

EYE OF TERROR

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL BY BARRINGTON J BAYLEY

AS THE war-fleets of the Imperium prepare to launch themselves on a crusade into the very heart of Chaos, the scurrilous Rogue Trader Maynard Rugolo seeks power and riches on the fringe worlds of that most terrifyingly insane realm – the Eye of Terror!

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'PREPARE TO ENGAGE! Suit up!'

In the bowels of the battle-barge, Sergeant-Brother Abdaziel Magron of the Dark Angels bellowed the order to his fellow Space Marines. His company of fifty had waited patiently, chanting a prayer while listening to the ear-splitting discharges of the great lasers whose turrets sprouted like warts all over the exterior of the vessel.

The barge was a hurriedly converted freighter. There was no way, down here in the hold, to tell how the attack was going, except when the craft juddered and its adamantium-reinforced steel howled in protest at receiving incoming fire. Once, distant hoarse shouts had been heard, followed by a loud hissing and whipping noise, a sudden sense of decompression, and the slam of emergency bulkheads sealing off a hull breach. The order given Magron could mean anything: the barge was being boarded, *they* were to board an enemy space vessel, or they were being sent down to the interstellar planetoid that was under attack. If the last, then the earlier laser bombardment had failed to destroy the rebel base.

None of the hugely bulky, genetically enhanced warriors, bearing the gene-seed of Primarch Lion El'Jonson, was so undisciplined as to ask questions. The order itself was enough. Each man strode to the cubicle where his personal power armour was stored. It was but the matter of a minute to insert himself into such armour. Neural connections to the spine and the brain snapped in place. These ensured that in terms of movement, strength and enhanced perception, wearing such armour was like having a new war-body, an artificial extension of a marine's already superhuman toughness.

The company was lucky. These were the new Mark Four suits or 'Imperial Maximus' suits, a considerable improvement over the standard Mark Threes, using lighter, harder material. It was the first power armour in which the helmet actually moved with the wearer's head. The dark green of the armour, the livery of the Dark Angels, appeared even darker in the dim electrolumen as, bolters at the ready, the company assembled in the hold, a hulking army – literally an army, since fifty Space Marines was worth a regiment of ordinary soldiers. Company markings, campaign badges, as well as the Imperial eagle on each breastplate, all gleamed in bright yellow as they caught the light.

That eagle, sign of allegiance to the Emperor, was now an even stronger bond than before, if that was possible. Magron knew that there burned in the heart of every brother Dark Angel in the hold the same absolute faith in the Emperor as burned in his. And besides that, the same hatred. For an inexplicable fate now called on them to fight the worst of blaspheming heretics – fellow Astartes, Space Marines who had painted out that eagle from their own armour, defied their vows and rebelled against the God-Emperor! Such stupefying treachery was beyond understanding. Such apostasy was beyond forgiveness. The only possible response was implacable hatred. Sergeant Magron took comfort in knowing that at least no Dark Angel would ever commit such a betrayal. The Dark Angels were renowned throughout the Adeptus Astartes for their religious zeal. It was inconceivable that a brother would ever forget his holy purpose.

There were lift tubes to take them to the assault craft on the deck newly welded to the outside of the barge. As they were about to file into them, there came a shuddering shock and a spurting of hot smoke. The wall where the tubes were installed buckled, rendering them useless. Magron barked orders, his voice carrying through the comm-link in each man's helmet. The troop leaders knew what to do. Bolters banged, their shells exploding against a metal partition and demolishing it to reveal the emergency exits. There was a *woosh* and a tugging as the hold was evacuated of air. They had broken through to the decompressed part of the ship.

This action might well be resulting in the suffocation of any crew members who had so far failed to don space gear, but that could not be helped. Gigantic boots tramping and kicking through wreckage, bolter shells blasting aside any impediment,

the Dark Angels found their way to the outer hull and the nacelle containing the assault craft, rocket-driven rafts open to space.

Waiting for them was their lieutenant, cloaked over his armour. He beckoned to them, one gauntlet grasping the rail of the nearest raft.

Sergeant Magron now could see for himself why the lieutenant had given the order to deploy. He had fought engagements in space before, but then there had always been a sun at the heart of the system. Here the scene was lit by starlight from the massed stars of the galaxy, the nearest of which were light-years off. Blotting out a patch of that light was a planetoid about the size of Jupiter's small inner moon, Io. How it had got here – whether by escape from some planetary system millions of years ago, or by forming in interstellar space in some freakish manner – no one would ever seek to know. Its value was strategic: it was roughly equidistant between a number of settled star systems, and so was an ideal place for a military base.

