

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



# WINGS OF BONE

# **WINGS OF BONE**

James Swallow

AVES LIKED TO speak to Griffon. He made sure that the rest of the crew were not around when he did, lest their opinion of him sink any lower. The one occasion he'd been caught crooning to the machine, it had led - typically - to a punishment beating from Nilner. Aves thought about the hulking thug as he sat in the big gunnery officer's chair, the same knot of impotent hate he always felt for the bully tightening in his chest.

He ran an oilcloth over the triggers of the twin bolter cannons, wiping away the accumulated sweat and grease. 'Just right,' he told Griffon. 'Good enough for the Emperor himself.'

Aves took the controls in his hands and placed his feet on the pedals. He felt at home there, nestled in the cupola across the shoulders of Griffon's fuselage. To his left and right, the wings of the Marauder class bomber extended away, blunt leading edges pitched like the blades of a double-headed axe. A white design of the plane's mythic namesake was drawn there, close to a rendering of the double-headed eagle of the Imperium. The cowling of the engines made the bomber's profile more muscular at the wing roots, the massive motors silent now, but powerful enough to lift the forty-tonne flyer and a full payload into high orbit.

Aves pressed a pedal and the turret made a slow circuit; he grinned as it rotated quietly and smoothly. Staring out past the upturned barrels of the bolters, Aves watched the stubby t-shaped tail swing by, and beneath it, Stoi's posting. The albino tailgunner never told Aves if he was satisfied with the crewman's maintenance on his station, preferring to hover on the edge of things, quiet and sinister. The flight crew nicknamed Stoi 'The Ghost', but Aves was convinced he was something far more sinister: an agent of the Inquisition, maybe. He smothered a flare of irritation, remembering Nilner's braying laughter when he had voiced this fanciful suggestion.

The turret rotated over the prow of the bomber where Captain Vought's cockpit was, with the twin lascannon turret beyond. Aves looked down at the captain's acceleration couch with barely concealed desire. He wanted so badly to settle into that chair, to feel the potency of Griffon through the flight yoke in his

hands, and the need was like a guttering flame inside him, forever burning. But the daydreams that had spurred him into volunteering for duty in the Imperial Navy had not helped him qualify for aircrew status.

Aves felt a familiar mood, black and dolorous, threaten to overcome him. He'd lost count of the number of times he had tried and failed the flight status exam, and it was his own awkwardness and clumsy nature that kept him forever grounded, forced to work as a maintenance hand on the flyers that captivated him. Naval Crewman 3rd Class Bryn Aves was doomed to remain grounded.

Unbidden, his hand strayed to the breast of his tunic, where a unit patch for the 404th squadron was fixed. Aves coveted the bone white wings that flight crewmen wore, and for the thousandth time, he wondered what it would be like to wear them himself.

A glitter of light in the sky distracted him from his thoughts. Low on the horizon a flashing dart moved closer, catching a flicker of orange light from the sunset. Aves licked his lips; he was positive that no aircraft was due to arrive at the base. Griffon and her squadron had returned a few hours ago, fresh from another in a line of inconsequential attacks on the heretic forces. In a rare piece of luck they had suffered no losses, so this was not some straggler limping back. He shifted the turret toward the approaching object - much nearer now -and Aves could identify it as a Lightning, a Naval fighter.

The crewman's heart pounded as the turret's auspex brought the fighter into blurry life on a targetting screen. The Lightning turned, hopping the line of trees at the base perimeter. It was too low to be detected by scanners, skimming the ground. For an moment, the flyer was fixed in the turret's gun cues and Aves saw clearly where the Imperial aquila had been struck off its wings and daubed over by a many angled star.

'Heretic!' The word almost choked him. The crewman's mind whirled; it was clearly a suicide attacker, probably loaded with munitions, and most likely followed the 404th back from the battle to inflict some payback. On it came, and still the air raid siren did not sound. The captured Lightning powered over the runway.

Aves found his hands moving without conscious volition, instinctively flicking off the safety catches on the heavy bolters. The red glyph in the firing

window appeared and Aves pulled the guns up to bead the target.

Words tumbled from his trembling lips, 'Emperor guide me, I implore you.'

If the heretic pilot saw the movement from the parked Marauder, it was of no consequence, time seemed to slow to a crawl as Aves gripped the twin triggers and squeezed. The bolters crashed into life and spat thick rounds into the air, bullets as big as candlepins cutting through the sky, shell cases arcing away in a glittering fountain of brass. The Lightning flashed over the bomber and the bolts raked its belly like predatory claws cutting into prey. Aves spun in the turret chair to see the stricken fighter flip over and smash straight into the ground. The airframe crumpled like paper under the impact, detonating in a yellow flash.

Griffon rocked on its landing gear from the shock and Aves lost his sight for a few moments, flash-blinded. He heard voices and footsteps scrambling through the bomber. Blinking, he looked up to see a huge man shape towering over him. Nilner. It seemed a miracle that the big gunner could even begin to fit his massive frame inside the cupola.

'I got him-' Aves began, fear and elation mixing in his voice.

Nilner cut him off, grabbing a fistful of his tunic and tearing him out of the chair. Before he could protest, Aves was thrown down into the hull, landing hard on his back. Breath gushed out of him and he tried to lift himself back up. In the poorly lit interior of the bomber he saw only shadows as Miner's heavy boot struck him in the ribs. The gunnery officer picked him up again and pitched the crewman out of the egress hatch. Aves tasted blood in his mouth as he fell in a heap on the black ferrocrete runway.

