

# BLACK LIBRARY EVENTS ANTHOLOGY

2017/18



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# **BLACK LIBRARY EVENTS ANTHOLOGY**

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# **THE ATONEMENT OF FIRE**

**DAVID ANNANDALE**

*Imprimis: the compliance of Diavanos was entirely peaceful. It was, and is, a reminder that our Crusade is first and foremost not about conquest, but about bringing illumination to the galaxy. The people of Diavanos greeted the promulgation of the Imperial Truth with rejoicing. (Addendum: The enthusiasm did, in some quarters, approach religious fervour, up to and including claims of fulfilled prophecy. Noting and countering this tendency immediately proved effective, and it is to be regretted that early detection was not possible on Khur.)*

*Secundo: despite their long isolation during the Age of Strife, the people of Diavanos managed to maintain a rich culture. Impressions formed by walking the streets of the capital, Ecstasia, are dominated by the pronounced elegance of the stained-glass towers, whose survival to the present day is remarkable.*

*Tertio: Diavanos' contributions to the Crusade post-compliance have been substantial. Over and above its considerable mining industries, it has provided a disproportionately high number of remembrancers. Conclusion: Diavanos presents a number of characteristics, apparent during its initial compliance and since, that make it a model of the Imperium's achievement.*

- Guilliman, Notes on Diavanos: Compliance and Aftermath, clvi

## **I THE MATTER OF SIN**

The Lord of Ultramar paced the circumference of the Reclusiam on the battleship *Ultimus Mundi*. Lumen globes in sconces kept the chamber in a perpetual deep twilight, conducive to meditation. Fluted columns rose every thirty-six degrees around the wide circle of the space. The designs of their crowns varied very slightly from one to the next, inviting the eye and

concentrating the mind. In the centre of the Reclusiam, Chaplain Volusius remained perfectly still. When he spoke, his voice was low, the murmur of a deep river, prompting Guilliman's flow of reflection.

'Is the sin beyond forgiveness?' Volusius asked.

'The Imperium Secundus was usurpation,' said Guilliman. 'Intentions do not matter when the crime is this great. We do not forgive treachery.'

'This was not treachery. Treachery implies intent.'

'That hardly lessens the gravity of usurpation.'

'It alters the nature of the sin,' said Volusius. 'And you did not answer the question of forgiveness directly.'

'I did not,' Guilliman admitted.

'You seek forgiveness?'

'I desire it.'

'The Emperor's or your own?' the Chaplain probed.

'It isn't a question of receiving forgiveness,' said Guilliman. 'It is a question of earning it.'

'Earned through self-denial? By not returning to Terra, you turn away from the possibility of receiving the Emperor's forgiveness directly.'

Guilliman shook his head, uneasy. 'Our strategy is dictated by the practical. Sanguinius must confront Horus. That is his destiny.' Acknowledging the reality of fate was still difficult, but he had seen too much now to do otherwise. 'The Blood Angels must reach Terra. The break in the Ruinstorm is a narrow one. The immaterium is still too violent for long jumps, and the traitors will seek to ambush the Ninth Legion. Our fleet is the largest and most able to engage the forces that will try to stop Sanguinius.' Of this much he was sure.

'There is no other reason for this choice?' said Volusius.

Guilliman did not answer.

'How is forgiveness earned?' the Chaplain asked again.

'By preserving my father's dream,' said Guilliman.

## II

### THE MATTER OF ATONEMENT

Madness clutched at the fleet. It found no grip, repelled by Geller fields. It slid against the hull of every battleship, cruiser and escort, screaming frustration and trailing flames of murdered colours. Scores of ships cut through the empyrean with a directness of purpose long denied them, rushing towards a threefold mission. They would strike in support of another fleet. They would strike in the

name of salvation. And they would strike in the name of vengeance.

In the strategium of the battleship *Ultimus Mundi*, the Lord of Ultramar contemplated the fragility of dreams, and the nightmare of force needed to preserve them.

'We'll be fortunate if anything of Diavanos remains,' Titus Prayto said. It seemed that he, too, had been thinking about fragility. The Librarian shook his head. 'It is not a world that could withstand the attention of the Twelfth Legion for long.'

'The cry for help the astropathic choirs intercepted is a recent one,' Drakus Gorod pointed out. 'If Diavanos was able to get a message out, then the World Eaters have only just arrived.'

Guilliman thought for a moment, then he tapped the controls of the tactarium table. The hololithic display of the threatened world became a map of the subsector with Diavanos' system at the core. 'We may be the indirect cause of the attack,' he said, making a further adjustment. The trajectory of the Blood Angels fleet towards Terra appeared, along with the known positions of traitor blockades.

'Our first report of the World Eaters fleet placed it to the galactic east of Diavanos,' Guilliman said.

'They know the Blood Angels are coming,' Gorod said. 'Diavanos is an excellent staging ground for an ambush on the route Sanguinius must take.'

'That is a new redeployment then,' said Prayto. 'There may be hope for Diavanos yet.'

'Destruction and hope,' Guilliman told his sons. 'We are the bearers of both.'

It was hope that obsessed him. Prayto must have seen it in his face, or perhaps the same thoughts haunted the Librarian. 'It would mean much to preserve this world,' he said.

'It is what the Imperium can be,' Guilliman said. *It is part of my atonement*, he thought. He would not see it fall to Angron's monsters.

And if he did save it, if in this present moment he preserved the world's past and its future, and did so in service to opening the way for Sanguinius and the salvation of Terra, then that would be another step towards his personal atonement. He did not think he would ever truly expiate the sin of the Imperium Secundus. But saving Diavanos was important in practical and symbolic terms.

He returned to the practical now. He studied the trajectories of the Ultramarines and Blood Angels fleets. Timing their movements was approximate. It would have been even if the warp were not in turmoil. But the distance to Diavanos was

short in galactic terms. 'The World Eaters will need to be moving out of the system if they hope to intercept Sanguinius,' he said. 'Their emergence will have to coincide closely with our translation at the Mandeville point. We will act accordingly. I want the fleet in attack formation, weapons ready. We shall be the arrival of lightning.'

The ships of the XIII Legion stormed out of the warp, and they were both gladius and shield. Their formation was impenetrable, their numbers so great that there could be no hope of going around them. And they struck with a violence that cut the night of the void open with terrible light. They emerged with torpedoes in launch tubes, cannons loaded and lances primed, already looking for the enemy.

The enemy were where Guilliman had foreseen they would be. The World Eaters had left Diavanos behind, and were just beyond the orbit of the outermost planet of the system. Their ships were close together. The Ultramarines came at them from the port flank. Guilliman's fleet was more than twice the size of that the World Eaters had mustered, its front wider than the length of the XII Legion's formation.

*Finally*, Guilliman thought. *Finally, we strike you traitors as you deserve to be struck.*

The civilisation-killing barrage from the Ultramarines hit along the entire flank of the World Eaters fleet. A coronal chain of fire blasted across the traitor ships. The darkness blazed with explosions and the flare of overwhelmed void shields.

'A strong thrust,' Guilliman said as the blinding glare filled the oculus. 'We have cut them deeply.'

Battleships and grand cruisers survived the initial moments of the barrage, but the smaller vessels were less fortunate. Catastrophe roared through their hulls. The cruisers *Galerus* and *Clavam* died immediately. The *Galerus'* engines ruptured. Multiple torpedo and cannon hits from the *Gauntlet of Power* vaporised the forward third of the *Clavam*, and its ordnance exploded at once. Twin suns shone in the centre of the fleet. The titanic plasma explosions washed over the other ships, compounding damage, taking out the frigate *Bellicose* and crippling the battle-barge *Iaculum*.

The bridge of the *Ultimus Mundi* erupted with shouts of '*For Calth! For the Five Hundred Worlds!*'

'It is good to see them burn,' said Gorod.

'Burning is too merciful for them,' Guilliman said. 'But you're right. These are

pyres that have been long in coming.'

The World Eaters responded to the attack eagerly. Their ships turned slowly. Their grace and majesty was due to their immense mass, and belied the bloodthirsty madness of the monsters who commanded them. Their weapons were fast, though, and the fury of the XII Legion hit back against the righteousness of the XIII. Angron's sons tore across battlefields like maddened beasts, yet they still possessed the discipline of warriors. They knew how to respond to the great fleet that had come for them. As the burning vessels turned, weathering the unending barrage, they did not break formation. The devastating shock waves unleashed from the slain ships were a huge push outwards. The fleet could easily have lost all coherence, wounded beasts lashing out from the collapsing centre. Instead, the World Eaters tightened their formation, all the while maintaining ferocious retaliatory fire from their broadsides. Bleeding flame, rents in their hulls spilling freezing gases and bodies into the void, the monuments to savagery drew closer and closer together, altering their trajectories until they were bow to bow with the Ultramarines, and the fleet had become a battering ram.

The system's sun was a distant, tiny spark of blue-tinted white, so far away it stood out from other stars only by the intensity of its light. Its cold eye faded beside the fury that had erupted in the far reaches of its system. The Legion fleets clashed with the force of a nova, a vast, roaring aurora of crimson and violet surrounding the vessels. The violence of the battle seemed as if it should tear open a new rift in the materium. With their fire heavily concentrated, the World Eaters hammered the Ultramarines' wall. They destroyed the *Rectitude* and the *Integritas* and the *Objective Truth*. The grand cruiser *Infestus* accounted for two of the killing blows before it perished in its turn. The nova grew brighter still, and the World Eaters' battering ram began to lose coherence. It failed to break through the line of the XIII Legion. More ships died or fell back, engines damaged and unable to keep up the charge.

On the bridge of the *Ultimus Mundi*, Guilliman tracked the advance of the battle, consumed by the demands of the immediate moments across the fleet. His sons acquitted themselves as he knew they would. Every piece of the primarch's colossal war machine acted in consonance with the purpose of the whole, and the purpose was devastation. Guilliman ordered adjustments to individual trajectories that cumulatively became the movement of the advancing wall. The fleet closed with the World Eaters as a unified, unyielding whole, and Guilliman viewed the enemy as a single, great beast, assessing moment to moment which

blow was needed to bring it down.

