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GAMES DAY ANTHOLOGY
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Black Library Games Day Anthology 2012/13

Welcome to the second Black Library Games Day Anthology.

This book is a celebration of Black Library and the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. Within these pages, you will find several tales from the grim darkness of the far future, along with a Horus Heresy story from the 31st millennium and a new tale from Warhammer's Time of Legends.

If you're new to the work of Black Library, this selection of action-packed short stories will serve as an example of what we do, and hopefully leave you wanting more. If you're already a reader, you will find links here to several of our bestselling series, and some tantalising hints about what you can expect in the next year.

We hope you enjoy the stories herein.
See you next year for more.

The Black Library Editorial Team

Contents

<i>Distant Echoes of Old Night</i> - Rob Sanders	7
<i>Extinction</i> - Aaron Dembski-Bowden	33
<i>The Master of Mourkain</i> - Josh Reynolds	49
<i>The Blessing of Iron</i> - Anthony Reynolds	67
<i>The Memory of Flesh</i> - Matthew Farrer	89
<i>Perihelion</i> - Dan Abnett	107

The Horus Heresy

Distant Echoes of Old Night

by 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 precious flesh.

This place, Algonquis, had once been a verdant forest moon, blessed with flocks of such 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 destruction 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 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 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 flood-waters 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 would be 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 hauling off?' 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, that 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 communique?' Murnau asked, changing the subject.

'Fenestra says that it was coded,' the Death Guard officer confided, 'but not like any Legion code the witch had 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-actual, 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 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 by far suffered 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 devastation - 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 emphasised further 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 the 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 he couldn't prevent a grin of lunacy spreading across his scabby lips.

'We can take the *Xanthus*,' he said, 'but it will be bloody for all. 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 and his wretched Destroyers. 'Assemble your squad, sergeant, for a direct assault on the enemy vessel. We shall create our own entry point and take Latham and his Fists by force.'

'Yes, Brother-Chaplain,' Gorphon replied with deadeyed 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, and 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.

He 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 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 chamber. Pushing through the trickles of hardening metal, Murnau found himself amongst carnage.

Here were fresh bodies; most were 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 seemingly provided no resistance at all. They had been too sick, too weak. They had done as instructed by their Legion 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 growing 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 appraised 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' course 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 an almost casual halt.

Sergeant Gorphon was braced across a hatchway leading to 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 hypothesised, '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... *whom?* 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.

'I 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 brutal 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 were 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 own 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 chain-blades 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 it were 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 wretched 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 spatters of gore that sat sizzling 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 Varskjold,' 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 Varskjold 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 were 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 reasoned that Varskjold 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 like 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 coarse 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, with the raw muscles and tendons creating the mask of frustration exposed and on display. 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 dominated, the sludge-ball that Algonquis had so quickly become. The notion that he was going to become part of that fruitful corruption seemed to momentarily amuse 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.

Warhammer 40000

Extinction

by Aaron Dembski-Bowden

*Legions die by betrayal. They die in fire and futility.
Above all, they die in shame.*

Kallen Garax, Sergeant of Garax Tactical Squad, Sons of Horus 59th Company. His armour is wreck-blasted and cracked, gunmetal grey with the sea-green paint scorched away into memory. Across his helm's left side, image intensifiers refocus with smooth whirrs, miraculously undamaged from his fall.

His men are in pieces around him. Medes is a dismembered ruin, his component parts scattered over the rubble. Vladak is impaled through the chest, decapitated by junk, twitching in a spread of bloodstained sand. Daion and Ferae had been closest to the defence turrets' power generator when their length of the wall exploded under a gunship's strafing run. Kallen has a flash memory of both warriors covered in chemical fire, burning as the shockwave sent them sprawling. Their scorched remains scarcely resemble anything human. He doubts they'd been alive when they hit the ground.

Smoke rises all around him, though the wind steals the worst of it. He can't move. He can't feel his left leg. Jagged wreckage lies strewn in every direction; a particularly sharp chunk of it impales his thigh, pinning him to the charred ground. He looks back at the burning stronghold, with its remaining turrets firing at the gunships strafing the battlements, and an entire wall broken open to the enemy. Across the desert, the enemy come on in a dusty horde, halfoccluded by the dirty smoke thrown up by their bike tyres and smoking engines. Dirty silver on a dull, desecrated blue: the Night Lords, riding in wild unity.

He keeps his calm, speaking over the vox, demanding Titan support that he knows isn't coming, despite the princeps's promises. They are betrayed, left here to die under VIII Legion guns.

Kallen looks at the plasteel bar driven through the meat of his leg, and gives it an experimental tug. Even with pain nullifies flooding his bloodstream, the grind of metal against bone peels his pale lips back from his teeth in a snarl.

'*Tagh gorugaaj kerez,*' he calls out in Cthonic. '*Tagh gorugaaj kerez.*'

A howl sounds closer, mechanical and full-throated. Jump-jets, whining to a close.

'*Veliasha shar sheh meressal mah?*' asks a vox-voice in a language he doesn't speak. He knows the sound of Nostraman, tongue of the sunless world, but speaks none of it himself.

A shadow eclipses the world's poisoned sky. It isn't one of his brothers. It doesn't offer a hand to help him rise. Instead, it aims a bolter down at his face.

Kallen stares into the gun barrel, dark as the nothingness between worlds. His eyes flick left, where his own bolter lies in the rubble. Out of reach. With his leg impaled, it might as well be half a world away.

He unlocks his helm's seals and pulls it free, feeling the desert wind on his bleeding face. He wants his killer to see him smiling.

Sovan Khayral, Techmarine, bound to the Sons of Horus 101st Company. The bridge burns around him, shrouding his vision with greasy smoke the ventilators have no hope of scrubbing into something breathable. To compensate, his eye lenses cycle through filters: thermal sight reveals nothing but smears of migraine heat; motion-sensing tracks the crew staggering and suffocating on the deck, and slouched in their seats.

The ship dying around him is the *Hevelius*, a destroyer of some renown in the Sons of Horus fleet. Like so many of the Legion's ships, she was at Terra when the Throne-world burned. The last sight Khayral had of the auspex display showed the flickering runes of the Death Guard fleet closing into killing range, herding the outnumbered and outgunned Sons of Horus vessels into showing their bellies. The Death Guard meant to finish this up close and personal. They'd get their wish, in a matter of moments.

Khayral's dense ceramite acts as a heat shield against the fires consuming all life around him. Retinal displays mark the temperature close to melting flesh and muscle from the bone. Sirens wail without respite, never needing to pause for breath in the choking smoke.

He hurls himself at the control throne, throwing aside the slack corpse-to-be of *Hevelius*'s asphyxiating captain. Through the smoke, he keys a code into the console built into the armrest. Shipwide vox comes alive with a nasty, wet crackle. Circuits are melting all across the ship, diseased and rotting and burning.

'All hands,' he says through his helm's mouth-grille speaker. 'All hands, abandon ship.'

Nebuchar Desh, Captain of the Sons of Horus 30th Company. He exhales a rancid coppery breath from his lungs, feeling bloody spit stringing between his teeth. One of his hearts has failed, now a cooling dead weight in his chest. The other beats like a heathen war drum, overworked and out of rhythm. His face is on fire with the pain of the lash wounds tiger-striping his flesh. The last whipcrack stole one of his eyes. The one before that opened his throat to the gristle.

He raises his sword in time for the whip to lash back, wrapping his fist and the hilt in a serpentine rush. A sharp pull tears the weapon from his grip. Disarmed, half-blind, breathless, Desh falls to one knee.

'For the Warmaster.' With his ravaged throat, the words are as strengthless as a whisper. His enemy answers with a bellow, loud enough to shake Desh's remaining eye in its socket. The wall of sound hits him with rippling physicality, denting and bending his armour plating in a series of resonating clangs. He stands against the wind for three erratic heartbeats until it breaks his balance, hurling him down and sending him skidding across the landing platform with a squeal of ceramite on rusting iron.

As he tries to rise, a boot presses down on the back of his head, grinding his mutilated face into the iron deck. He feels his teeth snapping in their sockets, gluing to the inside of his mouth with thick, corrosive saliva.

'For the—'

His benediction ends in a voiceless gurgle as the blade slides lovingly home into his spine.

Zarien Sharak, Brother of the Sons of Horus 86th Company. A seeker, a pilgrim, a visionary - he seeks out the Neverborn, surrendering his flesh to daemons as a statue of meat and bone offered up for reshaping. He pursues them, proves himself to them with sacrifices of blood and souls, forever seeking the strongest to ally with him within his own skin.

He no longer recalls how long he's been on this world, nor how long the World Eaters have been chasing him. He isn't here to run from them, he's here to stand and face them. They chase him now, laughing and howling up the side of the mountain. Sharak can hear the mad wetness in their words, and pays their frothing laughter no heed. His muscles burn; the last daemon to dwell within his flesh was cast out seven nights before, leaving him drained and anaemic in search of another. Soon, he knows. Soon.

His gauntleted hand grips the rocky ledge above. He has the briefest moment

to smile at the bolt shells bursting stone into fragments nearby before he hauls himself up and out of the World Eaters' line of fire.

The shrine awaits him, as he knew it would, though it resembles nothing he'd expected. A single sculpture, weathered by mutable time, reduced to something stunted, formless, vague. Perhaps it had once been an eldar, in the era when this entire region of space had been the domain of that sick and weak alien breed.

You have found me, comes the voice in his mind. Sharak sweats at the silent sound. He turns, seeing nothing but the deformed statue and the endless expanse of glass desert in every direction.

Sharak, it beckons. Your enemies draw near. Shall we end them, you and I?

Sharak is no fool. He's whored his flesh as a weapon to devils and spirits alike, but he knows the secrets most of his brothers lack. Discipline is all it takes to maintain control. Even the strongest of the Neverborn is no match for the strength of a guarded, warded human soul. They could share his flesh, but never dominate his essence.

This daemon is strong. It has demanded much of him these last months, and here at the precipice, it offers everything he needs to save his life. But he is no fool. Caution and care are his watchwords when dealing with this realm's creatures. He's seen too many of his brothers become scorched husks, home to daemoniac intelligence, all trace of themselves scoured and scraped away from within.

The World Eaters howl below - not like wolves, but fanatics. It's the lack of anything feral that makes it so sickening to hear, so much more of a threat. A beast's howl is a natural thing. A fanatic's cry is something of anger and tormented joy in equal measure, born of spite and twisted faith. He turns back to the stunted stone pillar.

You've followed my voice for a hundred days and nights. You've made foes of brothers and cousins alike, just as I asked. And now you stand before the stone that sinners once carved in my image. You've proven yourself in every way I asked of you. You are worthy of this union. What now, Sharak? What now?

'I'm ready,' Sharak says. He bares his throat in a symbolic gesture, and pulls his helm free. He can hear the rattle and grind of ceramite over rock. The World Eaters are almost upon him.

The Joining is different each time. Once, it was a hammer blow to his sternum, as if the daemon wriggled its way through an invisible puncture hole into his body. Another time, it came as a burst of consciousness and sensuality - perceiving shadows of lost souls moving at the edges of his eyes, and hearing whispers on the wind from entire worlds away. This time, it strikes with heat,

with a burning itch across the skin. He feels the Joining physically at first, a welcome violation of his flesh despite the bleeding and choking. It hurts down to his bones, weighing them down, driving him to his knees. His eyes turn next, hardening in their sockets, fusing to the bone behind. He taps them, scratches them, pulls at them... they're stones in his skull, edged by spines pushing from his face.

The strength is narcotic in its intensity. No combat drugs, no stimulant serum can match the energy feeding the fibres of his muscles. He starts to claw at his armour plating, no longer needing its protection. Ceramite peels away in chunks, making room for the chitinous ridges beneath.

Sharak looks past the pain, refocusing, seeking to calm his racing hearts. Control. Control. Control. It's only pain. It won't kill him. It can be overcome. It...

It hurts. It hurts more than the agonies of all past Joinings. It hurts to his core, beyond his flesh, hurting past the aches in his bones and into something deeper and truer and infinitely more vulnerable.

A lesson here, the voice says. Not all pain can be controlled.

Sharak turns, screaming through a mouth now crammed with knife-teeth. His jaw barely obeys him. His voice strangles off, killing the cry, and becomes someone else's laugh.

And not all enemies can be beaten.

Fear - fear for the first time in his life - floods through his organs in an adrenal rush.

Erekan Juric, Captain of Vaithan Reaver Squad. Lasfire slashes past him, ionising the air he breathes and leaving scorched smears across his armour. He ignores the incidental beams, firing back at the humans with his bolter kicking in his fist. The turbines on his back are heavy, broken things that no longer breathe flame. They stutter and sigh, exhaling smoke and bleeding promethium.

At his boots, his brother Zhoron is cursing him and thanking him, all at once. Juric drags Zhoron by the backpack, hauling him metre by metre up the gunship's ramp. Both of them leave a snail's trail of fluid along the ridged metal: Zhoron leaves a path of his blood from where his legs now end; Juric leaves a dripping track of leaking oil and fuel, with spent shell casings clanging down on the metal ramp by his boots. In the gunship's cargo bay, hastily loaded crates wait in ramshackle order, with wounded warriors in abundance.

'Shersan,' he voxes. 'Go.'

'Yes, captain,' comes the confirmation, flawed by vox-crackle. For a moment,

Juric smiles, even under enemy fire. *Captain*. An echo of an era when the Legion still had a structure; from the time before they were hunted like dogs by those they'd failed.

With a shudder, the ramp starts its grinding rise. The gunship kicks, lifting off the ground on a cloud of engine wash and swirling dust. Juric releases Zhoron, tosses his empty bolter into the gunship's waiting cargo bay, and starts running.

'Don't,' his downed brother warns through pained hisses. *'Erekan. Don't do this.'*

Juric doesn't answer. He drops from the rising ramp, thudding back down onto the rocky ground, breaking stones beneath his boots. In his fists, both weapons whine as they accrue power in unison: the curving axe shivers with lightning dancing over its silver blade, while the plasma pistol trembles with the heating of its spinal coils. Bursts of gas relieve the pressure from muzzle vanes. It wants to fire. He knows this gun, and he knows its will. It wants to fire.

The humans are upon him now. He faces them at the heart of the burning fortress, while evacuating gunships rise into the grey sky. The first is a woman, her face a canvas of fresh scars, invoking gods she scarcely understands. Two men run behind her, armed with salvaged twists of metal, their violated flesh different only from the woman's in the cartography of their mutilations, but the same in intent. A mob charges behind the three leaders, screaming and chanting, killing each other in a bid to reach him. Faith gives them courage, but their zealotry has driven them past the point of self-preservation.

Juric starts butchering them, saving the overkill of his pistol for what will surely come afterwards. Swing after swing takes him through the rabble, his axe never ceasing. Blood flecks his eye lenses, and sizzles as it burns away from his energised blade. These lives are meaningless.

'Kahotep,' he breathes the name through his helm's vox-speakers. 'Face me.'

The reply is a psychic pulse of distant mirth. *+Now why would I want to do that?+*

Juric puts his boot through the chest of the last man standing, and runs even as the body falls. Another shadow darkens the sky as a gunship judders overhead, before the concussive boom of its engines lift it into the storm. As if in sympathy for the falling fortress, rain starts in a hissing torrent. It does nothing to fight the fires.

Breathless, Juric asks the vox: 'Who's still on the ground?'

Name-runes and acknowledgement pulses flicker across his retinal display, along with a chorus of voices. The stronghold will fall before the hour turns, and half of his men are still inside its sundered walls.

He crosses the courtyard, leaping the green-armoured bodies of his dead brethren, heading to one of the last remaining buildings. The defence turrets are silent now, all as broken as the battlements. Thousand Sons gunships, stark and dark in the rain, drift over the tumbled plasteel walls. Their battle tanks rumble in through holes torn in the stronghold's barricades. With them come phalanxes of the walking dead, directed by unseen hands.

