

WARHAMMER
40,000



ADEPTUS TITANICUS
HUNTING GROUND
IAN ST. MARTIN

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HUNTING GROUND

Ian St. Martin

Asander stood at the foot of a goddess.

A snarling, wolfish face peered out ahead of her hunched shoulders, leering out across the plain in her tireless hunger for prey. Her claws were colossal weapons, implements of destruction that had reaped quarry from a thousand worlds. The curving, sculpted plates of her carapace were lacquered in a deep tourmaline red, so dark it was nearly black.

A name, shining in brilliant silver, was etched into her armoured greaves, just below the bladed lioness icon of the legio at the ankles of the goddess' splayed feet. The artisans had placed the name there for a reason. All those who had deemed to raise arms against her, from mortal men to towering engines that could scour cities of life, had ended at her feet. All would spend their final moments learning the name of the one that had cast them into the waiting dark.

Her name was *Ruber Captrix*.

Asander's heart raced. She was always the most beautiful in the first quiet moments after a hunt. Even at her feet, he felt their distance as if it were the space between stars. The pain of separation was worsening as the years passed, and even moments after disconnection, he yearned to return to her, to join his frail flesh with her divine spirit and sanctified machinery. Where she ran, he ran. When she hunted, he hunted. Turning his gaze from the Warhound's countenance to the field around him, Asander smiled.

They had hunted well this day.

Everywhere the weak light of the planet's star touched, fighting to pierce the caustic veil of burning smoke that swallowed the sky, the corpses of the Great Devourer lay. Mounds of twisted alien bodies were heaped beyond counting, an ocean of pale, bleeding flesh with its rolling tides frozen in place. Shattered

chitin and jagged chips of horn glittered upon the ground, like bits of shell covering a beach. The field of tyranid dead stretched unbroken to the horizon, broken and destroyed by Asander to reach the true prey that slumped in death at its centre.

Bio-Titan. The memory sent a ripple of warmth over the princeps. Feeling the lesser Tyranid bioforms pop and rupture beneath the tread of *Ruber Captrix*, as surely as if it had been his own boots. The speed of circling the monstrosity's flanks, tearing its legs from its worm-like form. Waiting until the moment was perfect, the goddess and her sister striking the killing blow as one.

A piercing war-horn cut through the silence, jarring Asander from his reverie. He looked beside his engine as her sister goddess, *Domina Mortis*, roared again, her carapace just as charred and slathered in ichor after their run through the battlefield.

No, Asander thought as he crouched down, scooping up a handful of the soil. *Not a battlefield.*

He allowed the dirt to slip from his grasp, as he had done across all the worlds he had walked upon in the Omnissiah's name. This was a hunting ground, and Asander gave silent thanks for it. A sentimental ritual, perhaps, but Asander had seen enough engine deaths to understand each successful hunt was to be cherished.

There may come a day when *Ruber Captrix* would fall, when she would no longer be able to run and hunt. But it was not this day. For Asander, as the last grains slipped from his fingers, that was enough.

The Adeptus Mechanicus ark transport *Baiulus* crouched at low anchor above the slowly turning sphere of Tophet VI, perched in the silence of the void. The crust of the world below was webbed with iron and machine cities, vast foundries and hive manufactories dedicated to fashioning the tools of Forge World Agripinaa. Raw materials were smelted, blessed machines were forged, and millions of men and women were reborn into the skitarii legions indentured to Agripinaa as the skies were lit with the flames of industry.

Now, its surface was lit by fire of a different kind. War had come to Tophet VI, and the cry of its destruction, screamed out across the stars by its astropathic choirs, had been answered by the *Baiulus* and the engines of the Legio Debellator she carried. She came to rest beside a slim needle of vivid emerald. It was known as the *Asuncion*, frigate of the Subjugators Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. The Space Marines had come both to honour their oath to protect the

Tophet system, and for the pleasure of confronting an enemy older than the history of their Chapter.

