



# BLACK LIBRARY WEEKENDER

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## VOLUME TWO

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2012  
Nottingham, England





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Welcome to the second of two short story anthologies exclusive to the inaugural Black Library Weekender.

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 and an action-packed saga from the Warhammer World, 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 future.

We hope you enjoy the stories within.

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W E E K E N D E R

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THE HORUS HERESY

# THE DIVINE WORD

A Horus Heresy short story

*Gav Thorpe*

*“The Word of the Emperor must be Read and Heard with Diligence so that you may arrive to the Knowledge that is needful for you.”*

*—The Lectitio Divinitatus, C.M31*

The sky above the city flashed and cracked with arcs of lightning, starkly silhouetting the army retreating from the shattered outskirts. Thousands of men and women pulled back from Milvian, bloodied and despondent. The burnt shells of tanks and transports were left in their wake as the soldiers of the Therion Cohort responded swiftly and gratefully to the retreat order.

Shellfire and las-blasts followed them, further thinning their numbers, until covering barrages from hundreds of emplaced guns fell upon Milvian, stalling any pursuit. In the growing gloom of twilight, the Therions streamed towards their waiting comrades.

The display view faded to static as the recon-link was cut by the observation officers accompanying the assault. Marcus was relieved that he did not have to look at the downcast columns trudging back to the Imperial lines, the view replaced by a strategic schematic of lines and symbols and target designations that cast a clinical veneer over the depressing affair.

It was not the first setback Marcus Valerius had faced in his military career, but he wondered if it would be the bit. The Therion vice-caesari pulled his attention away from the main screen on the command deck and returned his gaze to the small communications monitor in the panel beside him.

“The batteries at Milvian must be silenced by midday at the latest. There can be no further delays. Our success depends upon it.”

Looking at the stern face of Commander Branne in the hololith display, Vice-Caesari Marcus Valerius knew that the Raven Guard captain was not employing hyperbole. If Branne said the campaign hinged on Valerius’s army seizing Milvian in the next eighteen hours, you could be sure that it was the truth.

Though Branne kept his tone even, free from accusation, Marcus was well aware that he deserved far harsher treatment. The initial attack on Milvian had stalled early on, and the Therion Cohort had been forced back in some disarray. It was a setback the vice-caesari was determined to rectify.

“Everything is being prepared for a fresh assault at dawn,” Marcus assured the Raven Guard commander. He had rushed the initial attack, perhaps out of overconfidence, or simply eagerness. More than seventeen hundred Therions had paid for the mistake with their lives. “I have determined a new attack approach that should see us break through to the batteries this time. We will engage with full force and nothing less. Your ships will be clear for low orbital attack.”

“We are poised to strike a deadly blow,” Branne continued, labouring a point he had made several times before. Marcus accepted the reminder in silence, head bowed. “Your advance on the second capital, Milvian, has sent much of the traitors’ higher command fleeing to a bunker complex thirty kilometres south of the city. They will not remain there for long. The Raven Guard will fall upon the renegade commanders with gunship and drop pod in eighteen hours’ time, providing that the Therions and their auxiliaries can take Milvian and silence the defence lasers and other anti-orbital weapons guarding the city’s surrounds.”

Branne did not need to reiterate what was at stake. With the taking of Milvian and the elimination of the traitor command, the world of Euesa would be returned to the Imperial fold and with it control of the Vandreggan sector.

“Yes, commander.” There was nothing Marcus could say that would not sound like excuses or argument to the Legiones Astartes officer. “The Milvian batteries will fall.”

“Understood. Is there anything else?”

There was, but Valerius kept his thoughts to himself. There was the dream. The bustling command centre was no place to discuss a private matter between Valerius and Branne.

“Nothing, commander.”

“That is reassuring, Marcus. Fight well.”

The display shimmered and then disappeared. Marcus issued a few orders for

forces to move forwards and cover the retreat. Assured that all was being done that could be done, the weary vice-caesari left the command deck and returned to his chambers.

A gentle cough attracted his attention and he stopped to look at Pelon, who was waiting expectantly by the closed curtains across the window. The youth was maturing into a slender but muscled young man, and bore his rank of sub-tribune with pride. It was hard to reconcile the determined figure accompanying Marcus with the easily startled boy who had been assigned as his manservant ten years before.

“Yes?” said Marcus.

“Shall I let in some light, vice-caesari?”

Valerius waved a hand in ambivalent reply, dismissing the distraction as he started pacing, exhausted in body but his mind whirling with the implications of the defeat. Pelon took this as permission and drew on the cord that pulled back the heavy drapes. The last rays of bluish sunlight streamed through a trio of arched windows, revealing wooded hills and slate-grey clouds.

Marcus stopped, taken aback by the view. He had been so occupied with the attack he had not looked out at the hills of Euesa for several days. He strode to the window and watched as a tree-crowned hill slid past.

Of course, the hill was not moving; the massive Capitol Imperialis transport, serving as Marcus’s headquarters, was. Eighty metres long and fifty high, the *Contemptuous* trundled relentlessly forwards at a brisk walking pace, carried on long tracks, its slab sides dotted with view ports and weapons sponsons. Five kilometres away was another lumbering Imperialis, the *Iron General*, commanded by Praefector Antonius, Marcus’s younger brother.

Each of the super-heavy war engines carried two companies of the Therion Cohort—one hundred men and nine battle tanks—while a host of Mechanicum tech-priests, adepts and servitors tended the massive behemoth cannon and hundreds of secondary weapons.

Around the pair of transports the rest of the Therions advanced, on foot and in troop carriers, seven hundred thousand men in all. Amongst them strode the Scout and Battle Titans of the Legio Vindictus, supported by several thousand mechanically augmented skitarii, sagitarii, praetorians and herakli, along with dozens of strange war engines and service vehicles.

There were other super-heavy vehicles in the army—Baneblades and Shadowswords, Stormhammers and Leviathans of the Capricorn Thirteenth Suppression regiment alongside hundreds of Leman Russ tanks, Chimera

transports, Hydra anti-aircraft cannons and many other tanks and war engines. With them came Gryphons and siege bombard, Basilisk assault guns and mobile missile platforms.

In the two and a half years since the new Therion Cohort had been blooded at the Perfect Fortress of the Emperor's Children, Marcus's army had grown strong indeed.

The route of the advance was being paved—in some places literally—by the men and machines of the Lothor Pioneer Corps. Fifteen thousand men and as many engineering vehicles cut a swath through the woods, levelled hills and cut ramps down cliffs and escarpments to ease the passage of the following host. Rivers were dammed or bridged by cunningly designed machines. Swamps had been drained and roadways laid for hundreds of kilometres on end across the plains and foothills.

The only part of the force not represented were the Raven Guard themselves. The Legion of Lord Corax was dispersed across Euesa and in orbit. It had been the Raven Guard that had heralded the arrival of the Emperor's forces, and the Raven Guard that had seized the space port at Carlingia to allow the Therions and their allies to land their immense war machines.

"The command council is in two hours," said Marcus, turning away from the military spectacle. He crossed to the bunk made up in one corner of the chamber, the constant tremble of the massive transport's engines no longer a distraction. "Wake me in one hour."

He shrugged off his heavy coat into the waiting hands of Pelon. As Marcus sat on the edge of the bed and Pelon knelt to remove his boots, the vice-caesari noticed his attendant was pensive.

"Something is on your mind, Pelon. Speak it."

The attendant hesitated, concentrating on his task. He did not meet his master's gaze as he spoke.

"You did not mention your dreams to Commander Branne, I assume."

"I did not," replied Marcus. With his boots removed, he swung his legs onto the bed and lay back, hands clasped across his chest. "He made it clear after the debacle with the Raptors that I was not to speak of them again."

"The last such dream saved the Raven Guard from annihilation, vice-caesari. Do you not think this latest experience might be pertinent to the campaign?"

"I am fortunate that Lord Corax appears to have dispensed with any curiosity over our timely arrival at Isstvan and Branne would have it remain so. It is clear to me that the primarch did not send me the visions and I am not about to raise

issues that lead to uncomfortable questions. We have seen some strange things in this war already. An Imperial Army commander who has dream-visions would not be tolerated.”

“But what if the dreams were sent by another, higher power than the primarch?” there was slight admonition in Pelon’s tone.

“Nonsense,” said Marcus, sitting up. He looked at his attendant, “There are no higher powers.”

“I can think of one,” Pelon suggested quietly. The valet delved into a pocket of his tunic and brought forth a sheaf of tattered papers and plas-prints. He became more animated.

“I was given these by one of the Lothorians, in respect to an entirely different concern. There is truth in these writings, deeper than anything I have read before. The Emperor has not abandoned us, but continues to watch and guide his followers. It is all in here.”

He proffered the bundle of sheets to Marcus, but the vice-caesari waved them away with a contemptuous snort.

“I expected better of you, Pelon. I thought you had been raised a Therion and taught the wisdom of logic and reason. Now you seek to peddle these superstitions as a deeper truth? Do you not think I have heard these prattlings of the divine before? It is an affront to the Imperial Truth and everything we have fought for.”

“Apologies, vice-caesari, I did not mean to offend,” said Pelon, hastily stuffing the texts back into his pocket.

“Wake me in one hour, and say no more about god-Emperors and divine guidance.”

*Sleep had not come easily to Marcus for several days and today was no different. As soon as he started to slip into a slumber his thoughts were assailed with a frightening tableau. The vice-caesari stood on a grassy plain, storm clouds gathering overhead. Around him the grass parted and rustled as something slithered close by.*

*Serpents rose up around him, their slick green scales shining, baring fangs as long as daggers. Marcus was surrounded, unable to flee as the snakes closed on him, sinking their teeth into his legs and arms, burying fangs in his chest and gut even as they snapped and worried at each other.*

*As he writhed in torment, Marcus saw the body of a beast heaving into view and discovered that the creatures that attacked him were but the multitudinous*

*heads of a single monster. The creature subdued him with its venom and looped its coils about him as it withdrew its fangs, squeezing the life from him.*

Marcus woke with a sweat dampening his brow. Through the windows he saw that the sky had darkened to night. Pelon sat on a stool by the dresser, hastily pushing something back into his pocket as he turned at his master's wakening. There was concern in the attendant's eyes, and something Marcus had not noticed before: wonder.

Whatever nonsense was written in those scraps of text had clearly made a profound impact on the young man, but Marcus had not the energy to berate Pelon. The vice-caesari dragged himself upright, his shirt and breeches moist with perspiration.

Pelon crossed to the curtained wardrobe and pulled forth a freshly pressed uniform. Marcus wordlessly nodded his thanks.

Situated behind the bridge of the Capitol Imperialis, the command chamber was a broad room twenty metres by thirty, dominated by the glowing hololith display at its centre. A line of communications panels manned by servitors and adjutants lit one wall while the opposite bulkhead was filled with a live-feed visual display from the transport's scanners and the strategic network.

The hololith was centred on Milvian, a sprawling city that had burst past its curtain wall decades ago, creating a mishmash suburb of manufactories and habitation tenements encircling the perimeter defence towers and main garrison buildings. Large palaces of the planetary elite dominated the hill that rose inside the walls at the western edge, protected by four keeps overlooking the tilt bridge that spanned the river bisecting the city. Overflights by recon craft and orbital surveys had confirmed that all of the other crossings had been destroyed by the defenders.

Counter battery fire from macro-cannons and wall batteries was falling only a few kilometres away, so that the command council was conducted to a backdrop of continual shelling against the earthworks and trench lines thrown up over the last days by the Pioneers and their engines.

As Marcus spoke, sub-tribunes manipulated the display on the hololith, assigning formations and manoeuvres with blinking arrows and icons.

"The plan has not changed," the vice-caesari told his command council. "The taking of the city comprises four phases. The first has been completed already: the establishment of a siege line two kilometres from the outskirts of the

suburbs. Colonel Golade's guns and rockets of the Capricorn Thirteenth have pounded the inner defensive line. The curtain of fire laid down has held the main force of the traitors inside the central city, leaving the outskirts vulnerable. Led by their praefectors, the men of Therion will seize the outer city, ready for an assault on the walls, clearing the streets and buildings for the tanks and Titans that will form a spearhead for the main attack."

Marcus paused as a flashing blue dome appeared on the hololith.

"All was well, we thought, but the earlier attack met something we have not encountered before. A force screen shields the approaches to the city wall, capable of turning aside shells and lasers, ripping into living flesh with great sprays of energy. The men call it the "lightning field" and it stopped them in their tracks.

"The lightning field is the greatest obstacle, but once it falls," and Marcus was confident that it would fall once they located the generators and disabled them, "the inner city districts on either side of the river form the final two objectives. The orbital defence weapons inside the hill keep will be silenced and the Raven Guard can launch their drop attack on the fortifications beyond the city."

"Orbital support?"

The question was asked by General Kayhil of the Pioneers, a short, wiry man in his later years dressed in nondescript camouflage fatigues.

"Not until we silence the defences," replied Marcus. "We cannot risk any ships in low orbit and any other strikes would be too inaccurate. We need precision strikes to remove the lightning field. Once we have taken out the energy screen we will have air support, but the objective is to take the city, not level it."

The vice-caesari waited to see if there were any other questions from the assembled officers. At the back of his mind he could still feel the hot breath of the beast on his skin and the sting of its fangs piercing his flesh. He tried to ignore the sensation but the latest dream had been more vivid than before, leaving Marcus in a state of deep unease. He reviewed the holo-schematic once more, seeking any area of vulnerability.

His gaze settled upon the small town of Lavlin, four kilometres to the west along the main axis of advance. It had been hit heavily by the Capricorn Thirteenth and an orbital attack in the previous days, and a sweep by the Pioneers had confirmed it was clear of enemies, but now Marcus's eye was drawn to it

"We are sure that the flank at Lavlin is secure?" he asked Kayhil.

"No enemy troops there twelve hours ago," the general said with a shrug. "We

could perform another reconnaissance sweep into the ruins, but that would take time; I cannot spare men from the main attack.”

Marcus considered his options, stroking his freshly shaven chin. For all that the plan seemed to be secure—as secure as any plan could be—he could not rid himself of the doubts caused by his nightmare and the retreat earlier that day.

“I will detail ten companies to act as a reserve, in case the flank is threatened.” He turned his attention to one of the screens, showing the face of Princeps Senioris Niadansal of the Legio Vindictus, who had joined the council from the bridge of his Warlord Titan.

“Please assign two Battle Titans to the reserve, princeps,” said Marcus.

“It seems a waste of resource,” the Titan commander replied brusquely, brow furrowing. “Ten companies and two Titans might be sorely missed during the main assault.”

“We can breach the lightning field without them,” Marcus countered. “They can move forwards and support the main attack once the flank is secure.”

“Do you have some intelligence we have not seen, vice-caesari?” asked Colonel Golade of the Capricorns.

“No intelligence,” Marcus said quickly. He took a moment, calming himself. “It is imperative that we advance on the city unmolested, that is all. Better to be sure than regretful.”

“Perhaps you are being overly cautious, vice-caesari,” suggested Golade. “Casualties are an inevitable consequence of war.”

Valerius bit back a reply, thinking that the Capricorns were not in the assault force, safe behind siege lines located kilometres from the city. Instead, he simply grunted and shrugged.

“Cautious, yes, but not overly so, colonel,” Marcus said evenly, keeping his temper in check. Golade did not know what Marcus felt deep inside and could not be blamed for his doubts.

“Who is to command the reserve?” asked Antonius. Dressed in the colourful uniform of the Therions, complete with the red sash of office across his breastplate, the praefector reminded Marcus of himself a few years ago when he had been bringing planets to compliance. More than two years of war against the traitors had not marred Antonius’s optimism. Marcus envied his younger brother’s hopefulness, but after seeing what had happened at Isstvan and experiencing the treachery of Horus first-hand, Marcus had given up any thought of ultimate victory and simply accepted each battle as it came.

“You will,” Marcus replied. There was nobody he trusted more and the

presence of the *Iron General* was not essential to the main assault. “I will send details of the detachment, six infantry companies, four armoured, before you take your shuttle back to the *Iron General*.”

Antonius accepted the responsibility with a nod, a curious look in his eyes. At first Marcus thought he saw suspicion in the expressions of the others, but realised it was his paranoia, the other officers were dubious of the sudden change of plan but nothing more.

“Any other considerations we have not covered?” Marcus asked, changing the subject. The assembled council offered no further comments or questions in the brief pause. “Good. Golade’s bombardment commences in thirty minutes. We attack in forty-five.”

The bridge of the *Contemptuous* buzzed with comm-net feeds and the vox-chatter of Marcus’s subordinates. Every minute or so the main cannon fired, causing the Capitol Imperialis to shudder, the deafening boom muffled by audio dampeners.

Marcus concentrated on the main display, which had been divided into seven sub-screens showing the battle-telemetry across the five-kilometre-long front. One display was hooked into a live-feed from the recon craft in the upper atmosphere above the city, showing the pulverised defences below. The fire of the Capricorns continued to rain down, shells and missiles concentrating on the pillboxes and weapons batteries.

Five more were schematics of the Pioneers’ and Therions’ advance into the outskirts of Milvian. Infantry brigades moved swiftly from building to building, covered by Warhound Titans of the Legio Vindictus. Progress was swift, and it seemed the bulk of the enemy had been withdrawn to the wall as Marcus had expected. Even so, the attack was methodical and thorough, leaving nothing to fortune.

A kilometre behind the infantry came the tanks and assault guns of Therion and Capricorn. In long columns they crawled forwards along the main boulevards and avenues, accompanied by more infantry to ensure they were not ambushed.

The remaining screen was a pict-feed around the headquarters transport, the vista of smoke-shrouded streets slightly blurred by the six banks of void shields protecting the massive command vehicle. A flicker of las-fire, blossoms of explosions and columns of smoke painted the scene. The blur of artillery sped across the cloudy sky and plumes of dust from collapsing buildings billowed

along streets. From a across the comm, a constant background to innumerably reports and conversations, the chatter and whine of small, arms fire was punctuated by louder detonations, men and women exchanged terse reports, swore and cursed, reeled off target grids and barked the names of subordinates.

It felt quite distant, a step removed from Marcus as he listened and watched. He would catch a snippet of a sergeant berating his squad for falling back and then the sonorous chant of a Mechanicum servitor churning out scan vectors, broken by the crackle of static and hiss of cipher dampening. There were shouts, cries of pain, and on the screens tiny symbols would flash or disappear as the battle ebbed and flowed. Minuscule markings wormed their way along back alleys and were baulked at enemy-held junctions. Arrows of projected advances, triangles of tertiary objectives seized and circles denoting cannon fire zones covered the screens in a seemingly anarchic pattern.

Marcus did not try to comprehend it all. Now and then he would ask for clarification from one of his tribunes, but it was not his part to manage every detail of the conflict. His eye was on the broad sweep, and in this regard all was progressing as he had hoped.

Now and then his attention was drawn to the last subscreen, over which scrolled the casualty listing of the eighteen phalanxes of the Therions. Two thousand and thirty men had fallen in the first attack—not all of them dead—but the rate of loss had slowed as the army made progress past the outer line of defenders.

Four kilometres behind and three kilometres to the west, on the right flank of the advance, the *Iron General* and attending companies waited for the command to attack. The assault had begun an hour ago and there was no sign of threat from Lavlin, but Marcus was not yet ready to shake off his misgivings and commit the reserve.

The *Contemptuous* supported the main attack, ploughing along the main thoroughfare of Milvian towards the outer limits of the lightning field. The defensive screen had not been tested against the void shields of a Titan or Capitol Imperialis and Marcus had determined the super-fortress was the best means of destroying one of the generators. Once a breach was made in the field's coverage other forces would target the rest of the generators.

There was more to Marcus leading the attack than simple pragmatism. After the repulse of his earlier assault he wanted to prove to his men, and more importantly to Lord Corax, that he and his Therions could be relied upon. When

they had been founded they had served the Emperor himself and the primarch of the Raven Guard deserved no lesser service.

The *Contemptuous* ground forwards, pulverising deserted groundcars and abandoned tanks that lay in the command fortress's path. The batteries on both flanks and the main cannon were unleashing their fire into the surrounding city blocks, levelling everything within a few hundred metres. The shells of the defenders detonated around the advancing behemoth. Now and then a direct hit would shimmer across the void shields, engulfing the *Contemptuous* in a blazing aura of purple and gold.

In the wake of the gargantuan engine, Therion tanks and infantry waited to pour forwards to exploit any breakthrough.

Marcus knew that the battle was at its hinge-point, with the success or failure of the entire invasion in the balance of the next hour. Though the advance through the outer city had been swift, the traitors had been wise to marshal their resources inside the lightning field and the attack had almost ground to a standstill. There were numerous requests from Marcus's subordinates to commit the reserve; the added firepower of the Titans and companies were in demand all across the front.