Aves managed to raise his head, and there he saw Captain Vought and the rest of Griffon's crew, breathless from running, framed by the burning wreckage of the heretic Lightning.

'Sir?' Aves managed.

Vought watched him with cold dispassion; then Nilner was there, hauling him up to his feet like a rag doll.

'Don't ever use my guns, dullard!' Nilner growled.

Aves wanted to protest, but the next punch sent him reeling and consciousness fled. The last thing he saw was Vought, expressionless as he watched Nilner take the crewman's impertinence out of his hide.

\*

THE MEDICAL corpsman gave Aves something for the swelling and told him to get lost. The infirmary had its share of real injuries and a crewman's damaged face wasn't worth more than a few seconds of care. Pressing a bandage to the cut on his cheek, Aves began the walk back to the barracks. Night had fallen, revealing a star-dappled sky. The crewman glanced up; bright dots overhead signified the positions of warships, moving slowly between the glow of stars. He liked the nights on Rocene. The planet seemed to grow more reverent and docile in the dark and he somehow felt safer there than in the brightness of day. Aves found it easier to hide at night.

He stopped at the service road to let a Chimera grumble past, following the vehicle with his gaze as it trundled toward the hangars. Beyond them, he could just make out the faint tracery of the perimeter fence; and beyond that was the horizon, lit with a faint glow.

The heretics were there. The vast mechanised army that the apostate rebels had created was rolling ever closer with each passing day, sacking towns and torching cities to the ground as they went. Aves had heard rumours from old Dolenz in the tower about how the beleaguered Imperial Guard was being forced to surrender kilometre after kilometre to the oncoming insurrectionists. The missions of the Marauder squadrons from here at Point November base were meant to support the Guardsmen's efforts, but they seemed to have little success in halting the tide of the advance. The crews were sombre and terse and the failed suicide attack would not improve matters.

Aves passed the black scar in the ground where the Lightning had crashed. Whatever remained of the turncoat fighter had been hastily concealed under tarps, all of them emblazoned with the sigils of the Inquisition and dire warnings not to approach. He spotted Griffon's navigator, Kheed, nearby in conversation with one of the Guardsmen standing post by the wreck.

Aves made sure he did not make eye contact with him. Although he and

Kheed were the same age, the arrogant young officer was everything Aves was not. A high born caste member from a hive world, the navigator looked down his nose at everyone but the captain, and strutted about Point November as if he expected a command of his own to appear by the Emperor's grace. Kheed made no secret of the fact he thought of the crewman as less than a servant. Aves hated him almost as much as he hated Nilner.

Aves walked on past the fighter he had destroyed. The momentary elation he had felt at striking a blow against Terra's enemies was gone now, it had faded like a distant memory. In its place remained only the dull pain from where Nilner had repeatedly struck him. It seemed that despite his actions, Aves still had no leniency to come after breaking the rules, and Nilner had been very clear on many occasions that Aves was not worthy to man a post aboard Griffon. The gunner seemed to have made it his life's work to victimise him, and the other junior crewmen were content to let it happen, rather than risk being the target of the officer's ire themselves. Aves kept to the shadows, hoping to avoid another confrontation with the gunner, slipping through pools of dark cast by the officers' quarters.

‘-Aves.’

He froze as he heard his name spoken aloud. The voice came from Captain Vought's private quarters. Aves moved closer and recognised the deep tones of Sorda, Griffon's bombardier and Vought's second-in-command. The crewman crouched down, afraid of discovery, but equally afraid of missing something vital in the conversation.

Inside the captain's hut, Sorda was helping himself to a brackish local brandy from Vought's private store. ‘You must admit he displayed quick thinking.’

Vought said nothing, and arched an aristocratic eyebrow in response. Sorda downed the drink in one jolt. In the half-light of the room, the bombardier's bald head seemed to shine, the glow of the lamp glittering off the steel on his temple and his bulbous, bionic eye.

‘Crewmen are not trained to think,’ Vought said, his rich core-world accent adding gravity to every word. Aves has ideas above his station. He must understand that the Emperor places his servants where they are needed, not where they want to be.’

‘You would rather he had let the heretic pass unchallenged?’ Sorda eyed the brandy bottle but thought better of it. ‘You may be correct, but why do you let Nilner treat the poor fool as a whipping boy? Aves does his job well, yet that thug berates and abuses him at every opportunity. And you allow it to go on.’

Vexation flickered on Vought’s face; he was not one to encourage the questioning of his orders. ‘Sorda, there are many other captains who would see your behaviour as insubordinate. Do you know why I tolerate your familiarity?’

The bombardier was not cowed. ‘Because you owe me your life twice over? Because we flew through hell together at the Tellus Marches and Ogre IV?’

Vought allowed himself the smallest of smiles. ‘No, Sorda. It is because that bionic eye of yours makes you the best bombardier in the squadron. But sometimes I wonder if you see a little too much with it.’

Sorda shrugged. ‘What I see is a poor wretch that the crew consider a joke of a man, a failure who lacks the spine to be a true soldier of the Emperor... And yet, when he serves the Imperium he is punished for it.’

The captain’s expression went cold again. ‘Griffon has the finest combat rating in the 404th, because I allow my men to do what they will as long as that battle record stays unblemished.’ He poured a little of the brandy for himself. ‘Nilner is a thug and a bully, but he keeps the gun crew in line. To maintain that, I’d let him beat Aves all day if need be. Only the mission matters, Sorda. If you ever lose sight of that, I’ll put you off my crew.’