As individual vessels fell away from the whole, he shifted his focus away from them, leaving them to the elements of the fleet that were tasked to finish them off. When the battleship *Gladiator* veered away from the formation, its port flank blackened and pulsing with flame and flickering power levels, he gave a slight nod, satisfied to see the fleet's leader taken from the fight. He did not let himself be lulled by the hope that this represented a decapitation of the World Eaters. They would fight to their last, brutal drop of blood. Because he was not distracted by the *Gladiator*, he saw that the *Bringer of Ruin* took over command of the formation from the centre, and he directed the *Ultimus Mundi* and the *Triumph of Espandor* to bring a new concentration of fire against it.

Because the *Gladiator* had left the front line of the void battle, Guilliman did not follow where it went as the distance between it and the XIII Legion grew. Because he did not follow it, he was able to mark the moment that the current of the battle became definitive. The World Eaters still fought, and drew blood, but there was nothing they could do. The Ultramarines' wall curved around them and tightened, closing off all avenues of escape. The beginning of the end of the struggle had come.

*We have cleared your path for you, Sanguinius, Guilliman thought. We will do so again. You will reach Terra.*

Then Iasus, Chapter Master of the 22nd aboard the strike cruiser *Cavascor* was on the vox. *'The Gladiator is making for Diavanos'*, Iasus said. *'We are in pursuit.'*

Guilliman saw what the commander of the World Eaters was doing. The traitor also knew that the battle was lost. And he saw how to strike one last, festering blow. The symbolism of Diavanos was as clear to the World Eaters as it was to the Ultramarines.

'The World Eaters cannot let the promise of Diavanos survive,' said Prayto, echoing Guilliman's thoughts.

'Can you close with the enemy in time?' Guilliman asked Iasus.

*'We have engaged it, but its defences are holding. Lord primarch, we will destroy it, but not before it burns Diavanos.'*

*'I have ordered a Caestus boarding attack.'*

'Prepare two assault rams,' Guilliman ordered. To Gorod he said, 'Gather an Invictus squad. We are teleporting to the *Cavascor*. Diavanos has not seen its final dawn. I swear this in my father's name.'

Gorod blinked. 'You will lead the attack?'

'I will preserve Diavanos with my bare hands if I have to. *And I will exact a reprisal of flesh for the Five Hundred Worlds*, he thought. He was glad it was the *Cavascor* that was pursuing the *Gladiator*. Iasus commanded the Destroyers. The brutality of their way of war would be fitting justice for the World Eaters.

'*Heavy defensive fire!*' the Caestus pilot warned.

'Can you reach our targets?' Guilliman voxed. He stood in the troop compartment of the lead assault ram, the combi-bolter *Arbitrator* mag-locked to his side, the power gauntlet *Hand of Dominion* crackling with somnolent power on his left fist.

'*Their defence of the upper superstructure is too strong, lord primarch.*' A glancing strike strained the inertial recoil compensation systems. A bulkhead split and a conduit exploded, filling the compartment with flame and smoke. '*We are making for a gap where the cannons have been destroyed lower down.*'

'*The journey to the bridge will be much longer,*' voxed Captain Hierax, commanding a squad of Destroyers aboard the second ram. '*Do we alter the practical?*'

'We move faster, captain,' Guilliman replied. 'Before the *Gladiator* is in range of Diavanos, we *will* take the bridge and decapitate the ship.' He gave his command the force of law.

'*So it shall be, lord primarch.*' Beneath Hierax's disciplined tone was the promise of a massacre to be unleashed on the World Eaters.

The hull rang and trembled. Smoke poured into the troop hold as the damage mounted. 'Angron's sons are trying very hard to stave off their execution,' Gorod said.

'If they do not welcome the punishment then they should never have followed Horus,' said Guilliman. At the back of his mind, he had been calculating the seconds to impact, adjusting for the change in course, extrapolating the distance to the new target. Now he called 'Brace for impact!' at the same moment as the pilot.

The Caestus ram slammed into the base of the *Gladiator's* superstructure and its magna-meltas turned the ship's armour to slag. The hull jerked as if struck by a hammer, the recoil compensators dampening the shock to a mere tremor.

'Now let the traitors know fear!' Guilliman shouted as Firefury missiles devastated the space before the ram. The loading ramps dropped, and Guilliman led the charge. Explosions still thundered, and at first Guilliman thought the missiles had triggered secondary blasts by striking an ordnance storage facility.

But the explosions kept going, and they were coming from above. The muffled crashes were huge. The entire hull rang with them.

'Have we caused that?' Gorod asked.

They had arrived in a crew dormitorium. The carbonised bodies of XII Legion serfs lay in a cluster near the doorway to the primary exit. Gorod was not looking at the bodies. He was staring upwards as the brass-engraved ceiling trembled again.

'This is the doing of the enemy,' said Guilliman.

'Doing what?'

The explosions went on, gathering strength. It was as if an earthquake were shaking the decks above the Ultramarines. The ship boomed with the sound of terminal collapse.

Guilliman snarled in frustration. 'They're blocking us by destroying themselves.'

The corridor beyond the dormitorium confirmed his surmise. Both ends were blocked by compacted iron wreckage. The blasts continued, more muffled now, though the hull still rang like a funeral bell.

'They are collapsing all the decks between us and the bridge, Guilliman said. The World Eaters knew the *Gladiator's* hours were numbered. The ship was going to die, but it would not be turned from its act of final savagery.

'There are vital support systems on those decks,' said Gorod. 'They are killing themselves.'

'Does any atrocity surprise you?' Guilliman asked.

'It does not.'

'They don't need life support for much longer. All they have to do is keep us from taking the bridge. And they have.' The tactic was both primitive and effective. A mountain of crushed wreckage blocked the way upwards. There was no way for the Ultramarines to blast their way through hundreds of thousands of tonnes of metal before the *Gladiator* hurled virus bombs or cyclonic torpedoes at Diavanos.

'They cannot disable their weapons if they mean to use them,' said Gorod.

'Precisely.' Guilliman opened a vox-channel to Hierax. 'Captain, what is your position?'

*'Five decks below yours, lord primarch. We saw your breach before we made ours.'*

'We cannot go up. So we go down. Make for the torpedo bays. By the most direct route.'

*'Understood.'*

Gorod nodded. He grasped the new practical as well. They would melt their way down through the decks to the target.

Marakus of the Invictus squad placed the first krak grenade. Its incandescent heat turned metal to liquid and ate through the deck. Guilliman stared at the detonation without blinking. It could have been the anger of his gaze dissolving the adamantium and iron.

Three decks down, Marakus shouted in triumph. 'The mark of the Destroyers' passage,' he said, pointing to a crater in the deck a dozen yards ahead.

Guilliman took the lead again, dropping through the hole to a corridor scorched black by the bombardments of the *Cavascor*. It was only a few steps to the next breach, and a deck moaning with the wind of atmosphere escaping through cracks reaching all the way to the wounds in the hull. Guilliman passed the bodies of crew and slaves. There were the corpses of World Eaters too, but no attackers.

'Our passage is strangely uncontested,' said Gorod.

'The World Eaters are concentrating their strength,' said Guilliman. 'All they have to do is maintain control of the weapons until Diavanos is in range. They'll make their stand in the place they know we will attack.'

'Instead of wasting forces defending regions we may never pass through.'

'I doubt their reasons will be that strategic. They just won't want to miss the bloodletting.'

'*Lord primarch,*' Hierax voxed, from only a single deck away, '*torpedo bay in sight.*' A sustained burst of fire obscured his next words. The only word Guilliman could make out was '*entrances*'. That was sufficient. *Theoretical: more than one access to the bay. Practical: use the initial attack of the Destroyers to create a surprise second front.*

'Break them in half, captain,' Guilliman said. 'We are moments away.'

The squad passed the Destroyers' last breach and kept going. The deck thrummed with the crunching rhythm of bolter shells. Guilliman marched forwards, visualising the essential architecture of Imperial battleships, extrapolating variations based on the layout of the halls he had seen during their descent. A hundred yards past the first breach, Guilliman drove the *Hand of Dominion* into the deck. The corridor erupted with an azure flash. Layers of metal vaporised under his blows. He hit again and again.

*Do you hear me, you murderous animals?* he thought. *I am judgement coming for you.*

The deck gave way completely and Guilliman dropped through. He rose from a crouch, firing the *Arbitrator* into the surprised World Eaters before him. Armour

that had once been bone-white gleamed crimson. Brass spikes studded limbs, helms and pauldrons. Roaring, they charged him with chainaxes coated in dried blood and shredded flesh.

Guilliman drenched them with their own blood, detonating their skulls with his shells.

A few hundred yards to Guilliman's right, Destroyers engaged Destroyers.

The World Eaters fought a version of themselves held back by self-inflicted shackles. The Ultramarines fought an image of what, without honour and discipline, they might have become. Loyalist and traitor attacked each other with a ferocity born of absolute hatred. Hierax's squad hit the World Eaters with phosphex bombs, then rushed without pause into the inferno they had created. A cloud of white-green death crawled out of the sternward threshold to the torpedo bay. It ate into the armour of legionaries on both sides. It burned ceramite. It burned flesh. Heraldry dissolved, and the quicksilver flame flowed hungrily over blackened, gnawed, unrecognisable corpses.

The legionaries of Ultramar and Nuceria fought and killed each other in the midst of the spreading hell. Green flames licking down his pauldrons, Hierax smashed the edge of his chainsword into a World Eater's gorget. The blade ground through, finding a weak point in the armour. The traitor struck at the captain's helm with his chainaxe. Hierax roared with pain, but did not waver even as the helmet began to crack. He leaned into the sword. '*You will bleed for Ultramar!*' he shouted, hunger for vengeance reverberating from his vox-casters. Gristle and bone parted. The World Eater's head fell backwards, arterial blood spraying wide into the burning green.

