

THE HORUS HERESY™

DISTANT ECHOES
OF OLD NIGHT

Rob Sanders



A HORUS HERESY SHORT STORY

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DISTANT ECHOES OF OLD NIGHT

Rob Sanders

‘And they called him... *Death*.’ Brother-Chaplain Morgax Murnau’s sermon hissed across the open vox-channel. His straight, black hair framed his pale face like curtains, parting to reveal a ghoulish leer. Standing amongst the drop pod descent cages, with his fat, grinning skull-helm clasped beneath one arm, the Chaplain spat his words into the clunky receiver of a master-vox. ‘The living embodiment of the end. The darkness we dread. The release we crave. The future we fear.’

The Death Guard Chaplain stepped out onto the ramp-egress. The drop pod sat in the mire like a bulbous, rivet-plated tick. Everything oozed about him. The Chaplain’s slick oratory echoed among the petrified ferrouswoods, his dark words drifting over the sap-saturated morass like a mellifluous madness. The sermon was punctuated by the brief and occasional blast of stabiliser jets, as the drop pod’s machine spirit fought to keep the transport upright and from sinking into the swamp.

‘He brings you no more than your mortality demands. We play at perpetuity but we were not built for forever. Warmth will leave our great bodies. Our hearts will beat to empty echoes. Blood will sit stagnant in our veins and our flesh shall rot. Accept this.’

Murnau peered out across the bubbling mire. The ground was sodden with decay. It was water-logged and crawling with parasites, gigapedes and clinker-shell lice. Ghostly clouds of midges swarmed and swirled across the percolating surface, filling the foetid air with the drone of a billion tiny wings.

Murnau watched a drowning avian struggle in the muck; it flapped its sticky wings in frantic futility. Its hatchet beak had once gone to work on the heavy metal ferrouswood of titanic trunks but now it thrashed uselessly at the slime of microorganisms already breaking down its flesh.

This place, Algonquis, had once been a verdant forest moon blessed with flocks of colourful beasts. They had roosted in the treetops and filled the

hinterlands with harsh song. Below, sparse logging communities and indentured plantation workers had harvested ferrouswood with industrial chainaxe and saw. The dense timber was then used to supply off-world dustmills, workshops and factories in which some of the most durable lumber in the Imperium was put to myriad uses. The forest moon had been part of a sub-sector cornucopia of agri-worlds and mercantile trade-route hubs until the Death Guard frigate *Barbarus's Sting* blistered through the region, visiting orbital decimation on world after Imperial world. Murnau had observed the ship's commander select different varieties of apocalyptic biological weaponry for each victim-world, with the dreadful expertise of a true connoisseur. Engineered blights, atmospheric contaminants and galactic plagues long thought eradicated; all resurrected by Moritat Phorgal's renegade Mechanicum adepts.

Agri-world crops cankered in their continental fields. Drove of bloated livestock were impaled from the inside-out by the spore shafts of rampant fungal infestations. Clear, teeming oceans became vast expanses of sepia swill. For Algonquis, Phorgal had reserved an ecological decimant so destructive and voracious that even Murnau was surprised at how swiftly the forest moon had turned from a world of evergreen promise into a rotting ball of filth and corruption. Shrivelled needles rained to the forest floor while the great trunks of the ferrouswoods bled small lakes of sap, turning the rich, black soil into a sickly mire. Aggressive species of fungus ripped up through the pulp and bark of the trees, felling many of the titanic trees. Others remained as part of a petrified, skeletal forest of colossal stakes that pointed accusingly at the skies. Moulds and black mildew covered everything in a blanket of competing micro-organisms as local insect populations exploded, feeding off the carcass of a dying world.

'Hear me, Latham,' the Chaplain snarled into the vox-receiver. 'You and your brother Imperial Fists are already dead – you just don't know it yet. Where the sons of Mortarion walk, the will of the Death Lord prevails. We bring famine, pestilence, war and absolute destruction in its many forms. We bring the apocalypse in Mortarion's name. We are the Death Guard, Captain Latham. We are the end to all.' Murnau allowed his snarl to contort into an agonising smile.

'But,' the Chaplain said, raising a ceramite fingertip, 'don't make it too easy for us. Although we are here to escort you to the most final of destinations, death is meaningless without the sweet regret of a life well-lived. When my Destroyers take your life – and take it they will – I want you to have given your best. For the ache of loss to echo about your chest with the rattle of your last breath. Nothing pleases my lord more than placing the seeds of doubt in mortal hearts, seeds that

bloom into gardens of darkness and despair, before having his instruments of death tear those hearts from forlorn and desperate chests. We are the instrument, captain. Know that no fortification or defence can save you. Know that no rescue is coming. Know that your Emperor has abandoned you.'

Murnau's helmet-vox chirped. He slammed the vox-receiver onto its wall-mounted cradle and slipped his battle-helm over his head.

'Murnau here,' he hissed.

'I have Moritat Phorgal for you, Brother-Chaplain.'

'Proceed.'

Murnau snatched a drum-fed bolt pistol from the storage rack and holstered the weapon at his belt. With greater reverence he took his staff of office – his *crozius arcanum* – from its devotional harness. The short, adamantium staff was capped with the sculpture of a skeletal angel, its curved wings touching tip to tip and creating a brutal, spiked head to the revered weapon.

