



LOST TALES

Exhumed stories from the
Sabertooth Card Games Backgrounds

Foreword

Between 2001 and 2008, Sabertooth Games developed collectible card games under license of Games Workshop, using its intellectual property of the Warhammer 40,000 universe...

These three successive games were *Warhammer 40,000 Collectible Card Game* (2001), *Horus Heresy* (2003) and *Dark Millennium* (2005).

In order to promote them, the company published on its website a collection of short fictions...

The first one, *Live Ammo* (2003), was the result of a fan fiction competition won by Edward Bolme, under the pen name of Leo Eric Shepperd. Edward Bolme later wrote several novels and stories set in the fictional universes of *Magic the gathering*, *Forgotten Realms*, *Paranoia* or *Eberron*...

The Horus Heresy story arc came with the second game and had been written by Alan Merett, now overseer of all intellectual property development of Games Workshop.

This small series of short stories - we freely titled *The Horus Rebellion* - had been compiled in another volume following the standard of Black Library's novels.

By the end of 2005, with the Dark Millennium Card Game, third and last of the series, came no more than eight short stories.

The first ones were Dan Abnett's *Blind Hopes* (August 12th) and George Mann's *First Blood: Galadin's Feint* (September 8th).

Then came *Wraith War* also by George Mann, a two part story, the first part setting the background of a game campaign planned for January 2006 and the conclusion written according to the results.

George Mann's *The Gathering Storm* came around mid January 2006 (before the conclusion of the *Wraith War* campaign).

The Invitation was the next story, by the pen of Dan Abnett and had been compiled in the *Tales of the Dark Millennium* anthology.

Revelations by Steve Horvath was the very short introduction of an uncompleted tale.

Galadin's Assault is an unfinished two part story from the hand of Kevin

Beadle. As *Wraith War* it presents and develops the background of another campaign, organized in March 2006. We have to think that the campaign was still ungoing when the company collapsed.

Last came *Gate of Soul* by Mike Lee, also compiled in the *Tales of the Dark Millennium* anthology.

In 2008, Sabertooth games ceased activities, the company dismantled and the website disappeared... Here are the *Lost Tales* of The Sabertooth 41st Millennium card games.

LIVE AMMO

by Leo Eric Shepperd

OVERHEAD, THE RIPPLING thunder of another dropship tore across the sky as 3rd squad, 3rd platoon picked its way through the Hellthorne forest.

Potnek glanced up to try to spot the fiery contrails through the branches overhead. "I can't see anything," he muttered. Seen through the lenses of his gas mask, it seemed a light fog blanketed the woods, but knew the mist was a thin coating of condensation on the inside of the mask. The lenses were supposed to be fog-proof, and maybe they would be if it weren't so hot. If he weren't so hot.

"Scared, soldier?" asked squad leader Mandag.

"N-no," said Potnek bravely.

"My arse."

Potnek exhaled heavily, making his mask puff beneath his helmet. The acrid stink of the mask's virgin rubber smothered his senses, but it overcame neither the alien scents of the forest, nor the unmistakable smell of fear that escaped from the beads of sweat that trickled down his face.

"I haven't ever-well, it's just-"

"You've never faced the enemy."

Potnek drew a shuddering breath. "Yeah."

"You've drilled with live ammo, right?"

Potnek nodded, remembering the one live-fire drill in his two weeks' emergency-levy training. He'd crawled through obstacles while bolter rounds cracked through the air no more than a meter over his head.

"Same thing," grunted Mandag. "They just aim lower in real battles."

"Great."

"Look on the bright side, soldier," said Mandag, clapping him on the

shoulder, "you get to shoot back!"

Potnek chuckled, although it came out as a bit of a nervous titter. "Yeah, live ammo."

"S'right," said Mandag. "And they're as scared of it as you are."

"But they're bugs," protested Potnek.

Mandag's face turned dark. "That's enough chattering in the ranks, soldier."

The squad trailed the rest of the platoon through the forest to a wide clearing, widened even further by the fact that numerous trees had been felled to build a makeshift barricade and firing line around the perimeter of the firebase. The underbrush had been burned away by flamers, and Potnek immediately recognized that it had been done to facilitate the movement of reserves, ammunition and the wounded. He felt his fear rising once again, and with it, his bile.

He glanced to the bunker at the center, and saw an imposing man in a high-peaked red officer's cap. Hands held calmly behind his back, he directed the defenses of the firebase.

"He looks so calm," said Petnok, "how does he do it?"

Mandag turned his head. "Commissar Schmidt?"

Potnek nodded. "Yeah. With no armor, he could die as-"

Mandag rounded on his recruit. "You think he fears death?" he hissed in the greenhorn's face. He held his bolter pistol up, nearly striking Potnek in the nose with the blunt, iron clip. "Look at this, boy! The God-Emperor of Mankind blesses every round in this clip! Each round gives its life for one chance to blow the head off a stinking 'nid. These bolts have no fear, and by the Emperor, you'd better not waste their chance by quaking in your boots! We're all expendable, boy, we're all ammunition in the Emperor's war to save our race! Remember that!"

Just as abruptly, he spun around and yelled out, "You heard the lieutenant, 3rd squad! Over to the rampart! Move!" he stormed off to the barricade, leaving Potnek to wonder how Mandag could hear the lieutenant's orders while serving up a full charge of invective on one raw recruit.

Pressed up against the massive tree trunks, Potnek felt a sense of security. He was protected, he had live ammo, he was ready.

Until they came. Suddenly countless swarming bugs erupted as if from nowhere, shattering the quiet. The forest writhed with their teeming masses. The weapons of the Steel Legion erupted in a thundering roar even as the first wave

of tyranids crashed against the barricade.

Wide-eyed, screaming behind his mask, Potnek unloaded his first clip on full auto and ducked down. A few frantic, fumbling centuries later, he finally slapped in a second clip as a tiny tyranid leaped over the bastion and charged into the compound.

"Watch your targets!" yelled Mandag, audible only through the earpieces inside Potnek's helmet. Potnek looked up and saw a huge multi-legged monstrosity with great, curving claws starting to step across the logs. Its shadow washed over Potnek as he pulled the trigger again. He blew a line of holes in the beast's carapace, and walked the bolter up the thorax to its head. He struggled to keep the barking bolter on target as he emptied its clip into the creature's cranium; round after round pulverized the breast's brain, causing a rain of dripping gore.

For a moment, the tyranid stood there, swaying. Then, blood erupting from its throat as it screamed, it began hacking at the logs all about Potnek, blindly trying to chop him in two with its razor-sharp, two-meter claws.

Potnek panicked. He ran for the bunker and crashed into it, backpedaling as if to push himself into its armored walls. The gas mask smothered his rapid breathing, and he ripped it off. Immediately he regretted it; the alien smell of the forest, the awful cloying scent of the 'nids, and the stench of human viscera all exploded in his mind at once.

Breathing through his mouth, he slapped in a fresh clip and looked up, hoping to see a dropship of reinforcements, but saw instead a quartet of flying tyranids swooping down, armed with vile guns. Glancing around, he saw Commissar Schmidt nearby, calmly directing the defense.

Potnek leaped to protect the Commissar and opened up on the incoming creatures. He felt a thump in his chest, and felt suddenly cold. Looking down, he saw a gaping wound at his diaphragm. Behind him, as through water, he heard Schmidt directing fire at the aerial attack.

"My one shot," Potnek thought, "and the Commissar lives."

He tried to raise his bolter once more, but couldn't.

BLIND HOPES

by Dan Abnett

IN A SUNLESS corner of the endless void, where the nearest stars were just feeble points of light, there was a craftworld, and in that craftworld there was an unlit chamber, and in that chamber there was a blind seer, and in that blind seer's head were visions so awful that they could not be uttered aloud.

The seer had once been able to see in two ways: with her eyes, and with her mind. But her mind had been forced to witness something so abominable that her eyes had wept blood and she had been robbed of physical sight.

The blindness did not bother her particularly, for she had compensations, though a proud, vain part of her missed her eyes, which she knew, from the compliments paid to her all her life, had been rather beautiful.

And the darkness was an affectation. It didn't really matter if the chamber she occupied was lit or not. But it suited her mind these days to operate in darkness. At her instruction, her servants would turn out all the lamps and leave her to her consultations.

The craftworld, like all the other rare specimens of its type that still endured in the barren galaxy, was old. It was old even by Eldar standards. In human terms, the contemplation of its age would have induced madness. Still, the seer forced herself to think in such terms, as she was dealing with humans now. She had to think as they did, the better to control them. She had to think in unnaturally quick spasms of emotional logic that quite distressed her. How the mammals of Terra, with their brief, furious lifespans, barbaric technologies and shallow intellects had ever come to be a force of influence in the Cosmos was quite beyond her. They bred like vermin, brawled like children, and spread like insects. They had no depth to them; even the best of them had perilously little

understanding of the true purpose of sentience.

She had studied them carefully, appalled at their heathen ways and lack of cultural maturity, shocked by the ephemeral quality of their lives. She had seen their high art and music, and regarded both with disdain for their lack of profundity. She had watched them make wars, and laughed at the hollowness of their glories, and the frailty of their courage.

In the old, old days, before Kaelor had become a neglected, decaying ghost of its former self, the aspect warriors would have derided her for consorting with the mammals of Terra. But the warriors were all but gone now, the elegant colonnades of the craftworld emptied of their glory. Those few that remained understood, as she did, that humans were the only pawns left for them to use.

She wondered what the humans would make of her. A goddess, no doubt. In their eyes, she was a woman, far above average height for a human female, slender, and majestic. It was a ironic joke of the Cosmos that Eldar and human were so physically alike. Her perfection would have triggered wars of lust and driven human males to despair.

She liked that idea. The mammals of Terra, weeping at her impossible beauty.

She wept too. She wept blood. She wept for her mouldering craftworld and the shades of all those of her race that had perished. She wept because she had seen what was coming.

HER NAME WAS Ela' Ashbel, Farseer. She considered what a human mouth would make of her name.

'Ela' Ashbel,' she said carefully, mimicking human speech. 'Ela' Ashbel.' Human voices might actually manage the pronunciation of her name. It was not beyond their palates like Llu' Jneass or Amt Ut' Dbaegd. But they wouldn't get the inflection right. It would sound coarse, like the bark of a dog.

Before her blindness, her sight had been strong, voluntary. Ela' Ashbel had called the visions up at will. But now she was as damaged and imperfect as the craftworld that bore her. Visions came when they wanted, not when she called. Sometimes, they didn't come at all.

One day, one day soon, they would stop coming forever.

Ela' Ashbel hoped, prayed, that her work would be done by then.

Or all would be lost.

This would be a good day, she told herself. The augurs were good. Today,

she would reach out and catch visions, and things would move forward. She began to call out the names aloud, hoping to lure visions of them to her. 'Santos. Helfrich. Malachire.'

She laughed to herself, considering that her Eldar mouth was probably mis-saying the names just as badly as the humans would misspeak hers. The names were strange. So blunt and meaningless. Just sounds. 'Santos'? What kind of name was that? It was close in sound to the Eldar word for an old, faded scar. Why would anyone, even a mammal of Terra, name some one 'old scar'? And 'Malachire', one syllable away from the Eldar word for a small pond or pool. Did these names mean anything?

'Santos. Helfrich, Malachire.' She spoke the names again. They were the names of the key players in her game. There were five altogether. One, 'Garzulk', was not human, for it belonged to a greenskin, but that wasn't the reason Ela' Ashbel did not call it. 'Garzulk' felt wrong to her, not a true name. A lie. When she had it in her head, it brought an echo with it of another name. A real name and a real truth hiding behind the name 'Garzulk'. She could not explain it, but then the workings of the green skin minds were even more peculiar to her than those of the Terran mammals.

The fifth name had once been human, but the Four Powers had wrought it into a thing of their own on their hot anvil. The name was 'Erebus' and she dared not say it aloud, for she knew that its heat would scald her mind and draw her into agony. The fact of 'Erebus' had blinded her in the first place.

'Santos,' she said again. 'Santos.' She felt a cool wind at the nape of her neck, and knew, with relish, that the sight was coming. 'Santos.' Her mind opened and she saw Alabel Santos walked away from the battered Aquila lander into the sunlight of the desert bowl and drew her forge-built inferno pistol.

'Show yourself! I'm being polite, by the way,' she shouted at the hot, empty dunes. 'Me, I'm being polite. But I can't vouch for my right hand or the gun its holding.'

'She's going to get us killed,' Balid whispered.

'Killed, or flayed then killed, which is probably worse, simply in terms of pain,' Fantoni agreed.

'Go and have it out with her.'

'Me? She won't listen to me. I only serve.'

'You only suck-up,' Balid retorted.

'Shutting up and letting me work would probably be a terrific career decision

for both of you right now,' Inquisitor Santos said. As the pair bickered under the shadow of the lander, Santos had turned round to regard them. Balid and Fantoni cowered back.

'And don't pretend I can't see you.'

Santos walked back across the red dust to them, temporarily holstering her gun. Her gun was only ever temporarily holstered, in Guin Balid's opinion.

Santos was tall, stunning, clad in a masterpiece of intricate power armour. The rosette badge of her office glowed on her breastplate. Her long black hair was loose around her silver shoulder guards, and her head was fixed upright in a brass frame, the legacy of an incident which Balid still referred to as 'that unfortunate happenstance on Krendon Hive.'

Santos regarded them both with one true eye and one augmetic implant. The implant cast a targeting pencil beam invisible in the bright sunlight, but the red dot of its mark showed up on their bodies. She aimed it at Fantoni's forehead, then his groin, then did the same to Balid.

