

EXTERMINATUS

Chapter One Last Words

DATALOG #01777394

DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 922.M41

AUTHOR: Razael Flamestar, Salamanders Space Marine Captain

SUBJECT: Last Will and Testament

VOX RECORD BEGIN:

May our Lord the God-Emperor forgive me, but I fear I have gone too far.

I will not lie. I will not conceal my thoughts on this subject. Already I can feel the talons of Chaos caressing my soul, hungry for me to join them in their Hell-worlds within the Eye. I have stared into a darkness so profound that my faith has been shaken, broken like glass upon the rocks of my own damnation.

Emperor forgive me! Even now, although I know death is certain, and only your light can save me, I yearn to join the darkness beyond.

The Outerdark calls me, a siren song I cannot ignore.

Emperor forgive me!

I must focus myself, I must regain control! This datalog entry will be my last will and testament, the ghost of my regret that will confess my sins. Nothing stands before me now but the Void, the coldness beyond....

Where do I start?

The beginning most likely, but such things as order and logic are twisted before me. But I have not gone completely insane yet, and I am still alive!

Where this madness began, it floats back to me now, it is clear. I feel as if I'm waking from a dream, to find order restored, sanity renewed.

If only.....

No! The false preaching of the Emperor's dogs will not dissuade me at this last hour!

I have seen a truth, a curtain of lies has been lifted before me. I die now a renegade, a loving son of Chaos, and with my last breath I utterly rebuke and despise the God-Emperor!

May he die a second death, the rancid angel of murder, the raging avatar of death!
Curse him to the Warp!

The blood of billions runs at his feet, the gifts crafted in his name. And now, Razael Flamestar dies, proud, strong, and without the light of the Emperor!

(The echo of a bolter round firing)

END VOX RECORD

END DATALOG

EXTERMINATUS

4 Weeks Before

Captain Razael Flamestar of the Salamanders Space Marines Chapter loaded a new magazine into his bolter, smoke wreathing upward from the barrel, hot from dispensing lead.

Bullets and las-shots slammed into the adamantium bunker he took refuge in, a cacophony of sound that rang within his dark green helm.

"The traitors are well gathered here, brother Chaplain! I hope we brought enough guns."

Razael looked over to his squad leader, a hulking marine swathed in almighty Terminator Armour, a blessed crozius in one huge hand.

"The Imperium will never run out of guns, nor bullets, brother Razael." came the quiet reply of Chaplain Altarius, before he stood up and unleashed a salvo of rounds from his gauntlet mounted storm bolter. The shots roared from the barrel like vengeance itself, tearing forward and ripping apart the lightly armoured bodies of the Chaos guardsmen that confronted them.

Razael joined him a moment later, firing his bolter in a chorus of spitting lead with his Chaplain, and then the other squad marines added their gunfire.

Ranks of black-garbed, sunken eyed traitor guardsmen were cut to pieces from the bolter barrage, their blood gouging from their bodies and spraying upon the already gore-soaked city floor.

For five whole days the Salamanders had battled amidst the treacherous streets of Baphomet City, the capital of the once-loyal planet Korrgoth. Though the traitors were many, the Salamanders fought with a righteous zeal, carving their foe down and crushing the enemy bunkers. They were sure of their cause, and only felt truly alive when doing their sacred duty for the Emperor.

The traitors had been driven back into one military base, trapped like rats in their own headquarters.

The Salamanders had taken defensive positions amongst a surrounding ring of adamantium bunkers, and relentlessly laid down a piercing storm of gunfire.

But the traitors did not surrender. From their military compound, and emerging from the dungeons beneath it, they were ready for war.

They chanted as they died, voices distorted with the mangling essence of their new masters. They snarled like beasts as they fired their weapons, muzzle-flash lighting their eyes like the cast-off embers from the flames of Hell itself.

They had sold their souls to Chaos, and collectively spat in the Emperor's face.

To the Salamanders, and all Space Marines, there was no greater evil.

A line of the Chaos guardsmen rose up from their crater trenches, bare-chested and each holding an iron pole. Nailed to these grisly standards were the corpses of murdered PDF loyalists, their bodies eviscerated and parts of their skin flayed from the bone. Scrolls of defiled parchment baring scrawled prayers to the Ruinous Powers hung from necklaces they carried with pride.

"Death to the False Emperor!" they howled, charging forward in an act that was without doubt a suicide run.

EXTERMINATUS

Seconds later a volley of gunfire erupted from the Salamander line, and many of the standard bearers fell. The fleshy bodies of the traitors were torn asunder easily, shredding bone and blasting organs apart.

The survivors cast aside their totems, charging forward and screaming.

"Second line, flamers on!" ordered Terminator Chaplain Altarius.

The bolter armed marines stepped backwards, re-loading their guns.

A second contingent of Salamanders stepped forward, and thrust their flamers out the long slits of the bullet-riddled bunkers.

Searing, promethium born flame leaped forth from their weapons, engulfing the traitors. Mad laughter erupted from the flaming guardsmen, a disturbing sound that replaced their screams.

The enemy were ashes drifting on the wind a few moments later. Traitors caught on the cusp of the flame were now cooked, blackened skeletons.

Emerging into the military base courtyard was Finmaeral The Enlightened, a dreadnought of great skill and age. The pounding of his immense, mechanical feet on the war-ground was a tolling death knell. Purity seals adorned his mechanical bulk, declaring his absolute faith in Holy Terra and the Emperor.

His arrival sealed the doom of the traitors, as his autocannon arm unleashed a salvo of gunfire. Spent shell casings popped from the blazing weapon, clattering upon the ground, the sound swallowed up by the roaring noise of battle.

The flamer armed Salamanders charged from their bunkers, across the courtyard to assault the central building. This raging charge would be the death-blow to the traitors, none of them could possibly survive the inferno to come, a torrent of death spilling within the compound.

Huge gouts of promethium blasted forth from their flamers, engulfing the traitors who lurked within. Corridors were turned into hellscapes of fire as the flames scorched down them. Salamanders began entering the compound, blasting flame into every room they saw, killing without mercy or pity.

It seemed the battle was over, ending with the dying screams of burning traitor guardsmen. It was a decisive attack, foolhardy, but devastating.

But then, from the dark halls and rooms of the compound, a presence formed.

Untouched by the roiling flames, they took material shape, birthed screaming into the world by the dying prayers of a traitor psyker. He smiled as he died from his wounds, for the Brides of Slaanesh had arrived.

The Daemonettes surged forward, a mass of nude flesh and scything claws. Graceful and enticing, yet utterly horrific at the same time, the sadistic daemon-women moved amongst the surprised flamer Salamanders, slashing their Warp-sharpened talons across their necks and chests. The halls and corridors turned into a slaughterhouse, painted with fresh gore.

With every spurt of blood the Slaaneshi fiends trilled with pleasure, glorying in the slaughter.

"Daemons!" cried Altarius, sensing their presence within the building.

The Salamander flamers tried to withdraw, but they were doomed. The daemoniac host engulfed them, taking them apart in a fine mist of crimson.

EXTERMINATUS

Finmaeral the dreadnought despaired for his fallen brothers, then unleashed his autocannon upon the daemonettes, who rushed out of the complex, charging toward the bunkers.

Several were torn apart, vanishing back to the Warp they were spawned from. Knowing no fear, the demons strode forward, licking blood from their talons with long, sinuous tongues. Their eyes glinted with the promises of temptation, but the Salamanders resisted such suggestions.

Long had they warred against Chaos, and knew the vile nature of these she-devils. A hail of vengeful bolter fire tore from the bunkers, striking the demons. A squad of Devastator Salamanders unleashed missile, autocannon and plasma rounds down into the fiends, casting chunks of concrete into the air and tearing demons apart. Screams tore from inhuman lips.

When the smoke cleared, not a single demon remained.

"Krak missiles into the complex!" ordered Altarius.

If any demon-summoning traitors were still alive, he wasn't going to let them weave more foul rituals.

Razael Flamestar watched as barrage after barrage of missiles slammed into the compound, rending it apart. Great sections of the building were torn away, revealing the blood-soaked, flame-drenched rooms and halls within. More missiles slammed into the remnants, annihilating it.

Eventually it was reduced to a smoking heap of rubble.

Within the blasted ruins, nothing stirred. Clouds of dust billowed into the sky.

A calm fell over the city, and the Salamanders waited.

The chill winds blowing through the streets caught the ashes of rendered guardsmen, casting them around in swirls and puffs.

Altarius lowered his storm-bolter, and turned to his soldiers.

"Stand down, the foe is slain." he ordered, without a hint of emotion in his voice.

Razael loaded a new magazine into his bolter, before wiping some gore off his helm.

The gun he carried was caked in ash and tainted with traitor's blood.

It would need to be cleansed.

"Chaplain Altarius, the taint of Chaos lingers in the air." said Razael Flamestar, his voice grim. He could still feel the cold, hidden face of Chaos somewhere here.

"It lives on in more than just the air, brother marine." replied Altarius, who brought his armoured heel down on the smoking head of a dead traitor.

With a splatter of gore it ruptured.

"This is a cancer that worms throughout the city. It would take a witch of some knowledge and power to invoke the rituals of demon-summoning. Our work here has only begun."

Altarius fired a storm-bolter round into the chest of a crawling, badly wounded traitor.

Altarius watched as the traitor breathed his last.

As Razael turned away to help tend to his wounded comrades, a dark thought surfaced in his mind. He prayed this haunted world could escape such a fate, that it could be saved.

He prayed that the millions of innocents could be saved from this terrible vision.

Exterminatus.

EXTERMINATUS

Chapter Two Contagion of The Soul

Sergeant Rowland of the Korrgoth PDF sat down on a chunk of blasted concrete, water canteen in one hand, the other pulling off the strap that held his helmet fast. He surveyed the scene of devastation that was Baphomet City, peering over the death-scene from the City Hall Governor's Balcony.

In more peaceful times, the ornate ledge would be used by the Governor to survey his city, and pray in the early hours of the morning for strength from the Emperor. Now it was just another defensive position, a crow's nest standing high amidst the smoking holocaust of the city.

Rowland took a long drink of the canteen, his rough face smeared with dirt and blood. The refreshment did little to lift his spirits.

The faces of his dead comrades kept appearing in his mind. He saw the look in their eyes moments before they died, heard their screams of pain.

His eyes haunted, Sergeant Rowland looked over the city, and thought to pray. But his mind drifted back to his soldiers, back to the fight...

One moment conscript Benric Corman was there, advancing slowly. The next, his legs were gone, torn away by a damned traitor mine. The shattered bones sticking through were slick with blood. Then the screaming started.

Then the dying.

Rowland tried to stop thinking, tried to block it out.

He took another swig of water, then cast the empty canteen aside.

Below, he could see the re-grouped PDF soldiers marching through the streets.

Chimeras and Hellhounds joined them, rumbling forward on their great adamantium tracks.

They only needed half the body-bag for Benric.

Rowland tore off his helmet and threw it to the ground.

As the ghosts of his dead and mangled friends haunted his mind, Sergeant Rowland knew despair.

He prayed that the Emperor would save them, and put an end to this war.

But inside, he knew it had only begun.

In the darkness of a dungeon room, the glint of an autopistol flickered off the dim light above.

Deron Halberforge, traitor priest of Chaos, felt the barbed wire around his wrists cutting slightly into his flesh.

A moment later, the cold steel of an autopistol barrel was pressed against his temple. The bearded priest, bound to a plasteel chair, began to feel fear.

"Where are your clergy?" asked a deep voice, calm but laced with strength.

Deron's wrinkled brow began to sweat, and tried to shake his head to throw off the blind-fold over his eyes.

EXTERMINATUS

"I have none, Corpse dog!" spat the priest, a barbed circle-shaped symbol on his chin shining gruesomely under the light.

Inquisitor Leopold stepped back, his red cloak brushing across the adamantium floor. He lowered the autopistol, and fired a single round.

The bullet shot off a toe from the Chaos priest, who screamed in agony.

"I have a bullet for every toe in this gun, heretic." answered Leopold, his dark blue eyes catching the light in a disturbingly sinister manner.

Razael and Altarius, who stood nearby, watched on without emotion.

The priest spat on the ground, his wounded foot ebbing a greasy sludge that could be thought of as blood.

"My Gods are beyond the flesh, Inquisitor."

Razael and Altarius knew that was the wrong thing to say.