Guilliman and the Invictus Guard stormed into the torpedo bay, and into a maw of bestial fury. The Red Butchers howled in mindless wrath. Madness contained within Terminator armour, they charged without hesitation into the hail of bolter shells. The storm from the *Arbitrator* shattered their front ranks, exploding through armour and bone. Beyond feral, blind to everything but the need to kill, the Red Butchers charged over their dead and slammed into the tight formation of the Invictus Guard.

Guilliman's jaw was tight with rage as he waded into a maelstrom of pure destruction. These *things* had once been sworn to the task of spreading and preserving the Emperor's dream. They had become every worst instinct the dream had come to purge. *You were always going to fall, Angron*, Guilliman thought, and with a surge of bitter contempt he slammed the *Hand of Dominion* into the wretches.

They were things without thought, flesh-machines of empty fury.

There was nothing these warriors could do to stop him. But they might, in their berserk charge, slow him down and keep him from his target. Beyond the mass of World Eaters, past fallen gantries and slicks of burning promethium, many of the launch tubes lay open, their ordnance already fired. The largest of the vault-like doors was closed, its approach defended by a Centurion and a Dreadnought. So sealed, it meant the cyclonic torpedo had yet to be fired.

Guilliman drove the *Hand of Dominion* through the chest-plate of a Red Butcher. He hurled himself through the Terminators like a battering ram.

'Drakus!' the Centurion shouted, his voice amplified by his vox-caster. It was hoarse and rattled wetly, as if its owner were swallowing blood. 'I rejoice to see you burn today!'

The Centurion commanding the World Eaters stood next to the torpedo door, flanked by a Dreadnought.

'Deranax,' Gorod voxed to Guilliman. He did not respond to the World Eaters taunt. 'His belief in the Great Crusade was once very strong.'

'Then his sin is all the greater,' Guilliman snarled. *He will atone*, he thought. *He will atone until he is ash.*

The leaping, burning streams of phosphex from the other entrance were devouring the enemy. The Red Butchers were falling before the disciplined fire of the Invictus Guard. The tide of battle was against the World Eaters. But Deranax stood in triumph. Guilliman realised the torpedo was moments from firing. Diavanos was in range.

Guilliman's leap carried him over the heads of a cluster of Red Butchers. He came down with the *Hand of Dominion* at full charge. The force of his blow sent out a shock wave so destructive it was as a meteor slamming into the enemy. Terminator armour ruptured. Bodies burst into fragments. Shrapnel of bone and ceramite exploded. Guilliman ran through a storm of blood, sending a barrage of combi-bolter shells ahead of him, carving a path through the World Eaters.

The Contemptor Dreadnought thundered towards him, its heavy bolter roaring, its power claw reaching out. Deranax laughed, then turned to the controls next to the hydraulic arms controlling the vault door.

Guilliman moved too fast for the Dreadnought to track. He closed with the monster, clenching the *Hand of Dominion*, and fired a burst of shells into the helm. The Dreadnought shouted in incoherent wrath. The *Hand of Dominion* smashed through the Contemptor's power claw, then hammered the sarcophagus.

The Dreadnought staggered. Its heavy bolter arm flailed in an attempt to get

Guilliman in the line of fire. The primarch struck its chest-plate again. The sarcophagus was centuries old. It could withstand a direct hit from an artillery shell. The *Hand of Dominion* was much older, and was of a far different order of power. And it was wielded by a primarch. The sarcophagus collapsed beneath Guilliman's blow. He drove the *Hand of Dominion* through the layers of armour shielding, and into the soft, broken thing that was all that remained of the interred legionary's body.

The Dreadnought's roaring cut off at once.

The hydraulic arms pulled the vault door open, revealing the torpedo. Deranax held a detonator. 'Aim at a world and kill a primarch,' he growled with bloodlust and triumph. There were demolition charges on the casing of the torpedo.

The Centurion had used Diavanos as a lure, Guilliman realised. Deranax had waited until Guilliman was before him, and now he was going to trigger the cyclonic torpedo's detonation inside the *Gladiator*. Instead of destroying a planet as his final act of brutality, he would take the Emperor's Avenging Son with him into his funeral pyre. Guilliman fired. The shells struck Deranax's wrist before could pull the detonator's trigger. They destroyed the World Eater's hand but spared the detonator. It flew behind him and howling he lunged for the device. Guilliman seized Deranax with the power gauntlet and smashed him against a wall. He squeezed, channelling the *Hand's* power into a crushing grip. The Centurion's limbs and his immolating design came apart. Guilliman jammed the muzzle of the *Arbitrator* against Deranax's helmet.

The Centurion snarled, dying but undefeated. 'It all burns in the end,' he choked out.

Guilliman pulled the trigger.

As he turned from the corpse, Iasus voxed from the *Cavascor*. 'Lord primarch, have you taken the bridge?'

'It's unreachable. We have the torpedo bay.' The Red Butchers and the Destroyers were still fighting. They would until the end, but the end was coming fast.

After a moment, Iasus said, 'Lord Guilliman, I must urge your immediate withdrawal. The *Gladiator* is on a collision course with Diavanos. Thunderhawks are closing with your position. You must breach and evacuate at once.'

Through the Thunderhawks viewing block, Guilliman saw the fiery descent of the *Gladiator*. He saw the dark blade of the battleship plunge through the

atmosphere of Diavanos. He saw it flare red with heat.

He saw the blinding fireball of impact and the plasma detonation. No cyclonic torpedo cracked the planet open, but the *Gladiator* hit with the force of an asteroid. A bloom of fire, blinding white, hundreds of kilometres in diameter, lit up the clouds. The atmosphere convulsed, transforming into a furious cauldron, storm upon storm spreading across the world of gossamer towers. A terminal wind swept the continents, scouring Diavanos of its crystalline promise, putting an end to dreams.

\* \* \*

In the strategium of the *Ultimus Mundi*, Guilliman gazed at the deep augur pictis of Diavanos. *This is what we have saved*, he thought. *This is all we have saved of this world*. The *Gladiator* had made planetfall fifty miles from Ecstasia. The blast had razed the capital city. The delicate trceries of the architecture had vanished. Broken angles of glass and iron jutted through the clouds of ash and dust. There was nothing but grey now, grey forever under a sky of dark lead. Ashes fell, as they would for centuries to come.

'Some of the industries in the southern land mass are still viable,' Gorod said. 'The population has not slipped below the critical mass. Diavanos will survive.'

'Survive,' Guilliman repeated. The word was as dry as the ash in the air. 'Survival is not enough, Drakus. Look at what has been lost. Millennia of culture has been extinguished. Diavanos was a beacon through the Age of Strife. Where is its light now? Mere survival means decline. This will become a place of darkness and ignorance, unless we can kindle a new fire. Only the Imperium can do that. We do not fight just for the survival of the Imperium. We fight for the preservation of a dream.'

There was no atonement to be found here. There was only determination, and a vow. 'The Imperium will never be reduced to this darkness,' he told Gorod. 'It will be forever worthy of my father. Forever. I will hold it in the light. And if I have to fight forever, I will.'

# **SHIPRATS**

**C L WERNER**

Carefully, the heavy-set duardin warrior raised his weapon. His eyes narrowed, fixating on his victim. He appeared unfazed by the gloom of the darkened hold, his vision sharp enough to pick out a marrow-hawk soaring through a thunderstorm. The duardin judged the distance, allowed for the air currents that buffeted the moored aether-ship and estimated how much strength to bring to bear against his foe. The shovel came cracking down, striking the deck with such force that a metallic ping was sent echoing through the hold. Drumark cursed as the target of the descending spade leapt upwards and squeaked in fright. The brown rat landed on his foot, squeaked again, then scampered off deeper into the hold.

Furious, Drumark turned and glowered at the other spade-carrying duardin gathered in the *Iron Dragon's* hold. Arkanauts, endrinriggers, aether-tenders and even a few of the ship's officers gave the angry sergeant anxious stares.

'Right! Now they are just begging to be shot! I am getting my decksweeper!' Drumark swore, not for the first time.

Brokrin, the *Iron Dragon's* captain, stepped towards Drumark. 'You are not shooting holes in the bottom of my ship,' he snapped at him. 'We have enough problems with the rats. If you go shooting holes in the hull we won't be able to take on any aether-gold even if we do find a rich cloud-vein.'

Drumark jabbed a thumb down at his boot. 'It peed on my foot. Only respect for you, cap'n, keeps me from getting a good fire going and smoking the vermin out.'

'That is some sound thinking,' Horgarr, the *Iron Dragon's* endrinmaster scoffed. He pressed his shovel against the deck and leaned against it as he turned towards Drumark. 'Start a fire in the ship's belly. Nothing bad could happen from that. Except the fifty-odd things that immediately come to mind.'

Brokrin shook his head as Drumark told Horgarr exactly what he thought of the endrinmaster's mind. No duardin had any affection for rats, but Drumark's hatred of them was almost a mania. His father had died fighting the pestiferous skaven and every time he looked at a rat he was reminded of their larger kin. It made

him surly and quick to anger. This would be the third fight between the two he would have to break up since coming down into the *Iron Dragon's* holds. Unable to find any aether-gold, the ironclad had put in at Greypeak, a walled human city with which Barak-Zilfin had a trading compact. The grain the city's farmers cultivated was well regarded by the Kharadron and would fetch a good price in the skyhold. Not as much as a good vein, but at least there would be something for the aether-ship's backers.

