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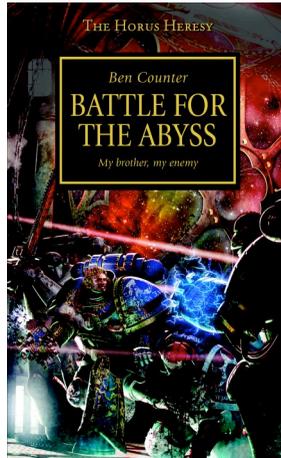
BATTLE FOR THE ABYSS

A Horus Heresy novel

By Ben Counter

News of Horus's treachery is in the open, and a time of testing has come. As Horus deploys his forces, loyalist Astartes learn that the Wordbearers are sending a fleet to Ultramar, home of the Ultramarines. Unless they can intercept and destroy it, the Ultramarines may suffer a blow from which they will never recover.

Battle for the Abyss continues the epic tale of the Horus Heresy, a galactic civil war that threatened to bring about the extinction of humanity.



About the Author

Ben Counter is fast becoming one of the Black Library's most popular authors. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he lives near Portsmouth, England.

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The following is an excerpt from *BATTLE FOR THE ABYSS* by Ben Counter.

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IT WAS DARK IN the reclusium. Brother-Captain Hektor kept his breathing measured as he prosecuted another thrust with his short-blade. He followed with a smash from his combat shield and then twisted his body out of the committed attack to make a feint. Crouching low, blackness surrounding him in the chapel-like antechamber, he spun on his heel and repeated the manoeuvre in the opposite direction: swipe, thrust, block, thrust; smash, feint, turn and repeat, over and over like a physical mantra. With each successive pass he added a flourish: a riposte here, a leaping thrust there. The cycles increased in pace and intensity, the darkness enveloping him, honing his focus, building to an apex of speed and complexity, at which point Hektor would gradually slow until at peace once more.

Standing stock-still, maintaining control of his breathing, Hektor came to the end of the training regimen.

‘Light,’ he commanded, and a pair of ornate lamps flared into life on either wall, illuminating a spartan chamber.

Dressed in only sandals and a loincloth, Hektor’s body was cast in a sheen of sweat that glistened in the artificial lamplight. The curves of his enhanced musculature were accentuated within its glow. Indulging in a moment of introspection, Hektor regarded the span of his hands. They were large and strong, and bereft of any scars. He made a fist with the right.

‘I am the Emperor’s sword,’ he whispered and then clenched his left. ‘Through me is his will enacted.’

Two robed acolytes waited patiently in the shadows, cowl concealing their augmetics and other obvious deformities. Even without being compared to the tall slab of muscle that was an Astartes, they were bent-backed and diminutive.

Hektor ignored their obsequiousness as he released the straps affixing the combat shield to his arm and handed it over along with his short-blade to the acolytes. He looked at the ground as his attendants retreated silently into the shadow's penumbra at the edge of the room. An engraved 'U' was carved into the centre of the chamber, chased in silver on a circular field of blue. Hektor stood in the middle of it, in exactly the position that he had started.

He allowed himself a smile as he beckoned his attendants to bring forth his armour.

A great day was fast approaching.

It had been a long time since he had seen his fellow Ultramarines. He and five hundred of his battle-brothers had been far from their native Ultramar for three years, as they helped prosecute the Emperor's Great Crusade to bring enlightenment to the galaxy and repatriate the lost colonies of man by fighting the Vektates of Arkenath. The Vektate were a deviant culture, an alien overmind that had enslaved the human populous of Arkenath. Hektor and his warrior brothers had shattered the yoke that bound their unfortunate human kin and in so doing had destroyed the Vektates. The human populace owed fealty to the Imperium, and demonstrated it gladly when they were free of tyranny. It had been a grim war. The Fist had been involved in a brutal ship-to-ship action against the enemy, but had prevailed. Repairs had been conducted on Arkenath, as well as the requisitioning of a small tithe of men, eager to venture beyond the stars, to help replenish elements of the ship's crew. Once the war was over, Hektor and his battle-brothers had been summoned to the Calth system and the region of space known as Ultramar. At long last, they would be reunited with their brothers and their primarch.