"Generator site within range, vice-caesari," reported one of the tribunes.

"Target main weapon systems, fire for full effect."

As the order left Marcus's lips another tribune blurted out a warning from his position at the sensor panels.

"Enemy Warlord Titan, eight hundred metres, sector four, targeting us." A sub-screen blurred and brought up an image of the traitor war engine, its outline hazy beyond its void shields. "Shall we redirect fire?"

"Negative," snapped Marcus. "Concentrate all weapons on the field generator. Our void shields can weather the enemy fire. Our Titans will respond."

The *Contemptuous* shook as it unleashed a full barrage from its cannons and heavy weapons. Half a kilometre ahead a building exploded into a storm as the lightning field detonated, sending rockcrete and molten metal hundreds of metres into the air amongst arcing shafts of energy.

A triumphant shout across the command deck was silenced by a call from the sensorium tribune.

"Warp missile, vice-caesari!"

The sub-screen zoomed in on one of the traitor Titan's carapace weapon hard points. A missile ten metres long launched in a plume of blue fire. It covered the first hundred metres in seconds before its miniature warp engine activated. The

missile disappeared for a moment, leaving a contrail of wavering white-and-green warp energy. A second later it reappeared, just two hundred metres from the *Contemptuous*.

“Brace for impact!” roared Valerius as the incoming ordnance skipped into the warp again.

The vice-caesari grabbed hold of the command console as the warp missile appeared inside the Capitol Imperialis void shields and detonated. Marcus was flung to the deck as the *Contemptuous* rocked on its tracks, teetering for a few long moments before crashing back onto the road.

Warning sirens blared, deafening Marcus as he pushed himself to his feet. Blood streamed down his face from a cut on his brow. He wiped it away with the frocked sleeve of his shirt.

“Damage control. Return fire. Is the field down yet?”

“No, vice-caesari,” said one of the tribunes. “Wait... I think it’s... Yes, it’s down!”

“Shall we commit the reserves?” asked another.

Marcus was on the verge of complying, knowing that any significant delay risked the enemy recovering from the lightning field’s failure, delaying the assault on the anti-orbital guns. His men and their allies were dying in their hundreds to push on but their deaths would be for nothing if the batteries on the far side were not secured by midday.

He was about to contact Antonius when his personal comm-link beeped. To Marcus’s surprise, it was his brother.

“Vice-caesari, we are detecting movement through the ruins of Lavlin. They are broadcasting Raven Guard identifiers and are requesting passage through the line.”

“Are you sure, Antonius?” Marcus could barely concentrate amongst the blaring of the klaxons, the barked reports of his tribunes and the throbbing from the wound on his face. “I have had no report from the primarch or his commanders of more forces operating in this area.”

“Comm-checks and sensor sweeps confirm a sizeable force of warriors and vehicles moving on our position. Perhaps there has been a change of plan?”

Marcus was taken aback by the news. While it was possible more of the Raven Guard’s army auxiliaries were joining the battle—several were spread across the planet fighting independently in line with Corax’s strategy—it stretched credulity to think that he would not be informed of their presence on his battle front.

“You are sure they are transmitting the appropriate call signs and codes?”

“They are Raven Guard signals, vice-caesari. A few days old, but they clear our protocol servitors.”

The vision of the many-headed serpent fluttered through Marcus’s thoughts and his gut writhed. It was more than coincidence, it had to be.

“The signals are false, Antonius. Open fire.”

“Brother? You want us to fire on allies? Have you gone mad?”

Marcus considered the accusation for a moment, and drew no conclusion one way or the other. Perhaps he was mad, but perhaps not. If the arriving force were enemies they would have a clear attack into the rear of the Therions. The whole force would have to be pulled back to counter them. Though Marcus was not sure of his sanity, his instincts were screaming at him to be aware of deception. The primarch himself had given strict orders concerning comms security since the crisis at Ravendelve. Marcus was well within his authority.

“Open fire on approaching forces. Traitors have breached our protocols. This is an enemy attack!”

“Marcus...”

“Open fire, or I will have you removed from command!”

The comm went silent. Marcus waited nervously, fidgeting with the red sash across his chest, yet there was no doubt in his mind he had done the right thing. He watched as the enemy Titan’s void shields flared and failed under the pounding of the main cannon and converging fire from friendly Titans arriving from all directions.

Nearly three minutes trickled past, during which Marcus was expecting to receive an irate communication from Branne, or perhaps even Lord Corax himself. He wiped the sweat from his face with the cuff of his jacket and stared at the screens, forcing himself to observe the ongoing battle.

“Vice-caesari, reports of fighting on the western flank.” One of the tribunes delivered the message breathlessly, face reddened with shock. “Praefector Antonius has engaged an enemy force on the outskirts of Lavlin. Reserve phalanx and Titans are moving forwards to engage.”

“I understand.” Marcus forced himself to remain calm. He let out a long breath and spoke in a measured tone. “Send word to all commanders. Focus on the assault. The threat is being dealt with. Any confirmation on the identity of the enemy?”

“Nothing confirmed, vice-caesari, but initial visual reports indicate army units bearing the colours of the Alpha Legion.”

Marcus nodded, the news unsurprising. Ever since their attempt to destroy the Raven Guard gene-seed two years earlier, Alpha Legion warriors and operatives had been dogging the primarch's warriors, though Marcus had not faced them directly.

"Send word to Legion command. Inform them that security protocols have been compromised. Recommend immediate evaluation of all forces and plans."

The comm beeped again in his ear.

"By the Emperor, brother, why did you not tell us you suspected such an attack?" asked Antonius.

What could Marcus say? None save for Pelon knew about the dream, and Marcus was not about to broadcast the fact to the entire army.

"Simply prudence, brother, nothing more. Do you need additional forces?"

"No, vice-caesari. The Titans and tanks are pushing them back already. Prudence be praised, eh?"

"Something like that."

Weary but victorious, Marcus flopped onto his bed. It was past midnight and there were still forces fighting in the city but he could leave the mopping-up to the others. He had received word from Branne that the drop on the enemy bunker complex had been a complete success. Four thousand enemy had been killed and a number of traitor commanders had been captured, including a single Alpha Legionnaire who had been coordinating the defence. The Raven Guard commander had been earnest in his praise of Marcus and the efforts of his army and had, thankfully, made no mention of Marcus's interception of the treacherous attack.

"Do you wish to undress, vice-caesari?"

Marcus had not noticed Pelon, who had been waiting patiently for his master's return. The attendant stood by the bed, hands held out to take Marcus's jacket. His arm was heavily bandaged and there were bumps on his hands. Marcus had heard reports of Pelon's heroic actions in saving several crewmen from a fire on the weapons decks, and had commended him in his reports to the primarch. He sat up and shrugged off his coat.

"A moment, Pelon," he said as the manservant turned towards the wardrobe.

"Master?"

"Those scribblings you had... What did you do with them?"

"I still have them, vice-caesari." Pelon looked crestfallen. "Sorry, did you wish me to dispose of them?"

“No, not yet,” Marcus said quietly. He thought of the day’s events and knew that he had to find hope from somewhere. He could not continue simply fighting each battle as it came. The emptiness inside would consume him even if the enemy did not kill him. The lightning field, the warp missile and, most of all, the Alpha Legion preyed on his thoughts. “Let me see them.”

Pelon delved into his pocket and fished out the sheaf of texts, passing them to Marcus after a moment’s pause. Fingers tugging at an earlobe, the vice-caesari started to read.

*“Love the Emperor for He is the salvation of Mankind. Obey His words for He will lead you into the light of the future. Heed His wisdom for He will protect you from evil. Whisper his prayers with devotion for they will save your soul. Honour His servants for they speak in His voice. Tremble before His majesty for we all walk in His immortal shadow.”*





# OLD SCARS

A Brazen Minotaurs story

*George Mann*

**07.13 hrs**

“Tell me of Karos, Pradeus. I understand you have walked upon its surface once before.” Daed’s voice echoed around the chapel, deep and booming, like the low rumble of an oncoming storm.

Pradeus thought his own voice seemed thin and inadequate by comparison. He sucked his teeth—a nervous habit he’d developed in childhood and been unable to shake. “A long time ago, when the twin suns still burned, bright and bloody red in the sky. It was a lush planet, covered in vast savannahs and soaring Imperial cities. Now it is a dead world, captain. Little can survive its harsh climate. What human population there is ekes out a paltry existence in vast thermal hives, a warren of tunnels and sunken conurbations deep below ground.”

“Why?” asked Daed. He placed his gleaming bronze vambrace upon the table beside its twin, flexing his shoulders. A thick, ropey scar described a snake across his back, its head upon his right shoulder, its body curling down across his spine so that the thin tip of its tail rested just above his left hip. The flesh was purple and puckered where it had healed imperfectly, the damaged halves of the wound reforming in an uneasy truce.

Pradeus was glad the captain could not see the expression of awe on his face. The weapon that had inflicted such a grave wound must have been terrible indeed; the weapon’s bearer even more so. “Why?” he echoed.

“Yes. I want to understand. Why do the humans continue to inhabit such a blighted world?”

Pradeus nodded, although the gesture was redundant; Daed continued to

remove his armour, his back to the Chapter serf. “The planet is nothing but a shadow of what it was, but once it was glorious. Rich mines seamed with precious metals and ores, spired cities stretching as far as the eye could see, all presided over by the Ecclesiarchy, high in their fortress-monastery. Now the people, I believe, cling to that former greatness, refusing to give up.”

“I admire their tenacity,” said Daed, flexing his shoulders. His thick, braided hair hung down between his shoulders. “So the surface is utterly inhospitable?”

“Karos’s suns have grown pale and thin, with only the merest hint of warmth ever shining upon the surface. The entire world is now encased in a wintry glove of ammonia ice, which shrouds the ruins of the old cities. The people have been driven below ground, making what they can of the ancient mining tunnels that riddle the rocky crust beneath the ice.” Pradeus glanced over his shoulder, looking to the door, where he had sensed movement. He saw nothing.

“And now the greenskins have arrived,” said Daed, darkly.

“Yes, captain, although for what purpose, I do not know.”

“Murder, pillaging, the sating of their foul appetites... They are not so difficult to understand,” said Daed.

“You have fought them before?” ventured Pradeus.

Daed laughed. “I have spilled their stinking blood on a hundred worlds, Pradeus, and will do so on a hundred more.” He stooped to remove a leg brace and the scar on his back twisted and flushed.

“And they have spilled yours, captain, lest you forget.” The newcomer’s voice echoed from the doorway, close to where Pradeus had sensed movement just a few moments before. He turned to see Theseon, the Chief Librarian of the Brazen Minotaurs, standing in the open archway, resplendent in his azure armour. He glanced back at Daed, waiting to see his reaction.

Daed turned towards his battle-brother. “And I still bear the scars to prove it,” he said, levelly.

“Old scars,” said Theseon, walking into the room. “And yet they still trouble you.”

Daed removed his second leg brace, but kept his eyes fixed firmly on the Librarian. “Karos is an Imperial world. The Guard cannot weather the climate, and so the greenskins, impervious to the cold, run riot upon its surface. What would you have me do, Theseon?”

Theseon placed a gauntleted hand upon Daed’s shoulder. “Nothing but your duty, captain,” he said, and Pradeus could sense the statement was loaded with a meaning he could not understand.

Daed nodded. “Then we deploy within the hour. We shall liberate Karos from the xenos scum that have infected it.”

Theseon nodded but did not speak. He lowered his hand.

“Pradeus?”

“Yes, captain?” said Pradeus, stepping around the bulk of the Librarian so that his master could see him.

“My armour is still ingrained with the blood of traitors. See that it is cleaned and prepared for battle.”

Pradeus’s heart sank. *Within the hour?* “Yes, captain,” he said, trying to keep the apprehension from his voice.

“And Pradeus?”

Pradeus nodded.

“I want it to gleam as I fell the foul brutes with my axe. I want them to know the Brazen Minotaurs have arrived.” He turned and stalked from the room, dressed only in his parchment-coloured loincloth.

Theseon turned to look at Pradeus, his face impassive behind the faceplate of his helm. “You’d better get started,” he said, without a hint of irony.

\* \* \*

## **08.09 hrs**

The battle-barge *Pride of Tauron* disgorged its payload of Thunderhawks, Storm Eagles and Stormtalons into the upper atmosphere of Karos in muted silence, as if the orks below, so intent on subjugating the human population and seizing control of the underground hives, had not even considered looking to the skies above. If they were aware of the Space Marines’ presence, they did not show it. There was no bark of surface-to-air fire, no evidence of ork vessels hurriedly scrambling to launch. This, Daed considered, spoke of either their ignorance or their sheer, animalistic arrogance. Both would prove useful in their undoing.

From the viewing port of the command ship, the barge hung in space like a vast whale, attended by a school of tiny fish. As Daed watched, the flotilla of landing vessels banked and fanned out in unison, swimming down towards the planet, their engines burning. These, however, were the deadliest of fish: they harboured teeth and claws. The orks would be destroyed, and the planet cleansed—no matter the inhospitable nature of the climate or the ferocity of the xenos. There were, as Theseon had intimated, old scores to settle.

The Thunderhawk banked, sliding easily through the thin air. Daed reached for the stabilising bar above his head, holding firm as the vessel accelerated towards the planet.

He could hear nothing but the sharp whine of the engines, as if the sound itself filled his head, drowning out everything, muffling his very thoughts. He focused on the fact that soon he would once again be in the thick of battle, bloodying his axe on the fresh corpses of his enemy.

He glanced at Theseon, who sat immobile in webbing close by, his head bowed, his gauntleted hands folded upon his lap. Something was troubling the Librarian, and it was more than simple concern over Daed's order to deploy to the planet below. Daed decided he would speak with Theseon upon planetfall.

The Thunderhawk bucked suddenly and banked to the left, the engines stuttering as the pilot fought to maintain control. Daed maintained his grip on the stabilising bar as the vessel went into freefall, spiralling around as it dove nose-first towards the frozen planet, like water circling a drain.

He opened a vox-channel, shouting over the noise of the screeching engines. "Report!"

"We're under fire!" came the immediate reply from Caedus, the pilot. "We took a direct hit to the primary engine."

"Get this vessel under control, Caedus," replied Daed, firmly. He released his left hand from the bar, holding on with the right, and allowed himself to fall against the side of the ship, his power armour clanging loudly against the plasteel. He peered out of the viewing port, fighting the momentum as the Thunderhawk continued to spin. Bright tracer fire scratched at the sky, indiscriminately showering Daed's small flotilla as they emerged from the cover of the clouds. As he watched, one of the Stormtalons detonated in a shower of burning shards, while a second Thunderhawk streamed out of the heavens on a wild trajectory, trailing black, oily smoke.

So, the orks had woken up. Daed couldn't suppress a grin. They were going to have a fight on their hands.

The metal footplates buckled slightly beneath his feet, the plasteel screaming with the stress, and he wondered for a moment whether the vessel would maintain its integrity as they spun towards the ground. Then Daed felt the nose coming up once again, the ship levelling off. A quick glance out of the window told him they were only a few hundred metres from the ground: a pallid landscape punctuated with eccentric hulking shapes—the remains of an ancient city, now entirely encased in ice.

“We need to set down.” Caedus’s voice burred over the vox. “We’re losing altitude.”

“Then get us as close to the rendezvous point as you can,” replied Daed. Through the viewing port, he watched as his brothers broke through the clouds, dropping beneath the cover of the ruined city, picking their way through the valleys and channels formed by the ice. Around them, burning rain scattered across the white expanse, showering down in glittering fragments: the remains of the fallen, taken out by the ork batteries.

“Now we all have something to avenge,” said Theseon, quietly, from behind him.

### **10.34 hrs**

The rendezvous point was, it transpired, a ramshackle structure erected by the Guard in an attempt to raise a defensible position on the ice. It was on the outskirts of the frozen city, and Daed, Theseon, Caedus, Aramus and Throle had been forced to cover the last five kilometres on foot, running through the frozen streets, their helms fogging with crystallised moisture from the air. There was little evidence of the xenos here, other than the heaped remains of dead humans, dragged from their warrens and left to the vagaries of the extreme weather. Judging by the expressions on their frigid faces, many of them had still been alive when the ice and thin air had done its work.

The Guard’s stronghold had been spliced together from plasteel sheeting and chunks of masonry excavated from the ruins. As Daed drew closer he could make out the remains of at least two Baneblade tanks, too, shoring up the barricade. Steam curled from small venting pillars that had been sunk into the ice, and he could feel the vibrating whirr of machinery deep beneath his boots. There was no sign of any actual Guardsmen, leaving Daed to conclude that the bulk of the human forces were either dead, or cowering beneath the surface, drawing what heat and sustenance they still could from the planet’s core.

He was relieved to find some evidence of industry, however; the small Brazen Minotaurs contingent was out on the ice, working to strengthen the perimeter, unloading the transport vessels and unlashng the tanks and ground vehicles.

Daed thumbed his vox. “Sharus?”

“Captain? It’s about time...” came the response. “Much longer and there wouldn’t have been any greenskins left for you.”

Daed laughed for the first time that day. “Have you located the commander of

the human forces?”

“Yes, captain,” said Sharus. “In the sinkhole, over by the venting pillars. Lieutenant Ariseth is his name. He claims there are very few of them left, that the greenskins have slowly eroded their forces over recent months.”

“I do not doubt it,” said Daed. “The conditions favour the thick-skinned xenos. The humans are too weak to withstand the ice and the thin air of this dying world.”

“And yet we are here to protect them, all the same,” said Theseon.

“We will do what they cannot, in the name of the Emperor,” said Daed, firmly. “We will scorch these foul greenskins from the face of this world.”

“The auspex readings suggest the xenos are many in number, captain,” said Throle.

“Then it will be necessary to hit them hardest where the most damage will be done,” replied Daed. “To strike when they least expect it. In this I must take counsel from Lieutenant Ariseth, who knows the movements and proclivities of the enemy.”

## **11.42 hrs**

The underground warren was comprised of nothing but the lined tunnels of an old mine, filled with coiled cables and dim electric lumen-strips, which were strung up at intervals along the low ceiling. They cast a sickly, yellow pall upon proceedings as Daed was led purposefully deeper into the structure, towards the command centre where Lieutenant Ariseth awaited him. The walls and ceilings ran with melting ice as the thermal cables fought a constant battle with the encroaching planetary winter, corrosive ammonia gas seeping out into the stale atmosphere. He'd noticed on the way down that the humans hid their faces behind gas masks in order to survive.

Daed glanced from side to side as he walked, taking it all in. If this was representative of the manner in which the human population now lived, the invasion was barely worth the orks' trouble. Small chambers, many of them formed from passages that had been widened or simply collapsed together, branched off like satellites from the main tunnels, and in these Guardsmen trained, rested or simply sat around waiting to be given orders.

Ariseth was waiting in one such chamber, hunched over a hand-drawn map as if attempting to divine a new stratagem simply by staring at the contours of the ice fields. He looked up when Daed entered the room, and immediately got to his

feet. “Most welcome, Captain Daed,” he said, unable to suppress the nervousness in his voice.

Daed stared down at him, weighing him up. The man looked grizzled and worn down by his experiences. His face was mostly hidden behind a respirator, and the flesh around it was black and peeling from too much exposure to the cold. He was wrapped in bundled animal furs and wore a fur hat pulled down low over his brow. One of his eyes had been replaced by a mechanical equivalent, and it turned and whirred as it attempted to focus on the Brazen Minotaur now.

“Lieutenant,” said Daed, his voice echoing and hollow-sounding in the small room. “The Brazen Minotaurs are here to assist in the removal of the xenos infestation from Karos.”

Ariseth raised an eyebrow. “You make it sound as if we haven’t been trying to do that for months,” he said, a modicum of bitterness creeping into his tone.

Daed allowed him that. “You must tell me everything you know of the greenskins’ motives and strategies if we are to prove successful.”

“Gladly,” said Ariseth. “It’s as if the damn things are able to predict our every move, our every counterstrike. Whatever we do they are ready for us, and ready to hit back, hard, when we’re overextended and least prepared. We are few now, captain. Many thousands of us have been lost.”

Daed nodded. “And their goal?”

Ariseth shrugged. “Mayhem, destruction, cold-blooded murder... They seem only to relish the slaughter. They seize our vehicles and modify them, sending them back into battle, firing upon us with our own ammunition. They storm the hives, cutting the power to the thermal generators so that the populations freeze. They seem to find such things amusing. What’s more, they seem impervious to the damn cold.”

“Have they established a base, a stronghold?” said Daed. He’d seen readouts on the *Pride of Tauron* that suggested the ork army had been massing in one particular location, but Daed knew the knowledge of the men on the ground counted for ten of any such readouts.