Outside, Aves held his breath. Sorda had never spoken anything but clipped orders to him since he had been assigned to Griffon, and it surprised him to think the officer might actually show some compassion. He was still turning this over in his mind when a strident voice cried out his name, startling him.

‘What are you loitering around here for?’ Aves spun on his heel to confront Weslund, Griffon’s lascannon gunner. His sallow face was set with annoyance, and he gestured sharply at the crewman with his free hand, the other gripping a volume of Ministorium doctrine. Weslund advanced menacingly, the light of zealotry flaring in his eyes. ‘Spying, perhaps? Listening and skulking?’

Aves realised that the gunner must have just returned from his regular prayers at the base’s tiny chapel. Weslund was extremely pious and fervent in his

devotion to the Golden Throne, given to seeing the taint of heresy in every corner.

‘I was just walking...’ Aves fumbled at an answer, eyes downcast.

‘Lies trip off your tongue so easily!’ Weslund snapped.

The door to Captain Vought’s quarters opened, revealing Griffon’s commander and Sorda. ‘What is the meaning of this?’ Vought’s voice cut like an icy scalpel.

Weslund spoke before Aves could even think. ‘I discovered him hiding outside your door, sir, eavesdropping.’

Vought gave Aves a hard stare. ‘Is this true, crewman?’

Aves shook his head, his cheeks reddening, unable to speak.

‘Nilner was too lenient with him, captain. The fool is corrupted, I’m sure of it. He should be shot as a traitor!’

‘Weslund, Aves shot down a suicide flyer. He’s no heretic,’ Sorda said. The lasgunner’s manner exasperated the bombardier.

‘Perhaps. Perhaps not. He may have been trying to silence-‘

‘Enough of this prattle!’ Vought growled. ‘While I admire your zeal in searching for immorality, you will not find it among my crewmen, Mister Weslund. Understand?’

The gunner closed his mouth with an audible snap and nodded.

‘As for you, crewman,’ Vought flicked a glance at Sorda, ‘if you were listening at my door, you’ll take another hiding from Nilner in punishment.’

Aves felt the blood drain from his face, seeing Nilner in his mind’s eye, the big man grinning as he laid into him.

‘Captain, if I may,’ Sorda broke in, tapping his bionic eye. ‘If Aves had been loitering outside, I would have seen his heat trace with my optics.’ He made a show of looking around. ‘I saw no such trace,’ Sorda lied.

Vought gave the bombardier a measuring look, then nodded. 'Very well. You men are dismissed. We have a mission at dawn and I expect you to be ready.' The captain slammed shut the door of his cabin and Weslund took the cue to walk away, giving Aves a lingering sneer as he shouldered past him.

After a moment, Sorda addressed Aves in a quiet voice. 'You did well today, lad, but take some advice. Keep to yourself. You'll live longer.'

Aves nodded jerkily. Sorda's were the first words of encouragement he could ever remember hearing from a superior officer.

\*

THE INTERIOR OF Point November's operations bunker was dingy and grim, an array of seated men gazing into auspex screens or buried in scanner hoods. In the centre of the room was a chart table sporting a map covering the whole of the peninsula around the base. Even from a few feet away, Aves could see that the red tide of markers denoting heretic forces was slowly consuming the Imperial held zone. A tactical officer moved a set of symbols closer to the enemy line, the tags represented the 404th's bombers.

'Aves, lad,' Dolenz beckoned him over. 'Don't stand in the way there.'

The crewman did as he was asked. Dolenz gave him a weak smile as he approached. Aves forced himself not to look below the old man's waist; where his legs should have been there were two spindly bionic replacements. Their steel exteriors made them seem like arcane metal bones grafted from an iron skeleton. The sight of Dolenz's disability always made Aves feel uncomfortable, but the old soldier seemed not to notice. He handed Dolenz a small jar of machine lubricant, secreted from the aircraft stores.

'Here you are. Enough for another few weeks.'

Dolenz took the jar with a crack-toothed smile and daubed a little of the fluid on his leg joints. 'Good boy. I'd have rusted stiff long ago if not for you.'

Aves looked around, listening to the mumbled litany of battle prayer and communications chatter. 'How goes the mission?'

Dolenz nodded at his auspex screen, the green display shimmering like a tank of stagnant water. 'Close now. Griffon is on target, with Basilisk in support.'

Aves took this in with a nod. Basilisk was Captain Marko's Marauder, a good crew with a record almost equalling Griffon's. He rubbed a hand over his brow; it was blood-warm in the bunker and the crewman was sweating.

'I heard what you did last night,' Dolenz said. 'Terra be proud, you were sharp and no mistake.'

'I was just lucky.'

'Luck?' The old soldier's face screwed up in dismay. 'No such thing. Some say I was lucky when I got shot down and lived to tell the tale.' He tapped a finger on his metal legs. 'I don't call having these pieces of iron welded to me lucky.' Dolenz gave a heavy sigh. 'Matters little, anyway. We'll quit this piece of dirt soon enough.'

Aves gave him a quizzical look. 'What do you mean?'

'You wouldn't have heard, would you?' The sensor operator looked around to see if any officers were listening to their conversation. 'There's talk, lad. A retreat is in the offing. We'll give up this forsaken piece of turf and let the Astartes take the lead instead.'