'Don't do that, mamzel,' Balid said. 'I am positively allergic to being made a target.'

'Then get busy. Throne knows why I ever hired the pair of you. Fantoni can't pilot a craft for crap, and you...'

'Me, mamzel?' Balid said sweetly.

'You.' Santos shrugged. 'Armed servitors, maybe? Auto-gun units? He's here, I know it. I would like to be, I don't know, *not alone* when he makes an appearance.'

'I'll get right on it,' Balid said, and ran to open the Aquila's stowage lockers and unleash the dormant servitors.

Left alone with his mistress, Benning Fantoni smiled sweetly. 'Nice day for it, though, eh?'

Santos shook her head. 'You're an idiot.'

Fantoni disagreed. 'No, no, mam, I'm *your* idiot.'

'Where are we?' Santos asked. 'Ah, I'd have to check the charts, mam...'

'Roughly?'

'On a planetary body in the Pyrus Reach sub-sector, in the region of Cauldrus, northern hemisphere and, I'm guessing, late summer.'

'And why are we here?'

'I'm hoping the answer to that is 'to avoid being killed or flayed.' But that's just a shot in the dark.'

Alabel Santos leaned against her staff and sighed. 'We're here to meet him. Face to face. To hear her words. Throne, why did I ever hire you, Fantoni?'

Benning Fantoni was not a large person, but he drew himself up to his full height and smoothed out the feathered shoulders of his scarlet robes. 'Because I am the best shipmaster this side of the Hendus Gulf.'

'You are the only shipmaster this side of the Hendus Gulf,' Santos corrected. 'Balid?'

'Getting there, mam!' Guin Balid called back. He was a portly, bald man in his late fifties, clad in a leather-jack body glove and strung around with firearms that he seemed unwilling to use. He had been a minor member of Inquisitor Grazlen's warband, and, after Grazlen's untimely death, Santos, Grazlan's pupil, had somehow inherited him. Balid had roused the weapon servitors, but had by some means miscued their commands. They were milling around in the desert heat, Balid chasing around to shepherd them together, like a farmer trying to shoo a wayward flock of fowl.

'And if you want to know what an idiot looks like...' Santos told Fantoni, and let the rest of the sentence hang.

She turned away and strode back out into the dune bowl, her hand on the grip of her gun. Behind her, Balid began to get the servitors into some semblance of order.

'Ulu' Kastar!' She yelled. 'I am waiting! Inquisitor Santos is waiting! Reveal yourself, sir!'

Heat haze shimmered the distances. The twin suns were low in the baked sky.

'Ulu' Kastar! I know you're here! Show yourself, or my gun will loose all patience and start to target the heads of the dunes!'

Balid had got the eight weapon servitors formed into a rank behind her. They raised their gun-limbs and their autoloaders rattled. Balid walked over to rejoin the pilot, Fantoni, in the shade.

'Do this, do that. I tell you, Grazlen was nothing compared to her. She orders me about like I'm her servant.'

'You are her servant,' Fantoni pointed out.

'Yeah, well, that given...'

'You are not a very good servant.'

Balid looked at Fantoni, assuming he had spoken, though if he had it was a in deep and curious voice Benning Fantoni had never used before. Fantoni

looked at Balid. Then the pair of them slowly turned and regarded the tall figure suddenly there beside them. He had joined them out of nowhere, to stand with them gazing at Santos's back, and the backs of the arrayed weapon servitors. He was a gleaming god in his high-crested armour.

'Crap!' Balid said.

'What is that word?' the other asked. 'My translator doesn't know it.'

'It's just a word,' whispered Benning Fantoni. 'A human oath.'

'Ah, a swear. I understand. What is the female doing?'

'She's,' Balid began, shaking with fear. 'She's... calling you out, I think.'

'Calling me out?' the magnificent, towering warrior echoed. 'But I am out. I am here, as she wanted. And what are those curious mechanoids about? Are they machines of war.'

'Yes, very terrible machines of war,' Fantoni replied. 'They'll shoot you up a treat.'

'They could try,' said the warrior. 'Still she shouts. Does she not know I'm here?'

'Ulu' Kastar! Come out!' Santos was yelling at the desert.

'Uh, mam?' Fantoni called.

'Shut up.'

'Really, mam.'

'Shut up, idiot! I'm working here!'

'If you'd just look behind you...!' Santos turned.

'What?' Fantoni pointed at the air beside him. Then he realised he was pointing at empty air. The warrior had vanished.

'What?' Santos asked.

There was a heavy, dry click. Santos turned back slowly. The Eldar warrior stood behind her, his alien weapon aimed at her head.

'I am Ulu' Kastar,' he said. 'Were you calling for me? If you were, my name is *Ulu' Kastar*.'

'That's what I said.'

'Was it? Your inflection was terrible.'

'Are you sent by Ela' Ashbel?' Santos said.

'Who?' 'Ela' Ashbel?'

'No, no, mammal, it is Ela' Ashbel. *Ela' Ashbel*. The vowel is long.'

'You know what?' Alabel Santos said. She drew out her inferno pistol and aimed it directly at the Eldar's brow, ignoring the weapon trained on her. 'I don't

care how it's pronounced. She's been in my head for months, drawing me on. She wants me to help her, and I will if I can. If you let me. How's it going to play, Eldar? Collaboration or shot for shot? I know who'll win.'

'So do I,' said the Eldar. Santos nodded. 'Yeah, but you'll still be dead. How's it going to play?'

The Eldar warrior lowered his weapon. 'Time is against us, human Santos.'

'I understand that,' Santos replied smoothly, returning her weapon to its holster. 'Your Farseer has communicated that much to me. That's why I'm here. This is all about Erebus and his accursed Word Bearers.'

'You seek Erebus?'

'Yes.'

'For personal reasons, human Santos?' the Eldar inquired.

Santos had been about to answer yes, but instead she said 'for reasons of the greater good. I don't even know what that foul creature is up to, or where he is in this subsector. Your Farseer hasn't deigned to let me in on that yet.'

'It is not time,' Ulu' Kastar replied. 'Tell us of the disposition of the Dark Angel warriors you have summoned.' Santos chuckled darkly. 'Just like that? You're holding all the cards-'

'What cards?'

'Figuratively, Eldar. You want my help, but you're giving me nothing. Yes, I have arranged for a company of Astartes warriors to enter this region. I signalled them, anonymously, with information they'll have found too intriguing to ignore. But I haven't contacted them directly, because when I do, they'll want to know what I know, and then I'll have to admit I brought them here under false pretences. They will most likely turn their backs. So come on... you expect me to bring in the heavy hitters, you better give me something solid I can convince them with.'

The Eldar warrior turned and began to walk away across the desert bowl. 'Where the hell are you going?' Santos called after him.

'To consult. Wait here.'

'Don't keep me waiting long,' she warned.

She stood and watching him trudge away, lean and gleaming, into the heat haze. She felt like shooting him in frustration, but right now that alien was her only physical lead to Erebus. And the vengeance that burned in her soul.

Balid glanced at Fantoni. 'That went well, I thought,' he said.

THE VISION DIMMED. Ela' Ashbel sighed. She began to understand the tenuous nature of the link between Santos and the fearsome human warriors. Santos was playing dangerous games. Ela' Ashbel knew she would have to supply her servant Ulu' Kastar with decent enough scraps to keep the human Santos happy.

But that could wait. Another vision was swimming in.

She felt the cool wind and saw Commander Enoch Helfrich, tall, heavysset and grey, reviewed the troop notices. Instances of desertion and panic amongst the Guard forces defending Obereach were rising to critical levels. He was on the verge of losing this battle, and the real fighting hadn't started yet.

Helfrich, an admired career soldier, was something of an old hand in wars against the green skins. He had the medals and the scars to prove it. But now the foe was mankind's oldest enemy. Chaos was coming in a thick, stinking wave of invasion. With Hyrusian and Cadian elements under his command, he'd organised a rearguard action through the systems to delay the archenemy's advance. The cost had been immense.

He left his desk, put on his cap and walked the long halls of the fortress to the west wall. As he stepped out into the daylight, his augmetic eye adjusted for the light levels. The defences of Obereach's main city lay below him.

Obereach. His homeworld, principal world of the beleaguered Hyrus system. It was an irony that after all his years service and many exploits he was driven back here to make his last stand. In his nightly prayers, Helfrich swore he would not let his birth world down.

The trouble was, he didn't know for the life of him how he was going to do that. The bulk of his Hyrusian regiments had been slaughtered in the Chaos advance. He had but a handful left, along with a battalion of swarthy, taciturn Cadians.

What they had done together in these last few months, holding the archenemy back, ought to have been the stuff of Imperial legend. As it was, it was a footnote to annihilation.

The weary troopers on the battlement top had saluted when he appeared, and he waved them to ease with a kind smile. 'Palliser?'

Captain Palliser came running up. He was a young man, eager but jumpy, and one of the last Hyrusian officers still alive. Apart from Helfrich, Palliser was the highest ranking local left.

'Commander?'

'Have you eaten breakfast, Palliser?'

'No, sir, I haven't had time...'

'Eat some breakfast, son. Now, while you still can. Before food and time run out. I need you fit and vital. Didn't I tell you that yesterday?'

'You did, Commander,' Palliser admitted.

'And what have you eaten since then?' Helfrich asked.

'Ah... two ration bars and a piece of dried fruit.'

'Throne, son. I'd put you on report if there was anyone but you to supervise. Go on, tell me about the defences. I know you're dying to.'

'The defences, sir,' Palliser said. 'We're about half-done, now. It's slow work. We've precious little resources and manpower is thin. I've tried drumming up some civilian help, local stonemasons and labourers, but they're scared. A lot of citizens have begun to flee to the countryside.'

'To their deaths,' Helfrich said darkly. 'Don't they understand? The enemy's out there. The countryside isn't safe.'

'I tried to explain, Commander.'

'Try again, son. Try harder.'

'Commander?' A brisk snap of heels made Helfrich turn. It was Major Venger of the Cadian unit. He was a heavy, fierce man, with a background in the Kasrkin elite. Venger was an ogre beside the timid Palliser.

'Report, Major.'

'Yes, sir. Recon says the archenemy mainforce is still delayed at Haldor, persecuting the captured population there. But I think enemy elements are now on their way.' He handed Helfrich a dataslate. 'Warp signatures, captured by the PDF sats this morning at oh six thirty local. We have heat trails too, suggesting planetside deployment.'

Helfrich studied the slate. 'They're here. At least, the vanguard is. All right, we are now at Assault Condition Magenta. This is what we've been waiting for. I want order of battle in thirty minutes.'

The two officers saluted.

'And may the Holy Throne protect us,' Helfrich muttered as they hurried away.

Ela' Ashbel felt the fear as the sight dissolved. There was a metallic taste in her mouth. She could see the deaths that were coming. She reached out, hunting for a vision clean of fear and trepidation. Immediately, she saw

Brother-sergeant Malachire of the Dark Angels Chapter strode on across the butchered terrain into the light of the rising sun. The sky was swathed in dust above the cremated city, and the armoured men of his company, dark, plated giants in the swirling dust, spread out around him.

They would find nothing, Malachire knew. Nothing alive. Chaos had razed this place, and left nothing in its wake except ashes.

The dead lay all around: bones baked white by the furnace heat of destruction. The Word Bearers had swept through here in the space of a single night.

MALACHIRE FELT NO fear. The emotion was alien to his gene-altered form. Curiously, he felt pleased. This was proof at last. Solid proof.

Their Lexicanium had been sent a signal, from an unknown source, a source that had kept itself deliberately anonymous, but yet had access to the highest channel clearance. The mysterious signal had warned of imminent jeopardy in the Pyrus Reach subsector, and mentioned, tantalisingly, the name Cypher. Malachire's company had been despatched by the Chapter Master to investigate.

Malachire, old and experienced, had expected a ruse. But now this: Hyrus Secundus, burned out and dead. Perhaps there was something to the mysterious signal after all.

'What was the population here?' Malachire asked calmly via his helmet's uplink to their waiting battle barge. The answer wrote itself across his luminescent visor in hololithic symbols.

EIGHT POINT THREE MILLION IMPERIAL

The symbols ran in a strap across the centre of his vision, just above the smaller sigil of his round counter, which read FIFTY and the rune of his life support, which read NINETEEN HOURS BASIC.

Just another number. Just another piece of data.

'Sergeant!' the vox blurted. 'You should see this.'

Malachire recognised the voice, but even if he hadn't, the identity of the speaker flashed up on his display. ANTIMON.

Malachire turned west through the fuming ruins, following brother Antimon's tracker pulse. He found Antimon standing with six other warriors inside a ruin open to the winnowing dust and the radioactive winds.

'Brother?' Antimon said, pointing.

The desecrators of this world had chosen to raise an alter here. Built from

shattered stones, piled rockcrete lumps, girders and slabs of masonry, it rose two hundred metres above them. Human skulls had also been employed in its construction, and dried reams of fabric had been wrapped about the crude heap. Malachire realised they were flayed human skins, dried by the wind, creaking and stiff. How many human skins had it taken to swathe a thing the size of a hab block, he wondered. Just another number.

At the top of the pile, at the crest of the primitive altar, an iron post supported a tattered banner. The sight of it made Malachire sick. It was the emblem of the Word Bearers.

'Burn it down,' he told his men. 'Destroy it. And then let's find these bastards and kill them. All of them.'

Ela' Ashbel pulled away from the pain of the vision as it circled her. The sight was fading again. She didn't know how much longer she would be able to see. Briefly, she glimpsed other, distant sights and other distant beings: a bitter thing called Duron, a scared and desperate human mammal called Henkel, but neither would resolve to her sight fully.