Long before the rebellion, the World Eaters Legion had taken possession of this lightless, frozen world and had excavated a stronghold deep within it. But now the World Eaters were among the blasphemous traitors. They had transferred their allegiance to Horus, the renegade warmaster and therefore were anathema. To seize or extirpate the interstellar base was the Dark Angels' objective.

A battleship, three cruisers and any number of improvised spacecraft had formed a staggered crescent around one half of the ancient planetoid and were sending massed laser fire slicing into its surface. Nothing else would have sufficed for the task; thermonuclear bombardment would no more than have dented the blacked-out landscape. Only high-density lasers carried enough energy to dig through the planetary crust and penetrate the mantle beneath, carving up the little world as if it were a ripe melon.

The battleship – recommissioned as the *Imperial Vengeance* – was at the centre of the crescent, a huge cathedral-like form shrouded in intricately worked turrets. Most of the planetoid's defence lasers must have been put out of action in the first salvo; only a few brilliant beams still stabbed upward from their armoured keeps, wavering to and fro in search of targets. Just the same, the scratch fleet's commander had miscalculated, for

the battle crescent was already being broken up, under attack from another quarter. Round from the other side of the planetoid, ascending from what must have been subterranean hangars secretly excavated, had come a fleet of heretic ships the Imperial planners had surely believed to be elsewhere!

Now the two forces were manoeuvring, the Imperial fleet forced to defend itself even while keeping up the laser bombardment of the minor world below. Plasma drivers ripped through the ether, tearing ships apart. The vast bulk of the *Imperial Vengeance* hove close by, blotting out the stars, a gargantuan turreted shape gouting plasma as well as planet-targeted lasers, smaller rebel ships gathering round it like sharks round a whale, while in its shadow the battle-barge seemed no more than a beetle.

The cloaked lieutenant was ignoring the bulking, blazing battleship, the flashes of battle visible over a range of thousands of miles. He was pointing down towards the World Eater planetoid. Brother-Sergeant Magron switched to visor magnification and directed his gaze likewise.

Combat assault craft, small, lumpy images even at maxmag, were rising from the surface of the planetoid. World Eater Space Marines, ready to take on even a battleship in close order combat!

Such crazed courage did not surprise Magron. The World Eaters were infamous berserkers, at the forefront of all the campaigns in the Great Crusade. Their love of carnage and destruction was excessive even for Space Marines. It was said that the Emperor himself had censured them for their savagery, as well as for their practice of turning recruits into murderous psychopaths by the use of brain surgery. Sergeant Magron's hatred for the traitors was tempered by the knowledge that they were also the worthiest adversaries he had ever faced.

The lieutenant's instruction was simple: 'Neutralise those transports!'

Magron bellowed into his helmet microphone, aware that the whole company had heard the lieutenant's order, and had also seen what their sergeant had seen.

'Embark and attack!'

The response was an eager roar from fifty throats: '*IT SHALL BE DONE, BROTHER!*'

Rocket-rafts shot out from the deck nacelles, making for the assault pods which were climbing up from the planetoid and

bearing on the battleship. Spotting their approach, the pods swerved, changed course and jetted to meet them. The World Eaters never refused a challenge!

Once the great battleship had dwindled there was a sense of coldness and desolation, as though they were in the midst of a vast undiscovered cave. The far stars were frigid, indifferent and unreachable. Sergeant Magron was aware of this utter bleakness in the brief period while the assault craft approached one another – then it was gone.

They were three on three: three rocket-raft and three carrier ascent pods capable of climbing up a modest gravity well such as might be possessed by a moon or an asteroid. As if by prior agreement they picked one another out. Rafts and pods collided with a crunch and went spinning through space jammed together.

The ascent pods differed from the rafts only in having a more powerful engine and protective cowl at the front. Bolter in one gauntlet, chainsword in the other, both Dark Angels and traitor heretics clambered to get at one another. Magron was taken aback at the lack of any tactical sense on the part of the World Eaters. Something had happened to them since they turned traitor; they had become a mob. Whereas the Dark Angels fought with discipline, co-ordinating their efforts and listening to the orders barked by their sergeant, there was no such organisation among the rebels. Each Traitor Marine fought on his own, apparently consumed with frenzy, and forgetting all the battle drills for which the World Eaters had once been famous.