'Kahotep,' he says again. 'Where are you?'

+Closer than you think, Juric. +

Yet another shadow blacks out the sky, this one cast by a vulturish gunship of old indigo and worn gold, not fleeing in shame but bearing down in triumph. Juric throws himself into the vague cover of a fallen wall, his eyes activating retinal runes on his eye lenses.

'I need anti-armour fire in the southern courtyard. Do we have anything left?'

The responses aren't encouraging. At least more of his men are escaping. That's what matters.

The Thousand Sons gunship burns the air with heat haze from its engines, hovering above the courtyard. Its spotlights cut down through the darkness, raking over the desecrated ground.

+Where did you go, Son of Horus? I thought you wanted to face me. Was I wrong?+

The gunship's landing claws bite into the earth, grinding bodies beneath their weight. As the engines cycle down, the ramp beneath the cockpit starts to lower, a maw opening to breathe warriors into war.

Juric watches the Rubricae march forth. His targeting reticule leaps from enemy to enemy, detecting mismatching life signs that suggest everything and conclude nothing. Are these men alive or dead? Both, perhaps. Or neither.

'Vaithan, to me.'

Three runes flash in response. It'll do. It's enough.

He wills his jump pack to fire, but the turbines' response is a shudder and a shower of sparks. He's grounded, and will need to do this the traditional way. Unopposed, three seconds is all it will take to close the distance. Four or five if they land more than one hit, which is likely.

Thayren strikes from above, landing boots-first into the phalanx of the walking dead. Dusty ceramite breaks beneath his impact and two automatons in the blue and gold of the Thousand Sons go down to the dirt, falling with no sound of protest.

Juric starts running the moment Thayren lands. For all his flaws, which he considers many and varied, he's no coward. The Rubricae's bolters bark in his

direction the moment he rises into sight. Whatever independence death stole from them, it left them able to aim. Each explosive hit is a horse kick to his body, blasting ceramite shards away and sending him staggering, cursing the loss of flight. Temperature gauges flicker in alarm as his armour starts to burn with blue witch-fire.

He finishes the first by taking its head, cleaving the stylised warhelm free. Dust bursts from the neck in a thin cloud, with the smell of tombs best left untouched. With the breath of dust comes a faint, relieved sigh. Juric doesn't see the headless body fall; he's already moved on, axe leading the way.

Thayren duels two of the enemy, easily weaving aside from their heavy, precise swings. Juric is almost at his brother's side when protesting engines herald the arrival of Raxic and Naradar. Both hit the ground amidst the Thousand Sons formation, chainblades revving, bolt pistols crashing.

Juric staggers again, down on one knee. His axe falls from his grip. The witch-fire washes over his armour, refusing to burn out, digesting the ceramite and eating into the softer joints.

'Zhoron!' calls one of the other Reavers. Even through the pain biting at his joints, Juric tries to tell them it's futile. The Apothecary is already gone, evacuated on the way to Monument.

He tastes the acid of his own spit on his tongue, and hears the sorcerer's voice in his mind.

+This is how a Legion dies. +

The warship sits silent in space, her reactor cold, her engines dead. Battlements line her spine in a protrusion of castles and spires, with thousands of powerless gun turrets aimed up into the void. She drifts alone at the heart of an asteroid field, suffering occasional impacts against her scarred armour, each slow crash adding to the asymmetry of her scars.

She once carved her name through the galaxy at the vanguard of humanity's empire, a bloodthirsty herald of eminent domain. She once hung in the skies of Terra, laying waste to mankind's cradle. Now she lies still, abandoned in hell, hidden from those who covet her.

Her spirit is a tight, tiny essence in her inactive core; the only iota of sentience and life within the immense hulk. This soul, as true as any human life despite its artificial genesis, slumbers in the infinite cold. She waits to be reawakened, but holds no hope it will ever happen. Her sons fled her decks, leaving her here to grow frigid and silver with ice crystals, so far from the light of the closest sun that the star is nothing but a pinprick in the night.

She dreams a warrior's dreams: of fire, of pain, of blood soaking across steel while great guns roar. She dreams of the Many that once lived within her, and the warmth they took when they left.

She dreams of the times she broadcast her name to lesser vessels, shrieking *Vengeful Spirit* as she crippled and killed her enemies.

She dreams of the last words spoken in her presence, ordered in the low growl of the one who'd come to command her. She knew him, as she knew all of the Many. He'd stood before her machine-spirit heartcore, a massive clawed hand against the glass of her brain. Her mind filled the cavernous chamber, shielded and armoured in dense metal.

Liquids bubbled. Engines groaned. Pistons clanked. The sound of her thoughts.

Abaddon, she'd said to him. *We can still hunt. We can still kill. You need me.*

He couldn't hear her. He wasn't linked, so he could neither hear nor respond. She knew that had been intentional. He was deafening himself to her, to make the abandonment easier. He'd spoken the final three words, then. The last words she heard with the clarity of consciousness.

'Shut her down.'

Abadd—

Ezekyle the Brotherless, a pilgrim in hell. He stands at the edge of a cliff that reaches impossibly high into a sky the colour of madness and migraines, and he looks down at the armies warring below. Ants. Insects. A crusade of souls the size of sand grains, half-lost in the dust churned up from the hammering of so many thousands of boots and tank treads.

His armour is a patchwork panoply of scavenged ceramite, repaired countless times after countless battles. The armour he wore in the rebellion is long-since abandoned, left to rot aboard the warship he exiled into the ether. His weapons from that war are likewise gone: his sword broken in some nameless skirmish years ago, and the claw he stole from his father left at the Legion's last fortress, the bastion known to the Sons of Horus as Monument. He wondered if they still left the weapon on display with the Warmaster's stasis-locked remains, or if they'd given in to their fevered hungers and fought over the right to be its bearer.

There was a time he'd be down there with them, waging war at the vanguard, maintaining a steady stream of orders and listening to a flow of positioning reports, all the while killing with a smile in his eyes and a laugh on his lips.

From this distance, he has no hope of discerning which companies are embattled, or even if either side holds to any of the old Legions' structures. Even

a cursory glance through the dust clouds is enough to betray the most obvious truth: the Sons of Horus are losing once more, against an enemy horde that vastly outnumbers them. Individual prowess and heroism means nothing down there. A battle can break down into ten thousand duels between lone souls, but it isn't how wars are won.

The wind, always a treacherous companion in this realm, carries infrequent scraps of shouted voices from the valley below. He lets the sounds wash over him without guilt, as unconcerned for the screaming as he is for the way the wind drags at his long, loose hair.

Ezekyle crouches, gathering a fistful of the red sand that serves this world as worthless earth. His eyes never stray from the battle, instinct pulling at him despite having no investment in whoever lives and dies.

Far below him, gunships crow and caw above the battlefield, adding their incendiary spite to the dusty frenzy. Titans - at this distance no larger than his fingernails - stride through the choke, their weapon fire still bright enough to leave thread-thin blurs across his retinas, each one a little slice of razored light.

He smiles, but not because of the battle. What world is this? He realises he doesn't even know. His wandering takes him from planet to planet, avoiding his former brethren when he can, yet now he stands upon a world watching hundreds of his brothers dying, without even knowing the planet's name or what they sell their lives to defend.

How many of the men screaming and fighting and bleeding down in the valley would he know by name? Most, without a doubt. That, too, makes him smile.

He rises to his feet, opening his fist. The lifeless, glassy dust glitters away in the wind, catching the light from three weak suns before spreading in a thin burst, lost to sight.

Ezekyle turns his back on the battle, and leaves the cliff behind. Footprints mark his passage, but he trusts the wind to breathe his tracks into memory before anyone catches sight of them. He looks to the horizon, where seven vast stepped pyramids rise into the sky, shaped by hands neither human nor alien, but wrought solely by divine whim.

In this place in space, on every world he walks, desire and hatred forge the landscape more reliably than mortal ingenuity or natural tectonics. He's crossed bridges over oblivion, threaded between islands of rock hanging in the void. He's explored the tombs of xenos-breed kings and queens, and left priceless plunder to lie untouched in the dark. He's travelled the surface of hundreds of worlds in this realm where the material and the immaterial meet to mate, scarcely paying heed to the extinction of the Legion he once led.

Curiosity drives him, and hatred sustains him, where once anger was all he needed. Defeat cooled the fires of that particular forge, however.

Ezekyle Abaddon, no longer First Captain, no longer a Son of Horus, keeps walking. He'll reach the first great pyramid before the first of the three suns sets.

Time Of Legends

The Master of MOURKAIN

by Josh Reynolds

Rotting meat hugs perfect bone, sliding through the shadowy hues of decay before it releases its stubborn grip. Like the world, flesh doesn't know when to surrender. Spirits chatter and screech, bound to flesh and bone by chains of black smoke. The Winds of Dhar and Shyish play across the razor angles of the Corpse Geometries, herding Ka like cattle, keeping them safe from outer predations. Safe and useful; more useful than when the stubborn flesh clung to perfect, unblemished bones.

All is silent. All is perfect. All is night, now and forever.

Come to me, Lord of Masks. Come to me, Prince of Lahmia.

Come Ushoran... Come!

Yellow eyes opened. A growl slid through his lips like a wolf on the hunt. Inhuman muscle swelled and then he was moving through the air, claws outstretched. He hurtled through the night, twisted limbs tensing in preparation for the impact of landing. He landed in the shadows of the alleyway and dove, almost swimming through the air, his twisted form moving with the grace of a dancer down towards the unsuspecting man.

Alerted at the last second by some instinct, the man turned and then fell as shark-like teeth savaged his throat, cutting off first his air, and then his life, in a burst of blood and escaping breath. They were so fragile, he thought, gulping down the warm blood with the greed of a long-denied drunk. So easy to hurt and kill. But it had always been so for him. Even before the coming of the long night.

Blood and death had been his tools, long before he'd accepted the poisoned chalice from... 'Neferata,' he growled, chewing the name like gristle. It was her fault that he had burned, that Lahmia had burned. 'What do you rule now, eh?' he whispered, speaking to the darkness. Sleeping crows shuddered into wakefulness and flight at the rasp of his voice. They spun into the air above the city as he watched. Neferata was queen of nothing now but ghosts and bad memories.

Ushoran inhaled, tasting death on the air. Mourkain stank of it. A charnel

odour clung to every brick and wooden beam. It was in the streets and in the water and in the air. The stink had been a gradual thing, growing over the course of centuries like mould spreading over wet stone. The people of Mourkain did not notice, their senses inundated and dulled by it. It had always been, and always would be, for them.

But Ushoran noticed, and revelled in it. For him, it was akin to the smell of ripening fruit. The stronger that charnel smell became, the closer to the time of plucking it was. Anticipation had grown in him over the span of years as he watched the brute settlement spread into something approaching a true city, like those he'd known in better centuries. The seeds of greatness had been sewn, and now was the reaping time. A long cat-like tongue speared through his lips to dab at the blood that coated his mouth and chin. He rose from his crouch and sprang from the side of the cooling body to the wall and then to the opposite roof.

He had been patient for so long, waiting for the right time without knowing when the right time would be. But it had told him. It had shown him. *Eating away at frail flesh and cleaning it of weakness. Only in death was there true strength.* The living could only carry it so far; now Mourkain was a city of the dead, though it knew it not.

It grew at night like a corpse-blossom, built by dead hands. He had seen the corpses of the newly dead and slaughtered prisoners taken in raids, resurrected by the dark magics to serve the whims of the master of Mourkain.

'Kadon,' he said, tasting the name. Kadon the Eternal, as he styled himself, or Kadon the Mad, as those who ruled in his name called him in illicit whispers. Mad or sane, he was Kadon the Unworthy to Ushoran. That was how he had thought of him all down through the long spiral of years as he waited for the right time to come. Kadon, who held something which was not his, and which could not achieve its full potential in the hands of the living.

Dust falls from the eyes of heroes and kings, and the dead are stirring in their tombs. They will rise and march and thrust the world into a silent, serene shape. The Corpse Geometries will bend and slide into formation for the dead, binding the fires at the poles and snuffing the stars themselves.

'But not for the living,' he whispered. 'That is why you called to me. Why you brought me here.' He looked up, his eyes searching out the square blotch of the giant pyramid, in the shadow of which Mourkain had grown like a nest of toadstools. It was a crude mockery of the great pyramids of Nehekhara, devised by barbaric minds and built by unskilled hands. The crookedly shaped stone that composed it was the source of Mourkain's grave odour. Kadon's first act as king had been to order it built. Why he had done so, and what it covered, Ushoran did

not know, and the voice did not show him, but it made him uneasy regardless.

For some reason, he thought of fire. He had burned once, long ago, before he'd first heard the voice; as Lahmia had burned, so had its children. He shifted on his perch, suddenly uncomfortable. The voice had begun to whisper to him in the warrens of Nagashizzar, where he'd hunted rats and ghouls in the years after Nagash's fall, searching for... what? He still didn't know. Something gripped him with black hooks, reeling him along, plaintive and absolute in its voice. At first, he had thought that he was mad. He still wasn't sure.

It had called to him from out of the mountains that marked the edge of the world, and he had come, unable to resist it. It fled before him almost teasingly, like the wanton maidens he remembered so dimly from before Lahmia fell. They had laughed at him, but in the end, he had made them dance for him, with hooks and blades and pain. *The maidens dance still, in the silent dust. They could dance again, for you, once you have done the deed*, the voice purred.

It promised him things, in his dreams and lately, in his waking moments. It promised him all those things he had so long hungered for, since before the poisoned chalice and the eternal thirst. He had been a prince of Lahmia, but would never have been king. Even after his ascension into death, he had been trapped in the shadows. Left with the scraps and tatters the others had left behind. And in Nagashizzar, he had been treated as vermin. But now...

He threw back his head, smelling the wind. There was death there, as always, but beneath it, a sickly smell, the smell of new rot and festering corruption. It was the smell of age and weakness, of faded power and tottering decline. The savage mathematics of Usirian, god of darkness and decay, claimed all men, even those who professed to control death.

Kadon had been rotting on the bone for a century, and the smell of his decline now permeated his lair. Even his people could smell it, though they knew not what it was. Ushoran had watched them plotting and scheming, much as he himself had done in life. They sensed the weakness of their god-king and circled him like desert jackals. But he was still too strong for them.

Not for Ushoran, though. Not now. Once, almost certainly... the voice had warned him of that. It had warned him that Kadon could control all the dead, even beings like himself. At the height of his powers, Kadon was too strong, even for Ushoran, and would have made of him just another slave. Or worse, he would have unmade him entirely.

Now though, Kadon was failing. The flesh was weak, and the spirit dim. Like an ancient leopard, Kadon was blind and bone-weary, easy prey for a stronger beast. Ushoran had waited for centuries for Kadon to stumble, and now he would

pounce. The thought lent him speed. He raced across rooftops of thatch and slate, inhaling the stink of a living city. He had prowled the edges of Mourkain for years now, probing its secret places and hiding from Kadon.

He was good at hiding. But the time for that game was done.

The voice rustled in his skull, night-black wings of comfort and confidence enfolding him. He had never been brave. Not in the way of warriors or kings. Ruthless, yes - hard and cold and with a grasp of necessity, but he had never been brave. Not until now. Now he would seize what he wanted. The voice had promised him a crown and a throne.

He sprang to the slope of the pyramid, his claws digging into the rock. With a grunt, he started climbing. Kadon had built his palace on top of the pyramid, like a ghoulish squatting protectively over a bone-pit. From there, he had ruled over Mourkain from its birth through the pangs of growth that followed. And then it was to there that he had retreated, leaving his *domnu* - his lieutenants - to rule in his name. Men who wielded the carrion winds often grew apart from the world of the living. It lost its lustre and its hold on them grew frail. He had seen the same happen to W'Soran, both in Lahmia and then later in Nagashizzar.