Then something else came, strong and unexpected. She saw

Garzulk, the Faceless, the Strong, the War-boss, was raging and whooping, his black and crimson metal-sheathed arms raised above his helm.

Lit by flames and explosions, his warband bounded forward around him, slaughtering the last of the screaming pinks. None of the warband even approached Garzulk in height or bulk, though many of them were notably massive Orks. The clan had triumphed again. Another of the pitiful pink nests in the Verdis system was overthrown.

This was almost becoming boring, Garzulk considered. Of course, there was glory in one-sided slaughter and mutilation, but he craved a fight, he craved an opponent that would test his worth as warboss. He'd heard stories of the pinks. Apparently, so Ork myth said, they actually possessed warriors who could match an Ork, fury for fury, power for power. Garzulk doubted it. He couldn't imagine any of the pink mammals he'd slaughtered ever owning the strength to make a proper fight of it. He would have to make do with this butchery, and be content. The pinks were stupid. If only they'd thought to armour themselves in metal.

As he had done.

Stupid pinks. Garzulk was glad that the talons of his power claw were dripping with the brain matter of dead pinks. The pinks certainly didn't have any better use for their brains. Stupid, stupid pinks.

Then a strange thing happened.

There was a whickering sound, and the Ork beside Garzulk fell down. As he fell, his head came right off. A moment later, and two more warriors nearby tumbled over, ripped open by whizzing silver missiles.

Garzulk roared an order, and none of his warband dared disobey. They turned in the billowing smoke to seek out the attacker. Was this the vaunted human warriors at last?

It wasn't. Through the wallowing flames and cascading smoke, Garzulk caught a glimpse of the new enemy. Tall, thin, frail warriors in gleaming armour and crested helms.

The old ones.

Astonishing they should try their hand like this, so openly. Did they love the pinks so much? Garzulk knew what his race knew about the old ones, and felt bewildered. The old ones seldom came out to fight, and only then at times of threat to their own interests. Why were they attacking his band here? Were they mad? He would break them and kill them so completely.

The old ones had been a force in their time, but these days they were nothing. Nothing, in the face of a warband at full rage.

Were they stark mad?

Garzulk didn't care. He would slaughter them anyway.

The blind seer began to weep for her brother Ila' Garnel. She had told him to take his warriors and seek out the greenskins and attack them. She knew they would pay the price for that, and Ila' Garnel had known it too. But he had obeyed her anyway.

The greenskins had to be brought in. They had to be goaded and brought into the fight, as a distraction if nothing else. Ila' Garnel had understood that. It hadn't made it any easier sending the warrior to his death.

Drops of blood fell on the chamber floor from Ela' Ashbel's weeping eyes. The next vision swept over her without warning. She saw

Dark Apostle Valerius, of the Word Bearers, waited for a moment. His aides were grouped around him, on their knees, looking at the black iron deck of the warship's bridge, none daring to regard Valerius. The entire command space of the battlebarge was silent, waiting, apart from the chime of system controls.

Valerius was over two metres tall. His spiked armour was draped with the flesh of the loyalist marines he had slaughtered over the years. He had stretched their faces over his shoulder guards and made bracelets of their bones.

At his master's bidding, Valerius had taken three out of the five worlds in the system. Hyrus Secundus, Hyrus Prime, and Haldor.

Now Obereach was the next target. Obereach, where that last pitiful band of loyalist soldiers, commanded by the idiot Helfrich, controlled the prime city.

They would die. Valerius had decided he would slay Helfrich personally. With his bare hands.

'Go,' he said. 'Your order is to go.'

His aides leapt to their feet and began yelling orders.

A firestorm immediately engulfed the northern climes of Obereach. Fleet weapons started to bombard, and drop ships and landers fell like a plague into the atmosphere.

The destruction of Oberreach had begun.

Ela' Ashbel was on her knees, sobbing in the dark of the craftworld's unlit chamber. The vision of Valerius had utterly dismayed her.

Worse was to come. In a flash, for one unwilling second, she saw

Erebus. The Dark Lord himself. She could taste his atrocities and his rage. He stank of death and the rancour of the Warp. Compared to him, Valerius was just a puppet. She could not see precisely where Erebus was, but some tiny spark told her *the Elysium system*. The Elysium system! He was close to the very heart of it all!

Ela' Ashbel whimpered. She watched as Erebus took a message from one of his minions, a message that told him Valerius's invasion had begun.

'A ruse! A diversion!' she cried out. 'Valerius is just a distraction from the Dark Lord's true purpose!'

Erebus, her vision of Erebus, turned slowly and gazed directly at her. 'Just so,' he murmured. 'And you and I know what the true goal is, don't we? The true triumph? You cannot stop me, Ela' Ashbel. You are too weak and I am too strong.'

The vision faded. Erebus, just like all the humans, had pronounced her name with the wrong emphasis. But Ela' Ashbel hardly cared. She was too busy convulsing and bleeding from her eyes and nostrils and mouth.

The last vision had almost killed her. Lighting the lamps, her anxious servants ran to her side.

FIRST BLOOD: GALADIN'S FEINT

by George Mann

LIKE THE RUMBLE of a storm breaking low on the horizon, the greenskinned aliens came out of the darkness, their flashing weapons lighting up the underside of the clouds as their muzzles chattered insanely at the sky. Rockets flared overhead, trailing streams of smoke and dust that reminded Galadin of nothing so much as a series of bright, detonating fists, punching out towards him and bringing with them a spray of burning, Orkish death. From his vantage point high above the battlefield, he imagined he could feel the ghost of heat from those discharged bombs washing over him, deflected resolutely by his sleeve of dark, heavy armour.

Galadin sucked at the dry air through his respirator, cursing under his breath. He hadn't been expecting *so many* of them...

Galadin's small expeditionary force of Dark Angels had arrived on Vilhan III two days ago, and since then had spent most of their time digging in, preparing for the Ork raid. What in the name of the Emperor the greenskins were doing this far out in the Pyrus Reach was beyond him, but he'd fought this enemy before and knew well of their savagery; following an encounter on Haladrom Prime almost twenty years ago he'd been one of the only survivors of his squad, and, grossly outnumbered, had been forced to watch as four of his dead battle-brothers had been stripped of their armour and burned by the brutal aliens.

This time he had other ideas.

He fingered his bolter with intent.

Galadin had been sent to Vilhan III in an effort to measure the extent of the Chaos incursion into the region. That, and the fact there were machinations of another sort at play within his Chapter; reasons why such a large force of his

brother Marines had been assigned to this backwater sub-sector. What none of them had been expecting to find on Vilhan III was an Ork raiding party in high orbit, and Galadin had decided that, even though he was outnumbered, it was preferable to dig in and fight it out. Better that than allow the vicious bastards a chance to get at the remaining Vilhan colonists.

He'd brought a large detachment of guardsmen - Cadians - with him to the planet, but after discovering the Ork raiding party he'd formulated a different plan for those men; unlike his fellow Marines, fanning out for battle down below, Galadin had decided not to deploy the guardsmen here to face this wave of Orkish terror, at least not head-on. They would be put to more strategic use, whilst his brothers coaxed the greenskins in closer, leading them on. It wouldn't last for long, and the risk - he hoped - was minimal.

Galadin scanned the small force of his brother Marines as they took up their positions around the edges of the makeshift outpost, far beneath him. He was standing on a raised girder that jutted out from the ruins of an old fuel refinery, providing him with a perfect vantage point for surveying the battlefield. And for killing Orks.

He considered the massing ranks of the enemy. From down below, the towering Marine sergeant looked like an immovable giant, a dark statue etched out against the red sky, surveying the coming storm with an emotionless, fearless resolution.

Words began to scroll across the hololithic display on the inside of his helmet. For a moment he ignored them, continuing to watch the mass of greenskins charging across the dusty wasteland, motorbikes and other strange, roughly-built vehicles kicking up clods of dirt behind them, blurring the horizon. They'd be on them in a few moments, rumbling noisily over the top of the empty fuel containers buried deep below the ground on the outskirts of the refinery.

A voice sounded in his ear, drawing his attention. 'Sergeant. On your command...'

'HOLD STEADY BROTHER. Bring them in as close as you can. We can't beat them on firepower alone.'

He watched the word spread amongst the other Marines, who duly lowered their weapons, allowing the charging, maniacal Orks to draw ever closer, unopposed.

This has to work.

Galadin waited.

Just a moment longer...

'Take out their vehicles.' His voice sang out across all channels. He raised his bolter and spread a line of fire down across the front ranks of the charging Orks. Bikes exploded as his brothers joined the attack, flipping the enemy high into the air as wheels burst open, torn asunder by the shred of high-speed bolter shots. The strange Ork buggies folded under the intense rage of the Marine attack, fuel igniting in great balls of flame, tongues of fire licking out at the still charging aliens and sending casualties plunging into the ranks of infantry running in behind the vehicles. One of these vehicles, swinging wildly with its driver limp at the wheel, careened at high speed into the line of Marines, sending two of Galadin's brothers sprawling dead to the ground. The creature on the back sent waves of hot, sputtering bullets randomly into the air as it tried to regain control of the turret-mounted guns, before one of the Marines put a shot through its skull, ending its brief interlude behind the Imperial lines.

More Ork bikes raced in from the left flank, and Galadin turned towards them, razing the area with a hail of bolter fire. He caught one of the riders in the throat, sending a gout of arterial spray into the air before the creature buckled in half and sent the vehicle crashing to the floor. More of the Marines turned to stop the other two bikes from getting in too close, but before they went down the riders managed to take out another two Marines with a shower of heavy fire. The statistics flickered up on the inside of Galadin's visor as the Ork weapons struck home: four dead. He roared as he continued to channel fire at the enemy.

Flamer fire squirted from somewhere beneath him; Balados, one of his squad, was burning deep into the enemy lines as the Orks came within range, causing tortured howls of pain to erupt from within their ranks. The burning creatures continued to charge towards the Marines, as if they were set on some sort of bizarre, pre-programmed path that caused them to run blindly at the enemy, but soon enough they careened off course and began barrelling into their comrades, flames guttering out as they became nothing but charred, black heaps on the battlefield. Galadin allowed himself a grim smile of satisfaction. The enemy were beginning to fall.

Suddenly, the air filled with a deep, resonating rumble as the sound of over three hundred pairs of charging Ork boots pounded across the hollow cavities in the earth where the abandoned fuel tanks were buried.

Here they come...

To these marauding aliens the thin line of Marines must have looked like a

feeble show of force, at best, and Galadin knew the odds would have been stacked against them in a close quarter battle: forty Marines against over three hundred Orks. Even the Emperor himself wouldn't fancy those odds. But Galadin had counted on that, counted on the enemy taking too many risks...and now they were playing right into his hands.

'Here they come. Steel yourselves Brothers, and take as many of them as you can. Remember - the more we fell now the less we have to mop up later!' Galadin gave a deep, guttural cry of rage as he raised his bolter and leapt off the girder, swooping down to join his battle-brothers just as the wave of Ork infantry broke around the outpost, swallowing his view.

Galadin's chainsword roared to life as he gutted first one Ork, then another, circling as the enemy swarmed in from all sides. He felt a blossom of pain in his left leg as he lopped the head off one of the ugly green brutes, and turned to see another pulling an axe free from his armoured leg. He shut down the pain immediately and fired his bolter at close range into the face of the axe-wielding Ork, dropping it still to the ground. He flexed his leg and checked his hololithic display: damaged, but usable.

Across the vox link Galadin could hear his brothers shouting to each other proudly as they cut down one after another of the vile aliens, defending the Imperial outpost with the last vestiges of their might. Galadin raised his voice to join his brethren as he forced himself deep into the Ork ranks. Swayed by bloodlust and the intricate dance of battle, he almost forgot to hail his rearguard. He glanced around, trying to ensure that all of the Ork forces had been engaged. In the thick of battle it was hard to tell. He swung his chainsword towards another of the greenskins, its teeth biting deep into the creature's arm. It smiled at him, ignoring the pain, and swung its gun around by the muzzle, trying to batter him out of the way. Galadin thought he could almost see the glee on the creature's face as it recognised how close the Orks were to victory, with only thirty-four Marines left between them and the colony.

Not if I have anything to do with it...

He pulled hard on his chainsword, ripping it noisily through the creature's shoulder and down into its chest, lacerating its ribcage. Then, momentarily free, Galadin voiced a message over a private vox link. 'Captain Lucien? *Now* would be a good time.'

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then there was an almighty explosion from somewhere behind him, a sound so deafening it was like the lid being blown off a volcano. There was a moment of hesitation on the battle field, a

confused second in which the Ork forces, shocked by the sound of the explosion, glanced towards the source of the noise. It only lasted for a second. The hail of four hundred lasrifles hummed into the rear of the enemy troops, cutting them down in quick, successive waves.

Eight hundred Cadian guardsmen emerged from their hiding places within the abandoned fuel tanks, bringing their fire to bear on the alien enemy, now flanked on both sides by swaths of Imperial forces. The remaining Orks, realising their error, turned, confused, and tried to flee, but to no avail: they were surrounded completely, and in every direction they ran they were confronted by the unflinching wrath of the Emperor and his loyal soldiers.

The battle reached a crescendo, and Galadin allowed himself to be carried along by its rhythm, its promise, losing himself in the spirit of the fight. Orks were falling all around him, as far as he could see.

Today, it seemed, was going to be a very good day indeed.