“They have,” said Ariseth, with a reluctant sigh. “If you’ll return to the surface, it’s best if I show you.”

## **12.16 hrs**

In the distance he could make out a series of dark shapes, jutting out of the

tundra like black spurs.

“Venting towers,” said Ariseth, trembling with the cold, despite the thick layers of fur that rendered him almost unidentifiable.

Daed peered more closely at the distant structures, and could just make out faint trails of steam billowing from the crests of the towers. “Siphoning off the excess heat from the thermal hives?”

“Yes. They form a chain over three hundred kilometres long, puncturing the ice at regular intervals,” replied Ariseth.

“Highly defensible,” mused Daed, scanning the horizons. The towering shapes loomed away into the distance.

“I’m afraid the orks have already established that,” said Ariseth, reluctantly. “They’re using the towers as staging posts, defending them like watchtowers or bastions. That one,” he pointed with a gloved hand to one of the towers immediately opposite them, around thirty kilometres distant, “is their command post. That’s where their warlord has established his base.”

“Then that should be our target,” said Daed, bristling. His hand closed unconsciously on the haft of his axe.

“There are hundreds of the beasts between us and that tower, captain, if not more. We don’t have the men or the artillery to take it.”

Daed grinned. “We have the will of the Emperor. That will be enough.”

“I hope so, captain. For all our sakes,” said Ariseth, although it was clear from his tone that he thought it would not.

“Do you know what the greenskins call their warlord?” asked Daed.

“I believe it is known amongst its kin as Grakka,” came the response.

Daed’s grip tightened on the haft of his axe. “Grakka?” he echoed. He felt the beating of his hearts quicken, the surge of unwanted memories from Praxis, of lying face down in the mud, his spine damaged, the flesh and muscle of his back carved into ribbons by the beast’s blade. And of the yellow-tusked, black-eyed face of the creature looming over him, its rancid breath foul and warm on his face.

“Yes, sir,” said Ariseth. “Have you heard the name before?”

“I have,” growled Daed, quietly. “I have.”

**15.27 hrs**

“The towers are enormous vents,” said Daed, “slowly siphoning off the excess heat from the underground hives.”

“And the greenskins are using them as defensive positions?” asked Aramus.

“Indeed. One of them represents their command post. That’s where Grakka is skulking,” said Daed, gritting his teeth. Even now he could visualise the moment when he might see that greenskin’s face again, how he might cleave its head from its shoulders with a sweep of his axe. The five of them—his veteran squad—stood outside on the ice in the waning light, surveying the horizon.

“You wish to mount a head-on attack on this command post?” said Caedus, incredulous. “Even for you, captain, that’s an audacious move.”

“I see no other way,” said Daed resolutely. “According to the data provided by Lieutenant Ariseth, the greenskins outnumber us fifty to one. The Guard are half frozen and will be of no use to us on the open field of battle. Even with the Dreadnoughts and the Land Raiders we are badly outnumbered, and the greenskins have had months to learn the lay of the land and mount their defences. We would not be well served by meeting them on the tundra, as hungry as my axe is to cleave their brutish skulls.”

“But surely, captain, we risk as much by mounting an assault on their stronghold?” said Throle. “The command position will be heavily defended, and it will prove difficult to lay siege to such an edifice when there are thousands of greenskins between us and the base of the tower.”

“An aerial assault. Ariseth argues that the xenos believe the venting towers to be a series of abandoned bastions. They are not aware of the true function of the structures. A well-placed attack could collapse the vents, causing the pressure to build up very quickly,” said Daed, glancing at Theseon, who was standing to one side of the small group, staring out across the icy plain.

“And the ensuing explosion would topple the tower, killing all of the greenskins within,” concluded Caedus. “It might work.”

Daed nodded. “More than that, the build up of pressure could cause a chain reaction, causing the neighbouring towers to blow in concert, taking out the entire xenos force.”

“It’s too dangerous,” said Aramus. “We’ve little chance of being able to strike with such accuracy, particularly if we are harried by the enemy as we close in. We know they have surface-to-air capabilities at the very least.”

“It’s our only option,” replied Daed, as if that were the end of the matter.

“What of the enemy’s ability to predict the movements of the Guard? Do they have a spy amongst the humans?” said Caedus.

Daed shook his head. “Mere superstition. There is nothing to it. It is simply that Grakka understands the strategies of the Imperial Guard, as he has

encountered them so many times before. These humans rely solely on their training. They cannot flex. They have forgotten how to surprise the enemy.”

“Forgive me, captain, but we are all aware of what happened on Praxis. I cannot blame you for seeking to have your revenge upon the beast that bested you there—indeed, I would gladly join you in such a quest—but can you be sure that you are not allowing the matter to colour your judgement?” Throle looked to the others for support. “I fear Aramus is correct. Our chances of victory are slim.”

Daed fixed Throle with a firm stare. “I will take those odds, Throle, and we will do our duty. Grakka has burned entire worlds—*Imperial* worlds—and we do the Emperor’s bidding when we set out to destroy him. We do this to avenge the dead, and to prevent the spread of his foul greenskins any further. My experience of Grakka has taught me one thing: that he must be stopped. If I seek vengeance, it is for the many who have tasted his axe and not survived, as well as for myself. For our fallen brothers.”

Throle nodded. “As you command, captain.”

“For Tauron!” bellowed Caedus.

“For Tauron!” echoed the others, save for Theseon, who remained silent, studying Daed from afar.

## 17.32 hrs

“You are distracted, Theseon. Something troubles you.”

Theseon raised his head to look up at Daed, who towered over him, resplendent in his bronze armour, power axe clutched tightly in his fist, the pelt of a black Tauronic lion draped over his shoulders.

“I am tired, captain. I sense... another mind. A confused mind. It is watchful. It saps my strength.”

“Another psyker?” asked Daed, his voice low.

Theseon nodded. “A xenos.”

“The truth of the matter becomes clear to me, Theseon. If Grakka is aided by a psyker, then it explains how he has so far been able to predict the movements of the Guard. We must strike soon, before he has chance to gather his forces in preparation for our attack.”

“I advise caution, captain. You must not allow your judgement to become clouded by thoughts of personal vendetta,” said Theseon. “We are not here simply to settle a score, but to liberate an Imperial world.”

“I know that, Librarian,” spat Daed, turning to glance at Throle, who had entered the small underground chamber while Theseon had been talking.

“Theseon speaks sense, captain. If the greenskins are able to anticipate our strategies, then we might look to uncover new ways to surprise them. Perhaps the assault on the venting tower has already been compromised.”

“No,” said Daed. “The attack must go ahead as planned. It is our best chance to neutralise the threat. If we can take out their command post, we might yet ignite a chain reaction that will envelop their entire force. I see no alternative.”

“But captain—” began Throle.

“The captain is right, Throle,” interrupted Theseon. “The assault on the tower must go ahead as planned.”

“And the psyker?” asked Throle, clearly restraining himself.

“I shall see to the psyker,” said Theseon.

“Very well,” said Daed. “I shall instruct the others to prepare for the attack.” He turned and strode from the room, ducking his head beneath the low lintel.

Theseon turned to Throle, holding up a hand until the sound of the captain’s footsteps had died away down the passage. “Here is what we must do...” he said, quietly.

## **19.46 hrs**

The tension in the repaired Thunderhawk was palpable as it roared above the ice-shrouded ruins. The five Brazen Minotaurs sat in silence, lashed to their webbing. The Thunderhawk was flanked by two Storm Eagles and a battery of Stormtalons, which would work to draw fire away from the command ship as they approached the venting tower, engaging the greenskins whilst Daed set about taking out the vents themselves.

They had left the ground vehicles and a second Thunderhawk posted to the ramshackle base of the Guardsmen. If the mission was successful, they would be needed to help mop up any remaining xenos; if the mission failed... Well, they would be needed to protect the remaining humans from the tide of alien beasts that would soon follow. Daed was aware of the risks.

“Five kilometres and counting,” said Caedus from the pilot’s pit. “And here comes the first response.”

The Thunderhawk took a sudden evasive manoeuvre, dipping low to avoid artillery fire from below. The orks, it seemed, were ready for them.

“Return fire,” ordered Daed, and Throle set the battlecannons ablaze, churning

up the ice in long furrows ahead of them. Through the viewing port, Daed could see the Storm Eagles doing the same, unleashing a barrage on the massed ranks of orks far below.

Daed consulted his auspex. "Something is wrong. The orks are pulling back. They have amassed around the command tower."

He was interrupted by the bark of heavy surface-to-air fire and the sound of a nearby Stormtalon detonating. Caedus banked sharply, and then levelled again, attempting to avoid becoming the weapon's next target.

"Librarian!" Daed growled. "You said you would see to the alien psyker. But now this," he turned the display of his auspex to present the screen to Theseon, who sat opposite him, silently regarding his captain. "The xenos are aware of our attack. They have formed a defensive perimeter around the tower. There must be thousands of them..." He trailed off, accusation in his tone.

"Two kilometres," came the report from Caedus.

"We'll never get through such a barrier," said Daed, angrily. "We'll have to turn back, remount our attack."

"Now, Caedus!" called Theseon, and in response the Thunderhawk dipped and turned sharply to the left. Daed, glancing out of the viewing port, saw that the other vessels were following suit, pulling away from the target.

"What in the name of the Emperor?"

"Trust me, captain," said Theseon. "This is how I will see to the psyker."

The chatter of the ork weapons stuttered and died as the Thunderhawk shot away at speed. "I do not know what game you are playing, Librarian, but I expect answers," said Daed, a warning note in his voice.

"Everything will become clear in a moment, captain," replied Theseon, distracted, as he leaned forward, straining in his webbing in order to see out of the forward viewing ports. "There!" he said, triumphantly. "The second tower. That is our target, Throle. Collapse those vents."

The battlecannons burst to life once again, chewing holes in the plasteel flank of the tower as Caedus brought the Thunderhawk around in a wide arc. Daed watched as the venting shafts shattered and collapsed in upon themselves in a cloud of steam, dust and debris.

The Thunderhawk banked again, pulling up higher and away from the tower.

"It should take only a few moments..." said Theseon.

The first sign of the coming eruption came in the form of a deep rumble that grew slowly until it reached fever pitch. As Daed watched, the ice around the tower began to fracture, opening large rents in the bedrock beneath. Steam

hissed from the tectonic wounds, gushing forth as the pressure attempted to find a way out and was instead forced along through the underground channels of the old thermal hive, once inhabited by humans, and now the domain of the orks.

Caedus followed the fracturing landmass as it raced across the landscape, tracking it towards the gathered mob of unsuspecting xenos. By now the Thunderhawk was too high to be able to see clearly how the greenskins were reacting, but Daed knew they would be attempting to scatter.

And then, the mounting pressure finally found its outlet—the second venting tower. The command post of the ork warlord, Grakka.

The tower detonated in a blossom of steam and light, erupting like a thunderclap. Debris billowed into the air as the very ground around the orks began to subside, the foundations of the tower collapsing, dragging the gathered xenos down into the depths of the fractured hive, cooking them alive in the gushing steam or crushing them beneath the shattered bedrock.

“It is done,” said Theseon, as the Thunderhawk swept over the ruins of the ork invasion force. “Return us to the base, Caedus.”

Daed stared angrily out of the viewing port as the Thunderhawk came about, offering him his last view of the ruination they had caused below.

## **21.06 hrs**

Almost as soon as they disembarked from the Thunderhawk, Daed turned on Theseon. “You disobeyed a direct order,” he barked. “Explain yourself, Librarian.”

Theseon nodded calmly, and laid a hand upon the captain’s pauldron. “Your plan was sound, captain. I knew that destroying the venting tower would work, and the chain reaction was likely. Yet the greenskin psyker... Your anger was like a beacon to him, drawing him in. Your mind was open to him. Grakka knew you were here, and that you would come for him. His forces massed in defence around his command post as a consequence, waiting for our attack.”

“It was your duty to tell me,” said Daed. His hands were bunched into fists as he attempted to contain his anger.

Theseon shook his head. “It was imperative that I did not. Doing so would have telegraphed our intentions to the enemy. You had to continue to believe that our goal was the command tower. It was the only way for the misdirection to work. We drew them away from the second tower, safe in the knowledge that the eruption caused by our attack would be enough to destroy the command post

too.”

“I do not approve of your subterfuge,” said Daed, levelly. “Although I grant you, Theseon—your audacity matches only my own. The beast is dead, and Karos is liberated.”

“And old scars are finally healed,” said Theseon.

Daed was silent for a moment. “You did what was necessary, in the name of the Emperor. We shall speak no more of the matter.”

Theseon nodded. “I see the ground troops are already deployed, mopping up the last of the enemy. Will you join them?”

Daed grinned. “My axe hungers for xenos blood,” he said.

“Then lend them your strength, captain,” said Theseon. “When you return from the field of battle, we must speak. There is a storm gathering in the Sargassian Reach, close to this system. Traitors mass.”

“Very well,” said Daed, gravely. “It seems there may yet be even older scores to settle.”

“Indeed,” replied Theseon, but Daed had already turned away, hefting his axe high above his head.

“For Tauron!” called Theseon.

“For Tauron!” echoed Daed, disappearing into the maelstrom of churned ice and fog.

Theseon looked to the skies: a clear, dark blanket, peppered with scattered diamonds. “Soon, Gideous Krall. Soon I shall come for you.”



— TIME OF LEGENDS —

# THE GREAT MAW

A Tale of the Ogre Kingdoms  
*L J Goulding*



Gentlemen, councillors, and esteemed professors of the Universities of Nuln, we gather here today at the behest of our noble Elector Countess and chancellor herself—the greatest academic minds of our time, alike in dignity and united in purpose. This symposium will deliberate upon the evidence and testimonials to be presented by our speakers, so that we might advise her upon the best course of action in the current plight. I speak, of course, of the depredations of the nomad-brute kingdoms of the east: the transient and ravenous ogres.

The recent collapse of our long-standing mercenary arrangement with the ‘Bonecruncher’ tribe has resulted in an escalation of hostilities in the eastern provinces. It is said, amongst other ill tidings, that the ogre champion known as Gurthodd now controls the Old Dwarf Road out from Averland, and that his thugs are demanding ever-greater tolls and taxes from the villages thereabouts.

Under the terms of the old arrangement, many Bonecruncher warriors were under the command of the... rather *forthright* Baron Helmut von Streissen. Ever known to speak his mind, he was reportedly unenamoured by the prospect of enduring yet another campaign season in the company of the ogre mercenaries. We are still unsure of the exact remark to which Gurthodd took offence, but given that he has threatened—nay, promised—to send word to yet more of his cousins in the Red Fist and Eyebiter tribes for reinforcements, we can assume that the late baron’s conduct on that day constituted a most regrettable breach of diplomacy. That is to say, a *fairly major* cultural misunderstanding which looks set to precipitate a new war between ogres and men, within the borders of the Empire itself.

It falls to us, my wise and learned friends, to decide if an agreeable accord can be reached before we arrive at that point. As ever, those less enlightened souls

within the military would cite the glory of Sigmar and grind our already overstretched armies against whatever forces the ogres might bring to bear against us.

We shall hear testimony from some of the baron's camp officials in due course, but it seems most prudent that we examine our own understanding of the ogres' culture and traditions if we are to pass judgment upon the words and actions of the man himself, may Morr keep his good soul!

As you are all doubtless aware, the ogres maintain no written history, no scrolls or archives that we might consult in pursuit of such knowledge. Rather, theirs is an oral tradition—and I hesitate to use the word 'rich'—whereby the cultural legacy is passed down from generation to generation in gruff fireside tales, or by their brutish shamans over the near-constant ritual feasting in which the tribes indulge.

In fact, the only known document relating to the genesis of the ogre race is the infamous and highly suspect treatise *Saga of the World-mouth*, by the travelling Marienburg trader Yohan the Honest. Supposedly derived from his own translation of the pictographs he claims to have found daubed in caves high above the Vale of Woe, this narrow and thoroughly subjective view has nonetheless formed the basis of our understanding for centuries.

Now, some of you may have heard the name of Anya Nitikin, and...

No. No sir, and I would thank you not to take that tone with me. True enough, she is a daughter of the northern lands, yet her academic work is of outstanding quality—enough to gain tenure at your vaunted Ochsenbrücke College, I might add! I have been engaged in correspondence with her for almost a decade, and at my request she has sent me her own notes upon the subject of the ogres' bleak and apocalyptic creed. It was some years ago that she travelled east in a great caravan attended by mercenary guards, many of them ogres; being fluent in their tongue, during the journey she was able to learn a great deal about their oldest customs and traditions.

If I may, I should like to read her drafted account to you all now, as I believe it throws astonishing new light upon the whole matter and may prove invaluable in our deliberations still to come.

She has named it, simply, *The Children of the Maw*.

The ogres were not always as they are now. It may come as a surprise to many that they were once a comparatively civil and prosperous race. In an age almost lost to legend, they dwelt as nomads upon the fertile plains in the east and traded

peaceably with their neighbours for thousands of years. In exchange for the secrets of fire and animal husbandry, the most gregarious ogre-kin pledged their loyalties to the Celestial Dragon Emperor of Cathay and fought many wars on his behalf, and their fearsome reputation spread far across the land.

One of the greatest ogre-kin warleaders was Rothyogg, chieftain of the Lass'ar. His warriors were fierce and brutal, and unrivalled upon the field of battle. Rothyogg had inherited leadership of the tribe from his father, and he from his father, and he from of old. It was naturally assumed that when the chieftain's fighting days were over, his firstborn son, Groth, would don the mantle and lead the Lass'ar to further glories. From the day he was whelped, he seemed destined for greatness.

This was not to be. At least, not in the way anyone had expected.

As he grew, Groth had become an oddity among the tribes. Some said that he had listened to the cryptic riddles of the Dragon Emperor's fighting monks, and others that he had simply stared for too long into the campfire. Nonetheless, his words were strange and unsettling to his father's warriors, and he spoke often. Though too dull-witted to adopt even the most simple cuneiform, he knew every one of the old tales by heart—the parables of Li and Tsang and the grim prophecies of the Tengu were known to be among his favourites. As he grew, he showed little interest in the practicalities of war and tribal politics, but took instead to trying to educate his less philosophically-minded kin in the wisdom of the ancients.

The Emperor's paymasters, who were always to be found in the mercenary trains, joked that Groth was an ogre who had dreamed that he was a man. Rothyogg was enraged by this perceived insult, but in despair he left his wayward son to his fanciful storytelling.

Over time, other youths had begun to compete for the chieftain's attention, keen to prove themselves to him in battle and claim presumptive leadership of the tribe. Groth remained distant, lacking the brawn or prowess to meet the frequent challenges that they would bellow at him, only half in jest. It was not until the end of that last, fateful summer that his true strength was to be revealed.

Rothyogg's mercenary band marched back from the far north—the War of the Bitter Lotus had been hard-fought, and the Lass'ar were weary yet victorious. They had crushed the enemies of their wealthy master, and Rothyogg now dreamed of gold and swiving; of a summer spent and a winter earned.

But the land was parched. The rice-fields were dry, and the yak herds had moved on in search of better grazing. With their rations dwindling on the long,

hot march, the ogres took what they could from the peasants that they passed, citing the glory of the Grand Imperial Army and claiming the spoils of war even out on the peaceful steppes.

When finally they came upon their old encampment, no cook-fires burned and the corrals were empty—not a single man, ogre or beast remained, save for the rangy form of Groth who stood wrapped in a tattered Cathayan robe against the dusty wind. He watched the returning warriors as they stomped down the hillside, their anger rising at the realisation that the Emperor’s armourers and paymasters had abandoned them. Rothyogg gritted his teeth, knowing that his son was somehow to blame.

Groth would not speak with his father’s lieutenants when they seized him. He would not be drawn or baited by their questions as to what had happened. He would only look on ruefully as they tore down the ragged tents and grubbed around in the dirt looking for the gold that they were owed.

The old chieftain settled himself on an overturned cart and unslung his mighty bronze battle mace, planting it in the dry earth and resting his hands upon its head. He fixed Groth with a weary glare.

“Come, young pup, and speak. Tell all who will hear your foolishness the reason that we stand here empty-handed, though we be the heroes of an empire.”

Still Groth did not speak.

The other warriors clamoured on all sides. They edged forwards, yearning to give voice to their anger, but none wishing to be the first to speak against the flesh and blood of their chieftain. Rothyogg gestured around to them.

“Such fine and loyal ogres as these,” he growled, “will you not tell them why they must now return to the tribe after months of campaigning, with nothing to show for it? The great Xen Huong himself bought our loyalty for his wars, but you send his chubby treasurers away and wipe the tally clean before we can collect?”