Stepping off the ramp and into the mire, the murky floodwaters lapped like syrup against Murnau's armoured knees. The Chaplain felt the saturated earth below take hold of his boots in its sucking grip, though his power-armoured tread was more than enough to break him free of the bog. Stomping through the filthy shallows, the Chaplain emerged from the shadow of the drop pod and set out through the petrified forest.

'This is Phorgal,' the helmet-vox crackled. The officer's voice was a distant presence, like the echo about a tomb.

'My brother in both life and death,' Murnau returned. 'The pod-relay is experiencing interference.'

'It's not the relay,' Phorgal told him. 'The *Barbarus's Sting* breaks orbit.'

'You're leaving orbit?' Murnau asked.

'Long range augur-scans have revealed a victim flotilla entering the neighbouring system.'

'Freighters?'

'Granary ships – bulk container vessels accompanied by an Imperial Army escort cruiser,' the Moritat informed him. 'We are en route to bring the primarch's judgement upon them.'

'And we, to Dorn's dogs down on the forest moon's surface,' Murnau assured him.

As Murnau trudged through the mire, languid ripples rolling through the sap-waters, he felt the rotten pulp of fallen ferrouswoods crumble beneath the soles

of his boots. The blackened, emaciated remnants still standing pierced the pestilent fog that hung like a shroud. The sticky surface of his battle plate became a trap for gangly flies and midges, and soon the suit was covered in dying insects.

He saw a distant and momentary flash in the forest murk, followed by a wave of heat that disturbed the mist and registered on his suit's autosenses. The broken blanket of fog revealed the Chaplain's destination – ahead, reaching up amongst the disease-riddled trees, Murnau could make out the shattered outline of a crashed vessel.

The massive debris section was one of five that the Death Guard had located upon the swampy Algonquisian surface. When the *Barbarus's Sting* had encountered the Imperial Fists frigate *Xanthus* making its quiet approach through the decimated agri-worlds, Moritat Phorgal had unleashed all weapons upon the loyalist vessel. It had tumbled to the moon's foetid surface, breaking up as it fell.

Phorgal had despatched the Chaplain to the crash site. His orders had been unequivocal: there were to be no survivors.

'Murnau,' the Moritat rasped across the vox. 'Fenestra still hasn't deciphered the astrotelepathic partial transmitted from the *Xanthus*.'

'That's... disappointing. We should have that bolt-magnet freak skinned alive. It disgusts me that we have to rely upon such degenerate humanity for our long-range communications.'

'But there it is,' Phorgal said.

Murnau heard the officer take a sudden and rasping intake of breath. It was usually the herald of some kind of reproach; many times had Murnau heard it, before the Moritat rebuked a legionary inferior. 'The fact is, Brother Murnau, there would be no astrotelepathic partial if your squad had brought the enemy to their ceramite knees.'

Murnau bit back an involuntary explanation. He would offer no excuses: he was a Chaplain of the Death Guard. In the darkness, he was Mortarion's all-seeing-eyes. In the silence, he was the primarch's burning words. Where uncertainty reigned, Murnau was surety of the Death Lord's vengeance... and Murnau was certain that uncertainty reigned in Vitas Phorgal's hearts. Undoubtedly, this was why the Moritat liked to do the Warmaster's bidding from a command deck throne.

'Finish them, Morgax,' Phorgal carped. 'Finish them now.'

'What of the nature of the communiqué?' Murnau asked, changing the subject.

'Fenestra says that it was coded,' the Death Guard officer confided, 'but not

like any Legion code the witch has seen before. It is certainly not one used by the Imperial Fists. It doesn't sound like a Legiones Astartes code at all.'

'Destination?'

'Sol,' Phorgal replied, the Moritat's voice suddenly laced with static. They were losing their vox-signal. 'The vessel's destination, given the frigate's last recorded trajectory.'

'Intriguing,' Murnau said. 'Well, the *Xanthus* was carrying something. Intelligence. Materiel. Supplies. Dorn will fortify his position, as is his nature. The Imperial Fists will hunker down and try to weather the coming storm. Let them try, I say, and let the Death Guard show them the futility of their lost cause.' He thought for a moment. 'Honoured Moritat, should the parameters of the mission be changed and this Terra-bound cargo be located and reported back to the Warmaster's strategists?'

'No,' Phorgal crackled. 'We leave such subtlety to our cousins in the XX Legion. This is war, and Mortarion's sons deal in death, not in the gathering of meaningless details. Your orders remain. No survivors, Morgax. Do you hear me?'

'It will be done,' the Chaplain assured him.

'The *Barbarus's Sting* will return for you shortly,' Phorgal said. 'Then the tedium of the warp, and on to the fabricator moons of Uniplex Minora. Finish it, and make it quick.'

As Murnau stepped through the sap drizzle and the shallows he saw another flash. His suit registered the heat backwash of a powerful weapon – it was coming from the shattered hull-section. The fog and midge swarms thinned, and the Chaplain took in the full majesty of Phorgal's void-victory. The remnant was a mauled wreck. All that remained of the *Xanthus* was a midships gunnery section, the gothic majesty of which was dragging one end of the wreckage below the broiling swamp surface, as compartment after compartment flooded with filth.

Murnau took in the objective with a tactician's eye. With one end of the shattered section sinking, the other was rising like a metal mountain. The Chaplain cast his optics across the exposed guts of the vessel, wracked with fires and leaking various gases and hydraulic oils. The rents and tears in the crumpled hull plating were providing the loyalist forces with firing slits and opportunities to keep the assaulting Death Guard at bay. The stuttering fire of las-carbines and boltguns lay waiting for them.