WRAITH WAR

by George Mann

LIKE A LEGION of slender, ethereal ghosts, the guardians of Ulthwe raced across the battlefield, light-footing over the bloated, abandoned corpses of their green-skinned enemy and razing the horizon with a halo of fire-light and screaming shuriken projectiles.

Behind them, tall, elegant war machines rumbled noisily as they discharged their weapons into the waiting hordes, pummelling the ramshackle fortifications with unrelenting ferocity.

Inside the fortress walls, a sea of impatient Orks awaited the coming onslaught with a sense of something approaching glee, whilst turret-mounted guns chattered incessantly at the approaching Eldar, filling the sky with a hail of bullets. To the Orks manning these guns, the charging Eldar looked like an army of ancient gods, shimmering like wraiths in the light of the dying sun.

Nevertheless, these were gods of a mortal kind, and many fell to the spray of bullets sputtering out from the hot mouths of the unreliable Ork weapons.

Too many dead. Too many lost voices.

From a vantage point high above the battlefield, Farseer Karus Bethaneal looked out over the clashing troops below, his crimson sash billowing about him in the harsh winter breeze.

This is not how it should be.

He cradled the sigil of his craftworld close to his chest as he called out upon the infinite power of the webway, crafting runic symbols with his mind's eye. Colours swam into his mind; abstract shapes and swirling geometric patterns; filtered light from the darker places of the universe.

Around him, momentarily, the battle seemed to still.

Bethaneal closed his eyes and allowed his mind to focus. He teased the shapes and patterns, drawing them out, making sense of the formless images as they splashed into his sensorium. Breathing deeply, he peered into the future... and withdrew sharply, gasping for air. There was violence there, a dark and brutal coarseness that seared his mind, eroding the edges of his vision, causing him to pull away. It was as if the savage, animalistic minds of the green-skinned aliens were somehow blurring everything, swamping his view of the future. Either that or the battle was still too much in the balance. He hoped that was not true.

I've been too long on this cold, hard world.

He waved his hand and the battle seemed to awaken with a renewed vigour, as if his few moments away had somehow stirred the melee to frenzy.

He watched, his heart wrenching, as a band of the savages toppled a spirit walker, its lance broken by rocket fire, its legs shattered by relentless attack. It crumpled down against the fortress wall, crashing through the hastily built barricades and spilling more of the green things out onto the battlefield. Flames erupted around the fallen titan like a wound trying to cauterize itself, and explosions flamed into life along the length of the fortress wall, temperamental Ork weapons detonating in the blaze. He could hear the screams of anguish as the souls of the dying were wisped away into the void.

Bethaneal adjusted his position on the rocky overhang. Behind him, the battle was going more in their favour, the green hordes falling back from the furious onslaught of his Aspect Warriors. Blades sliced through air, armour, flesh and bone in a whirling cacophony of blood, as the Banshees danced their way through the Ork ranks, green skins falling in their wake. Further afield, Hawks dived into the fray, picking off unwary Ork infantry who seemed oblivious to the swooping death that harried them from above. He smiled, feeling the joy in the hearts of his warriors as they parried with the aliens, defending their honour, their lives, their race.

Yet he could also hear the lamenting song of the dead. It was always there, of course, a quiet, undulating murmur in the back of his mind. Sometimes he gave it voice, allowed it to fill his head, a conduit between this world and the ancient light of the webway. He felt comforted by his time with the spirits, always renewed, always gifted of clarity. But now was not a time for that.

Bethaneal closed his eyes and reached out again, probing the lurid, yet pliable minds of the enemy. To his ancient mind it was like trying to grasp hold of a candle flame; too much, too soon, and it guttered out, unable to cope with

the telepathic connection he was attempting to initiate. This time, however, there was a beacon attracting his attention; a leader of the savages, or else a prophet or wise one. He teased at the edges of its mind, appalled by the spongy alien-ness of it, yet also aware of its savage intensity, its power. He found it hard to connect with the creature, hard to *understand* its loud and often emotive thoughts, to interpret them and give them a frame of reference he could connect with. Nevertheless he persevered. He hoped it would yield its secrets.

His name was Groshpit, but they called him ‘The Flayer’.

He liked ‘The Flayer’. It made him feel larger than life, like a leader should feel; powerful, awe-inspiring, god-like amongst his warriors. The name had come about after his campaign on Bastion V and had spread quickly amongst the others, referring to the manner in which he’d dealt with the captured soft-skins and their mewling women. He had peeled them like fruit and tossed them back at the remaining - defeated – humans, as they retreated from the planet, rushing to escape his might, crowding into tiny space vessels to flitter away into the night.

He had crushed them too, eventually, bombarding their craft from space as they fled.

He only wished he could deal with the quick-footed ones as easily.

Still, the Mek-Boys had been hard at work inside the fortress, labouring on the weapon that was going to win them the battle, and the planet. He could see it now: the thin, fragile carcasses of the old ones smeared across the battlefield, their sorcerers captured and bled, their shining armour smelted down and turned into weapons to smite them with. His weapon would be a sight to behold.

He rubbed his tusks absently, smiling.

Groshpit, The Flayer, could feel victory close at hand.

Bethaneal shivered inside his cloak. The images of the alien creature fled his mind, and the coldness seemed to pass with them, leaving him standing once again to face the wind. The alien’s thoughts had been animalistic – almost prehistoric – but he had managed to shape them into something he could interpret, just. And he heeded the warning well.

The green skins were about to show their hand, a very dangerous hand, and Bethaneal had to warn his brethren...

Bethaneal clutched his sigil close to him and allowed his mind to flower open, psychic tendrils reaching out to his children on the field of battle, warning them of the imminent danger. Amidst the raging dance of death and blood he felt, oddly, a wash of calm, as the warriors heeded his warning, and, realising

there was no retreat, continued to battle on with renewed vigour, resigned to their fate.

The Farseer felt sadness welling inside of him.

Surely the end does not come like this?

He watched the greenskins as they swarmed around a wide opening they had cleared in the fortress walls, far below him. The unclean mind of their leader had revealed to him its plan; an enormous weapon - a cannon of unimaginable power - was hidden inside the belly of the fortress, and at this very moment the creatures were wheeling it forward, preparing to raze the earth with an onslaught of fire, blood and shrapnel. It was not this, in itself, that terrified Bethaneal; he and his brethren had faced far worse in their time amongst the mortals, but rather the willingness of the alien leader to sacrifice nearly half of his warriors in an effort to swing the tide of the battle. In destroying the encroaching Eldar with his vast and glorious weapon, he would also be devastating almost a thousand of his own troops. Sacrifice on that level seemed anathema to Bethaneal, who held each and every life so precious that he counted them all as they fled the mortal world, channelling their anguish and sorrow.

He scanned the battle scene laid out before him. His warriors were easily pushing back the alien forces now, as he had known they would, fighting back the tide of green-skins with their mastery of war. His warriors were artisans, beautiful, whirling embodiments of death. He feared that it would all be for nothing.

The Ork forces were stalling. He could see clearly now, in his mind's eye, that the battle would be over soon. Left to battle it out, his Aspect Warriors would have the fortress stormed within the hour. It hinged on the weapon of destruction that the mechanics of the alien warlord were priming to fire.

Bethaneal peered more closely at the events taking place on the fortress walls. He could see, just, the warlord himself – Groshpit – standing on the barrel of his enormous gun, barking commands at his mindless slaves. Bethaneal closed his eyes and collapsed his mind into the webway once again. Images and abstract colours swam into view. He reached out, trying to grasp the flickering life force of the ork leader, in the hope that he could snuff it out entirely. Once again he teased around the edges of the alien's fragile mind, looking for a way in. He snatched images, fragments from the other's thoughts – feelings of glory, of power, of excitement and blood lust – the primal urges of a savage. He also knew then that he was too late, that the alien didn't have *enough* of a mind to vanquish in this fashion. He withdrew, allowing the world to envelope him once

again.

A squad of brave Hawks were diving at the swarm of aliens that were manning the gun, but to no avail – there were simply too many of them setting up a defensive perimeter around the weapon.

Bethaneal watched, helpless, as the Ork warlord gave the command to fire with a wave of his hand, still perching precariously on the shaft of the cannon as if it were an extension of his own might.

Bethaneal couldn't make out the activity behind the weapon itself, but could see its hot muzzle gazing out across the battlefield, and he waited, his breath held, for the gouts of flame to erupt into the ranks of warriors battling down below. There was a low rumble as the weapon powered up, generating energy, building pressure, before a massive explosive blast shook the entire area, knocking Bethaneal to his knees and momentarily deafening him.

Slowly, he climbed to his feet and cast his eyes over the scene below. To his amazement, the battle continued to rage on. He took in the scene for a moment longer before he realised what had happened. The weapon had misfired. He tried to see through the smoky haze that had descended all around him.

The fortress was gone. In its place, a burning patch of tundra and the remnants of the structure, ablaze with anxious flames and filled with the sounds of the dying. The warlord was gone, vaporised with his weapon as the energy banks he was standing on must have collapsed, venting the entire discharge of the weapon inside the fortress walls, and containing it there, leaving the battlefield before it entirely untouched.

Bethaneal's spirit soared. He grasped his sigil and began the long climb down towards his brethren, ready to join them in the fury of the battle. He knew, now, beyond doubt, that the day belonged to them, and though it was a victory claimed from the ashes of a failed alien technology, he knew the fates were on his side, and his brethren would wake to fight another day.

GATHERING STORM

by George Mann

++++Inquisition Report++++
++++Ref: Duron/374749.4783++++
++++Priority: Active++++
++++Clearance: Magenta++++

Lord Gradsholme.

The storm that has been gathering latterly in the Pyrus Reach has now reached a crescendo. The fighting is spreading across the sub-sector at an alarming rate, the Chaos incursion swallowing planets like the jaws of some giant, hungry beast. I fear the threat is now worse than originally anticipated. Many planets are lost and it is due only to the resilience of the Adeptus Astartes that we have managed to maintain a hold in the sector at all. The green skins and their feral war-making have inadvertently provided a reprieve in the Hyrus system, clashing head-to-head with the Chaos invasion force on Hyrus Prime and crushing them in a three-day-long campaign. Whilst most of the planet is now under alien control, the capital, along with a handful of other cities, remains ours. The traitorous Word Bearers, under the command of their hideous apostle, Valerius, now fight a war on two fronts, wedged between the brave remnants of the Hyrusian Guard in the ruins of the cities and the brutal aliens in the wastelands. Meanwhile, a combined force of Cadian guardsmen and Dark Angels have dispelled more of the green-skins on the planet Imon, but I feel it will not be long before their swelling numbers will overwhelm us altogether. For

some reason currently beyond my understanding the creatures seem drawn to this backwater. I cannot believe they have the faculties to appreciate the reasoning behind the Chaos incursion, which leads me to believe they have somehow been manipulated into entering the fray. To what ends, I have yet to uncover. Further reports from the planet Decimus suggest a slight difficulty with a small force of Eldar, who, inexplicably, launched a raid against the Imperial forces from some fortified ruins bordering the wrecked city of Alsem. Up until this point it had seemed that the ancient ones had been leaving our forces in peace, and although they were easily defeated it still leaves me with a sharp feeling of disquiet. We cannot afford a battle on three fronts, not if we wish to hold back the Chaos armies and prevent the ruinous powers from gaining a hold in this sector. Will it be long before the Brother Knights arrive to offer some reprieve? I digress.

During the aftermath of the encounter with the Eldar, some of Captain Grenyard's men uncovered a bizarre xenos artefact of unknown origin. I surmise now, with hindsight, that this had indeed been the objective behind the alien attack. I have ordered it brought to my ship, from where I will report on my findings within the week. I have also received word that a large detail of Adepta Sororitas, aided by the Dark Angels and led by Inquisitor Santos, has decimated a contingent of Word Bearers on the planet Cauldrus. News which, in itself, is wholeheartedly welcome, yet it troubles me that Santos appears to have such incredible insight into the movements of the enemy. It appears she laid out an ambush as if she knew the traitors were coming. I intend to investigate; for some time I've feared Santos has been treading too close to the line of propriety, and during this time of peril in the Pyrus Reach we cannot afford to doubt our own. I have resolved to draw a line under the matter, one way or another. For Santos I fear the worst.

Inquisitor Juri Duron

‘INQUISITOR DURON?’

The sound of a woman clearing her throat behind me.

I paused.

‘Sir? You requested my presence?’

I hesitated a moment longer, then opaqued the screen on the tablet, scrubbing my report from view. I turned around in my chair to see Sister Superior Kaye, decked out in full battle regalia, standing behind me, her arms folded neatly

across her chest. In the dim light of the chamber her expression was serious, understated. She seemed more than a little awkward in my presence. I wondered, absently, how she really felt about transporting an unknown, male Inquisitor into the heart of a war zone, manners and matters of etiquette aside.

Not that it mattered much.

I rubbed a hand over the stubble that covered my scalp. ‘Do you have an update for me Sister?’

‘Yes sir, we’ve had word that our outpost on Cauldrus is once again under attack from Chaos forces.’

‘Indeed? And have you spoken directly to Inquisitor Santos regarding the matter?’

‘No sir. She is in the thick of the fighting at present.’

I studied her patiently, waiting for that little, tell-tale sign that would betray the fact that she was being liberal with the truth. Not even a twitch. She must have truly believed that Santos was personally involved in quelling the incursion. Nevertheless, I nodded my approval.

‘I hear Inquisitor Santos has a... flair for resolving this sort of situation. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. Please proceed with due haste.’

I drummed my fingers on the edge of the desk, demonstrating my impatience.