Ushoran shook the memories off. W'Soran was not here. Neferata was not here. Ushoran was here. Ushoran was who it had called. He snarled and leapt to the ledge of a narrow aperture, one of hundreds that lined the pyramid face at this level. They were not quite windows, but they would serve. He slid inside and dropped silently to the rough stone floor. The air was musty, as one would expect from the inside of a tomb, and it was as dark as the depths of the mountains.

Only the *domnu* were allowed into the palace these days; Kadon had no living guards inside his lair, no courtiers or women. The corridors were crafted from slabs of stone. In its early years, Mourkain traded with the *dawi* of the mountains, and those folk had lent their talents to the building of this place. The stunted folk were masters of stone and iron, and it was on the back of their craft that Mourkain had flourished as it had. Now, however, no *dawi* dared to set foot here. They knew the stink of death-magic when they smelled it, and had left Mourkain to its devices as Kadon's madness became palpable. Trade had dried up, and now the wise men of Mourkain struggled to keep the intricate mechanisms and devices that kept their city alive functioning.

Ushoran clucked his tongue as he drifted through the corridors like a shadow. He would see to it that the trade routes were re-opened. The *dawi* had fortresses all over these mountains, and they would make staunch allies for his kingdom. He let his claws scrape softly against the stone of the walls. They fairly

thrummed with power. Nagashizzar had felt much the same. Death coiled, waiting in the stones. Death and something else. The faint odour of smoke filled his nostrils and he pulled his fingers back and tried to banish the sudden surge of fear that tickled at the base of his mind.

He was getting close, he knew. The smell of the carrion winds was growing stronger. Like the pyramids of home, the corridors of this place moved across from east to west, and then up south to north in a zigzag pattern. It was like following a well-worn path. He sped on, running now, first on two legs and then on all fours.

Hurry Ushoran! The stars spin faster and faster as dust is stirred by hollow winds. The dead howl in their cages of breathing meat! Hurry, the voice hissed in his ears. The corridors gave way to a room, and Ushoran slid to a halt.

The throne room crouched in the web of corridors that surrounded it, nestled like a cancer in the heart of the pyramid. Smoking, glowing braziers were scattered throughout the room, their light revealing the tapestries of dried flesh and woven hair that adorned the walls, and skulls lined the upper reaches, where the curving walls came together in a converse ceiling. The eye sockets of these skulls glowed faintly, and their jaws began to chatter as Ushoran entered.

The throne was made from the ribcage of some great beast and spread across the rear wall. Its skull cast a deep shadow over the thin, withered occupant. That occupant leaned forward, wrinkled features twisting in a crooked smile. 'I smelled you, leech-man,' Kadon croaked. 'I smelled your sour grave stink the first moment you entered my kingdom.'

'Am I to be impressed?' Ushoran said, with a bravado that he did not feel. If Kadon had truly known of him, why had he never sought him out?

As if reading his thoughts, Kadon chuckled and stood. 'It wanted me to seek you out. But I did not want to find you,' he said. Old and bent but still strong looking, Kadon wore heavy fur robes that weighed more than he did, and leaned against an iron staff. At its tip, something squirmed. With a start, Ushoran realised that it was a hand. His eyes were drawn from the writhing fingers to Kadon's brow, where something beautiful rested.

It was all strange angles and sharp edges and it seemed to twist and swell like a thing alive. Ushoran recognised it immediately as the source of the voice which had drawn him down through these long years. He had seen it before, adorning the skull of Nagash, and that thought sent a shiver through him. Desire or fear, he could not tell. Its voice was no longer a whisper, but a thunderous roar, and his bones shook to hear it.

The crown and the throne beckoned to him. With one, he would be a king.

With both, perhaps he would be a god. The god Kadon could have been, had he not been weak and frail and flesh. Only past the point of death could a man be both. Ushoran flexed his talons and snarled in excitement.

'I smelled your hunger.' Kadon chuckled breathily, watching him posture. 'It whispers to me, telling me men's desires.' Withered fingers stroked the crown on his head. 'It whispers to you as well, doesn't it?'

Ushoran said nothing, his eyes on the crown. Images battered at the gates of his mind. He recognised the great cities of Nehekhar, now long gone, cold and dead. Nagashizzar rose over the bitter waters of the Sour Sea, its peaks spewing smoke. Chariots hurtled across the wastes, drawn by skeletal steeds. Nehekhar was just the beginning. Mourkain was next, and then the realms of the north and the west, and the entire world.

He would rule a silent, perfect world from the throne of Mourkain. He would be the god-king of an empire to surpass Settra's. *Crown and throne, Ushoran*, the voice growled. *Crown and—*

Kadon touched the crown again, and the voice stilled abruptly. Ushoran shook the visions off and stalked towards Kadon, his claws flexing. 'It wants you, you know. It has ridden me to my grave. The flesh is weak,' Kadon croaked, making a fist. 'It wants you, but I pretended not to see, pretended not to know. It promised me everything, but it wishes to give all that I have won to you? No!'

Ushoran lunged, jaws wide, claws spread. Kadon thrust his staff out, and the mummified claw at its tip writhed as dark energies burst from it. Ushoran howled as his body was wracked with pain. His leap faltered and he slammed to the floor, his skin blistered and smoking. 'I let you come here now because I could no longer prevent it. But I can still kill you, leech-man.'

Rise, Ushoran, RISE... take us! Take the crown and the throne and the WORLD...

He roared, rising to his feet and crashing into Kadon. The stick-thin frame of the necromancer barely budged as the vampire hit him and he clawed for Ushoran's throat. Kadon's strength was astonishing and Ushoran found that he was glad that he didn't need to breathe.

'All is night,' Kadon snarled. 'The bones dance and build and all is quiet.' Ushoran hissed and ripped the necromancer off of him and smashed him against the floor. Kadon's eyes blazed hatefully as he squirmed snake-like in Ushoran's grip, his staff rattling away. 'It wants you,' he said. 'It would make a graveyard of the world and ride you through the gates, if I let it... but I won't. The world is mine, not yours. It promised me!'

Bone rubbed against metal. Ushoran released Kadon and spun. Eyes like

green embers glowed, meeting Ushoran's own yellow ones. Two armoured shapes stepped out of specially prepared niches set in the wall to either side of the throne. They wore ancient armour composed of rotting leather and bronze plates and carried crude, square-bladed swords. Fleshless grins greeted his snarl. The guardians glided forward, their weapons at the ready.

Ushoran's flesh flowed like water as he moved to meet them. His centuries in the wild had taught him much; the flesh of his kind was as changeable as the morning mist. He revelled in the sweet agony of the change as his body broke down into a clammy fog and rolled towards the wights. As he swept past them, he resumed solidity and brought his fists together on either side of the skull of one. Ancient metal and bone crumpled and he snatched the sword from its hands.

He brought the sword up only just in time as the blade of the other came within a hair's breadth of splitting his head wide open. He growled and slid back warily. He was no swordsman. The only weapons he had ever used were his hands. The guardian moved smoothly towards him.

The only salvation is in oblivion. Only in death can they find freedom, the voice whispered to him.

'I grant you freedom,' Ushoran hissed, narrowly avoiding a vicious cut and plunging his sword through the dead thing's chest. He lifted it off its feet and impaled it on the throne, his brutal strength driving the length of the sword into the bone. Ripping off its sword arm, he turned and left it writhing there.

Kadon had gotten to his feet, seemingly none the worse for wear. 'I know you, leech-man. It knows you of old, so I know you,' he said. The crown pulsed angrily on his brow and the necromancer grimaced. 'It dreams of you, and tells me to give in. But I won't give it up. I took it from the hands of the dead and I'll not give it back!'

Ushoran threw himself at the necromancer with a growl. Kadon spat razor-sharp syllables and Ushoran's flesh writhed on his bones. He felt as if he were boiling from the inside out. Kadon circled him, still talking. 'It told me to put it on. It told me to bury him deep. To bind him in stone and mud, to put the weight of the mountain on his bones and spirit. Never to raise him! Not him!' Kadon grasped the crown and staggered. 'I did as you said,' he moaned. 'I did it for you and this is how you repay me? Perhaps I should put you back where I found you?' he mumbled.

'Stop talking,' Ushoran growled, lunging. Kadon's fingers cut through the air and tendrils of darkness flashed out, snagging his limbs. His form dissolved once more into fog and what plunged out of it towards the necromancer was a silver-

furred wolf. Kadon gestured desperately as the wolf closed in, jaws agape, and the beast was flung back with an agonised yelp as black lightning crashed through it.

'Assume any shape you like, you'll never have what is mine,' Kadon said, snatching up his staff as Ushoran rolled onto all fours. The crown flared with a cold light. Kadon shrieked, as if it were burning him. Ushoran bounded forward and his jaws snapped shut on the side of Kadon's throat. The necromancer squealed and his staff caught the side of Ushoran's skull.

Ushoran fell flat, his thoughts rattling around his head like broken chips of stone. He sat up, sour blood and leathery meat dangling from his jaws. Kadon stumbled towards his throne, his hands clamped to his throat. Ushoran spat out the foul-tasting meat and got to his feet. His jaws tingled. There was a foul power in the sorcerer's blood, and it burned his throat like poison.

He wanted more of it.

He loped towards the wounded man, panting eagerly. The crown pulsed eagerly. Its voice purred encouragingly. *Yessss, it said. Kill him. His usefulness has ended. Take me up... put me on and take the throne! King and god, Ushoran!*

'No,' Kadon gurgled, his eyes rolling wildly in their sockets. The necromancer's will beat against Ushoran's for a moment, staggering him. Century upon century of power lashed him, holding him in place. The crown shrilled angrily in Ushoran's head as Kadon denied its will.

The necromancer dragged himself towards the wall behind his throne, towards one of the niches where his guardians had lurked. He laid a bloody hand on the stones and a hidden door slid open, revealing a set of winding steps. Kadon staggered into the aperture, leaving a trail of red in his wake. As he disappeared, Ushoran found that he was free to move again.

He quickly followed Kadon. 'Where are you going, necromancer?' he called out. The stones of the corridor beyond the hidden entrance seemed to vibrate in tune to his voice. The crown urged him on, its voice strangely faint. 'There is nowhere to run. I have hunted you across centuries,' Ushoran said, hesitating. Was that smoke he smelled?

Something that might have been fear rippled through him as the strange smell crept from the aperture and coiled around him. His lips peeled back from his fangs and he felt the desire to flee rise in him. Was it smoke? Was that the stink of pitch? He shook the thoughts off. What was down there? Where was Kadon going? There was nothing down there except... Ushoran snarled in sudden realization. There was nothing down there except whatever Kadon had buried

down there all those centuries ago. He bounded after the necromancer, ignoring the strange fear which pressed down on him from all sides. He took the stairs three at a time. Ushoran could feel the weight of the pyramid on him here, and his senses prickled warily. 'Where are you going, Kadon?' he said again, though quieter this time. He stopped, listening. The rocks seemed to grind against themselves here, as if something moved beneath them. And perhaps it did, a small part of him said.

Crude pictograms had been scratched into the walls by those ancient builders. Like the hieroglyphs of home, these told the story of the tomb. He traced them with his claws, curious. The body had been found in the river that curled through the mountains, a crown in one hand. The body of a mighty man, larger than any of Mourkain, though reduced to ruin by unknown enemies. Ushoran's claws tightened on the pictures, defacing them.

'No,' he hissed, looking away. It was one of Nagash's servants... that was who it had been, who it had to have been. But why did he smell smoke and pitch? The stairs wound through the guts of the pyramid like a scar, weaving down and to the bottom, to the deep black barrow that marked where Kadon had found the crown. Disjointed images of that time filled Ushoran's head, and the crown urged him on with desperate wordless pleas. Something was happening, he knew. Something was building in the rocks, like water released from a dam. In his head, the muted whispers of the crown had turned to shrieks. Ushoran felt panic grip him. He yearned for the clear night and the taste of blood. Instead, he continued on, his eyes straying to the pictograms again, and the symbol of the barrow's occupant. He knew that symbol. He had seen it often enough, before Lahmia had fallen.

'No!' he hissed again, shaking his head. It was one of the barbarians who had served Nagash, an opportunistic thief; that was who was interred here. A dark joke played on Kadon by the crown. Ushoran chuckled, but the sound faded as it left his lips.

The smell of blood grew stronger and he hurried on, pushing worry and curiosity out of his mind. Crown and throne, those were his only concerns.

Kadon was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs, in a tight corridor which had been blocked off at the opposite end with a stone slab. The necromancer slumped against the rock, scrawling bloody signs on it and whispering raggedly to himself. 'Great king,' he wheezed. 'Prince of Lahmia, come forth...' On his nodding head, the crown sparked and screamed, a strange light flashing across its surface. It wanted no part of this, Ushoran knew.

What was Kadon doing? Was he trying to summon one last defender to his

aid? He leapt down the final few stairs and loped towards Kadon. The necromancer suddenly jerked and frothed as blood burst from his ruined neck and splattered the stone. The crown fell from his head with a clang and lay on the ground, flickering weakly. Kadon was splayed out on the ground, his eyes rolled to the white and his jaw slack. Ushoran stumbled forward, reaching for the crown, his crown. After so long, at last, he would have a crown. No more hiding in the shadows. No more standing behind the throne. No, now he would sit upon it. 'Mine,' he whispered, stretching out his hand.

Crown and throne, Ushoran, it purred. God and king, Ushoran. All yours...

No, something said in a voice like distant thunder. Ushoran's head jerked up. The corridor, indeed the entirety of the pyramid, seemed to echo with that one word. The symbols on the walls seemed to dance and spin. He jerked his hand back and looked to the slab where Kadon had left his bloody marks. The blood had soaked into the stone. He stretched out a hand. The rock was warm. No, more than that... it was scalding! Ushoran jerked his hand back with a hiss.

'What?' he muttered. The crown cried out in his head, urging him to pick it up.

Fire blossomed from the slab and caught him in a searing embrace. He screamed shrilly as a familiar bitter reek filled his nostrils. It was the stink of pitch and burning pork. He caromed off the walls of the corridor, wailing and hammering blindly at the rock.

He heard the rumbling tread of feet and the sizzling of the flames that coated him from head to toe. Shrieking, he tried to flee, but wherever he turned there was fire... nothing but fire and his flesh burned, even as it had on that night so long ago on the fields before Lahmia.

Something as cold as the deepest river beneath the mountains brushed over him, freezing him even as he burned and he fell to his knees. A shape took form out of the flames... A man, huge, larger than the corridor could contain. This was what the magics of Kadon had served to bind here, deep beneath his crude pyramid. The spirit on whose back Mourkain had been built, whose essence tainted every crevice of Kadon's pyramid; the true master of Mourkain, its god and king and soul.

The crown screamed.

The last king of Khemri looked into Ushoran's eyes and the hatred the vampire saw burned him truer than any flame. Ushoran scrambled back, his flesh blackening and curling off as it looked down at him and judged him wanting. Words crashed against his mind, and he squirmed beneath their weight. He felt the burning poison of the stars in his veins and the terrible pressure of the crown. He felt the strength of a mind that had never surrendered to greed or fear. A

name burst from his lips and it resonated through the boiling air like a thunderclap.

Hands made of smoke crashed down around him, threatening to crush him like a serpent. He crawled away, trying to escape. The crown's call faded as fear filled him, too full for anything else. A ghostly hand seized the crown and held it aloft. It seemed to squirm in that grip, as if in pain.

Take the throne, Ushoran, something whispered, its words echoing in the hollows of his soul, *while the true master of Mourkain keeps his crown.*

Burning, Ushoran fled for the second time in his life. He did not look back, not until he had escaped the confines of the secret corridor. Sobbing and snarling, he shoved the stone door back in place. Only then did the hateful fear and the burning agony abate. He turned and gazed blankly at the throne room. 'Scraps and tatters,' Ushoran said, staring at his claws, and then at the throne. It was his throne now for all that it was worth.