Hektor was full of pride at the thought of seeing Roboute Guilliman again, his gene-father and noble leader of the Ultramarines Legion. The deciphered messages from the Fist of

Macragge's astropaths had been clear. The Warmaster himself, mighty Horus, had ordered the Legion to the Veridan system. Guilliman had ratified the Warmaster's edict and instructed all disparate Ultramarine forces to muster at Calth. There they would take on supplies and rendezvous with their brothers in preparation to launch a strike on an ork invasion force besieging the worlds of neighbouring Veridan. A short detour to the Vangelis space port to take on some more battle-brothers stationed there and the campaign to liberate Veridan would be underway.

FULLY ARMoured, HEKTOR strode down an access tunnel and headed towards the bridge. His ship, the Fist of Macragge, was a Lunar-class battleship, named in honour of the Ultramarines' home world. Deck hands, comms-officers and other Legion serfs bustled past the Astartes down the cramped confines of one of the vessel's main thoroughfares.

The faint hiss of escaping pressure greeted Hektor's arrival on the bridge as the automated portal allowed him entry, before sliding shut in his wake.

'Captain on the bridge,' bellowed Ivan Cervantes, the ship's helmsmaster. Cervantes was a human, and despite being dwarfed by the mighty Astartes, he remained straight-backed and proud before the glorious countenance of his captain. Cervantes snapped a sharp salute with an augmetic hand; his original body part had been lost on Arkenath, together with his left eye, during the boarding action against the Vektates. The bionic replacement glowed dull red in the half-light of the bridge.

Screen illumination from various consoles threw stark slashes into the gloom, the activation icons upon them grainy and emerald. Crewmen, hard-wired directly into the vessel's controls from access ports bolted into their shaved scalps worked with silent diligence. Others stood, consulting data-slates, observing sensor readings and otherwise maintaining the Fist of Macragge's smooth and uninterrupted passage through real space. Lobotomised servitors performed and monitored the ship's mundane functions with precise, circadian rhythm.

‘As you were, helmsmaster,’ Hektor replied, climbing a short flight of steps that led to a raised dais at the forefront of the bridge, and sitting down at a large command throne at its centre.

‘How far are we from Vangelis space port?’ Hektor asked.

‘We expect to arrive in approximately—’

Warning icons flashed large and insistent on the forward viewport in front of the command throne, interrupting the helmsmaster in mid-flow.

‘What is it?’ Hektor demanded, his tone calm and level.

Cervantes hastily consulted a console beside him. ‘Proximity warning,’ he explained quickly, still poring over the data that had started churning from the console.

Hektor leaned forward in his command throne, his tone urgent.

‘Proximity warning? From what? We are alone in real space.’

‘I know, sire. It just... appeared.’ Cervantes was frantically consulting more data as the organised routine of the bridge was thrust into immediate and urgent action.

‘It’s another ship,’ said the helmsmaster. ‘It’s huge. I’ve never seen such a vessel!’

‘Impossible,’ barked Hektor. ‘What of the sensorium, and the astropaths? How could it have got so close to us, so quickly?’ he demanded.

‘I don’t know, sire. There was no warning,’ said Cervantes.

‘Bring it up on the viewscreen,’ Hektor ordered.

Blast shields retracted smoothly from the front viewscreen, revealing a swathe of real space beyond. There, like black on night, was the largest ship Hektor had ever seen. It was shaped like a long blade with three massive decks that speared out from the hull like prongs on a trident.

Points of intense red light flared in unison down the vessel’s port side as it turned to show the Fist of Macragge its broadside. The light illuminated more of the ship, so that it stretched the entire length of the viewscreen. It was even larger than Hektor had first assumed. Even several kilometres from the Fist of Macragge, it was rendered massive in the glow of its laser batteries

‘Name of Terra,’ Hektor gasped when he realised what was happening.

