist already healing. Tethys takes advantage of the distraction, breaking free of the melee and becoming a streak of silver as he resumes his desperate race to the Golden Throne.

In the years since my ascension, I have fought alongside Dante countless times against numberless foes. But I have never seen him fight like this. No-one that old should be able to move that fast, especially after weeks of constant fighting and the absence of true sleep. It almost makes me weep to see such martial perfection – a feeling made all the more acute by my still-new lumpen shell. I instinctively swallow – I don't need to be a sanguinary priest to know that he is trading what sand has yet to fall in the hourglass of his life for the strength to do this one last deed.

The Lord of the Blood Angels guns his jump-pack, streaking past Ka'bandha back-jointed knee. There's a sickening cracking noise as his power-axe hews it into ruin. Again, the neverborn bellows in pain, this time in a voice of cannonfire and the crash of bronze shields. Dante leaps once more into the air, circling to strike again. Even as his foe sinks to one knee, a whip of daemon-sinew lashes out, wrapping round his left ankle. Muscles the colour of dried blood bunch as the beast pulls back slamming the Chapter Master into the ground. The impact is titanic, but gun-shot brief. I will my Lord to get up even as Ka'bandha rushes forward, eager to crush him under its god-given bulk.

At the last possible instant, as the beast's bronze-rimmed hoof comes crashing down, Dante rolls aside, his golden armour fractured in a dozen places, the blood of the oldest of angels streaming down his side, his chest. He drags himself upright, putting all his weight on his right leg. In my mind's eye, his form blurs with another hobbled Angel wearing the same achingly perfect face. The slaughter-god huffs in disbelief even as Dante kicks his jump-pack into life. Turning in his flight, the master of the Blood Angels aims and shoots, vapourising the beast's other knee cap. It is its turn to smash its face into the dirt. Even as the beast crashes to the ground, Dante soars, turns and dives, the Axe Mortalis raised high above his head.

The axe falls, taking all his momentum with it, as it slams like a thunderbolt into the daemon's bestial skull. My hearts kick in my ruined chest like unborn babes as I bear witness to my lord's triumph. The taste of triumph curdles and vanishes as quickly as it came. Even as its outline shimmers and begins to dissolve, the neverborn reaches behind, while Dante is still trying to free Mortalis from his foot-think skull and seizes him in a vice-like grip. Even with my gift focused on Tethys, our Chapter Master's pain bleeds through to me, pulsing in jagged waves. Ka'bandha vanishes back into the hell from whence it came, its iron-flesh dissolving into oily black smoke as it

discorporates, but the damage is done. Freed from the beast's grip, Dante crashes to the ground for a second time and does not rise.

I yell over the vox for a Sanguinary Priest as I break into a lumbering run, accompanied by Decimus and his company, now reduced to a splinter of its former strength. My cry is redundant. Corbulo is here. He kneels, the few remaining white spots on his armour giving way to red as he does so. For a long while he busies himself about our fallen master, but his frantic efforts are in vain. Slowly, he shakes his head. A great sigh rises up from what remains of the angelic host. I pretend not to see the wet streaks running down the Sanguinary High Priest's flawless face. Before I turn away, I catch sight of Dante's own countenance. I wish with all my hearts that I could tell you that it was of a man at peace, a smile about his lips in recognition of a life's purpose fulfilled. I can't. In the instant I let my gaze play across the ruin that was once his face, I see no trace of the man who fought and bled for the Emperor and His Imperium across the length and breadth of 15 centuries.

We fight on, fearing the worst, with every functioning only thanks to muscle-memory while grief consumes us. The light that played around Dante's gilded armour seems to dim and fade. I cannot bear to look upon the ruin of his mask. To have even one reminder of our Father's beauty stolen from us is one too many. While it is almost absurd to think of us outlasting this day, in a way I am glad. A future in which we are bereft of Dante's guiding hand is a poor one indeed.

Tethys has passed beyond my sight, but that gives me no succour. The Emperor's words still echo through my mind. We have failed Him and we have failed humanity. There is no hope for the future, no doubt that these are the last days of man. I no longer have to imagine how the Excoriators must feel when the Darkness takes them. Our foes are curiously silent. Perhaps having roared "Death to the False Emperor" for so long, they struggle to form a new refrain. I care not. The deed is done and they will pay.