But the crown—

Ushoran howled.

And Mourkain's master returned to his slumber, crown in hand.

A Space Marine Battles Story

The Blessing of Iron

by Anthony Reynolds

He knows who started this unrest. He knows who released them from their cells. He sees it written in the data-code that flows through him like a raging current. They hid their tracks well, but this is his world; he knows the slippery back-trails through Penatora's archaic data-core like no other, for he is the beneficiari overseer of the Cog.

They are searching for something. Something termed "the Fallen Asset". It means nothing to him.

He skims across their path, probing and searching, trying to understand. They are destroying his world to possess this thing. But why?

It is not *something*, he comes to realise. It is a *someone*.

Pride is his downfall. He underestimates them. They see him through the data. He tries to pull back, to flee from their sight, but he is too slow. They see him seeing them.

And now they are coming for *him*.

Humans. The un-augmented. The un-machined. Frail, fallible and illogical organic things ruled by irrationalities and emotion. I feel no kinship towards them.

I do not understand them, nor do I have any desire or need to understand them. I am not comfortable in their presence, and they are certainly not comfortable in mine.

In truth, I despise them for their lies, their duplicity and their weakness, yet it is my role to protect them. To die for them, if necessary. Such is my purpose.

I am Brother Dolmech of the Iron Hands Chapter. Kaargul Clan, 4th Tactical. I am a genetic son of the Gorgon, the Primarch of Iron, Ferrus Manus. I was made for war, gene-bred and machined to kill the enemies of mankind; to kill in the name of the Emperor and the blessed Omnissiah. Praise be.

I was born human, a wet, screaming thing of flesh and blood. It is a disturbing notion, and it bothers me when I think of it, which is thankfully rarely. I was taken by the Chapter as a child and made what I am. I became far more than human - something else entirely. I began my progression towards becoming one with the blessed machine. I remember little of my time as one of the un-augmented, for which I am grateful. Of my life before the Chapter, I know nothing, nor do I care to. The mewling flesh-thing that I was is dead. In time, nothing of it will remain.

I stand among the grey uniformed Cog militia, a black armoured giant among children. Garbed in my mech-modified Errant-pattern war armour, I am over three heads taller than the largest of them. Most of them are displaying the physical signs of fear. Fear is not a notion that I or my brothers are capable of comprehending, yet we have come to learn how to recognise it in lesser beings. The stink of their sweat fills the manufactorum. It is repulsive. It smells of weakness. I switch to my internal recycled air supply.

There are thirty-two of the militia men and women. They are armed with lasguns, and wear lightweight carapace plas-armour. It offers their fragile flesh-bodies scant protection.

Two skitarii legionaries are stationed here. I hear the click-buzz of their binaric code-speech. I feel more kinship with them than the un-augmented militia. They are kill-brood warriors, armed with belt-fed rotor cannons. They can be relied upon. Even so, they will not be enough. This manufactory plant, designated Cog-349, is already dead.

The enemy have almost breached the reinforced blast doors. They are working at the joins with slam-drills and lascutters. It will not be long. This pleases me. I am impatient for battle to be joined. My squad-brothers, fighting elsewhere upon this moon installation, have already bloodied their blades. Now it is my turn.

There is a grinding squeal and a sudden spill of molten metal flows onto the deck as melta-charges are ignited. The doors are breached. The enemy is upon us, a veritable flood of humanity. All bear the forehead barcode welt of committed penal inmates. Level 4B+. Murderers, rapists and agitators.

The cog-toothed power axe in my left hand surges into life with a mere synapse impulse. Humming energy plays across its teeth. I heft my bolter in my right hand. Bionic recoil compensators in my mechanical arm tense as I choose my target.

'Engaging,' I say, voicing my action across my squad's closed vox network.

'Kill well, brother,' returns the voice of my squad sergeant, Haldaarn, speaking into my ear. The distance and high level of interference makes his mechanised

voice crackle and distort.

I open fire.

Beneficiari Armicus's gaze pans across the flood of data. It falls like waterfalls down the glossy screens beneath his fingers. More information transfers directly into his cortex via the subtly vibrating cables plugged into the socket in his left temple. All of them say the same thing: that Penatora IV is dying.

The rabble has breached the doors. Gunfire erupts. It is shocking in its volume. He adjusts his aural dampeners, and continues with his work.

He has been the beneficiari of Penatora Cog-349 for seventeen years. For seven years before that he had been a beneficiari aide, first class, elevated from the ranks of duty technicians stationed here at Cog-349.

Optics were always his speciality. There is no man alive who is better with eyes than Armicus.

Cog-349 is his life. He knows nothing else. And yet he knows that within minutes it will fall to the murderous rabble.

He knows that he is not a well-loved man. He has no social attachments. He has no one that he would call "friend". He is efficient, however, and not once in his seventeen years as beneficiari had he ever allowed Cog-349's production quotas to fall below the output required by the Penatora master schedule.

His work crews laugh at him when they think he doesn't notice. Even the junior technicians join in. They view him as something of an eccentric, an object of ridicule and jest. A fool. A joke.

They laugh at his daily rituals and inflexible routine. They smirk at his steam-ironed pleats (seven seconds beneath the scald-plate, each one, at precisely 05.00 hours, daily) and at his meticulously parted and oiled hair (combed eight times to the right, five to the left at 05.14 hours). But he does not mind, nor does he begrudge them for it. He does not expect them to understand.

Order is his life. It is his comfort. Yet now his ordered existence is crashing down around him. Penatora IV is being ripped apart. As the news filtered through to him and his worker crews, he had retained an external veneer of calm. That was good. That was what his workers needed.

The unrest started as nothing more than a ration queue brawl in the lower hab-slums. Such a thing was by no means out of the ordinary. Ration-wars between Cog house menials were a monthly - if not weekly - occurrence, but order was generally restored within hours. The appearance of Cog militia usually brought a swift conclusion to hostilities - the threat of incarceration, mind-scrubbing and lobotomisation has a way of making even half-starved hab-workers fall quickly

back into line. The beneficiaris of Penatora IV were unforgiving masters. Any unrest risked a loss of production, and that was unacceptable.

Skitarii intervention was rarely needed. On this occasion, however, it was sanctioned, yet even a demi-cohort of kill-brood warriors was unable to suppress the unrest. The speed with which the hab-slum riot escalated was unprecedented.

But what had sent alarm calls sounding out to the listening posts scattered throughout the sub-sector was the full-scale facility-wide failure - or rather, the *override* - of the moon's penitentiary cages.

More than one million, seven hundred and forty-two thousand inmates simultaneously released from incarceration, free to act as they pleased. Such an occurrence was meant to be impossible, but that impossibility did nothing to stop the killing that came next. The violence spread like wildfire through a bone-dry forest. Within hours, the entire moon installation was consumed by a frenzy of rebellion and butchery.

Linked to the Penatora wet-frame by a cluster of vibrating cranial cables, Armicus had been updated of the progression of the uprising as it happened.

Some of his workers had wanted to run. These, he let go - he did not try to stop them. Most had chosen to stay, as he had requested. Even now they were working at their stations, continuing to carry out their duties as Penatora IV burned.

Cog-349's production quotas continued to be met. Production in the majority of the nine hundred and seventy-six other Cogs that made up the entire moon-based facility had halted, but Cog-349 continued its output. It didn't matter to Beneficiari Armicus that the bionic eyes his Cog was building would likely go to waste now. His superiors had not given him leave to halt production, and so he would not.

There was a certain sublime beauty to it, Armicus had thought. Cog-349 was a pocket of order in the midst of chaos. It made him proud.

Now it is almost over.

Even with his aural dampeners at full, he hears the roar of the rabble and the staccato bark of gunfire. There are so many of them. Nevertheless, Armicus feels a fierce sense of pride in his workers. They do not falter. They continue at their allotted tasks even as they are overrun.

Positioned at his workstation, raised above the others, Beneficiari Armicus feels as though he is on an island, and that the seething mass of humanity below is a rising tide. Las-beams spike past him, but he does not flinch. A solid round strikes a data-screen to his side, cracking its glass surface - he simply transfers the data-stream to a secondary slate, and continues to work.

They are climbing to his station now, faces twisted in animalistic fury. Beneficari Armicus feels at peace, despite the chaos raging around him.

In the end, order is all that he has. He clings to it. It gives him comfort.

He will enact his duty until the end, and then he will be at peace.

My first shot takes a shaven-headed human square in the forehead. The penal welt branded into the weak flesh there acts as a perfect target. The rocket-propelled bolt penetrates, punching a hole straight through. It detonates just as it is driving out the back of the skull. The explosion takes his head in a shower of blood, shrapnel and bone shards.

The mob is packed so tight that the blast takes down five more of them. Bolt rounds are designed for use against armoured targets. Against unarmoured foes such as these it is utterly devastating. I acknowledge that it is overkill, yet the scale of the destruction serves a purpose. I can see the shock and terror on the faces of those behind them. Dripping meat, all that remains of their comrades, clings to their faces. My second shot takes out another three. The third shot, five more.

The sound my boltgun makes as it fires is deep and satisfying, a solid and repetitive bass note that all but drowns out the hissing swish of the militia's lasguns, and even the whine of the skitarii kill-brood's rotor cannons.

The escaped prisoners have some guns, taken from guards or slaughtered militiamen, and they return fire as they come, but the vast majority of them are armed with nothing more than makeshift clubs and blades. They come on in a screaming, rabid rush, trampling over those that fall, crushing them into the floor. One of the humans at my side takes an incandescent green las-blast to the head, and he falls without a sound, his flesh cooked. Another strikes me, scorching my armour.

Scores of insurgents are cut down by the weight of militia fire. The skitarii rotor cannons scream like Thunderhawk engines, tearing furrows through flesh. The concussive shock of my detonating bolt rounds sends men cartwheeling into the air. Thirty, forty, fifty are killed, and then they are upon us, having closed the distance.

I charge in to meet them, closing the distance in three steps. They back away from me, as well they should, but the weight of those pressing from behind means that they cannot escape. I storm into their midst, bringing my relic axe around in a wide arc. Its cog blade cuts through them eagerly, severing the limbs of three men in one sweep; cleaving straight through muscle, meat and bone. Hot blood gushes like a trio of erupting geysers.

I kick one of them in the chest. His ribcage collapses, his organs pulped, and slams backwards into the others.

Bones break. I swat back another of them with the stock of my bolter. His neck snaps and he hurtles into the mob, a living projectile that takes down three others. One more bolt round fired at close range - four dead, three seriously injured - and I put away my bolter, mag-locking it to my thigh.

I put my fist through the face of an enemy that has stumbled too close. The force of the blow punches out the back of his head. They are so frail, the un-augmented. Their bones break so easily. I bury my axe in the head of another, hacking down from crown to sternum. I tug the blade free, blood cooking on its keen edge.

One of them has the temerity to attempt to strike me. He has a power baton, of the kind used by a prison warden. My axe cuts the weapon, then the wielder, in half.

Most of the militia are down; only one of the skitarii remains active. I can hear his binaric war-cant as he attempts to link with his fallen kill-brood. The barrels of his rotor cannon are glowing hot. It vents steam, pausing its fire, and in that moment the skitarii is engulfed beneath a surge of stinking humanity. It is a demeaning end for one that has joined with the machine.

I continue to kill, clearing a circle wherever I move, but I am but one battle-brother. They cannot harm me, but I cannot stop them all.

'Tactical update: Cog-349 is lost,' I say, even as I carve through. I am not breathing hard. My primary heart beats at a sedentary pace. My secondary heart is still - it is not needed in an exercise such as this.

I drop to one knee and cut the legs out from beneath two combatants, severing the limbs at the thigh. They fall screaming their pathetic screams, their stinking organic life-force spraying forth wildly. I kill another as I rise. My axe carves him open from groin to throat. Viscera spills out upon the floor. He clutches at his innards as he dies.

'Understood,' comes Sergeant Haldaarn's distorted response. I can hear the crackle of weapons fire behind his voice. 'Fall back to my location, Brother Dolmech. You have done what was needed. Affirm.'

'Affirm,' I respond.

My purpose here was never to save Cog-349. It was always going to fall.

I raise my helmet's vox-amplification levels. 'Beneficiari Armicus.' My voice is a mechanical growl, designed to inspire fear.

The rabid mob clambers like primitive proto-humans on his position. I target them. A bolt takes one of them in the lower back. All that remains of him a

moment later is a falling rain of blood and churned flesh, and a pair of hands that cling momentarily to the rungs before they drop. The others die in turn.

'Beneficiari Armicus,' I repeat. 'You are coming with me.'

'Take this,' says the black armoured Adeptus Astartes giant, tossing him a lasgun wrested from dead hands. Armicus catches it awkwardly. Bodies are strewn across the deck around them, victims of the Space Marine's wrath. 'You know how to use it?'

'Yes,' replies Armicus. With shaking hands he checks the power-clip - half charge. Safety off. Shoulder rest unfolded.

'Use it,' orders the giant.

He lifts the weapon to his shoulder and squeezes the trigger. The shot goes high, striking a bulkhead, making paint blacken and peel. There is only marginal recoil. Compensating, he fires again. His second shot also misses its intended target, but his third strikes home. It takes a slabmuscled inmate in the chest, cooking flesh and making his orange penal overalls burst into flames.

'Good,' says the giant. He kills a handful of enemies with each shot. 'Let's go.'

The Iron Hand moves through them like a scythe, killing with every strike. He is always in motion as he drives them back; a furious god among men, unstoppable and terrible in his potency. Blades break against him, and ranged fire ricochets off his armoured form, barely leaving a mark. He responds with lethal force.

There is no flourish to his fighting technique, no extravagance or refined finesse. Every movement is designed to kill, it seemed to Armicus, with the least amount of energy expenditure. It appeared to be the perfect application of effort versus reward.

To Armicus, the destruction this one Space Marine leaves in his wake is far more terrifying than the braying mob.

But there are so many of them. There are so many that Armicus cannot miss with his lasgun. He shoots into the crowd again and again. He shoots until the power cell of his weapon runs dry. The enemy press in.

Something hits Armicus in the side of the head. He cries out and falls to his knees. He touches his scalp and his fingers come away bloody. Blood runs down his neck. The tide closes in.

The Iron Hand is suddenly standing over him. He smashes the enemy back, clearing a circle in the midst of the sea of humanity. His humming cog-toothed axe bites out, hacking apart flesh, and his bolt pistol barks. A mist of blood appears where a body was moments before. It settles on the black clad giant and

upon Armicus. He can taste it on his lips.

'We must find another way,' the giant says. 'This is unsustainable.'

Cog-349 burns. The rioters have accessed promethium stores and burner fluids, and have put them to work. Flames, smoke. Black and coiling, and quickly out of control.

Brother Dolmech leads the way, striding purposefully now that he has smashed a path through the enemy. Beneficiari Armicus has to run to keep up. The Space Marine's bolter swings left - target kill - then right - target kill.

They are behind the frontal wave of rioters now. Those that remain in their path scatter upon sighting the hulking armoured giant. They recognise death when they see it.

With no targets in sight, Armicus finds his eyes drawn back to the Iron Hand. The immense figure terrifies him. He is simply too big - Armicus finds it impossible to rationalise.

He appears more like a machine than something that was ever human, armoured from head to toe in thick black war plate. A symbol of a white gauntlet is laser-etched onto his left pauldron. He has the mechanical gait of one whose legs are not his own, Armicus can see that clearly - his whole life has been dedicated to the creation of servitors, after all. The giant's left arm, from what he can tell, is augmetic from the bicep down. His helm is an intimidating blank, though the right hemisphere is an armoured metal cranium, replete with sensors, communication arrays and intricate targeting systems. He wonders what the giant's face must look like, beneath.