‘As you wish, Inquisitor. The Emperor’s Inspiration is suitably armed, should we encounter any undesirable elements that are still in orbit around the planet. I’m led to believe it is not a major invasion party.’ She turned to leave.

I waited for a moment, just long enough for her to begin making her way towards the door. In her long, flowing robes she looked almost as if she were floating, the manner in which she glided elegantly across the chamber floor.

‘Sister...?’

‘Yes.’ She stopped and turned to face me once again.

‘My apologies. I wanted to ask you about the small Sorietas scout ship you sent on towards Cauldrus two days ago,’ I let that hang for a moment, ‘What was the purpose of the expedition?’

Sister Kaye’s face took on a pale hue. ‘We were operating under the orders of Inquisitor Santos, sir. I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose her orders.’

‘Hmmm. Very well. Are you at liberty to discuss the reasons behind Inquisitor Santos’s visit to the Pyrus sector, or why she would deem it appropriate to requisition such a large force of Battle Sisters? Prior, that is, to the

Chaos incursion that we were obviously not expecting...’

She glared at me, obviously feeling the pressure of my hard questioning. I offered her a wry smile. ‘Sister, it’s very clear to me that you have an admirable sense of duty and it is not my intention to besmirch that in any way. I am simply seeking the truth of the matter...’

‘I would suggest, in that case, sir, that you speak to Inquisitor Santos directly when we arrive in Cauldrus’ orbit. It is my belief that the fighting should have abated by the time we are due; the outpost is well fortified.’

‘Of course it is.’

I turned back to my desk and waved my hand over the tablet, bringing it back to life, at the same time allowing Sister Kaye to know she had been dismissed.

The sound of her footsteps could be heard, echoing, as they trailed out behind me.

I waited for the sound of the door sliding shut.

I was absolutely convinced that by the time we arrived in Cauldrus orbit, Inquisitor Santos would be nowhere to be found.

Sighing, I cued my vox and began sending a message to Brother Captain Stephanus, in an effort to discover when the contingent of Grey Knights was due to arrive in the sector. The fighting, in my opinion, wasn’t over until it was over.

Darkness. Nothing but darkness and the light of distant stars, burning through the half shuttered windows.

What light there is in this place has a sour hue, suggesting shadows that hide within shadows, layers within deeper layers. It is almost as if the light, aware of the sheer depravity and terror in this place, has fled, too, driven out by the encroaching madness.

Seated, clad in enormous plates of power armour that is decorated in ribbons of flesh, is Lord Erebus, Herald of Chaos, Prefect of the Word, Warmaster of the 3rd Grand Host, keeper of the darkness within. Tubing coils from the sides of his skull, snaking into the power unit that adorns his shoulders. His face is a grimace of pure rage; eyes bloodied with a deep crimson glow, mouth a black pit of spittled hatred, nose wrinkled in disgust at the news he is hearing broadcast on a vox unit that sits on the desk before him.

Slowly, he lifts his hand and wipes his mouth, his eyes flicking across a projection on the far wall.

‘Phaeron?’ His voice is a roar that thunders like a storm in the Warp.

‘Yes sir?’ The other voice is warbly and strange, as if heard through a filter

of some kind. Erebus cocks his head to acknowledge the sound of a scream echoing from somewhere else in the barge, far below.

‘Phaeron. Where is my tablet?’

There is a hesitation on the other end, a fumble.

‘It is lost sir. We believe that Duron has acquired it.’

Erebus leans forward in his chair. It is clear that if Phaeron were in the room, Erebus would have squeezed the life from his pathetic frame with his bare hands.

‘Lost is... not acceptable. The time is approaching. Lorgar awaits us. Fail me again and your skin will be flayed and fed to the dogs whilst you are forced to watch, your head kept alive by the ministrations of my surgeons whilst your body is burned, still twitching, it’s nerves still connected to your brain. Have you ever seen my surgeons at work, Phaeron?’

Erebus smiles.

The reply is soft, spoken quietly. ‘Yes sir.’

‘Then deliver the tablet as planned to the rendezvous point at Elysium.’

‘Yes sir.’

Erebus reaches forward and cuts the connection. He sits back in his throne-like chair, his fingers tapping the arms absently. Then he turns to another man who stands whimpering in corner.

‘Dravos. Fetch me a minion from the lower deck. I feel like skinning someone.’

Terrified, the other man scuttles away.

Erebus’s tongue flicks out and he hisses until the man has fled far into the artificial night.

Deep in his blackened heart, he knows that Chaos is coming to the Pyrus Reach.

THE INVITATION

by Dan Abnett

This short story had been published in the "Dark Millennium" compilation

BEYOND KAEROGRAAD AND the fertile plains, where the northern country rises into the maw of winter, there is a place called Namgorod, which men held for a long while until the holding of it became too hard and they let it go into the wilds. Even in summer, the northern country is no friend to man: the steep, flinty hills, the ragged forests, the deep glens where streams are frozen in their beds for three-quarters of the year. In winter, the north coughs up snow upon the place, as a consumptive coughs up blood, and the region is a mortal enemy to anything warm and alive. Men knew this when they built Namgorod, knew it every winter as they tried to hold on, and when they left it to the ministry of the ice and snows, they understood that winter was its true master.

Tegget came to Namgorod on the eve of glittering winter. He could taste it in the air, like a cold stone in his mouth, and smell its sharp edge. Tegget was a catcher of men, and the northern country sheltered its fair share of outlaws, absconders and fugitives in the summer months, so he knew the trails well enough. But it was six weeks past the end of catching season, and those fugitives that did not intend to die of cold had already tried to flee across the plains: most of them into the waiting clutches of professional men like Tegget.

A catcher of men, especially one so honed and experienced as Tegget, had no business coming to the north so late in the year, but Tegget had good reasons. The bounty was one; more than he could make in three decent seasons. The loan of an expensive, self-heating bodyglove was another. Most of all, it was the nature of the request. By dint of his profession, Tegget was an outsider to the

finer echelons of society in Kaerograd, tolerated as a necessary evil by the grandees and nobles of that city. For the Regent himself to make the request, well that was a wonderful thing indeed. Tegget anticipated prestige, an elevation in rank, perhaps even a royal commission. 'Lowen Tegget, Catcher of Men, by appointment to his Excellency the Regent.'

Tegget worked alone. He had explained this fact to the Regent, and it seemed to suit. The Regent, speaking somewhat indirectly to Tegget, as if a bad odour had invaded the private chambers of the Regency, had emphasised the delicate nature of the matter. It was to be kept 'close'. If rumours of it got out, Tegget would find his prize money forfeit. Other punishments were hinted at, and stipulations made.

Tegget had never been one for talking about his work. He just did what he did.

He imagined that was why the Regent's people had sourced him. That, and his reputation. Though Tegget didn't talk about his work, others did, and Lowen Tegget was known for his wetwork, and the remarkable extent to which he messed people up.

Tegget rode his transport, a fat-wheeled AT-bike, to within a kilometre of Namgorod, then killed the drive and continued on foot. The bike's engine had a mute-shield, which had cost him plenty on the black market, but he didn't want to push his luck. He buckled up his armoured jack, slid his hunting las from the bike's saddle boot, and threw two of his best psyber lures into the air. The metal blades of their wings opened as they ran free, and they circled the treetops with gentle beats.

Both of them were small aquila-form: artificial kestrels wrought from steel and compound ceramics. Tegget pressed his left cheekbone, and the ocular implant in his left eye-socket began to display, split-screen, the view from the lures.

Namgorod was quiet. Flaking black ruins, the largest a great shell of ribs open to the wind. There was a light dusting of snow on every surface. The sky was hard and dark, like smoked glass and, in the west, the first, bright winter stars had just appeared like lanterns.

'Where are you?' he whispered.

'If I'd-' Pavlov Curtz, Regent of Kaerograd, cleared his throat, trying to compose himself, 'If I'd had some notice of your visit, great lady, I would have prepared a rather more-'

Olga Karamanz held up her hand for silence. 'Do not exercise yourself,

Regent. I require very few things of you, and a formal, ceremonial welcome is not one of them.'

Curtz shrugged. 'Forgive me, great lady, but the Cauldrus system is a backwater, most often overlooked. State visits are rare, especially from such an august personage as the Canoness of the Order of the Martyred Lady. The Ecclesiarchy will wish to schedule conference with you, to discuss matters of faith, and the-'

'This is not a state visit,' said the battle-sister standing to the left of the canoness.

'As has been specified,' added the other, waiting by the door, 'this is a private matter.'

Curtz opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, and sat down. The minute they had arrived and been announced, he had realised something was wrong. A canoness like Olga Karamanz did not make an idle visit to a place like Cauldrus Prime. Nor did she come so secretively, hurried in through the back doors of the Regency, attended by just two sisters. There was no entourage, no massed escort.

The three women were dressed in veiled black robes, which only slightly betrayed the armour beneath.

From what he could see of Canoness Karamanz's face behind the veil, she seemed surprisingly young. Her features were slim and very fair, almost adolescent in their purity. He could not guess her age, though her voice was soft and dry as if it was a thousand years old.

'You know what this concerns?' she asked.

Curtz nodded. 'The... uh, the matter of the miscreant.'

The battle-sisters attending the canoness were both considerably taller and more robustly made than the great lady herself. Faces invisible behind the veils depending from their starched black headresses, they stood with their hands clasped in front of them. The canoness had introduced them as Sister Elias and Sister Bernadet, though the Regent had lost track of which was which.

'The miscreant,' said Elias or Bernadet.

'You saw fit to report the incidents discreetly via ecumenical channels,' said Bernadet or Elias, 'which tells us you understood the sensitivity.'

'I... yes,' said Curtz.

'Yet you are surprised to see us?'

Curtz cleared his throat again, and rose to his feet. He crossed to the

sideboard and retrieved his half-drunk glass of amasec. He had been called away from the end of a trade dinner for this unexpected event. He was still wearing his formal robes and the ridiculously ostentatious badges of the guild and union offices he was patron of.

He took a sip and let the sliding warmth of the liquor stiffen his resolve.

'I expected a response,' he said. 'Perhaps an envoy, perhaps even a sister ambassador. Someone to smooth things over and see that things were done properly.'

Not... not the canoness herself.'

He looked round at them. 'I'm so sorry, may I offer you a-?'

Olga Karamanz shook her head on behalf of all three of them.

'You are put out, Regent,' she said. 'My apologies. We were already in the vicinity at the request of the Most Holy Ordos. And, well, we want to make sure that this is handled... properly, don't we? Why don't you begin by telling me exactly what happened?'

Curtz nodded. He thought, in a sudden, uneasy flash, of Tegget, and wondered if he had done the right thing in hiring him. Throne knew, he had no wish to anger a canoness.

Nor any wish to send a man to his death.

Even a piece of scum like Tegget.

The great hall of Namgorod loomed over him like the bones of a whale. Flakes of snow were falling, silent and soft and almost luminous, out of the night, and the wind had dropped. The air-chill was savage.

Lowen Tegget had known hardship. He was ex-Guard, ex-stormtroop elite. He'd seen some living hells, and dreamt of them still, some nights. This cold was just a trifle.

He moved in through the ruins, all the while rubbing the powercell of his hunting las with his heated glove to keep it lively. There was something here. Signs of heat residue, a cook fire, the gnawed bones of small animals. And something else: a presence, a shadow that lurked just out of reach in the silent ruin.

He knew what he was supposed to be tracking. The fact didn't scare him, but it made him particularly alert. 'The miscreant is a dissembler,' the Regent had said. 'It wants us to think it is something, and it is most certainly not that thing. God-Emperor, Tegget, I'd not send you up there if I thought there was any truth to it. This is a matter of pretence, and blasphemy.'

Blasphemy. That was a word to conjure with.

Namgorod had been the first township built by the settlers when they had reached Cauldrus Prime centuries before. They had raised it here because it was a site adjacent to their initial landing zone. The great hall he was presently creeping through had been built from ribs and girders scavenged from the wrecked colony ship that first winter. Later, the colonists had realised that other parts of the planet offered more decent and habitable conditions, but Namgorod, as the first coming place, had persisted out of respect for a long time, until it had become untenable.

Untenable. Untameable. Such was the northern country. The people of Cauldrus Prime, Tegget's ancestors, had abandoned Namgorod, because it was too wild, too inimical to human life.

Something wild was with him now. He could taste it as surely as he could taste the snow.

He checked the view from the lures. They were circling the hall, their vision boosted by cold-light and night-fibre arrays.

Tegget heard something. A tiny mouse noise in the darkness to his left. He raised the rifle, panning it slowly.

There was a blink, and his lure-sights went dead. First one, then the other. He tried to re-cue them, but the links were flat. He felt his pulse rate elevate.

Something hit him from behind so hard, so fast, that he had no time to cry out.

He saw his rifle spinning in the air. He saw the world upside down as he was somersaulted away from the collision.

He saw blood in the air, jetting arterial blood, and knew it was his own.

'I strove, more than anything, to protect the reputation of the order,' Curtz said, resuming his seat. 'There were three incidents, mass-killings. The perpetrator made a great effort to suggest they were the work of a battle-sister.'

He paused, and looked at the canoness and her guards. 'A battle-sister of the Order of the Martyred lady,' he emphasised. 'A battle-sister... *corrupted.*'

The three veiled women remained silent.

'I knew this was impossible,' Curtz went on. 'Absolutely impossible. Your kind -

forgive me, great lady - your kind are incorruptible. I made a careful study of the archives to reinforce my opinion. History shows us many horrors, but never a battle-sister fallen. That was when I realised it was a sham. Lunacy in fact. I

suspected that it was matter of blasphemy. You are no doubt aware that the Pyrus Reach is greatly conflicted of late. Terrible times, and the poison of it, I'm glad to say, is slow to reach us. Sometimes being a backwater has its benefits. I supposed that some miscreant desired to stain the order's name by committing these crimes, to engender unrest and panic. I sent the reports to alert you to the defamation.'