The chieftain narrowed his eyes.

“By what right, young pup? By what right do *you* speak for the tribe?”

When Groth finally spoke his voice was low and timid, and Rothyogg strained to hear the words.

“Speak up!” he bellowed. “My ears still ring from the din of battle.”

Groth repeated himself. “I did not send them away. They left because they fear us.”

Rothyogg snorted. “Aye, they’d do well to—we’re the biggest ogres of the plains! We’ll crack their skulls if they don’t pay up!”

Several of his mercenary champions chuckled and slapped one another on the back, pleased at their own reputation. One young bull with a thick mane of hair stepped forwards and beat a fist upon his open palm, leading the rest in their favourite war chant.

“Lass’ari! Lass’ari! Dobi eny’tari!”

*The Lass’ari The Lass’ari The biggest and the strongest!*

Of all those gathered in the camp, only Groth remained impassive. Rothyogg roared with laughter, standing to grasp the chanting bull by the arm.

“Why can’t you be more like Gilmog, eh young pup? He’ll be a bloody warleader one day. Men and ogre-kin alike will tremble at the mention—”

“Will he feast on the children of men, too?”

Groth’s words brought utter silence to them all. The wind whipped at loose tent flaps, suddenly seeming much louder than they had mere moments earlier.

Old Rothyogg turned slowly to face his son, with his mace in hand and pure thunder in his eyes.

*“What did you say?”*

Those standing closest to Groth began to edge away, nervous glances cast back and forth. Pulling the tattered robe up around his shoulders, he stood his ground.

“Word reaches the Dragon Emperor of your warriors’ depraved appetites, father. You bring doom upon us all.”

Rothyogg trudged forwards, with a look of almost deranged incredulity on his face.

“You accuse me... of...”

“I accuse you of nothing,” said Groth. “But they say the Emperor is convinced, and his retribution will be swift.”

He swept his arms wide and gestured up into the great blue sky. A handful of the mercenaries squinted and tried to follow his direction.

“Soon after you left for war, I had a vision. In the dead of night the moons blinked—just once—and in that moment a new god was born. He came down from the sky and found nothing but greed in the heart of the tribes. And so he gifted the world with a mouth of its own, so that it might drink the seas and devour the land.”

Rothyogg’s step faltered, his eyes widening at Groth’s words. The bronze mace fell from his grip, and he clawed at his chest with numb fingers. Gilmog and a few others rushed forwards to aid him.

“More... of your madness... young pup...” he wheezed, his face pale. “I should

have drowned you in the herd trough... the day you were born..."

Groth slowly lowered his finger, pointing accusingly at the stricken chieftain.

"Aye, perhaps that would have been better for you. Have you not seen the new star that burns in the heavens? Every night it has grown brighter. It is a bad omen—a bad omen indeed."

With that, he turned and strode away, his father's warriors stepping aside with only a few gruff murmurs of disbelief. Was it mere coincidence, or had young Groth struck down the mightiest warleader of the ogre-kin with one simple gesture?

"I will have no part of this, or what is yet to come." His voice seemed to carry even against the wind, as though his words needed to be heard by all. "This is the beginning of the end, father—you will see. The new god is almost here."

Groth's words were borne out, of course. Fraulein Nitikin writes at great length of the legendary cataclysm that ended the civilisation of the ogre-kin, though for the sake of expediency I shall spare you all the full reading at this time. Whether we choose to believe that the astromancers of the Cathayan Emperor were truly responsible, or if it was merely the result of some capricious whim of the Ruinous Powers, it cannot be denied that the devastation that followed would wound the very fabric of the world itself.

All of the ogre tribes across the plains had watched as Groth's new star grew larger, until finally it outshone even the sun in broad daylight. Though Rothyogg's wayward heir had disappeared into the hinterlands beyond, rumours of his prophecy began to spread like wildfire in those final days.

The flash of the meteoric impact was said to have lit up the mountains beyond the easternmost dwarf holds, and the tremors that wracked the earth were noted in the historical writings of Ulthuan. Even for the most long-lived of races, to have witnessed such a thing must surely have been to believe that the world was indeed at an end, for how could the land survive when the heavens had decided to vent their fury upon it?

Firestorms lashed the plains. The grasslands burned, herd-beasts were incinerated, and countless thousands died in the first rolling wave of destruction.

Then the rain of fire—a million times a million blazing chunks of bedrock, each a miniature of the great meteorite, hurled into the skies by its coming. What little had survived the first wave was obliterated in the second.

Finally came the long, creeping death. Far beyond the reach of the firestorms billowed an unnatural cloud of dust; a slow, poisoned haze that hung over the ashen landscape like a funeral shroud. Even to the hardy constitution of the ogre-

kin, to breathe it was to succumb to terrible sickness and no prospect but a withering, choking demise. In time, the haze grew so thick that it blotted out the midday sun and left the land in perpetual murky twilight.

So it came to be that the survivors of this great cataclysm began to envy the dead.

The ogres as we know them today are a people defined by their hunger—they know naught but the desire to gorge themselves and silence the rumbling in their bellies. They take and take, and give nothing back to the world. If one were to believe that the stories were true, then the Celestial Dragon Emperor’s vengeance upon the murderous ogre-kin was fulfilled a thousand times over with the arrival of the comet. In the weeks and months that followed, the ogres first learned what true hunger was.

No livestock or crops had survived the devastation. In the chill, dust-choked wastelands that the plains had become, ragged survivors of the tribes emerged from out of the acidic sandstorms, roaming the ruin of their homelands in search of food. They clawed up the blasted remains of dead trees looking for softer roots to devour, and swatted blowflies and midges from the air and licked their sore palms clean afterwards. After that, in desperation they turned to their own belts and sandals, chewing over the stale leather for many hours until they could bear to swallow it.

Their maddening hunger grew, and soon enough the emaciated ogres began to eye one another warily. Whenever one of their number fell to starvation out on the plains, the body did not lie untouched for long.

The Lass’ar themselves fared poorly in those days.

Gilmog had beaten down his rivals for leadership of the tribe following the eventual passing of old Rothyogg. Along with fewer than a dozen of his bull mercenaries, he led the survivors westwards away from the heart of the storms, though their direction soon faltered in the blinding haze and none could any longer be sure of the path they trod. As the sickness took them, their teeth came loose and their hair fell out in clumps. Many Lass’ar simply vanished into the murk, vacantly and wordlessly trudging away from the group, never to be seen again. Gilmog and his cronies never seemed to feel the aching hunger quite so keenly as the rest, though, or so it seemed...

Eventually they came upon a dismal, rubble-strewn gap in the hills and found that they stood at the feet of the great western mountains that had once bordered their lands.

“Let us carry on,” the frail ogres cried out. “Let us climb the slopes and ascend

into the heavens.”

Gilmog snarled and ground his teeth, his patience wearing thinner with each day.

“Fools!” he growled from behind his ragged mask of sackcloth. “We are not dead! We have no place in the sky! Curse that old shaman Molthagg for putting this idea into your heads.”

The tribe sobbed and floundered onwards, falling to their knees on the scree-slopes or simply collapsing where they stood. Even though the wind was fresher in the bare valley, the foul-smelling stream that tumbled lazily over the rocks offered them no succour.

Wearily trailing Rothyogg’s battered old mace on the ground behind him, Gilmog felt his own strength ebbing away as they climbed. Finally he too sank to the ground, and his bulls were practically overcome with relief that they needed go no farther that day.

On the edge of delirium, the chieftain rolled onto his back, dragging in lungfuls of the sour air. “We are not dead,” he muttered to no one in particular. “We are strong—we are the strongest. We can eat the mountains themselves...”

With trembling fingers, he scooped up handfuls of pebbles and stuffed them into his mouth, swallowing in a series of dry gulps. The others looked on, a mix of disgust and bewilderment upon their exhausted faces. Some, the most desperate or those keenest to win Gilmog’s favour, followed his example. Though the stones weighed heavily in their guts, they took the edge off their hunger pains and allowed them to settle into a fitful sleep.

The last day of the ogre-kin dawned as many had before, with the pale light of the sun barely managing to penetrate the blighted haze. The wind seemed to carry the faintest rumbling of distant fires, just as it always did, and the Lass’ar began to stir upon the slopes of that mournful vale.

Some had not survived the night, and with renewed vigour Gilmog and his warriors shoved the others aside and dragged the bodies away. The stone-eaters seemed stronger than before, though the murderous glint of near-starvation still remained in their eyes, and none dared to oppose them.

It was not until some hours later that the bulls’ carrion feast was interrupted by the sound of pitiful screams from further down the valley.

Terrified, the other Lass’ar dragged themselves over the rocky crags on raw hands and knees. “Death has come,” they wailed, gnashing their stumpy teeth and clawing at the heavens for salvation. “He is here, now! He is here to claim

us for his own!”

His grip sticky with spilled blood, Gilmog took up his mace and led his few remaining warriors down towards the valley mouth. They had encountered other ragged bands of survivors out in the wastelands—some even with warriors of their own—but he had seen them all off. Not even the blast-mutated horrors that squirmed beneath the sands held any fear for mighty Gilmog!

Yet, when he caught sight of the spectre in the mists, he froze.

Swathed in tattered rags that fluttered in the wind, the silent figure stood tall and gaunt beside the foul stream. Its face was hidden by a loose cowl, but Gilmog could clearly see the creature’s scarred flesh beneath the rags, and the old blood that stained its bandage-wrapped feet.

“Stay where you are, wanderer,” he called out with a sneer. “No ghost after all, eh? You had some of this lot worried for a moment.”

The bulls laughed raucously, some belching over bloodied lips after their meal, but the figure beside the stream remained silent and unmoving.

Gilmog regarded him a while longer. “Be off with you. Go back to the wastes, or I’ll break your skull and feast on your sweetbreads. Know that I am the chieftain of these lands now, and I’m not given to idle threats.”

The figure slowly inclined its hooded head, as though considering Gilmog’s words, or perhaps listening to another voice entirely—one that perhaps only he could hear. When he eventually spoke, it was a pained rasp that cut through the rumble of the wind and reached the ears of every warrior present.

“You are no chieftain of the Lass’ar, Gilmog. You are nothing but a foul tyrant.”

Gilmog almost started at the sound of his own name spoken aloud. He had not expected defiance from this unknown wanderer but now that it was so, he realised that he did not relish the idea of approaching him any closer. He saw his bulls exchanging uncertain glances.

“And you carry my father’s mace, pretender,” the figure hissed.

Cold realisation settled over the group. The voice carried a note of grim familiarity for every single one of them.

“Shut your mouth, scrawny one! You don’t speak to me!” Gilmog spat a wad of bloody phlegm for good measure. “How a mad wretch like you ever survived out there is a mystery.”

Groth slowly raised his hands out from under his cloak. In spite of themselves, many of the assembled warriors, Gilmog included, let out gasps of horror.

“Blackened flesh, raw and bloody,” said Groth. “And nine putrid stumps

where ten fingers ought spread. Is it not strange what looks appetising when starvation looms?”

Groth held out his finger—his *only* finger—to point directly at Gilmog. It felt like a spear aimed at his heart, even though he stood many yards away.

“But then, you know all about that.”

Gilmog’s eyes darted around the mist-wreathed slopes. Other Lass’ar had crept closer to watch the confrontation unfold. Their pale, withered forms clung to the jagged out-croppings and shadowy defiles overlooking the mouth of the valley. He suddenly realised that they resembled the cowed, wraith-like figure of Groth more than they did the rest of his bull warriors. Their sallow eyes and hairless pates marked them out like skeletons picked clean among the grey and black rocks of the mountains. A thought came to him, unbidden—perhaps they *were* already dead after all?

Not him though. Not Gilmog or his mighty stone-eater bulls. He had no intention of surrendering to the long, slow extinction, and he would not stand for this affront to his rightful leadership from Rothyogg’s meek little whelp.

“You want these weaklings, Groth of the One-Finger? You want to be chieftain of the sickly and the ghost-kin?” He snorted in derision. “You can have them. I’ll cast them out of my tribe. Take them up to the heavens with you when you go, and let your new god judge them. They’re no good to me.”

Even as he spoke, he realised that Groth had not once broken his gaze, nor lowered that accusing finger. Gilmog even fancied he could make out the glint of Groth’s eyes boring straight into him, though hidden beneath the shadow of his cowl and obscured by the clinging haze.

Groth remained silent for such a time that Gilmog assumed that their tense exchange was over, though he could still keenly feel every pair of Lass’ar eyes fixed upon them both. He turned to leave, but Groth’s voice stopped him.

“It was you, Gilmog.”

The chieftain looked back, a sudden unease in his heart—an acute feeling of vulnerability that he could not quite dismiss. Nonetheless, he tried hard to keep his voice as solid and unyielding as the mountain rock.

“What lunacy are you speaking now, man-lover?”

Groth took a step forwards, his foot splashing down into the stream, and Gilmog flinched. He took another, and another, wading into the waters and leaving swirling red trails in the current behind him as his crusted bandages sloughed away to reveal burned and scarred flesh beneath.

“It was *you* who brought the Emperor’s wrath upon us,” he said, jabbing out

with his finger to accentuate the words. “It was *you* who first tasted the flesh of the little ones. It was *you* who led the rest of our warriors to feast upon the soft-meat, out in the rice fields. You deceived them all. Now you cannot satisfy your hunger, even when you devour the bodies of your own kin.”

Gilmog became aware of his warriors glaring at him, and of other Lass’ar rising to their feet out on the valley slopes. He tried to find words to give the lie to Groth’s accusations. “No... It’s not...”

“It is too late. We all know it. We can all feel that craven hunger inside us now. You have infected all of the ogre-kin with your greed, and created something far greater and more terrifying, out there in the wastelands.”

Halting not ten feet away from Gilmog, Groth reached up and pulled back his hood.

Though many were appalled, only the chieftain actually made a sound—he wailed in something like fear and shame as he saw the burned remains of the prophet’s features, sinking to his knees at the water’s edge and unable to look away.

Groth’s lipless jaws hung festooned with sharp, black teeth of knapped flint, slathers of bloody spittle plastered across his empty cheeks. His nose was gone, leaving only a gaping hole in the centre of his face; though the horror of this paled in comparison to the shocking, dry yellowed orbs of his eyes that stared wide from sockets where no lids remained. The scent of charred meat hung about him, such that even the stifling wind could not dispel it.

“I know this to be true, because I have *seen* it for myself.”

The sound of skittering pebbles and the splash of shallow water came as the first of the emaciated Lass’ar ambled closer. Gilmog cried out in alarm, though he could not tear his gaze away from Groth’s.

“You have taken so much from our people, tyrant,” he hissed. “Now the Maw tells me that it is time for you to give something back.”

The first blow came with an enraged bellow from one of the bulls stood behind Gilmog, knocking him from his knees and into the shallows. Dazed, he felt the bronze mace snatched from his grip only a moment before the club of a second warrior shattered his pelvis.

The fury of the stone-eaters was soon forgotten, though, as the Lass’ar fell upon them all. With sticks, stones and their bare hands, dozens of the withered ogre-kin beat them down and tore into their flesh; like ghouls in the twilight, their eyes burned with hatred and pure, ravenous hunger.

Gilmog struggled to pull himself forwards, but a sandaled foot stomped down

on the back of his neck with an agonising crackle of vertebrae. Blood washed into his mouth—even as he felt rusted blades piercing him, he tried to swallow it.

*Anything to feed the hunger in his belly...*

Groth had sat then upon the rocks, gazing into the poisoned waters for a long time as the lass'ar feasted. When finally they were done, he rose and drew up his tattered hood once more.

“Children of the Maw, follow me now,” he said, a jagged smile breaking over the scabrous ruin of his face. “I have something *great* to show you.”

The story continues, of course, but from this point onwards the content becomes rather fanciful, and refers to places that exist on no map of the eastern lands. Fraulein Nitikin acknowledges the ambiguity of the source material in her footnotes, which I will distribute shortly.

The question remains, then: what exactly did the self-styled prophet Groth Onefinger discover out there in the blasted wastes? And, subsequently, what became of him and his followers? The true answer is likely lost to myth, if indeed it ever was more than thinly veiled allegory.

Before we adjourn for luncheon—eternal hunger being the curse of ogres and academics alike!—I should like to draw your attention to this woodcut, which comes from the university collection and is believed to be a copy of an original Cathayan scroll.

It is a hypnotic image, is it not?

Note in particular the colossal teeth, which are presumably symbolic, and the tiny ogre-like figures that have prostrated themselves before it. Were this indeed a truthful depiction, then what a terrifying, vengeful god it would be, no?

I see that some of you clearly have questions. One at a time, if you please.





# SIGNAL TO NOISE

*C Z Dunn*

Sister Agentha of the Order of the Fractured Cipher realised what she was listening to over the vox mere seconds before the eldar raiders sprang their assault. One moment she was standing next to Chaplain Gerataus on the bridge of the Black Templars strike cruiser *Inevitable Retribution*, the next she was sprawled unceremoniously across the deck as xenos fire rocked the Space Marine ship.

Blinking into realspace, almost three dozen of the dark craft discharged full weapon salvos against the *Inevitable Retribution*, though most of their firepower was reserved for the vessel accompanying the Black Templars, the Executioners craft *Guillotine*. Taken unawares by the aliens' surprise attack, *Guillotine's* captain had neither the time to raise its shields nor return fire and in the space of mere seconds the huge vessel was bleeding atmosphere into the void. Vast rents opened up in the hull through which poured manpower and materiel. The human crew and Chapter serfs perished instantly, their physiology no match for the ravages of open space, while the battle-brothers of the Executioners drifted aimlessly, their power armour life support systems preserving their existence.

Several of the smaller eldar craft broke off from the assault and targeted the survivors. No mercy was shown and the zone surrounding the two Space Marine vessels was soon filled with slowly dissipating balls of crimson and metal.

The *Inevitable Retribution*, by virtue of being further away from the point of the eldar's realspace translation, did not take as many immediate hits and was able to raise its shields before catastrophic damage was inflicted. On the bridge, klaxons wailed and Black Templars and crew alike barked and relayed orders, getting fire teams to the sites of the most crippling damage and calling up replacement crew from below decks to take the positions vacated by those who

succumbed to the initial assault.

Castellan Kaleb commanded the helmsman to face their ambushers head on. For tortuous minutes the massive vessel swung around, eldar craft harrying the ship with sustained barrages of fire that dissipated against the shields. Halfway through the turn, all those on the bridge witnessed the final demise of *Guillotine*.

Also attempting to turn and fight, the stricken ship had ponderously rotated, but this did little more than present its unshielded flank to the xenos raiders. Like hungry animals pouncing on a scrap of meat, the eldar lit up the void with the discharge from their weapons, raking the exposed side of the ship and setting off a series of detonations that culminated in *Guillotine's* warp drive going nova. Despite their greater speed, not all of the eldar vessels were able to outrun the corona of immaterial energy, and several of them disintegrated as the raw stuff of the warp engulfed them.

“Brace for impact!” yelled the Castellan across the bridge, and Space Marine and Chapter serf alike gripped anything that was riveted down as the tsunami of Chaos energy broke against their shields and washed over the ship. For the second time in the space of minutes, Agentha slammed against the deck of the bridge, sustaining a deep gouge just above her brow.

“Captain, damage report.” The Castellan was rooted in the same position he had been before the wave had struck. The only other woman on the bridge besides Agentha, answered him.

“Shields are down to less than ten per cent and warp drives were damaged during the initial assault. Praise His name that we did not suffer the fate as those unfortunate souls.” Through the oculus, Agentha could see *Guillotine* slowly falling through the dust belt of the planet below, inexorably caught in the pull of its gravity well. The captain didn't need to say that if the eldar came back for more, their chances of survival, let alone victory, were virtually nil.

Agentha pulled herself up to a sitting position and dabbed at the gouge on her forehead with the sleeve of her robe, the orange fabric slowly turning to crimson around the cuff. All around her, medically trained serfs were tending to the wounds of their comrades, applying bandages and tourniquets to the most severely injured and removing the bodies of those beyond treatment. All of them ignored Agentha. Her presence on the mission had been a necessity, as she was only one of a handful of people in the Imperium able to read the complex hieroglyphs of the necron Khansu Dynasty, but her initial excitement at leaving the order and seeing more of the galaxy had soon turned sour.

The Black Templars barely tolerated her being on board one of their ships, and

since the cleansing of the tomb world she had been virtually confined to her quarters. The only reason she was on the bridge when the eldar attacked was because the vox-operators had picked up a faint signal from the world below, and Chaplain Gerataus had ordered her aid in deciphering it, which she believed she had done just before the alien attack.