They locate a small service elevator a little over a kilometre beyond Cog-349's armoured borders. The route to it is narrow and circuitous. The narrow passageway scratches at Brother Dolmech's shoulder plates. The smell of the fire clings to them.

There has been no communication between the pair but stilted practicalities. Turn left. Stop. Wait. Run.

Beneficiari Armicus still bleeds from the left temple. He dabs ineffectually at the stain it has left on his lapel. In spite of the crush, he suffered only scrapes and bruises. Nothing serious.

The Iron Hands giant has borne the brunt of the enemy's attentions. His armour is scorched and pitted from small arms fire though it has not slowed him. A spear of lasgun fire struck him on the left wrist, scorching the bionics there, and now it sparks intermittently.

To access the elevator, they must leave the darkened confines of the service-alleys. They pause in the shadows. A pack of branded prisoners scurry past the entrance. Their fists are bloodied, and they are clutching weapons.

'Stay behind me,' orders the Iron Hand. Without waiting for a response, he moves out behind the group.

I step out into the open. My bolter bucks. Three shots. Meat splatters up the industrial walls.

Sounds echo in the confined space. There are four corridors leading to this junction. There are footfalls approaching from three directions. I differentiate the various sounds reverberating through the corridors. Eleven men within fifty metres, closing in fast. One of them is wounded or crippled, dragging his left leg slightly. Two of them are labouring under a heavy load. I hear the sound of metal on metal - an ammunition belt. A heavy-bore weapon.

'Hail the elevator,' I command.

The beneficiari limps forward and keys a seven-digit code into the keypad alongside the conveyor's sealed door. I cannot see the keypad, but I know the numbers he presses from the muscle-movement of his arm and shoulder. *Seven-two-four-six-five-two-one.*

I hear the carriage begin to rise. I discern that it is nine floors down. Too slow.

The first group round a bend, ten metres away. I drop the first. His chest explodes, soaking the others. The shock of the blood makes them freeze for a fraction of a second.

Foolish. I close the distance and cut them down, conserving ammunition.

I hear the next ones coming, and aim up one of the subsidiary corridors. It is poorly lit, that one - the lumen strips set into the ceiling are flickering and weak. I fire a fraction of a second before I see my target. The bolt round takes the first man in the throat. The velocity of the shot slams him back into the wall and the bolt detonates a microsecond later, decapitating him.

The carriage is still two levels down. Figures appear from three directions at once, firing as they come. I kill four of them instantly. It is not enough. Las-fire and solid autogun rounds slice towards me. I am struck once in the left knee, and twice in the chest. My return fire kills another two.

One of them has braced his feet wide, and a heavy stubber is brought around to bear. My bolter is already swinging around to drop him, but I am too slow. Curse my weak flesh.

He fires.

Metre-long muzzle flashes spit from the barrel and a flurry of high-calibre

rounds are unleashed.

The mighty warrior is in front of Beneficiari Armicus, shielding him with his bulk. Armicus cowers, his face pale and fearful as rounds stitch across the wall, tearing jagged holes through the sheet plating. Dozens of rounds strike the Space Marine, yet he does not fall. He endures. He returns fire.

The elevator arrives. Its three overlapping doors slide back like the eyelids of some rusting, mechanical reptile. The interior is dimly lit by a cluster of blinking red lumen orbs.

Armicus is frozen, rooted in place. The Iron Hand shoves him - too hard - and he is hurled inside, slamming against the far wall. He cries out as his shoulder dislocates. The Space Marine backs in after him, firing. The elevator strains noticeably beneath his weight. The enemy are massing. Solid rounds ping around them.

The doors do not close.

'Over capacity,' intones the servitor hardwired into the carriage control panel. It is nothing more than a head and upper torso, and is almost completely concealed by ribbed cables and piping. A faded barcode welt can be seen emblazoned upon its forehead - once, it had been an inmate here on Penatora IV. 'Six personnel maximum.'

From a crumpled heap on the carriage floor, Armicus laughs. The Iron Hand glances down at him momentarily. His helmet is ruptured, and his left eye lens is cracked and dark. Then he looks back into the corridor and fires his bolter out through the lift doors. Screams and the sickening sound of exploding meat follow.

A mehadendrite snakes out from the Space Marine's left wrist, waving in the air like a leech seeking blood. It wafts to and fro for a second, then stabs forward, sinking into the servitor's throat plug. The pallid, hairless creature shudders and jerks spasmodically, its singular organic, milky eye rolling back in its head.

'Code override,' the servitor drools. The tri-doors slam shut and the engines groan and wheeze. They begin to ascend.

The mehadendrite retracts with a whirr and a snap, releasing the servitor.

The Space Marine mag-locks his weapons, and toggles the release catches on his damaged helmet. There is a hiss of equalising pressure as he removes it. His face is not unlike that of the twitching servitor hard-wired into the wall. They both share the same milky-white, translucent flesh, and both have a considerable amount of wiring, cabling and mechanics protruding from their temples.

However, where the servitor has a vacant look upon its slack-muscled face, the Iron Hand wears an expression of keen intelligence and determination.

'Laughter is a physical expulsion of air from the lungs. It is used by humans to express mirth, surprise, pleasure, or, to a lesser extent, unease, nervousness or derision. Which of those communication modes are you denoting with your laughter?'

The Iron Hand's left eye has been replaced by a high-grade augmetic. Its lens shines with cold blue light, and it whirrs as its focus adjusts onto the crumpled beneficiari.

Armicus stares up at him. The beneficiari's skin is waxy, and covered in soot and sweat.

He recognises the Iron Hand's augmetic eye. Bionics have been his life for the past forty-seven years. He knows his own handiwork when he sees it.

'Why do you laugh, Beneficiari Armicus?' repeats the Iron Hand.

'Your eye,' whispers Armicus. 'It is one of mine. It was constructed by Cog-349.'

'That is correct.'

The beneficiari draws his knees up to his chest and takes a shuddering breath. He begins to rock. The lift is vibrating as it roars up through the core of the moon.

'You are shaking. Your heart rate is one hundred and fifty-six beats per minute, and rising. You are hyperventilating and your adrenal levels are spiking. Diagnosis: You are going into a state of shock, Beneficiari Armicus.'

The beneficiari's haunted eyes flicker towards the Iron Hand.

'Why... why am I alive?'

'Your vital functions have not failed. Hence, you live.'

'You are going to kill me?'

'Negative. I am Brother Dolmech of the Iron Hands Chapter. Kaargul Clan, 4th Tactical,' says the Iron Hand. 'I will not kill you. Faced with the prospect of death, you continued with your allotted function. Your actions were commendable. I would see you rewarded by the Chapter for your duty. The Blessing of Iron awaits you.'

'I thought... I thought you were going to kill me. For what I know.'

'What do you know?'

Beneficiari Armicus stops rocking and turns to face Dolmech.

'I know who ran the override code that released the prisoners of Penatora IV. I know who started all this...'

'Who?'

'It was you. It was the Adeptus Astartes.'

The conveyor grinds to a halt. Hot air vents as the tri-doors retract.

I step out first, bolter raised. Target search negative.

'Come,' I say.

The human was speaking nonsense. A symptom of frailty and weakness, I deduce. A resolution of physical shock and trauma.

The only Adeptus Astartes on this world are myself and my four battle-brothers. None of us gave the override code to unlock the prisoners. It was an illogical theoretical. Penatora IV is important to the Adeptus Mechanicus; hence it is important to the Iron Hands Chapter. There would be no benefit to causing this mass destruction.

I wonder briefly if I made an error/failure in choosing him for the Blessing of Iron. I override the notion in 0.054 of a second. Shock trauma. It does not detract from my initial assessment.

We are located higher within the moon's sub-strata here, less than a hundred metres from the arid surface. Alcoves and arches loom overhead. It is dark, but darkness means nothing to me.

My sensors detect something for a moment, up above. I am instantly in a state of readiness. I scan the shadows. I run a pulse-sweep with the auspex built into my left vambrace augmetic. Negative. Blink. Negative. I lower my bolter.

I calibrate for Sergeant Haldaam's location. Seven point three-five kilometres distant. The human will slow me, but he has earned the honour that will be bestowed upon him. We have the time.

They come out of the darkness from above. They were hidden to my eye and to my scan. Their presence was shrouded. They descend, propelled downward on arcs of flame.

I raise my bolter.

Target lock. Target lock.

There are two of them, at first.

My systems blink a warning within my better eye - the augmetic constructed by Cog-349. They have target lock on me as well.

Target lock. There is a third. It detaches itself from the darkness, hurtling down with the speed of a missile.

I want to fire. I want to destroy these threats.

I do not fire. Neither do they.

They land, two behind, one in front. They hit hard, their ceramite boots slamming into the grid-worked decking. Their jump packs scorch the metal

black.

They are Adeptus Astartes. They are Space Marines.

Their armour is dark, but it is not the black of my Chapter - except for the one in the front. The armour of the others is the deep, dark green of an abyssal sea. Robes drape over their heavy ceramite plate.

The one in front, the only one among their number who is clad in black, wears a helmet of gleaming bone. We Iron Hands do not have Chaplains in our ranks, but I recognise one all the same.

'Dark Angel,' I say.

'I would be more comfortable if you lowered your weapon, Iron Hand,' says the skull-faced newcomer. 'You may surrender the human to our custody.'

Dolmech does not comply. His bolter remains levelled squarely at the warrior's head.

The other Space Marine is unarmed. He has not reached for the ornate crozius at his hip. The two Dark Angels flanking Dolmech and Beneficari Armicus have their weapons trained, however. Plasma pistols. Their heat coils burn with the power of contained suns.

'Your comfort is of no concern to me, Chaplain,' Dolmech says, 'and I am not handing this human over to you.'

'I understand that our presence here is... unexpected,' says the Chaplain, 'but I remind you that we are not the enemy.'

'You are shrouding my vox-signal. You are stopping me from communicating with my battle-brothers.'

The Chaplain nods. 'Aye. You wouldn't be able to stop us if we were to seize him, you understand. No one would ever know. It is out of respect that I *ask*, and do not simply... *demand*.'

'I reiterate: remove your vox-shroud, and submit yourself for appraisal.'

'That is not going to happen. Do not be a fool, Iron Hand. We are comrades. Brothers. This human is of importance to us. What is he to you?'

'Beneficari Armicus is under my aegis. I will judge any assault on him is an assault on the Iron Hands Chapter.'

'I do not want to assault him, brother,' says the Chaplain. 'I merely want to speak to him.'

Armicus knows this to be a lie. The Dark Angels' mere presence radiates the threat of violence towards him.

'No,' says Dolmech. 'He is to receive the Blessing of Iron. He is of the Iron Hands now, and will be protected as such.'

The Chaplain turns his burning red lenses on the quivering human. 'The Blessing of Iron, you say...' He stares down at him for a long moment. There are a number of audible clicks from the helmets of the three Dark Angels. Internal closed-vox.

Abruptly, the two veterans put up their weapons. Target lock is removed.

Beneficiari Armicus lets out a long, slow breath.

'Very well,' says the Chaplain. 'I see that I have erred, brother. I intended no disrespect to you or your august Chapter. We have what we came for, and I am sure that we can rely upon the discretion of this most *worthy* human...'

The three Dark Angels watch Dolmech and Armicus as they leave, standing as motionless as statues. After a few moments they are swallowed by the darkness.

'I do not understand,' says the first Dark Angel. 'We have the asset, but that human knows what we did to attain it. The Iron Hands will seek reparation, will they not?'

The riot had merely been a diversion. A distraction that allowed them to swoop in and seize their true target - the one inmate that knows where their Fallen brother was last seen.

'The beneficiari is to receive the Blessing of Iron,' replies the Chaplain, simply.

'An honorific?' asks the second.

'In a sense. One that is rather specific to the sons of the Gorgon.'

* * *

For nine hours, the united combat squad Haldaarn held Cog-001 against the rioting inmates of Penatora IV, ensuring that the heart of the installation - the central servitor construction facility - was not destroyed in the mayhem. Ammunition was exhausted after the first seven hours. The final two hours were conducted with close combat weapons only. Four thousand, four hundred and eighty-seven confirmed kills. The Iron Hands suffered no casualties.

After the siege, eighteen Skitarii demi-cohorts landed. In the ensuing battle, a further four hundred and seventy-one inmates were slain before order was restored.

The Iron Hands departed Penatora IV ninety-seven hours after having made planetfall. They returned to the Chapter cruiser, the *Iron Will*.

Battle-brother Dolmech took Beneficiari Armicus with them.

I do not understand humans. Nor do I wish to.

The Blessing of Iron is a great honour, and yet Beneficiari Armicus bleats like an animal as the saw cuts into his scalp.

'Are you sure this one is worthy?' Brother Doxgaarn asks.

What I say next I will come to regret, but the decision has already been made.

'He will serve.'

His arms are removed and replaced with blessed heavy-duty augmetics. He screams even as the bionics are fitted, yet by the time the spine-plugs are rammed into his nervous system his screams have faded. He whimpers and moans, but he will never scream again. Soon, even those pitiful sounds cease. The physical lobotomisation is unnecessary after the mind-wipe, but will better facilitate the neural programming.

His transformation is complete.

No longer is he Beneficiari Armicus. That name is dead, along with all his human weaknesses. He is a servitor now. He will serve until he is no longer needed, or until his

systems fail. That time may not be for many hundreds of years.

It is a great honour that I have bestowed upon him. He is now more of a machine than I. His human emotions, memories and fears have been burnt away. He is one step closer to the divine.

I envy him.

Praise be to the Ommissiah.

The Memory of Flesh

by Matthew Farrer

Three eyes, one green glass in brass, one clear crystal in bright steel. The third, crystal also, wide and bulbous, set high up on the brow in a gunmetal-dark mount. They glittered in the pitiless blue light, bright against the black radiation hood.

The eyes turned. Left, right, up, down. Nothing triggered the alert routines. They adjusted focus, field depth, and spectrum sensitivity. Nothing on infrared but for a little heat from the idling engine behind. Ultraviolet was a uniform glare of such intensity as to be almost useless. A moment's adjustment damped it out.

Left, right. The beautiful indigo sweep of the desert, stippled with micrometeorite impacts etched in shadows as inky-black as the sky overhead.

Up, to glance at the distant rock ridges. Auspex had put the ridge lines at thirty-eight kilometres away. The Rhino's ranging lasers had confirmed thirty-eight-point-one-seven.

Left, and moving, tramping across the surface on sturdy metal-sheathed legs. No sound. No air to carry any.

Fifteen degrees around the perimeter, past the train of three ammunition wagons coupled to the rear of the Rhino. They had their own optical feeds, but cruder, best backed up by direct checks.

Left, right, up, down. Silence, emptiness, nothing but purple dust drenched in the murderous radiation of its star.

The sentry moved on. Traverse another fifteen degrees. And halt, listening.

A code-bark had hit the Rhino's high-gain antenna and bounced to the servitor's own short-range receptors. A move order under the veteran-sergeant's transmission seal, a set of coordinates, an adjustment to alertness settings. The Rhino's hatch came down, kicking up puffs of dust that made tiny, perfect arcs in the vacuum.

Sixty-seven seconds later, with the hatch closed, the servitor anchored into the control hub and its three eyes now channelling the external optical feeds, the Rhino moved silently away across the desert, bound for the ridge line.

The breg-shei were fast, but break their back with a bolt shell and they died just like anything else. Veteran-Sergeant Dolmech had eighteen confirmed kills on the xenos since planetfall on Regnan Drey. Up that to thirty-two since they had begun the pursuit through Regnan Magna's rings and moons. Up that to a hundred and forty-eight since initial engagement with the ugly little hulk from which the creatures had been terrorising Imperial colonists on Regnan Impri.

Every one of those kills had been at close quarters. Dolmech didn't trust a breg-shei to stay dead until he had personally put his boot through its thorax.