Cycling the vox-channels, Murnau found Sergeant Grull Gorphon barking savage orders to his squad. The Death Guard had taken position about the starboard flank of the frigate. It had suffered by far the worst impact damage and the Imperial Fists had done a frustrating job of fortifying the airlocks and barricading the hull breaches on the other approaches.

The Chaplain found Gorphon's warriors moving between the bolt-chewed trunks of petrified giants. Like Murnau, they had found a grim thrill in their surroundings; about them a world was dying, and from that finality a new life was emerging. It was a slithering, rank, appalling form of life, but life all the same. With the enemy intent on consolidating within the crashed *Xanthus* and with an entire frigate's supply of ammunition at their disposal, the Death Guard were committed to leaving them no safe ground.

Morgax Murnau believed that for every job there was a perfect tool. The *Barbarus's Sting* carried one such tool among its Death Guard contingent. A blunt and uncompromising tool of ruthless decimation – Gorphon's Destroyer squad, known as 'the Graven'.

The Destroyers attracted the worst from among the Legiones Astartes. Space Marines that Legion officers kept on a tight leash: the empty; the wilfully destructive; those for whom there was no quarter; those for whom the galaxy must burn. Where necessity dictated, however, the singular talents of these warriors were put to deadly use. Weapons of mass destruction were recovered from dark armoury depths, and the Destroyers' appetite for annihilation was whetted by the prospect of battle, bloody and furious.

No survivors, Phorgal had commanded. And Murnau had sent for the Graven.

Sloshing through the bolt-plucked mire, Murnau came upon Zorrak – one of the Graven's heavy weapons specialists. His armour was unpainted but filth-splattered to a fitting camouflage. With his backpack against the rotting trunk of a petrified ferrouswood, the Destroyer clutched the ungainly bulk of a missile launcher to his chest. Zorrak nodded his acknowledgement to the passing Chaplain – the movement parted the darkness of his long, matted hair, revealing the raw mask beneath. The whites of his eyes burned with a manic agitation from the patchwork of the Destroyer's face, and his scabbed lips curled around a devilish smile. Zorrak jangled with the custom-loaded reserve warheads hanging from his belt.

These were Terran-devised nightmares, terror weapons of the gene-war darkness of Old Night. With material harvested from decommissioned fusion reactors, the warheads were so radioactive that it was a wonder that Zorrak

didn't glow in the dark. Instead, he and his comrades bore the horrible cost of handling such hideous weaponry in the burns and scarring afflicting their battle-bred forms.

The Chaplain leaned back as a stream of las-fire tore through the mildew-threaded bark at Zorrak's shoulder. The Destroyer gritted his gleaming white teeth before throwing his armoured body around – he leaned into the missile launcher and aimed it at the shattered frigate. Missile after missile tore out of the bucking launcher, and the derelict vessel became enveloped in a cluster of blinding halos as the localised blasts of the rad-missiles ripped through the hull and vessel structure. Some tore rents and twisted cavities into much larger breach-points for the waiting Death Guard. Others set off internal chains of explosions that migrated through the wreckage, forcing Legion serfs from their sentry-points and shrouding the interior with intensely toxic radioactive material.

Stomping between the cover of the largest ferrouswoods, the mire threatening to hold onto every bootfall, the Chaplain received the greeting of individual Destroyers in the form of mad eyes and sneers of ulcerated delight. All of Gorphon's squad carried the radiation burns and sickly hang-dog expressions of their calling. Moving in on the shattered section, the Destroyers splashed from trunk to trunk, chunky bolt pistols in each gauntlet and pausing only to lob rad-grenades into the derelict. They riddled the sinking section with alternating streams of brute-calibre rounds, roaring their sick glee at the loyalist attempts to cut them down.

From the wreckage of the *Xanthus* came the boom of a colossal carriage locking mechanism. Murnau knew that sound. His helmet vox-channel became a cacophony of warnings.

'Incoming!' he heard Sergeant Gorphon bellow to his men.

The Chaplain cast his optics across the smashed flank of the frigate. The magna-bore barrel of a single cannon had been rolled out from the darkness of a mangled gunport. Somehow Captain Latham had got one of the remaining cannons operational and his survivors had manhandled it into position on its warped carriage.

There was no cover that could save Murnau from the plasma blast – the open ground and smouldering ferrouswood stumps testified to that. The cannon was devastating in its capabilities but clumsy without a calibrated way to aim the weapon. From the angle of the gargantuan barrel, Murnau estimated only a grazing vector at best. The improvised crew behind the beast would not want to waste the shot and the Chaplain assumed the loyalists would rather aim high

than blast uselessly into the mire.

‘Do your worst,’ Murnau hissed through his teeth. Calmly, he knelt down in the shallows and bowed his skull-helm. ‘For death is nothing to fear—’

Everything went white.

The roar of ship-to-ship weaponry shook him to his bones. His battle plate’s autosenses momentarily clipped out, and the sap about him boiled to a bank of filthy steam.

Before his optics had even been restored, Murnau leapt back to his feet, a gaunt grin of self-satisfaction on his face. As he predicted, the plasma beam had passed above their position and blasted its way through the petrified ferrouswoods beyond. The barrel of the great weapon had gone, shunted back on its colossal carriage, but through the open gunport Murnau sensed he was being regarded with disappointed eyes.