For the second time that day, reality stumbles, as if the mechanisms behind the veil have stalled. The shadows are wrong. I look back at the Inner Palace. A star in the centre of a vortex of ephemeral radiance rises to meet its falling twin. The descending star's essence is familiar to me. I have tasted it every time my mind has touched that of my brothers or even those mortals dedicated to the Emperor and his vision for humanity. Yet its scale is vast. My mind struggles to comprehend what is seeing, the way an ant struggles to comprehend that it walks upon the surface of another being. To my oh-so limited perspective, it reminds me of a gas-giant, a failed star that lacked only the spark to ignite – until now.

The light is white-hot, an all-consuming psychic supernova. As my sight returns, I see that a full third of the host of the Fallen is dead, as if the corruption of their souls had fuelled some spiritual inferno. Abaddon still lives. Despite the distance, I hear his roars of anger. None who still stand, be they loyalist or traitor fail to realise that he could kill every last one of us, eat our inheritance and despoil our lord's corpse and he still would not have true victory.

Something has happened to me. The place where my power resides is like a half-shut portal that has swung fully open.

"The sound of wings!" Decimus cries, with fierce, rekindled passion.

I look into the eyes and souls of my brothers and I see a bond, a communion. It reminds me of the pacts that fill the breasts of traitors with patron-granted power, but the source is noble, pure. It is… us. Humanity's virtues distilled and honed to a killing edge. And kill we do.

Despite their terrible losses, the enemy rushes forward, spilling through the countless breaches in the inner walls in a flood of debased ceramite and profane banners. We regroup under cover from the thunderous roar of titan-fire from god-machines that despite the weight of millennia spent unmoving have awakened with the same fury that beats within our chests. As we move further back we pass banners beyond counting until finally Decimus and the few other commanders left alive call a halt. We stand with our backs to the Eternity gate. I wish I had time to stare at the work behind me that that has consumed the resources of entire worlds and lifetimes beyond counting, but every moment must be spent hacking and blasting at the rancid dregs vomited up by the Eye.

We fight like young gods, as if every Astartes still standing has fully inherited the might of their genetic sire. We still die, but for each of us that falls, scores of traitors die with us. My mind returns to my first day on the walls. My excitement at the glory to be had. Glory. Such a small word for so noble a concept. I think this as I run yet another of the Black Legion through with my Force Halberd. One of them mounts me from behind, intend on inserting something round into my innards. If I l let him prime the melta charge it will be my end. I spin my torso, not once but over and over again, until the world is a blur. By some dark miracle, my assailant is still with me. I lock the joint. He flies off, melta bomb in hand. I take it personally and cook him alive, sending bolt after bolt of wych-fire until he is nothing but cooling slag.

Chapter X

Eater of worlds/hollow victory/the last stand

Angron comes for us. Thanks to Tethys' shared wisdom, I identify the daemons trailing behind him, like the tail of a crimson comet, as daemons of the greater choirs. The beast lopes forward in a way that makes me feel that he has a personal score to settle with Sanguinius' sons. A memory bubbles up from within my ironform – of my Father staring down the Sire of the Eaters of Worlds in this very place, 10 millennia ago.

We die in scores. Despite our new Emperor-given power, we are still flesh and blood and face beings made from hate and spite. The Sanguinor blazes to the fore, his golden radiance greater than ever, despite the countless dents in his artificer armour. Mephiston is with him. The ultimate expressions of our Father's dual nature move like lightning, slashing great furrows across Angron's calves, thighs and shoulders. He bellows even as he tries to swat them aside. I feel it burst something inside me – Astartes or not, we were not wrought to withstand such transcendent hate.