Even then, this one put up a fight. Its club-like forelegs flickered with that incredible speed they had, and bounced off his chest plate. The blind fist of a head - they still weren't sure where the sensory organs were, or how they worked - bobbed in its little socket. The sacs that held its viscera distended and shifted its gut back and forth inside its shell.

Dolmech leaned forward and twisted his ceramite boot sharply around and back, in a motion he had perfected aboard the xenos hulk. He felt the alien's spinal ridges crumple and snap, and its limbs went limp.

Nineteen confirmed kills since planetfall.

Dolmech's helmet display bracketed and tagged a cluster of movements: another alien coming at him over the ridge crest. Even before the image had properly autofocused and resolved, his bolt pistol was kicking. He aimed low - the slender bodies were hard to hit, but ground shots would either cripple the creature's feet or blast the terrain beneath it and ruin its balance and speed.

Impact, explosion. The breg-shei staggered for a moment and Dolmech was already surging forward, jump pack flaring.

Two bolt shells streaked past underneath him, the timing split-second perfect. Brother Thulko's shots clipped the creature's shoulder and thorax, and a second later Dolmech crashed into it, power axe ripping through the up-jutting leg joint, his armoured shoulder ramming its body. The force wrenched the breg-shei up onto its rear legs and it scabbled to avoid landing on its back. Their firearms, crushed between their armoured chests, fired together, but the alien's synaptic lash barely had time to flare up before Dolmech's bolt shattered the bulbous projector-cell. A second point-blank shot opened up its thorax, and Dolmech jammed the muzzle into the wound and fired again. The upper carapace juddered and deformed as the shell exploded inside, and the creature died.

Twenty confirmed kills.

Dolmech remained kneeling in the tangle of stiffening limbs, head down so Thulko had a clear field of fire on any new contacts. He felt rather than heard the

metallic snaps as the autoloader extended from his mechanical forearm and switched a full magazine into his pistol.

'Clear,' Thulko's voice said in his ear, with the odd watery quality that the radioactive sunlight was lending their vox traffic. Dolmech stayed down a moment longer, filling the almost-spent magazine in his autoloader. The last shell in place, the loader slid back into the metal frame of his forearm. Both Dolmech's arms were mechanical from the bicep down, a dark grey iron-titanium alloy he had forged himself.

He stood.

'I've ordered Jothael-004 to move its supply point from deep reserve to this point in the line,' he voxed back. A kick parted the dead breg-shei's limbs and he stepped off the corpse. 'Update your tactical maps accordingly and designate this as our new anchor disposition. Affirm.'

'Affirm,' came Thulko's reply. A moment later the rest of his squad, strung out along the hills, chimed in with him.

'Affirm,' from Ergai, who was escorting two servitor-driven Rapier platforms out to the ridge-crest where they could pelt heavy las-fire onto any more breg-shei that tried escaping across the radiation-drenched desert beyond.

'Affirm,' from Orzereg, who had taken a meltagun and gone forward to join Gymark in flushing out a pocket of breg-shei who had encysted themselves in the rock crevices and killed the servitors Dolmech had first sent to root them out. Gymark's affirmation came in a moment later. One by one, the squad signed in and the runes in Dolmech's positional display turned green.

The final affirmation was a quick crackle of non-verbal code from Veteran Jozeck, who was commanding the squad's Razorback carrier and guarding a notch between the hills eight kilometres to the south. He had taken a hit from a synaptic lash and his fine control was taking time to return. Just after the hit, his speech over the vox had been a stream of strange sounds, obscenities and odd stream of consciousness sentences; he had switched to using code pulses until he trusted himself to vocalise normally.

To stand out on this open desert in sunlight that would have killed an unshielded human in minutes was a pleasing tribute to the strength of the Iron Hands' armour, augmetics and wills. Jozeck's infirmity was a humiliating reminder of the weakness of their remaining flesh.

The breg-shei who had shot him had been smashed to fragments by a furious extended barrage from the Razorback's heavy bolters as Jozeck avenged the insult. Dolmech approved.

His vox gave an alert click and Thulko's rune flashed in his visor. He turned to

his squadmate.

'Speak.'

'Querying for next course of action, brother-sergeant, given your order in context of tactical auguries from the *Ironshod*.'

Dolmech made no reply over the vox, but plodded back through the purple dust to stand directly by Thulko, looking past the other Space Marine's shoulder. He extended his hand, after a moment another click told him that the other had done likewise, and established a closed-vox connection between their armour systems. Each watching the landscape behind the other's back, they conversed.

'Speak,' said Dolmech again.

'The transmissions from *Ironshod* indicate possible movement signatures on the right flank of this position. I raised the query wanting to know whether you would require me to double back and block that route against any enemy trying to slip through our line.'

'That was the context. Go on.'

'A breg-shei ambush on our supply cache as it moves up to join us may reduce our available materiel stock and impede our push across the next open desert. The servitor is not Adeptus Astartes. It is not strong.'

'The servitor is my own workmanship, Thulko. I know its capabilities exactly.'

'In which case...'

There was a pause while the other Space Marine digested Dolmech's words. 'I have stated my piece, then. I respect you too much to cast aspersion on your works, brother-sergeant. The servitor will repel any ambush it encounters.'

'I doubt it. Inload its trajectory data from my armour, please.'

There was another short pause.

'Brother-sergeant, I...'

'Uncertainty is weakness, Thulko. Expunge it.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant.'

'You are correct. The servitor is built to fight, but it is not an Iron Hand. It will not be the equal of the pack of breg-shei that I suspect are breaching our line.'

'Have we positional data?' Thulko queried.

'Not yet. Radiation is interfering with *Ironshod*'s auguries. It is getting harder to pinpoint small enemy concentrations with precision. Optimal approach is to provide a fixed and known point to converge on, at which we can intercept them. I gave them our supply cache.'

'You announced it over the vox...'

'Because more and more evidence from the Librarium indicates that breg-shei senses extend to a spectrum that includes battlefield vox. Twelve recorded

incidents indicating enemy ability to intercept and understand our transmissions, nine more speculative.'

Thulko nodded. 'And so the physical line. I have learned, and grown stronger, brother-sergeant.'

'All I ask,' Dolmech replied. 'That, and to hold this position until further contact from me. I have the ambush of an ambush to prepare.'

Twenty-two eyes, steady and unblinking, watching the desert pass by.

Cortical augmetics allowed the servitor to monitor all the Rhino's pict feeds at once, a three hundred and sixty degree moving panorama its old human senses would never have been able to manage. The route Dolmech had ordered showed as a yellow overlay, numbers over the waypoints blurring downward as the ridge line came closer.

Its optics did not isolate and tag movements the way Adeptus Astartes battle visors did, and it took the servitor several seconds to focus on the thing cantering across the desert sand eight hundred metres away. A gleaming, multilimbed body, throwing back the purple and blue light around it and giving glints of other colours with every fluid step, like an oil slick moving in three dimensions.

The bolters on the Rhino's frontal cupolas traversed and found range, the arming sequence triggering an automatic code-bark alert on the general band. Threat parameters ticked into crimson. The spite-switch in the towing couplings armed automatically, ready to detonate the wagons to avoid capture. Target reticules, heat status and ammo counts flashed into the servitor's vision as gunnery catechisms unspooled across its brain.

The first shot from the right-hand bolter went short, skating along the desert floor and exploding silently in the dust, kicking up a cloud that fell behind and vanished in seconds. The second shot passed in under the breg-shei's high-prancing legs without connecting.

And then the Rhino's side was covered in crawling green-white light as the creature returned fire.

The servitor was not frightened by the hit. It was not perturbed by the spurts and arcs of energy that began coalescing on the inside of the Rhino. It simply filtered the optic feed to compensate for the haze of lash-light, and was ranging another shot when two more blasts struck the Rhino from dead ahead.

Two breg-shei reared up from their cyst-nests under the coarse, purple regolith. For a moment they were frozen in the forward-facing pict displays, and then they had broken out to each side, saturating the oncoming Rhino with energy.

Another shell flew at the flanking alien, which was fast enough to flatten its body to the ground and let the shot spear past. The left-hand bolter sputtered out an erratic three-shot salvo that passed between the new attackers and cratered the desert floor. A moment later the carrier juddered slightly as the tracks received conflicting messages to change their speed.

Sensing they had hurt their prey, the breg-shei leapt forward. One daintily twitched its body along the ground, whipping green streamers of energy ahead of it. Its partner went high, leaping straight up, keeping a fat beam of power from its lash trained on the centre of the Rhino's front plate. It hung for a moment before the weak gravity started to pull it back down, its careful focus of the lash never faltering.

That was how Brother Dolmech met it - high above the desert, riding his jump pack in behind it and cleaving it with savage axe-strokes almost too fast to see.

He half-somersaulted and pulsed the pack again, alien blood spattering and freezing around him as he knocked the halves of his enemy away. Some reflexive jerk of its manipulator claws had triggered its lash one final time and for a moment thready worms of light danced down the side of Dolmech's armour. His right foot went numb, and his breathing hitched as his multi-lung spasmed. His thoughts dissolved into roars and crackles, odd half-words and dream-images bursting and vanishing, until control returned to him with a crash like a fortress gate.

The hit had been the barest brush. A more direct one would have left him brain-burned. Breg-shei lashes were the scourge of organics.

Organics. Dolmech's thoughts were his own again, and they were all dark, bilious fury. His armour, his beautiful augmetics, had shrugged off the attack. His flesh was not stern enough to imitate them. *Weakness.* The sensation was revolting.

Dolmech punched down out of the black sky with hatred driving his striking arm. The other breg-shei saw his shadow and danced under his axe-stroke, but it had no answer to his full armoured mass slamming into it. Dolmech drove the thing into the desert floor like a rivet into a bulkhead, raising a great cloud of regolith around them that suddenly flared white as the breg-shei discharged its lash into the ground beneath it.

A yellow flare punctured the glow, the flash of Dolmech's pistol, the round caroming off the curving head-ridge. Dolmech released his pistol, gripped the hard crest behind the head socket and dragged the enemy bodily upward. Its forelegs whipped around and crashed into his armour hard enough to light amber warning runes in his visor, but Dolmech had his footing and leverage now. A

cough from his jump pack lifted him a bare half-metre from the ground, the breg-shei held in front of him.

A moment later the speeding Rhino slammed into them both.

For a heartbeat the xenos seemed stunned by the impact and Dolmech took his chance. They were too close for the long-hafted axe so he whirled it up over his shoulder, letting the mag-lock on his pack catch it, and brought his arm back down in a sledgehammer blow that drove the breg-shei against the Rhino's front. There was a stunning flare beneath them as its lash went off, but Dolmech felt no hit. He locked one augmetic hand around the Rhino's hatch lintel, and began using his other to batter the thing to death. After four hits, its back armour was broken. After six, the counter-blows of its forelegs had grown weak and desperate. Dolmech shot his hand out to where his bolt pistol swung on the lanyard chain anchored to his wrist. He crooked his arm around the breg-shei as though he were attempting to throttle it with his forearm, worked the gun muzzle into place and shot its head off.

Pulling himself up and away, he let the body slide down the front of the tank, to fall and be ground under by its treads and those of the ammo wagons behind it.

It was not a triumphant moment. There was still another one out there. Another one of the creatures who had shot him and made him feel *weak*. Dolmech's mouth was still twisted in anger as he triggered his pack and arced silently into the sky again.

The servitor designated Jothael-004 kept the Rhino on an arrow-straight course, churning forward to the ridge line at the point of its indigo dust plume. It had flashed an all clear in response to its master's curt interrogatory code, but if Dolmech had been aboard the carrier to examine his thrall more closely he would have been furious...

The Rhino was moving on its own, rolling forward on locked controls. Data traffic between the servitor and control hub was jagged, barely coherent. The armoured bolter mountings hid feverish mechanical activity as the subsystems received odd order sequences: *reload, switch magazine feeds, jam check, jam check, reload, unload, switch feeds*. Sensors were being shut off, reactivated, amplified and tuned down almost at random. In the pilot's socket, the servitor's body jerked periodically like someone succumbing to sleep and then jolting out of it. Diagnostics should have been running on the Rhino's systems, ensuring the attack had not disrupted anything the Iron Hands would need, especially any systems they might couple their own armour interfaces with. But those systems

were ignored.

The diagnostics ran repeatedly, obsessively, on the servitor's own cerebral systems, combing both its flesh and metal brains like someone ransacking a room over and over again for something they could not find.

A terse message came in on the general vox - somewhere out across the desert Dolmech had chased down and killed the third breg-shei. Orders still applied: Jothael-004 was to move up to the base of the ridge line. Dolmech was designating the area provisionally secure.

At that, there should have been changes. Jothael-004 should have revised its threat condition downward, changed the configuration of its sensor sweeps and confirmed its position.

The servitor did none of those things. It let the Rhino carry it on, twitching at the controls, the interface writhing, and the threat overlay on its vision remained bright throbbing crimson.

* * *

The final breg-shei's lash had thrown out constant, strobing charges as they had brawled in the dust and Dolmech had not been able to avoid every flash. His head still rang from it, and at first he took the signal for one of the maddening sense-echoes left by the xenos weaponry.

'...ALIVE? ...WHY... why am... BLESS—'

To his own disgust Dolmech wasted several moments trying to identify the voice before he realised it had no organic origin. It was the voice of Jothael-004, synthesised directly into the vox-band. All his servitors sounded alike. Some Iron Hands programmed recognisable variations into their vox-coders, but Dolmech had always dismissed that as frippery. A properly-coded servitor would identify itself with every transmission.

Jothael-004 had not. Jothael-004 was malfunctioning. *'...coming with... WITH... unsustainable... with me... EYE YOUR...'*

Dolmech wheeled around, purple grit swirling up around his ankles, and strode to the battered corpse of the breg-shei he had hunted down. He seized a protruding leg in both metal hands and, snarling with the strain on his organics, broke it off. He flung the fragment away and stamped on the corpse. He grabbed his power axe from its clamp at his shoulder and opened yet more gaping wounds in its shell. *'...have... ASSET... Fallen Asset...'*

Brutalising the dead thing did not vent his rage, but after a few moments it took away some of its edge. Dolmech's helmet logs showed Jothael-004

reporting all clear as it drove away, but it was definitely the source for this babble. Everyone would have heard the transmissions. He was disgraced in front of his squad. His workmanship was flawed. His workmanship was weak.

In his early days with the Iron Hands, Dolmech had worked hard to clear his psyche of the endless emotional buzzing that he dimly remembered from the days before the Chapter had taken him. But as he had grown older, risen to command a squad, expunged more of the frail old flesh from his body, Dolmech had decided there was a place for emotions. There was a place for disgust, and hate, and contempt. Those emotions he had learned to use as weapon and fuel. He had used them to burn weakness out of him even as the surgical lasers burned the flesh away from his body to replace it with bright, pure metal. Disgust led to strength of will. Self-hatred led to cleanliness.

He had personally carried out the construction of the servitor echelon that supported his squad in battle. Responsibility for this one's weakness fell squarely on him. Dolmech looked down at the breg-shei corpse again and felt nothing but weary loathing. Enough of this. He would have to board the Rhino and correct Jothael-004's aberrant conduct directly.

A pulse from his jump pack punched Dolmech up into the empty sky. He kicked his feet out and fired another pulse that set him on a long ballistic arc back toward the ridge.

'...BLESSING IRON why why IRON alive BLESSING...'

The servitor wasn't even of true Iron Hands make, Dolmech realised. It had not come from the culturing vats and tissue printeries in the clan-company's apothecarion. It was ex-human, one of the unmodified flesh-stock that made up the grubbing masses of the Imperium, the raw material for servitors and Chapter thralls.

The raw material for Iron Hands Space Marines, too, but Dolmech did not like to think of that.