The terrible vessel that had somehow foiled all of their sensors, even their astropathic warning systems, was firing.

‘Raise forward arc shields!’ Hektor cried, as the first impact wave struck the bridge. A bank of consoles on the left suddenly exploded outward, shredding a servitor with shrapnel and all but immolating one of the deck crew. The bridge shuddered violently. Crewmen clutched their consoles to stay upright. Servitor drones went immediately into action dousing sporadic fires with foam. Hektor gripped the arms of his command throne as critical warning klaxons howled in the tight space, and crimson lightning shone like blood as emergency power immediately kicked in.

‘Forward shields,’ Hektor cried again as a secondary impact wave threw the Astartes from his command throne.

‘Helmsmaster Cervantes, at once!’ Hektor urged, getting to his feet.

No answer came. Ivan Cervantes was dead, the left side of his body horribly burned by one of the many fires erupting all across the bridge.

What was left of the crew worked frantically to reroute power, close off compromised sections and find firing solutions so that they might at least retaliate.

‘Somebody get me power, lances, anything!’ Hektor roared.

It was utter chaos as the carefully drilled battle routines were made a mockery of by the sudden and unexpected attack.

‘We have sustained critical damage, sire,’ explained one of Cervantes’s subordinates, blood running freely down the side of his face. Behind him, Hektor saw other crewmen writhing in agony. Some were prone on the bridge floor and not moving at all. ‘We’re dead in the void.’

Hektor’s face was grim in the gory glow of the bridge, a burst of sparks from a shorting console casting his features in stark relief.

‘Get me an astropath.’

‘A distress call, sire?’ asked the crewman, fighting to be heard above the chaotic din. The silhouettes of his colleagues rushed back

and forth to stem the damage, desperately trying to restore order in spite of the fact that it was hopeless.

‘We are beyond help,’ Hektor uttered with finality as the Fist of Macragge’s systems started failing. ‘Send a warning.’

CESTUS KNELT IN silent reflection within one of the sanctums in the Omega quarter of Vangelis space port. The vast orbital station was built into a large moon and based around several hexagonal blisters into which docks, communion temples and muster halls were housed. A labyrinthine tramway connected each and every location of Vangelis, which was organised into a series of courtyards or quarters to make navigation rudimentary.

The bustling space port was crammed with traders, naval crewmen and mechwrights. A large proportion of its area had been given over to the Astartes. Vangelis was a galactic waymarker and small numbers of Astartes involved in more discreet missions used it as a gathering point.

Once their objective was completed, they would congregate at one of the many muster halls designated for their Legion and await pick-up by their battleships. Though little more than a company from any given Legion would be expecting transit at any one time, sectors Kappa through Theta were at the complete disposal of the Legions. Few non-Astartes were ever seen there, barring ubiquitous Legion serfs and attendants, though occasionally remembrancers would be granted brief access in concordance with maintaining good relations with the human populous.

Cestus drank in the darkness of the sanctum and used it to clear his thoughts. He was fully armoured, and pressed his left gauntlet against the sweeping, silver ‘U’ emblazoned on the cuirass of his power armour, symbol of the great Ultramarines Legion, whilst keeping his head bowed.

Soon, he thought.

He and nine of his battle-brothers had been on Vangelis for over a month. They had been acting as honour guard for an Imperial dignitary at nearby Ithilrium and were consequently separated from the rest of their Legion. Their sabbatical had passed slowly for

Cestus. At first, he had thought it curious and enlightening to mix with the human population of the space port, but even bereft of his power armour and swathed in Legionary robes he was greeted with awe and fear. Unlike some of his brothers, it wasn't a reaction that he relished. Cestus had kept to Astartes quarters after that.

The fact that transit was inbound to extract them from Vangelis and ferry him and his brothers to Ultramar and their primarch and Legion filled Cestus with relief. He longed to embark on the Great Crusade again, to be out on the battlefields of a heathen galaxy, bringing order and solidity.