There's a cracking, grinding noise. For a moment, the titanic melee ceases, replaced by a mad scrabble for safety. I ignore the cries of "Titanfall, titanfall" over the vox, even as thousands of tonnes of adamantium, ceramite and Martian steel descend towards me. A thought and my wings are with me. I land at the exact moment the titan hits the ground. My armour is sprayed by hot jets of blood from Blood Angel and berserker alike as they are crushed beneath its colossal weight. The noise as the God-engine falls is so loud that my autosenses leave me deaf for long moments. I keep killing anyway, cutting my way through berserkers and charnel daemons like, hoping against hope that the Eater of Worlds did not escape. The first sound that comes back to me, the snap of leathery wings against the air puts an end to such thoughts.

To our left, the Space Wolves fight on, pinned by their oldest foes, despite a ferocity the equal of their fallen sire, while to our right, Guilliman, the warrior-elite from a dozen chapters that call him sire and the Custodes are waging war against Mortarion and his pestilent host. Everyone is committed, no-one can break free to aid us against the Eater of Worlds. This fight is ours and ours alone. We hew at the Red Angel, landing blows beyond counting and reducing vast expanses of iron-flesh and daemon-sinew to ruin. It is not enough. The iron crest atop his deformed skull pulses and with a roar, he swats both the Sanginor and Mephiston with a cracked blade the width of an Astartes. They die in the same instant and for the briefest of moments, I feel a new tension in the pregnant air, as though something unseen and as yet unrealised has lurched towards its birth.

A lesser force would have been unmanned at the loss of the two beings that have embodied the light and darkness at our chapter's heart for so long. We are different. Their deaths free us, making Angron's deaths our responsibility. If he will not die at the hands of heroes, he will die at the blades of brothers. We swarm him, using the countless weapons lodged in his hide for hand-holds. Like a tide of crimson army ants, we swallow him whole, his bestial cries almost drowned by the roar of a hundred chainswords. His gigantic fists pull entire combat squads at a time from his back, crushing them and flinging their broken bodies to the blood, piss and shit-soaked ground. But it is not enough. We saw through bone, we saw through sinew. We pulp organs. The Eater of Worlds crashes to the floor. There is a great hawking noise as he tries to spit on the golden visage of the Emperor that impassively presides over the slaughter before he is reclaimed by the sea of souls.

The fighting dies away. I turn to see Guilliman clasping his hand to a great festering wound in his side, while his men shake as though palsied as they try to fight off the plagues brought in the wake of ‘Nurgle’s Angel’. Of Mortarion, there is no sign. I turn away, not wishing to see scores of brother-warriors given the Emperor’s Mercy by the few apothecaries that remain.

The fighting ebbs away, like a fire it needs fuel and deprived of such – fresh foes for us to slay – it withers and dies. Some of my brothers collapse, their strings cut, their bodies too intent on purging fatigue toxins to remain standing, while others hack at the empty air for long moments, before realising there is nothing left to kill. Some cheer, but they are quickly silenced. It is not that we have run out of foes to slay, it’s just that none are currently in range of blade or bolter. I sense some form of theatricality behind the lull, as if this moment has been carefully choreographed. I bet it has.

We are utterly spent. The battle against War-Given-Form has sapped the last vestiges of our strength. All of us are wounded. Most can barely stand, let alone fight. My ironform is a disgrace. I dread to think what Nathanael would think if he were to see it now. I can just make out in the corner of my increasing static-prone vision, rivulets of a dark liquid dripping down from my power fist. I tell myself that it's only hydraulic fluid.

A fire starts, beginning from a single burst of light at the back of the vast hall until every banner is burning. The sight is oddly beautiful even as I mourn for the honour of all those who died in the Emperor’s name. For many of the chapters and regiments that have passed into history, there is now nothing left to show that they existed.

The symbolism is obvious: Abaddon wants us to know that even the memories of our deeds are not safe, that he will expunge every mention of our names from the records. He and his pet sorcerer stride towards, accompanied by his terminator elite. They are hilariously fresh, clad in onyx armour that unlike our own has not been abraded down to worthlessness by two full months of fighting. I can feel their minds as they chuckle to one another, placing bets and wagers on how many of us will die at their hands this day. I don't need my gift to know just how hollow their laughter is. They came here expecting to win the victory of all victories – fate has proven them fools.

Decimus meets my gaze.