A second round fired, and a second toe was severed.

A scream followed soon after.

Razael wondered how the soul of a priest could fall to Chaos. But there was no question this man was a heretic, he was caught conducting a dark ritual beneath a Temple to the Emperor. Many had been seized under similar circumstances.

After successfully destroying the traitor guardsman military compound, the Salamanders and PDF had conducted a thorough sweep of the city. Those suspected of Chaos worship were rounded up, and thrown into the expansive dungeons beneath Baphomet City. Deron Halberforge was one such captive.

The interrogations had begun, headed by none other than an Inquisitor of the Holy Emperor, dispatched to dig up the roots of Chaos and burn them without mercy. Leopold pressed the gun barrel under the chin of the priest, who gritted his teeth to try and stem the pain.

"Where are your clergy?" asked the Inquisitor again, his voice having lost none of it's wrath.

The priest was silent for a short time, his breathing laboured and heavy.

"Most of them are dead, killed in the initial battles. Others fled to different cities, others are still here."

Leopold was pleased they were getting somewhere.

He pressed the barrel harder against the priest, his skin seared a little by the hot metal.

"Where elsewhere, and where here?" he asked.

The priest began to laugh, sharp teeth glittering like a snake's jaws.

"We are everywhere, Imperial dog! We live within everyone, we see everything! You are all going to die!"

Leopold stepped back, tearing the blindfold off the priest.

"You are nothing more than a pawn of the Ruinous Powers, heretic. You know nothing of the grand scheme here, you are nothing but disposable waste to those you venerate."

The priest almost looked offended.

A shot rang out from the autopistol, the bullet hitting the traitor priest between the eyes. Blood and brains spattered the wall behind him.

"And you are nothing but disposable waste to me." finished Leopold, holstering the gun.

EXTERMINATUS

The Inquisitor knew when lies were told, and knew when he heard the truth. Quickly he could assess a man, he could read a soul with a moment's glance. As he turned to leave the room, he looked over the two marines who stood with him.

In Altarius, he saw only faith and dedication.

But in Razael, he saw something dangerous, something he would need to watch with unflinching care.

In Razael, he saw doubt.

"Inquisitor Leopold, what is your advice?" asked Altarius, walking regally with his hands behind his back.

The hulking Inquisitor answered quickly and without hesitation.

"This planet is riddled with Chaos taint. Too far from the Emperor's light, these scum have lost faith. They have turned to Chaos, seduced by promises of easy wealth and power. I have no doubt that somewhere on this planet lurks a mastermind of this Chaos rebellion, the heart of a dark cancer. My interrogations of this priest, and the others that I have faced, tells me we have only one choice."

Razael's soul felt an ache, and his face beneath his Salamander helm went deathly pale.

Altarius turned to his Inquisitor comrade, and nodded.

"Exterminatus."

Razael despaired inside, but dared not show it. He was not supposed to care, nor allowed to question his superiors.

Doubt was weakness in the Adeptus Astartes.

Leopold was about to speak again when the City Alarm could be heard above, blaring throughout the streets.

"It seems we are needed, Chaos rises against us once more." said Altarius.

Leopold nodded, and strode off to his quarters to gather his gear.

Razael's sorrow welled up within him, but he tried to push it away. He wasn't supposed to have feelings but he couldn't help it.

As the promise of battle shrieked above, the Salamanders Captain felt a heavy weight resting on his soul.

Everyone on this world was going to die.

Climbing the adamantium stairs upward, Razael prayed.

Emperor save us, and spare this world.

All he had left was hope.

Inside him, he knew that hope was dying.

Chapter Three Shadows

Razael Flamestar ascended the dusty stairs, bolter loaded and mind ready for war. Above he could hear the discordant pounding of artillery shells, and the ceaseless roar of hundreds of lasguns.

Quickly he moved through the dark rooms of the Baphomet City Prison compound. PDF soldiers were hurrying out of the building, their Sergeant's barking orders. Razael spotted his three squadrons of Tactical Marines, who had quickly assembled in the Main Room and awaited their Captain.

The high vaulted ceiling above was decorated with gold, silver and engraved with thousands of religious passages. Metre-long scrolls hung from pillars soaring upwards to the roof.

Razael approached his marines, and looked over them.

He wondered how many would survive the fight.

"Team 1 and 2, follow..."

His words were cut short by the deafening sound of an ordinance explosion above. A gigantic hole was torn open in the vaulted ceiling, sending chunks of red-hot steel and debris scattering downward. A shockwave blasted downward, shattering centuries old windows.

Instinctively the marines dived for cover as the room filled with the bellowing flames of the artillery shell. Great chunks of the roof fell to the ground, seared and scorched from the intensity of the blast. They trailed tails of bright flame as they descended. Those Salamanders still on their feet quickly ducked to evade the falling debris, their power armour singed from the intense aura of heat.

Razael was deaf for a few seconds, but his augmented healing abilities quickly returned his hearing.

Half of squad 2 were gone, crushed to death beneath a massive block of the fallen ceiling. The plasma gunner of Squad 1 had staggered painfully to his feet, left arm severed just above the elbow. Moments later he collapsed onto his knees, before dropping to the rubble-strewn ground.

"Regroup around me!" bellowed Razael, clouds of grit and dust swirling around him.

Altarius entered the room, Leopold close behind.

Razael turned to them, moving at a crouch.

"How can they launch such an attack? We destroyed their Basilisks and Leman Russ days ago!" said Razael, incredulous.

Leopold drew his pair of glittering power swords, his bearded face an emotionless mask.

"Never doubt the resources of the Great Enemy, Captain." replied Leopold, who strode over to a window.

The Inquisitor surveyed the scene outside.

Baphomet City was alive with war. The air was choked with billowing clouds of black smoke, and filled with the blast of lasguns and the screams of the dying.

Bright flares billowed around the city as flamers were fired to drive back the hordes

EXTERMINATUS

of mutants who had emerged, the shocked but steadfast PDF pouring lasgun fire into the seething mobs.

Ahead, barely 300 metres, stood a beast of horrific power. A metallic, twisted machine in the shape of a spider, dragging itself through the city streets on eight clawed legs. Symbols of the Chaos Gods had been hammered into its unnatural frame, and it bore the ever-shifting, metallic face of a man howling.

Mounted on its back was a mighty battle cannon that wept gouts of smoke and ichor, and in one arm it fired a huge reaper autocannon, cutting PDF soldiers to pieces. Others stationed in buildings were burned alive by the beast's heavy flamer. With every kill, the daemon-machine screamed in triumph.

"Defiler." said Leopold, hatred turning his words to ice.

Altarius muttered a silent prayer to the Emperor, asking for strength and courage in the battle to come. The Chaplain was a seasoned veteran of combat, but never had he encountered a metallic monster such as this before.

"Let's go, they need us out there!" bellowed Razael, who began to run forward.

He was quickly joined by his marines, Altarius and Leopold, and together they burst out of the now burning Prison complex. The great doors flung open, casting forward a cloud of dust and debris.

Instantly they were charged by a screaming gang of mutants, twisted creatures armed with a chaotic assembly of weapons. Each was warped in a different way, but all were hideous in the extreme. Some had extra limbs, others claws writhing out of their bodies, and others were dishevelled, writhing things, composed of tentacles and shifting faces. Others struggled to move forward, staggering around on many-jointed legs. But together they chanted, proclaiming their allegiance to the Great Enemy.

The mutants opened fire, joyous at the chance to kill such fine warriors of the Imperium.

Three members of Team 1 were cut down by the shots, riddled with dozens of rounds, barbs and projected adamantium shards. One particularly huge mutant carried a heavy stubber under one slimy arm, and killed a marine with a volley of concentrated gunfire. As the lumbering stubber gunner saw the death he had wrought, he laughed.

"Return fire!" bellowed Razael. The Captain raised his bolter, and fired a burst into the seething mob. His shots rang true, finding the heads of three mutants and tearing them to pieces. He fired a single round at the heavy stubber armed big mutant, shattering its skull and sending blood and brains spattering backwards. Its laughter had been silenced.

The Salamander squads opened fire, churning the bodies of the mutants with bolters, heavy bolters and melta-gun blasts. Frag grenades were hurled forward, dispersing tightly packed groups of mutants and killing several, pieces of bodies and sprays of blood cast outward from the blasts.

Haelion, an experienced flamer marine, stepped forward and unleashed a gout of fire, sending the surviving mutants running for their lives.

EXTERMINATUS

“No mercy for the damned!” cried Haelion, sweeping the flamer across the wounded mutants who lay writhing on the ground.

Some of the flamer victims staggered away, burning, before collapsing to the ground and becoming still. Haelion roared at the top of his lungs, unleashing gouts of flame at approaching mutants armed with knives and clubs, keeping them at bay.

Altarius fired well-placed bursts with his storm bolter, killing any mutant he saw. He constantly chanted prayers to the Emperor, bolstering the resolve of his comrades.

Leopold had broken away from the marines, and was carving a path through a large mob of Chaos mutants that had emerged on their left flank.

Razael thought this to be an unwise tactic, as they needed the powerful Inquisitor to remain with them and cut down any mutants who charged.

But Leopold was deaf to any such notions, and forged ahead alone.

The Inquisitor fought in silence, his powerful but focused attacks shedding life and limb with every stroke. His power swords glowing, Leopold massacred the mutants like lambs. By the time he was finished, his once gleaming silver power armour was slick with gore. Dozens of mutated corpses lay about him, hacked and butchered.

Razael ordered his marines into cover as the Defiler unleashed another battle cannon blast. A huge, howling shell tore across the city and slammed into a nearby building full of entrenched PDF soldiers.

With a cloud of flame and dust the building exploded and collapsed, and the many PDF soldiers inside were doomed to die as the roof caved in on them. Others, some burning from the flames, leapt in desperation from windows in the building, crashing to their deaths on the broken streets below.

Slithering across the ruined city floor was a dark-skinned mutant with the lower body of a snake. He was naked save a leather vest he wore.

A leather vest covered in grenades, explosives and a very unstable looking meltabomb.

The mutant stood up and charged, taking the Salamanders by surprise. He snatched up the detonation device on his belt, one scaled finger ready to press the trigger.

Razael turned to fire, but he was too slow.

Sergeant Rowland was not.

From a roof several hundred yards away the veteran fired his sniper rifle, sending a bullet straight into the head of the suicide mutant.

The round made easy work of the mutant's head, shattering the skull and brain.

The lifeless corpse slumped to the ground, ebbing purple blood.

Rowland fired twice more, picking off other mutants hiding amongst the rubble. His aim was deadly, and resolve iron.

The ghosts of his friends inspired him to kill without mercy. Each piece of scum he sent to the grave was vengeance for his slaughtered comrades. Every time he heard the high-pitched bang of the sniper rifle firing, it was a hymn sung in the name of the faceless dead.

Faceless dead to the war effort, but good friends to Sergeant Rowland.

EXTERMINATUS

The Salamanders kept their heads down behind cover, which consisted of chunks of concrete and twisted steel. The Defiler had turned on them, and unleashed a seemingly endless barrage of reaper autocannon fire. It savoured the opportunity to kill a Chaplain. Such a devout soul would be most enjoyable to crush.

Leopold stalked forward, cutting down anyone who blocked his path. Dozens of mutant firearm shots slammed into his body, but were reflected by his blessed armour.

Leopold ran towards the howling Defiler, its eight clawed legs cutting scars in the concrete street as it lumbered forward, pressing the advantage. It was closing on the pinned Salamanders, and it wouldn't be long before the trapped marines would be within striking distance of the Defiler's heavy flamer.

The hulking machine spotted Leopold, and fired an enormous gout of flame at him. Leopold dove forward, rolling as he went. The black, roiling fire shot above him. He felt the roaring heat, but had evaded the flame itself.

The Defiler roared in frustration. How hard could it be to kill one man? It had already slain several hundred today.

Hidden inside a nearby building, Rowland fired another sniper round. It shrieked forward and hit the Defiler's flamer gun, which malfunctioned from the precise hit. Oil and thick flamer fuel spilled from the shot, mechanical blood leaking from ceramite veins.

Reacting to the howls of the Defiler, several mutant gangs swarmed from a building beside the machine, and charged to attack the advancing Leopold. The Defiler was the centre of their attack, they could not let it fall to one plucky Inquisitor.

Razael, Altarius and his marines had moved forward during Leopold's advance, and unleashed a torrent of gunfire and flamer blasts into the forming mutants.