Word had reached them that the Warmaster Horus had already departed for the planet of Istvan III to quell a rebellion against the Imperium. Cestus was envious of his Legion brothers, the World Eaters, Death Guard and Emperor's Children who were en route with the Warmaster.

Though Cestus craved the esoteric and was fascinated by culture and erudite learning, he was a warrior. It had been bred into him. To deny it was to deny the very genetic construct of his being. He could no more do that than he could go against the will and patriarchal wisdom of the Emperor. Such a thing could not be countenanced. So, Cestus sought the seclusion of the meditative sanctum.

'You have no need to genuflect on my account, brother.' A deep voice came from behind Cestus, who was on his feet and facing the intruder in one swift motion.

'Antiges,' said Cestus, sheathing his short-blade at his hip. Normally, Cestus would have rebuked his battle-brother for such a disrespectful remark, but he had formed an especially strong bond with Antiges, one that transcended rank, even of the Ultramarines.

It was a bond that had served the battle-brothers well, their whole much more than the sum of their parts as it was for the Legion in its entirety. Where Cestus was governed by emotion but prone to caution, Antiges was at times choleric and insistent, and less intense than his brother-captain. Together, they provided one another with balance.

Battle-Brother Antiges was similarly attired to his fellow Astartes. The sweeping bulk and curve of his blue power armour

reflected that of Cestus, together with the statutory icons of the Ultramarines. Pauldrons, vambrace and gorget were all trimmed with gold, and a gilt brocade hung from Antiges's left shoulder pad to the right breast of his armour's corselet. Neither Astartes wore a helmet; Antiges's fastened to a clasp at his belt, whilst Cestus's head was framed by a silver laurel over his blond hair, his battle helm cradled beneath his arm.

'A little on edge, brother-captain?' Antiges's slate-grey eyes, the mirror of his closely cropped skull, flashed. 'Do you desire to be out amongst the stars, commanding part of the fleet again?'

As well as a company captain, Cestus also bore the rank of fleet commander. During his sojourn on Ithilrium that aspect of his duty had been briefly suspended. Antiges was right, he did desire to be back with the fleet, fighting the enemies of the Emperor.

'At the prospect of you lurking in the shadows, waiting to reveal yourself,' Cestus returned sternly and stepped forward.

He managed to maintain the chastening expression for only a moment before he smiled broadly and clapped Antiges on the shoulder.

'Well met, brother,' Cestus said, clasping Antiges's forearm firmly.

'Well met,' Antiges replied, returning the greeting. 'I have come to take you away from here, brother-captain,' he added. 'We are mustering for the arrival of the Fist of Macragge.'

IT WAS A SHORT journey from the sanctum of Communion Temple Omega to the dock where the rest of Cestus's and Antiges's battle-brothers awaited them. A narrow promenade, lined with ferns and intricate statuettes, quickly gave way to a wide plaza with multiple exits. The Ultramarines, who spoke with warm camaraderie, took the western fork that would eventually lead them to the dock.

Turning a corner, at the lead of the two Astartes, Cestus was hit square in the chest. The impact, though surprising, moved the Astartes not at all. He stared down at what had struck him.

Quivering amidst a bundle of tangled robes, a litho-slate clasped reassuringly in his hands, was a scholarly-looking human.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ Antiges demanded at once.

The pale scholar cowered beneath the towering Astartes, shrinking before his obvious power. He was sweating profusely, and used the sleeve of his robe to wipe his head before casting a glance back in the direction he had come from in spite of the monolithic warriors in front of him.

‘Speak!’ Antiges pressed.

‘Be temperate, my brother,’ Cestus counselled calmly, resting his hand lightly on Antiges’s shoulder pad. The gesture appeased the Ultramarine, who backed down a little.

‘Tell us,’ Cestus urged the scholar gently, ‘who are you and what has put you in this distemper?’

‘Tannhaut,’ the scholar said through ragged breaths, ‘Remembrancer Tannhaut. I only wanted to compose a saga of his deeds, when a madness took him,’ he blathered. ‘He is a savage, a savage I tell you!’