“All stations,” the Castellán said, opening up a ship-wide vox-link. “We are taking the ship into the dust belt around the planet. Those alien vessels do not have sufficient shielding to follow us in, and that should afford us enough time to effect repairs.”

From the other side of the bridge, the figure of Chaplain Gerataus strode purposefully towards the Castellán until their faces were only centimetres apart.

“Need I remind you, Castellán, that it is not the Black Templars way to run and hide. Chapter protocol dictates that we turn and face the xenos scum, and not relent until they are vanquished.” Such was the passion with which he delivered those words that Agentha could see flecks of spittle landing on the Castellán’s cheek.

“Chapter protocol dictates that I do not needlessly send this ship and the battle-brothers on board to their certain doom.” The Castellán’s words were calmer, more measured than the Chaplain’s. “We take shelter, we make our repairs and *then* we strike back.”

The Chaplain stood there for a moment, the red lenses of his two ocular implants staring the Castellán square in the eyes, before slowly turning and making his way back to the vox-array.

Agentha had fashioned a workable dressing, and though she could still feel her wound pulsing as it gently bled, blood no longer poured into her eye. Unusually for a Sister Dialogus, Agentha’s eyes were unaugmented. Sisters of the Order of the Fractured Cipher believed that they were created in the Emperor’s own image and accepted no form of bodily modification. Some of the senior sisters of her order even frowned upon Agentha’s use of eyeglasses, which she now wiped clean in the folds of her robe before placing them upon her nose.

The bridge had become a much calmer place since their descent into the dust belt and the near-silence of serfs and crew carrying out their duties was only punctuated occasionally by the sound of a large chunk of debris smashing against the shields of the *Inevitable Retribution*. Agentha made her way back over to the vox-array. A serf had just finished repairing the communications device and was fiddling with dials to test whether it still functioned.

“May I?” Agentha asked the startled serf as she gestured for him to give her the headset. Frozen like a small mammal trapped in the beam of a hunter’s lamp, he glanced towards the Castellan, who nodded. The robed youth hastily dropped the headset and scurried away. She picked up the headset from where it had been dropped to the deck and, placing them over her ears once more, tried to tune it to the same frequency it had been on before her work had been so rudely interrupted. She gently rotated one of the large dials, but moments later quickly pulled the headset off, face painted in a grimace.

“Is there a problem, Sister?” Gerataus said, irritation evident in every syllable.

“The signal. It’s... It’s much stronger than before.”

The Chaplain broke off from the chart he was studying and loomed over Agentha. “Impossible. The only way that could happen is if it was being transmitted from the planet below, but all auspex returns confirm that it is a dead world. The vox-array must still be damaged. Serf! Get back here and perform a proper repair of this unit.”

“No. It’s not that.” Agentha waved a hand at the serf to gesture him away and once more the baffled youth had to look to the Castellan for confirmation. Kaleb ordered the serf to return to what he was doing and joined Gerataus and Agentha at the vox.

“Then what is it, Sister?” the Castellan asked, ignoring the Chaplain’s scowl.

“I’m not certain, but I believe that this is an old signal that has somehow retained its integrity over the millennia. My guess is that the dust field trapped the radio waves.” She put one of the headset cups to her left ear, leaving the other free to listen to the Space Marines.

“Ridiculous. Why are you even listening to this girl, Castellan? That head wound has addled her mind.”

Agentha had spent time in the company of the noble Adeptus Astartes before and though she knew to give them their due deference and respect, she would not be cowed in this matter. “It’s not ridiculous. On old Terra, mariners who traversed the polar regions would often report picking up radio signals from centuries previous. Just as the ice preserved whatever was frozen in it, the signals bounced off its surface, gradually weakening until they eventually faded altogether. I think that’s what the dust belt is doing here, bouncing the signal around and preserving it.”

The Castellan looked impressed, but sceptical. “But you said that this signal has been preserved for millennia, not centuries. How can you tell, and how could it have been sustained for so long?”

“I realised how old it was before the attack. The signal is a voice speaking in a derivation of High Gothic.”

“I too heard that broadcast, girl, and whatever language that voice is speaking, it is *not* High Gothic.” Gerataus turned to the Castellan. “See. I told you that injury had scrambled her faculties.”

“It *is* High Gothic... Just an ancient version of it.”

“Explain.” The Castellan sounded as if his curiosity had been piqued.

“My entire life has been dedicated to the study of language, and in that time I have come to realise that it is a living thing, language grows and evolves, discards those parts of itself that no longer serve a purpose and shapes itself to its environment and current needs. All languages do this, be they human or xenos, and have done ever since the first life forms gained the ability of speech.”

The Castellan nodded thoughtfully. Even the Chaplain looked as if he was giving this some consideration.

“High Gothic is no different, but it has the added complications of being one of the oldest human languages, pre-dating the Imperium even, and being a ceremonial language spoken on a million worlds. If you were to speak High Gothic to somebody living a thousand years ago or a hundred light years away, then you should be able to understand each other almost completely. Comparatively little of the language would have changed. But if you were to go back five thousand years, or to the other side of the segmentum, then you’d have a hard time understanding each other but may get a general sense of what is being conveyed. Go back further than that, or to the far ends of the Imperium? Well, you might not even recognise it as the same language.”

“So, that’s what we’re listening to here? A local form of High Gothic from over five thousand years in the past?” Gerataus said.

“Yes. Some of the words are identical to current usage, and the grammar hasn’t changed a great deal, but this is definitely an ancient form of High Gothic.”

“How ancient?” asked the Castellan.

“I believe that it is around ten thousand years old... from the time of the Great Crusade.”

Castellan Kaleb eyed her incredulously. “How can you be so sure?” he said.

“Because in the time we’ve been speaking, the voice on the signal has mentioned the term ‘Great Crusade’ over a dozen times and ‘Emperor’ almost twice that. Here, listen.” Agentha flicked a switch on the front of the vox-array and the bridge filled with the sound of a woman’s voice delivering what

appeared to be a sermon. “There. Can you hear that? ‘Imperator’. That phrase there? That’s ‘Imperial Truth’.”

Though her vocation meant she dealt mainly with the written word, all Sisters of her order were trained to recognise the spoken forms of all languages they dealt with, for those rare occasions when dead languages unexpectedly sprang back to life, often on the lips of a race or culture long thought vanquished by the Imperium.

“I think I can make out the word for ‘fleet’. It’s the same term some of the Venerables use for it. What’s that word she’s using before it? ‘Exploratory’?”

Agentha cocked her head and squinted, deep in concentration. “Close. It’s ‘Expeditionary’ I think.”

The scowl returned to the Chaplain’s face. “So we know it’s somebody speaking High Gothic. That still doesn’t explain how the signal has persisted for so long. You said the radio waves on ancient Terra broke down after only a few centuries, but this woman’s voice has been preserved for over ten thousand years. How is that even possible?”

Agentha bowed her head slightly. “My lords, I do have one theory.”

“Well, what is it, girl?” The Chaplain’s patience had worn parchment-thin.

“I believe the signal was extremely strong in the first place and thus has taken longer to decay. Rather than being a vox-to-vox communication, this was originally broadcast on a very wide spectrum.”

Kaleb and Gerataus both came to the same realisation simultaneously

“This was a broadcast to the entire planet,” the Castellan said.

The darkened confines of Agentha’s chamber flickered in the dull light afforded by the handful of candles she had managed to scavenge. Her chamber, more a cell if she was being strictly accurate, was sparse, with only a bedroll and blankets, a seat and a simple table. The only other items in the room were a stack of ancient books and charts, arrayed almost floor to ceiling, that she had recently acquired from the ship’s archive.

With the *Inevitable Retribution* effectively trapped while repairs were made, Castellan Kaleb had granted permission for Agentha to carry out research into the world below and the origins of the transmission. It was a vain hope at best, but, as she was escorted into the ship’s archive by a battle-brother of the Black Templars, her spirits lifted.

The archive was easily as large as the library back at her order’s convent, but where the Fractured Cipher’s vaults held only tomes pertaining to languages

both dead and active, the *Inevitable Retribution's* collection—only a fraction of the Chapter's as a whole—covered all manner of subjects. After poring over a collection of antique star charts, Agentha turned her attention to the Military History section, which formed easily a third of the archive.

Chaplain Gerataus, having had a similar idea to Agentha, was already in that section and, after relieving her of several of her most pertinent star charts, took his leave along with a number of dusty tomes of indeterminate age.

The battle-brother who had been ordered to watch over her did not take kindly to lugging armfuls of books from the archive to the her cabin but, remembering that the Castellan had ordered him to aid the Sister Dialogus, grudgingly relented. Now, safely within the four metal walls that had been home for the past eighteen months, Agentha was deep into the task of identifying the world whose dust belt they were now sheltering in.

Agentha's skillset was firmly in the realms of the linguistic, but two decades of ten-hour days spent studying with the order had conditioned her for research, and after the simple matter—for her at least—of deciphering the keys to the star charts, she had begun to narrow her search down to a handful of sub-sectors in this region which contained worlds similar to the one below. Her initial hopes that it was a planet called Culchare was dashed when further research proved that world had been destroyed entirely during the Great Heresy. Other promising candidates soon fell by the wayside: Jindran—only discovered four thousand years ago; Osiris—destroyed by the Inquisition; Durmian VII—its surface of boiling sulphur was completely unlike like the inert world below.

For hours Agentha referenced and cross-referenced, eliminating many worlds from her study but coming no closer to the identity of the planet. When her final long shot—that the world may have shifted orbit in the intervening millennia—didn't pay off, she slumped over the charts on the table, utterly exhausted. She rubbed her eyes and contemplated unpacking her bedroll for some much-needed sleep, but could not bring herself to do so. Castellan Kaleb was only indulging her for as long as they were stopped for repairs. As soon as the warp drive, shields and weapons systems were functioning again, they would bring the foul xenos to battle, then be on their way. The signal would be lost, possibly forever. She had only one chance and needed to make every minute count. If only it were like deciphering a new language...

And that's when it struck her.

Being careful not to disturb the thick layer of charts coating the table, she moved over to the door of the chamber and pulled hard on the lever that

activated the lock. She swung it open and poked her head out into the gangway. There, exactly where she had left him many hours earlier, was the Black Templar who had escorted her to the archive.

“Beg your pardon, my lord,” she said with mock timidity. “Is your armour’s vox keyed into the ship’s?”

“It is. Why do you need to know?”

“I’d like you to ask the Castellan something, please. It’s to do with my research.”

The Black Templar paused for a moment, contemplating. “Very well. What do you need to ask him?”

“It’s regarding the dust belt. I need him to sweep it with the auspex and let me know its composition.”

The Black Templar hailed the Castellan and after relaying Agentha’s message there was an awkward pause while they both awaited the response.

“Very well, I’ll let her know,” the Space Marine said eventually, breaking the silence. “The Castellan doesn’t quite understand it. He had expected the auspex to return readings of naturally occurring rock and minerals, but the dust belt is comprised entirely of man-made alloys and materials. He says that if you can offer an explanation, I’m to escort you to the bridge immediately.”

“If you could give me just a little while longer, I’m sure I’ll have all the answers the Castellan requires, and more.” The Black Templar nodded and Agentha retreated once more into her chamber.

It was just as she’d suspected. Just as languages evolved and developed, so too had this world. Where languages gained new words over time, this planet had gained its dust belt. The fact that it was comprised of man-made materials strongly suggested that a space battle had taken place around this planet at some point. If Imperial forces had been here during the Great Crusade, then it was probable that it had been fought more than ten thousand years ago.

She carefully removed the top few layers of star charts from the table and began to reassess the maps she’d discounted early on in her studies. If the battle had been as vast as she imagined, then once she discovered the name of the planet, finding out more about it should be a relatively straightforward task.

Carefully moving aside a brittle, yellowed parchment she unveiled a hand-drawn chart that had started to develop brown patches on its mottled surface. Gently moving her finger over the lines and circles denoting worlds and long-forgotten routes, her eyes widened as she found the name of the tomb world the Black Templars and Executioners had so recently cleansed. Hurriedly, she traced

a line to the galactic east and her finger came to rest on the tiny dark circle that indicated the world below.

And once she knew the name of that world, she needed no book to discover exactly what had happened here. She already knew.

The quiet of the bridge had given way to the noise of activity during Agentha's hours of study, and as her Black Templars escort led her in, only the Castellan and Chaplain paid her any heed. The repairs to the *Inevitable Retribution* were almost complete, and systems were being checked and rechecked in preparation for the counterattack against the eldar pirates.

"It would seem you are too late, Sister. Chaplain Gerataus has already solved the riddle of our mystery transmission."

"With the correct charts, it was a simple task to identify this world and the matter of mere minutes to cross-reference the relevant tomes in our archive," the Chaplain began.

*Yes, and if I'd had access to that material then we would have all been standing here having this discussion a lot sooner.* Agentha considered vocalising her thoughts but prudence and survival instinct won out.

"The world we orbit is Remonora Majoris, one of the many planets brought to compliance by the Emperor himself during the Great Crusade," Gerataus continued. "His fleet arrived here to find a sophisticated human culture that had persisted through Old Night but, bereft of the Emperor's benevolence and rule, had degenerated into a debauched society that readily embraced depravity and sought personal gratification above all else."

"Yes, but—" Agentha attempted to interject. Gerataus simply ignored her.

"After the Emperor's initial communications with the world were rebuffed, He chose to enlighten them in the ways of the Imperium. To urge the people of Remonora Majoris to step off their path to damnation and expose them to the Imperial Truth. For two entire days, the iterators of His fleet broadcast to the planet but to no avail. So caught up were they in the pursuit of pleasure that their eyes had been blinded to the obvious and so, when it was clear that Remonora would not come to compliance willingly, the Emperor Himself addressed the population."

"But that's not—"

Gerataus once again ploughed through Agentha's interruption.

"He urged them to see sense and offered to show them mercy. 'Become one again with mankind or suffer its wrath,' he told them, but still they did not listen

and thus that wrath became manifest. With unswerving fury, Imperial forces landed and put an end to the perverted ways of Remonora Majoris. The spaceports filled with those trying to flee the Emperor's judgment, but the instant their craft broke from the atmosphere, the weapons of the fleet were brought to bear on them and this..." He swung an arm towards the occulus, gesturing at the dust belt. "This was the result. A graveyard of the impious."

"Please—"

Gerataus was no longer registering her presence, let alone her words.

"In less than a day, Remonora Majoris was brought to compliance and took its place in the Imperium, while the Emperor departed to carry out His great work and bring yet more worlds back into the fold and under His protection." The Chaplain moved towards the vox-array. "Ten thousand years ago, this was the site of a great Imperial victory, and today it shall be so once more. On that day, the sons of the Emperor went to war with His voice ringing in their ears, and so too shall we!"

He wrenched the headset from the vox and the speakers kicked in allowing the sound of the iterator's voice to once again fill the bridge. He turned to Agentha, finally acknowledging her. "Your work here is done, girl, and your efforts are... noted. Brother Atreus will escort you back to your chamber. We will summon you when we find a suitable planet upon which to set you down so that you may seek passage back to your order." He turned to speak to the Castellan.

"You're wrong," Agentha said, clearly and calmly.

Gerataus slowly turned to regard her, his augmented eyes burning like balefire.

"You're wrong," she repeated.

Impossibly swiftly, the Chaplain advanced on the Sister Dialogus, but Castellan Kaleb loomed in front of her, barring Gerataus's way. Kaleb held up a palm in placation. "Let us listen to what the Sister has to say. She is on this mission for her expertise and it would be churlish of us to dismiss her out of hand."

The Chaplain's gaze bore through the Castellan. "Very well," he said. The Castellan nodded at Agentha to share her thoughts.

"My lord's research was very thorough and, in the main, highly accurate," she began.

"Of course it was. My sources date back to the years immediately following the Great Heresy. They are as accurate as if I stood there and witnessed the events myself."

The Castellan once again raised his palm, this time to impede the Chaplain's

tongue.

Agentha cleared her throat. The date of your source is its very problem. In the years following the Warmaster's betrayal, millions of books and documents were either destroyed or put beyond reach because they told of the heroic acts that the Traitor Legions had once performed for the Emperor and the glory they brought upon his name. Any work or text that venerated a Traitor Legion or fallen primarch was expunged and history was either erased or altered to match the new Imperial Truth, the new version of history built upon the ashes of betrayal.

"Lies and heresy! Show me the nearest torpedo tube and let us be done with this wretch's untruths. How could she possibly know all this?" The Chaplain's ire was up.

"I know this because I have translated and transcribed such documents. Although the overwhelming majority were put to flame many thousands of years ago, from time to time one will surface in the personal effects of a heretic, or buried deep beneath the ruins of a long forgotten city. When they do, it is the task of the Order of the Fractured Cipher to interpret them so that our masters within the Ecclesiarchy can determine the fate of the text."

"That is all well and good, Sister, but why do you believe that the Chaplain is wrong?" The Castellán was still strategically placed between Gerataus and Agentha.

"I know that the Chaplain is wrong because one of my first duties upon ascension to the Sisterhood was to translate a manuscript detailing the pacification of Remonora Majoris. It was written by a scribe who accompanied the sixteenth Legion during the Great Crusade and was found upon the wreck of a vessel formerly belonging to that Legion." She pushed her eyeglasses back up the bridge of her nose. "When the iterator on that broadcast stops speaking—in, by my estimate, about fifteen minutes, Terran standard—it will not be the voice of the Emperor that you hear. It will be the voice of Horus."

The Chaplain lunged forwards, but the Castellán thrust his palm against Gerataus's chest and shoved him back. He looked ready to pounce once again, but the voice of the ship's captain cut through the tension.

"My lords, the xenos craft are currently passing overhead, carrying out a sensor sweep. If we strike now then we would have surprise as our advantage."

"How close to full operational capacity are we?" asked the Castellán, his gaze still fixed upon Gerataus.

"Warp drive is functioning again, shields at eighty per cent. Bombardment cannon is still under repair but all other weapon systems are online."

The Castellan took no more than a few seconds to assess the situation before answering. “Captain. Bring the *Inevitable Retribution* out of orbit and let us avenge the loss of the Executioners and *Guillotine* with the blood of our enemies.”

The noise of activity rose as the bridge crew busied themselves for battle, almost drowning out the woman’s voice emanating from the vox. Gerataus finally turned from Agentha and strode over to the vox-array. He forcefully spun one of the dials all the way to the right and the iterator’s voice rose in volume to an uncomfortable level. “Come. Let us go to battle knowing that soon we will be blessed by the voice of the Emperor!”

The *Inevitable Retribution* burst from the dust belt of Remonora Majoris like a leviathan from the deep, its prow breaking the surface and showering its hull in the debris of long-destroyed spacecraft. Caught unawares, two of the sleek eldar craft found themselves directly in the strike cruiser’s line of fire and soon became yet more celestial flotsam orbiting the world below. The remaining xenos vessels altered their courses and swung back around, stabbing lances of energy weapons discharge heralding their path, but bouncing futilely from the *Inevitable Retribution*’s shields. With the element of surprise on the Black Templars’ side, the battle was taking a very different course this time.

On the bridge, the iterator’s voice was reaching a crescendo, at a volume so great that the sound of alien weapons fire hitting the shields was barely audible. Through the oculus, Agentha watched as another eldar ship was torn apart by the weapons batteries of the spacefaring fortress, the darkness of space illuminated by the orange bloom of explosions. She saw two of the xenos ships peel off from the main formation and target the bridge of the strike cruiser. The first was shot down and tumbled away into the void, but the second was helmed by a pilot of some skill. The small craft jinked and swerved, deftly avoiding incoming fire while all the time keeping its weapons targeted on the bridge. The shields held, and as the eldar marauder grew overconfident, the *Inevitable Retribution*’s guns found their mark, shearing a wing from the alien ship. Even with his doom imminent, the pilot kept true to his course and in one final act of defiance attempted to ram the bridge with his ailing craft.

“Shields full forward!” the captain shouted across the bridge.

The eldar ship exploded against a wall of energy. Agentha had to cover her eyes, such was the glare from the blast, and when her vision returned, she saw that more enemy craft had peeled away from the main formation, emboldened by

their comrade's actions.

“What do we have left in the shields, captain?” the Castellan barked, struggling to be heard over the sound of klaxons and the voice of the iterator.

“That hit took a lot out of us. Down to under forty per cent.”

All of the *Inevitable Retribution's* forward-facing weapons opened up at once, putting a wall of fire between it and the eldar raiders. More of the alien craft perished, but more still broke off from the main formation until all of the xenos ships were using their superior manoeuvrability to full advantage, striking swiftly before retreating beyond the range of the Black Templars guns. Another eldar ship took a direct hit, this one spinning away and barrelling into another of its kind.

Through the oculus, Agentha saw one of the smaller ships weaving around the debris clouds and weapon discharge, mimicking the actions of the earlier vessel which had so very nearly breached the shields. Castellan Kaleb saw it too.