Taken by surprise, the hideous creatures were repelled back into their building. The gangs fired their crude weapons as they went, keeping the Salamanders from advancing any further. One of the marines died as a mutant gunshot tore through his helmet and went straight into his brain.

Leopold pressed home the advantage, swinging his power swords as he advanced. He severed one clawed leg of the Defiler, which buckled and staggered as a stream of sparks and unholy blood sprayed from the wound. The giant leg crashed to the ground, still twitching.

In response the wounded Defiler clawed at the Inquisitor, trying to rend and crush him to death.

At the same time it fired the reaper autocannon at the Salamanders, tearing several of them to pieces in a remorseless hail of bullets as their cover was shattered by the same gunfire. Razael and his comrades fell back to a new position, taking cover behind a smoking Chimera vehicle. Inside, the corpses of several PDF lay still, burned and mangled.

A single mutant, badly wounded but still alive, crept behind Leopold to stab him with a power knife. But the ever watchful Rowland fired again. The bullet exploded through the creature's neck, killing it instantly.

Leopold rolled aside the Defiler's claws, chunks of dust and grit sprayed upon his body as the beast tried to catch him.

EXTERMINATUS

"I shall banish your unholy spirit, for Him whom we owe everything!"

Sweeping his swords to the side he severed another leg, and this time the Defiler fell forward awkwardly, crashing to the street floor. The stone cracked beneath it's bulk, dust gushing upward.

With a battle-howl the raging Inquisitor dragged his swords along the Defiler's torso section, cutting it open. A torrent of daemon-blood and sparks spluttered forth, and with a last scream of hate, the war machine moved no longer.

Climbing the tortured remains, Leopold drove his swords down deep into the Defiler's face, before ripping them free with a spray of oil and searing gore. Hacking and stabbing in a frenzy, Leopold did not cease his assault until the Defiler was silent and undeniably dead. The Inquisitor stood atop the shattered beast, and spread his arms wide as he roared in victory.

Seeing this display, the beleaguered PDF rallied, and with wrath they assaulted the remaining mutants. Like a wave of seething flesh the Chaos servants were driven from Baphomet City, and gunned down as they ran. The streets ran with tainted blood and were choked with warped corpses.

Survivors of the city rout never made it across the surrounding wilderness, as barrages from mortar shells fired by PDF support squads tore them to pieces. Tower-mounted autocannon emplacements shredded anything that survived the mortars. After several minutes, the gunfire ceased, and the pounding blasts of the mortars ended.

A mass of broken, bloodied corpses stretched out over the surrounds.

"Inquisitor General Leopold, mutants are emerging from the sewers in the Northern Sector!" came the call from a vox-master PDF soldier, his face drained of colour.

Leopold heard the reports of the second wave, and quickly boarded a Rhino to race towards the battle-front. As an Inquisitor, he could command any resource the Imperium had. Nothing was beyond his power.

Only a week before he had declared himself general of the Imperial forces on Korrgoth, and had sworn victory or death.

"I shall remain here, and hold the centre. More mutants may arrive. They seem to scuttle forth out of the shadows themselves." said Altarius, his eyes watchful.

Razael nodded, and took the survivors of his team into the Rhino with Leopold.

As the boarding hatch slammed shut and the engine gunned, Leopold gripped the handles of his swords tightly. Daemon-engine blood still dripped from the blades, searing the ceramite floor when it fell.

His intuition told him that one day, soon, he would have to kill the doubt-filled Razael. Doubt had no place under the gaze of the immortal Emperor.

Razael loaded a new magazine into his bolter, and then met the stare of the dark-eyed Inquisitor.

Within those dead, hollow eyes, Razael saw only hate.

More disturbingly, the Salamander didn't know if that hate was for Chaos, or just for him.

EXTERMINATUS

Deep below the war-torn streets of Baphomet City, within the re-enforced vault of a long abandoned munitions factory, a hooded figure sat in silence. The sleek, gracefully carved throne he sat upon was crowned with an arch of skulls, casting a shadow down over the powerful figure. His pale coloured robe sat in contrast to his dark power armour, beads of ethereal light glinted within the hidden depths of his hood.

With a barely audible sound the doors to the audience chamber slid open, and a mangy, wart-covered mutant hobbled into the room. His red eyes squinted as the flickering light of the hundreds of candles set into the walls washed over him. Not daring to complain, feeling afraid he even thought discomfort in the presence of his master, the degenerate shuffled forward, then came to a stop. He bowed reverently to the hooded figure before him.

His master barely noticed the token gesture of respect. What things like malformed mutants thought of him was beneath his sight.

The mutant Kerbole rose, blood-shot eyes meeting the glinting gaze of his lord.

"Milord Sahjhon, I have received a report from the Prison Complex assault. We were repelled with heavy casualties. The Defiler, Gorgonax, was destroyed."

The Chaos marine gritted his teeth in barely suppressed anger. The ceramite fingers of his gauntlets scraped against the arms of his throne.

"Surely you must have more encouraging news for me? It is not wise to leave a Fallen Angel displeased."

The mutant shook, breath stolen from his lungs. He swallowed hard before continuing.

"Of course, Milord. We managed to slay quite a number of Salamanders, and the PDF numbers are slowly being whittled away."

The Fallen Angel smiled at the news, wolfish fangs shining in the darkness.

"And what of our project?"

Kerbole smiled, a mouth full of rotten teeth exposed.

"We have found it, Milord. Many died trying to recover the relic..."

Sahjhon waved a dismissive hand in the air.

"That is without concern. Our dead agents are now enjoying the rewards of Chaos servitude, sitting at the table of the Great Four."

The mutant nodded at this, a look of wonder in his eyes. His mind raced with thoughts of sitting at that same table, to be great in something's eyes, something more than just a hated freakish outcast. To have a place, a belonging, even if it was in Hell, was desirable to the wretched mutant. He had been cast from the Emperor's sight because of something he had no control over, mutations that ruptured his body and cankered his skin. The Imperium looked upon his kind with undiluted scorn, vermin fit only to be exterminated with prejudice.

Sahjhon rose from his throne, moving past the cowering mutant and heading for the door.

"Bring me the detailed report. Tell me every fact and discovery. Nothing is too small to go without mentioning."

The command of Sahjhon echoed around the ceramite vault, and the mutant nodded in response.

EXTERMINATUS

He licked his dry, twisted lips, and feelings of slaked vengeance roared to life in what passed for his heart. Soon, he and his master would make the Imperium pay. Kerbole could hardly wait.

Chapter Four Allies and Enemies

And there it was, sitting amongst a roiling circle of flames. Hunched over and grotesque, cast down from beauty and duty, eyes glowing like burning coals.

From it's back wept a flow of blood, the stumps of severed wings.

And hungrily it consumed the meal before it, flesh, bones, feathers and all.

And with joy the damned angel devoured his own wings, gnarled hands smeared with gore.

Sergeant Rowland awoke in a sweat, the image of the flesh-eating angel still burned into his mind. The spartan quarters he slept in did little to give him comfort. They were clinical, orderly, and felt utterly dead to him.

The Imperial Guardsman sat up slowly, his ruffled uniform creased and still dirty from the days fighting. He had been so exhausted he had simply collapsed onto his bed and slept. Outside, he could hear the distant, pulsating sound of mortar and cannon rounds exploding into the earth.

Rowland got to his feet, wiping one hand across his face. He still felt sleepy, still felt drained.

But that hadn't changed for a while now. He had lost the ability to sleep, only capable now of collapsing into rest when driven to breaking point. Horrid visions crept into his mind whenever he closed his eyes. There was no respite from it.

Rowland staggered over to a small mirror on the wall, and looked over himself.

Coarse stubble had grown on his face, and bags hung drearily under his eyes. A cut above his left eyebrow had scabbed over, but dry flakes of blood had clotted in his hair.

Rowland fell to his knees, hands over his ears. The noises had started again. Like the howls of ghosts he heard the screams of his men, heard the sound of enemy gunfire, heard pleading and shouts, and the sound of flesh tearing as bullets and bombs did their ghastly work.

"Stop it! Stop it!" screamed the Sergeant, fingernails digging into the flesh of his ears. As the sound reached a crescendo, it ended with a clap of thunder.

Rowland was gifted with blessed silence, a few precious moments he savoured. It was like water to a man dying of thirst in a desert.

Slowly, quietly, he got to his feet. He steadied himself against the wall with one hand, eyes still closed.

He opened them slowly. The ghostly quarters around him was empty of life, save his own.

From a rack on the wall he collected a combat knife, laspistol and grenades. Soon the Officers would be making the rounds, assigning Guardsmen to new regiments, or giving Sergeant's a new contingent of men to lead.

Rowland sheathed the combat knife into his boot, and holstered the laspistol in his belt. The bandoleer of grenades was strapped on tight next, and the dutiful Sergeant did one last equipment check to make sure he had everything he needed.

EXTERMINATUS

Last on was his helmet. Years ago, when he had graduated from the academy, he had scratched a 16 into the back of the helmet.

The old mark was still there, and he ran a finger over it, feeling the etching. Back then, he hadn't seen a day of real combat. It was all very exciting, the prospect of war, of serving the Imperium and the Emperor.

But then the reality screamed itself into reality.

The circular locking mechanism on the quarters door turned, and the steel door opened.

A tall, thin, bearded Officer stepped inside, uniform perfect and face rigid.

"Sergeant Rowland?"

The dishevelled soldier turned, and greeted his superior with a salute.

"A new offensive will begin soon. Be prepared to leave at any hour. After your exemplary conduct as a sniper, we may have a special mission lined up for you. Emperor protects."

With a salute the Officer left, closing the door behind himself.

And with that, Rowland was alone once more.

But that was a lie, Rowland was never truly alone.

He reminded himself of that as he gazed around the room, the mangled faces of the dead staring at him.

Leopold and Altarius stood atop a ceramite watchtower in the heart of Baphomet City, looking over the blasted remains. Everything had fallen quiet, a rarity in the current climate. The mutants and traitors had slithered back into their hiding places, and for now at least, combat had ceased.

"We have something we must discuss." said the bearded Inquisitor Leopold, hands resting on the thick railing.

Altarius stood beside him, and knew this conversation was coming.

"Exterminatus." replied the Chaplain, the smoky wind flowing over the pair.

Leopold nodded slowly, then flexed the fingers on his power armour.

"This planet is utterly rife with corruption. The number of mutants here is staggering. Whole regiments and divisions of PDF have turned traitor. Daemonic rituals have been conducted, witchcraft done in the night. Even Daemons themselves have walked this soil."

Leopold said the words without emotion, like he was reciting a list of evidence whilst working out the punishment for a conscript's misdeed.

"It is widespread yes, but perhaps not worthy of extermination. Perhaps the enemy showing his face will allow us to carve out the cancer. No traitor PDF will be spared mercy, only death awaits them. But Exterminatus? It is truly deserved?"

Leopold looked incensed at the Chaplain's words, as if the Salamander was personally attacking him.

"Deserved? Yes. Where the enemy shows itself is only where the enemy is strongest. All over this world my agents have found heretical covens working in smaller cities, mutants hiding in isolated realms. A vast network of treachery and witchcraft is devouring this world alive. It must be destroyed. There is no salvation."

EXTERMINATUS

The Salamander nodded in agreement.

"You are right. I will not stand in the way of your orders." replied the Chaplain.

Leopold was pleased. If only all men so easily saw the wisdom of his ways.

"These traitors will die in the manner their ancient Warmaster killed our people millennia ago. The virus-bombs will see to this filth."

Altarius turned to Leopold, a look of pale regret on his face.

"Inquisitor, I and my Salamander brothers should be mind-scrubbed after this affair.

Our continued value as servants to the Emperor will demand it."

Leopold regarded the words carefully, and inside his mind he felt disdain.

"You are right. Perhaps not all servants of the Emperor, even his holy Space

Marines, can endure the memory of this kind of crusade."

Altarius nodded, then backed away slowly.

The Chaplain had almost made it to the descending stairs when Leopold turned to him.

"One last thing, Chaplain. There will be a slight change to the Salamanders deployment."

Altarius turned to the Inquisitor, and bowed.

"Whatever you require, Inquisitor." replied Altarius.

Leopold flexed the fingers of his gauntlets, a feeling of holy purpose running like fire through his veins. Disgust burned like acid in his mind as a name flooded into it.