Moving on through the syrupy murk Murnau found an approving Sergeant Gorphon waiting for him. Two horribly scarred members of the Graven, Brother-Destroyers Khurgul and Gholic, were yelling ripe abuse at the sinking derelict from the necrotic trunks, goading the Imperial Fists within. They hammered the open and more vulnerable areas of the wreck with their monstrous pistols and tossed clutches of grenades at the structure, the detonations of which bathed the swamp in a radioactive haze that killed the flies and made the shattered hull of the *Xanthus* shimmer. For a few minutes now, Murnau had suffered the background crackle of radioactivity, filtered through his battle plate. His suit told him what he already knew – that death, in one of its myriad forms, hung heavily over the whole area.

‘Inspiring, Chaplain,’ the Destroyer sergeant said as Murnau took his final trudging steps through the las-bolt molested waters. Like the legionary Destroyers, Grull Gorphon was a wretched mess of radiation scarring and weeping rawness. His bare head was like a scab that had cracked, and sores bled rancid fluid down his gaunt cheeks. The bulbous power fist crackling at his side further emphasised the sergeant’s macabre appearance, making him appear lopsided, almost hunchbacked.

‘Status report, sergeant.’ The Chaplain spoke with a focusing harshness, but if his tone bothered Gorphon, the Destroyer certainly didn’t let it show.

‘The Fists have the derelict section locked down tighter than Dorn’s arse cheeks,’ the sergeant related coarsely. ‘Barricades and bulkheads have been torched shut. A lot of bonded crew members – I’d say about forty – hold fire arcs on the approaches and they have a starboard cannon powered and operational.’

All that before the real problem of Oriel Latham and four of his veterans holed up in there.’

‘Our losses?’ Murnau asked.

‘Three,’ Gorphon told him with casual resignation. ‘That damned gun claimed Rork on its first shot. Latham and his bastard brothers took Urzl-kal and Ortag as they reconnoitred for unsecured entry points. The good news is that Latham is running out of time. The section is sinking and the more swamp water it takes on, the faster it’s going under. Between that and the radioactive hellhole my Destroyers have created between decks, I expect Latham the hero will be giving up his ground soon.’

Murnau gave Gorphon the searing optics of his skull-helm.

‘I’m afraid that’s not good enough, sergeant,’ the Chaplain hissed, some of his former manic morbidity creeping back into his voice. ‘Phorgal has stepped up our schedule. The Moritat has sent Dorn’s loyal dogs a long way down the crow road, but it is down to us to see them to the end of their journey. We don’t have long before extraction. Do you hear me, Gorphon?’

The sergeant nodded slowly, but couldn’t prevent a grin of lunacy spreading across his scabby lips.

‘We can take the *Xanthus*,’ he said, ‘but it will be bloody. Our losses will be high.’

The Chaplain nodded. ‘Do you think the Death Lord intended you to accompany him into the forever?’

An involuntary snort became a dark chuckle shared between the two warriors. ‘Do you think he intended it for any of us?’ Murnau added, as much to himself as Gorphon as his Destroyers. ‘Assemble your squad for a direct assault on the enemy vessel, sergeant. We shall create our own entry point and take Latham and his Fists by force.’

‘Yes, Brother-Chaplain,’ Gorphon replied with dead-eyed assurance before returning to his suit vox. ‘*Graven*,’ the Destroyer sergeant announced across the channel. ‘Fall back to my position immediately. The word is given – boarding action. Zorrak and Hadar-Gul, provide cover for the approach. Barrage. Full spread.’

Murnau drew his pistol and waited amongst the ferrouswoods as the remainder of the *Graven* worked their way through the las-bolts and shallows to their sergeant’s position. As ordered, Zorrak and Hadar-Gul lit up the *Xanthus* with a blinding and incessant barrage of rad-missiles, the Destroyers sidling through the filth like crabs. Murnau fancied the derelict rocked under the combined barrage

of detonations – under such a devastating distraction the Fists and their sniping bondsmen and crew could create little in the way of murderous opportunity.

Sliding their pistols to automatic, Khurgul and Gholic came out of their cover to provide a curtain of boltfire for Gorphon. The Destroyer sergeant's power fist spat and sizzled with dark energy as he closed his great, metal digits and smashed at the ferrouswood trunk with his seething knuckles. He struck again and again, shredding through blackened pulp and grain and breaking through the base of the forest moon giant. The ancient and colossal tree gave out with a shrieking crack. The Death Guard watched it topple and followed its petrified canopy with their eyes as it landed on the derelict. The top of the heavy metallic trunk tore along the mangled section of hull-shielding, before coming to rest in a new, gaping breach.

'To me, Graven!' Gorphon roared. Murnau held his crozius arcanum above the sergeant, which the Destroyer took as his blessing on their endeavour. Bowing before it, he climbed up through the splintered trunk and took a heavy run at the incline created by the felled ferrouswood.

The Graven followed one after another. Each of the Death Guard slapped one of their brute pistols back into their holsters and drew their blades. The Graven's chainblades were short, broad and falchion-shaped: the weapon of choice for hacking apart enemy defenders, hiding in the confined spaces and shadows of a crashed vessel.

As Murnau's ceramite boots chewed up the necrotic bark of the fallen tree the Chaplain could feel the hammer of the Fists' bolt rounds into the underside of the trunk.