'Space Marines? Here? But what about the base?'

Dolenz shrugged. 'Probably be abandoned. If the rumours are true, mind.'

Aves tried to assimilate this new piece of information. The sudden idea of the unknown left him with a jumble of excitement and fear.

'Here, lad, it's starting,' hissed Dolenz, as the comm channels came to life. 'They're in sight of the mark.'

'Point November base, Griffon,' Vought's voice issued out of the air. 'Commencing attack.'

\*

CLOUDS OF FLAK thrown up from guns on the ground burst about Griffon in dark spheres of smoke, opening like deadly black poppies. Vought dismissed them, concentrating on steering the fully-laden Marauder through streams of bright red tracer, spat into the sky from Hydra anti-aircraft batteries that had been captured by heretic units. Every few moments, a brilliant white flash on the ground signalled the launch of a massive Manticore missile, prompting the captain to trigger a flare shell or chaff cylinder from a control on his yoke. Vought could see the ground as a seething carpet of armoured vehicles and enemy soldiers, all of them pouring weapons fire into the bomber's path. The air was his medium, and he was master of it, powering the massive tonnage of the Marauder through the flak and into the kill zone.

'Griffon, Basilisk. Your three o'clock low,' Captain Marko's voice said in his ear. 'I have the lead.'

'Copy, Basilisk. We'll follow you in,' Vought replied, then switched to the Griffon's intercom channel. 'Sorda, arm the weapons. Open the bay.' A red indicator glyph on Vought's console glowed, indicating the bombardier's readiness, and across the ventral hull of the bomber, heavy metal doors yawned open revealing a tightly packed payload of ten spin-stabilised, gravity assisted bombs. Each of the warheads contained two hundred kilos of dense high explosive compound and an iridium penetrator fuse, designed to pierce through enemy armour before detonating. From the nose turret, Weslund began to sing a hymn about blood and fire, his reedy voice carrying through the fuselage.

In the weapons bay Sorda gave the bombs a smile, like a proud parent about to send a child out into the world. He had chalked a devotional message on every one of the grey cases; the closest one bore the words 'The Emperor's Might Knows no Boundaries' in his precise gothic hand. He glanced down through the open hatch, watching shot and shell flash by beneath Griffon's wings.

Vought saw a flare of power from the Basilisk's engines and the other Marauder dipped down toward the centre of the heretic army. Griffon shivered violently as a flak shell blew close by, spent shrapnel clattering off the wing. The aircraft commander sighted down over the nose, past the lascannon turret. For a moment, Vought thought his eyes had deceived him; there appeared to be a grounded starship down there in the mud, a flat expanse of hull like a beached

steel whale. What he saw was the mobile command post of the heretics, a colossal land leviathan easily the size of an Imperial frigate. Great tracks and spiked wheels churned at mud and earth, labouring the vehicle forward, flattening hills and uprooting woodlands before it. And there at the very centre of it, beckoning Vought like a target on a range, was a hideous grinning skull set upon a star.

At the sight of it, Weslund spat a foul curse over the intercom and began to babble in dark, stentorian tones, breaking his litany every few moments with a discharge from his cannons.

Basilisk swooped down over the prow of the leviathan, jinking from side to side to dodge tracer spat from Hydra batteries. 'Ready. Ready,' said Marko. 'Drop-'

The bomber's commander never finished his sentence; a vibrant laser flare tore into Basilisk from the eye of the skull and cut down the middle. The aircraft's fuel reservoir tore open and exploded, instantly flashing the bomber to ash.

'Lord's blood!' Weslund gasped.

Vought set his jaw and pushed the yoke forward, mirroring Basilisk's attack run. All about him, he heard the bomber's bolter turrets chatter as Nilner and Stoi raked the enemy with punishing salvos. He would only have seconds before the leviathan would be able to recharge the massive lascannon for another shot.

'Ready. Ready,' Vought called.

Sorda made a sign of supplication to the Golden Throne and gripped the release switch, pressing his eye to the sightglass.

'Drop.' The instant the captain's command left his lips, Sorda slammed the knife switch down and with a well oiled whirr of machinery, the clamps holding the bombs in place opened in perfect order. Each of the weapons shrieked as it dropped out of the bomb bay and into the fast flowing air, the wind whistling through the fusing propeller and steering vanes. The bombs struck hard across the leviathan's hull in bright flares of flame.

Vought poured power into Griffon's engines and pulled back on the yoke, arcing the aircraft up and away from the target site. He allowed himself a sneer at the heretic's expense as the laser cannon cracked through the air where the Marauder had just been. 'Too slow,' he whispered, from behind his breather mask.

As the flyer turned outbound, Vought's concentration returned to threading the bomber through the storm of anti-aircraft fire. Almost as an afterthought, he toggled the intercom. 'Stoi, report,' he demanded from the tailgunner. 'Target status?'

When the weapons officer didn't reply straight away, Vought felt a flicker of irritation. 'Stoi, wake up! What is the status of the target?'

Every crewman on Griffon was surprised when the gunner gave a terse, single word response. 'Undamaged.'

\*

KILOMETERS FROM the combat, Aves and Dolenz exchanged glances. 'What does that mean?' said the crewman. 'The bombs misfired?'

Dolenz shook his head. 'Nothing like that. That great bloody tank, I'll warrant it'll take more than standard ordnance and cordite to crack it.'