"None of us imagined that this would be our end," he says with the breathy tones of a man attempting to speak with at least one punctured lung, "but we will face it nonetheless. Sanguinius faced this bastard whelp's sire, defiant to the last, despite no hope of victory. How can we do otherwise?"

There are murmurs of assent. We divide up our collection of bolter shells, chain sword blades and grenades, so that every Astartes still standing has at least something that might do more than scratch our foe's immaculate paintwork.

And then we charge. Shells hammer us, bleed us and turn the Emperor's loyal sons into ignoble mush. Yet, somehow our headlong rush gains impetus. We are beyond hate, beyond fear. We are even beyond the Black Rage. We slam into the foe and send them reeling. There a terminator dies, the braggart's thick armour no proof against chainblades wielded with a madman's strength and a surgeon's skill. Another drops to the floor, his eyes gone from bolter shots delivered at point blank range. We win little victories here and there, but they are too many, we too few. I wince as Decimus

is pulled limb from limb and Solonius' head bursts under a power fist's unkind embrace. Psi-fatigue wracks me again and again as I send stuttering flashes of searing energy at my brother's killers. The terminators mob me, using their combined strength to topple me. I thrash and thrash but it is no use. My desperation becomes a pulse of telekinetic force, sending them flying. I have only postponed the inevitable.

I can't see any of my brothers. For all I know, I am the last of the Blood Angels. Grief takes me, even as a figure out of legend moves into my line of vision. If I were still wearing my fleshform, I would be heaving my guts out such is the stain he leaves on the galaxy simply by existing. The Despoiler waves the talon that slew our father at me with a bored air. He doesn't even feel the psi-lance I fling at him with all the hate I can muster. It is swallowed whole by an ocean of god-given power.

Abaddon is furious like a man who has lusted after a fruit for years only to taste it and find it rotten. I can't help but smile. My auto loaders crank and grind with mirth. He knows I'm laughing at him and is displeased. He demonstrates his irritation by pulling Drach'nyen from its scabbard. A mere flick of his wrist opens my sarcophagus up like a flower. He reaches in with the Talon. I can't see anymore, but I can hear the snapping of nutrient-shunts and synaptic relays. The great claw lifts my fragile remains up with almost gentle ease and envelopes me completely. Abaddon closes his fist. The pain is like a solar flare - beyond comprehension in scale but nanosecond brief.

There is a light ahead. As I drift towards it, the presence becomes more defined. Sanguinius looks down at me. He is so beautiful, so perfect. He is not solid, not yet, but I know he could be. His angelic visage ripples and I know he is on the cusp of giving birth… to himself. The sight of him would stop my hearts if they were not already stilled by death's embrace. He doesn't say anything, but my father's need is clear: my soul, my essence. It is not a choice. Choice implies that there are multiple options that need be weighed carefully in their turn. I have already given my life, my flesh, my blood. Why not one thing more? The angel nods in gratitude and takes me into his embrace. I am home.

Epilogue

The angel flies across the void. He is both ancient and new-born. The tides are favourable here, so he stops. Will becomes form and soon he is standing in an idealised version of the Chapel of Loss, the grandest chamber of the Blood Angels' fortress monastery on Baal.

The presence appears before him. The angel knees and bows his head. He looks up into a face that is of all men and none. "I am not your son," the angel says.

"AND I AM NOT YOUR FATHER." The presence nods in agreement. In a flash of insight, the angel remembers a story about a shelled sea creature that coats a grain of sand with layer after layer of its own secretions until a pearl is formed. He is the same, only the grain of sand is the being that died for his Emperor and the layers are his sons, their memories of him and the devotion minds beyond counting have felt towards him.

The angel looks out from the stain glass windows of the chapel, seeing countless worlds aflame. The death cries of countless billions batter against his senses.

"What can we do?"

"FIGHT ON THIS PLANE AND THE OTHER. TEACH MORTALS HOW TO BRING YOU INTO THE MATERIUM. SHARE WITH THEM OUR KNOWLEDGE SO THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE SONS AGAIN."

It is the angel's turn to bow his head in acquiescence. He unfurls pearlescent wings formed equally from soul-stuff and platonic ideals of flight and freedom.

One chapter has ended. Another has begun.