By the time the Chaplain reached the hull of the *Xanthus*, Gorphon and his Destroyers were already inside. Leading with his pistol, and using the head of the crozius to move aside curtains of wiring and bleeding hydraulic lines, Murnau followed the swift progress of the Legion Destroyer squad.

Murnau was delighted to find that everything had already died in their meandering path. The shattered section was a torturous labyrinth of inclined passages, smashed chambers and crash-warped superstructure. There were bodies everywhere – the rag-doll remains of the bonded crew, unfortunates who had not survived the brutal descent and forest-scarring impact. Lamps flickered feebly with dying power and the gloom was thick with radioactive haze; inside the derelict vessel, every surface was covered with powdered fallout from the terrible rad-barrage. As the Chaplain moved through the twisted darkness, it

dusted his midnight plate.

Murnau stepped through a messy hole in a bulkhead wall. Metal dribbled down the opening – here the Destroyers had used their melta bombs to blast through to a sealed-off section of the ship. Pushing through the trickles of hardening metal, Murnau found himself among carnage.

Here were fresh bodies, most missing limbs. They were riddled with ragged holes, blasted aside in the savage rush of the boarding action. The frigate's crew and the Imperial Fists bondsmen were all dead or dying. Many clutched las-carbines and pistols. The Chaplain could imagine the staccato light show of beams and lasbolts that had met the Destroyers and lit up the darkness between the decks.

Once blade to blade, the mortal crew had provided no resistance at all. They had been too sick, too weak. They had done as instructed by their masters and held the Warmaster's forces at bay, but they had done so on their knees, begging for death. The misery and suffering that had been experienced aboard the *Xanthus* was almost palpable. Murnau found himself smiling behind his faceplate.

The deck was slick with vomit and other bodily fluids, including spreading pools of freshly spilled blood, and many bodies lay with broken limbs already trussed and bandages wrapped around balding heads. The terrible evidence of the Destroyers' arsenal was everywhere – radiation poisoning; ulceration; blistering; red-raw skin beneath robes that had been long-abandoned under raging fever. Even if the Graven hadn't butchered and blasted their way through the section by hand, the frigate's bondsmen would have died anyway. Gorphon had been right: the survivors were running out of time. The sons of Mortarion had simply provided a blessed release and alleviated their suffering with their screeching blades and bolt rounds.

While his optics feasted upon these past atrocities, Murnau's vox-feed kept him apprised of new ones unfolding on the decks below. There were screams of anger, futility and death frequently drowned out by grenades, the gunning of blades and the thunder of pistol fire. Gone were the Destroyers' coarse insults, insanity and hilarity. The Death Guard were implacable, unstoppable. Gorphon's macabre killers were silent and driven, eating up the carnage and the sweet ambience of endings.

The loyalists', and indeed their own.

The Chaplain found his first Space Marine casualty of the engagement on an inverted stairwell – Khurgul's impassive advance had taken him into the path of

a stray krak grenade. His Mark III plate had been torn by the blast like a hastily opened rations can. His helm was shattered, and only half the Destroyer's head remained within it. Lying on his side, his lifeblood cascading down through a grille landing, Khurgul blinked incomprehension at Murnau. He endlessly repeated his attempt to attach a fresh drum-magazine to his empty pistol, failing again and again.

'Peace, brother,' the Chaplain told the Destroyer. Swinging his staff of office, Murnau brought the head of the crozius down on what remained of the Space Marine's own.

Pulling the stylised and serrated wings of the weapon from the Destroyer's smashed skull, Murnau followed the Graven's path of destruction down through the charnel-house decks and into the sinking bowels of the frigate. Over the vox-link he heard a new sound: the deep, throaty bark of bolter fire. The Graven had located their quarry – Dorn's dogs, the *Xanthus*'s complement of Imperial Fists legionaries, holding out as only the VII Legion could in the dark depths of the shattered section.

Dropping down through another melta-blasted hole in the deck and passing through a buckled bulkhead, Murnau found himself in a maze of twisted metal: sealed-off sections, presumably breached and flooded; barricaded passageways and entire decks collapsed in upon one another. Murnau's suit lamps lent a ghostly illumination to the devastation. No light penetrated this deep into the ship, leading the Chaplain to believe that they were below the surface level of the swamp. As he descended, Murnau found two more fallen Destroyers and the barb-mauled body of the Imperial Fist that had taken their lives. The bolt-chatter was closer now, although the frenetic exchange of gunfire was bounced around the torturous architecture of the crashed vessel. Gorphon and his Destroyers must have forced the loyalists out from their fortified hold-point, blasting their way down into the belly of the frigate. The Imperial Fists had run out of vessel to retreat into. They had gone as far as they were going to go.

The Chaplain found the Graven gathered on the steep incline of a maintenance corridor. The deck below was alight with angry fires that drove back the darkness with a white-blue brilliance. The Death Guard were involved in a furious fire fight with a handful of the enemy, punctuated by the detonations of rad-grenades. The returned fire from below was wild but insistent. Still, it surprised Murnau to find the Destroyers there, their storming advance having ground to a halt.

Sergeant Gorphon was braced across a hatchway leading to a tool store. He

was holding his great power fist up to shield his ghoulish face as boltfire tore at the surrounding architecture.