"Assign Razael Flamestar to my personal retinue."

Razael Flamestar stood, bolter in hand, on the ruined and debris-strewn corner of a street in Baphomet City. Columns of armed Guardsmen, their vehicles, and several squadrons of autocannon-bearing Sentinels marched past. One Guardsman in each regiment proudly held aloft the banner of the Korrgoth Planetary Defence Force.

The black-winged eagle stared with wrath down from the blazing colours, the symbol of an entire world. On the sides of Hellhounds and Chimeras phrases and words had been etched, various profanities directed at the foe, or prayers to the Emperor for protection.

Razael watched the soldiers pass by, and knew they were heading towards a new offensive. The newly ordained General Leopold had declared a full-on frontal assault against any remaining mutants and traitor PDF. The city would be scoured, the sewers gassed and invaded. Anyone under suspicion of Chaos infection was rounded up and questioned. Hundreds of executions took place, the bodies of the guilty strung up on metal bars outside the city as a grim warning to anyone else thinking of Chaos conversion.

However, Razael himself would not be following them. Command of his Tactical Squads had been given over to Altarius, by personal command of Leopold himself. And by the same orders, Razael had been recruited into Leopold's personal bodyguard.

EXTERMINATUS

The grinding noise of Chimera and Hellhound tracks on the broken streets echoed in Razael's ears, as did the shouts of Guardsmen and their Sergeants. More regiments were passing by now, every so often a Guardsmen would turn to see the lone Salamander standing, then quickly turn his gaze away as his commanding Sergeant barked an order.

Razael wondered why the fearless Inquisitor had recruited him. In trying to decipher the motive, the Salamander never came around to a comforting conclusion. He still remembered the look that burned like blazing fire in the blue eyes of Leopold, a gaze of hate so powerful it turned the man's regal face into a mask of rage.

Or perhaps the regal face was a mask, hiding the ravaging monster beneath? Razael swore at himself for thinking such a blasphemous thought. Of course an Inquisitor was only holy in intent and spirit. It was just his inferior intuition leading him astray, clouding his thoughts.

Or was it?

The Salamander felt a constant confliction. Before, when watching brave columns of Imperial Guardsmen marching by, his heart would swell with pride and righteous zeal. But now, instead, he could think only of these young men dying, their bodies torn apart, their blood staining the already crimson-soaked soil.

He felt despair, and wondered if the Holy Emperor, far away on Terra, really valued the deaths of all these men. Could he even see them? Did he really care? Did he weep for every shattered soldier, honour every lost soul?

Razael didn't know, but it haunted him without mercy.

A Space Marine should have no doubt, no fear, and no compassion in the arena of war. He was a living sword, an angel of death in service against the forces of evil itself.

But the greatest horror of all was Exterminatus. To think, after all the hard-won battles, after all the brave blood shed, the world would be turned to arid death anyway was too much.

And everyone would die. All the mutants and traitors yes, but along with them, the loyal PDF and every man, woman and child. No-one could be trusted to have escaped Chaos infection.

Korrgoth would be turned into one enormous death chamber.

Razael was torn away from his thoughts, something he didn't mind at all, by the buzz of the com-link flicking to life in his helmet.

"Razael Flamestar, report to Imperial HQ. Do not delay, new mission to be launched."

Razael turned away from the snaking line of leaving soldiers, and started the lonely walk back to the Governor's Palace.

As the debris crunched beneath the soles of his ceramite feet, Razael felt something change inside himself. No matter what happened, he would crusade against any attempt at Exterminatus. These people, the ones innocent of any evil, didn't deserve to be killed simply to eradicate the guilty. That would be an evil beyond anything Chaos had done on this world. Razael was a sworn guardian of Man. He could not let this slaughter come to pass, even if it meant rebellion.

EXTERMINATUS

Razael thought he'd feel better after making his decision, a choice that would mean eventually defying an Inquisitor, and becoming a traitor to the cause. He would be hunted by his own comrades wherever he went, a death warrant signed for his life. He would be defamed and reviled by those who once stood beside him. All who were once allies would become enemies.

But faced with standing by and letting a world die, Razael could not indulge in apathy.

A new sense of purpose and a refreshing clarity now dominated the Salamander's Captain.

But as a gust of icy wind swept past him, Razael felt a terrible pall of doom.

How could one Space Marine stop Exterminatus?

Sahjhon, Fallen Angel Chaos Space Marine, stood with dark-hearted pride before the scene that greeted him.

In the dark, tomb-like vault, green lights cast a sickening glow down onto those watching the event taking place. Sahjhon was joined by Kerbole, several other mutants, and a few Officers and Sergeants serving in the traitor PDF. They stood in a small crowd, eyes turned upward.

Floating in the air, caught in the centre of a deep red beam of light, was a distinguished looking Imperial Officer. His well-made uniform and neatly trimmed beard gave him the look of being one of those refined, "sophisticated" types. Sahjhon looked upon the Officer with disgust, his face twisted into a portrait of hatred.

A surge of purple energy writhed down through the beam, and the captured Officer screamed in agony. His fists clenched into balls, his body arched backward and he opened his mouth to howl in pain.

Kerbole laughed, before spurting out a phlegm-laced cough.

"Enjoying yourself, Senior Officer Tiberius?"

Sahjhon's tone was full of dark enjoyment, and the smile that broke the surface of his face added to this truth.

The purple energy had faded away, and Tiberius was still once more.

"You can break my body, but the Emperor has my soul!" shouted back the defiant Imperial, staring down at the mocking crowd beneath him.

Sahjhon raised one power-armoured hand, and clicked his fingers.

"Don't be so sure. You haven't passed on to your Corpse-Lord's realm yet. This energy beam is simply your combined prison and torture chamber."

Tiberius looked on without comment, but fear blazed in his eyes.

A hooded, dog-faced mutant slithered forward, an ornate wooden box in his hands. It was only small, but delicate and eye-catching.

Sahjhon reached out and took the box, the dog-like mutant stepped backwards and bowing deeply as he went.

Kerbole smiled evilly. He knew something special was going to happen.

EXTERMINATUS

The spiteful mutant glared up at the captive Imperial, and hoped it would be painful and horrific.

Sahjhon stepped forward a few paces, wooden box in one mighty hand. The steps of his ceramite boots echoed loudly in the vast vault.

"Death is a wonderful psychic conduit. Kill a billion people at once, and even your beloved Emperor, far away in the cancerous heart of Terra, can hear their mental scream."

Tiberius gritted his teeth. He wanted to say something, insult the Chaos Marine, but the energy of the beam made it hard to even speak.

Sahjhon reverently placed the box on the cold ground.

"I plan to reap a terrible power, a strength fueled by death. And your Imperial comrades will feed it to me."

Sahjhon opened the box. Inside, the size of only a key, was a glittering, silver-snake ornament.

Sahjhon touched it with one finger, and the snake began to float upward. With a sound of splintering and tearing flesh it warped itself into a long, graceful staff.

Sahjhon seized it in both hands, and smiled as a sense of unholy energy coursed through him.

"Time for a test run!" shouted the Fallen Angel.

Thrusting the staff upward, the snake's head opened wide, baring fangs, eyes flaring crimson red.

Tiberius screamed as his flesh withered into ash, bones decayed into threads, and his soul was ripped from his body.

The howling spirit of Tiberius was dragged into the snake's maw, which snapped shut over it.

A red light flashed like the glinting of a jewel within the eyes of Sahjhon, and he turned to his servants.

Like acolytes before a manifested god, they bowed deeply.

Kerbole was particularly impressed.

It had, after all, been painful and horrific.

And with a howl of victory, Sahjhon prepared for the last stage in his plan for Daemonhood.

EXTERMINATUS

Chapter Five Omega Commence

High above the surface of Korrrgoth, floating against the dark cold of space, orbited the Imperial Inquisitorial Cruiser *Praetor*. Pitch black and sleek, the ominous vessel was the personal ship of Inquisitor Leopold, gliding like a dark eagle searching for prey.

Amidst the shining com-screens, babble of technical servitors and the commands of the Navigator, Captain Lycaeus stood ready at the helm of the bridge. Before him, many dozens of the whirring, cybernetic servitors saw to their duties on the vessel. Echoing throughout the bridge was the constant sound of the naval crew, pale-skinned servitors leaned over glowing consoles as they tapped in commands and Imperial Naval Crewman dutifully checking data that came across the glittering screens.

Captain Lycaeus, clean-shaven and bald, with dull grey eyes, cast an exacting glare over the crew from his metal platform in the centre of the bridge.

His keen eyes could see no problems, everything was running to schedule.

The ageing Captain reached down to a small computer installed in the metal podium before him. With a few clicks of the buttons, the hololithic display flared to life.

A greenish glow was cast over Captain Lycaeus's face as he read the orders, sent to him personally by none other than Inquisitor Leopold himself.

The words seemed to be one long, indecipherable piece of babble. But the only words that truly mattered were the last ones. Two little words that would decide the fate of millions.

"Omega Commence" read the little words, and Captain Lycaeus muttered them under his breath. This was the code he had been waiting for.

With the click of a button, the hololith shut down.

Captain Lycaeus held down a large, yellow button that read "Ship Communications", then began to speak. His words echoed throughout the vessel.

"We have received new intelligence. All hands prepare for Omega Commencement. Last Phase shall be enacted in one Imperial hour."

Captain Lycaeus let go of the button, and turned to leave the bridge.

Nobody on this ship, except himself and Leopold, knew that Korrrgoth was inhabited by Imperial citizens. The crew had simply been led to believe that primitive alien life, life likely to be tainted with Chaos, existed down on the surface.

If they did know the truth, perhaps the good and honourable crew of the *Praetor* would not so readily drop the bombs that would kill 170 million human beings.

In the command bunker, on the war-torn surface of Korrrgoth, Inquisitor Leopold shut down the com-link he had established with the *Praetor*. Now the wheels of Exterminatus had been set in motion.

EXTERMINATUS

The small bunker room was his command centre. It held nothing save a control console and a metal table surrounded by a dozen chairs. Maps of the surface of Korrgoth hung on the walls, and a cylinder shaped light on the ceiling cast a bright glow down upon the room.

Leopold knew that in exactly one hour, the virus-bombs would descend on Korrgoth. All life, without exception, would be rendered down into a lifeless, sludge-like biomass. The plants and trees would shrivel up and slough away. The oceans would dry up, aquatic life disintegrating along with them. Animals keel over in death spasms and melt away. And all humans, mutants and traitor scum would turn to ooze and ashes and die utterly.

The world would be left an arid, dead addition to the galaxy. No life would ever return to the gutted husk.

But Chaos would be utterly cleansed. The unclean would be vanquished. Heresy would not take root in this planet.

And that was all that Inquisitor Leopold cared about.

In what passed for his heart, no pity or sadness for the people of Korrgoth was allowed. Indeed, he would chastise himself for any such thoughts.

After all, had not these scum and heretics sold themselves to Chaos? Who knows how many of them truly had betrayed the Emperor, and prayed nightly to the Ruinous Powers. Whole segments of their society had gone over to corruption. Where one traitor was revealed, a thousand hid within the shadows.

Where one traitor was revealed, a thousand hid within the shadows.

Or so Inquisitor Leopold thought.

No, he would not cry for the doomed to be dead.

If he had the chance, he would spit on their graves.

Leopold turned away from the computer screen and took a seat at the command table. Soon, the members of his personal retinue would arrive, and he would inform them of the coming mission.

There was only an hour left before Korrgoth died.

But it was enough time for Inquisitor Leopold.

Minutes later, the door to the room slid open silently, and his retinue arrived. There was Damocles, a power-fist armed Assault Marine. Joining him were two gun-servitors, one baring a heavy bolter, the other a mighty plasma cannon.

Following him was the grizzled Sergeant Rowland. The marksman Guardsman had performed well during the Defiler conflict, so Leopold recruited him into his bodyguard. The scruffy, withered soldier carried a sniper rifle over his shoulder on a strap.

Last to enter was Razael Flamestar, tall and strong Salamander Captain.

At the sight of him, Leopold's blood turned to raging fire. But the anger did not break the surface of his being. It stayed smothered, ready to be unleashed when the time was right.

The gun-servitors clumped over to stand in the corner, half-mechanical faces gazing around absently. Rowland, Razael and Damocles took seats at the command table, Leopold observing them silently.