“All gunnery stations, target your fire on the smaller vessel,” the Castellan commanded over the ship-wide vox.

Spears of orange and yellow energy lanced towards the small alien ship, but its diminutive size made hitting it near impossible. As it closed on the bridge of the *Inevitable Retribution*, one shot came close to scoring a direct hit, but instead of eliminating the onrushing craft all it did was scorch its hull.

“Brace for impact!” Kaleb ordered as the craft sped inexorably towards the rapidly failing shields.

The last thing that Agentha heard before the blackness took her was the iterator's speech finally coming to an end.

Agentha came back to consciousness to find a Black Templars Chapter serf dressing her head wound; it had reopened during the impact. Squinting, her eyeglasses having fallen to the ground after she blacked out, she looked out through the oculus at the blackened carcasses of eldar vessels hanging in the void. From the absence of activity on the bridge, and the lack of the alert klaxons, she presumed the Black Templars had won the battle.

But another noise was absent too.

The serf tied off the bandage leaving a few strands of her auburn hair poking out from beneath it, and took his leave. She rose to a kneeling position and began to pat around on the deck, attempting to locate her eyeglasses. As she did so, a giant shadow crept over her. She looked up, expecting to find Chaplain Gerataus, but instead saw Castellan Kaleb. His massive hand was outstretched

and in his palm lay her eyeglasses, one lens cracked but otherwise intact. She took the proffered optics and pushed them snugly onto her nose.

“The signal? Did it—?” She began, but broke off when she saw where the Castellan was pointing.

There, off to one side of the bridge sat the smashed remains of the vox-array, Chaplain Gerataus’s crozius arcanum embedded in it.

Agentha looked up at the Castellan, who smiled down at her sadly. “Brother Atreus. Please escort Sister Agentha back to her chambers,” he commanded. Atreus nodded and was quickly by her side. Agentha readjusted her robes slightly and wiped her fingers down them, leaving red smears in their wake.

“And Sister?” the Castellan said just as she was on the threshold of the bridge. She turned back to see the Black Templar still wearing that same sad smile. “Please try and stay out of the Chaplain’s way for the rest of your voyage with us.”

Agentha simply pushed her eyeglasses back up the bridge of her nose and took her leave.



**WARHAMMER**

# **BLOODWALKER**

A tale of Malus Darkblade

*C L Werner*

Ice cracked beneath the heavy, loping tread of the nauglir as it stalked through the snowdrifts. The cold one's breath turned to mist with each shuddering exhalation, its horned head undulating from side to side with almost mechanical monotony. The brute's ribs stood stark against its scaly hide, the steel barding lashed about its body sliding back and forth with each step. Oily froth trickled from the corners of its fanged mouth, freezing as it dangled from its jaws.

The armoured rider in the nauglir's saddle ran a gloved hand along the beast's neck. Leaning forwards, he spoke reassuring words to his weary steed.

"Not much farther, Spite," he said, his voice crackling with exhaustion. "A few more days. Only a few more days and we will be home."

Spite gave no sign that it heard its master's voice, merely maintaining the steady league-eating trot the cold one had maintained for so many days. The lack of response troubled the nauglir's master more than any surly snarl or angry hiss could have. It was a sign that Spite was reaching the limits of its formidable endurance. The cold ones were beasts of the reptilian orders, capable of surviving the harsh cold of Naggaroth only by gorging themselves frequently, their metabolisms using the food to maintain their body heat. Without a steady supply of fresh meat, a nauglir would become steadily more lethargic until, finally, it dropped in its tracks.

It had been days since Spite had last fed. The nauglir's scaly hide felt like ice beneath its master's hand. The reptile couldn't go on for much longer. Once his steed fell, its rider's chances of survival wouldn't be worth an asur's life in Har Ganeth.

There was one thing that gave Malus Darkblade some hope. For all its seeming mindlessness, Spite was moving with purpose and direction. Once before, the

nauglir had made this bold, lonely journey. Even more than its master, the reptile's brain bore the impression of the long trail that would lead it to Hag Graef. The long trail that would again put the cursed Temple of Tz'arkan behind them.

A hot rush of anger warmed the elf's cold flesh as he thought of the scheming daemon that has used him, used him to unleash itself upon the mortal world after millennia trapped within its own temple. For a year, Tz'arkan had coerced and manipulated him, lurking inside his own body, spreading its corruption through his flesh. And when it was through with him, when it had no further use for him, the daemon had betrayed him. It had sought his life, but it had taken only his soul.

The eyes of the highborn were frozen windows of hate as he thought of what Tz'arkan has stolen from him. His hand closed about the hilt of his sword, not for the first time wondering if he might not have fared better with a lesser weapon in his final confrontation with the daemon. A mortal blade wouldn't have forced Tz'arkan to abandon its attack. Only a relic of such power as the Warsword of Khaine could have made the mighty daemon know fear. Without it, Malus would be dead.

But perhaps death was more merciful than life without a soul.

A scowl twisted the druchii's hawkish features. All his life he had struggled against the world. He would not give up now. He would not meekly submit to the cold clutch of Death. If the gods desired an end of Malus Darkblade, they would have to work for it.

Malus snapped from his thoughts as he felt Spite's body go tense beneath his caressing hand. The highborn braced himself to leap from the saddle, thinking the nauglir was about to pitch over into the snow. An instant's reflection, however, had him drawing his sword instead. Spite had long been his steed and he knew the reptile's every manner and motion better than the back of his own hand. When he saw the nauglir's neck rigid, its head pointing steadily towards a stand of snow-covered pines, he knew it was not fatigue that had changed the cold one's attitude. Spite had caught a scent upon the breeze. The scent of an enemy.

No sooner had his sword cleared its sheath than the highborn's lurking foes exploded from their hiding places. Crossbow bolts whistled through the air, glancing from Malus's armour and Spite's barding, one missile tearing through the scaly ridge of the nauglir's tail. A fluid curse rolled across the wind, bemoaning the ineffectual marksmanship. Then the ambushers came charging

out onto the snow, determined to finish with sword and spear what they had failed to accomplish with crossbows.

There were five of them, lean druchii in steel dalakoi and long flowing khaitans of black silk. Tall helms with sharply angled bevors and flowing razor-edged horns obscured the visages of each elf, but there was no mistaking the crimson-scaled cold ones they rode, or the bat-winged device branded into each reptile's scaly hide. It was the device of the Black Ark of Naggor, Har Ganeth's most bitter rival and enemy.

"Dogs of Naggor!" Malus shouted at the charging elves. "Come and embrace death!"

The highborn dug his spurs into Spite's flanks. The nauglir reared back, its foreclaws pawing at the air, then lurched forwards in a loping sprint. The smell of battle, the sight of foes, invigorated the faltering reptile, pouring fresh strength into its weakened body. Malus clung to the brute's reins, pressing his legs close to Spite's sides. He knew his steed's wind wouldn't last long. If he would survive, he had to exterminate his enemies before Spite exhausted itself and collapsed beneath him.

The warriors of Naggor thundered onwards, their cold ones hissing their fury as they bore down upon the highborn. Malus could hear the silver keikalla jangling against their armour, the little spirit bells proclaiming his foes to be knights rather than common killers. Any pretensions to honour were quashed, however, when another crossbow bolt went whistling past Darkblade's ear. One of the knights hadn't abandoned his crossbow, but was instead hanging back to allow his fellows to engage Malus while he reloaded his weapon.

Such slinking treachery brought a sharpness into Malus's eyes and murderous determination into his veins. If he was fated to die upon this blighted patch of wasteland, his killer wouldn't be the cowardly bowman.

A flash of the Warsword and the foremost of Malus's antagonists toppled from his saddle, his helmet cleft in half by the magic blade. The dead elf's boot caught in one of the stirrups and as his cold one sprinted away it dragged the corpse after it.

Snarling like an enraged panther, the second of the knights rushed Malus, striking at him from his left side before the highborn had recovered from killing the first Naggorite. The elf's blade glanced from Malus's vambrace as he blocked the blow. Then the Warsword was driving down at the knight. Malus's foe tried to emulate the same tactic as the highborn, to turn aside the blow with his steel vambrace. Unlike the Naggorite's sword, however, Malus's weapon bit

through the thick armour, shearing through it like paper and cleaving the arm beneath. The Naggorite howled in agony, dropping his sword as he clutched at the spurting stump. Mortally wounded, he sagged low in his saddle as his nauglir dashed across the snowfield.

Another bolt came flying at Malus, this time punching into him with enough velocity that it dented the armour above his heart. Pain flared across his chest as the impacted metal drove the chain aketon biting into his skin. He glared at the circling opportunist, watching as the Naggorite wound back the string of his weapon.

Before Malus could charge the bowman, the other knights were upon him. Having learned better than to attack him singly, they tried to mount a coordinated assault. The tactic failed only because of the stubborn ferocity of their steeds, each cold one trying to sprint ahead of the other and claim the choicest morsels from the kill. It was in the truculence of the Naggorites' nauglir that Malus took advantage. When he kicked his heel against Spite's ribs, his steed didn't hesitate.

Far more intelligent than others of its kind, Spite obeyed the direction of its master immediately. Summoning a fresh burst of speed, the nauglir rushed past the first knight and lunged at the second, a tactic that caught both knights and their mounts by surprise. Before they could recover, Spite's leg delivered a savage, raking kick to the trailing cold one, slashing open its belly. The stricken nauglir's charge turned into a sprawling fall as it tripped over its own entrails. Its rider cried out in shock as the brute dragged him down with it, then crushed him under its scaly mass as it thrashed about in agony.

The other knight struggled to wheel his own nauglir back around. As he did so, Spite's powerful tail came whipping around, slapping across the other cold one's face. Instinctively, the reptile recoiled, rearing back and raking its foreclaws through the air in an effort to protect its own eyes. The knight could only hang on and curse his steed's panic, fighting to regain control over the reptile.

It took the Naggorite only a moment to assert himself, but in that moment, Malus had closed upon him. The Warpsword came slashing at the knight, crunching through his shoulder, splitting the pauldron, hewing through steel and flesh and bone. The magically keen blade didn't stop until it had cut clean through the elf's body and sheared away the top of his steed's skull. Rider and reptile sank to the earth, the centre of a spreading patch of crimson snow.

Malus turned away from his slaughtered foe, looking for the crossbowman.

“Khaine’s Blood,” he cursed when he found no sign of the last Naggorite. Seeing the destruction of his comrades, the last knight had fled back into the safety of the woods. Briefly, Malus considered tracking the elf down, but he could feel Spite stumble when he tried to turn it towards the trees. The nauglir had reached its limits and beyond. Reluctantly, the highborn gave the beast its head and allowed it to stagger over to one of the dead reptiles.

As a rule, the only flesh a cold one would refuse was that of another cold one. The druchii who rode the reptiles into battle had to smear their bodies with a poisonous ointment to keep them safe from the rapacious appetites of their monstrous steeds. Spite, however, was too hungry to observe such proprieties and tore into the dead nauglir with savage abandon. It was all Malus could do to keep his steed from devouring the poisoned flesh of the dead knight as well.

“Eat up,” Malus told his steed. He again cast his eyes about, half expecting another steel bolt to come whistling at him from the trees. He had been driving Spite hard in his effort to reach Hag Graef quickly, but with warriors of Naggor on the prowl, the time for speed was past. Now he had to be more cautious. And the first rule of caution was to find a safe place where Spite and himself could rest and recover from their long journey.

“The stronghold of Yrkool should be near here,” Malus judged as he studied the range of mountains looming in the west.

The highborn smiled grimly and stroked the neck of his steed. “Feed quickly, Spite. I fear we have a little way yet before either of us can rest.”

The last of the Naggorites dismounted from the saddle of his cold one. The armoured knight stood staring at the snow-covered pines which surrounded him, watching for any sign of movement, his ears sharp for even the slightest sound that might indicate pursuit.

The druchii felt sickness boil at the pit of his stomach as he considered the carnage Darkblade had wrought upon them. Five of the Black Ark’s most lethal warriors, and their enemy had abused them like trussed slavelings on the way to Khaine’s altar. Belladon could have sent twenty knights and they might not have been enough. Five against Darkblade had been nothing less than suicide.

Or perhaps that had been the hag’s intention. Suspicion roared through the elf’s heart as he wondered if the witch hadn’t intended for the knights to succeed, if the ambush had been engineered to eliminate *them*, not the highborn.

Angrily, the druchii stripped away one of his gauntlets and flung it down into the snow. His nauglir hissed hungrily as the elf raked the edge of his knife across

his palm and brought blood bubbling up from the torn flesh. The reptile grew quiet, however, as its master clenched his fist and sent bloody beads dripping onto the ground. Sibilant words rasped across the elf's tongue and the air around him began to shimmer with an icy haze. The cold one slapped its long tail against the trees, even its primitive mind unsettled by the arcane taint of sorcery.

In a matter of moments, a small puddle of blood had formed in the snow at the knight's feet. The druchii glared down at the crimson liquid. The words of his incantation fell silent as the image of a face stared back at him from the surface of the puddle. It was a cruel, hard visage, possessed of an infernal beauty at once alluring and terrifying. The knight shuddered as he felt the pitiless eyes staring back at him. Few were they who could meet the gaze of Belladon, Hag of Naggor.

"I see failure in your face," Belladon's lips formed the words, though no sound issued from the puddle.

The knight clenched his fist, anger racing through him as Belladon reprimanded him. "He cut through us like a raging manticore," the elf reported. "You should have sent more warriors."

Belladon's expression darkened. "Do not question me. You were given the resources to accomplish your purpose."

"The others are dead and the enemy escaped," the knight stated, striving to keep accusation from his tone.

"It was Malus Darkblade?" Belladon asked.

The knight nodded. "It was Eldire's witch-spawn."

The face in the puddle smiled. "That is all I needed to know. You have accomplished your purpose. Another will take up the hunt now."

Belladon's eyes hardened, her slender hands crossing before her lips, fingers splayed in a complex pattern. For an instant, the knight felt fear well up inside him, but before he could act upon the emotion it was too late. The witch's spell already had him in its coils.

Passing through the puddle of blood, invisible tendrils of magic wrapped themselves about the knight, seeping through his armour and permeating his flesh. Agonising pain roared through the druchii's body and he fell to his knees, screaming. Blood gushed from his nose, from his eyes, from his ears. A stream of gore bubbled over his lips, spilling into the snow. The hideous stream flowed into the little puddle, rapidly expanding its dimensions. By the time the knight's body was bled dry and his corpse collapsed, a pond of steaming gore stained the ground.

Now masterless, the nauglir hissed angrily at the pond, smelling the stink of sorcery rising from it. The reptile lashed its tail in fright, then turned and ran off into the fastness of the forest.

From the depths of the pool, a figure began to form. Inch by inch it grew, taking substance from the knight's blood. As its head took shape, rising from broad shoulders, two burning eyes boiled up from the pits of its skull and cast their vicious gaze upon the desiccated husk of the dead druchii. Fangs gnashed together in a hungry leer as the daemon contemplated the carrion. It lifted a half-formed arm from the edge of the pool, reaching for the corpse.

Then, reluctantly, the daemon drew back. There was a compulsion it had to fulfil before it could glut its appetite. It had to accomplish the task set before it by the one who had conjured it into the mortal world.

It had to find Malus Darkblade.

After hours following the almost invisible forest trails, it was with a supreme sense of relief that Malus saw the black walls of Yrkool suddenly appear through a break in the trees. The stronghold stood upon a small rise, a pinnacle of rock amid the sprawl of the forest. The pines had been cleared away from the fort, placing it at the centre of a half-mile-wide clearing. Banners bearing the heraldry of Hag Graef flanked the simple stone road leading up to the fort's massive darkwood doors. As Spite walked along the road, Malus noted the long stakes interspersed between the banners, each pole topped with a bleached skull. Druchast letters were cut into each forehead, proclaiming the skull that of a traitor, trespasser or outlaw. Malus's hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, as he wondered if any of these titles had been added to his name since last he'd walked the streets of his city.

The musical cry of a horn brought his eyes back to the fort. A body of armoured elves had appeared on the walls, something Malus had expected from such a lonely outpost. A closer look revealed no weapons in their hands, however, which was far more surprising. The trumpeting call of the horn wasn't sounding an alarm, but proclaiming welcome. While he watched, the huge doors of the fortress were drawn inwards and a troop of druchii soldiers filed out onto the road. They formed columns on either flank, arms crossed over their chests in the ancient gesture of respect and honour. An elf in ornate armour and wearing a flowing cloak of finest human leather stood between the two columns, his arm extended in greeting.

"My Lord Malus!" the druchii commander called out, his accent that of Hag

Graef's lower nobility. "It is an honour unparalleled for the castellan of Yrkool to welcome such a highborn into its humble halls."

Malus cast an appraising gaze over the castellan, taking Spite's reins and stopping the cold one on the road. What was the commander's game, he wondered? Did the elf hope to weasel favours from him as a reward for Yrkool's hospitality or was he playing some deeper game? Perhaps he hoped to ingratiate himself into Malus's good graces and secure a position in the highborn's retinue, or at least a posting somewhere less forsaken than Yrkool? Lesser druchii had nurtured such ambitions, Malus reflected, thinking of Hauclir, the late captain of Hag Graef's Spear Gate.

"Forgive the spartan reception," the castellan said, walking down the path, his hands spread to either side and well away from the swords belted about his waist. "My scouts only noted your approach a league from the clearing. I fear this was the best I could arrange on such short notice."

Malus favoured the castellan with the faintest hint of a nod. "I have travelled a long way," he said, urging Spite onwards. "My first priority is food and rest. We can discuss any deficiencies in your courtesy later." The highborn directed his most imperious stare at the smiling castellan. It was a look that had never failed to send servants and retainers hurrying to carry out his demands.

The castellan, however, simply continued to smile. When Malus saw the elf direct a sidewise glance at his soldiers, the highborn brought his spurs kicking into Spite's flanks. Whatever trickery the castellan was up to, he would be the first victim of it.

Before Spite had gone more than a few feet, however, the nauglir crashed onto the paving stones. In drawing closer to the fort, Malus had come abreast of the soldiers. At the castellan's motion, these had thrown open their hands, flinging what looked like dust across the road. Spite's charge carried it full into the yellow cloud.

Malus recognised the dust as soon as he noted its colour. It was the powder used by hunters to subdue cold ones in their subterranean lairs. It had a soporific effect upon nauglir, rendering them helpless for hours. Spite crumpled beneath Malus, stricken so swiftly it didn't even utter a sound. The highborn tried to throw himself from the saddle, but was too slow to leap clear. When Spite slammed against the ground, his leg was pinned beneath his steed.

"Take him alive!" the castellan shouted at his soldiers. "He's worth nothing to me dead!"

Malus ripped his sword free from its sheath, hewing through the arm of the

first soldier to close upon him. Then he felt bright stabbing pain explode through his skull as the pommel of a sword was driven against the back of his head. The shock numbed his fingers and before he could recover another soldier was wrestling the Warpsword from his weakened grip.

“Try not to damage his face,” the castellan ordered as a mass of soldiers used the pommels and flats of their swords to batter Malus into submission.

“The Drachau will want to recognise Darkblade when he is executed.”

Nehloth ran a covetous hand along the Warpsword’s scabbard. It didn’t take someone versed in the ancient history of Ulthuan and the elven gods to recognise a blade of quality. Even less so when he had seen with his own eyes the way the sword had sheared effortlessly through bone and steel.

The castellan leaned back in his chair, glancing apprehensively at the grim walls of his war room. There was no telling how many of his garrison were spies for the Drachau or one of the highborn families of Hag Graef. Any one of them might send word back to the Hag about his capture of Malus. That didn’t worry him; the druchii was an outcast and kinslayer. No one would mourn him when he was gone. Indeed, the Drachau probably would have him executed... if Nehloth returned him to the Hag.

He wouldn’t, of course. As much as the Drachau might like to see Malus disposed of, the witchlords of Naggor wanted his head even more. It was something Nehloth’s own patron was counting on. Lord Severin was the Drachau’s favoured son, but the highborn wasn’t content with his lot. He intended to become Slavemaster of Hag Graef and wasn’t willing to wait. Towards that end, Severin had been secretly negotiating with the Naggorites, seeking the support of the witchlords in securing his father’s throne. Yrkool, closest of the Hag’s outposts to the Black Ark, was an important rendezvous for the conspirators and Nehloth was deep in Severin’s confidences.