At least there would be if the rats that had embarked along with the grain left anything in good enough condition to sell. There were more than a few Kharadron who claimed that the *Iron Dragon* was jinxed and that her captain was under a curse. Sometimes he found himself wondering if his detractors were right. This was not the first time Brokrin's ship had suffered an infestation of vermin, but he could not recall any that had been so tenacious as these. Whatever they did to try to protect their cargo, the rats found some way around it. They were too clever for the traps old Mortrimm set for them, too cunning to accept the poisoned biscuits Lodri made for them. Even the cat Gotramm had brought aboard had been useless - after its first tussle with one of the rats it had found itself a spot up in the main endrin's cuppola and would claw anyone who tried to send it below deck again.

'These swine must have iron teeth.' The bitter observation was given voice by Skaggi, the expedition's logisticator. Tasked with balancing profit against expense and safeguarding the investment of the expedition's backers, every ounce of grain despoiled by the rodents stung Skaggi to the quick. He held a heavy net of copper wire in his hands, extending it towards Brokrin so he could see the holes the rats had gnawed. 'So much for keeping them out of the grain. We will be lucky if they do not start in for the beer next.'

Skaggi's dour prediction made Drumark completely forget about his argument with Horgarr. He looked in horror at Skaggi. An instant later, he raised the shovel overhead and flung it to the floor.

'That is it! Drumark declared. 'I am bringing my lads down here and we will settle these parasites here and now!' He turned to Brokrin, determination etched across his face. 'You tell Grundstok thunderers to hunt rats, then that is just what we will do. But we will do it the way we know best.'

Skaggi's eyes went wide with alarm, his mind turning over the expense of patching over the holes the thunderers would leave if they started blasting away at the rats. He swung around to Brokrin, his tone almost frantic. 'We will be ruined,' he groaned. 'No profit, barely enough to pay off the backers.'

Drumark reached out and took hold of the copper net Skaggi was holding. 'If they can chew through this, they can chew their way into the beer barrels. Me and my thunderers are not going dry while these rats get drunk!'

The sound of shovels slapping against the floor died down as the rest of the duardin in the hold paused in their efforts to hear what Drumark was shouting about. Many of them were from his Grundstok company and looked more than ready to side with their sergeant and trade spades for guns.

'The rats will not bother the beer while they still have grain to eat,' Brokrin stated, making sure his words were loud enough to carry to every crewman in the hold. How much truth there was in the statement, he did not know. He did know it was what Drumark and the others needed to hear right now.

'All due respect, cap'n,' Drumark said, 'but how long will that be? Swatting them with shovels just isn't enough and we have tried everything else except shooting them.'

Brokrin gave Drumark a stern look. 'Others have said it, now I am saying it. You are not shooting holes in *my* ship.' The chastened sergeant held Brokrin's gaze for a moment, then averted his eyes. The point had been made.

'What are we going to do?' Gotramm asked. The youthful leader of the *Iron Dragon's* arkanauts, he had watched with pointed interest the exchange between Brokrin and Drumark.

'I know one thing,' Horgarr said, pulling back his sleeve and showing the many scratches on his arm. 'That cat is staying right where it is.' The remark brought laughs from all who heard it, even cracking Drumark's sullen mood.

Brokrin was more pensive. Something Drumark had said earlier had spurred a memory. It was only now that his recollection fell into place. 'The toads,' he finally said. The newer members of the crew glanced in confusion at their captain, but those who had served on the *Iron Dragon* before her escape from the monster Ghazul knew his meaning.

'Some years ago,' Brokrin explained to them, 'we sailed through a Grimesturm and a rain of toads fell on our decks. They were everywhere, even worse than these rats. You could not sit without squashing one or take a sip of ale without having one hop into your mug.'

'To rid the ship of her infestation,' Brokrin continued, 'we put in at the lamasery of Kheitar. The lamas prepared a mixture of herbs, which we burned in smudge pots. The smoke vexed the toads so much that they jumped overboard of their own accord.'

'You think the lamas could whip up something to scare off rats?' Gotramm

asked.

Brokrin nodded. 'Kheitar is not far out of our way. There would be little to lose by diverting our course and paying the lamasery a visit.'

'Kheitar is built into the side of a mountain,' Horgarr said. 'Certainly it will offer as good an anchorage as the peak we're moored to now.'

Skaggi's eyes lit up, an avaricious smile pulling at his beard. 'The lamas are renowned for their artistic tapestries as well as their herbalism. If we could bargain with them and get them to part with even one tapestry we could recover the loss of what the rats have already ruined.'

'Then it is decided,' Brokrin said. 'Our next port of call is Kheitar.'

The lamasery's reception hall was a stark contrast to the confined cabins and holds of the *Iron Dragon*. Great pillars of lacquered wood richly carved with elaborate glyphs soared up from the teak floor to clasp the vaulted roof with timber claws. Lavish hangings hung from the walls, each beautifully woven with scenes from legend and lore. Great urns flanked each doorway their basins filled with a wondrously translucent sand in which tangles of incense sticks slowly smouldered. Perfumed smoke wafted sluggishly through the room, visible as a slight haze where it condensed around the great platform at the rear of the chamber. Upon that platform stood a gigantic joss, a golden statue beaten into the semblance of an immensely fat man, his mouth distorted by great tusks and his head adorned by a nest of horns. In one clawed hand the joss held forward a flower, his other resting across his lap with the remains of a broken sword in his palm.

Brokrin could never help feeling a tinge of revulsion when he looked at Kheitar's idol. Whoever had crafted it, their attention to detail had been morbid. The legend at the root of the lamas' faith spoke of a heinous daemon from the Age of Chaos that had set aside its evil ways to find enlightenment in the ways of purity and asceticism. Looking at the joss, Brokrin felt less a sense of evil redeemed than he did that of evil biding its time. The duardin with him looked similarly perturbed, all except Skaggi, who was already casting a greedy look at the tapestries on the walls.

The young initiate who guided the duardin into the hall stepped aside as Brokrin and his companions entered. He bowed his shaved head towards a bronze gong hanging just to the left of the entrance. He took the striker tethered to the gong's wooden stand and gave the instrument three solid hits, each blow sending a dull reverberation echoing through the chamber.

'Take it easy,' Brokrin whispered when he saw Gottramm from the corner of his eye. The young arkanaut had reached for his pistol the moment the gong's notes were sounded. 'If we aggravate the lamas they might not help get rid of the rats.'

Gottramm let his hand drop away from the gun holstered on his belt. He nodded towards the joss at the other end of the hall. 'That gargoyle is not the sort of thing to make me feel at ease,' he said.

'The cap'n is not saying to close your eyes,' old Mortrimm the navigator told Gottramm. 'He is just saying do not be hasty drawing a weapon. Abide by the Code - be sure who you set your axe against, and why.'

Brokrin frowned. 'Let us hope it does not come to axes. Barak-Zilfin has a long history trading with the lamas.' Even as he said the words, they felt strangely hollow to him. Something had changed about Kheitar. What it was, he could not say. It was not something he could see or hear, but rather a faintly familiar smell. He turned his eyes again to the daemon-faced joss, wondering what secrets it was hiding inside that golden head.

Movement drew Brokrin's attention away from the joss. From behind one of the hangings at the far end of the hall, a tall and sparingly built human emerged. He wore the saffron robes of Kheitar's lamas, but to this was added a wide sash of green that swept down across his left shoulder before circling his waist. It was the symbol that denoted the high lama himself. The uneasy feeling Brokrin had intensified, given something solid upon which to focus. The man who came out from behind the tapestry was middle-aged, his features long and drawn. He certainly was not the fat, elderly Piu who had been high lama the last time the *Iron Dragon* visited Kheitar.

The lama walked towards the duardin, but did not acknowledge their presence until after he had reached the middle of the hall and turned towards the joss. Bowing and clapping his hands four times, he made obeisance to the idol. When he turned back towards the duardin, his expression was that of sincerity itself.

'Peace and wisdom upon your path,' the lama declared, clapping his hands together once more. A regretful smile drew at the corners of his mouth. 'Is it too much to hope that the Kharadron overlords have descended from the heavens to seek enlightenment?' He shook his head. 'But such, I sense, is not the path that has led you here. If it is not the comfort of wisdom you would take away from here, then what comfort is it that we can extend to you?'

Although Brokrin was the *Iron Dragon's* captain, it was Skaggi who stepped forwards to address the lama. Of all the ship's crew, the logisticator had the glibbest tongue. 'Please forgive any intrusion, your eminence,' he said. 'It is only

dire need which causes us to intrude upon your solitude. Our ship has been beset by an infestation of noxious pests. Terrible rats that seek...'

The lama's serenity faltered when Skaggi began to describe the situation. A regretful look crept into his eyes.

'We of Kheitar are a peaceful order. Neither meat nor ilk may pass our lips. Our hands are not raised in violence for like Zomoth-tulku, we have forsaken the sword. To smite any living thing is to stumble on the path to ascension.'

Brokrin came forwards to stand beside Skaggi. 'Your order helped us once before, when hail-toads plagued my ship. The high lama, Piu, understood the necessity of removing them.'

The lama closed his eyes. 'Piu-tulku was a wise and holy man. Cho cannot claim even a measure of his enlightenment.' Cho opened his eyes again and nodded to Brokrin. 'There are herbs which could be prepared. Rendered down they can be burned in smudge pots and used to fumigate your ship.' A deep sigh ran through him. 'The smoke will drive the rats to flee. Would it be too great an imposition to ask that you leave them a way to escape? Perhaps keep your vessel moored here so they can flee down the ropes and reach solid ground.'

Skaggi's eyes went wide in shock. 'That would cause the lamasery to become infested.' He pointed at the lavish hangings on the walls. 'Those filthy devils would ruin this place in a fortnight! Think of all that potential profit being lost!'

Cho placed a hand against his shoulder. 'It would move a stain from my conscience if you would indulge my hopes. The death of even so small a creature would impair my own aspirations of transcendence.'

'My conscience would not permit me to cause misery to my benefactors,' Brokrin stated. 'But upon my honour and my beard, I vow that I will not use whatever herbs you provide us without ensuring the rats can make landfall without undue hazard.'