He paused. Still, the three women remained silent.

'Now... now, I'm not so sure.'

'Because?' asked the canoness.

'Because you're here.'

'What did you do?' asked Elias or Bernadet.

'I hired a man. A fellow of decent reputation as a catcher of men. I hired him to hunt down the miscreant, so that the matter might be settled and the good name of the order cleared.'

The canoness rose to her feet. 'You sent a man after this... as you said... miscreant?'

'A good man. A capable man.'

'Regent,' she said. 'You have signed his death notice.'

'I made provisions,' Curtz said quickly. 'The man was no fool. Very capable, very sly. He will keep his mouth closed.'

'Forever,' said Bernadet or Elias.

'Now look-' the Regent began.

'You look, Regent,' snapped the canoness. 'I have to know where the man went, and on what clue. This must be contained.'

'Are you telling me-' Curtz began, astonished by the realisation of what they were saying.

'I am telling you nothing,' the canoness said. 'It is better that way. Throne knows, for all of us. Tell me where this man went.'

'I can do better than that,' the Regent said, his voice tiny and terrified. 'I can show you. As one of the terms of his employment, I insisted he carried a tracker.'

'Report?' whispered the canoness into her vox. The night was moonless, and flakes of falling snow stuck against the dark gauze of her veil.

'Trace is clear,' Battle-sister Elias replied.

'Advancing,' voxed Battle-sister Bernadet.

Two of the best, the canoness thought to herself. Bernadet and Elias, two of the most profoundly gifted warriors in the order. They were long since out of

sight, but she could picture them. Elias with her storm bolter, Bernadet with her power sword and flamer. Two of the best.

Then again, the canonesse thought, *Miriae* was the best of the best.

The canonesse walked down an avenue of black trees through the falling snow, her hand upon the haft of her mace. Her gown was unheated, but the armour beneath it protected her from the hideous cold. This cold has been sent by the Emperor, she reasoned, and thus was mortifying and uplifting.

Her lander had put them down two kilometres from the place called Namgorod.

The Regent had begged them to wait until morning, at which time he would have been able to summon a significant force of PDF troopers from the Interior Guard to support them.

Not appropriate. This had to remain a private matter. If anyone found out, if word spread-Olga Karamanz stiffened in dread. This whole matter was unthinkable.

Unbearable. Better it was finished now, quickly, under the silent folds of a bleak winter night. *Miriae*. *Miriae*.

They had found the AT-bike up on the track, and followed the tracer signal down towards the ruins. The Regent's man - Tegget - was undoubtedly hours dead, but the tracker had been a smart idea. His corpse might be cooling, but the device was still alive and signalling.

'Something-' Elias voxed.

Then, 'No, nothing. Just a dog-fox. Area's clean.'

Karamanz raised her tracker handset. The signal from the poor unfortunate's body was still clear, and stationary. Ahead, in the ruins of the great hall.

Where are you, *Miriae*, Karamanz wondered? That wasn't the real question. The real question was: what did they do to you?

What did the vile powers of Chaos manage to do to you when they held you in their clutches? Verdicon. That's where it happened. *Miriae* Sabathiel, sister superior, had been reported as missing in action during the vicious fighting against the unholy Emperor's Children.

And then this. Back from the dead. Back, but changed. Changed in ways no other Sister of Battle had *ever* been changed.

Second only to the mighty Astartes, the Sisters of Battle were the most perfect fighting mechanisms of the Imperium of Man. Unlike the Astartes, none of them had ever fallen to corruption. What a trophy for Chaos. What a twisted

champion.

'Canoness?' It was Elias.

'Speak, child.'

'The outbuildings are empty. I'm coming west on your flank.'

'Close in.' Karamanz drew her mace and ignited it. It hummed blue in the snowy dark. 'Bernadet?'

'East of you, approaching.'

The canoness stepped into the great hall. Snow sifted down like flour through the bare rafters, tie-beams salvaged from a long-defunct starship. The trace was just ahead of her now. She paced forward, mace by her side, anticipating the sight of Tegget's corpse.

There was no corpse. Just a spatter of blood across the black flagstones.

A spatter of blood and small, blinking device...

Karamanz's mind turned quickly. 'Beware!' she voxed.

Her warning came too late for Sister Bernadet. Clambering over the slumped, snow-dusted rubble of the east transept, Bernadet turned and raised her weapons as she heard a whirring. The psyber lure, beak and claws to the fore, whipped down out of the night and punched through her veil, through her face, through her skull.

Bernadet staggered, clutching automatically at her ruined head, her discarded sword and flamer bouncing off the loose stones around her. A half-noise burbled out of her ruptured throat.

She fell dead on her face.

Elias heard her fall and ran to her. She was ten paces away when Bernadet's fallen flamer somehow misfired all by itself. The firestorm hit Elias like a hammer, and burned off her robes, her veil, and the skin of her face. She stumbled, on fire, screaming in fury. She raised her bolter in a hand dribbling with molten fat and tissue.

A las-round, a hot-shot from a hunting weapon, burst her cranium and felled her.

Twisted and still, her corpse continued to burn.

'Elias? Bernadet? Sisters?'

Silence. The crackle of the dead-link vox. The crackle of the flames. The sigh of the winter wind.

'Miriael?'

Karamanz turned in a slow, wary circle, her mace ready.

'Was I so easy to find?' asked a voice from the dark.

'Miriael?'

'Was I so easy to find?'

'Yes!' Karamanz hissed.

'Good.'

'Miriael, please. I want to help you.'

A shadow disengaged itself from the night. Just a shadow, hunched and puppet-like, its long, shaggy hair backlit by the glow of the snowfall.

'I knew you would come looking for me,' the shadow said. 'I knew you would hunt me forever.'

'I want to help you.'

The shadow laughed.

'By the power of the Throne, and the God-Emperor-' Karamanz began.

'Shut up! I won't listen to that any more.'

'Miriael...'

'There are so many things I want to do. So many things I need to do, but all the while you are hunting for me, I can't be free. I needed this.'

'This?'

'Oh, great lady, why do you think I made it so easy for you to find me?'

Olga Karamanz froze. Her grip on the haft of her mace tightened.

'I wanted you to come, so we could be done with this.'

The shadow stepped closer. It wasn't Miriael. It was a rough-set woodsman in an armoured jack, swaying and pale, wounded. He held a hunting las across his chest, but made no attempt to raise it.

'Miriael!'

'My lord Balzaropht has plans for me,' the hidden voice said. 'But I can't accomplish them all the while you're hounding me. So I called you here, so this could be done with.'

Canoness Olga Karamanz swung around and raised her mace into the third quarter defence. The sword, its blade as bright as the snowlight, was already inside her guard. It ripped through her gown and plate armour, and opened her body to the spine.

She fell, pouring hot blood into the cold floor. Steam rose. Behind her veil, her mouth opened and closed uselessly.

'Hush,' said the voice. 'We'll speak no more about it.'

'I'm cold,' said Lowen Tegget. He sat down, and hunched his head between

his knees.

He was tired. There was a dreadful stench of blood in the air of the great hall, like hot iron.

'Cold can be ignored,' said the shadows.

'Says you. I'm cut here. You cut me.'

Mirrael Sabathiel emerged from the darkness, sword in hand, and bent down beside him. 'You'll heal. You're mine now. Daemon princes sing and my pulse quickens. Soon yours will quicken too.'

'Throne,' Tegget sighed. 'Am I cursed? Have you cursed me?'

'You were the invitation, Lowen. You helped me defeat my enemies. I'm showing my gratitude by sparing your life... and sharing with you the wonders I've seen.'

Tegget groaned.

Mirrael Sabathiel straightened up and held out her arm. The two kestrel lures swooped in and perched there. One was dripping with blood.

'I like you, Lowen. I like your toys. They please me. You could serve me.'

'How, lady?'

'Oh, Lowen Tegget. By being you. You are a cunning man. A fine killer. See, tonight you did for two Sisters of Battle. There is nothing you can't do.'

Tegget smiled and shook his head sadly.

'I'm just a catcher of men, lady,' he said.

She reached out her hand and began to stroke his shaggy hair. 'You're so much more than that, Lowen,' she said. 'You're my friend, and you're an instrument now.'

'I'd like you to walk with me and serve at my side.'

He looked up at her, his face pale and frightened. 'Is this what corruption feels like?' he asked.

She nodded, still stroking his head.

'Feels good,' he admitted. 'Where will we go?'

'Ah, now, my little hunter,' Mirrael Sabathiel said. 'How are you at hunting eldar?'

REVELATIONS

by Steve Horvath

IN THE BLACKNESS of space just outside of the Cauldrus system sits the Eldar spacecraft called the Prophecy, the flagship of the Farseer Ela' Ashbel.

She sits in her meditation chamber gazing at events both past and multiple possible futures and how it impacts the present. She senses the presence of Lyranis waiting outside the door, with a wave of her hand the runes drop to the floor and the visions fade.

She touches his mind with hers and bids him to enter.

"I have made the arrangements for your meeting with the Mon-Keigh."

"You still disagree." It was a statement not a question.

"It is not my place to question your judgment my Lady."

"You have served on my seer counsel for over two millennia Lyranis. It is not only your place but your duty"

"They are wild chaotic impulsive creatures. They cannot be trusted."

"It is because of their nature that they make the perfect pawns. We do not have the strength left to fight this battle alone."

"But the other craft worlds have sent aide and more is to arrive."

"It is not enough. If we are to regain our place amongst the stars we cannot continue to throw our lives away in battles we cannot win. Not when there are other resources we can use. You know what Erebus intends. If he succeeds in bringing his masters Daemon world through into real space all of our plans, all of the lives we have lost and the sacrifices we have made will be for nothing!"

"It is of course as you say. We will be at the rendezvous point shortly; we will be ready when you are my lady." With that he bows, turns and leaves.

After Lyranis leaves in the barest of whispers she breathes "I hope so."

To be continued...

GALADIN'S ASSAULT

by Kevin Beadle

“90 SECONDS TO docking”, the commlink announced.

Galadin remained steady as the Docking Pod sped towards the Cruiser at incredible speed. A final pray to the machine god and a last check of his boltgun were needed, but otherwise his squad was ready. They weren't the first to board; the 1 st Company with their Tactical Dreadnought Armour had been deployed to deal with any heavy resistance before the bulk of the troops – lead by Galadin himself – joined the battle.

Although he would never show it, inside Galadin felt nervous for the first time in years. His recent field promotion to Captain had been praise enough, especially from Master Azrael himself, but to be given this vital mission as his first command showed a regard higher than he'd expected.

“60 seconds to docking”

Looking out of the view-port on the side of the pod, the target approached rapidly. The mutated, twisted hull of what once was the grand Imperial Cruiser Eternal Pain sickened him. To see such workmanship perverted to the will of Chaos was a travesty, and one he'd deal with this very day. His mission was to eliminate the Dark Apostle Valerius and his twisted ship to give Hyrus Prime some respite, and he would succeed in driving this scum from the universe.

“45 seconds to docking”

Suddenly the commlink burst into life, the sounds of the approaching battle echoing in his ears.

“Squad Talil attempting to secure first quadrant...”

“Brother Christof is down, repeat Brother Christof is down. Request reinforcements to third quadrant...”

“30 seconds to docking, make preparations for arrival”

Galadin checked his boltgun one final time with practised ease, and readied his squad. Beside him Brother Ramous prepared the ammo feed for his Heavy Bolter – an impressive weapon especially in these confined areas. Galadin had hand picked his new squad and they had come with high recommendation, he knew they would perform their roles on the battlefield admirably.

“20 seconds to docking”

“Squad Talil taking heavy casualties, first quadrant falling. Target sighted in first quadrant, repeat target sighted in fir....” The commlink from Brother Talil descended into static, the implication clear in Galadin’s mind. Turning to his troops he watched their final checks and prayers.

“10 seconds to docking...”

“Brothers, today is our day, our fight. We will drive our twisted brethren from this ship, and burn it from the inside. For the will of the God Emperor, and for our Master Azrael, we will prevail today.”

“5 seconds to docking...4...3...2...1...docking clamps engaged”

“To battle men, for the Emperor!!!!”

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To be continued...

GATE OF SOULS

by Mike Lee

This short story had been published in the “Dark Millenium” compilation

DIRGE WAS A cursed world.

It was a planet of bleak stone and black rock, and it didn't belong in the Hammurat system; of that much the Imperial surveyors were certain. It was a rogue world, one orphaned from its home star countless millions of years in the past, and it had wandered through the darkness of space for millions of years more before being trapped in the grip of Hammurat's three blazing suns. Where Dirge had come from – and what strange vistas it had crossed over the aeons – the surveyors didn't care to know. Its surface was a wasteland of deep craters and jagged peaks, shrouded in thick, poisonous air that howled and raged under the cosmic lash of Hammurat's suns.

What mattered was that Dirge was rich; a virtual treasure trove for the ever-hungry forge worlds of the Pyrus Reach subsector. The planet's crust was thick with valuable metals, radioactives and minerals, and the cometary impacts that had shattered Dirge's surface had brought with them even more exotic elements in amounts never before catalogued. When news of the discovery reached the subsector capitol it touched off a frantic rush of prospectors and mining expeditions, eager to cash in on the new world's untapped riches. Within the space of a year, almost two million prospectors, miners, murderers and thieves had come to Dirge to feast upon its riches.