EXTERMINATUS

In Rowland, he saw nothing but the mental death that common Guardsmen too long in the field were devoured by. Seeing his comrades torn to pieces, burned, vaporised, clubbed to death, had turned the once proud Sergeant Rowland into the walking dead.

There would be no problems from the Sergeant. He was just a man, a commoner, a single gun serving in the endless machine that was the Imperial Guard.

In Damocles, Leopold saw strength of conviction and unstoppable battle-prowess. He was a sturdy, reliable battle-brother, someone who could be depended on to do his duty and serve the Emperor without question. There would be no problems from him.

But Razel Flamestar, the Salamander Captain, would be a problem. Doubt, compassion, mercy and fear beat within the Marine's heart. These were traits without use, petty things that needed to be vanquished and replaced with something stronger.

Within this weakness, Leopold knew that Chaos could flourish. The taint would whisper to the seemingly humane Salamander, and turn him into a ravening monster.

Had the foul Razel already sold his soul to darkness? Was he plotting treachery even now, murder and mayhem dancing in his mind?

It wouldn't matter.

Because something danced in Leopold's mind, something that would make sure Razel Flamestar never left Korrgoth alive.

"Welcome, comrades." said Leopold with a nod of his head. The assembled group nodded in greeting, except for Rowland, who simply stared into space like a corpse. "I have called you all here because we must embark on a sacred mission. We will tear the crooked heart from the ribcage of this treachery. I believe I have found the source of evil here."

Razel felt hope swell up within him. For a few moments he cherished the feeling, thinking that if simply the mastermind of Chaos here was killed, all could go on living without harm, and peace would return.

The feeling died moments later. The order of Exterminatus had been given. Only the Salamanders stationed on Korrgoth and the captain of the *Praetor* were aware of this. And of course the vicious Inquisitor Leopold, mastermind of it all.

Leopold clicked a button on the table, and a hololith beamed upward from the control console. It showed a run-down section of Baphomet City, rubble and debris scattered around the scene. It was an abandoned Munitions Factory, surrounded by a rusted razor-wire fence. And it was within Baphomet City.

"Whoever is co-ordinating these Chaos attacks is a powerful psyker. He cannot use normal means of communication, as our skilled servitors and specialists would inevitably intercept these messages and learn vital intelligence from them. Instead, this Chaos insurgent sends out psychic pulses to other rebel psykers, pulses that act as commands, which are relayed onto others."

The retinue took the information in, Leopold gesturing with one hand as he continued on.

EXTERMINATUS

"This psychic network leaves a trace, a residual Warp echo. Librarians of the Salamanders Marines, and sanctioned psykers from within local PDF ranks, have managed to piece together this network."

Leopold clicked another button, and the hololith changed to show a world map of Korrrgoth. Like the branches of a sickly tree the psychic network could be seen reaching out all over the world.

Razael felt despair. This was all the evidence the Inquisitor needed to damn the entire populace of Korrrgoth.

Leopold turned to his comrades, and locked eyes with Razael.

"Clearly one can see the world-wide taint of Chaos. This place is deeply infected."

The Salamander Captain looked away.

Deep inside, the remorseless Inquisitor Leopold felt a surge of enjoyment at seeing the fool Razael so badly harmed by this news.

Damocles pointed to the hololithic map, and spoke.

"Am I right, or does this network have a central command?"

Leopold smiled, and nodded.

"Indeed. The strongest, most powerful psychic pulses are appearing, always, at only one place."

The hololith changed to show the Munitions Factory within Baphomet City.

"So, the mastermind lairs within the Factory. Most studious and efficient conduct, good Inquisitor." said Damocles, his power-fist flexing.

Leopold clicked another button, and the hololith vanished.

"In one hour, this world will turn to roiling sludge. But before it does, we will descend on this arch-heretic, and interrogate him. We must learn if he has agents on other worlds. And we must, with the blessing of the Emperor, do Holy Justice upon him."

Leopold rose from his seat, as did the others sitting around the command table.

"We will leave in five minutes. Gather all your equipment. No doubt this Chaos fiend will be well prepared for an attack on his compound. We will not reach him without a struggle."

Damocles raised his power-fist, which crackled slightly as the disruption field flickered.

"The Hand of Death will reap the Emperor's work." promised Damocles, before he turned to leave.

Rowland shuffled out of the room, a haze in his haunted eyes. The gun-servitors followed him, muttering to one-another about collecting more power cells and munitions for their weaponry.

Razael and Leopold were left standing in the silent room alone, gazing at one another. Somehow, some way, the Inquisitor had sensed the change within Razael, and the Salamander knew it. That look of volcanic rage seared itself into the Inquisitor's eyes now, like the maws of dragons ready to bathe him in flame.

Though neither of them knew it, each was thinking the same thought.

How best can I kill this man?

EXTERMINATUS

Razael Flamestar quickly gathered some extra clips for his bolter, and several more frag and krak grenades, along with a pair of melta bombs, and loaded them into a small steel container. It would be loaded into the Inquisitor's Rhino, which would hurry them off to the Munitions Factory.

The armoury within the Command HQ was well stocked, and Razael had many weapons to choose from.

Razael took a missile launcher off the wall, and tested its weight in his hands. It seemed lighter than he remembered. Many years had passed since his days training to become a Marine. Such a mighty weapon was quite intimidating to him then. He took several missiles from a huge explosives trunk, and made last checks on them to make sure they were stable and ready for use.

Such a weapon was useful in many situations, and the Salamander Captain would take one with him.

The armoury was silent, save his own movements, and Razael sat on a bench. He took a small metal container from beneath the bench, and held it in his power-armoured hands. Within it was the tool he would use to thwart Exterminatus.

Now, all that was left was to confront, and vanquish, the fanatical Inquisitor Leopold.

The prospect made Razael's insides turn into jagged ice. He had seen the wrath of the mighty Inquisitor. When such power allied itself with him, it was frightening yes, but also inspiring. One felt in secure hands when Leopold battled for you. But to have that wrath turned against you, the holy sword inverted and aimed to pierce your own heart, was a thing of pure terror.

Razael steeled his spirit, resolute to do everything he could to halt Exterminatus. He was prepared to die. It was most likely he would.

But he had to try.

Razael was disturbed from his thoughts as the armoury door slid open. A man entered the room, dressed in the flak armour and uniform of an Imperial Guard Sergeant. His face was scruffy and his eyes red. He looked like a sheet of withered skin, stretched tight over to large a surface.

Sergeant Rowland stepped into the armoury in silence, only the echo of his Imperium issue boots giving away his presence.

The veteran looked over a few boxes of sniper rifle ammunition, shaking each one to make sure it jingled nicely, to make sure it was full of precious bullets.

Razael slipped the metal container he was holding into the cargo box along with his ammo. It would be safely carried onto the Rhino, Leopold would never notice a thing.

Rowland turned around to face the Salamander, the comparatively small Sergeant holding one box of ammo in his hand, and two others tucked under his arm.

"Mind if I add these to that cargo crate?"

Rowland's voice was dry and lifeless.

Razael stepped aside and gestured towards the box with one hand.

"Go ahead." he said, trying to sound calm and officious.

Rowland strode over and dropped the three boxes inside. They clanged loudly.

EXTERMINATUS

The Sergeant looked over the missile launcher, then turned to Razael.

"Taking that one with us?" asked Rowland, still looking over the launcher.

"Indeed. Such a weapon is never useless."

Rowland nodded slightly in agreement.

He couldn't argue with that. He'd seen what a well-aimed missile could do. His mind began to churn like a dangerous river, flooded him with memories he wished would stay buried deep where he had left them.

Junior Officer Bertrand and his squad of Conscripts advanced on the enemy position, moving low and silent. The air was thick like a blanket, unnaturally heavy. It was like a noose tugging around the neck, with all the same feelings of panic and dread.

Rowland was there, laspistol and chainsword ready, his own soldiers close behind him. The treacherous PDF inside the building ahead would soon be taken by surprise, easily crushed. Then everyone could go back to safety for another day, another day of being alive.

Then a missile screamed forward from a camouflaged position, so damn well hidden it was all but invisible. The missile landed true, and everything turned to fire, heat, ash and screaming. Everyone choked on dust and smoke for a few moments, before it cleared and a slaughtered hell revealed itself. Rowland was down, shrapnel in his hip. Guardsman Daeron lay a few feet beside him in pieces, all bloody and raw.

Staff Sergeant Corland lay dead, legs gone beneath the knees. Half his face was seared flesh, half his mouth torn away, half his teeth grinning at him in death, no flesh or gums to hide them...

Rowland came screaming back to reality, curled up on the floor, lashing out at phantoms that tortured him alone. Razael reached down and seized the struggling man, hefting him up to his feet.

Rowland recovered himself, swallowing hard as he noticed a cold sweat had gathered on his face.

"What was it? A psychic attack? Some Chaos sorcery?"

Rowland shook his head.

"If only it was that fleeting." replied Rowland, wiping his forehead.

Razael understood the man's pain then as he spoke, the Salamander had seen it before in Guardsmen on other worlds. The madness of battle living on to torment the living.

Razael picked up the Sergeant's sniper rifle, dropped as he thrashed, and handed it to Rowland. The Sergeant slung it over his shoulder.

It was then Razael realised what it would mean to the Sergeant if Korrgoth died. It would mean all the soldier's blood and sweat was for nothing. His comrades in arms would have died their painful, violent deaths, and nothing good would come from it. They truly would become faceless, nameless casualties.

Everything the Sergeant, and all warriors of the Korrgoth PDF fought for would turn to ash.

And what if Razael told the people of Korrgoth what was coming? He would be declared a maniac and heretic, and promptly executed by his fellows. There was no room for reason or diplomacy.

Only through the art of war could Exterminatus be slain.

Razael turned to Rowland, a decision having been made in his mind. For the conflict to come, the Salamander would need every ally he could gather.

EXTERMINATUS

"You must know something, Sergeant Rowland. I believe destiny has linked our paths together. Today, we must save a world from dying."

Rowland seemed to flare with a life then, only brief, but life nonetheless.

"I'm listening." was his reply. In his voice was a feeling of hope, almost too quiet to be alive, but hope nonetheless.

Final Chapter Fate Decided

The Abandoned Sector of Baphomet City was a blasted landscape of ruined urban war. All the once tall and glittering structures of the sector had been twisted into burnt out wrecks, small fires still burning amongst the debris. No life stirred amongst the dusty rubble, and only the sound of a single Rhino APC could be heard, moving solemnly through the shattered holocaust. Charred skeletons and destroyed vehicles choked the ruins, a graveyard of men and machines.

The throaty growl of the Imperial engine, and the grinding of the adamantium tracks, heralded the vehicle's presence as it drove through the cold streets. Painted pure black, and adorned in purity seals and many religious scrolls and chains, the Inquisitorial Rhino struck a path amongst the rubble, easily surging over any debris that had fallen across the crater-pocked roads.

Within the vehicle it was dark, illuminated only by the dim glow of the internal lights, and the cast-off glare from the many computer screens. Several Salamander Space Marines crewed the vehicle, performing the necessary tasks to keep the Rhino moving.

In the passenger bay, a group of grim warriors waited in silence. Leopold, Razael, Damocles and Rowland sat calmly on the benches, faces betraying no emotion. Two gun-servitors stood motionless against the disembarking ramp, the ramp itself serving as a sturdy door for the rear of the Rhino. When the time came to disembark, the ramp would descend from its vertical position, and the deadly passengers would charge out into the battlefield, ready for whatever was waiting. Rowland was the first to speak as the shaking of the moving Rhino set everyone swaying slightly.

"Inquisitor Leopold, why are we attacking this compound by ourselves? Surely a good battalion or two of PDF wouldn't hurt. Emperor knows I'd feel safer with some more troops on our side."

Leopold regarded these words as if he had been asked a dumb question by a child. The Inquisitor seemed to respond only to harshly chastise the foolish commoner for even questioning his tactics.

"Because what is left of the PDF has been deployed to scour the sewers, and draw away the attention of the enemy. A single vehicle such as ours, carrying a small team of elite soldiers such as ourselves, has the best chance to penetrate the compound and seize the Chaos mastermind."

Rowland wished to ask more questions, but held his tongue. It was clear the Inquisitor didn't want to hear his voice.

Besides, by now, Rowland couldn't care less about the Inquisitor and his brilliant plans.