Twisted fragments of shorn hull plating danced around the vessels. It glittered with the silver of bare metal, chased in hazard striping of gold and jet. Each jagged shard was older than the Imperium itself, forged in a time when the ship they had belonged to took to the stars to build the interstellar empire its commanders now fought to destroy.

The ship itself was wounded, but far from dead. After it had loosed its storm of death down onto Tophet VI, it had entertained the *Asuncion* for a moment before slipping from range, lost in the dark corners of the system. The Subjugators had taken to the surface, and now, so would the Legio Debellator.

Asander's heart raced in union with the plasma reactor of *Ruber Captrix* as she loped across the charred surface of Tophet VI. Her void shields shivered and flared with a hundred impacts as she charged a line of battle tanks, the princeps feeling their barrage as little more than the irritant buzzing of insects. The tanks bore ancient Olympian names upon their hulls of iron, war machines that had besieged the Throneworld itself, but to her, they were simply prey.

Dropping from the *Baiulus* beside the focus of the conflict around Tophet VI's hive capital, the legio had fielded its engines in prime position to exploit a flanking advance. Their enemy were veteran and numerous, battle tanks and cohorts of Dark Mechanicum infantry, but a charge from *Ruber Captrix* and *Domina Mortis* had forced them from their assault on the hive's walls, fighting off the back foot to prevent the Titans from rolling up their lines at the flank.

Ruber Captrix roared, a booming report from her war-horns that sent jets of dust slashing over the enemy. She had driven past foes to rout it alone, but this was an opponent who would not wither from just her voice.

For them, it would take her claws.

Traitor tanks exploded in the Warhound's wake. Ancient Space Marines in thrall to the Archenemy were crushed beneath her feet. Asander could smell them, the thickened corruption bleeding from their machines and their dead. Warp-ensorcelled alloys. Flesh and blood twisted through with promethium and tainted cybernetics. It coated his tongue like poison.

Asander leaned forward in his throne, moving instinctively from side to side in harmony with the Warhound's swaying tread. Ahead of him, his moderati were silent in focus, their hands dancing over the pulsing light of their consoles.

'Void shields holding,' said Berowne, reaching up to snap a pair of goggles over

his head. ‘Vulcan mega-bolter reloaded and primed.’

The report set Asander’s lips into a grim line of concentration. He pushed his right hand forward, making a fist. *Ruber Captrix* raised its arm in concert, the twin barrels of its weapon ticking as they began to spin.

‘I have the shot, my princeps,’ said Berowne, his eyes locked to the targeting matrix on his viewscreen. Reticles bracketed over a pair of Vindicator siege tanks rapidly turning to withdraw from the Warhound’s line of sight.

‘Fire.’

Twin tongues of flame leapt from the tips of the mega-bolter’s barrels. The air filled with the tearing scream of hundreds of mass-reactive shells launching. Streams of empty casings poured from ejection ports beneath the weapon, smashing and clattering to the ground like a disjointed chorus of broken bells.

The first Vindicator vanished, shredded by the fusillade. The second threw its powerplant into overdrive, surging in reverse to escape. Bursts of thick black smoke popped across its hull as it threw up a smokescreen to cover its retreat. Berowne stared into his console as the Warhound snuffed the cloud of smog and crackling electromagnetic interference for heat traces and auspex returns. He found the target within the smoke and tracked the tank, leading the fire of *Ruber Captrix* back into the pall. Darts of fire slashed into the smokescreen, and the Titan’s crew was rewarded by a orange sphere of exploding flame that ripped out at its centre as the tank’s fuel cells ignited. Asander glimpsed the tiny figures of Iron Warriors leaping from the wreckage, still firing their boltguns as they withdrew into the thinning smoke.

Berowne chased the regrouping traitors with bursts from the anti-infantry bolters mounted in *Ruber Captrix*’s chin.

‘Forget them,’ murmured Asander. ‘Our focus is on the armour.’