Not so deep, however, that he was willing to let a weapon like the Warpsword slip through his fingers. The castellan would keep that for himself. When he sent word to the Naggorites about Malus’s capture, they would be waiting to ambush the prisoner when Nehloth sent a few of his soldiers to take him back to the Hag. The escort would be killed, of course, and the only ones around to refute the castellan’s claims that the Warpsword had been sent along with Darkblade would be the Naggorites—and even their ally Severin wouldn’t believe them.

Yes, Nehloth reflected, it had been a very profitable day. All that was left was to send a messenger to Lord Severin, advising him of Malus’s capture. A mere

formality; the castellan already knew what was expected of him, but he knew Severin would take issue if he didn't keep him informed every step of the way.

A light snow was drifting down into Yrkool's courtyard when the messenger was ready to depart. Nehloth watched the elf exit the barracks, muffled in a heavy wolfskin cloak. The castellan knew he could trust this soldier to perform his duty. The elf was one of Severin's sworn retainers and the oaths he had made to his lord were so terrible they would make even the Dark Mother blanch.

From his position overlooking the courtyard, Nehloth nodded to the messenger as he mounted his horse. As the elf rode towards the great gates, the castellan gave the order for them to be opened. It was a foolish custom, but at night only a direct command from the castellan could open those gates. The druchii soldiers were well aware of the gruesome penalty for disobeying that custom.

As the gates swung open, however, Nehloth's elves had something far more gruesome to occupy their thoughts. Standing just beyond the portal, its eyes glowing in the darkness, was a monstrous shape. Twice the height of an elf, its blood-coloured body glistening with wet sliminess in the moonlight, the thing sprang into motion the moment the gates swung wide, its claws sweeping out for the horrified messenger.

Colour drained from Nehloth's face as he saw the monster bring its claws together, one to either side of the messenger's head. There was a gut-churning crunch as the druchii's skull disintegrated between the creature's palms. The elf's body quivered a moment after it toppled into the snow. Another sweep of the monster's claws sent the messenger's decapitated horse collapsing beside him.

To their credit, the soldiers at the gate didn't flee even after witnessing their comrade's horrible demise. With the martial discipline demanded of all Naggaroth's warriors, they rushed at the monster. The beast hovered over those it had killed, its slimy hide rippling with obscene life as it savoured its handiwork.

The spear of the first soldier to reach it stabbed clean through its waist. That of the second punched into its side. A third warrior slashed at it with his sword, hacking into its knee.

The monster rounded upon the elves who had attacked it, eyes burning malignantly from its skull-like visage. Long fangs clacked together as slimy lips pulled back in a sadistic grin. The wounds its attackers had visited upon it were already closing; in the blink of an eye its crimson skin was without the faintest trace of injury. The same could not be said for the beast's attackers. Their

screams echoed across the fort as the monster literally tore them limb from limb.

Now the horn sounded the alarm, elves rushed from the barracks, crossbowmen manned the walls. Two score druchii warriors converged upon the slimy abomination, glaring with hate as they saw the carnage it had inflicted.

Nehloth retreated back inside Yrkool's keep, his body trembling in terror. Forty warriors or four hundred, he knew the garrison had no chance against the monster. He had dealt with the Naggorites long enough to recognise one of their daemons—the hell-fiend they called the Bloodwalker. No mortal blade could harm the daemon. No spell could turn it aside. It existed only to track down the one it had been sent to find—and it would enjoy killing everything that got in its way.

The castellan rushed back into his war room, seizing the Warpsword from where it rested on the table. Mortal steel might be ineffectual against the Bloodwalker, but a magic blade might pierce its unholy essence. Nehloth turned in alarm as the door to the war room was flung open, but was relieved to find only his terrified adjutant, not the rampaging daemon.

“The monster is slaughtering the garrison!” the elf fairly shrieked. “We must flee!”

“And have the Drachau after us for deserting the fort?” Nehloth sneered. “No. We will fight the daemon!”

“With what?”

Nehloth stroked the Warpsword, then frowned. The magic blade might indeed work against the Bloodwalker, but was he willing to risk his own life to find out? Even as he asked himself the question, a cunning gleam entered his eye.

“Come!” Nehloth ordered. “There is a proposition I want to make to our prisoner.”

Malus stared incredulously at Nehloth as the castellan knelt beside him in the dank squalor of the dungeon. “You want me to do what?”

“I want you to defend Yrkool,” Nehloth repeated. The daemon doesn't much care who it kills. You can die down here in chains when it comes for you or die like a druchii with a blade in your hand.”

“My blade,” Malus said. He had not failed to notice that the castellan carried the Warpsword. Nehloth nodded in agreement.

“With the understanding that you will return it to me,” he said. “I want your oath, Malus Darkblade, that you will defend Yrkool against this daemon. When it is vanquished, I shall allow you to leave—after you have returned the sword.”

Nehloth craned his head to one side, listening as a thin shriek drifted down to the dungeon from the courtyard. “I want you to swear by your mother’s soul, Darkblade, that you will abide by our pact.”

The words stabbed into Malus like a dagger. Of all the oaths Nehloth could have demanded, there was none that could pain him more. Better than any living druchii, he knew what it meant to forsake one’s soul.

“You have my word,” Malus snarled. “Now undo these chains before the daemon brings this whole fort crashing down on our heads.”

Nehloth grinned as he unlocked Malus’s chains, almost sneering as he handed the highborn his blade. In the back of his mind, the castellan wondered if the Bloodwalker had been sent not to destroy Yrkool, but to kill Darkblade. If so, then whatever happened, the castellan would win.

The courtyard was a scene of carnage when Malus emerged from the keep. Great blocks of stone had been ripped from the outbuildings and hurled at the battlements, smashing the crossbowmen into crimson rags. Fire raged unchecked in the barracks, devouring its timber roof. Horses screamed as the flames reached out to claim the stables. The ground was strewn with mangled bodies, mutilated in a fashion that even the highborn had never imagined possible. Streams of blood oozed through the snow, crawling with unnatural life to flow towards the Bloodwalker’s feet. Whenever the streams touched the daemon, the monster’s eyes blazed and its body glistened with hellish light. The daemon’s skin writhed and rippled as it absorbed the blood of its victims.

Malus drew the Warpsword and pondered his next move. The Bloodwalker was busy grinding the face of a soldier into a bloody smear on the wall of the keep, but the moment the highborn stepped out into the courtyard, it lost interest in its savage amusement. The burning eyes of the daemon fixed upon Malus and its long fangs clacked together in a hungry snap.

“Not good,” the highborn cursed as the daemon lunged towards him. After the beating the soldiers had given him, Malus’s body was too sore to react with its usual quickness. The daemon’s claw licked out, raking across the highborn’s arm. Malus felt an electric shock burn through his body as the daemon’s talons tore open his skin. Blood oozed from the wound, rushing with unnatural speed towards the daemon’s body.

Malus struck at the Bloodwalker with his blade, the ancient relic slashing across its forearm. The daemon recoiled, howling in pain as black steam boiled from the cut. At the same instant, the stream of blood pulsing from Malus’s

wound slowed to a more natural trickle.

The highborn brought his sword slashing at the daemon's claw as it came at him again. The Bloodwalker, however, had learned this blade could hurt it. Displaying inhuman agility, the daemon rolled inside the sweep of Malus's sword. Its claw smashed into his breastplate, hurling him across the courtyard as though he'd been shot from a ballista. Sparks flickered through the druchii's vision as he crashed against the flagstones.

The daemon stalked towards him, fangs exposed in a murderous grin. Malus struggled up from the ground, but he knew his battered body was moving too slowly to escape the monster.

Deliverance came from an unexpected source. Unwisely peering out from the keep to see how Malus was faring, Nehloth's adjutant made the mistake of catching the daemon's attention. The slight motion of the elf's head in the doorway brought the daemon wheeling about, pouncing on the adjutant like a raging lion. Viciously, the Bloodwalker savaged its victim, forgetting about the highborn entirely.

The grisly scene brought inspiration to Malus. Turning towards the burning stables, the highborn made a valiant dash across the courtyard. The Bloodwalker spotted him when he was passing the keep and with a ghoulish howl, it dropped the mangled adjutant and charged after its quarry.

Malus reached the stable doors an instant ahead of the daemon. He could see the portals rattling as the panicked horses kicked at them from within. Glancing back at the daemon, he brought his sword slashing down, chopping the steel bar holding the doors shut.

A dozen terrified horses leaped into the courtyard, smoke and flame billowing behind them. The daemon howled again, lashing out at the beasts as they rushed past it, blood-lust blazing in its eyes.

Malus left the thing to chase the horses. Throwing a hand before his face to shield it from the smoke, he forced his way into the burning stable. Above the crack of flames and the pop of burning timber, he could hear the furious shrieks of Spite. With as much haste as his bruised muscles could muster, Malus ran towards the source of the shrieks.

He found Spite chained by a neck-ring to a massive block of granite in a stall at the back of the stable. Burning debris showered down around the reptile, singeing its scales. The cold one snapped angrily at the flames licking down at it from the ceiling, trying to attack its tormentor.

"I have need of you, old friend," Malus coughed. A single stroke of the

Warpsword snapped the chain. For an instant Spite seemed more inclined to attack the flames than follow its master, but the nauglir quickly reverted to its training.

Climbing onto Spite's back, Malus turned the reptile towards the doors. He had seen that the Warpsword could hurt the daemon—what he couldn't overcome in his condition was its speed. But with a steed under him, the situation had changed.

With flames and smoke billowing about it, Spite charged out from the inferno like a fiend spat from hell. The Bloodwalker spun around, ignoring the horse it had caught. The daemon howled and bared its fangs.

“Let's try this again, shall we?” Malus snarled, raising the Warpsword high. Spite dropped into a crouch, its powerful legs becoming like steel coils. With a terrific display of strength, the cold one sprang at the rushing daemon. The reptile's lunge carried it clear over the Bloodwalker. As Spite passed the daemon, Malus struck, the enchanted edge of the Warpsword cleaving through its neck.

Malus was nearly thrown by the impact of Spite's landing, but he managed to retain sufficient control to not only keep his place, but even turn the nauglir around to face their stricken enemy. The highborn smiled coldly as the decapitated daemon swayed unsteadily upon its cloven feet. As he watched, the slimy body began to disintegrate, melting into a pool of blood and offal.

“You did it! You actually did it!” The castellan emerged from the keep, gawking with disbelief. Nehloth's exclamation brought the few surviving soldiers creeping out from their hiding places. Malus cast a disgusted glance at the survivors.

“You asked me to save Yrkool from the daemon,” Malus stated.

“You have honoured your oath,” Nehloth replied. “We will make no effort to hold you now.”

Malus wasn't sure if there was treachery in the castellan's words, not that he cared. The elf was already dead and had been the moment he'd extracted that oath from him. “You asked me to save Yrkool from the daemon.” His gaze bore into Nehloth's eyes. “But who will save the fort from *me*?”

Malus Darkblade turned his back on the ruins of Yrkool, spurring Spite into the shelter of the forest. Between himself and the daemon, the garrison had been slaughtered to a soldier. Even Nehloth, who had been quite discomfited when the Warpsword was returned to him, blade first and through his chest.

Malus rued the petty hate that had made him kill the castellan out of hand. He should have taken his time, learned if the fool had truly been acting in the Drachau's name when he had tried to arrest him. If so, then it would inflict some adjustment to his plans about returning to Hag Graef.

Even more troubling had been the presence of the daemon. Had the fiend descended upon Yrkool by mere chance, or had there been purpose behind its rampage? Perhaps it had been following him ever since Malus left the Wastes. More troubling, perhaps it had been dispatched by Tz'arkan to hunt him down.

The very thought of such a possibility turned Malus colder than the snow falling around him. The Bloodwalker was dead, destroyed by the Warpsword. Whatever its purpose, it would trouble him no more.

Ebon wings hovered above the ruins of Yrkool, great demi-reptiles that bore armoured warriors upon their backs. In an instant, they circled the clearing, searching for any tracks. Whatever impressions there had been were lost under the fresh snow.

One of the warriors reached beneath the folds of his wyvern-hide cloak and drew forth a golden pendant, a huge bloodstone gleaming at the centre of the talisman. The cruel beauty of Belladon stared from the depths of the jewel.

"My Lady Belladon," the Naggorite said, his voice betraying a tinge of fear. "We have searched the fortress. There is no sign of Darkblade. Much of the fort is burned. He may have perished in the fire."

"He lives," Belladon's words hissed through the Naggorite's mind. "And while he lives, he is a threat to Witchlord Bale."

"But we do not know where he has gone," the Naggorite protested.

From behind the bloodstone, Belladon's expression hardened. The Bloodwalker found Malus once; now that it has tasted his blood, it can do so again. Land your doom-wings in the courtyard. Choose the least useful of your witchguard.

"I'm afraid I will need some of his blood when I call the daemon back."





# SHADOW PLAY

An Inquisitor Czevak story  
*Rob Sanders*

Inquisitor Bronislaw Czevak exchanged the exotic gloom of the webway for the darkness absolute of the death world forest. Without light to navigate by, the inquisitor closed the armoured covers of his map—the *Atlas Infernal*—and allowed it to fall to his side on its leather shoulder strap. The static of dimensional transference died behind him, leaving Czevak in the thick, warm darkness of Umbra-Epsilon V. Everything was black. Indeed, the only way to tell the sky from the horizon was the star-pricked smear of haze that seemed to spread across the above and beyond like oil on water—for Umbra-Epsilon belonged to the dreadspace of the Eye.

About him, Czevak could see nothing, but it was a loud and predatory nothingness. The night forests not only creaked with ambulatory plants and mega-flora but it was also the setting for a carnivorous arms race. A layered cacophony of alien roars betrayed different species of death world killers, haunting the midnight jungle. Calls of aggression, territoriality and the agony of transmutation, as the monsters out-evolved each other for supremacy in the dark, under the Eye of Terror's corrupting influence.

Cranking a chunky lamp, the inquisitor watched as the environment about him retracted, with both plants and predators withdrawing like the feelers of a slug at the horror of brightness. Czevak saw that everything—the leaves hanging from the night forest trees, the gangling insects droning inbetween, the fang-riddled hunters and their brute prey—all appeared different shades of darkness. As the death world's bleak and tiny sun rocketed up into the sky, Czevak witnessed a further, habitual retraction of the night forest flora and fauna. He saw that nothing living on Umbra-Epsilon V had much in the way of pigmentation at all. The ecology all shared the same translucence that evolution usually reserved for

dwellers of the deep. The inquisitor watched the sun cut a swift path across the sickly firmament like a comet before disappearing below the opposite horizon as swiftly as it had appeared. Through some perversity of the Eye, the giant, stationary death world of Umbra-Epsilon V was in fact orbited by its feeble star, rather than the other way around.

Lifting the lamp higher and turning, Czevak saw that the warp portal, through which he had just translated, was part of an arrangement of standing stones. Dipping a free hand inside his garish coat, he produced an arrangement of explosives. Like festive lights, melta bomb charges hung from a loose coil of cable. Dangling from the arrangement was the atomic clockwork timer with which the inquisitor intended to detonate the explosives. Slipping the coil over his shoulder, Czevak set to work examining the portal's transference nodes and infini-circuitry, until he realised that he had not been the only one interested in the warp portal.

Czevak found that the standing stones and their portal centrepiece were in the middle of an excavation site. Tools and digging equipment littered the monument, abandoned in the black earth. Beside them were bodies. Fresh. Human. Everywhere. As he stepped through the massacre, the inquisitor's lamp caught the dull metallic sheen of a hull, leading Czevak along the length of a bulk transport—a drop-freighter—that the inquisitor reasoned the dig-team must have outfitted for their dreadspace excursion. The open cargo bay was laden with xeno-archeological equipment and similarly decorated with bodies. The expedition was packing serious firepower, as might be expected of an excursion to the surface of a death world, but a brief inspection of the weapons—including a sniff of their barrels and ejection ports—told Czevak that many had not even been fired.

As interesting as the mystery was, Czevak had important business on Umbra-Epsilon V. He turned back towards the warp portal and his intended demolitions, but it was only a half-turn, as curiosity suddenly got the better of him.

“No,” the inquisitor said, with a finger of remonstrance. “Massacre. Death world. Massacre. Death world,” he repeated, attempting to convince himself of the foolhardiness of further investigation. Nodding, he turned slowly back for the safety of the portal and the standing stones. This was fortunate for the inquisitor, since he certainly would have slit his own throat on the wicked blade waiting behind him. Casually holding the weapon was a warrior in the spiked garb and armour of an alien raider. Czevak recognised its species immediately. Pirates. Mercenaries. Sadistic murderers, feasting on the anguish and terror of

their victims: the dark eldar were each and all of these.

Holding its helm under one arm and seething with simultaneous hatred and satisfaction, the willowy creature had crept up on the inquisitor like a shadow. The kabalite's ashen expression suggested the detestation of an entire species and the murderous gleam of its eyes spoke to its intention to hurt him without end. The inquisitor searched for the appropriate words—and not even in his own language. His time spent in the Black Library had exposed him to many accursed texts about the dark eldar, some written in their wretched tongue.

“You have me,” Czevak told it, praying to the Emperor that his poor translation hadn't communicated something more suggestive to the alien. After a heart-stopping moment, the savage smiled. It really hated him now that he had sullied its beautifully barbed language with his sluggish human tongue. The dark eldar warrior nodded and flicked the tip of the blade towards it, motioning the inquisitor to follow. Czevak felt compelled to comply.

The dark eldar were also infamous slavers. Their devotion to savage thralldom was known and feared the galaxy over. Czevak's hosts did not disappoint. The inquisitor was marched at knifepoint through the night forest to a temporary camp. The complex was guarded by kabalite warriors and the tents' canvas was flayed flesh. A collection of large orb-cages contained the raiding party's death world prizes: all manner of weird and wonderful alien lethality, subdued into servitude by dark eldar beastmasters. Rifle-clutching sharpshooters balanced above the menagerie on barbed sentry poles like stilt fishermen. Also under their wicked sights was a cage-compound containing the raiders' collection of off-world slaves.

The Imperial, the alien and the mutant were all represented among their miserable number. Each was permanently manacled to the black wraithbone bars. When not employed in back-breaking labour or sick entertainment for their dark eldar captors, the poor wretches were forced to carry sections of their own cage and assemble their imprisonment under the alien eyes and vicious whips of their slavers. Stripped of his harlequin coat, melta bombs and the *Atlas Infernal*, the inquisitor was similarly accommodated.

With the light of the death world sun a feeble gleam, there was little to tell between the rapid passing of day and night. Just as regular, Czevak had started to note during the first hours of his incarceration, were the horrific screams of dark eldar warriors. The inquisitor assumed that they were being taken by death world predators, prompting him to find unexpected comfort in his imprisonment. In

Czevak's section of cage the inquisitor found he had been manacled with a merchant officer—the lame master of a raided sprint trader—and a dark-skinned brute who looked like he could lift the cage-compound all by himself. Bare-chested and dressed only in labouring slacks, Czevak identified him as a surviving member of the slaughtered dig-team. Around his head, like a crown, the xeno-archeological labourer bore a distinctive tattoo: a serpent wound around his skull in a circle, attempting to devour itself. Czevak had seen such markings before, on the puppets of Ahzek Ahriman, engaged in the sorcerer's demented and unrelenting search for the Black Library of Chaos.

“Bronislaw,” the inquisitor introduced himself. He thought it best not to use his title and full name.

“Huggan,” the officer told him. “Master of the *Euryliad*”.

Czevak looked to the cultist, but he said nothing.

“He doesn't seem to talk much,” Huggan said by way of explanation.

Czevak looked about the cage-compound. The thick wraithbone bars and the alien sharpshooters were the only things preventing the death world fauna feasting on the slaves and for that the inquisitor was thankful. There would be no escaping its confines. He decided that his incarceration would be brief. He needed a distraction. Ironically for a distraction, something that would get him noticed.

“He'll talk to me,” the inquisitor said confidently. The cultist was not impressed with Czevak's confidence and continued to ignore him. “He's content to sit and wait because he thinks a rescue is coming.”

“Is it?” Huggan dared to hope.

“No,” Czevak said honestly. The cultist fixed him with his deep, brown eyes. The inquisitor stared back. “Ahriman will never set foot on Umbra-Epsilon V.” Wide-eyed now, the cultist's face clouded with surprise and vexation.

“What know you of the master?” the hulking cultist growled back.

“I know that the Radzner-Gheiss manuscripts—the documents detailing the position of Umbra-Epsilon V and the location of the alien warp portal—contain a small error.”

“There was no such error,” the cultist railed back. “We discovered the master's prize exactly where the manuscripts described.”

“Your copies are correct,” Czevak admitted. “Your master possesses the originals, I raided them from the Mount Avalox Repository. I paid a visit to Mount Avalox. While I was there I made a few alterations to the originals.”

“You lie...”