‘Status report, sergeant,’ the Chaplain demanded. ‘Why have you not advanced?’

‘Three,’ the Destroyer stated, ‘perhaps four Fists are holding the gunnery deck below. The retreat point is fortified and seems well-supplied with ammunition from the frigate’s armoury. We, on the other hand, are down to our last clips.’

‘Latham...’ Murnau spat, but the sergeant shook his scalded features. Stepping back he allowed Murnau’s suit lamps to brush the outline of an armoured corpse beyond. The body had been laid carefully in the corner of the storeroom. The figure was helmetless, and plate markings identified the Space Marine as an Imperial Fists captain.

Captain Oriel Latham, wearing the ghastly expression of one unexpectedly confronting a sudden and violent death.

‘You?’ the Chaplain asked.

Gorphon shook his head. ‘Killed in the crash, we think.’

Murnau nodded slowly. *Latham, dead...* with the resistance being led by... *who?* Another legionary? A resourceful sergeant or second?

He looked to Gorphon. ‘Other ways in?’

The Death Guard sergeant shook his head.

‘We can’t force our way through?’ Murnau hissed with sudden annoyance. The Chaplain could feel victory almost within his throttling grasp.

‘We don’t have the numbers to weather that kind of punishment,’ Gorphon told him, shrugging one seemingly hunched shoulder. ‘Besides, such losses are unnecessary. The Imperial Fists will probably present themselves to us shortly.’

Murnau didn’t like where the Destroyer sergeant’s smug, self-satisfaction was taking them. ‘And why would they do that?’ the Chaplain muttered.

Gorphon unhooked a fat bomb-canister that was hanging from the bottom of his pack.

‘Because they’ll die if they don’t,’ Gorphon announced amongst the incessant chunter of echoing gunfire. He tossed the canister over to the Chaplain. Murnau caught the weapon and turned it over in his gauntlets.

Phosphex.

The Legiones Astartes had many brute weapons at their disposal. Some were favoured for their surgical precision; others for their simple, destructive potential. As living weapons of the burgeoning Imperium, legionaries appreciated the respective merits of the death-dealing tools of their trade. In

many monastery bases and Legion battle-barges there were certain weapons that gathered dust, unused by those unwilling to embrace their destructive potential. For many squads and officers, the use of rad-weaponry and chemical devastants was beyond the pale. They were distant echoes of a dark past, and forgotten remnants of the anarchy from which a stable Imperium was ultimately born. For a Legion's Destroyers they were the weapons of choice – weapons that inflicted horror and sowed fear in enemy ranks.

Following the phosphorescent nightmare of its exothermic detonation, phosphex would hang like a poison that burned and seeped its way into anything unfortunate enough to come into contact with it. As far as could be determined, it would never decay.

'You have deployed this weapon?' Murnau asked.

'Rolled two canisters down there,' Gorphon told him with raw-faced pride.

'You missed the screams, Chaplain.'

'That's unfortunate. I wish you hadn't done that.'

'Why?' the sergeant asked absently as he risked a brief glance down the slanting maintenance corridor. The fire fight was dying away to nothing, a testament to the toxic inferno that had swept through the lower deck.

'Because our mission requires us to go down there,' the Chaplain said with almost reptilian resolve. Gorphon clearly saw the conviction in Murnau's eyes.

'You can't be serious! That would be suicide,' the Death Guard Destroyer protested.

Murnau leant in close. Each of his words was hushed and deliberate.

'No... survivors...'

'But, Brother-Chaplain,' Gorphon began, 'the phosphex—'

'Will test us, yes,' Murnau admitted. 'But no more than Lord Mortarion was tested, advancing undaunted, indomitable, into the mountains of Barbarus. Each step was agony for him, every breath torment, but he did it to set us free. And so we are – free to choose, free to follow. Free to determine our own destiny. All he asks in return is *obedience*. Let us follow in the primarch's footsteps now, undaunted and indomitable.'

Murnau unclasped his skull-helm and fixed the sergeant with his eyes. A moment of fleeting doubt crossed the sergeant's wretched face before the pair shared a moment of infectious insanity.

The Chaplain would lead them in the primarch's footsteps.

The sergeant nodded.

'Gholic. Hadar-Gul. Take point,' Gorphon ordered. 'We are to finish the

survivors.’

As he attached his helmet to his belt, Murnau detected a moment’s hesitation in the Destroyers – the first they had demonstrated in the brutal boarding action. The raw-faced Graven knew what their sergeant’s orders meant. The Death Guard would have to brave the phosphex themselves and match both their physical resilience and resolve against the Imperial Fists.

Leading the way with their pistols and with idling chainblades held ready, the Destroyers advanced. Grull Gorphon followed with Murnau at his side and Zorrak bringing up the rear. Like Hadar-Gul, he had dropped his cumbersome launcher and had armed himself with bolt pistols instead. The walls and ceiling of the passage had ignited as the phosphorescent fires spread. The chemical blaze danced horribly over the metal, burning with an eerie white-blue flame – it seemed hungry, as though eager to claim new territory. As the squad made its cautious way down the steep corridor, Murnau felt the liquid mist of the toxic compound against his skin. It smothered him like a lingering miasma, and almost immediately he felt the poison seep and scald its way into his flesh.