‘Aye, princeps.’

‘Mistress Vyola,’ Asander looked to his second moderati.

‘Sir?’ she asked.

‘Bring us around behind their formation, running speed.’ Asander’s eyes narrowed. ‘Let us ensure the rest of those seeking to break free die beneath our feet. Berowne? This smoke does us no favours. Let us illuminate our path.’

The plasma blastgun that formed the majority of *Ruber Captrix*’s left arm thrummed. Its focusing coils shivered as energy was siphoned into them from the caged star of the Titan’s reactor core. Asander felt the building energy prickle the skin of his arm with gooseflesh.

‘*Power transfer successful,*’ came the calm crackling tones of Komnena, *Ruber*

Captrix's tech-priestess, from her station behind the cockpit. *'Charge threshold achieved, and maintaining within tolerance parameters, Omnissiah be praised. The instrument is primed for discharge at your command.'*

Berowne leveled the weapon on the centre of the enemy formation. 'Target acquired.' He hauled back a lever beside his throne. 'Target locked.'

Asander lowered his head, feeling the hull of *Ruber Captrix* groan as she crouched to brace. His arm began to itch, sheened with sweat.

'Fire.'

A blinding sphere of energy screamed from the left arm of the Warhound. It hurtled down into the line of enemy armour on a comet's tail of hissing light. The smokescreen burned away to nothing as it tore past. Entire swathes of the invaders were obliterated, fused into molten smears of vitrified ruin. Hull plating was burned to slag in an eyeblink. Infantry were evaporated, leaving behind nothing save stark shadows scorched into the ground where they had stood an instant before.

Domina Mortis fired her own plasma blastgun from *Ruber Captrix's* left, and under such a bombardment, the enemy lines fractured. Unlike traditional Titan maniples deployed by other legions, fielding monstrous Warlord and Reaver Titans bristling with weaponry that would not be out of place on a small starship, the force under Asander's command was composed entirely of Warhounds. The Scout Titans fought as a pack, harrying and surrounding larger prey and working in unison to bring it to its knees. The other two Warhounds of the depleted maniple, *Regina Verum* and *Argentum Sororis*, ran together on the opposing flank, sowing the same carnage amongst the enemy and driving them from the hive city's gates.

Asander watched the columns of charred battle tanks throw up tails of dust and smoke in their wake as they retreated, and angled *Ruber Captrix* behind them. The Warhound's bestial sentience slavered to run the routed enemy down, and the aging princeps was inclined to agree with her. His eyes scanned into the distance across the surface of Tophet VI, searching the land beyond the hive's walls behind him. He was about to give the order for his engines to give chase, when his vox crackled.

'Lord princeps.'

The voice was inhumanly deep, flawed by vox interference but unmistakably that of a transhuman.

'I am Brother Garrido. On behalf of the Subjugators Chapter, Adeptus Astartes, I bid you welcome to Tophet Six and offer my thanks for your intervention. If you

would dispatch a command delegation, we would have your council in coordinating our defence.'

Asander paused. He frowned, looking back at the savaged battlements of the hive. The legio had arrived not a moment too soon. Whole sections of the walls had been torn down into mounds of rubble. Demolished Imperial tanks and defence batteries lay twisted and broken like a child's toys, strewn amongst the wreckage in a sea of hundreds of dead skitarii and planetary defence auxiliaries.

Tapping a series of keys on his armrest, Asander opened a vox channel to the other legio engines.

'Hold.'

The strategium was a small, cramped room, cold and filled with the soft chatter of cogitators and vox-stations. The council of commanders was to be conducted without binharic cant, though the majority of the chamber's occupants were capable of the Mechanicus' chosen method of communication. This was done in deference to the pair of warrior-giants dominating one corner of the room.