Damocles was charging his power-fist, muttering battle-prayers under his breath. Once he was done, he drew his bolt pistol with his left hand, and prayed the Emperor would bless the holy rounds it would dispense.

Razael was silent. Many thoughts were rushing through his head.

EXTERMINATUS

At this hour, an hour of dawning apocalypse, much was resting on his shoulders. He felt the burden of 170 million souls weighing down on him, such a momentous responsibility threatened to break his resolve, and set him fleeing into the arms of cowardice and apathy.

It would be easier to join his fellows and watch Korrgoth die.

Razael checked his bolter clip was full, then jammed it into the gun.

But today, the easy path would not be his.

The Salamander driving the Rhino turned around in his seat, and spoke to Leopold. "Inquisitor Leopold, the Munitions Factory is just ahead. We should be there in under two minutes."

Leopold nodded in response, and the Salamander driver turned back to his duties at the wheel.

Rowland slung his sniper rifle off his back, and did one last weapons check.

Razael looked up from the last minute exam of his weapon, and locked eyes with Leopold.

"What reports do we have of enemy strength here?" asked the Salamander Captain, trying to keep a steady and strong tone.

"There are several dozen mutants seen entering and exiting the compound on a regular basis, along with a regiment of Traitor PDF. Beyond that, everything else will be a surprise."

Rowland adjusted the sight of his rifle, then turned to Leopold.

"You think we can defeat dozens of mutants, an entire Traitor PDF regiment and whatever else awaits us?"

The Inquisitor drew his pair of power swords, the blades crackling with disruptive force.

"Of course, Sergeant. We have the Emperor on our side. Nothing can stand in our way."

Razael did not fail to notice the Inquisitor's attention turn to him as he finished speaking, nor that terrible look of rage that flared in his eyes.

As an icy wind blown down from the polar mountains of the north chilled the city, the Rhino came to a slow stop at the rusted razor-wire gate of the Munitions Factory. Along the way, they had not encountered any form of resistance. No minefields, no ambushing mutants, no snipers, nothing at all.

Only the whistling of the wind greeted them as the Rhino drove into the blasted courtyard of the factory, broken heaps of barrels, crates and factory machines littering the scene.

Slowly, as quietly as possible, the disembarking ramp on the rear of the Rhino came down. Leopold and his retinue emerged from the APC, the glare of afternoon sunlight hidden above by a thick blanket of looming storm-clouds.

The gun-servitors surveyed the scene, heavy bolter and plasma cannon primed and ready. Rowland was between them, sniper rifle in hand, crouched down and alert.

EXTERMINATUS

Damocles was scanning the rubble, bolt pistol ready to fire.

Razael and Leopold stood together, their gazes focused on the main factory itself, some hundred feet away. The gigantic structure loomed above them, decrepit and dead, like the rotted ribcage of some ancient, metal fiend.

Leopold turned to the Rhino, and spoke.

“Take the Rhino a short distance from here and await our return.”

The driver gestured in response, then clicked a button to raise the disembarking ramp.

With an echoing clank it sealed shut as it closed, and the engine roared back to life.

The plasma cannon armed gun-servitor turned to Leopold and began to speak quickly.

“There is a notable seismic disturbance bearing on our...”

From the concrete of the ground beneath the Rhino a dozen long, barbed tentacles burst forth. A spray of cement chunks and grit leapt into the air alongside them, a cloud of dust billowing outward.

Leopold and Damocles leapt backwards, Rowland and Razael quickly joining them.

The Rhino tried to reverse, but the tentacles moved too fast.

The slimy tendrils came crashing down on the vehicle, caving in the adamantium armour and beginning to depress the entire chassis.

The ground cracked and heaved as the tentacles pressed down on the rapidly crushing Rhino, the metal screeching loudly as it was rent asunder.

“Engage the enemy!” shouted Leopold, power swords raised.

The gun-servitors opened fire, heavy bolter rounds tearing two tentacles into greasy chunks as spent shells littered the floor. Everyone felt a surge of heat as the plasma cannon servitor fired its terrible weapon, blasting a tentacle into two sizzled halves.

Damocles fired rounds from his bolt pistol as he charged, power-fist ready.

Razael unleashed a salvo at the thrashing tendrils, riddling it but failing to tear it apart.

The Rhino Salamander crew came staggering out the back of the vehicle, one holding the cargo crate Razael had loaded into the APC. The three Space Marines retreated to stand beside their comrades, who blazed away with bolter and plasma fire.

Leopold charged into the fray, hacking apart one tentacle with his swords, dividing the slithering appendage into several pieces. Damocles punched an enormous hole in another, a spray of gore splattering over his green armour.

With a titanic roar the concrete ground tore open, and a lumbering, armadillo-like Chaos Spawn climbed to the surface. Its head was a distorted combination of human and daemon, its feet viciously clawed, and now badly damaged tentacles flailing above its body.

“Send it back to the Warp!” howled Leopold.

A tentacle came thrashing down, crushing the plasma cannon armed gun-servitor into the ground. A greasy mix of blood and mechanical fluids pooled around the dead servant, eyes now even more lifeless than before.

EXTERMINATUS

Razael, Rowland, the Salamander crew and the heavy bolter servitor opened fire on the roaring fiend, whilst Leopold and Damocles thundered towards it, weapons flaring with disruptive energy.

The hail of rounds tore into the Chaos Spawn's body, chunks of flesh and carapace spattering off as the bullets tore it apart.

But still it stood, twisted maw open in a bellow.

Damocles stepped forward, and saw a clawed paw coming for him. With a roar the Salamander Assault Marine lashed out with his power-fist, mangling the paw and snapping off several talons.

Leopold ducked down low to avoid a swinging tendril, then thrust both swords at the Spawn's snarling face. But the horror was too fast, and jumped back, evading the Inquisitor.

Rowland crouched down, and took up aim with his sniper rifle.

The haunted Sergeant felt the world around him slow to a crawl. All his vision, save the Chaos Spawn he targeted, turned grey and hazy. It often happened in a tense moment, when lives were at stake, when one bullet could mean the difference between victory or defeat.

The Spawn reared up, claws ready to slash and tear.

The air crackled sharply as the sniper rifle fired, and the bullet streaked ahead faster than sound.

A gout of blood and shattered scale spat out from between the eyes of the Chaos Spawn, which began to stagger and sway.

Leopold drove forward, thrusting his swords into the Chaos Spawn's neck and head. Damocles charged, waiting for Leopold to rip his swords free and step back. Leaping through the air, power-fist trailing disruptive energy, Damocles crushed the head of the Chaos Spawn entire, driving the bloodied remnants into the concrete with a vengeful roar.

The great beast was dead.

But the battle was far from over.

Large piles of scrap and rusted metal began to shake. Growing slowly, but audible, were strange sounds that issued forth from mutated throats.

The Imperial warriors gathered together into a tight formation, watching as more and more places once thought empty of life began to move and quiver.

"More of them?" asked Rowland, glancing around.

"There is always more of them." replied Leopold.

Scrap and torn debris was cast aside as a host of lesser, warped things emerged from their hiding places. Before, whilst the lumbering Spawn lived, they were too afraid to show themselves.

But now, it was their turn to taste flesh.

All were twisted, nature-defying horrors. Some were hounds with human feet and faces, others lizards with wretched wings and hairy heads. Some stood tall like humans, but their forms were tortured with cruel mutations and warpings.

Hundreds emerged, gathering makeshift weapons, maws drooling in anticipation of the meal to come, hooves and taloned feet scraping on the concrete ground.

EXTERMINATUS

"Death to the Enemy!" roared Leopold, and like a man without the thinnest shred of sanity he charged forward.

"Praise the Emperor!" shouted Damocles, joining the Inquisitor.

The Salamander crew and Rowland began tossing fragmentation grenades. The servitor turned to target a rapidly approaching, goat-like mutant with three draconic heads.

A hail of heavy bolter fire tore the beast apart, and the servitor turned the salvo to strike down three more mutated horrors that surged forward.

Razael leapt up to stand atop the dead Chaos Spawn, and began firing single shots in precise and lightning fast moves. Each bullet found the brain or skull of a mutant, and each bullet was a kill-shot.

Leopold and Damocles were charged by dozens of fiends, and disappeared amongst a roiling sea of twisted flesh and snapping barbs.

A spider-like mutant leapt from debris close-by, seizing the heavy bolter servitor and dragging it down into a dark and deep hole. Blood and sparks spattered out as the spider-mutant began to kill and feed, joyous at consuming a fresh meal.

Two of the Salamander crewmen stood side-by-side, bolters firing, mutants cut down around them. The third had climbed atop the Chaos Spawn and joined Razael, firing down into the enemy crowd where one simply could not fail to hit something. Rowland had withdrawn some distance from the others, pursued by a mangy gang of vicious, stooped over mutants. Weaving through rubble and twisted metal he found his way into a smaller munitions storehouse, and slammed the door shut behind himself, turning the lock.

He moved back and took cover behind a broken bookshelf, sniper rifle trained on the door.

Had he not been as experienced and alert as he was, he never would have heard the amphibious, rat-faced mutants that crept behind him, emerging from a metal locker. Quickly the Sergeant turned around, and fired his sniper rifle.

The rat-thing staggered backwards with a scream, a gaping hole torn in it's chest. The storeroom door smashed open, and the seven mutants rushed in.

Rowland tossed his grenade bandoleer at them, all the grenades pins having been pulled.

The explosion tore the front of the storeroom open, sending a shower of metal and torn flesh scattering outwards. Rowland was knocked off his feet, his face and left shoulder grazed badly by a chunk of spinning metal cast off from the grenade blast. Outside, the battle raged on.

Leopold and Damocles had charged themselves into a drawn-out, vicious fight of attrition. The two Imperial warriors seemed to be growing tired, their armour covered in cuts and blood, and torn in little places where mutants had found flesh and caused a wound.

But around them were dozens of the dead, crushed and hacked, and the number of those who joined the lifeless was growing.

Two of the Salamanders were gone. On the ground and overwhelmed, they had been brought down and stabbed, hacked and bitten by a dozen hungry mutants.

EXTERMINATUS

Within moments of their deaths they were being torn asunder, each mutants taking a piece of flesh to consume, then scuttling off to some distant hiding place to feed. Whilst the sole-surviving Rhino crewman fired rounds into the mutants, Razael cracked open the ceramite cargo box.

Quickly, faster than he thought he could, Razael raised the missile launcher. The loud hiss of the missile firing tore across the area, and the frag warhead sped forward. The impact was terrible, and the blast, spread over the tightly-packed crowd of warp-spawned mutants, was devastating.

Dozens were killed in the blast, and finally the numbers began to recede. Such an overwhelming weapon of death struck a barb of fear into the craven hearts of the mutants. A second missile, just as deadly, sent them into a rout.

Within moments the scene was clear of everything save the victorious Imperials and the torn apart dead.

Rowland staggered from the storeroom, ducking past fires burning amongst the twisted metal.

Leopold and Damocles emerged from their slaughterhouse-like combat, each looking the butcher they were. Damocles was clearly wounded, favouring his right leg badly. Leopold seemed drained, but something beyond energy drove the Inquisitor on.

"We must progress into the factory." said Leopold dryly.

The Salamander Rhino crewman took the com-link radio off his utility belt, and began to receive an Imperial message. He listened to it closely, then relayed the communication to his comrades.

"I just received an update from the offensive against the mutant army. Progress has been good, but one sector fared badly and was viciously ambushed. We suffered many casualties. The leader of that Imperial force, Chaplain Altarius, is missing in action. They believe he has been captured."

Razael's heart sank. He had known the Chaplain for many years. He respected the devout Marine, who had saved his own life on more than one occasion. The thought that he had been captured, and was being held, tortured and taunted by the enemy, drove a lance of despair into Razael's soul.

Leopold cared not. To him, it was acceptable loss in the wider war.

Leopold had not the slightest care for these things, death and mayhem, the burning of worlds and the shattering of lives. But he was no thoughtless killer, no unintelligent brute that achieved his goals with might alone.

He was cunning.

Few fathomed the difference between empathy and understanding. Leopold knew what suffering would be caused by his orders, what lives would be ended through Exterminatus. He could hear the pained screams of the innocent people as they died, could see their faces twisted into their last death-mask, and without a doubt he comprehended their incredible suffering. He had no illusions this would be anything but agonising torture for all those devoured during Exterminatus.

He knew what would happen, knew the horror of it.