Little more than a year later three-quarters of them were dead.

Seething electrical storms burned out equipment and raging winds tossed fully-loaded ore haulers around like toys. Seismic activity collapsed tunnels or

trapped gases exploded under the touch of plasma torches. Men were carved up in backroom brawls over claims too hazardous to mine. The outnumbered Arbites mostly looked the other way, pocketing bribes equal to a year's salary on more settled worlds and counting the days until their transfers came through.

Sometimes prospectors would return to the crater-cities from the crags or the deep tunnels, bearing strange artifacts of polished stone inscribed with strange inscriptions. When the rotgut was flowing in grimy taverns all over Dirge, men would sometimes go quiet and whisper of things they'd seen out in the storms: strange, corroded spires and dark menhirs covered in symbols that made their blood run cold. No one paid the stories any heed. Prospectors loved to tell tales, and what difference did some strange stones make when there was money to be made?

And so the crater cities grew, spreading like scabs across the deep impact wounds the comets left behind. Men died by the thousands every day, killed by storms, earthquakes, carelessness or greed. Still more lost their minds from metal poisoning, or mounting debt, or simply snapped from the stress of constant danger and merciless quotas from corporate masters dozens of light-years away. They blinded themselves with homemade liquor or wasted away in the grip of drugs like black lethe and somna. Some sought comfort in the words of itinerant priests, putting their salvation in the hands of holy men who took their tithes and sent them back to their dormitories with empty prayers and benedictions.

In the end, nothing made a difference. Until a prospector named Hubert Lohr came down from the crags one day, sold off all his possessions and began preaching a new faith in the bars and back alleys of the crater cities. Lohr accepted no tithes; instead he offered people the secrets of Dirge. He spoke to broken-down miners, diseased prostitutes and petty thieves and told them of the Lost Princes, who still wandered the void in search of their wayward world. The Lost Princes possessed powers greater than men – greater even than the Emperor, who offered nothing but mouldy catechisms and cruel exhortations for the men who lived and died beneath his gaze. Lohr told the fevered crowds that if they made an offering large enough it would shine like a beacon across the void and lead the Princes back to Dirge. And when they returned they would reward the faithful with gifts beyond their comprehension.

By the time the agents of the Ecclesiarchy and the planetary governor realized the peril in their midst it was already too late.

* * *

THE BATTERED AQUILA lander had barely touched the plasteel tarmac before Alabel Santos was out of her seat and striding for the landing ramp. Even without the grim badge of the Inquisitorial rosette gleaming upon her breast she cut a fearsome figure in her ornate power armour. One hand rested on the butt of her inferno pistol and a sheathed power knife hung in a scabbard on her other hip. 'Get the gun servitors ready,' she snapped at the portly, middle-aged man struggling with his own restraints while fumbling for his respirator mask. 'I don't plan on being here long.' Her man Balid bleated something in reply but she paid little heed, her armour's respirator system whining with strain as she headed swiftly out into the howling wind.

Purple lightning flared overhead, etching the bustling airstrip in sharp relief. Tech adepts swarmed over a long line of parked Vulture gunships, tending fuel lines and reloading rocket pods for another fire support mission over Baalbek City. On the other side of the plasteel tarmac sat a cluster of Valkyrie Air Assault craft, red tags fluttering from the Hellstrike missiles loaded on their stubby wings. A platoon of armoured stormtroopers, part of the Guard regiment's mobile reserve, huddled near their parked transports, cursing the wind and waiting to be called into action.

Santos spotted the permacrete bunkers of the regimental field headquarters just a few hundred metres from the airstrip, the pale colour of the new structures standing out sharply from the dark grey terrain. The guards on duty raised their weapons at her approach, but hurriedly stepped aside when they saw what badge she wore. She cycled through the atmosphere lock then pushed past bewildered and tired staff officers before marching stiffly up to a broad planning table set with an old-fashioned paper map of Baalbek City. Grainy aerial reconnaissance pics were spread across the table, highlighting different city districts. Studying them was a short, broad-chested officer in the uniform of the Terassian Dragoons, surrounded by a pair of staffers and a tall, forbidding woman whose cold eyes glittered beneath the rim of her peaked Commissar's cap. The colonel glanced up at Santos's approach, a curt order on his lips, but his exhausted face went pale at the sight of the gleaming rosette. His gaze continued upwards. The inquisitor's head was held stiffly erect in a frame of brass, lending her stunning features the severe cast of a martyred saint. 'Colonel Ravin, I presume?' she said without preamble. Red light flashed balefully from her augmetic eye. 'I am Inquisitor Alabel Santos of the Ordo Hereticus. What is your situation?'

To his credit, the colonel didn't skip a beat, as though having an Imperial inquisitor arrive unannounced at his headquarters was all in a day's work. 'Two months ago dissident elements among the mining population engineered a planet-wide revolt, overwhelming the local Arbiters and PDF contingents –'

'I know why you're here, Colonel,' Santos snapped. 'I've been reading your despatches since you arrived on Dirge.' She studied the picts scattered across the table and plucked one from the pile, sliding it over to the colonel. The aerial image showed a mob of citizens surrounding a bleached pillar of bone, their gloved hands raised in supplication before the blasphemous sigil at its peak.

'You aren't dealing with dissidents,' Santos replied coldly. 'They are something altogether worse.'

Colonel Ravin and the Commissar eyed one another. 'They call themselves the Cult of the Black Stone,' the Commissar said. 'That's all we've been able to learn so far.'

'Then I shall educate you further,' Santos said, leaning across the table. 'This is the symbol of the Word Bearers, Colonel.' The inquisitor rapped the pict sharply with her knuckle for emphasis, causing the staff officers to jump. 'The Ruinous Powers have taken an active interest in Dirge, and I have reason to believe that one of their greatest champions is at work in Baalbek City. I've come halfway across the sub-sector to find out why.' And to stop him once and for all, Emperor willing, Santos thought grimly. You have much to answer for, Erebus.

Colonel Ravin's pallor deepened. 'But that's...that's incredible,' he stammered. 'Traitor Marines? *Here?* How do you know this?'

'Because it is the Inquisition's business to know such things,' Santos snapped, turning back to the picts. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the colonel stiffen, then with an effort she reined in her temper. You have enough enemies without needing to make more, she reminded herself.

'It's all in the reports, Colonel,' she explained. 'I've been studying every status report, Administratum log and Ecclesiarchal dictum filed from Dirge for the last six months.' Santos picked up one of the picts: it showed the planetary governor's palace in Baalbek City. Like all city structures, it was low, broad and windowless, built to withstand the frequent cyclones that swept over the crater wall from the wastelands. The resolution of the pict was good enough that she could recognize the impaled figure of the planetary governor, suspended on a girder among an iron forest set on the palace roof. The inquisitor set the pict aside and reached for another.

‘Four months before the uprising, merchant ships were reporting strange surveyor readings in the vicinity of the system’s far asteroid belt,’ Santos continued. ‘The local port authority dismissed the reports as pirate activity, but curiously, there was a dramatic drop in pirate attacks in the system over the same time period. Shortly afterward, orbital traffic control detected a number of unidentified flights into and out of Dirge’s atmosphere. Again, these reports were passed off as smuggling activity, but I have another theory – a Chaos warship entered the system and is likely still here, hiding in one of the system’s asteroid fields.’

Santos studied an image of cultists dragging bloody corpses from a burning dormitory towards the base of one of the cult’s sacrificial pillars. She set it aside with a frown of contempt. ‘Then there are arrest reports from the local Arbites headquarters. In the days leading up to the uprising several cult figures were arrested and when put to the question they described their leaders as armoured giants – the ‘Lost Princes’, according to one of the prisoners. The cultist described the greatest of these princes as a god among men, who wore the skins of his foes as testament to his power and bore a mighty talisman of his gods’ favour.’

‘The Chaos champion you spoke of,’ the Commissar declared. ‘Who is he?’

But Santos shook her head. ‘I dare not speak his name. I’ve placed your souls in peril just telling you this much.’

One pict after another showed cultists at work around hab units and municipal buildings across the city, carting out truckloads of debris and hauling them away. After the fourth such image she began to line them up on the map table in chronological order.

‘If the prisoner was to be believed, there were no less than five Word Bearers present on Dirge, including the Chaos Lord. That’s an astonishing number for such a minor world.’

‘Minor?’ Ravin said. ‘Dirge supplies more than half of the industrial materials used by forge worlds across the sub-sector.’

‘The Word Bearers don’t make war according to the *Tactica Imperium*,’ Santos declared. ‘They don’t think in terms of lines of supply or resource interdiction. They fight for souls, spreading terror and debasement from world to world like a cancer. Dirge, however, is both isolated and sparsely populated. From their standpoint, it’s a poor target.’ The Inquisitor studied the line of images and her frown deepened. ‘Colonel, why did you order these images taken?’

Ravin looked over the picts and waved dismissively. ‘We were trying to gauge the extent and composition of the enemy fortifications based on how much material they were excavating. Those work teams have been at it day and night since before we got here.’

Santos straightened. ‘Excavations.’ The Inquisitor felt her blood run cold. ‘These cultists aren’t using floor panels and wall board to build fortifications, Colonel. They’re hollowing these buildings out to dig for something. That’s why the Word Bearers are here. Why *he* is here. The rebellion was just a diversion so they could search the planet without interference.’ Her hand was trembling slightly as she snatched up the last pict in the line. The time code in the corner indicated that the last excavation had begun almost three days ago. No new excavations since, she realized. They must think they’ve found what they’re after.

‘Colonel, I require the use of your mobile reserve and a flight of Vultures,’ Santos declared in a steely voice. ‘I’ll brief the platoon leader en route.’

* * *

THE BUILDING HAD formerly housed the local tithe assessor’s office. Only three storeys tall, square, windowless and slab-sided, the structure was built like a treasure vault, which wasn’t far from the truth. A small army of servitors and stooped scribes had toiled night and day within its cold, gloomy cells, recording the profits of the mining cartels and the independent prospectors and assessing the Emperor’s due.

Now the square outside the building was piled with the guts of the Imperial tax collection machine. Large, ornate cogitators stood in drunken ranks, their wooden cabinets splintered and their brass gauges tarnishing in the corrosive air. Drifts of torn cables and mounds of flooring and wall board were plucked and pushed by the restless wind, and a pall of glittering dust swirled endlessly in the harsh construction lamps erected by the work crews outside the building.

Glass crunched like brittle bones beneath Erebus’s armoured boots as he stepped through the narrow doorway. Just beyond the threshold a tiled floor extended for less than a metre before ending in a jagged cliff of permacrete and steel.

The miners of Dirge knew their trade well. Working day and night, they’d completely torn out the first two floors and the building’s two sub-levels.

Tangles of shorn wiring, crumpled metal ducting and shreds of wallboard hung like man-made stalactites from the gutted ceiling, painted white with a layer of grit that sparkled in the harsh light of the construction lamps.

All work had stopped in the pit below. More than two dozen men set aside their tools and prostrated themselves on the rocky ground at the Chaos Lord's arrival. Erebus looked out over the fruit of their labours and was pleased.

Once the subfloors had been removed the miners had dug another three metres into the grey, ashy soil before they'd found the first of the black stones. It had taken another day of careful work under difficult conditions to lift away millions of years of rock-hard encrustations that had covered the strange symbols carved into their surface. The work had gone slowly because the delicate sonic brushes would run out of power after only a few minutes in proximity to the rocks, and because the workers' brains disintegrated from prolonged exposure to the symbols themselves. Even from where Erebus stood he could feel the power of the Warp rising like black frost from the surface of the accursed objects.

On the orders of Magos Algol the tallest of the stones had been pulled upright again. It rose five metres into the air, casting a long, misshapen shadow across the excavation site. The surface of the object looked crude and rough-hewn, but the symbols carved into the rounded surface were sharp and precise. They climbed the stone in a kind of spiral, following the rules of a language that had died out before the birth of mankind. At the top of the stone the symbols ended at the base of a perfect sphere, haloed by an arch of stone wrought in the shape of twining tentacles.

Erebus smiled, revealing pointed teeth and the fearful demeanour of a cruel and vengeful god. The Chaos Lord was clad neck to foot in the imposing armour of a Space Marine – but where its ancient engravings once extolled the might of the Emperor of Man, it now preached an altogether different faith. Blasphemous runes and symbols of ruin pulsed sickly from the Traitor Marine's breastplate and the edges of his pauldrons, and the skulls of defiled Imperial priests hung from a brass chain around Erebus's neck. Psalms of vengeance and depravity were scribed in blood upon the tanned hides of fallen Space Marine heroes and stretched between barbed spikes across the Chaos Lord's pauldrons and from hooks at his waist. In his right hand Erebus held aloft a talisman of fearsome power – the dark crozius, symbol of his faith in the Chaos Gods.

A broad ramp, wide enough for two men to walk abreast, had been built from the ground floor to the base of the excavation. Its steel supports quivered slightly

as Erebus descended slowly into the pit. His black gaze was fixed on the standing stone and the orb at its summit.