Brothers Garrido and Ayolas of the Subjugators stood in silence at the edge of the central table. Their armour showed signs of the intense siege, rent with deep gouges and bearing patches of flat grey ceramite where the bright green lacquer had been scorched bare. The jet fist of Dorn stood unbowed upon their pauldrons.

They had made planetfall numbering ten battle-brothers, a force capable of turning the tide of any engagement. Now they stood at six. Garrido had arrived bare headed, displaying the blunt, oversized features that came with ascension to the Space Marines, and cold eyes that offered nothing in the way of mercy or rest. Ayolas remained helmed, his features hidden behind a snarling, grilled visor.

An assembly of Mechanicus leadership was present, including the skitarii commander and various high-ranking adepts wearing the black and scarlet-edged colours of Agripinaa, the hues of sacred Mars reversed. Asander represented the legio, along with Cynna, princeps of *Domina Mortis*. Berowne and Vyola tended to *Ruber Captrix's* rearming and repair, while *Argentum Sororis* and *Regina Verum* stood watch over the walls.

'The enemy has been driven back,' began Garrido, stepping forward to place his gauntleted fists upon the central table. 'But not beaten. These cursed ones are dogged in their sieges. If they withdraw, it is only to reorganise and marshal greater forces to the fore.'

The Space Marine nodded to a tech-adept, who activated a hololithic projector. A grainy image leapt over the assembled commanders. An enormous hunched figure, a walking cathedral of twisted metal and spiked carapace, dominated a valley landing zone, ringed in battalions of traitor armour and Dark Mechanicum battle servitors.

‘This was the last transmission from our Thunderhawk,’ continued Garrido. ‘Performing reconnaissance on the hostile staging ground prior to our losing contact. It is confirmed as a Warlord-class Battle Titan.’

‘Is this the only image you have?’ asked Asander. ‘What else is known of the disposition of this engine?’

The Subjugator tapped a command into the projector. A section of the image expanded to fill the frame, centring over the pixelated image of a defiled icon on the Titan’s torso. Though twitching and blurry with distortion, the image of a lioness could not be mistaken.

‘Perhaps we might dispense with the notion of any present party’s stupidity and cut to the matter at hand.’ Garrido leveled his gaze at Asander. ‘I believe you know exactly what its disposition is. Tell me why this traitor Titan bears the mark of your legio. Now.’

The strategium went silent. Asander met the Subjugator’s glowering stare with a practised calm he forced into his words.

‘As you are undoubtedly aware, the forge world Agripinaa lies in the vicinity of the warp anomaly colloquially designated as the “Eye of Terror”. Consequently, it is frequently the target of Archenemy invasions. To counter this, the forge periodically deploys expeditionary advances into the anomaly, to disrupt potential incursions and compel the enemy to adopt a more defensive posture.

‘Legio Debellator has participated in such expeditions. My maniple was slated to deploy. However, after a prolonged engagement with engines of the eldar xenos, we were replaced in the rotation by another maniple. When contact with the expedition failed and never reestablished, we believed the engines lost.’

‘Until now,’ growled Garrido.

‘If the Archenemy has corrupted our engines,’ replied Asander, ‘they must be destroyed, and our fallen avenged.’

‘The cursed Fourth Legion will renew their assault,’ said Garrido. ‘And your fallen Titan will walk with them, there can be no mistake.’

Asander did not wilt under the Subjugator’s gaze. ‘The legio will hold your walls,’ he said with finality.

The delegation dispersed. Asander turned and walked from the strategium, still

feeling the eyes of the Subjugators boring into his back.

‘I don’t like it, Roan,’ said Cynna, once the chamber doors closed behind the two princeps. ‘The Grand Master sent us here for Demaratus, and our imperative is better sought in the open where we can hunt.’ They had shared in many hunts together, long enough for her to trust the instincts of the older commander. ‘What are you thinking?’

Asander glanced sidelong at Cynna. He felt weak, longing to feel *Ruber Captrix*’s snarl return to his heart. ‘I think the best place to set a trap is where our prey feeds.’