EXTERMINATUS

But he had no empathy for those who died and suffered. That he could understand the suffering of others, perceive their thoughts and feelings, yet carry out his gruesome work was the most terrible weapon he could ever wield.

Few souls possessed this weapon, understanding without empathy, but those that did were horrendous indeed.

Leopold had used this very weapon for decades to out-wit and vanquish his enemy. He could see their moves before they happened, read their souls and emotions like an open book, and remorselessly crushed them.

As the bloodied group began to move towards the Munitions Factory, Leopold cast a glance over to Razael Flamestar.

The disruptive fields of his power swords crackled.

Soon, he would be rid of the Salamander.

And yet another great victory would be recorded beside the name of Leopold, Inquisitor and Holy Servant of The Emperor of Mankind.

The wind had died away to little more than a light breeze as the group approached the Munitions Factory. Nobody knew what was waiting beyond the immense double-doors that served as the entrance. But, judging by what had already confronted them, they would surely not receive a warm welcome.

Leopold halted the group with one raised hand, and everyone came to a sudden stop.

The air around them sung with a silent power, a tangible feeling that raced through the body like alien blood invading the veins.

Leopold gathered his thoughts, taken off-guard by the sheer power of whatever was waiting inside. The psychic energy here was incredible.

“What is it?” asked Rowland. Razael loaded a new clip into his bolter, Damocles fitting some new rounds into his gore-slicked bolt pistol.

“No mercy for the enemy beyond these doors. There is no doubt, none at all now, that the Chaos mastermind waits for us.”

Rowland’s nerves were already on a razor’s-edge. Leopold’s dire warning didn’t make him feel any better.

The group moved forward as one, ready for anything.

When they came to be ten paces from the entrance, the rusted metal of the doors underwent a terrible change. The material itself began to writhe and slither like the skin of some slimy beast. Fat, blood-choked veins rose to the surface of the metal, and a viscous oil began to drip from the doors.

With a sound like a dead gale blasting through a tomb, the doors swung open.

Before the group was a vast, open chamber, a grand chapel of evil.

The walls, floor and roof had mutated themselves into a pitch-black marble with shining green veins. Pillars soared up to support the roof, spines and barbs writhing on the columns like millions of little fingers.

EXTERMINATUS

Glazed windows decorated with scenes of Chaos sacrifice and carnage lined the upper reaches of the walls. The ceiling, vaulted and immense, was covered in a tapestry of dead flesh, bones, limbs and flayed skin sowed together into one massive visage of horror.

Against the northern wall of the Chaos Chapel rose a massive dais thirty feet tall. The steps leading up to it pulsed with a greenish energy, the veins carrying a current of warp essence around the building.

The dais itself flared every few moments with bright green energy, the great beating heart of Chaos upon the world of Korrgoth, spreading it's corrupting poison all over the globe.

A tall piece of metal, branched and twisted like a metallic tree, rose from the centre of the dais.

Tied to it with razor-wire, clad in battle-scarred armour and looking to be on the very edge of death, was Chaplain Altarius.

Standing at the top of the dais, snake-like staff in hand, was the Fallen Angel Sahjhon.

With red eyes like hot coals he gazed upon the Imperial group that entered his sanctuary.

"Welcome to my home." he said, voice carried as a mighty echo around the chapel. Leopold, Razael, Damocles and Rowland advanced into the chapel, weapons raised. The Rhino Salamander crewman was close beside them.

Leopold rose one power-sword to point directly at Sahjhon, and the Inquisitor's voice became like avenging thunder.

"We have come to do justice upon you, Chaos filth. Your taint has cost the Imperium a great deal."

Sahjhon began to descend down the dais, staff in hand. He laughed, a rasping hiss full of malice.

"Don't pretend to care for the dead, Inquisitor. I know your kind. You are a shoe-licking servant of the Corpse-God, a vapid fanatic."

Leopold growled quietly to himself, grip tightening on his power-swords.

"And you are simply a traitor."

Sahjhon laughed again, and stopped halfway down the dais. He leaned on the staff he held, and smiled, exposing his wolf-like fangs.

"I hold the Staff of Bleak Valhalla. Once I'm done, you shall have no eternal piece with your false Emperor. With every death I cause, my power grows! Your souls will be mine!"

A howl tore across the chapel as Sahjhon raised the staff, snake-jaws opening in an instant.

A writhing beam of black energy shot forward and seized the Rhino Salamander crewman. His body twitched and spasmed, before shrivelling to a skeleton in seconds then turning to a cloud of thick dust.

Sahjhon's eyes flared red as another soul was enslaved within his staff.

"Kill him!" shouted Leopold, who began charging towards the dais.

Damocles followed close behind him, bolt pistol raised and firing.

EXTERMINATUS

Razael advanced a little more cautiously, letting a salvo of bolter rounds fly from his gun. Rowland crouched down and aimed his sniper rifle.

Sahjhon span the staff in front of himself, a wavering field of red energy forming. The bullets that sped towards him were torn apart and shattered on the energy field, harmlessly nullified.

Damocles cast aside his bolt pistol, and raised his power-fist.

Leopold was getting closer, but he still had a large expanse of ground to cover before he reached the Fallen Angel.

Razael loaded a new clip into his bolter, and aimed at Sahjhon.

A round fired from Rowland's sniper rifle, but the Fallen Angel easily deflected it with a mocking smile.

Sahjhon jammed the staff end into the dais, and thrust one hand out. A shockwave of energy knocked Leopold and Damocles over, cracking the earth, which spat out a spray of greenish blood.

"Enough with you, craven sniper!" howled Sahjhon. He pointed the staff at Rowland, the snake-jaws opening wide.

Rowland threw himself aside, the black beam tearing into the chapel wall and blasting it apart. The Sergeant fell badly, his sniper rifle snapping in two as he landed, and he was momentarily stunned as his head smacked hard into the base of a pillar.

Razael fired again, but the fast-moving Sahjhon deflected his rounds. The Salamander Captain stepped to the side and took cover behind a pillar, gathering his thoughts on what to do next.

Leopold and Damocles surged to their feet and charged once more, much closer now. They were only seconds away, but the Fallen Angel who faced them seemed unconcerned.

A hunched over figure wreathed in a pitch-black cloak darted from behind a pillar. In one warty hand it clutched a power-knife, and moved with speed unnatural for such a twisted creature.

Damocles howled as Kerbole ran behind him and slashed the power-knife across the back of his legs. Tendons and muscles were severed, sparks spat from the armour and the raging Assault Marine collapsed to the ground.

Leopold carried on without missing a step, rolling forward to dodge a blast of black energy from Sahjhon's staff.

Rowland had recovered, and was now moving towards the dais, laspistol in hand.

He fired a few shots at the cloaked Kerbole, but the scuttling mutant was too fast.

Razael emerged, bolter re-loaded, and fired on Kerbole.

Again, Kerbole evaded the shots, ducking behind a pillar that splattered blood and gore as the rounds tore into it.

Leopold engaged Sahjhon, the pair duelling on the marble dais. Sahjhon was extremely well-skilled in using the staff in its lesser function as a power weapon. Sparks and powerful energy flew as the disruptive fields of the weapons ground against each other.

Kerbole moved again, darting past Damocles, who rolled over as the mutant charged.

EXTERMINATUS

Damocles was powerful, but his large gauntlet-weapon made his reactions much slower than the vile mutant.

Kerbole slashed the power-knife down and hard, decapitating Damocles with a spurt of blood.

The mutant ran to duck behind a pillar, but was surprised when he saw Sergeant Rowland waiting for him in the shadows.

Rowland seized Kerbole by the neck and used the mutant's momentum against him, slammed the wretched creature's head into a pillar.

The spray of gore and skull-fragments heralded the death of Kerbole.

"That's how we do it in the Korrgoth PDF, scum!" spat Rowland, throwing the corpse aside.

Sahjhon pushed Leopold back with a sturdy kick to the centre of his chest, sending the Inquisitor sprawling down the dais. One power-sword flew from his hand and stuck fast in the ground.

With a glare of wrath in his eyes the Fallen Angel raised his staff and unleashed a blast of dark, soul-sucking energy at Rowland.

The Sergeant was quick enough to leap aside, and landed rolling.

Rowland staggered to his feet, then looked down in shock to see a jagged piece of metal stuck in chest. Blood pumped from the deep wound.

"Damn shrapnel." spluttered Rowland, falling to his knees.

Razael fired on Sahjhon, but the Fallen Angel jumped backwards, then created a shield of energy to deflect the bolter fire.

Leopold jumped to his feet and began charging back up the dais, armed with only one power-sword.

Razael dropped his bolter, knowing the weapon was useless against Sahjhon. He picked up the Inquisitor's dropped second sword, and started towards the dais.

Sergeant Rowland fell backwards, gaze now fixed on the warping ceiling above.

All pain had left his mortal wound. A strange feeling of being without weight coursed through his body. All sound drowned away into nothing.

Around him, the world turned grey.

Emerging from the air, walking towards him, was Rowland's dead PDF comrades.

All the conscripts he had commanded, all the loyal troops who he had led into battle, and seen die horrible deaths, were standing around him now.

But their bodies were whole and unmarked, their skin radiant, and they had a look of peace on their faces.

One conscript stepped forward, and reached out towards Rowland with one hand.

Sergeant Rowland's last act was to reach out to touch the spectre only he could see.

A moment later, life left the damaged body of Sergeant Rowland.

At last, his torment was over.

Razael saw the brave Sergeant die, saw him reaching out to touch something nobody else could see. The Salamander Captain felt a surge of fury course through his veins.

Too many good people had died. Death had feasted like a glutton on Korrgoth.

EXTERMINATUS

Razael Flamestar needed to shed only a little more blood, and the old reaper would be sent flying back to his crypts beyond the stars.

Exterminatus could be aborted.

Only ten minutes were left.

The Salamander needed to hurry.

“Since you shall provide us with no information, I pronounce the sentence of death upon you, traitor!” shouted Leopold, charging forward.

Sahjhon was full of smiling confidence, until something he did not foresee surged through his body.

The power of the Staff of Bleak Valhalla abandoned him. All the rage, wrath and psychic might he commanded was torn from his body, and sent howling back into the staff.

The Fallen Angel gasped a deep breath as the air began to flee his lungs.

What was happening? How could the staff betray him like this?

Slowly and weakly he leaned back to evade the Inquisitor that now bore down upon him. With the swing of a fist, Leopold broke Sahjhon’s right wrist.

The staff tumbled from his shattered grasp, clattering down the dais.

“To the Warp with you!” howled Leopold.

Razael charged up the stairs, sword at the ready.

Sahjhon wondered in his mind, despaired in his mind, why the Dark Gods had abandoned him to death only minutes before his time of glory.

Leopold and Razael each drove a power-sword into his chest, massive damage tearing through him.

Leopold twisted the blade and wrenched it to the side, a spray of blood and organs leaving as the blade exited.

Razael drew the blade free, then swept the blade down low across Sahjhon’s right leg.

The limb severed cleanly, and the Fallen Angel toppled to the ground.

Sahjhon rolled down to the base of the dais, blood on his lips.

A little spurt of blood gushed up from his mouth, and a moment later, the Fallen Angel was dead.

Leopold moved down the dais, then kicked Sahjhon’s body.

“At last, the mastermind is slain.” said Leopold. A moment later he whispered a prayer under his breath, thanking the Emperor for the strength he had needed to gain victory.

Razael moved up to Altarius, who was still hanging limply from the metal tree, bound in razor-wire.

A few precise cuts from the power-sword freed the unconscious Chaplain, who Razael carried down the dais.

He carefully placed the pale-skinned Chaplain on the ground, then rose to his feet.

Leopold and Razael stood ten paces from one-another, and each knew what was coming.

“You must halt Exterminatus. You have no right to condemn a world to death. Send a com-link data message to the *Praetor* and order them to cease Exterminatus.”

EXTERMINATUS

Razael's tone was steady and defiant. The Salamander Captain stood tall and proud, power-sword pointed at the Inquisitor who had been an ally, but was now the enemy.

Leopold smiled, a sinister looking sight.

"Never. These people have earned their doom. I am strong enough to make the sacrifice required to keep the Imperium secure. You are a treacherous fool."

Leopold took joy in his words, finally able to say them after so long.

Razael knew the chances of the Inquisitor halting the Exterminatus were slim. He was not surprised by this failure.

"You are wrong. You demand a sacrifice from others, not yourself. I cannot allow this abomination to pass."