Aves fell silent as Vought's commands echoed out from the faraway bomber.

\*

THE CAPTAIN turned to call down into the fuselage below the cockpit. 'Kheed, get down there and confirm Stoi's sighting. I want to know if there were secondary explosions, anything.'

Without looking to see if his orders were being followed, Vought flicked to the main comm channel and relayed a warning about the leviathan's lascannon, but the remainder of the 404th were still caught in the flak, fighting to stay on course

and bomb the living hell out of the heretics below them.

Kheed reached the hatch to Stoi's turret and cranked it open. The albino gunner said nothing, and handed him a pair of ageing field glasses, stabbing one bony finger at the smoke wreathed horizon below. The navigator searched for the steel deck of the land leviathan and found it. Smoke poured from massive chimneys along its spine, and tracer fire arced skyward from myriad guns along its armoured hide, but no flames or structural damage were evident, beyond a few pits and dents across the face of the grinning skull.

The navigator keyed the intercom and spoke in a flat, toneless voice. 'Target remains, captain. Confirming, status is undamaged.'

Vought's lip curled in annoyance and he pitched the Marauder round in a harsh wingover, determined to see the leviathan for himself. A force field, Kheed?' he snapped.

'Negative. Sir, they must have armour as thick as a battlecruiser to shrug off a strike like that.'

'Indeed,' Vought fumed quietly. The intelligence reports from Imperial Guard on the ground had mentioned nothing of this, and now the squadron had lost aircraft in an attack that would have failed even if the enemy crew were blind or asleep. The captain decided that there would be harsh words spoken with his Guard counterparts on return to Point November.

'Incoming!' Nilner's rough shout cut through Vought's train of thought. 'Lightnings, coming out of the suns!'

The pilot turned the bomber hard to port and flicked a glance upward. He saw a trio of bat-winged fighters vectoring in on their position. 'Gunners, target and annihilate! Sweep the heretic scum out of the sky!'

Nilner pedalled his turret around to follow the lead fighter as it swooped down on Griffon. His big, sweaty hands enveloped the firing grips and squeezed. In answer, the heavy bolter cannons screamed death into the flashing shape of the seized Lightning. The massive bolts tore through the engine cowlings of the flyer and shattered the glass cockpit, turning the interior into a red ruin. Nilner grunted his approval and turned the turret around, looking for another kill.

The gunner had been quick to spot the trio of interceptors, and true to the training doctrine that had been drilled into him, Nilner concentrated his attention on the most immediate targets. Consequently, he never saw the fourth Lightning, hanging back from the trio, as it emerged from the brightness of Rocene's twin suns. As Griffon turned to avoid the laser trails from its surviving squadmates, the other fighter tore over the nose of the Marauder, triggering a long burst from the autocannon mounted on its chin. The first burst struck the number three engine, which blasted out a cascade of flame and broken turbine blades before choking into silence.

Vought saw nothing but a grey shadow as the heretic pilot passed by his cockpit with only a few metres to spare. Autocannon rounds crashed through the bomber's hull at point blank range, silencing Weslund's songs for the Emperor forever as they ripped him apart. Part of the captain's canopy shredded as shots grazed the air near where he sat, but left him unharmed.

Nilner fired blindly at the oncoming Lightning and tore off one of its wing-mounted engines for good measure; but in return, a hot shell from the autocannon, big enough to punch through a ceramite plate, took all of his left leg below the knee. The big gunner screamed and spat blood.

Vought swore a blistering curse that would have earned him a dozen lashes if it had been spoken in earshot of a commissar, hands rigid around the yoke as cold air howled through holes in his cockpit. He shouted into the communicator, not knowing if his voice would be carried back to the airfield.

'Point November, this is Griffon. Mission failed. Returning to base.'

\*

AVES WAS WAITING by the runway when the first of the Marauders emerged from the clouds. Sentinel powerlifters and Trojan crawlers fitted for firefighting details were clustered by the ramp, ready to move at a moment's notice if a bomber made a crash landing. The crewman squinted into the murky sky and his breath caught as he counted the steel grey shapes as they closed in, many of them trailing smoke in black streams. By his count, only a quarter of the squadron had returned.

Aves saw Griffon then, the watery sunlight glinting off the shattered nose turret. One of the lascannons had been completely sheared away, and the broken spars of the turret sphere looked like ragged teeth in a howling, angry mouth. As he watched, the landing skids emerged from their hatches and locked into place. With the number three engine a shredded wreck, it seemed that Captain Vought was preparing to forego the more difficult vertical touchdown and attempt a runway landing. The fire crews saw this as well, and the Trojans started up their motors, rotating in place to tear after the bomber if the need arose.

Griffon turned into the wind at the end of the runway and trembled slightly. Aves found he could not take his eyes off the wounded flyer as it descended towards the ferrocrete airstrip. At the last second, Vought chopped the Marauder's throttles and the heavy bomber touched down with an echoing scrape. The landing skids spat sparks and wisps of vaporised paint where they kissed the runway. The aircraft flashed past Aves, choking him with a lungful of smoke from the damaged engine. Two Trojans roared into life and made off after the Marauder; Aves leapt and grabbed a handhold on the second, clinging on as it rumbled toward the slowing bomber.