Berowne could not suppress the chuckle, try as he might.

‘Something is amusing to you, moderati?’

Berowne turned back to Asander, his grin vanishing under the princeps’ withering stare. ‘Apologies, my princeps. It is just... the very notion of it.’

‘Of what?’ asked Vyola distractedly, hands pressed to her temples to adjust the heavy tactical visor she wore.

‘The fact, my dear,’ answered Berowne, ‘that we are using the Adeptus Astartes as bait.’

‘Careful to avoid being within earshot of them when you say that,’ the other moderati replied. ‘The demi-gods would backhand your head from your shoulders for less.’

‘While I do so cherish your comradely banter,’ Asander chastised them, ‘attend to your stations. Both of you.’

‘Aye, sir.’

The princeps rolled his neck, feeling the pull of the segmented MIU cables slotted into his temples and spine that linked him with *Ruber Captrix*. Its irritation was boiling over into his mind, colouring the bodiless view of the Titan’s surroundings he viewed through the manifold with tinges of crimson and black. It had an impatient soul, and waiting crouched within a forest of industrial cooling towers behind the crumbling bastions of the hive, away from the gathering storm of the Archenemy advance, wounded its bestial pride. Asander pressed at the limits of his sight, questing out with the maximum range of his auspex and thermal scans.

Where are you, Demaratus?

The crump of artillery sounded behind *Ruber Captrix* as the hive’s remaining batteries hurled their defiance at the ocean of steel filling the horizon. The tremors of the Earthshakers rocked the ground, sending sympathetic shivers up

Asander's shins. The clatter of breaking masonry falling against the Titan's carapace was an irritant tap against his back and shoulders. The battle would begin in earnest now, and it would take all of his concentration to keep *Ruber Captrix* in line.

The Subjugators had done laudably in organising the defence. Knowing that their numbers were too few for a direct tactical application against a sizeable force of battle tanks and mechanised infantry, Garrido had instead deployed his battle-brothers at intervals amongst the mortal soldiery of the planetary defence forces on the ramparts. They would be anchors within the storm, islands of implacable lethality lifting the morale of the entrenched Imperials as they sold their lives to hold the walls.

The Adeptus Mechanicus defenders maintained their own formations. Battle cohorts of Agripinaa skitarii waited in silence in the yawning breeches in the hive city walls. Vanguard infantry stood in ordered rows, surrounding hulking dunecrawler walkers, while Ironstrider and Sydonian dragoon cavalry held the flanks.

The noise of a hundred engines joined the crack of the Imperial guns as the Iron Warriors charged over Tophet VI's scorched plains, the smoke of their exhaust choking the sky with a liar's night. Screaming munitions filled the air like shooting stars, smashing down into the walls. Skitarii were blown apart, cybernetic warriors unmoving as the comrades beside them were shredded by shellfire. Sections of the walls shattered, sinking in clouds of dust as if the earth were swallowing them.

Still, the Legio Debellator held. They would not move until their prey exposed itself.

Asander felt her even before he heard her. Tremors that put the Earthshaker artillery to shame rattled up his legs, squeezing them with cramps. His thermal scans spiked an instant before a blinding flash left prismatic afterimages dancing over his eyes.

An entire section of the wall vanished, as though it had never existed. The edges of the ramparts standing on either side were blackened with the telltale carbon scoring left in the wake of the most powerful las-weapon not equipped aboard a void warship. The destruction continued on two kilometres into the hive, leaving a black valley of fused slag where once there had been streets, manufactories and tenements filled with people.

Through the manifold, Asander watched a shape resolve in the smoke, like a predatory monstrosity rising with sinister slowness to the surface of the deep

ocean.

The pict captured by the Subjugators' Thunderhawk in its final moments did no justice to the sacrilege Asander glimpsed through tear-streamed eyes.