Razael spoke without flinching. He thought he would be afraid at this moment, the ultimate confrontation, but a sense of purpose and destiny carried him along without fear.

A few moments of tense silence passed as the two stood motionless, each waiting.

The wind snapped silent, and the rumbling of the storm-clouds above halted.

The world held it's breath as the two warriors stood ready, each holding a power-sword.

And then, the battle for 170 million lives began.

With a roar Leopold charged, and whatever look of hatred had lived in his eyes once before was devoured by the new beast that was born inside them. Absolute hate, rage and fury flooded through the Inquisitor.

Razael counter-charged him, sword swinging as he met Leopold.

Disruptive sparks and energies wreathed off the two as their swords clashed time and time again, neither able to find a gap in the battle skill of the other.

As their blades clashed, and the two pressed their swords together, Leopold stared into the eye of his foe, a truly daemonic look spread over his face.

"Once you're dead, I'll make sure history remembers you for what you are. A filthy traitor!" spat the Inquisitor, before kicking Razael back.

The Salamander Captain rolled with the impact, dodging under a sword-slash as Leopold advanced.

Razael jumped to his feet, parrying a second downward hack. He remembered how the Inquisitor moved, the speed of his swings, the timing of his attacks.

Leopold performed a spinning slash as Razael rolled past him, the tip of his blade cutting a gouge in a nearby pillar. A spew of unholy blood poured forth.

Razael knew he had to move fast. Only a few minutes were left.

There was a gap in the Inquisitor's attack pattern. Razael spotted it, studied it, and knew what he must do. But to exploit this chance would cost him dearly.

The world turned to slow motion as Leopold advanced, sword thrust forward with a mighty stroke.

Razael smashed it aside, and saw the Inquisitor twist to make his second attack as the Salamander had predicted.

Razael moved his body, and the power-sword of Leopold cut into the side of his torso. The blade drove deep, and Razael felt the pain of his sacrifice.

EXTERMINATUS

But the Inquisitor was not expecting such a move from his foe. A gap in his defence was open.

Razael drove his power-sword into the Inquisitor's chest, driving it up to the hilt.

A large spurt of blood gushed out of Leopold's back, and the Inquisitor felt his legs give out. His spine was severed.

Leopold fell backwards off Razael's sword, blood draining from his front and back. Razael tore the power-sword from his side, howling as he did so.

Leopold lay on the chapel floor, breathing ragged, blood ebbing from the corner of his mouth.

Even as death closed in on him the Inquisitor would not surrender. With one hand he weakly reached for his power-sword, determined to kill the vile Salamander who had so mortally wounded him.

And with one last thought of bitter hatred, Leopold was dead.

Razael dropped his power-sword, and removed a small box from his utility belt.

Quickly he worked to open it, and removed the remote data-link. A small, simple looking device, it was capable of long-range communications.

He reached down and seized the data-com from Leopold's belt.

With this, he could send a message to the *Praetor* with Leopold's own coded data stream. Whatever order was sent would be immediately and unquestioningly acted upon, for nobody tarried when under the gaze of an Inquisitor.

Into the data-com Razael wrote the order to cease Exterminatus.

He took the data-com and went to slip it into the remote data-link.

Just a few more buttons to press, and Exterminatus was over...

Agony tore through Razael as the blade of a power-sword jutted through his chest.

The seething blade ripped through bone, muscle and organ, blood cast off and out from the blade that had pierced him.

The data-com and remote data-link fell from his grasp, clattering to the floor.

Razael fell to his knees as the power-sword was ripped from his body.

The Salamander Captain fell, turning to see his attacker.

Eyes black as coals, Chaplain Altarius stood over Razael, power-sword dripping with blood.

His laugh was like lightning rolling across mountains, proud and terrible.

Razael grasped life with all his strength, hatred for the Chaplain keeping him alive.

"And so my grand plan moves to the final stage." said Altarius, casting the power-sword aside.

He extended one hand, and the Staff of Bleak Valhalla flew towards his grasp.

Altarius gripped it tightly, feeling the power rush through his veins.

"You fought against Chaos, you killed them yourself in huge numbers! You tried to convince Leopold to halt Exterminatus! How can you do this?"

Altarius smiled evilly at the ragged words of the dying Razael, his face a portrait of pride.

"I would kill a million of these mutant scum to achieve my goals! I would sacrifice them in legion! And of course I had to appear concerned about Exterminatus to the fool Leopold, I had to show him a face that would lead him astray. Even one as perceptive as he was not immune to failure."

EXTERMINATUS

Altarius glanced over to Leopold's corpse, and laughed. Then he began to speak once more.

"Sahjhon was my Chaos ally, we met many decades ago. Only recently did we join forces, eager to shed blood in the name of the Warp. On this world, rumours said, was an artefact forged in ages gone by that could transfer the energy of death into psychic power. We found it, buried deep within the heart of the world. It was not easy to acquire, but by the grace of Chaos, we did it!"

Altarius held the staff high, appraising his trophy.

"Leopold's offensive against the mutants was my perfect excuse to leave the Imperial forces and come here. Naturally, on the eve of our success, Sahjhon betrayed me, deciding to hoard all the spoils for himself. He is a traitor at heart, I expected nothing less from him."

Razael could feel death edging closer. The words of his old friend turned vicious foe tormented him without end.

"But I am the true master of the Staff. My servitude to Chaos is much more valued than his. Few heretics can walk amongst the faithful as undetectable as I did.

Sahjhon planned to sacrifice me, but thankfully you intervened."

Altarius raised one hand to the sky, and a red energy glittered in his eyes.

"You see, I engineered all of this! I rallied the mutants into a vicious army! I showed them how to build a Defiler! I corrupted the hearts of the PDF! And why?"

Razael felt cold inside. He barely had any life left now.

"So that a single-minded fool like Leopold would arrive, and declare Exterminatus on such a clearly irredeemable populace. And when Exterminatus comes, the staff shall protect me from the virus, and the deathly energy of 170 million souls will flood into the staff. With this, the fruits of Exterminatus, I shall attain Daemonhood!"

Altarius brought one power-armoured foot down onto the data-com and remote data-link, shattered them both with a vindictive gleam in his eyes.

Altarius turned and started up the dais. When he reached the summit, he stood with arms wide, gaze cast upward to the vaulted ceiling.

Razael's breathing had almost utterly ceased. His heart beat with the only the smallest shred of life.

He turned his head, and saw something standing beside him. It was glorious, darkly beautiful, with a cloak of stars and eyes like the depths of an ocean.

You know what to do. Don't be afraid. We will protect you.

The serene voice echoed in Razael's head.

And in an instant he knew what the being offered.

And he knew the price for this one last chance to stop Exterminatus.

He reached out with one hand.

The lithe, dark entity reached down, and took the Salamander Captain's hand.

Altarius stood waiting at the dais. Barely a minute was left until the virus bombs fell.

Destiny was waiting for him.

He was distracted from his thoughts of self-glory as a swarm of dark lights flashed around the limp body of Razael.

EXTERMINATUS

Altarius shielded his eyes as the lights flickered and glittered, persisting for a few moments before vanishing.

Razael had changed. He stood tall, unwounded and mighty. His armour had shifted into a dark, spined suit baring the symbols and totems of Chaos. From his back spread a pair of leathery wings. His hands were taloned, vicious weapons capable of splitting open adamantium tank hulls.

And before Altarius could react, Razael beat his wings and soared into the air, crashing through the roof and ascending into the heavens.

Altarius laughed, and returned to awaiting his glory.

"Flee you coward, nothing can stop me!" shouted Altarius.

High in the air above, Razael didn't hear him.

And if he did, he would have greatly disagreed.

On the bridge of the *Praetor*, Captain Lycaeus stood waiting. A hololithic clock counted down as he waited to order the servitors to unleash the virus bombs.

10, 9, 8, 7, 6...

The bridge rocked violently. Hololiths sputtered in and out of working order.

Captain Lycaeus heard the reports coming over the com-link. Something was wrong.

"What's going on? Why has the countdown stopped?" shouted the Captain.

A servitor turned to him, and began to speak.

"Sir, we have lost control of the Bombardment Deck. We have been breached by an intruder."

Captain Lycaeus turned around as he heard screaming coming from the closed door behind him. Howls and terrified voices screamed across the com-link.

And the door slid open. A winged Chaos Marine stood framed in the lights of the hall, a trail of blood and shattered bodies behind him. The monster charged into the bridge, talons raised.

All the Captain could do was scream as death claimed his soul.

Altarius stood atop the dais, Staff of Bleak Valhalla in both hands. The snake-jaws opened wide as the Dark Apostle of Chaos prepared to invoke the death of a world. But on the moment everything was supposed to begin to die, all was silent.

Altarius decided this was simply because the *Praetor* was a little behind schedule.

Soon the bombs would fall, and the virus would spread.

That was his belief.

Psychic energy rising inside him, Altarius swept his hand in a gesture directed at the roof.

The living metal began to break apart, blood and gore falling to the marble ground.

Within a few moments the vaulted ceiling broke apart, and the sky above was open to Altarius.

He did not like what he saw.

Flames burning the hulk, shards of adamantium splintering off, the *Praetor* was falling from the sky. The jagged prow of the ship was bearing down on Altarius, hurtling towards him at an incredible speed.

EXTERMINATUS

The Staff could not protect him from this. The field could filter out the virus, but millions of tonnes of burning ceramite and adamantium halted for nothing and no-one.

Altarius fell to his knees, woe overcame him.

On the eve of victory, he was defeated.

Moments later the *Praetor* speared into the Munitions Factory, exploding as it impacted with the ground. The massive cloud of dust, fire and debris arched into the war-torn sky. Flames bellowed across the abandoned sector, great chunks of concrete and scrap metal torn asunder.

From all over Baphomet City the crash could be seen, and the resulting explosion lit up the sky like red lightning.

And with the destruction of the *Praetor*, Exterminatus was dead.

Through the endless expanse of space, a single figure flew. Great, warp-fuelled wings carrying him along solar currents, the Chaos Marine once known as Razael Flamestar prowled across the stars.

He had sold his soul for the chance to destroy Exterminatus, he had given everything to save Korrgoth.

A new reality had been thrust upon him. New Gods vied for his attention. The power of darkness was spread out before him, an entire universe was out there. He felt love for the terrible forces that had given him the strength to do his work. Chaos had allowed him to save Korrgoth. Until the end of time he would selflessly serve his new Masters.

At first, it had been painful to slaughter the unknowing crew of the *Praetor*. But as each soul died on his talons, it became a little easier. In the end, he felt nothing when hacking them apart, for he had judged their deaths needed to save Korrgoth.

After the slaughter was done, if Razael still possessed a shred of humanity, he would have realised his descent into becoming just like the Inquisitor Leopold. He had sacrificed one group to preserve a greater whole.

But such things were not of his concern now. In his new state, everything seemed so much simpler.

The data-log vox record he had left behind, just on the edges of the destroyed abandoned sector, would lead everyone to think him dead.

He would be long gone before any Imperials realised his so-called "Last Will and Testament" was nothing but a deception.

As the freedom of a new life dawned upon him, Razael gave thanks to his new Gods. Never again would he worship the false, petty wretch known as the Emperor of Mankind. The Ruinous Powers were his religion.

They had sent an ancient emissary to offer him one last chance to thwart Exterminatus. In his last noble act, he sold his own soul for the strength to save Korrgoth.

And why did the Warp Gods do this? Why didn't they simply let him die, and watch a world burn?

EXTERMINATUS

A world could die in their name, 170 million slaughtered in a single day. But all the power and energy of such a thing would be devoured by their selfish servant Altarius. He desired personal power, his love for the Ruinous Powers was built on a desire to enhance his own lot. His devotion was not true.

On the other hand, they could corrupt a single pure soul, someone who would sacrifice himself willingly. They could watch a noble and heroic spirit be slowly poisoned to unimaginable evil, a monstrous entity with no ambitions for personal power or self-glory. This Champion would be a pure thing of Chaos, an utterly adoring servant, a true fallen angel of death. Everywhere he went, the void of nothingness inside him would drive him to thoughtlessly destroy and taint. And to the Dark Gods, nothing was more precious than a pure soul corrupted. And as the daemonic wings of Razel Flamestar beat on the solar winds, across the vast expanse of the galaxy the laughter of Dark Gods echoed like death knells.