Erebus stepped unflinchingly into the stone's twisted shadow. The darkness that fell upon him was unnaturally cold, sinking effortlessly through the bulk of his daemonic armour. The Chaos Lord felt his shrivelled insides writhe at the icy echo of the Warp, and Erebus welcomed it, spreading his massive arms wide. His mind filled with visions of the Seething Gulf, the ocean of mad wonder that the servants of the false Emperor called the *Occularis Terriblus*. It was the font of godhood, the birthplace of universes. Amid the roiling sea of unfettered power, Erebus beheld a swollen red orb that glittered like a drop of congealing blood. He heard the cries of multitudes, the chorus of supplication sung at the feet of his unholy master, and he longed to join his voice to the song. *Lorgar!* His mind called into the void. *The time draws nigh, unholy one. Soon the gate will swing wide!*

Erebus chuckled to himself, the sound echoing in the cavernous space and causing the cultists to tremble in fear. He turned to the assembled multitude, his eyes alighting on a two figures kneeling apart from the storm-suited labourers. One was a hulking giant in red armour similar to Erebus's own; the frail, elderly man hunched next to the Word Bearer looked as slight as a children's puppet, all slender sticks and grimy rags, too fragile to touch.

The Chaos Lord favoured his servants with another dreadful smile. 'Arise, Phael Dubel,' he commanded gravely. 'And you, Magos Algol. Blessed are you in the eyes of the Gods Who Wait.'

The magos rose to his feet with an agility that belied his frail and aged appearance. His skin had the grey pallor of a corpse, his thin, wrinkled lips pulling back from gleaming steel teeth in an avaricious grin. His dark robes, once decorated with the fur mantle and chains of a *Magos Archaeologis*, now bore lines of depraved script that spoke of his allegiance to the Ruinous Powers. Algol's eyes glittered like black marbles in the shadows of his sunken eye sockets, bright with forbidden knowledge and reptilian cunning.

Dubel, one of the Chaos Lord's chosen lieutenants, bowed deeply to his master and stepped to one side, turning so that he could keep the assembled workers and the open doorway in view at all times. One hand rested on the butt of his holstered bolt pistol. The other, clad in a fearsome, outsized gauntlet called a power fist, opened and closed in an unconscious reflex, as though the weapon hungered for a victim to crush in its grip. Magos Algol walked a careful path around the sharp edges of the stone's shadow, looking up at Erebus with a

calculating smile.

‘You see, great one? It is just as the *Book of the Stone* described,’ Algol’s voice was harsh and quavering, like the sharp note of a plucked wire. ‘I told you we would find it here.’

Erebus regarded the towering stone greedily. ‘Have you deciphered the runes yet, magos? Does it tell us where the Orb of Shadows lies?’

‘In time, in time,’ the magos said, raising a wrinkled hand. ‘The runes require careful study, great one. Their meanings, if interpreted without proper care, could be...explosive. But,’ Algol added quickly, ‘it does indeed speak of the orb. You will have the answer you seek.’

‘Then do not let me keep you from your work, blessed magos,’ Erebus said to the man. ‘Inform me the instant that you have deciphered the text.’

The magos bowed to the Chaos Lord and approached the stone, his hands fluttering eagerly as he began to contemplate the inscriptions. Erebus joined his lieutenant. ‘Send word to the *Throne of Pain*,’ he said quietly, referring to the cruiser hiding in Dirge’s outer asteroid field. ‘We will return to Ebok as soon as Algol has uncovered the location of the Orb. Then our work will well and truly begin.’

Dubel looked back at the looming stone, his black eyes lingering on the sphere. ‘Once we have the orb, what then?’

‘Then we seek the Temple of Ascendancy,’ Erebus replied. ‘I believe it to be on Fariin, in the Elysiun System, but the orb will tell us for certain.’

The Traitor Marine stiffened, fixing his master with a suspicious stare. ‘Ascendancy? You seek to follow the same path as Lorgar?’

Erebus returned his lieutenant’s stare. ‘I? No, Dubel. I am but a humble servant,’ he said enigmatically. ‘Perhaps I seek to blaze a path for Lorgar to follow *me*.’

Dubel’s eyes widened in shock. Before he could reply, however, the ground shook beneath a drumbeat of thunderous explosions as Imperial rockets slammed into the side of the hollowed-out building.

* * *

ONE HAND GRIPPING a support strut just inside the Valkyrie’s open hatchway, Alabel Santos leaned out into the assault craft’s howling slipstream

and watched the Vulture gunships streak over the flat roof of the target building. Fires were burning from rocket strikes in the debris-choked square and tendrils of smoke rose from craters blasted into the building's thick permacrete wall. The landing zone looked clear.

The three Valkyries of the mobile reserve platoon – plus an extra support craft carrying Balid and his gun servitors – were howling along at roof height down one of the city's narrow streets, right on the heels of the gunships. She could already feel the Valkyries start to slow as they dropped toward the deck, preparing to flare their engines for tactical deployment.

Santos swung back into the passenger compartment and addressed the platoon commander. "Once we hit the ground we're going to have to move fast. Have two of your squads form a perimeter around the Valkyries and I'll have my gun servitors provide support. You and the assault team go in with me. Once we're inside, don't hesitate. Don't think. Just kill everything that moves."

The Stormtrooper lieutenant nodded at Santos, his face hidden behind a full-face tactical respirator that gave him the look of an automaton. His vox unit crackled. "We're with you, Inquisitor," he said curtly. "The Emperor protects."

Santos drew her pistol just as the Valkyrie plummeted like a stone and then stopped less than a metre over the rubbish-strewn square with its engines shrieking. There was a stuttering roar as the door gunner let off a burst with his heavy bolter at some distant target. "Go go go!" she shouted, leaping from the assault craft and heading for the building at a run. Behind her the stormtrooper assault team deployed with speed and precision, hellguns covering the building's entrance. The lieutenant followed right behind Santos, a plasma pistol in one hand and a crackling power sword in the other.

The inquisitor pulled her power knife free from its scabbard and thumbed its activation rune. She rarely carried it; the knife was an heirloom weapon, given as a gift from her mentor Inquisitor Grazlen when she attained the rank of inquisitor.

Santos held the weapon in a white-knuckled grip as she charged into the building's narrow doorway. She was going to bury that burning blade in the Chaos Lord's eye or die trying.

* * *

CHUNKS OF BROKEN permacrete and twisted plasteel continued to rain down from the gutted ceiling among Erebus and the cultists as turbofans shrieked and heavy weapons fire hammered outside. The Chaos Lord looked for Magos Algol and found the corrupted scholar on his knees, coughing wetly amid falling drifts of dust. ‘Finish your translation, magos!’ Erebus thundered, then raised his accursed crozius before the huddled cultists and spoke in a piercing voice. ‘Rise up, warriors of the faith! The servants of the false Emperor are upon us! The eyes of the gods are upon you – go forth and win their favour!’

With a lusty howl the cultists staggered to their feet and brandished the tools of their trade: heavy sonic drills, power mattocks and arc hammers. They knew from bitter experience what those tools could do to soft flesh and brittle bone.

Dubel drew his bolt pistol. There was a searing crackle as he ignited his power fist’s disruption field. “Death to the servants of the false Emperor!” he roared, and the cultists surged forward, racing up the ramp to the doorway just as the first of the attackers stepped into view.

An inquisitor, Erebus thought, catching sight of a woman in ornate power armour leading the charge. Her alabaster face was distorted in a snarl of almost feral rage, and she fixed him with such a black look of hate that he could not help but think they’d met somewhere before.

Erebus bared his teeth in challenge and spread his arms in welcome, words of blasphemous power hissing off his tongue.

* * *

THERE! THE SHOCK of seeing the Chaos Lord again sent a bolt of pure, righteous fury through Alabel Santos. Erebus was mocking her, grinning like a devil, his arms open wide. I’ll give you something to smile about, she thought, raising her inferno pistol. Just as she drew a bead on Erebus, another armoured shape rushed in front of the Apostle, bolt pistol raised. The mass-reactive rounds smashed into her shoulder and chest before her ears registered the flat boom of the pistol’s report. The impacts spun her around, the servos in her power suit whining dangerously as they sought to compensate for the blows.

Footsteps thundered up the ramp towards Santos as a dozen cultists charged forwards, weapons ready. The lieutenant appeared beside the inquisitor, levelling his pistol and firing two quick shots into the oncoming mob. Bolts of superheated plasma blew the lead cultists apart. “Flamer to the front!” the

platoon leader ordered over his vox.

Armoured stormtroopers fanned out on the narrow lip of permacrete to either side of the doorway, firing red bolts of las-fire into the charging cultists. Then a soldier stepped to the top of the ramp and fired a hissing stream of burning promethium point-blank at the charging miners. The cultists shrieked and fell back from the tongue of searing flame, setting the ramp alight with their tumbling, thrashing bodies.

Two stormtroopers to Santos's right were blown off their feet by bolt pistol rounds, their carapace armour no match for the Traitor Marine's deadly fire. The inquisitor dropped to one knee, trying to peer through the thickening black smoke and strobing las-fire for another glimpse of the Chaos Lord. She couldn't see him, but she could hear him, his deep, sonorous voice chanting terrible words that sent a shiver down her artificial spine. The Chaos Lord's voice rose to a terrifying crescendo – and for a moment it felt as though the very air in the room was receding, drawing back from the battle as if in horror.

The screams of the burning cultists went silent all at once. Then Santos felt the fabric of reality come unravelling. She heard a chorus of screeching howls and tasted hot brass on her tongue, and before she could draw breath to shout a warning the daemons were upon them, charging straight through the fire.

They had faces like skinned wolves and their powerfully-muscled bodies gleamed with freshly-spilled blood. Their eyes, their fangs and their twisted horns were pure brass, bright from the forge, as well as the razor edges of their two-handed axes. Upon their sloped brows was carved the mark of the blood god, and they had come for a bounty of skulls to lay at the foot of his throne.

Men screamed. The stormtrooper carrying the flamer fell to one knee and toppled onto Santos, splashing the inquisitor with blood. Roaring an oath to the Divine Emperor, she pushed the corpse aside just as a blood-spattered figure loomed above her.

She didn't feel the blow. There was a hot wind against her face, and then there was the strange sensation of warm blood soaking through the body glove around her shoulder. Her left arm locked in place and Santos felt the sting of needles as the suit's medicae unit attempted to keep her from lapsing into shock. All she could think was *thank the Emperor it missed my head*, then she put her pistol against the daemon's midsection and pulled the trigger. A bolt of pure cyan, powerful enough to pierce the armour of a land raider, tore the daemon apart and then detonated with a thunderclap against the ceiling. The bloodletter dissolved in tatters of stinking, oily smoke.

Santos fell backwards, landing against the marble verge. As though in slow motion, she could see another daemon rushing at her, axe raised to strike. There were screams and the clash of steel somewhere nearby – and then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the smoke shift and reveal the red-armoured form of the Dark Prophet, standing before a monolith of twisted stone.

Death approached on cloven feet. Santos could feel her strength fading, and between one heartbeat and the next she made her choice. Taking her eyes from the daemon, she steadied her pistol against the marble tiles. With a tic of her cheek, she activated her augmented eye's laser sight. The needle-thin beam glittered in the smoke, tracing a merciless line across the open space and painting a bloody dot on the Chaos Lord's forehead.

'This is for Krendan Hive,' she whispered, and pulled the trigger.

The bloodletter howled above her – and then staggered as a bolt of plasma smashed into its head. The daemon staggered, then the blade of a power sword sank into its chest. The lieutenant leapt over Santos' body as the daemon's form dissolved. 'Get the inquisitor to safety!' he ordered, taking aim on another daemon and shooting it in the face. 'The Emperor protects!' he bellowed, taking another step down the burning ramp.

Santos felt hands grab the collar of her armour. Darkness crowded at the edge of her vision. The thunderclap of her shot rang through the open space and she tried to catch a glimpse of Erebus again, but all she could see was the lieutenant advancing coolly into the face of the onrushing daemons and firing shot after shot from his plasma pistol. The weapon's discharge vents were glowing white-hot, and his armoured gauntlet was melting from the heat.

'The Emperor protects!' she heard him say as another daemon loomed before him. The lieutenant fired his pistol again – and this time the overheated power core exploded, consuming him and his foe in a ball of incandescent light.

Santos felt herself dragged across the stone floor and passed out in a fiery wave of pain.

* * *

EREBUS SAW THE bright flare of the inferno pistol and for the briefest instant he feared that the dark gods had deserted him. His vision deserted him in a blaze of cyan, and a clap of terrible thunder dashed him to his knees.

By the time he regained his senses the battle was over.

The ramp was gone. Indeed, the entire front of the building had collapsed, sealing the doorway with tons of broken permacrete. A bare handful of flickering work lights still cast a fitful glow over the site.

After a moment, Erebus started to laugh. He raised his crozius and offered his thanks to the Ruinous Powers for their dark gifts. Nothing in this universe would keep him from reaching the Damnation Gate.

Still laughing, the Chaos Lord turned to look for Magos Algol, and saw that the dark gods had been fickle with their blessings.

The inquisitor's bolt had missed Erebus and struck the monolith instead. Its dark surface had exploded, erasing the engravings in a storm of razor-edged shrapnel. Algol lay on his back at the foot of the ancient stone, his frail body shredded and a look of surprise etched on his bony face.

Erebus knelt by the body of the dead magos. Nearby, he heard a shifting of fallen rock, and glanced over to see Dubel picking himself up from the rubble. The Traitor Marine saw what had happened to Algol and hissed a vicious curse. 'We'll go back to Ebok empty-handed now,' the Traitor Marine spat.

The Chaos Lord studied Algol's shocked face. 'I think not,' he said, taking the magos's head in his left hand. The man's thin neck snapped with an expert twist of his wrist; vertebrae popped in dry succession, and then Erebus held Algol's head up to the flickering light.

'The monolith is gone, but the eyes that beheld it still remain,' Erebus said. 'The eyes are the gateway to the soul, Dubel. And gates, once opened, will give up everything they contain.'

Erebus looked into Algol's eyes and laughed, seeing his future.