“Your master isn’t coming,” Czevak said. “He will not arrive to rescue his loyal servants and he isn’t en route to take possession of your portal prize.”

“How do you know such things?” the brute demanded, his building anger causing him to quake and his wraithbone wrist restraint to rattle on the bars.

“Because I’m here to destroy it,” the inquisitor told him.

The cultist roared and lurched for Czevak, reaching around a terrified Huggan, his great hand clawing for the inquisitor’s neck. Dark eldar warriors rushed into the cage-compound, slashing at the black earth with their razorflail whips.

As the cultist released and retracted, a reptiloid appeared at the cage, latching onto the bars with the claws of two of its four scaly arms. In the other two it held Czevak’s harlequin coat, melta bombs and the *Atlas Infernal*. The inquisitor was relieved to see the artefacts. The thing was all monstrous serpent from below the waist and above the neck. Everything inbetween was clad in the barbed armour of its alien employers. Czevak knew the species as the sslyth, bodyguards and mercenaries favoured for their loyalty in the ordinarily treacherous ranks of the dark eldar.

“Bring before the mistresssssss...” The monster spoke a sibilant interpretation of dark eldar tongue and with their feet barely touching the floor, both Czevak and the cultist were freed by dark eldar warriors and ushered from the cage-compound with shard carbines buried in their backs.

Hurried through the camp of flesh-tents, with the light of the death world sun cruising bleakly across the sky, the two prisoners were taken to a large and heavily guarded master-tent. There was another scream—another loss to the host’s diminishing number—and the sslyth despatched two of their number to investigate. With the reptiloid slithering behind, the prisoners were dragged into the twilight of the pavilion. The cultist was wraithcuffed to one of the whipping grates that adorned the back of the tent, while the inquisitor was slammed down in a chair before a willowy table. He too had a pair of wraithbone binders slapped on his wrists.

The inquisitor detected kabalite warriors gathered in the shadows, as much ghoulish voyeurs as guards, and saw the sslyth bodyguard come forwards and deposit the *Atlas Infernal*, his string of bombs and his harlequin coat on the desk. From a draped entrance to a private tent beyond emerged a pair of dark eldar. Czevak stifled his disgust as the two alien women, their skin alabaster white, came out hand in clawed hand.

The first went to take the chair opposite Czevak. She was an emaciated

courtesan: smooth skin, jutting bone and barbed corsetry took her loathsome beauty to a cadaverous extreme. Her head was shaved and her eyes sharp, glinting with an inky intelligence. From their body language the dark eldar were lovers, with the second the seeming senior of the pair. A lava flow of blood-soaked hair cascaded from an arrangement on her head and tumbled down her lithe body. With the tapered fingertips of midnight gauntlets pushing the courtesan down into the seat, she turned and withdrew a few steps. The shredded satin of her loose robe drifted open with the turn to reveal the black leather of thigh-high boots, an armoured girdle and a spiked under-bodice. Her ghastly flesh was all sinewy muscle, marking the alien filth not only as the host's leader but also a warrior-athlete in her physical prime. Gladiator. Wych. One of the ruling succubi elite.

Out from the drapes shuffled a hunchback. It wore a spiked collar on a length of chain that was held by the courtesan. Its face was an armoured trap of overlapping visors, from the rear of which spilled the horror of a pulsating warp parasite. Czevak had seen such hosts before as part of his work in the Inquisition but had also witnessed the parasites flowing freely through the interdimensional webway. They were known by many names but Czevak recalled them as medusae. Highly empathic, they were capable of absorbing sensations and capturing extreme emotions in the form of a dream or memory. In the Black Library, Czevak had learned how the dark eldar prized the brainfruit as both a culinary and experiential delicacy, through which they could re-experience the pain, fear and vivid emotions of their victims. The inquisitor assumed that the hybrid was performing such a function as he sat there. The courtesan adjusted the filter on an eerie green lens set in the armoured mask, as an inquisitor might a pict-caster before an interrogation.

Czevak squinted across the table at his interrogator. The courtesan began drawing secreted knives from her corset: stilettos, lancettes, shanks, shivs, needle dirks and a selection of kris blades. Each glimmered with the hue and sticky residue of exotic toxins and alien venoms. Czevak nodded his understanding. The courtesan was a Sister of Lhilitu: skilled poisoners and experts in the art of horrible death. The inquisitor smiled. He would play her game.

Like a connoisseur, the courtesan theatrically selected her first blade. The sslyth was suddenly behind the inquisitor, its reptilian claws holding him down and pinning his bare arm to the desk. The unsmiling courtesan picked up the wired string of melta bombs with the tip of her knife and moved them out of the

inquisitor's reach. She let slip a harsh stream of alien utterance.

"Who arrrrrrre you?" the reptilian mercenary translated.

When Czevak didn't answer, the courtesan used the knife tip to pick up the harlequin coat.

"How came you by thissssss?"

"I killed the eldar harlequin wearing it," Czevak admitted brazenly. The courtesan and her savage kindred exchanged glances of surprise and hostility, although it was difficult to tell what shocked them more—the inquisitor's grand boast or the fact he had delivered it in their own foul language.

"You lie..." the courtesan hissed.

"Keep telling yourself that," Czevak said. The courtesan dropped the coat and tapped the armoured covers of the *Atlas Infernal*.

"What is this you are carrying?" the courtesan demanded.

"I wouldn't open that if I were you—"

But it was already open. Unclasping the golden lock, the poisoner allowed the heavy covers to part and the atlas-plates of stretched flesh to fall open. Rather than shriek and soul-shrivel as he had observed other eldar do, the courtesan merely frowned at the pariah's ancient blood pumping through the veins and capillaries that ran through the skin parchment. Czevak shook his head in simultaneous fascination and disappointment.

"The children of the Fall have indeed become adept at hiding their gift from She Who Thirsts," Czevak said. It wasn't a compliment. The psychic atrophy of their foul race had not only protected them from the attentions of the Chaos God Slaanesh—it fortified them against the nullifying powers of the *Atlas Infernal*. Another sunset produced another stomach-curdling scream from outside the tent. A kabalite officer jogged in to report the obvious in a hateful whisper to his succubus mistress.

"You know a good deal about our affairs for a preything," the courtesan accused, playing with her knives like a distracted child. "Now let me show you how I come by my information. My anointments are swift—but pain is its own eternity. Affliction is my art and agony its medium. You will tell me all before your end."

"Is that the venom of the lesser Nguyan skyfish?" Czevak asked with an enthusiasm that seemed out of place.

The courtesan's joyless lips parted with genuine surprise. Czevak continued. "The eggs from which, if taken in the spawning season—which I have—provide a natural antidote to the adult skyling's deadly poison."

Czevak watched the courtesan bite at her thin bottom lip with obvious frustration. Stabbing the tip of the blade into the desk, she took up another in her delicate hand. The inquisitor sniffed at the air.

“The Mount St. Hesta steam traps,” Czevak announced, his eyes closed and nostrils flared. “A natural volcanic laboratory of the most lethal toxins for twenty systems in any direction. You’ve opted for a discharge colloquially known as mother’s milk. It can be neutralised with a combination of sulphurpetre and nova lotus—which fortunately I have already taken recently as part of a Methuselan water seasoning.”

The courtesan snatched up knife after knife, each time with the poison lacing the blade correctly identified and antidote supplied.

“...a medley of molecular eutrophicants...”

“...deadly voidshade...”

“...the harvested phosphor-proteins from Fornaxian blindmites...”

“...simple chronoflax...”

“...hydromimetic acid, no wait—soulbane...”

As Czevak played with his poisoner, the death world sun rose and fell. Darkness intruded upon the tent, as well as the screams of the taken. The armoured forms of kabalites entered, the remaining dark eldar sentries having fallen back.

“Explain yourself,” the succubus demanded with an imperious snarl.

A kabalite commander scanned the darkness beyond with his splinter pistol before following his warriors in through the tent entrance.

“Mistress,” the officer began, “something unseen stalks us in the forest.”

“It’s a death world,” the courtesan shrieked, turning her fury with Czevak on the commander. “Everything’s stalking something.”

“It is one with the darkness,” the warrior insisted.

“So are we!” the poisoner screeched. “This sack of flesh is behind this. I’m sure of it and he’ll be telling me how shortly.”

“This isn’t me,” Czevak told her, shaking his head. The back of the courtesan’s hand slapped the inquisitor’s face aside, her sharpened nails drawing blood across one cheek. Czevak leant forwards and with the finger of one cuffed hand dabbed blood from his cheek onto his tongue. “Hive spiderpede venom,” the inquisitor told her. “Blisters, delirium, necrosis, death.” Czevak smiled. “Ordinarily.”

The courtesan turned her fury back on the commander.

“I don’t know what Archon Myzrioch expected of you but he is dead—by my

hand—and his expectations died with him. You live for your mistress, Lelith Hesperax, now. You and your turncoats face possible death in the night forest or certain death here. You choose.”

The commander looked from the courtesan to his wych mistress. Lowering his head uncertainly he started backing out of the tent door. The sudden savagery of the officer’s disappearance was felt like a gut punch to all watching his exit. The night was a sea of shadow behind the kabalites and it was as if he had been snatched below its black waves by a submerged and hidden predator.

“On the door!” Lelith Hesperax yelled with succubite authority, prompting the commander’s remaining sentries to set up about the entrance with their weapons trained on the opening. Outside, bleak sunlight had briefly returned.

“You will talk!” the courtesan turned on Czevak. Slamming a bone goblet down on the desk, the courtesan poured a ruddy mixture into it from a ghoulish decanter. The liquid sizzled and spat in the cup. “Worlds like this,” the courtesan told him, “supply the kabal with slaves and beaststock. Sometimes they face the unnatural enemies of the warp and more exotic poisons are needed for our blades. They supply these also.”

“What is it?” Czevak asked.

“The blood of the warp beasts we have trapped in the night forests,” the courtesan told him. “Rarely does one substance have the potential to poison not only the body but also the mind and the soul. Now talk. What is your business with our portals and who are your friends outside? Tell me now and I promise I’ll kill you quickly. If you refuse, you can tell me between your pleadings for such a luxury, as the toxin warps your form. Consider... Are you ready to evolve?”

The inquisitor licked his dry lips.

“I’m here to destroy the warp gate,” Czevak answered honestly. “A powerful sorcerer sworn to the Dark Gods comes to this place to take possession of the artefact and mount an invasion of the webway. Nothing will stand in his way: not the seers and strike forces of the Ulthwé, nor the cult warriors of the Dark City or the roving harlequinades of the webway. He will stop at nothing until the Black Library of Chaos is his. I aim to stop him.”

The courtesan grinned. It almost cracked her face.

“You expect us to believe such a thing?” The courtesan picked up the chalice and snapped her fingers, prompting the sslyth to tighten its grip on the inquisitor.

“Wait!” Czevak blurted. “Wait!”

The poisoner hovered. “Do you have anything to go with that?” the inquisitor

asked. “A chaser of some kind, or perhaps some of those little berries on a stick?”

Grabbing the inquisitor’s face with its spare hands, the sslyth forced his mouth open. The courtesan tipped the bubbling contents of the cup into the gap between his puckered lips. The reptiloid then closed Czevak’s mouth and held his nose, forcing the corruption down his throat. The sslyth released the inquisitor and Czevak immediately doubled over, his back arched over into convulsions. The courtesan watched with satisfaction as the inquisitor struggled and a roar of agony built up inside his chest. Vomiting the ghastly liquid up onto the floor of the tent, the inquisitor sat bolt upright. The roar built into a single word.

“Rancid!” Czevak told the courtesan, wiping blood and spit from his lips. “I told you,” he said. “It needed something.” The inquisitor stood up and tossed the wraithbone binders on the desk next to the empty chalice and the *Atlas Infernal*, having deftly freed himself of them under the cover of his convulsions.

\* \* \*

“Kill him!” the courtesan shrieked, her words bringing a thicket of splinter rifle barrels up and at the inquisitor. As the death world’s feeble sun plummeted below the horizon, a deeper darkness settled in the tent. Shadows grew like ink blots, swallowing half of the enclosure’s occupants. There were screams and shouts of terror and alarm. Kabalites were enveloped in obscurity and taken by the deep darkness. The blackness snatched the dark eldar warriors and any of their kindred that attempted to deny the darkness its due. Even the powerful sslyth had succumbed, its long tail having been seized upon by something hiding in its shadow. Wrenched back by its serpentine length, the sslyth clawed at the tent floor with all four of its hands but to no avail. The shadows took it. As the mercenary disappeared, the hulking cultist began thrashing his great body against the grate, attempting to get loose of his restraints. The remaining warriors didn’t know where to aim their weapons: Czevak, the escaping cultist or everywhere else.

As darkness turned to twilight with the welcome return of the death world sun, the dark eldar found that Czevak was wearing his harlequin coat, had the *Atlas Infernal* over one shoulder on its strap and the string of melta bombs over the other.

“Hold!” Lelith Hesperax called as a dark eldar warrior aimed his weapon at the inquisitor’s back. The courtesan stared her defeat at the inquisitor.

“How?” she said.

Czevak slapped the armoured side of the *Atlas Infernal*.

He took pity on the poisoner with an explanation: “The pages exude a field of nullification. It sanitised the corruption in the cup and offers some protection against the pollutive environments of the Eye. It’s also what killed your parasite.”

The courtesan turned to find her chained voyeur dead on the ground behind her.

“The brainfruit!” she screeched in panic, descending on the corpse with one of her kris knives. She proceeded to butcher the host, harvesting the precious brainfruit of the medusa with its preserved memories, sensations and horrors.

“Time’s up,” Czevak told the wych mistress. “Are you ready to deal?”

“You think you could trust me?” Lelith Hesperax marvelled. The inquisitor ignored her.

“You will send one of your warriors to free the slaves in the cage-compound and escort them to the drop-freighter stationed near the portal. There is a merchant officer among their number who can pilot the ship.”

“And why would I do that?” Hesperax said with predacious allure.

“Because in return I’ll tell you how to save your own lives,” Czevak said.

The wych glared at him. Czevak pointed to the roof of the tent. “Tick-tock” he told her.

“What about him?” Hesperax said, pointing at the cultist.

“What are you doing?” the courtesan interrupted, clutching a transparent container of harvested brainfruit.

“He stays,” Czevak insisted.

Lelith Hesperax hesitated for a moment and then directed the warrior watching Czevak to carry out his instructions. As they waited and the frail sunlight ebbed away, the courtesan approached her lover.

“Don’t do this,” she begged. “Mistress, I can make him talk.” Her continued entreaties met with stonewalled silence and in the distance Czevak heard the powerful engines of the cultist drop-freighter rumble to life. As the inquisitor had hoped, Master Huggan and the prisoners were wasting no time getting off the death world.

“Talk,” Hesperax ordered the inquisitor.

“You mentioned that some of your warriors belonged to Archon Myzrioch.”

“This is not treachery,” Hesperax replied, sweeping her hands about the gathered kabalites and the shadowy corners beyond them.

“Oh, but it is,” Czevak asserted. “Archon Myzrioch is dead?”

“By my hand,” the poisoner piped up with dark pride before turning back to her lover. “For you...”

“Did you pay off all of Myzrioch’s warriors?”

“They could not wait to serve the Lady Hesperax.”

“What about his mercenaries?”

“Yes.”

“What about the mandrakes?” Czevak put to her.

“Myzrioch worked with shadow-kin?” the courtesan asked.

“I’ll take that as a no,” the inquisitor replied.

“So?” the succubus said. “So what? Even if Myzrioch was fool enough to engage half-daemons and shadowspawn, his bargain with the darkness has nothing to do with us.”

“They might be living shadow,” Czevak said, “but they still expect to be paid. When you took out Myzrioch, you took up his debt. They have followed you far from the Dark City here. They will not give up.”

“What do they want?” Hesperax asked, the sharp edge of her words dulled with uncertainty. Now she knew her enemy, things were less straightforward.

“How would I know?” Czevak asked with a smile

“What then?” the courtesan demanded. Czevak hesitated.

“Let them die,” the cultist rumbled behind him.

“You said you would tell us,” Hesperax snarled in accusation.

“Mistress!” the dark eldar warrior called, freshly returned from escorting the slaves to the drop-freighter. “Night is falling.”

“Tell us!” the courtesan screamed. Czevak nodded slowly to himself.

“I have read of the shadow-kin demanding the more archaic as part of their payment,” the inquisitor told her.

“What do you mean?”

“Rather than slaves and preyflesh, they sometimes ask for a heartbeat or true name.”

“How are we supposed to supply those?” the wych mistress seethed.

“I don’t know what they would do with them, but a number of times I have read of them demanding an engager’s last words.”

Hesperax looked to the courtesan, Myzrioch’s torturer, poisoner and murderer. The courtesan’s eyes were dark with panic. She reached up and touched the succubus lightly on the cheek, a delicate gesture for such a monstrous aberration.

“Mistress,” the courtesan said fearfully, “I cannot remember.”

“You don’t need to,” Czevak said. “You’re holding them in your hand.”

Looking down, the dark eldar beheld the transparent container the courtesan was holding, with the bloody brainfruit within. The courtesan had carried out her dark work—as she always did—with the parasite watching.

“I’m sorry,” the courtesan told the succubus. “I wanted you to enjoy his end.”

“I’m sorry too,” Lelith Hesperax told her lover. “Sorry that you failed me.”

In one fluid motion, the succubus landed an athletic kick on the courtesan’s chest. The poisoner screamed as she fell back, still clutching the brainfruit. The kick carried her into the black depths of the shadowy corner behind.

Night fell. There were screams and horror as the darkness took its prize.

“Well, that will be me off then,” Czevak said, taking a step towards the door. Before the sole of his boot hit the tent floor, the wych’s blade was resting across his chest.

“You thought you could trust me?” Hesperax repeated from their earlier conversation. “You have cost me dearly. There is a price to pay.”

“Isn’t there always?” Czevak agreed. He pointed at her blistered cheek, upon which the courtesan had laid a delicate hand... and sliced her with one of her poisonous nails. “Hive spiderpede venom: blisters, delirium, necrosis, death. Time really is not on your side, mistress.”

A shadow of doubt crossed the succubus’s face, a fear that had not existed there since her very earliest days in the battle colisea of the Dark City.

“Antidote?” Hesperax said, lowering the blade. The word was half threat, half request. “For anything your perverse human heart could wish for.”

“All I want,” Czevak told her, “is for you and your alien filth to leave this world as swiftly as possible.”

“Agreed,” Hesperax said.

“I mean it,” Czevak told her with an outstretched finger. “Time is not on your side. You will need every second to reach your destination and every one of your warriors to help find the antidote.”

Hesperax nodded her agreement.

“The antidote is vixine, drunk as a tea,” Czevak told her. “The heat activates its properties. You will find it on the exodite world of Ishquiel, in the petals of the darkstar flower. They’re black and can be found growing on the foothills of the mountains near the Tal-Morai gateway. Go now, in peace. And remember, wych, that I spared you.”

A ripple of hatred passed across Lelith Hesperax’s features. She half suspected that the wily human was still holding out on her. She didn’t have time for further

intrigue, of his or her own. She prompted her remaining warriors to exit the tent and make for the portal.

“Remember?” the succubus repeated back to him as she followed them.

“Don’t worry,” she assured Czevak with menace, “I won’t forget you...”

Listening to the xenos footsteps disappear into the night forest, Czevak turned to the cultist, still bound to the grate. Walking over, the inquisitor activated the runes that released the wraithbone fetters, allowing the huge acolyte to crumble to the tent floor. Czevak nodded to himself and went to leave.

“What will you do?” the cultist asked.

“Destroy the portal,” Czevak said. “With me on the other side, of course.”

“You would leave me here?”

“Yes,” the inquisitor told him as he reached the tent entrance. “But I was being uncharitable when I said Ahriman will never set foot here. He will see through the errors I left for him at Mount Avalox. You can still expect your rescue, if you live long enough.” The inquisitor went to leave. “And if you do, you can tell your sorcerous lord that Bronislaw Czevak pays his respects...”

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Gav Thorpe** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of ‘The Lion’, a novella in the collection *The Primarchs*. He has written many other Black Library books, including the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost* and audio drama *Raven’s Flight* as well as fan-favourite Warhammer 40,000 novel *Angels of Darkness* and the epic Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*. He is currently working on a new Dark Angels series, *The Legacy of Caliban*. Gav hails from Nottingham, where he shares his hideout with the evil genius that is Dennis, the mechanical hamster.

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Domiciled in the East Midlands, **C Z Dunn** is the author of the Dark Angels novella *Dark Vengeance*, the audio dramas *Ascension of Balthasar* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories. Having spent many years in the publishing industry, with a strong leaning towards genre fiction, he is an expert in e-publication, audio production and zombies.

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**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.