Theoretically this would have given the Dark Angels an advantage. Instead they were taken by surprise to be plunged into a chaotic scrum. Neither side was equipped with suit jets. Each warrior had to find a foothold amid the tangled remains of the carrier assault craft to avoid being knocked into space by an exploding or ricocheting bolter shell, and could advance or retreat only with caution. The Dark Angels did retain one advantage, however: the World Eaters were mostly encased in the old Mark Two power armour, more likely to be ruptured by a bolter round or opened at the joints by a chainsword.

Amid the flashes of distant laser beams, under the glimmer of starlight, the Marines fired, grappled, clashed. Some were flung into space where they slowly receded, trying to fire bolt after bolt back at the battle scene as they spun round and round.

Armour cracked and opened, allowing the entry of the next bolter round which would turn the suit into a container of bloody mush. Chainswords snagged one on another as combatants sought to thrust, parry and find a weakness where plate met ceramite plate.

Magron had already disposed of three traitors when he came face to face with a World Eater bearing the markings of a sergeant, like himself. For a moment or two the combined discharges of a whole bank of laser cannon threw the scene into vivid relief. Magron saw that the hated rebels had indeed discarded the Imperial eagle, painting it over. Instead the World Eater bore, on the breastplate of his armour with its traditional chapter colours of white and blue, a strange symbol, crimson in colour: an X-shape transecting three horizontal bars, the upper one broken.

He had no idea what this sign represented, but for anyone to deface or cover over the emblem of the Emperor and His Glorious Imperium drove him to an extra fury. He switched to rapid fire and aimed a barrage of bolts at the offending bonded ceramite, even though it was the strongest part of the traitor's armour. So concerted was this shock-train of explosions that the World Eater sergeant was propelled backwards and lost his foothold on the wreckage of the assault pod. But before he could be thrown out of reach of any solid object he had recovered himself, seizing an upright grip-rod.

His next reaction came as a total surprise. Magron had been unable to glimpse the other's face, hidden as it was within the visored helm. Now the rebel sergeant reached up with his chainsword hand and used two fingers to unsnap the fastenings, remove his helmet and fling it down to where it lodged in the wreckage! With a puff, air was whisked from inside his armour, instantly freezing to a frosting of glittering crystals in the sunless cold of space.

Magron found himself staring at the bared face of the World Eaters sergeant: a beastlike, feral face with bared teeth, craggy brow half-buried in campaign studs, the face of a frothing madman, screaming soundless words of defiance.

The Dark Angel could not understand such an action. True, a Space Marine could survive exposed to space for a while, though in some discomfort – but who would so expose his head to bolter shot and ripping chainsword, for no reason?

Not only the sergeant appeared to have gone mad. Others were following his example, discarding their helmets to grimace and mouth in hard vacuum. Were it not for the lack of air to carry it, a discordant concerto of harsh battle-screams would have greeted the straggling Dark Angels.

Were the World Eaters now so thirsty for blood that they would offer their own to their enemies? The Dark Angels launched themselves with renewed confidence, sure that the traitors' foolhardiness had sealed their doom and that the affray would soon be over. Strangely, it was not so. Not only had their recklessness heightened the World Eaters' berserker rage, it was as though some sorcerous mystical influence protected their exposed heads. Again and again the broken bodies of Dark Angels were despatched, to hover lifeless near the assault craft, while the World Eaters, daring their enemy to kill them if they could, adroitly dodged bolter shells and turned aside chainswords.

Magron went after the sergeant, determined to rip through that manic rebel head. If only he could wipe out Primarch Angron's entire gene-seed! In mock welcome, the traitor sergeant held out his arms, grinning insanely, eyes gleaming. Then he pointed his bolter overhead and loosed off a volley in sheer delight, waving his chainsword with abandon.

Magron took a risk. He kicked himself off from the raft and sailed towards the World Eater, temporarily abandoning his foothold, at the same time loosing off a volley aimed at the other sergeant's bolter. To his gratification it was torn out of the traitor's gauntlet and sent spinning off into space. He anchored himself again by wedging his right boot under a warped handrail. He raised his left gauntlet to point his bolter directly at the other sergeant's exposed face. The World Eater, with eerie soundlessness laughed back at him, daring him to fire.

Magron put up the bolter. He had promised himself to use the chainsword.

The rebel sergeant also seemed to relish the challenge. He edged forward, more cautious now, the speed-blurred edge of his own weapon held before him. Expertly he flicked his gaze over Magron's Mark Four armour. Demented he might be, but he was no fool. He had tested the Mark Four's capabilities in the last few minutes, and had learned much.