At the end of the runway, Griffon skidded to the right and almost left the paved airstrip, finally shuddering to a halt on the grassy abutment nearby. Guardsmen scrambled over to the flyer, wrenching open the hatchway, and Aves followed. Up close, he could see the myriad holes and scars from bolter impacts and laser burns that dotted the underside of the fuselage. The Marauder stank of spilled fuel, and dark puddles of lubricant were already beginning to pool beneath it where conduits had been severed by shrapnel. Griffon seemed to sag beneath her own weight, bleeding fluid into the mud.

Aves heard a strangled scream and turned to see Kheed and one of the Guardsmen moving Nilner out of the hatch. The gunnery officer's uniform was slick with blood, the stark white of bone dangling from where his leg used to be; the leg he'd used to kick Aves savagely, gone now, torn to fleshy tatters. Kheed caught his eye and shouted.

'Aves, get over here! He's bleeding out and I can't stop it.' He nodded toward a small three-wheeled rover parked at the end of the runway. 'Get him to the infirmary, fast!'

The Guardsman laid Nilner down on the flatbed and strapped him in. Kheed

waved a blood smeared hand at Aves. 'He's lost a lot of blood. If you don't hurry, he'll be dead, understand? So get going!'

'Yessir!' Aves replied nervously, but Knead was already gone, rushing back to the bomber. The Trojan crews were squirting fire retardants over the wing, leaving him alone with his charge. Aves climbed into the saddle and gunned the engine, yanking the handlebars around in a tight turn. He heard Nilner wail as the rover bounced over a bump in the road.

Aves pushed down the accelerator and cut across the tracks between the runways. The direct route to the infirmary would take a few minutes, following the service road around the barracks and hangars. It would be quicker to thread through the alleys formed by the maintenance sheds. Aves made a tight turn and drove out of sight, into the shadows by the base wall.

Nilner was babbling something incoherent from the litter behind him, alternatively weeping and coughing as the trike skipped over the ferrocrete paving. Aves brought the rover skidding to a halt at a junction and hesitated.

'Aves!' the delirious gunner shouted. 'You took my leg, you little bastard!' The crewman watched Nilner thrash against the restraints. His eyes were unfocused as he raved. Aves realised that Nilner was completely unaware of his surroundings, maddened with shock and pain. 'Worthless piece of excrement! You're pathetic!'

He took his foot off the accelerator and watched Nilner silently. There was nobody around this part of the base, nobody to hear the gunner's shouts. Aves watched the crimson patch of blood soaked cloth on Nilner's litter as it grew and grew, fed by the big man's vital fluid. A cold, callous thought began to form in his mind.

'If you don't hurry, he'll be dead.' Aves spoke Knead's words out loud. It would be so simple to just wait, he mused. So easy to stay here and watch Nilner bleed out his last in agonised delirium. He studied the gunner's tunic, the bloodstained wings on his uniform breast.

'I hate you,' Aves told him in a quiet voice. 'You make my life a misery for your own sport and now I have yours in my hands.' He leaned closer to Nilner's sweaty face and recognition glimmered in the gunner's eyes.

‘Aves,’ he rasped. ‘Help me!’

The crewman’s face twisted in anger; suddenly he wanted to make Nilner beg for his life, he wanted him to suffer. ‘It’s my choice now!’ Aves growled. ‘My choice if you live and die!’

Nilner seemed very small then, a wretched and feeble shadow of the thug that had tormented Aves for months. ‘Please...’ he whispered.

\*

SORDA TAPPED AVES on the shoulder and the crewman gave a start. ‘Sir! Forgive me, I was just loading parts for the repairs on Griffon-‘

‘I know. The captain tells me that we have a replacement engine and spares for the lascannon.’ He paused. ‘This is not about Griffon.’

‘Sir?’

‘This is about Nilner.’

Aves looked away. ‘I followed my orders, bombardier.’

‘Yes. Yes, you did.’ Sorda gestured towards the infirmary. ‘He’ll live. The tech-priests will be able to give him a mechanical leg, just like Dolenz. The apothecaries told me you got him there just in time. A few minutes more, and they would not have been able to save him.’

‘I followed my orders,’ Aves repeated.

‘And I can’t imagine why you did.’ Sorda stepped closer, lowering his voice. ‘Do you think that he will thank you for it or be grateful? That’s not his way, Aves. Nilner has no compassion in him, not a spark of it. If your places had been reversed, he would not have hesitated to let you perish.’

Aves spoke after a long pause. ‘I know, sir. But I’m not him. As much as I wish I could be sometimes, I’m not like Nilner.’

The officer gave him a measuring gaze and then nodded toward the load of

equipment the crewman had been assembling. ‘Captain Vought has been summoned to the command post for new orders. Griffon will be airworthy before nightfall, yes?’ ‘With the Emperor’s blessing, yes.’ ‘Get to it then, and we’ll fly against these heretics again.’

\*

AVES CLIMBED OUT of the bomb bay, rubbing a cloth over his hands to wipe off the grease and muck. The fuel feeds for the replacement engine were now secured, and his job was done. Griffon would fly, if the Imperium so commanded it. The crewman noticed a train of ordnance carriers snaking across the service road. Dragged by a Trojan crawler were a dozen flatbeds, each dominated by the bulk of an Atlas bomb. Aves had never seen an Atlas up close before. They were like long, distended teardrops ending in a splay of winglets, heavy and threatening. Unlike the standard bombs the Marauders usually carried, Atlas warheads were so huge that only one could be taken aboard each aircraft. Aves knew little about ordnance but everyone in the Navy knew what an Atlas looked like. Concealed inside that oblate black cowling was an atomic charge big enough to crack a mountain.