'It pleases me to hear those words,' Cho said. 'I know the word of your people is etched in stone. I am content. It will take us a day to prepare the herbs. Your ship will be safe where it is moored?'

'We are tied to the tower above your western gate,' Mortrimm stated. He gestured with his thumb at Brokrin. 'The cap'n insisted we keep far enough away that the rats wouldn't smell food and come slinking down the guide ropes.'

'Such consideration and concern does you credit, captain,' Cho declared. He suddenly turned towards Skaggi. 'If it is not an imposition, would it be acceptable to inquire if the tapestries we weave here still find favour among your people?'

The question took Skaggi by such surprise that the logisticator allowed excitement to shine in his eyes before gaining control of himself and resuming an air of indifference. Brokrin could tell that he was about to undervalue the worth of Kheitar's artistry. It was a prudent tactic when considering profit but an abominable one when thinking in terms of honour.

'Your work is applauded in Barak-Zilfin,' Brokrin said before Skaggi could find his voice. The logisticator gave him an imploring look, but he continued just the same. 'There are many guildhalls that have used your tapestries to adorn their assemblies, and poor is the noble house that has not at least one hanging from Kheitar on its walls.'

With each word he spoke, Brokrin saw Skaggi grow more perturbed. Cho remained implacable, exhibiting no alteration in his demeanour. Then the high lama turned towards the wall from which he had emerged. Clapping his hands together in rapid succession, he looked aside at the duardin.

'I thank you for your forthrightness,' Cho said. 'Your honesty makes you someone we can trust.' There was more, but even Brokrin lost the flow of Cho's speech when the hangings on the walls were pushed aside and a group of ten lamas entered the hall. Each pair carried an immense tapestry rolled into a bundle across their shoulders. To bring only a few tapestries out of Kheitar was considered a rewarding voyage. Was Cho truly offering the duardin five of them?

Cho noted the disbelief that shone on the faces of his guests. He swung around to Skaggi. 'I have noticed that you admire our work. I will leave it to you to judge the value of the wares I would offer you.' At a gesture from the high lama, the foremost of his followers came near and unrolled their burden. Skaggi didn't quite stifle the gasp that bubbled up from his throat.

The background of the tapestry was a rich burgundy in colour and across its thirty-foot length vibrant images were woven from threads of sapphire blue, emerald green and amber yellow. Geometric patterns that transfixed the eye formed a border around visions of opulent splendour and natural wonder. Soaring mountains with snowy peaks rose above wooded hills. Holy kings held court from gilded thrones, their crowns picked out with tiny slivers of jade wound between the threads. Through the centre of the tapestry a stream formed from crushed pearl flowed into a silver sea.

'Magnificent,' the logisticator sputtered before recovering his composure.

'It gladdens me that you are content with our poor offerings,' Cho told Skaggi. He looked back towards Brokrin. 'It is my hope that you would agree to take this

cargo back to your city. Whatever price you gain from their sale, I only ask that you return half of that amount to the lamasery.'

'Well... there are our expenses to be taken into account. Skaggi started. However good a deal seemed, the logisticator was quick to find a way to make it better.

'Of course you should be compensated for your labours,' Cho said, conceding the point without argument. 'Captain, are you agreeable to my offer?'

'It is very generous and I would be a fool to look askance at your offer,' Brokrin replied. 'It may be some months before we can return here with your share.'

'That is understood,' Cho said. He gestured again to the lamas carrying the tapestries. 'Pack the hangings for their journey. Then take them to the Kharadron ship.'

The unaccountable uneasiness that had been nagging at Brokrin asserted itself once more. 'I will send one of my crew to guide your people and show them the best place to put your wares.' He turned to Mortrimm. 'Go with them and keep your wits about you,' he whispered.

'You expect trouble?' Mortrimm asked.

Brokrin scratched his beard. 'No, but what is it the Chuitsek nomads say? "A gift horse sometimes bites." Just make sure all they do is put the tapestries aboard.'

Nodding his understanding, Mortrimm took his position at the head of the procession of lamas. Because of their heavy burdens, the navigator was easily able to match their pace despite one of his legs being in an aethyric brace. Brokrin and the other duardin watched as the tapestries were conducted out of the hall.

'Should I go with them, cap'n?' Skaggi asked. 'Make certain they do not mar the merchandise when they bring it aboard?'

'I think these lamas know their business,' Gotramm retorted. 'They are the ones who sweated to make the things and they have just as much to lose as we do if they get damaged.'

Unlike the banter between Drumark and Horgarr, there was a bitter edge to what passed between Gotramm and Skaggi. There was no respect between them, only a kind of tolerant contempt. Brokrin started to intercede when something Cho had said suddenly rose to mind. He turned towards the high lama. 'You called your predecessor Piu-tulku? Is not tulku your word for the revered dead?'

'The holy ascended,' Cho corrected him. 'Among the vulgar it is translated as "living god". You have yourself seen the ancient tulkus who have followed

Zomoth-tulku's transcendence.'

Brokrin shuddered at the recollection. Deep within the lamasery there were halls filled with niches, each containing the mummified husk of a human. They were holy men who had gradually poisoned themselves, embalming their own bodies while they were still alive in a desperate search for immortality. The lamas considered each of the corpses to still be alive, tending their clothes and setting bowls of food and drink before them each morning. He thought of Piu and the last time he had seen the man. There had been no hint that he had been undergoing this ghastly process of self-mummification.

'I was unaware Piu had chosen such a path,' Brokrin apologised.

Cho smiled and shook his head. 'Piu-tulku did not choose the path. The path chose him. A wondrous miracle, for he has transcended the toils of mortality yet still permits his wisdom to be shared with those who have yet to ascend to a higher enlightenment.' His smile broadened. 'Perhaps if you were to see him, speak with him, you would understand the wisdom of our order.'

That warning feeling was even more persistent now, but Brokrin resisted the urge to play things safe. Something had changed at Kheitar and whatever it was, he would bet it had to do with Piu's unexpected ascension. Glancing over at Gotramm and then at Skaggi, he made his decision. 'We would like very much to meet with Piu-tulku.'

Cho motioned for the initiate by the door to come over to them. 'I am certain Piu-tulku will impart much wisdom to you, but to enter his august presence you must set aside your tools of death.' He pointed at the axes and swords the duardin carried. 'Leave those behind if you would see the tulku. I can allow no blades in his chambers.'

Brokrin nodded. 'You have nothing to fear, your grace. Our Code prohibits us from doing harm to any who are engaged in fair trade with us.' He slowly unbuckled his sword and proffered it to the initiate. 'We will follow your custom.'

Slowly the three duardin removed their blades, setting them on the floor. Gotramm started to do the same with his pistol, but Cho had already turned away. Brokrin set a restraining hand on Gotramm's.

'He said blades,' Brokrin whispered. 'Unless asked, keep your pistol.' He brushed his hand across the repeater bolstered on his own belt. 'We will respect their custom, as far as they ask it of us.'

Brokrin gave a hard look at Cho's back as the high lama preceded them out of the hall. 'If he is being honest with us, it will make no difference. If he is not, it

might make all the difference in the Realms.'

Drumark escorted the lamas down into the *Iron Dragon's* hold. He had tried to choose the cleanest compartment in which to put the precious cargo, but even here there was the fug of rat in the air. 'This is the best one,' he said. 'You can put them down here.'

'You think they will be safe?' asked Mortrimm. Like the sergeant, he could smell the stink of rat. He looked uneasily at the bamboo crates the lamas carried, wondering how long it would take a rat to gnaw its way through the boxes.

'As long as there is grain, the little devils will keep eating that,' Drumark spat, glowering at a fat brown body that went scooting behind a crate when the light from his lantern shone upon it. 'It will be a while before they start nibbling on this stuff.' He turned his light on the sallow-faced lamas as they carefully set down the crates and started to leave the hold. 'Tell your friends to get that poison ready on the quick. If we do not smoke out these vermin, your tapestries will be gnawed so badly we will have to sell them as thread.'

The warning put a certain haste in the lamas' step as they withdrew from the hold. Mortrimm started to follow them as the men made their way back onto the deck. He had only taken a few steps when he noticed that Drumark was still standing down near the tapestries.

'Are you coming?' Mortrimm asked.

'In a bit,' Drumark answered, waving him away. Mortrimm shook his head and left the hold.

Alone in the rat-infested hold, Drumark glowered at the shadows. The stink of vermin surrounded him, making his skin crawl. Instead of withdrawing from the stench, he let his revulsion swell, feeding into the hate that boiled deep inside him. Rats! Pestiferous, murderous fiends! Whatever size they came in, they had to be stamped out wherever they were found. He would happily do his part. He owed that much to his father, burned down by the foul magics of the loathsome skaven.

Drumark looked at the crates and then back at the noisy shadows. Despite his talk with Mortrimm and the lamas, he was anything but certain the rats would spare the tapestries. The vermin were perverse creatures and might gnaw on the precious hangings out of sheer spite. Well, if they did, they would find a very irritable duardin waiting for them.

Checking one last time to be certain Mortrimm was gone, Drumark walked over to a dark corner near the door and retrieved the object he had secreted there

without Brokrin's knowledge. He patted the heavy stock of his decksweeper. 'Some work for you before too long,' he told it. Returning to his original position, he doused the lantern. Instantly the hold was plunged into darkness. Drumark could hear the creaking of the guide ropes as the ship swayed in its mooring, the groan of the engines that powered the ironclad's huge endrin, the scratch of little claws as they came creeping across the planks.

Gradually his eyes adjusted to the gloom and Drumark could see little shapes scurrying around the hold. Soon the shapes became more distinct as his eyes became accustomed to the dark. Rats, as fat and evil as he had ever seen. There must be a dozen of them, all scurrying about, crawling over barrels, peeping into boxes, even gnawing at the planks. He kept his eyes on the crates with the tapestries, all laid out in a nice little row. The moment one of the rats started to nibble at them he would start shooting.