Murnau could now hear the howling agony of the Imperial Fists rising up from the lower deck. Across his vox-link the Chaplain detected the faintest murmur of agony from the lead Graven as they stomped through the hanging phosphex. The matte ceramite and green trim of their plate visibly smouldered in the glow, but Murnau didn’t fully appreciate the torture to which he had exposed them until he too pushed on into the concentrated cloud of chemical death. The glowing flames flaring from the metal of his cables, chestplate and studded pauldrons was disconcerting enough, but they set light to his long, black hair and licked at his face.

Murnau could feel the desiccating toxic compound eating *into* him.

The Graven held their tongues, biting back the agony as they descended to the gunnery deck. Murnau assumed that the remaining Imperial Fists were suffering as much – if not more so – than the Death Guard, since the Destroyers entered unmolested. Not a single shot was offered in defence.

The gunnery deck was a vision of refulgent, blue hell. There were fires everywhere. Here the Destroyers found the empty canisters and the chemical cloud in greatest concentration. Murnau heard a low growl across the vox from members of the Graven, but it was the rumble of determination. They were Death Guard – the sons of Mortarion, the scourge of Barbarus. They were much more than their brother Legions. They did not fear death, nor any instrument of

death. Brute endurance was their greatest gift, and it was that and that alone that drove the faltering Graven onwards.

‘Bodies,’ Gorphon announced, rasping through his corrupted lungs.

‘Over here, also,’ Gholic gargled, as the Destroyers moved out cautiously across the open deck. Imperial Fists, helmetless and face down, their yellow armour burnt and twisted. As Murnau and the sergeant stood over the body of one particular dead Space Marine, the Chaplain noticed something out of the corner of one stinging eye.

‘Movement!’ Hadar-Gul managed in a hoarse roar.

Another of Latham’s men stumbled out of the blue murk, his boltgun held slackly in his gauntlet and kicking wild shots into the deck and ceiling. Gorphon spun around, slapping the Imperial Fist back with his power fist. The loyalist fell, his ghoulish face a steaming mask of eaten muscle – there was no skin to speak of, and his cheekbones were visible through the hyper-desiccated flesh. The Destroyer sergeant brought his crackling fist around and took the melting head from the shoulders of the unfortunate warrior. The Imperial Fist fell to his knees before toppling to one side.

‘Blood!’ Zorrak called out, drawing Murnau and the remaining Graven towards him.

Following spots and splatters of gore that sizzled on the deck amongst the phosphex residue, the Destroyer led them through the blue haze. The spots became clots, and the clots became bloody boot prints until finally a smear on the deck led the Death Guard to a single Space Marine crawling arm over ceramite arm across the gunnery deck. Zorrak raised his bolt pistol.

‘Hold!’ Murnau barked through his scorched lips. The prone warrior was certainly not an Imperial Fist, as the plain colour of his plate confirmed. His armour could almost be taken for that of the Death Guard. Murnau squinted with his raw eyes. Even through the flickering phosphorescence dancing across the plate it was clear that the suit bore no marking, Legion symbol or rank insignia.

‘Who is he?’ Gorphon managed, expecting the Chaplain to know.

Murnau didn’t, but he felt sure that this was the precious cargo that the *Xanthus* was transporting to Terra. The passenger was a Space Marine, true, but a legionary no more.

‘He is a loyalist spy,’ the Chaplain announced. ‘Some agent of the Emperor.’

The Chaplain stepped in front of the crawling Space Marine, who looked up at him from the deck. His eyes were misted and blood-speckled, and his face flesh ruptured and wasting away before the Chaplain’s gaze. His russet hair and beard

were plaited and his chin whiskers rich with the clotted gore he'd brought up from his disintegrating lungs. As he stared up at Murnau he showed the blood-stained serration of sharpened teeth. His voice – when it graced the seething silence – was raw, but full of primal determination.

‘This... is Varskjöld,’ the agent wheezed. ‘Sergeant... do it now...’

It took a moment for Murnau to realise that the agent was talking into his vox-link.

A sudden detonation rocked the gunnery deck as one of the battery plasma cannons was overloaded. It flashed with the heat and light of a miniature sun.

Murnau felt the entire vessel shift. He was blown into a bulkhead wall, and a series of quakes shuddered violently through the superstructure. The agent Varskjöld had instructed some unseen ally to blow the cannon and deliberately hull the derelict, and Murnau could feel the *Xanthus* lurching as a cascade of swamp filth flooded the gunnery deck. Something inside the vessel had equalised – a tipping point had been reached and the extra weight of the diseased waters was taking the shattered section down into the depths.

Moments passed in a blur. Murnau heard the single crash of a bolt pistol. The phosphex obscured everything in a bank of blue, luminescent lethality, and under its cover Gorphon had been shot in the throat. From the angle, the bolt taking the Destroyer sergeant under the chin and blowing out the top of his scabby crown, Murnau reckoned that Varskjöld had taken the shot with a concealed weapon. The Chaplain's response was immediate and well-practised, the crozius coming down on the agent's head with terrible force, splitting open his skull and allowing his brains to spill out through the tangle of his russet plaits.

The sinking ship lurched again, hurling the remaining Graven to the deck once more. Beyond, Murnau could hear the churn of filth bubbling up beyond the flooded sections. Foetid air howled past the skinned flesh of his ears, though doing little to dislodge the cruel hold of the phosphex had on the deck. About him, the Chaplain heard the tortured groans of the *Xanthus* being rushed to a quagmire grave.