'...OVERRIDE CODE KILL ME override code YOUR eye YOUR EYE YOUR EYE YOUR...'

It was *that* one. Dolmech remembered it. The one from the penal manufactorum Cog. That strange business with the rebellion, and the Dark Angels. It had told him something about his eye, and had been afraid of the Blessing. That fear, at least, had left it when it had surrendered the better part of its flesh and its mind to the reforging.

'Jothael-004,' he voxed. 'Sergeant Dolmech instructing. Quarter your current speed and stand by for rendezvous. Await my hail.'

There would be repercussions. Their advance would snag on this. An

unconscionable delay, perhaps whole minutes, while he set right the instrument he had made. Speeding after the Rhino in great flaring bursts from his pack, Dolmech bent his considerable will to keeping his thoughts on the task at hand, but he could not help wondering what his punishment from the Chapter would be.

The external vox-grille set above the servitor's sternum vibrated, but the Rhino was not pressurised and there was nothing to carry the sound. If there had been, it would have been the one word, over and over. *Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech.*

One by one the optical feeds went blank, replaced with green-black darkness and scrolling columns of letters. *Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech.*

This was a name with meaning. The servitor had not enough mind left to understand what, but still the faintest trceries of long-scrubbed neural paths, inflamed back to half-life by the breg-shei lash, were ringing and clamouring as that name passed through them.

Dolmech.

Cutting. Ripping. Unutterable, obliterating pain. The stink of blood and hot machine oil. The towering figure in power armour watching impassively as a voice shrieked for mercy. A voice that the servitor did not remember as the one it used to own.

It had no ability to understand the images that the lash-flare had dragged out of its lacerated mind. It had no consciousness to understand what had happened to it. But it went to work on the memories nevertheless, pushing this strange new data through the directives that still sputtered in its forebrain.

It tried the processes in its basic motor and vox routines, then its order and code-phrase banks. When the diagnostic routines tried they stalled: the trauma of the Blessing of Iron had been absolute, but the cold analytics of the diagnostic assessors did not know how to deal with these sense-swamping memories so at odds with the all-clear the physical sensors were reporting.

Its thoughts started to whip about more quickly. Its selfrepair processes screamed for priority, for its severed limbs and violated body, insisting that there was damage, massive damage.

That process spun out a connection to another directive framework: the still-active combat protocols.

Now the servitor found a process that could resolve this flood of mental noise.

It registered that it had suffered terrible injury. Not recently, according to diagnostics, but the memories were too vivid to dispute. Massive damage, forced

physical trauma. Overriding of attempts to resist or escape.

The words "Blessing of Iron" ricocheted through the servitor's head without triggering any associations.

The shape. The great shape that had watched. That had caused the trauma. The core of the threat. *Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech. Dolmech.*

That name had no other meaning in the servitor's mind. The programming that had locked Dolmech in as its owner and controller had been left in ruin by the alien lash. Now it was processing that name and that image with the mental machinery it used for battle.

The servitor tagged the name and image of *Dolmech* with a vermilion threat rune, matched it to auspex scans and recent vox footage.

The optic feeds flared back into life. In the control position, the servitor that had once been Beneficiari Armicus was still again, and ready.

Dolmech caught the code-bark from the Rhino a moment after he finally spotted the carrier dragging its wagons up the first ridge. His anger was thrumming as hot as the hard blue sun overhead. The servitor had disobeyed him. It had fled him, sped past its destination point. And now this code-bark, signifying auspex contact with an incoming threat.

The ridge was clear of breg-shei. Dolmech knew that. He snarled at the humiliation the damned thrall was causing him and triggered a hard jump pack burn that sent him bulleting forward.

The Rhino was clambering into the increasingly broken terrain of the ridge, as if its driver had simply not bothered to stop or steer it. The ammo wagons bounced behind it, leaning this way and that. It was only a matter of time before one of them twisted its coupling too hard and snapped free. Dolmech debated landing on each one and decoupling it before he dealt with the servitor, then dismissed the idea. The whole rig needed to be stopped now.

'Dolmech,' he voxed. 'Dolmech commanding. Decommission yourself instantly, preparatory to dismounting and mind-scrub. Confirm and obey. *Confirm and obey.*'

Another code-bark, confirming the threat signal. The servitor was demented. Something had got at—

A bolter round cracked into Dolmech's chest, killing his forward momentum and setting warning runes dancing across his helmet display. He dropped to an ungainly landing on the top of the second ammo truck, trying to make sense of it. Another shell exploded just below his gorget. Had the truck not jounced and tilted him it would have hit the helmet seal square on. His attacker was using

targeting doctrine identical to what he had programmed into—

Dolmech realised what was happening. No snarl, but a roar as he unlimbered his axe and blasted forward again, nothing in his thoughts but to hack his way into the Rhino and tear his misbegotten creation apart with his own metal hands.

The servitor's broken mind had not been able to quite make sense of the decommission command, except in the general sense that here was another attempt by the threat designated *Dolmech* to try and end its existence. Counterfire to the incoming assault had performed as per doctrine, but as the sergeant crashed against the back of the Rhino and damage warnings began streaming out of the feeds, the methodical combat logic started to grow ragged.

'I thought...' it remembers without understanding. *'I thought you were going to kill me.'*

Kill. Me. Kill.

The pain. The "Blessing". The Dolmech-threat took it and made it a prisoner and did... things...

The servitor's damage reports screamed red at the fresh flood of memories, as the Rhino's rear hatch split and parted under Dolmech's assault.

The last scraps of coherent orders in the servitor's mind were washed away, weakened by the breg-shei lash and destroyed by the relived agony of the Blessing of Iron. For the first time since it had had its humanity ripped from it, it felt fear again.

Blindly, the Rhino's bolters spun and fired, trying to angle in to hit the Space Marine battering his way into his own transport. The vox was all screams, beast screams, the servitor giving voice to pain and fear that had been walled off a lifetime ago.

At the moment that Dolmech finally tore the hatch off its mounting, his servitor's raw panic triggered the spite-switch.

The first wagon's detonation lit up the ridge line brighter than a breg-shei lash. The second and third joined to make a bright ball of light that, for a moment, shouted defiance back at the giant star overhead.

The Rhino - along with Jothael-004 - was obliterated in an instant.

Veteran-Sergeant Dolmech was catapulted away from the wreck, turning head-over-heels again and again, finally crashing soundlessly to the desert floor beyond the ridge line. He skidded in the dust, rolling and tumbling, coming to rest on his mangled jump pack, helmet knocked from its damaged seal by the great blast.

Open to the harsh sunlight, his exposed face bore one dead flesh-eye and one

cold blue augmetic of exquisite workmanship. Both stared lifelessly up into the hard black sky.

Warhammer 4000

Perihelion

A Rayenor vs Eisenhorn story

by Dan Abnett

An hour into the symposium it became clear we weren't all going to get out alive.

I'd come to watch. To spectate. Covering my identity with the paperwork of an archaeolinguist from Shurfath, the local universitariate, and disguising my face and build with scholar's robes and a falsehood, I'd come to sit among the academics and the savants in the gallery.

I lie. I hadn't come to watch. I'd come to see *him*. It had been a long time since I'd last seen him. Fifty years? A century? I lose count.

Bader Vecum had died. That was the start of it. Bader Vecum, eleventh son of an eleventh son, the last discernible branch of a noble house line that had ruled the island nation of Maelificer for thirty generations, had died. You know the island, I'm sure. In the cold, green northern oceans of Gudrun, in the Helican Sub; a place of mild summers and dark winters, of ice-capped peaks and geothermal power, of ancient towns etched into the steep sides of dead volcanoes. To the north of the island, the jagged black walls

of the continental shelf can be seen on a clear day, three hundred kilometres away across a forbidding polar sea.

House Vecum had a seat in Gudrun's Upper Legislature, but it had never been one of the most powerful or influential of Gudrun's noble families. Over the centuries, Maelificer had been sustained by the export of preserved fish, seabed ores, and by geothermic power, but it had always maintained a reputation as a seat of learning. In those steep, cliff-side towns, there flourished Shurfath Universitariate, two academies of rubrication, six museums, and four distinguished library collections, all thanks to the scholarly enthusiasms of the noble Vecums, amateur philologists all.

Now the last was dead, without issue, of terribly old age, and Maelificer was to be administered by the Vecum's mainland cousins in House Courel. Bader Vecum's famous private library was to be broken up and dispersed into the

discipline libraries of Shurfath, as well as several mainland scholams.

There had always been talk that House Vecum's private library contained some items of unusually esoteric merit and, as is often the case with old collections long held in private hands, the Inquisition had appointed an emissary to oversee the disbursement of its contents. One can never be too careful. Even without any malicious intent on the part of its owners, a thousand-year-old collection might have something pernicious festering at the back of a shelf. I have personally seen great tragedies unfold because of the unwitting ownership of the blasphemous.

I have seen a page of faded manuscript kill a world.

We gathered in the empty house, high on the steepest scarps of the island's peaks. It was the end of autumn, and the first ice was glinting in the harbour, the first dark, deep-ocean gales were building out in the west. Migratory birds mobbed the skies outside the high windows, preparing for departure. Servants hurried from draughty room to draughty room, nursing warmth out of the corroding heating systems that Bader Vecum had allowed to ail alongside his health.

Inquisitor Cyriaque led the symposium. With his interrogator, Voriet, and three savants, he had spent two months sifting the collection. He was now presenting his conclusions to a body of his peers from the Ordos, along with an invited audience of academics, for deliberation. Eighteen volumes had already been sequestered without consultation. The Inquisition does not invite opinion on some matters. But there remained one hundred and fifty-one items where a strong argument could be made for careful academic study rather than strict prohibition. Chancellor Manivar of Shurfath was particularly insistent on this possibility.

'Shurfath's reputation,' he said, rising to his feet at the start of the symposium, 'which I may be so bold as to suggest extends beyond Gudrun and the subsector to the local Imperium Sector range, depends so much upon the quality of our collection. And that collection, at its core, has been the great work of House Vecum, whose broad and admirable curiosity has allowed them to accumulate a vast and irreplaceable archive of books down the ages. While we understand the necessity of restricting some volumes, from time to time, for the social good, we urge the worthy Ordos not to sequester the entire catalogue. It is not all contaminated because of one or two unwise inclusions. Please allow as much of the whole as possible to be transferred to the academic files of Shurfath and its fellow institutions at home and abroad.'

I was broadly in agreement with the chancellor's wishes. I had reviewed the

questionable pieces, and there was nothing in them that warranted censorship. Depriving scholars of access to such material blunts our collective knowledge.

But, you may remark, I would say that, wouldn't I?

I also liked Shurfath. There was something about the cold, hard climate of Maelificer that focused scholarly intent. Some of the most learned members of the sector's Ordos had studied there at one time or another: I myself had spent nine months there, trawling its stacks. That was many, many years previously, when I was attempting to do some background research on a matter that had occupied a colleague of mine during a visit to Elvara Cardinal. Though answers had eluded me (and the man was long since dead), I had come to appreciate Shurfath's atmosphere and learning.

Inquisitor Cyriaque leant towards the chancellor's way of thinking too, but he was young, and this was one of his first formal duties. He knew that the eyes of seniors were upon him. He could not afford to seem lenient. He could not afford to appear radical.

There's a potent word: *Radical*.

The first volume was brought out for examination and discussion, the first of the one hundred and fifty-one in question. It was going to be a long process. Cyriaque had chosen a small lecture room in the upper levels of the vertical palace, a gloomy, wood-panelled chamber of uninterrupted brown. It had once been used by medicae students for anatomy lessons, and there were tiers of seats around the central stage. The tiered gallery stalls, like a little box theatre, were almost as sheer as the cliffs outside. We leant on the wooden handrails and peered down into the gas-lit arena where Cyriaque's savants, their hands white-gloved, were laying the first questionable book on a piezo-charged neutralising cloth. Vorieta, the interrogator, had placed aversive wards around the lip of the wooden stage. There were guards too: Inquisitorial servants in the stern robes of the Ordos, and the more ostentatious men-at-arms of House Vecum.

Cyriaque began his review. The book was a copy of a copy of Unacius's *Readings*, one from which the notorious "poetry" had long since been expunged. It was undoubtedly harmless, an unloaded gun. The mezzopict illustrations were, however, charming and rare, and deserved to be held for the benefit of students of the visual arts. The chancellor rose and, once Cyriaque had finished his summary, said as much.

The Ordos seniors seemed unmoved. Old Karnot Veshar would be, I knew well, monodominant to the end, hardline, bitter. Adrienne Corwal was harder to read. An elegant, diligent woman, she had her psyber drone hover over the pages as the savants turned them, relaying close-ups to her optic implants. Zaul

Gaguach seemed bored. I distinctly heard him twice ask an aide what the palace kitchens were preparing for supper.

And then there was *him*, of course. Faceless, implacable, as unreadable as a blunt. It is not weakness to confess that I felt a certain emotional response when he moved out from the shadows, onto the stage. It had been a very long time, and we had once been very close.

His career had been blighted by the affair of Slyte. His career, and the Kell Mountain region of Sarre Province. Gudrun, and Eustis Majoris too, bore the scars of his work.

I knew full well those modest scars were far preferable to the fatal exit wounds that would have been the consequence of his inaction, but Lord Grandmaster Rorken had been obliged to censure him. In the service of the Throne, and the Holy Ordos, he had been required to operate on a rogue status. He had saved, at a conservative estimate, trillions of lives. Even so, the aftermath had been a terrible mess. In order to continue in service with the Ordos Helican, he had agreed to suspend his active status and fulfill an advisory role in the Inquisition's headquarters.

A waste. A waste of a huge talent. At least, I had heard, he was writing again.

The *Readings* were finally passed for collation. *His* vote swung it, though his *aye* was the only word he uttered. I was glad to see that a fear of accusations of radicalism, a fear that he was the rogue they had always suspected, did not stay his hand. He knew what was right and what was foolishly wrong, and the mezzopicts belonged in a decent library.

The second work was brought out and introduced by Cyriaque. It was a "tarnished" copy of an M.39 *Ennead*, where old, block-printing transposition errors had created quasi-blasphemous images of the Emperor.

I had honestly thought we would get all the way to item sixteen - a prayer pamphlet of the Technotic Sect that had a genuinely heretical tone - before there would be any real dissent or argument. That would probably take up the whole of the first day. In one of the scheduled breaks, or perhaps after the evening session, I would steal my chance to talk to him.

But it didn't go anything like that.

As Cyriaque's savants turned the pages of the *Ennead* with their white-gloved hands, one of the House Vecum guardsmen at the back of the room, a tall fellow with a lugubrious expression, shifted uneasily. He was wearing a long green coat, a white sash, and copious gold braid, and his tall silver helm was festooned with the feathers of the oceanic greywing. He was holding a ceremonial poleaxe.

I noticed him twitch for a second time, and thought perhaps he was suffering

from indigestion or other gastric discomfort. Then he hoisted the poleaxe and, with a slightly bemused frown, plunged it into the nearest Ordos guard.

There was a prodigious quantity of blood. A major artery had been severed, and the force of blood pressure all but hosed the backs of the seniors on the stage.

The mess did not concern me much, nor the sudden commotion, the shouting, the movement, or the production of weapons. The poor house guardsman, already surprised at becoming a killer, was positively astonished to be killed. An outraged Inquisitorial agent drew down and shot him at point-blank range, and he fell backwards, releasing his grip on the haft of the poleaxe, which was still twitching in time with the ebbing arterial pulse.

My concern was the sense I had registered the moment before the killer struck. A tiny pulse of psychic power.

The house guardsman had been a puppet. A mind had used him. It had taken control of his limbs and forced his action before he'd even had a chance to resist.

That was power. Worse, it was precision.

There is only one thing more dangerous than a human psyker. It is a human psyker expertly trained by the Scholastica Psykana.

I know. I am one.