But the rats did not nibble the crates. Indeed, Drumark began to appreciate that the animals were conspicuously avoiding them. At first he thought it was simply because they were new, a change in their environment that the vermin would have to become comfortable with first. Then one of the rats did stray towards the row, fleeing the ire of one of its larger kin. The wayward rodent paused in mid-retreat, rearing up and sniffing at the crates.

Drumark could not know what the rat smelled, but he did know whatever it was had given the rodent a fright.

It went scampering off, squeaking like a thing possessed.

The rest of the vermin were soon following it, scrambling to their bolt holes and scurrying away to other parts of the ship. Soon Drumark could not hear their scratching claws any more.

Keeping his decksweeper at the ready, Drumark sat down beside the door. He stayed silent as he watched the crated tapestries, his body as rigid as that of a statue. In the darkness, he waited.

The wait was not a long one. A flutter of motion spread through the rolled tapestry at the end of the row. Faint at first, it increased in its agitation, becoming a wild thrashing after a few moments, the cloth slapping against the bamboo that enclosed it. Someone - or something - was inside the rolled tapestry and trying to work its way out. Eyes riveted on the movement, Drumark rose and walked forwards. He aimed his decksweeper at the tapestry. Whatever had hidden itself inside, it would find a warm reception when it emerged.

The thrashing persisted, growing more wild but making no headway against the framework that surrounded the tapestry. Whatever was inside was unable to free

itself. Or unwilling. A horrible suspicion gripped Drumark. There were four more tapestries and while his attention was focused on this one, he was unable to watch the others.

Drumark swung around just as a dark shape came leaping at him from the shadows.

The decksweeper bellowed as he fired into his attacker. Drumark saw a furry body go spinning across the hold, slamming into the wall with a bone-crunching impact. He had only a vague impression of the thing he had shot. He got a better look at the creature that came lunging at him from one of the other crates.

Thin hands with clawed fingers scrabbled at Drumark as the creature leapt on him. Its filthy nails raked at his face, pulling hair from his beard. A rat-like face with hideous red eyes glared at him before snapping at his throat with chisel-like fangs. He could feel a long tail slapping at his legs, trying to hit his knees and knock him to the floor.

Drumark brought the hot barrel of his decksweeper cracking up into the monster's jaw, breaking its teeth. The creature whimpered and tried to wrest free from his grip, but he caught hold of its arm and gave it a brutal twist, popping it out of joint. The crippled creature twisted away, plunging back down on top of the crates.

Any sense of victory Drumark might have felt vanished when he raised his eyes from the enormous rat he had overcome. Six more of its kind had crawled out from their faces in the tapestries, and unlike the one he had already fought, these each had knives in their paw-like hands. They stood upright on their hind legs, chittering malignantly as they started towards the lone duardin.

'Skaven!'

The cry came from the doorway behind Drumark. The discharge of his decksweeper had brought Horgarr and several others of the crew rushing into the hold, concerned that the sergeant had finally lost all restraint with the rats infesting the ship. Instead they found a far more infernal pestilence aboard.

The arrival of the other duardin dulled the confidence that shone in the eyes of the skaven infiltrators. The mocking squeaks took on an uncertain quality. Ready to pounce en masse on Drumark a moment before, now the creatures hesitated.

'What are you waiting for, lads!' Drumark shouted to Horgarr and the others. 'The bigger the rat, the more of our beer it will drink! Get the scum!'

The sergeant's shouts overcame the surprise that held the other duardin. Armed with shovels and axes, Horgarr led the crew charging across the hold. Their backs against the wall, the skaven had no choice but to make a fight of it.

As he rearmed his decksweeper and made ready to return to the fray, a terrible thought occurred to Drumark. The tapestries and their devious passengers had come from the lamasery. A place from which Captain Brokrin had not yet returned.

'Hold them here!' Drumark told Horgarr. 'I have to alert the rest of the ship and see if we can help the cap'n!'

\* \* \*

The young initiate held the ornate door open for Cho and the duardin as they entered the shrine wherein Piu-tulku had been entombed after his ascension. The room was smaller than the grand reception hall, but even more opulently appointed. The hangings that covered its walls were adorned with glittering jewels, the pillars that supported its roof were carved from blackest ebony and highlighted with designs painted in gold. The varnished floor creaked with a musical cadence as the visitors crossed it, sending lyrical echoes wafting up into the vaulted heights of its arched ceiling.

Ensconed upon a great dais flanked by hangings that depicted the wingless dragon and the fiery phoenix, the living god of Kheitar reposed. Piu was still a fat man, but his flesh had lost its rich colour, fading to a parchment-like hue. He wore black robes with a sash of vivid blue - the same raiment that had been given to the mummies Brokrin had seen in the lamasery's vaults. Yet Piu was not content to remain in motionless silence. Just as the duardin had decided that the lamas were delusional and that their late leader was simply dead, the body seated atop the dais opened its eyes and spoke.

'Enter and welcome,' the thing on the dais said. The voice was dull and dry with a strange reverberation running through it. 'Duardin-friends always-ever welcome in Kheitar.' It moved its head, fixing its empty gaze in Cho's general direction. 'Have you given help-aid to our guests?'

'Yes, holy tulku!' Cho said, bowing before the dais. 'The tapestries have been sent to their ship, as you commanded.'

The thing swung its head back around, facing toward the duardin. It extended its hands in a supplicating gesture. The effect was marred by the jerky way in which the arms moved. Brokrin could hear a faint, unnatural sound as Piu moved its head and hands, something between a pop and a whir. He had seen such artificial motion before, heard similar mechanical sounds. The tulku was similar to an aethyric musician he'd seen in the great manor of Grand Admiral Thorgraad, a wondrous machine crafted in the semblance of a duardin bard. The

only blight on the incredible automaton's music had been the sound of the pumps inside it sending fuel through its pipes and hoses.

Whatever the esoteric beliefs of Kheitar, what sat upon the dais was not an ascended holy man. It was only a machine.

Piu began to speak again. 'It is to be hope-prayed that we shall all profit-gain from...'

Brokrin stepped past Cho and glared at the thing on the dais. 'I do not know who you are, but I will not waste words with a puppet.' The outburst brought a gasp of horror from the initiate at the door. Cho raced forwards, prostrating himself before the dais and pleading with Piu to forgive him for such insult.

Brokrin gave the offended lamas small notice. His attention was fixed to the hangings behind Piu's dais. There was a ripple of motion from behind one of them. Pushing aside the snake-like dragon, a loathsome figure stalked into view. He was taller than the duardin but more leanly built, his wiry body covered in grey fur peppered with black. A rough sort of metal hauberk clung to his chest while a strange helm of copper encased most of his rodent-like head. Only the fanged muzzle and the angry red eyes were left uncovered. A crazed array of pouches and tools swung from belts and bandoleers, but across one shoulder the humanoid rat wore a brilliant blue sash - the same as that which adorned Piu.

'Now you may speak-beg,' the ratman growled as he stood beside Piu. His hairless tail lashed about in malicious amusement as he smelled the shock rising off the duardin.

'Mighty Kilvolt-tulku,' Cho cried out. 'Forgive me. I did not know they were such barbarians.'

Kilvolt waved aside the high lama's apology. He fixed his gruesome attention on Brokrin. 'No defiance, beard-thing,' he snarled, pointing a claw at either side of the room. From behind the hangings a pack of armoured skaven crept into view, each carrying a vicious halberd in his claws. 'Listen-hear. I know-learn about your port-nest. Your clan-kin make-build ships that fly-climb higher than any others. I want-demand that secret.'

'Even if I knew it,' Brokrin snapped at Kilvolt, 'I would not give it to you.'

The skaven bared his fangs, his tail lashing angrily from side to side. 'Then I take-tear what I want-need! Already you let-bring my warriors into your ship.' He waved his paw at Cho. 'The tapestries this fool-meat gave you.' He gestured again with his paws, waving at the skaven guards that now surrounded the duardin. 'If they fail-fall, then I have hostages to buy the secret of your ship. Torture or ransom will give-bring what I...'

Kilvolt's fur suddenly stood on end, a sour odour rising from his glands. His eyes were fixed on the pistols hanging from the belts Brokrin and Gottramm wore. He swung around on Cho, wrenching a monstrous gun of his own from one of the bandoleers. 'I order-say take-fetch all-all weapons!' The skaven punctuated his words by pulling the trigger and exploding Cho's head in a burst of blood and bone.

The violent destruction of the lama spurred the duardin into action. With the skaven distracted by the murder on the dais, Brokrin and Gottramm drew their pistols. Before the ratmen could react, the arkanaut captain burned one down with a shot to its chest, the aethyric charge searing a hole through its armour. Brokrin turned towards Kilvolt, but the skaven took one glance at the multi-barrelled volley pistol and darted behind the seated Piu-tulku.

Instead Brokrin swung around and discharged his weapon into the skaven guards to his right. The volley dropped two of the rushing ratmen and sent another pair squeaking back to the doorways hidden behind the hangings, their fur dripping with blood. Gottramm was firing again, but the skaven were more wary of their foes now, ducking around the pillars and trying to use them as cover while they advanced.

'We are done for,' Skaggi groaned, keeping close to the other duardin. Alone among them, the logisticator really had come into the room unarmed. 'We have to negotiate!' he pleaded with Brokrin.

'The only things I have to say to skaven come out of here,' Brokrin told Skaggi, aiming his volley pistol at the guards trying to circle around him. The ratmen were unaware the weapon had no charge and seeing it aimed in their direction had them falling over themselves to gain cover.

A crackle from the dais presaged the grisly impact that sent an electric shock rushing through Brokrin. The armour on his back had been struck by a blast from Kilvolt himself. Feeling secure that the duardin were distracted by his henchrats, he returned to the attack. The oversized rings that adorned one of his paws pulsed with a sickly green glow, a light that throbbed down to them via a series of hoses that wrapped around his arm before dipping down to a cannister on his belt.