Almost blind and still suffering under the cruel and caustic attentions of the phosphex haze, the Death Guard were struggling. With the deck shifting beneath them, it was little wonder that the roaring black waters took them so easily.

Murnau half stumbled, half clawed his way up the incline and hooked his gauntlet into the piping running along the gunnery deck bulkhead. Gholic and Hadar-Gul disappeared into the darkness without a word as the deluge of rotting sludge swept them away.

The ship was moving. What had once been an incline was becoming a floundering vertical. Zorrak's thundering footsteps took him towards the Chaplain, and the two Death Guard reached out their gauntlets for one another, but their ceramite fingertips missed by a whisper and the Destroyer plummeted down into the furious churn of the rising floodwaters.

Using his crozius like a climbing pick, Murnau ascended the wall like the face of a cliff. Hammering into the metal sheeting, he created purchase points to haul himself up while his gauntlet and mag-locking boots had to contend with the busy piping and cables running down the corridor's length. All the while, the lingering cloud of phosphex ate away at both the Chaplain's flesh and his resolve – every inch of exposed flesh felt as if it was on fire.

With the swirling filth gargling and spitting its sticky way up towards him, Murnau heaved himself up into the buckled stairwell, but a waterfall of canker-curdled muck began to dribble, stream and then course down from above. Murnau held his position for a moment. The *Xanthus* was sinking, and as it did so the morass surrounding it was flooding in through the rents and breaches in the crashed vessel's hull. The frigate was being flooded from above and below, cutting off the Chaplain's escape and trapping him in the stairwell.

Murnau slammed his fist into the passage wall, putting a dent in the metal. His gaunt face was screwed up with rage, the raw muscles and tendons creating a mask of frustration. He settled himself amongst the stairwell structure, watching the liquid filth cascade past him and gush into the stinking waters below. The Chaplain thought on the living bounty that had withered and died to create such ruination and putridity. He considered the promise of new life that the rotting slime held for the insects, parasites and fungal forms that had colonised, and come to dominate, the sludge-ball that Algonquis had so quickly become. The notion that he was going to become part of that fruitful corruption momentarily amused the Chaplain. He would have smiled but for the fact there was so little of his face left.

The stabbing pain in his eyes flickered away to darkness and all Murnau had left was the fire in his scalded, bloody lungs and the doom in his hearts. His mirth and madness had abandoned him. He licked his perfect teeth. Even with a blistered tongue he could taste the heavy metal lethality seeping into his body.

In the empty blackness, the Chaplain's thoughts returned to the tale of Mortarion's ascension that he had told the Destroyers to inspire them, and fortify their spirit. To his surprise and disappointment, he found precious little of

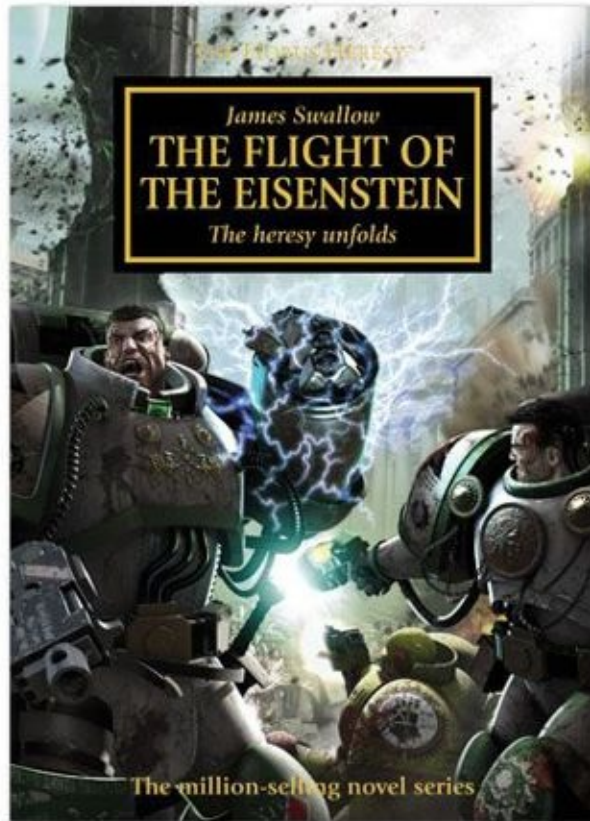
inspiration in the story now. Picturing Mortarion on the toxic slopes of Barbarus served only to remind him that the poisoned environs of their homeworld had actually defeated the primarch, and it had been down to the Emperor to save his fallen son.

There would be no one to save Morgax Murnau. The Chaplain remembered Phorgal's insistence that there should be no survivors aboard the *Xanthus*.

Indeed, there would be none.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROB SANDERS is a freelance writer, who spends his nights creating dark visions for regular visitors to the 41st millennium to relive in the privacy of their own nightmares, including the novels *Atlas Infernal* and *Legion of the Damned*. By contrast, as Head of English at a local secondary school, he spends his days beating (not literally) the same creativity out of the next generation in order to cripple any chance of future competition. He lives in the small city of Lincoln, UK.



Having witnessed the terrible massacre of Imperial forces on Isstvan III, Death Guard Captain Garro seizes a ship and sets a course for Terra to warn the Emperor of Horus's treachery.

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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

**Originally published in the Black Library Games Day Anthology
2012.**

**This edition published in 2013 by Black Library, Games
Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

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ISBN 978-1-78251-173-1

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