Cestus exchanged an incredulous look with Antiges, who turned back to fix the remembrancer with his imperious gaze once more.

‘What are you talking about?’

Tannhaut pointed a quivering finger towards the arched entrance of a muster hall.

A stylised rendering of a lupine head was etched into a stone panel beside it.

Cestus frowned when he saw it, knowing full well who else was on the space port with them at that time.

‘The sons of Russ.’

Antiges groaned inwardly.

‘Guilliman give us strength,’ he said, and the two Ultramarines strode off in the direction of the muster hall, leaving Remembrancer Tannhaut quailing behind them.

BRYNNGAR STURMDRENG’S booming laughter echoed loudly around the muster hall as he felled another Blood Claw.

‘Come, whelplings!’ he bellowed, taking a long pull from the tankard in his hand. Most of the frothing, brown liquid within spilled down his immense beard, which was bound in a series of intricate

knots, and swept over the grey power armour of his Legion. ‘I’ve yet to sharpen my fangs.’

In recognition of the fact, Brynngar displayed a pair of long incisors in a feral grin.

The Blood Claw Brynngar had just knocked prone and half-conscious crawled groggily on his belly in a vain attempt to get clear of the ebullient Wolf Guard.

‘We’re not done yet, pups,’ Brynngar said, clamping a massive armoured fist around the Blood Claw’s ankle and swinging him across the room one-handed to smash into what was left of the furnishings.

The three Blood Claws left standing amongst the carnage of broken chairs and tables, and spilled drink and victuals, eyed the Wolf Guard warily as they began to surround him.

The two facing Brynngar leapt in to attack, their shorter fangs bared.

The Wolf Guard drunkenly dodged the swipe of the first and hammered a brutal elbow into the Blood Claw’s gut. He took the punch of the second on his rock-hard chin before smashing him to the floor with his considerable bulk.

A third Blood Claw came from behind, but Brynngar was ready and merely sidestepped, allowing the young warrior to overshoot, before delivering a punishing uppercut into his cheek.

‘Never attack downwind,’ the bawdy Wolf Guard told the Blood Claw rolling around on the floor. ‘I’ll always smell you coming,’ he added, tapping his flaring nostrils for emphasis.

‘As for you,’ Brynngar said, turning on the one who had struck him, ‘you hit like you’re from Macragge!’

The Wolf Guard laughed out loud, before stomping a ceramite boot in mock salute of his triumph on top of the last Blood Claw, who had yet to stir from unconsciousness.

‘Is that so?’ a stern voice from the entrance way asked.

Brynngar swung his gaze in the direction of the speaker, and his one good eye brightened at once.

‘A fresh challenge,’ he cried, swigging from his tankard and delivering a raucous belch. ‘Come forth,’ Brynngar said, beckoning.

‘I think you’ve had enough.’

‘Then let us see.’ The Wolf Guard gave a feral grin and stepped off the inert Blood Claw. ‘Tell me this,’ he added, stalking forward, ‘can you catch?’

CESTUS HURLED HIMSELF aside at the last moment as the broad-backed chair flew at him, smashing into splinters against the wall of the muster hall. When he looked up again, he saw a broad and burly Wolf Guard coming towards him. The Astartes was an absolute brute, his grey power armour wreathed in pelts and furs, numerous fangs and other feral fetishes hanging from silver chains. He wore no helmet, his long and ragged hair swathed in sweat together with a beard drenched in Wulfsmeade, swaying freely about his thick shoulders.

‘Stay back,’ Cestus advised Antigès as he hauled himself to his feet.

‘Be my guest,’ the other Ultramarine replied from his prone position.

Adopting a crouching stance as dictated by the fighting regimen of Roboute Guilliman, Cestus rushed towards the Space Wolf.

Brynngar lunged at the Ultramarine, who barely dodged the sudden attack. Using his low posture to sweep under and around the blow, Cestus rammed a quick forearm smash into the Space Wolf’s elbow, tipping the rest of what was in the tankard over his face.

Brynngar roared and came at the Ultramarine with renewed vigour.