The heavy armour Brokrin wore guarded him against the worst of the synthetic lightning. He turned his volley pistol towards the dais. Kilvolt flinched, ducking back behind the phony tulku. As he did, the ratman's eyes fixated on something behind the duardin captain.

'The boy-thing!' Kilvolt snarled from behind Piu. 'Stop-kill boy-thing, you fool-

meat!'

Brokrin risked a glance towards the door. It had been flung open and the initiate was racing into the hall outside, screaming at the top of his lungs. Immediately half a dozen of the skaven were charging after him, determined to stop him from alerting the other lamas about what was happening in Piu's shrine.

The ratmen made it as far as the door before a duardin fusillade smashed into them. Skaven bodies were flung back into the shrine, battered and bloodied by a concentrated salvo of gunfire. Just behind them came their executioners, Drumark leading his Grundstok thunderers.

The surviving guards squeaked in fright at the unexpected appearance of so many duardin and the vicious dispatch of their comrades. The creatures turned and fled, scurrying back into their holes behind the wall hangings. A few shots from the thunderers encouraged them to keep running.

'The leader is up there!' Brokrin told his crew, waving his pistol at the dais. 'There are tunnels behind the tapestries. Keep him from reaching them.'

Even as Brokrin gave the command, Kilvolt came darting out from behind the dais. His retreat would have ended in disaster, but the skaven had one last trick to play. To cover his flight, he had sent a final pawn into the fray. Piu tulku rose from its seat and came lurching towards the duardin. There was no doubting the mechanical nature of the thing now. Every jerky motion of its limbs was accompanied by a buzzing whirr and the sour smell of leaking lubricants. Its hands were curled into claws as it stumbled towards Brokrin, but the face of Piu still wore the same expression of contemplative serenity.

'Right! That is far enough!' Drumark cried out, levelling his decksweeper at the automaton. When the Piu-thing continued its mindless approach, he emptied every barrel into it. The shot ripped through the thing's shell of flesh and cloth. In crafting his 'tulku' Kilvolt had stitched the flayed skin of Piu over a metal armature. The armature was now exposed by Drumark's blast as well as the nest of hoses and wires that swirled through its body.

Despite the damage inflicted on it, the automaton staggered onwards. Drumark glared at it in silent fury, as though it were a personal affront that it remained on its feet. While the sergeant fumed, Brokrin took command.

'Thunderers!' he called out. 'Aim for its spine! Concentrate your shots there!'

The thunderers obeyed Brokrin's order, fixing their aim at the core of the Piu-thing. Shots echoed through the shrine as round after round struck the automaton. Under the vicious barrage, the thing was cut in half, its torso severed and sent crashing to the floor. The legs stumbled on for several steps before

slopping over onto their side and kicking futilely at the floor.

'And stay down!' Drumark bellowed, spitting on the fallen automaton.

Gottramm seized hold of the sergeant's arm 'We have to get back to the ship! There are more of them in the hold with those tapestries!'

'Already sorted out,' Drumark declared. 'By now Horgarr should be done tossing their carcasses overboard. I figured you might be having trouble over here so me and the lads grabbed one of the lamas and found out where you were.' Brokrin felt a surge of relief sweep through him. The *Iron Dragon* was safe. At least for now. He turned his eyes to the dragon tapestry and the tunnel Kilvolt had escaped into. Even now the skaven were probably regrouping to make another attack.

'Everybody back to the ship,' Brokrin said. 'The sooner we are away from here the better.' He gave Skaggi an almost sympathetic look. 'When we get back we will have to dump the tapestries over the side as well. We can't take the chance the skaven put some kind of poison or pestilence on them.'

Skaggi clenched his fist and rushed to the wall. With a savage tug he brought one of the hangings crashing down to the floor. 'If we have to throw out the others then we had better grab some replacements on our way out!' Catching his intention, Gottramm and some of the thunderers helped Skaggi pull down the other tapestries. The hangings were quickly gathered up and slung across the shoulders of the duardin.

'What about the rat poison, cap'n?' Drumark asked as they hurried through halls that were empty of either lamas or skaven.

'We cannot trust that either,' Brokrin told him. 'We must do without it.' He gave the sergeant a grim smile. 'I hope you remember where you put your spade.'

Drumark sighed and shook his head. 'I remember, but overall I would rather stay here and shoot skaven than play whack-a-rat with a shovel.'

# **THE SON OF SORROWS**

**JOHN FRENCH**

*'Slaughter is harder than people imagine. With the right circumstances, it can occur spontaneously, but to bring it about deliberately is a most difficult matter. Still more difficult is effective terror. The human mind is prone to fear, but terror, the deep emotion that lingers in the bone and blood for generations - for that, the tools must be sharp, and their application finely judged.'*

- from an address to the High Lords of Terra by Drakan Vangorich,  
12th Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum

### **Mission time stamp 01:32:34**

*'You!'*

Koleg did not look around.

*'You hear me?'*

Koleg kept his gaze on the temple front.

*'You need to move, friend-pilgrim.'*

Statues covered the temple, piled together and mortared in place, drowning in bright paint and gold leaf. Gargoyles leered up at the blink of discharge from the remembrance towers that rose above it. Gilded haloes gleamed. Holy lips smiled red. Rain ran from the faces of the saints and the wings of the angels. They called it the city of tears for its rain.

The drops splashed on his face and patterned on his coat. He saw the water pour from the edge of an angel's wing. The stone feathers caught a flash of light from the electro-discharge. For a second they looked real...

*Oh-ho, ho-nooo...*

*Which one did we know...*

*Knowww... ho...*

*'I am going to say it one more time. You need to—'*

*'It needs to be an example,' he said. 'That's what the order is.'*

He turned and looked at the warden. The man was fat. His red cloak of office

was too small for him, and he held a shock rod in his right hand. The thumb was steady on the activation stud. There were debt and penance tattoos on the man's chin and jaw, red and black dots amongst stubble.

'You are not a part of this,' said Koleg. 'You should not be here.'

He saw the pupils go wide in the warden's eyes, but he did not back away.

'It's curfew,' said the man. 'It's the will of the Lords, you have to—'

Koleg hit him just beneath the sternum. Air gasped from between teeth. The man stumbled backwards. Koleg jolted his palm into his jaw, and the warden dropped onto the wet stone steps. Koleg drew a needle from a sheath in his cuff and stabbed it into the man's throat. He flicked the tiny glass bubble on the needle's head, and sedative began to seep down the silver shaft. The warden would not wake for an hour. By then it would be over.

Koleg shrugged the pack from his back. Fastenings snapped open. Gun metal gleamed in the blue crackle. His hands worked quickly: propellant kindler into stock, stock into casing, drum number one into feed port.

*I know, I know...*

*I know where you go...*

The thread of rhyme passed through his thoughts again. He paused for a second.

*Hawk shifting on a gloved hand, eyes hidden under a red falconry hood...*

Winked and stood, the grenade launcher in his hands. Viola said that communication out of the district would be disrupted for an hour. He reached into his coat and took out the mask. The raindrops formed silver domes on the black ceramic. Its eyes were mirrors. Two chrome cylinders plugged into the cheeks. He pulled it on. Luminous numerals lit at the edge of his sight. Small speaker grilles settled over his ears with a hiss of static.

He took a breath. It was not to calm him. He was always calm. It was a habit, and habits were important.

They did not know that he was coming. The shock would help.

He looked at the temple doors, big blank slabs of board and metal. White-and-red handprints all over them. Hinges exposed. Rock frame. He had time to place the charges he had brought. There was no need to rush. They did not know he was coming.

### **Signifier 0**

'It's a kill mission, top to bottom. It needs to be—'

'An example,' said Koleg. He looked up from the weapon components laid out

on the green cloth.

His room was two metres by three metres. White paint covered the riveted metal walls and ceiling. The paint was fresh, but the rust still showed on the panels next to the basin and faucet. The floor was a rough-textured black. His bunk was bolted to the wall. The sheets and blanket on the bed were taut and smoothed, edges folded tight. His personal chest sat in the corner. Equipment gleamed inside the open lid. He sat on the floor, the stripped and separated tools of his trade in front of him.

'I understand what is needed,' he said. 'You can leave the mission briefing details. I will review them and clarify if necessary.'

Viola was still looking at him. He read the expression on her face: the distaste in the crease of her mouth, the questions she could not keep from her eyes. He noted the emotional markers, and then looked away. He looked straight ahead, hands and fingers finding their own way as he broke a gas-propelled grenade launcher down.

'It needs to be an example. That is why it's just going to be me.' He glanced up. 'It is this type of mission that the inquisitor recruited me for.' He put the last piece of the launcher down and snapped the casing pins from a Kahre 354 hand cannon. 'Is there something you wish to ask?'

Viola's face twitched under her ash-white hair. It was a slim face, he noted, made lean by concern, and taut by habit. Her hand shifted the collar of her velvet dress coat. She began to shake her head and turn away, then stopped and looked back at him.

'You are unsettling,' she said.

'Yes,' he said. 'I have been told that before.'

She looked around the room, and shook her head again.

'This is a cell, you understand?'

'I know,' he said.

'We painted it and scrubbed it, but it was part of a brig.'

'I know.'

'You requested this?'

'Yes.'

Viola shook her head and let out a breath.

'Why?'

'Because it is all I need.'

'All right,' she said after a moment. 'All right. You are here by the inquisitor's command, and that is enough.' She moved towards the door.

'Your discomfort is understandable,' he said. She paused in her step. 'I am new. I am unknown. I do not fit. Your discomfort is understandable.'

'I thought you did not feel emotion?'

'I don't. Not any more. But you don't need to feel emotion to recognise its effects. If I could not do that then I could not perform my role.'

'And what is that?'

'Terror, Mistress von Castellan. The creation of a precise kind of terror.'

### **Mission time stamp 01:35:01**

*Click...*

*Switch to arm.*

*A breath. Muscles relaxing.*

*Thumb tense on switch.*

*Press.*

*Click.*

The doors to the temple blew in. Rock dust and smoke billowed through the breach, and out across the square.