Nearby, Sorda was speaking with the remainder of the bomber’s crew. ‘With Weslund dead, we’ll need someone to man the lascannon. Kheed, you can take that post. We won’t need a navigator to find that cursed leviathan again.’

Kheed’s face soured. ‘A gunnery post? I don’t think the captain would agree-‘

‘Captain Vought authorised me to issue whatever orders I saw fit,’ Sorda interrupted. ‘You may feel that cannon duty is beneath you, Mister Kheed, but necessity overrides your personal feelings. Man the weapon, that’s an order.’

‘You won’t get your hands too dirty,’ said Stoi sarcastically. It was possibly the longest sentence that Sorda had ever heard the tailgunner speak.

‘What about you, then?’ Kheed sneered. ‘You’ll be leaving your precious bombs to stand at Nilner’s turret?’

Sorda shook his head, watching the Trojan approach. ‘We’ll only be carrying a single munition. I have to be the one to get it on target.’ But the Trojan rolled

right past Griffon without stopping, taking the bombs to the other flyers on the ready line.

Aves's face creased in confusion. Was the Marauder to be given a conventional load while all the others in the squadron would carry an Atlas? His answer came as Captain Vought strode out of the lengthening shadows of evening toward the assembled crew.

'Captain,' Sorda began, 'those Atlas-

'We are to stand down,' Vought said bluntly. A ripple of disbelief passed through Griffon's crew. 'Because of the shortage of personnel, we're to remain on base and assist with the evacuation.'

'Transport duty?' Kheed said, his voice rising. 'We're fit to be nothing more than a common shuttle now?'

Vought ignored the interruption. 'Command has ordered that Point November be abandoned and all Imperial Guard forces are to fall back. A full company of the Doom Eagles are on their way from Merron, and the remaining combat capable aircraft in the 404th will launch a final bombardment prior to their arrival.'

'Griffon is ready!' Aves blurted out. Normally, he wouldn't have dreamed of speaking out of turn, but his heart was racing and his better judgement was forgotten.

'The grease monkey's right,' snapped Kheed. 'We can fly right now, captain. Command can't brush us aside like this!'

Vought's voice was icy. 'Command can do whatever they wish, navigator. We go where the Emperor wills, and you would do well not to let your desire for glory tell you otherwise.'

'But why, captain?' Sorda pressed. 'Did we work around the clock to reach flight status just so we could ferry boxes of paperwork up to orbit?'

'I was informed by the wing commander that Griffon will not be granted battle ready status without a replacement for Nilner.' Vought was tense. He shared his crewmen's anger at being denied a chance to avenge themselves on

the heretics. 'No one can be spared to take his place. The commander felt that in such an undermanned state, Griffon would be wasted on the sortie.'

'I can take Nilner's turret, sir,' said Aves. 'I can stand his post.'

Kheed made a face as if he had smelt something bad. 'You can't be serious. You're a washout, a grounded weakling!'

Vought gave the crewman a hard stare. 'Look me in the eyes, Aves. Convince me.'

Aves did as he was ordered, a powerful wellspring of surety surging up inside him. 'It will be my honour to serve the Emperor.'

The captain felt a flicker of surprise as he saw something in Aves that he'd never seen before - a steely, unbending resolve. He gave him a brusque nod and turned to Sorda. 'Get him outfitted and have the ordnance crew load an Atlas aboard. We'll lift in fifteen.'

Aves never saw the looks of incredulity on the faces of the other men. He was elated, and it was all he could do not to whoop for joy and cry out thanks to the heavens; but then Vought was at his side and the captain was speaking in low, grave tones.

'Mark me well, lad. If you blunder up there, you'll be the death of us all, and by the Golden Throne I swear you'll die screaming before I do!'

The crewman gave a shaky nod.

'You should have been careful about what you wished for. Now you're going to learn the truth about your dreams - those fantasies you have about wearing the wings, that's all they were. The reality is enough to ruin some men for life.' He paused, turning to study the darkening sky. 'You're in it now, lad. No turning back.'

'I... I'll do my best, captain.'

'Yes. Or we'll all die.'

\*

GRIFFON DOVE INTO the battle on spears of orange flame, knifing through the sky amid the ragged remains of the 404th. Aves felt his gut knotting in fear. The sky, the perfect night sky of Rocene that he'd admired so many times from the safety of the ground was gone now, replaced by an ominous void choked with explosions and spitting streaks of inferno. He gripped the dorsal bolter cannons tightly as the Marauder sank into a voyage through the footless hall of an airborne hell.

Off to port, he saw the eye-searing flash of a laser as it connected the ground briefly with another flyer that seemed to vanish in a cloud of ashes, disappearing like some twisted conjuring trick. Aves blinked furiously, his eyes watering as the bright beam remained imprinted as a purple stripe on his retinas. The thick air was a mix of turbulence and random thermals, hot gas and smoke rising upward from the ground where great swathes of city lay burning or Imperial forces died by the thousands in heretic fuelled death pyres.

The crewman twitched as he glanced around inside the enclosed steel turret, frantically trying to scan every inch of the horizon at once, terrified that some enemy would approach from just the direction he hadn't been looking. The triggers of the bolters were wet with sweat from his palms, and he found himself remembering the uncountable times he had wiped them down after a mission. Aves imagined Nilner, sitting where he was now, feeling the same fears, courting the same terrors.