It was at that moment that Magron noticed something happening on the planetoid below. A glow was emanating from it, becoming brighter and brighter.

Despite the raging space battle ranging over the planetoid, the Imperial task force had managed to sustain the laser barrage. Now it was working, and what was more, it was working better than its directors had planned. The beams had scythed through the planet, had cut aside the crust and had delved deep into the mantle in search of the deep keeps. And now, what had not been intended – they had penetrated to the hot liquid metal core of the planetoid.

The little world was not like other planets and moons. It was alone, lacking a parent sun or brother worlds to flex it with gravitational tidal forces. So it had never been tempered by a dynamic environment. It had never been forced to settle and cool into long-term stability. Now it was paying the price for its aeons-long inertness. The pent-up power of the core, which had lain quiet for so long, encased in its thick shell of rock, was roused. It seethed and moved. And it had more than its own energy now. The high-density lasers had added theirs to it, turning it into a bomb.

Already partly disintegrated by the barrage, the planet exploded.

It all happened tremendously fast. The core glowed and swelled, lighting up the darkness, demolishing the crust and mantle and hurling their fragments outward mingled with sprays and streams of flaming, molten iron, a vast outpouring of high-velocity matter and total destruction.

Sergeant Magron's visor temporarily turned black to protect him against the glare. His momentary blindness left him prey to the World Eater. With a grinding, whining sound the other sergeant's chainsword buzzed against his ceramite armour, trying to saw through the plate abutments. He brought his own chainsword up and, more by luck than skill, turned the traitor's ravening sword-teeth aside, only to have him attack the armouring of his power cables.

When his visor cleared, the first thing Magron saw was the ruddy face of the World Eater sergeant, mouth exultantly agape, as if revelling in the annihilation of his own base. A red glow suffused the scene, coming from the still-expanding mass of the exploding planet below them. Magron staved off the World

Eater's next rush, at the same time snatching glances around him. Several of his brothers had been despatched during their sudden blindness, betrayed by their own equipment. Some of the Traitor Marines, however, had met the glare unprotected and were dazzled, unable to see clearly.

The strident voice of the lieutenant came through his communicator from one of the other rafts: '*Brother Sergeant! Brother Angels! Our end has come! Pray for your souls! Pray to the Emperor!*'

The first wave of that explosion began to reach them, the smaller fragments, the gravel, the tiny shards of rock, that had been flung outward at higher velocity than the more massive pieces of the disintegrated world. It was a preliminary warning of the greater flood of stone and metal that was coming. Magron heard a rattling against the exterior of his armour. Too late, he realised he had allowed his attention to be distracted. He was open to the traitor sergeant's next lunge.

Then a rock the size of his fist took off the World Eater's head.

Similar missiles were slamming into the assault carriers, wrecking them completely, shoving them back towards the World Eaters' original destination, the *Imperial Vengeance*. Marines of both chapters were crushed as high-velocity rocks smashed into them, cracking open their armour, flinging them into space broken and crippled.

Even that was but a foretaste of the deluge to come, the broken-up masses of the one-time planetoid's crust and mantle, the still-molten spilled core, the raving glowing vapour, which now overwhelmed the space battle which was still in progress, spouting plasma and laser fire even in the face of the catastrophe. Aghast, Sergeant Magron watched as a huge chunk of black basalt, as big as the *Imperial Vengeance* itself, struck the task force's turret-encrusted capital ship. The impact shattered them both. Fractured adamantium, twisted metal, broken rock and superheated steam receded into the darkness in a writhing turmoil.

Something crashed into the assault craft and carried it away into the darkness too, away from the great torrent of debris that smashed both spacefleets to nothing. Had Sergeant Magron not been a Space Marine the initial impact might have killed him instantly, but he *was* a Space Marine, with his specially hardened body. So he survived, to be briefly carried along in the wreckage until he became dislodged from his footing and went

flying off, spinning slowly end over end, the stars apparently spinning about him.

For a long time faint glimmers – chunks of basalt, globules of cooling metal or fragments of spaceship – went sailing by at the edges of his enhanced vision, against a background of spiralling stars. Finally there was nothing. Nothing to show that there ever had been a solitary interstellar planet, or a base buried deep within it, or a task force, or a battle in space. No voices, whether friend or foe, loyalist or traitor, came through his communicator. No one else had survived to answer his calls. He was adrift in space, with no other human being within ten light-years.

He was utterly, completely alone.

**Venture deep into the howling maelstrom
that is the heart of Chaos in
EYE OF TERROR!**



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