A Warlord Titan, crown jewel of any legio of the Adeptus Titanicus, defiled. A behemoth of breathless scale, corrupted. A war engine that Asander had hunted beside for decades, its ancient, noble spirit violated.

Betrayed. Cursed.

The Warlord Titan that had once been *Ecce Bellum* of Legio Debellator passed from the smoke, a torrent of steam, oil and blood streaming from the volcano cannon that was its right arm.

Then the screaming began.

Asander's body locked in spasm as it blasted across the manifold. Berowne and Vyola reeled in their thrones, their hands clamped over their ears as a wall of discordance and virulent scrapcode struck them like a hammer blow. The cockpit lights were extinguished as tocsins wailed and amber emergency lighting flickered online. Dark blood trickled from Asander's ears, eyes and nose. The scream was beyond conception, depthless in its horror.

And at its core, with pain so deep and heart-breakingly clear, Asander recognised a voice.

The Warlord's tread drew nearer, sounding as though the world were splitting open with every step. The volcano cannon fired again, and more of the wall disappeared as the shadow of the colossus spilled into the hive. Iron Warriors and skitarii swarmed around its feet, insects fighting and dying beneath an uncaring god. Mortal soldiers were ripped apart by black-metal abominations of the Dark Mechanicum that fed on the living and the dead. All were crushed indiscriminately as *Ecce Bellum's* tread carried her through the last of the walls. Dust and smoke swirled around the Warlord's legs like twisting skirts as she advanced into the hive proper.

Asander cried out, his MIU cables snapping taught as he fought to regain control and bring *Ruber Captrix* back online. It felt as though he were pushing a mountain of razors and broken glass off his chest. The spirit of his engine howled in primal rage, and he plunged his mind into its fury. It numbed his pain, granting him strength, and the cockpit shivered as consoles and lights began flickering to life.

'Status,' Asander hissed through clenched teeth, eyes screwed shut in pain and concentration. 'Report.'

Berowne cuffed his nose, smearing blood across the back of a gloved hand.

‘Targeting systems back online. Weapons live, ready to fire in one hundred and eighty seconds.’

‘Locomotive systems resetting,’ Vyola called back to the princeps. ‘Re-spinning the power couplings. At minimum output, we can walk in seventy seconds.’

‘*The heart of Ruber Captrix has returned to balance,*’ voxed Komnena. ‘*Her core is conciliated with the requisite rites, and its fire beats in union with the Omnissiah – praise be.*’

Asander grunted, angling a pain-clawed hand to tap at his vox and open a channel to *Domina Mortis*.

‘Are you with me, Cynna?’

The reply came after a moment, the other princeps’ voice tight and breathless with pain.

‘*Domina Mortis endures. We are with you.*’

Asander voxed *Argentum Sororis* and *Regina Verum*, receiving similar affirmations from their commanders. He raised his right arm, feeling his hand twitch as autoloaders filled the chambers of his Vulcan mega-bolter.

‘Then with me, we hunt!’ Asander killed the link, glaring down at his moderati. ‘Forward, running speed! I want firing solutions, and *now!*’

As *Ecce Bellum* plodded ponderously into the hive, it was *Regina Verum* who struck first. Pressed against the inner walls of the Imperial fortifications, the Warhound waited for the Warlord to stride past her position before spinning up its powerplant from idle. She pounced from concealment, loosing sheets of flaming gel from her inferno cannon and saturating the back of the enemy engine with clinging fire. The massive engine’s void shields flared star-bright as the burning slick popped and splattered on its multi-layered surface.

Ecce Bellum halted, her torso grinding with abused cogwork and hydraulics as she traversed to bring her weapons to bear on the threat, but she was too slow. *Regina Verum* flashed past her, sprinting at full speed deeper into the industrial park surrounding them. The Warlord’s pained screams spiked from her war-horns in rage, trudging after *Regina Verum* in pursuit. Fire slashed down from her weapon batteries, but the nimble Warhound weaved a serpentine path, dodging all but glancing shots that sparked from her void shields.