The screeching chatter of Stoi's tail guns brought him crashing out of his reverie and Aves spun the dorsal turret around to sight down the fuselage. The albino gunner was pouring rounds into the sky behind Griffon, but Aves could not see a target; then they appeared, bursting out of the funeral black mist like two angels of death, twin Thunderbolt fighters each smeared with foul graffiti and Chaotic symbols. Stoi caught the leader with a well aimed salvo that shattered the heretic flyer. The wingman reacted quicker and executed a sharp wingover, dancing close to Aves's sights. The crewman shouted out a wordless cry and slammed the triggers home.

Bolt shells tore the flyer into ribbons and it collapsed in on itself, folding up into a burning knot of metal. Aves found himself grinning and panting as he

realised he had just made his second kill.

White light flared out in the distance, casting stark, sharp edged shadows in the turret. The crackle of static over his headset confirmed that one of the bombers had dropped its Atlas, immolating untold numbers of heretic troops in an instant atomic holocaust.

Something glittered in the clouds to starboard and he turned the guns to train on it. Through his auspex, Aves saw another of Griffon's sister bombers, a Marauder Destroyer variant, spitting orange fire from ducts along the fuselage, and without warning one of the vessel's wings broke away. Fragments of metal sliced through the air around the bomber and peppered Griffon's wings, slicing through fuel lines and fluid channels. Aves's heart leapt into his mouth as jets of combustion streamed from the engine cowlings. A large spear of broken metal clattered over his head and ricocheted off the tailplane, spiking through Stoi's turret as it passed. The tailgunner's bolters drooped and fell silent.

Griffon flew on, cutting through the sky, seemingly unaware that her lifeblood fuel was bleeding out behind her, that one of her crewmen had likely just been killed. All around him, Aves saw an inverted rain of bright fireflies lancing up into the darkness, streaking past in thin glowing trails. The bomber jinked wildly to port, slamming his head against the console, knocking sense into him.

'Tracers!' Aves trembled as cannon rounds from a massed battery of Hydras converged on the bomber. In places where the hull had been patched with thin, substandard plating, the flak cut through Griffon's fuselage and ate into her vital systems.

'Griffon, inbound to target. Terra, protect us.' Vought's voice, tight and forced, spoke from Aves's comm-set, and he heard the grinding metallic noise of the bomb bay doors opening.

Still the tracers chewed and nipped at the Marauder as she turned into the wind. Aves glanced over his shoulder toward the nose and saw smoke streaming from the lascannon turret, the cupola ravaged by a direct hit from below. First Weslund, now Kheed; the devotional icons and prayer pamphlets Weslund had decorated the inside of the turret with had not stopped the cramped metal sphere from becoming the coffin for two men.

The clouds were thinning even as the raging storm of gunfire increased. The

bomber dropped into the attack slope toward the heretic's mobile base, and Aves could see where a near miss from an Atlas had run it aground. A second hit would kill the big machine once and for all, cutting out the heart of the apostate forces. Aves felt his fear wane as a cold, clinical calm came over him. The certainty, the Tightness of purpose he had felt on the runway was in him once again, and he heard Captain Vought's words echo in his mind: 'He must understand that the Emperor places his servants where they are needed.'

Aves nodded to himself. This was where he had been destined to be. Griffon was shuddering all around him, electrical arcs jumping from component to component, the burnt tang of sizzling plastics mingling with the stink of hot metal; and then he heard the voice. A single word.

'Aves...' The captain poured a lifetime of agony into his name.

In an instant, the crewman had vaulted out of his seat and dropped into the fuselage; he dashed past the hatch to the bomb bay, barely registering Sorda's body sprawled across the floor there, blackened shreds where his chest had been. Aves pulled himself up the ladder rungs and into the cramped cockpit. The handholds were slippery with liquid, and the crewman felt his gorge rise as he realised it was Vought's blood.

'Captain...'

Vought held one hand pressed to his throat, fingers wet around a knife of glass embedded in his larynx. His face was bathed in red light cast from a dozen warning glyphs on the console before him. 'Boy. Listen.' He spoke in ragged gasps. 'Can't launch... Atlas... Too much damage.' Griffon bucked as a shell chewed a lump out of her wing. Vought nodded at him. 'Take over.'

Aves did not question the order, quickly unstrapping the pilot from his couch. Released, Vought slipped to the floor of the cockpit, barely breathing. Aves took the captain's place, feeling pools of vital fluid soaking into his flightsuit.

Beyond the cockpit window, the land leviathan was growing to fill the horizon, the plume of smoke emerging from its cracked hull like an arrow in its side.

Aves reached forward and flipped the arming switch for the Atlas from safe to active setting. 'Ready, sir.'

‘Good lad.’ With painful effort, Vought forced himself up and held out his hands. ‘Take this. Quickly, now.’

The captain placed a bloodstained emblem in Aves’s trembling hand, an age-yellowed skull framed with skeletal wings. The crewman ran his finger over them, caressing the careworn bone carving.

‘Earn them, lad. You know what must be done,’ Vought coughed. ‘Wear them with honour.’

The crewman turned Griffon into the face of the gunfire, pinning the bone wings to his chest; then he reached for the throttle and pushed the Marauder’s engines to the redline.

Griffon fell into the leviathan like a spear thrown by the Machine God himself, and in the glorious firestorm of her sacrifice, the heretics knew the wrath of the Imperium’s most steadfast souls.