The murderer's executioner, standing over the body with his sidearm drawn, suddenly became the next instrument of the invisible agency. He shivered. Then he turned and started to shoot, wildly, into the galleries and across the stage. One of the savants was cut down, and Cyriaque was hit in the thigh. Guards - both Ordos and house - who had rushed forward to help the first butchered victim and restrain his killer scattered.

Karnot Veshar was a psychic. Hurling himself out of his seat, the back of his coat soaked in blood, he yelled a command word at the shooter, who was one of his own retinue. The chilling use of *will* made me flinch. Veshar was strong, but his practice was clumsy. There was none of the stiletto finesse that had triggered the incident.

The guard with the gun ceased his rampage, impelled by Veshar's will. He halted, and looked down at the gun he was holding as if its presence in his hand was an utter mystery.

Confusion had dulled everyone's wits. The guard with the pistol, stunned to inaction by Veshar's yell, was no longer the problem. The rogue mind had flitted on, leaving one slave for another.

Another House Vecum guard, a captain, had dropped down beside the first victim, attempting in great earnest to ease the fellow's miserable death. The

captain suddenly shivered, and wrenched the offending poleaxe out of the first victim's torso. He rose, a brimming lake of blood around him on the floor, and ran the brute weapon at Veshar as one might run down a boar.

The captain would have killed the inquisitor cleanly, but for two factors. Veshar used his will again, and screamed a frantic command of prohibition. The captain was too possessed by a superior mind for it to be fully effective, but it did make him hesitate, and his boots, decorated with velvet rosettes and brocade, slipped in the pooling blood.

Instead of impaling Kamot Veshar's chest, the spike of the poleaxe cracked through the inquisitor's left hip and pinned him to the wooden frame of the box gallery.

His outraged scream was as considerable as the quantity of blood that he began to leak. Around them, guards of both stripe opened fire and cut the blameless captain down from several directions.

They were all idiots. The mind had already moved.

The galleries were emptying. Spectators, in great agitation, were fleeing to the comparative safety of the side rooms and the waiting chambers.

I knew it was time to withdraw. The bloodshed on the little galleried stage, which had taken on the ridiculous quality of some gruesome pantomime show, had been just that, a show. The majority of the most powerful and capable people at the symposium were on that stage, and the attack had been designed to occupy them, to confuse them, and create a debacle that would entirely focus the attention of the audience.

Their demise had not been the primary intention, however. If one of the Ordos seniors had been the target, why begin with the guard?

I was sure I was the true target.

Somehow, some agency had learned of my presence. I seldom frequented public or populated areas, but someone had found out about this one, rare appearance.

Where had I slipped up? How had I shown myself? For many years, I had lived other lives, covering all trace of myself. Where had I made a mistake? What fragment of truth had I left uncovered?

Was it simply my determination to meet with him here? Had that been my undoing?

Who was to blame? Who had come for me?

I have, I am sorry to reflect, accumulated far too many mortal enemies.

And I share the same Archenemy as the rest of my species.

I left the gallery and took the small back stairs, a dark flight of wooden steps

with a tight turn. I pushed my way past straggling spectators who were making for the exit. Some cried out as I pushed them aside, afraid that death was coming to touch them too.

I was armed with a power knife in a sprung sheath along my left forearm, and a Tronsvasse auto in a flat holster under my coat, but my most dangerous weapon was inside my skull.

I reached a lower hallway under the lecture room. The floors were boarded with gleaming black timber and dressed with old rugs. The walls were lacquered panels. Dim, ancient faces peered out of ancient oil paint scenes in ancient frames. Refugees from the audience had accumulated in the hallway, huddled savants and frightened scholars. When they saw me, and read my grim sense of purpose, they shrank from me and fled.

My disguise - especially the uncanny ancient technology of the falsehood - was good enough to cover me under regular circumstances. Sitting, walking, standing, I was just another figure of no consequence. But now I was moving with speed, and no amount of borrowed finery and optic deception could cover my bulk and my oh-so-mechanical gait in rapid motion. I was clearly no academic. I was still a tall, broad-shouldered man, and what damage life has done to my solid frame, augmetics have repaired. Servo-assist leg-frames become obvious when one is running, and no one could mistake the martial training evident in my bearing.

Vesher's brittle screams were still echoing down from the lecture room above me. I believe that, by then, they were attempting to unpin his smashed pelvis from the panelling.

I felt the rogue mind flick across me, hunting for me, fixing on my psychic aura. I wrenched the auto from my concealed rig.

Just in time.

Shots came at me down the hallway, hard rounds. They drove into the wood panels like gas-gunned rivets, flecking the air with splinters. The scholars around me broke again, this time caught between my threatening form and the source of the gunfire.

More shots. Two of the scholars were hit as they milled in front of me, and crashed to the floor.

I brought the Tronsvasse up, still moving.

One shooter was half-concealed behind a golden helm and carapace displayed on a pedestal. I fired, missed, but made the attacker duck back into cover.

There was a second, concealed on the other side of the hallway. He was firing a large-calibre pistol. I saw the muzzle flash of the weapon as a bullet hissed past

me, and aimed for that.

I think I hit him in the hand or forearm. I heard a yelp.

I used my will, and declared, 'Show yourselves!'

Though they were both being slaved by the rogue mind, my raw command was enough to make them falter and stumble out of cover for a moment.

Both were Ordos guards, black-suited members of Gaguach's retinue. They were blameless and, like as not, would be free of control again in a moment. But I had not the luxury to show any mercy. Still running, I fired. Two shots, to the left, to the right. Each round struck the middle of a forehead and knocked a man on his back.

I had reached the end of the hallway. The door to a retiring room lay open to my right, and stairs were directly ahead. The scholars had all fled. I could still hear their cries of fright and panic from the staircase. I could still hear Vesher howling at a pain that would blight the rest of his life.

'Who are you?' I asked, reloading. 'Who are you? Where are you?'

+Who are *you*?+ a mind-voice answered. Cold, crisp. The sort of sharp voice a blade would use if it could speak.

I turned slowly, watching the doors and exits.

'Who are you?' I repeated, adding will to the words.

+Who are *you*? I did not expect you. You were not anticipated. Who are you? Reveal your name.+

The will-force in the send almost made me speak my name aloud, but I bit back. So I wasn't the intended target after all. I was, in fact, the rogue element. The unexpected player in the game.

+I know you. I can smell your mind. The rogue. The famous pariah. Long years since your rosette carried any authority.+

The mind was strong. I pushed at it, harder, harder still. I knew the psyker was stronger than me, but sometimes strength isn't everything. I was hoping to outflank it with skill and practised technique, to wrong-foot it. The mind sounded young, not experienced enough to know every trick an old dog has in his book.

But it was hard to push, because the mind kept moving. There was a flexibility to the psionic pattern that was quite disturbing. It was fluid. It flitted, like a wild bird, from slave to slave, yet it did so with great purpose and accuracy. It was not simply ricocheting from one consciousness to the next.

It was fast. Strong and *fast*.

I pushed again. It slipped aside, but this time I came away holding some words torn off its elusive subconscious like a handful of grass.

Grael Ochre, the Yellow King.

'Grael Ochre. Is that your name?'

No answer.

'Yellow King... of what?'

No answer.

'Yellow for cowardice? Won't you reply?'

I pushed again.

'What is Orpheus, Grael Ochre?' I asked. 'Why does that word lurk so brightly in your mind?'

The mind pushed back. Fire cored through the neural links of my augmetics, making me gasp and stagger to the wall for support. All my old wounds - all the artificial neurons spliced in to allow me to control my exo- and endo-augmetics - shrieked with induced pain, the cellular memory of injury and surgical incisions replayed.

Clever, turning old pain against me. Getting me out of his head.

He was gone again. The house was alive with the sounds of shouting, of security teams rushing up and down the tight, wooden staircases. I limped into the retiring room and pulled the door shut behind me. It was cold in there, unfriendly. No one had bothered heating it for the day. A limpid grey light fell through the tall windows. Drapes and tapestries hung dark like shrouds. There were shelves of books, some ragged furniture.

I needed to sit down. I tried to let go of the pain he'd poured into me. This Grael Ochre, whoever he was - and I was sure a name like that was just another mask, a *psydonym* - was cruel and exceptionally skilled. I had only stolen the few clues I had by brazen persistence and the fact that he had not expected another psyker to be in play at the symposium.

He had lit me up with old agonies: ghosts of all the wounds and traumas I had ever suffered, and not just the physical ones. I was almost overcome with a sense of loss, of several losses. Remembered grief. I saw faces, briefly, in my mind's eye. Faces I had not thought of in years. Uber Aemos, my long dead savant. The irrepressible Midas Betancore. Fischig, stubborn to the end. Tobias Maxilla and his gleaming artificial life. Alizabeth Bequin.

He woke them up. Grael Ochre woke them all up and sent them to torment me for a minute or two until the pain ebbed away.

'Why are you here?'

I looked around sharply. He was right behind me. Perhaps he had taken shelter in the retiring room too, or perhaps he had been drawn to the flash of my mind. He was a dark shape, a shadow beside the seaward windows. It was as though he

didn't want to be involved in anything.

'You recognise me?' I asked.

'Of course. Even with the falsehood, I had a suspicion. Is this anything to do with you? Today's little round of murder and puppet-play?'

'No,' I said. 'I thought someone might have been taking advantage of me making a public appearance, but that was arrogant. It's not me they're after. Does the name Grae'l Ochre mean anything?'

'No.'

'The Yellow King?'

'No.'

'I see,' I said. Was he ignorant, or was he just not playing? Throne knew, he had no reason to trust me. He hadn't had for years.

I removed the falsehood so he could see my face. My scarred, expressionless face.

'It is good to see you,' I said.

His vox-speakers made a noise, perhaps the approximation of a sardonic laugh. I was not seeing him, and he was not seeing me. There was no expression, or even microexpression, to read on my frozen face, and no nuance to prove that I genuinely was pleased.

And he was just the chair: the armoured, hard-machined, floating shape that stored and supported his helpless organic remains. He was seeing me through optical relays, and speaking via voxponder circuits. The armoured prow of his chair unit was no more readable than my features.

It looked as if he had not maintained the exterior of his chair in a long while. It was scarred and scratched, and the paint was flaking. He had not bothered to keep up its sinister appearance for field work.

Spots of fresh blood dappled one side of the chair's armour.

'Why are you here?' he asked.

'I came to see you.'

'We have not seen each other for a very long time, Gregor. I had not expected ever to see you again.'

'Times change,' I replied.

'So do people. Neither of us is what we used to be. Rogues, the pair of us.'

'You were only rogue by circumstance,' I said.

'It cost me my career. And that implies you are *not* a rogue by circumstance. Are you really the radical they say you are? The *diabolus* threat that has five sectors looking for you?'

'What I am is immaterial—'

'Not so,' he replied. 'Even if you are innocent, this isn't the time or place to prove it. Your reputation is accursed. You should not be here.'

'I walk where I choose.'

'Dark places, all of them.'

'And I am not here to prove my innocence. I am here to see you.'

'Which is why you should not be here at all,' he said.

Gunfire echoed down through the house. Upstairs, another attempt was being made to smoke out or kill the psyker assassin.

'You could stop that. You could crush him,' I said.

'No.'

'You're the strongest mind on the island.'

'Once, perhaps.'

'You won't use your psy to restore order here?'

'Others will. Gaguach and Corwal are closing the killer down. Another few minutes.'

'Neither of them is strong enough.'

'Together, they'll do it.'

'So you don't use your mind anymore?' I asked.

'It was a condition of my pardon. The inquiry lasted fifteen years, Gregor. Molotch made a terrible mess.'

'Not as terrible as the one he wanted to make. The one you stopped.'

'I agreed to retire from active duty. I swore to suspend my mind from psychic activity. I merely use the little mind-impulse I need to control the chair and run life support. Nothing else. Nothing active. Not even telepathy.'

'Why? The greatest mind of your generation.'

'In a ruined body, with a shattered reputation. My mind and your body, there's almost one whole person between us. Almost.'

I looked away. Even without the nuance of microexpression on my part, he could tell he'd offended me.

'Your skin is thinner these days,' he said. 'It was a joke, yet it cut you. You never used to care. Are you so ashamed of the path you've taken?'

I holstered my weapon and readjusted my falsehood.

'I came to see you,' I said. 'I know it's been a long time, but it was for something important. But I can see you've changed. There is no point bringing this to you.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I'll get over my disappointment.'

'We cannot work together,' he said. 'We cannot be seen together, or have any association.'

'Because I am a radical? *Diabolus*?'

'Because I was given a choice after Molotch,' he replied. 'Retire from active service and refrain from psionics. Or, on behalf of the Holy Ordos, hunt down my old master, the heretic Gregor Eisenhorn.'

I did not know what to say. He had chosen the prison of his chair and the negation of his extraordinary consciousness over me.

'This thing,' he said, 'this psyker that has come hunting in House Vecum today. I think it's come for me. I made enemies. Molotch, Culzean, and their ilk, they had associates. They belonged to secret orders and clandestine fraternities. Their kin want me dead. While I abstain from psionics, there is no satisfaction in killing me. They are goading me. It's happened before. They are daring me to use my psy again. When I do, I will become a worthy target again. Then they will exact vengeance and kill me. I refuse to play their games and rise to it. This matter here, this Grael Ochre... it will be done soon. Calm will be restored. Go now, Gregor. Go now, before they lock the place down. You cannot be found here, for your own sake and for mine.'

I nodded. I turned.

'Does the word Orpheus mean anything to you?' he asked suddenly.

'No,' I said.

Another vox noise, the analogue of a sigh.

'Then good-bye, Gregor,' he said.

'It really was good to see you, Gideon,' I replied.

With a soft whir of suspensor mech, the chair turned to face the seaward windows. Ravenor was no longer looking at me.

'I hope we never meet again,' he said. His voxponder was toneless.

Covered by the falsehood, its resolution turned to maximum effect, I left the palace by the back staircase, and exited into the deep, hillside well of covered steps below the ramparts. An hour's walk, down the steep black stairs that snaked down the windswept cliff, would bring me to the harbour road. From there, I could reach the boat-dock in the shadow of Shurfath Universitariate where my launch was hidden, and quit Maelificer.

Behind me, the sporadic sounds of gunfire continued to disturb the mountain air, and I could still feel a dangerous mind at large.

I hate running from a fight.

As it turns out, I wasn't.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dan Abnett has written over forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. His most recent Horus Heresy novels, *Prospero Burns* and *Know No Fear*, were *New York Times* bestsellers. He is currently working on new adventures for Inquisitors Ravenor and Eisenhorn, along with more Gaunt's Ghosts and Horus Heresy. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's written several novels for Black Library, including the Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach* and the *New York Times* bestselling *The First Heretic* for the Horus Heresy. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his wife Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere. His hobbies generally revolve around reading anything within reach, and helping people spell his surname.

Matthew Farrer lives in Australia, and is a member of the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild. He has been writing since his teens, and has a number of novels and short stories to his name, including the popular Shira Calpurnia novels for the Black Library.

After finishing university **Anthony Reynolds** set sail from his homeland Australia and ventured forth to foreign climes. He ended up settling in the UK, and worked for four years at Games Workshop's design studio as a games developer and two years as part of the management team. He now resides back in his hometown of Sydney overlooking the beach and enjoying the sun and the surf.

Josh Reynolds was formerly a roadie for the Hong Kong Cavaliers, but now writes full time. His work for Black Library includes a prodigious number of short stories for *Hammer and Bolter* and various anthologies, along with the novels *Knight of the Blazing Sun*, *Neferata* and *Gotrek & Felix: Road of Skulls*

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.

Table of Contents

[Contents](#)

[Distant Echoes of Old Night](#)

[Extinction](#)

[The Blessing of Iron](#)

[The Memory of Flesh](#)

[Perihelion](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHORS](#)