As the Warlord strode deeper into the complex, another signal appeared on her sensors as *Argentum Sororis* attacked, strafing behind the larger engine and raking her legs with mega-bolter and turbolaser fire. *Ecce Bellum* reeled, and the engine was forced to engage stabiliser locks to arrest her stumble. As her void

shields burned, two more contacts appeared at close range on her flanks.

Ruber Captrix and *Domina Mortis* leapt forward as one, skidding to a halt to fire their plasma blastguns together. Steam burst from the glowing weapons as they loosed comets of blue-white energy, before lunging forward again at a sprint. The plasma blasts struck the forward shielding of *Ecce Bellum* in the same instant, concealing the Warlord behind a blinding flash as they succumbed to the onslaught and overloaded with a thunderclap.

Asander felt a tooth crack as *Ecce Bellum*'s screams rose in volume. Warnings filled his vision as the missile pods on the Warlord's carapace snapped open. Twin plumes of smoke burst across the giant's shoulders as she emptied her missile tubes. Dozens of warheads corkscrewed out on trails of supersonic exhaust.

'Evasion stride!'

Ruber Captrix wound through the forest of industrial piping and cooling towers as missiles smashed down all around in a deafening barrage. Asander felt Cynna cry out through the manifold as a direct hit broke through her voids and sheared away her plasma blastgun. A warhead impacted on his right side, and he bit into his lip as he felt his collarbone snap.

The Warhounds returned fire from their mega-bolters, stitching fire across the twisted carapace of *Ecce Bellum*. Her once-pristine armour was now blackened saurian hide soaked in grotesque scales of congealed blood. Spikes of rusted iron and horn thrust up through it in random clusters, jagged and weeping straw-coloured fluid as they burst from the strike of heavy mass reactives. *Domina Mortis* peeled away on the Warlord's left, trailing smoke from her crippled left arm. Asander sprinted past on the right, dipping low but not fast enough to avoid a glancing slash from *Ecce Bellum*'s power claw. The energised talons pierced the void shields as they raked across the back of *Ruber Captrix*.

In the moment they touched, Asander felt Demaratus at the monster's heart. He felt the memory of a man he had found as a child, he felt—

—corruption slither over his tongue, crawling with clawed legs down his throat. Filling his lungs with swelling larvae, quivering as they burst to send their poison spiralling into his blood—

Asander hissed, thrashing his head and shaking his MIU cables like a gorgon's crown. Blood pooled at his seat from the deep claw wounds in his back. The shouts of his moderati blurred, sounding as distant as another man's dream. Another missile smashed into the back of *Ruber Captrix*, and it took everything for Asander to keep the Warhound on her feet as she was hurled forward. He

heard *Argentum Sororis* crash into a manufactory complex, her leg a crippled mass of twisted metal, still firing her turbo defiantly from her knees. He couldn't see *Regina Verum* or *Domina Mortis*. He knew that *Ruber Captrix* was still standing, but he couldn't feel his legs.

Psycho-stigmatic wounds ripped open across Asander's face as his voids collapsed under the firestorm of *Ecce Bellum*'s close defence batteries, the claret mask feeling as cold and distant as the screaming klaxons within the Titan's cockpit, and the panicked shouts of his crew. *Ecce Bellum* was rounding on him, lumbering with glacial, inevitable malice to swing the barrel of its volcano cannon to bear. The devastating weapon trembled, gathering annihilation into itself, poised to fire.

Asander reached up toward *Ecce Bellum* through the manifold, using the instant of their contact to anchor his mind and scream out into the Warlord.

<Demaratus!>

Ecce Bellum hesitated. The engine paused for a moment, the barrel of the volcano cannon wavering. Asander coughed, and warmth spilled down his lips as he stared up at the colossus poised to murder him.