Cestus ducked the clumsy two-armed bear hug aimed at him and used Brynngar’s momentum to trip the Space Wolf hard onto his rump.

The manoeuvre almost worked, but Brynngar turned out of his trip, casting aside the empty tankard and using his free hand to support his body. He twisted, using the momentum to carry him, and landed a fierce punch to Cestus’s midriff when he came back too swiftly for the Ultramarine to block. An overhand blow followed as Brynngar sought to chain his attacks, but Cestus moved out of the

striking arc and unleashed a fearsome uppercut that sent Brynngar hurtling backwards.

With the sound of more crushed furniture, the Space Wolf got to his feet, but Cestus was already on him, pressing his advantage. He rained three quick, flat-handed strikes against Brynngar's nose, ear and solar plexus. Staggered after the barrage, the Wolf Guard was unable to respond as Cestus drove forward and hooked both arms around his torso. Using the weight of the attack to propel him, Cestus roared and flung Brynngar bodily across the muster hall into a tall stack of barrels. As he moved backwards, Cestus watched as the rack holding the barrels came loose and they crashed down on top of Brynngar.

'Had enough?' Cestus asked through heaving breaths.

Dazed and defeated, and covered in foaming Wulfsmeade, a brew native to Fenris and so potent that it could render an Astartes insensible should he drink enough, Brynngar looked up at the victorious Ultramarine and smiled, showing his fangs.

'There are worse ways to lose a fight,' he said, wringing out his beard and supping the Wulfsmeade squeezed from it.

Antiges, standing alongside his fellow battle-brother, made a face.

'Up you get,' said Cestus, hauling Brynngar to his feet.

'Fair greetings, Cestus,' said the Wolf Guard, when he was up, crushing Cestus in a mighty bear hug. 'And to you, Antiges,' he added.

The other Ultramarine backed away a step and nodded.

Brynngar put his arms down and nodded back with a broad smile.

'It has been a while, lads.'

It was on Carthis during the uprising of the Kolobite Empire in the early years of the crusade that the three Astartes had first fought together. Brynngar had saved Cestus's life that day and had been blinded in one eye for his trouble. The venerable wolf had fought the Kolobite drone-king single-handed. The mighty rune axe, Felltooth, which Brynngar wielded to this day, had part of its blade forged

from the creature's mandible claw by the rune-priests and artificers of Fenris in recognition of the deed.

'Indeed it has, my noble friend,' said Cestus.

'Drunk and brawling? Are the drinking holes of this space port insufficient sport, Brynngar? Did you build this muster hall for just such a purpose, I wonder?' said Antiges with a hint of reproach.

Lacquered wood panelled the walls, and a plentiful cache of barrels, filled with Wulfsmeade, were stationed at intervals throughout the hall. Huge, long tables and stout wooden benches filled the place, which was empty except for Brynngar and the groaning Blood Claws. Tapestries of the deeds of Fenris swathed the walls. The muster halls of the Ultramarines were austere and regimented; this one, fashioned by the artisans of Leman Russ's Legion, looked more like a rustic longhouse from the inside.

'A pity you could not have joined in sooner,' Brynngar remarked. 'Perhaps tomorrow?'

'With regret, we must decline,' Cestus replied, secretly relieved; he had no desire to go a second round with the burly Space Wolf. 'We leave today for Ultramar. War is brewing in the Veridan system and we are to be reunited with our brothers in order to prosecute it. We are heading to the space dock now.'

Brynngar smiled broadly, clapping both Astartes on the shoulder, who both felt the impact through their armour.

'Then there is only one thing for it.'

Antiges's expression was suspicious.

'What is that?'

'I shall come to see you off.'

With that, the Wolf Guard turned the two Ultramarines and, putting his massive arms around their shoulders, proceeded to walk them out of the muster hall.

'What about them?' Cestus asked as they were leaving, indicating the battered Blood Claws.

Brynngar cast a quick look over his shoulder and made a dismissive gesture.

'Ah, they've had enough excitement.'

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