<You were an orphan of the Drysax slums on Yopul Quintus,> he gasped. <I found you, tinkering with engines before you could walk or speak. I took you with me to the legio. I raised you. We, we walked as god-machines across the surface of eighteen worlds together. We felled xenos of the tau, the eldar, the greenskins, you and I!>

Through the ever-present scream, Asander could barely make out bursts of choking, trembling words.

<...left me... abandoned me... left me for them to take me...>

<I let you go into the Eye when I should have been there with you. I should have been there to protect you!>

The voice rose, anger tainting the words as the daemon possessing the engine poured in. Asander felt heat sear his face as the volcano cannon primed.

LEFT ME ABANDONED ME LEFT ME LEFT ME LEFT ME

<Demaratus, remember!>

The scream eclipsed everything. Twin voices, man and daemonic machine, rising to swallow all other sound. The machine and daemon cried in anger and outrage, the man in agonised defiance, as the cannon refused to fire.

<...Roan...>

<Demaratus?> Asander rasps.

<...can't hold it back... much longer...> The volcano cannon of *Ecce Bellum*

spasmed as her princeps grappled with the daemon infesting the engine's heart.
<You have to... fire now. Please... Roan... kill me.>

<Dem,> Asander choked. <I can still-->

<Shoot!> Demaratus screamed, the words twisted with inconceivable pain.
<Do it, please! Please!>

The volcano cannon dipped, its servos smoking as it ground down and levelled at *Ruber Captrix*'s head. Asander's world shrank to the barrel of the enormous weapon, as pinpricks of light gathered deep within it. He cried out, raising his left arm, feeling the faint tickle of static raise the hair on his forearm as he made a fist.

<I'm so sorry.>

Ruber Captrix fired her plasma blastgun at point-blank range. The shot struck *Ecce Bellum* directly in the faceplate, obliterating her iron skull in a welter of aerosolising blood-oil and spinning armour splinters. The screams ceased, shrinking back to echoes and afterimages across the manifold.

Decapitated, the Warlord wavered for a handful of heartbeats, swaying back and forth, before falling back to crash with a meteor's force into the streets of the hive.

The few remaining forces of Iron Warriors and Dark Mechanicum not crushed in the Titan's fall were routed by a blistering counter-attack by the *Agripinaa skitarii*, hounded from the hive city to be destroyed in a protracted chase across the plains of Tophet VI.

Asander felt his vision curdle and blur as it narrowed into blackness.

Moderati Vyola grunted as she dragged Asander down from *Ruber Captrix*'s cockpit. She looked up at the Warhound from her splayed feet. She was savaged, and Vyola was amazed that she had remained standing. It would take months of extensive repairs before she could hunt again. Vyola couldn't bear to look upon what had been *Ecce Bellum*, nor would she bring herself to consider the fate of the other legio engines she had walked with into the Eye.

Asander stirred, and Vyola adjusted his arm around her neck to keep her princeps upright. His legs dragged limp behind him.

'Berowne?' Asander asked in a whisper.

Vyola paused. 'His last act was firing the blastgun,' she answered quietly, remembering her comrade's slumped form in the throne beside her.

Asander didn't respond, his glassy eyes staring absently into the ground. 'Set me down.'

Carefully, Vyola lowered him down, propping him up against *Ruber Captrix's* foot. Asander gazed at the broken rockcrete and burnt soil of Tophet VI, before gathering a handful into his hand. He gave silent thanks for his hunting ground, looking up at his venerable Warhound as the earth fell between his trembling fingers. She was always the most beautiful in the quiet moments after the hunt.

Ruber Captrix was unbowed. She would hunt, she would stand, and she would walk again.

Even if Asander would not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian St. Martin has written the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Deathwatch* and the short stories 'City of Ruin' and 'In Wolves' Clothing' for Black Library.

He lives and works in Washington DC, the US, caring for his cat and reading anything within reach.

[When a tragedy occurs, two young Imperial Knight pilots must work together and learn the ways of war if either are to survive.](#)



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