Koleg's mask blanked the flash of the explosion. The blast wave whipped over him.

Two seconds, counted precisely in his mind.

He stood. The launcher was in his hands. The first cylinder was loaded with photo flash, choke and shriek grenades. He aimed. His mask was set to infra-sight. The air around the temple door was red with heat.

Five seconds.

Orange silhouettes moved beyond the door, staggering. The metal of their guns was cold-blue.

Koleg fired, shifted aim and fired, shifted and fired. The grenades flew through the door and detonated. Choke gas blended with smoke. Hot silhouettes began to stagger and fall.

Flash of blinding light, white through the cloud. Human shouts. The sound of people trying to breathe while choking.

*They have no gas masks,* he noted. The shriek charge went off under the stone arch. The air shivered. The staggering figures began to spasm. Koleg caught the edge of the sound an instant before his mask filled his ears with grey noise. That instant of exposure was enough to bring bile to his throat.

Forward, another two grenades.

Thump-crack, thump-crack...

He had reached the door when the first armed target lurched into sight, and raised a weapon. Koleg put the third grenade into its central mass. It punched the figure back off its feet. The shriek grenade detonated and a fresh blast of neuro-disruptive noise ripped through the air. Koleg was through the door, slinging the launcher over his shoulder. The bloom of heat from the door breach was fading from his sight. He pulled his macrostubber from its holster. Lights flashed on as the temple finally began to wake. Koleg tapped the switch on his mask. Red markers spun at the edge of sight as the mask sifted heat and motion for threats.

Flaking faces of saints and angels covered the ceiling and walls. Open arches ran across the far end of the chamber.

A man came out of a vestibule door, wearing soiled, multicoloured robes, face blue and white from ingrained dye. Koleg squeezed the trigger for an instant. Recoil kicked up his arm. Muzzle flare breathed from the pistol. The deluge of micro-rounds tore a hole in the man's chest. Blood smudged the fog of gas. Koleg surged forwards, grabbing the corpse as it fell. The next target through the door had an autopistol. *Munitorum pattern d-3-4*, thought Koleg. *High rate of fire. Substantial recoil.*

The target fired an instant after Koleg shoved the corpse forwards and put a point-blank burst into the shooter's face, and went through the next door.

The temple structure opened beneath him.

### Signifier 1

The door closed behind Viola. Koleg remained on the floor. His hands slotted the last pieces of the macrostubber pistol together, and he set it down beside the other weapons. All were ready. He looked at them for a moment, and then picked up the data-slate that Viola had left on the bed. It had a holo projector attachment and filled the air above it with a three-dimensional image of a structure which looked like a spire tower that had been turned upside down, and thrust into the ground. Audio crackled from the slate's inbuilt speaker.

'...Seekers of Incandescent Truth, a cult that conforms to the prevalent local interpretation of the Imperial Creed...'

'...fallen out of favour within the dioceses...'

'...temple capable of housing nine hundred adherents, numbers currently dwelling in the temple estimated at two to three hundred...'

He listened. He watched, and read. When it was complete, he set it going from the beginning. After three passes he shut it down. Then he sat, eyes open, but flickering from side to side as though he were dreaming. Parameters were set,

methods selected. When that was done, he paused.

It would take him an hour to pass from orbit to the strike location. The rogue trader ship *Dionysia* would pass over that optimal drop location in one hundred and five minutes. That was acceptable. Inquisitor Covenant wished this dealt with as soon as possible, before the Seekers of Incandescent Truth had time to realise what was happening, before they had time to prepare. He would complete the task within the next four hours. Before he began he needed to review his signifiers.

They were in a box: green metal, foam-lined, letters and numbers stencilled on the outside. He stared at it before he opened it. That was the way he had to do it, the way that he had been taught to do it, each step meticulous. The lid opened with a hiss of collapsing vacuum. He paused, observing the passage of his thoughts, watching for threads of emotion. There were none. He would maintain his watch throughout this preparation.

Three small packets lay in the box, each wrapped in black velvet. He began on the left, taking each packet out, setting it down, and unfolded the velvet to reveal the contents: a crystal cylinder a little taller than a clenched fist; a votive candle; a falconry raptor hood to fit over the eyes of a trained hawk.

He looked at them, listening to his pulse. It remained steady, the turning of his thoughts regular, smooth, flat...

Then he reached out and picked up the crystal cylinder. A thick, brushed-steel cap sealed the top. Three slivers of pink flesh hung in the thick fluid within, each no larger than the tip of his smallest finger.

Memory filled his senses.

It began with smells: burnt flesh, urine, static and sweat all hiding under the thick blanket of counterseptic.

*The orderlies moved around him, checking the bindings that held him at the wrists, neck, ankle and waist. He rolled his shoulders. Above him a cluster of articulated still limbs twitched and extended. Laser cutters, micro-saws and drills spun and cycled between different speeds. It reminded him of a prize brawler, limbering up before a fight.*

*'It's part of the mind interface integration,' said the surgeon. Koleg glanced up at her. She smiled at him. It was a beautiful smile, he thought. Teal plastek robes covered her from neck to fingertip. An indentured medicae tattoo sat on her left cheek. Chrome cables led from sockets in her spine up to the cluster of flexing limbs hanging from the ceiling. 'I have to make sure that when I impulse a drill to push through the skull it stops when I tell it, and doesn't, you know,*

*start trying to click fingers it doesn't have instead.'*

*'I would prefer that not to happen,' he said, and found himself smiling back at her.*

*'For now,' she said. 'You would prefer that not to happen for now. By the time I have finished with you, the two possibilities will seem as insignificant as each other.'*

*Assistants in red and teal bodygloves began to clamp his head in place. Cool fingers held him still as metal touched the skin of his scalp. The beat of his heart rose.*

*'Calm, calm now,' said the surgeon. She was still smiling at him. The movements of the articulated limbs on the ceiling slanged. A single needle-tipped arm reached down and jabbed into his neck. Warm numbness spread through him. 'We are going to have to secure your head so that you cannot move during the procedure.'*

*A second later he heard the sound of drills and bolt drivers as they screwed the clamp to his skull. He was breathing hard. He tried to think of the swish of feathers, and the beat of wings carrying a hawk into a blue sky.*

*'Heartbeat and adrenal levels rising,' said a cold voice from out of sight.*

*'You have to be conscious, you see,' said the surgeon, 'so that I can observe your emotional reactions as I work. It's the only way to be sure that the excision and implants are correct. That we are taking enough, but not too much.'*

*The limbs unfolded above him, spreading like a flower under warm sun. A circular saw the size of a coin began to spin. The surgeon was next to him now, needle-tipped fingers moving over his skull, serene smile still in place. 'There will be no pain once we are working directly in the brain.'*

*'They...'* He tried to speak, but his breath was coming fast now. His blood hammered in his ears. *'They did not tell me about this. They said it was an augmentic implantation. That I would wake up and not feel...'*

*'Hmm... Yes, that's true.'* Her fingers held still on his scalp. *'But also not. You agreed to this because you do not want to suffer any more. But I am afraid to do that we need to know what part of your brain your sorrow and tenor live in so that we can remove them. I need to be able to see the signal spikes. So, right here and now, Sergeant Koleg, for this to work you need to be terrified.'*

*The saws and drills plunged down towards him.*

*\* \* \**

**Mission time stamp 01:39:42**

The Seekers of Incandescent Truth had not begun as heretics. They professed love of the Emperor. But it was their faith that had led them astray. They had taken to kidnapping nascent psykers. All were tortured for pain-soaked words of revelation. Some proved imperfect to the needs of the cult. It was worse for those who survived. The cult had not done anything more directly dangerous, but they would. In time, of course they would. The rot would swell and burst its bounds. When that happened it might do a lot of damage, or it might implode. It did not matter, though; it could not be allowed to continue, and the inquisitor had decided that while it was being dealt with, the death of this heresy could serve as a lesson.

Koleg was the agent of that lesson.

He knelt on a grated platform above the cavern. Multicoloured light glimmered up through the mesh floor from the drop beneath. The space was a wide, circular shaft. Metal steps led to a spiral of metal gantries that ran down the cavern walls. Lanterns of stained glass hung in the central space, lighting the gloom with dirty red, blue and orange. Down at the bottom of the shaft, lights shimmered and crackled cold-blue and fire-yellow.

Someone saw him. Bullets sparked off the grated floor. Threat markers multiplied in his sight. He placed the macrostubber on the ground next to his knee and slid the grenade launcher from his back. More rounds pinged off the floor. The air vibrated with gunshots and cries.

Koleg looked up at the ceiling: soot-skimmed bronze and iron supports, no ventilation. They would be relying on the natural draw of air up the cavern. Fire burst across the edge of the gantry. He heard the buzz-whip of rounds passing close by. He released the launcher's ammo drum and reached for the one in the pouch on his lower back. A trio of figures ran from a door to the stairs leading up to him. He scooped up the macrostubber and fired. They dropped in red shreds, one tumbling over the edge, blood scattering as he fell.

Koleg put the pistol down, pulled out the drum of six grenades and locked it into the launcher.

More figures were coming up the spiral of stairs and gantries. He saw tatters of fabric, faces with fever-sheened skin. He aimed the grenade launcher up, tumbled the firing setting to low-pressure auto, and pulled the trigger. The grenades thumped free of the barrel one after another. Red and black gas trailed in their wake as they arced up and dropped down the central well of the chamber. Koleg picked up his pistol and put a trio of controlled bursts into the clusters of armed figures.

Gas dispersion would take twelve seconds in this space, air saturation thirty. He moved down the stairs, pistol tracking threat markers, his left hand pulling a chrome-and-black disc from a pouch across his chest. The disc was a little wider than his palm with raised circles of shining metal. He stopped and placed it on the metal gantry floor. It locked in place with a magnetic thump.

Black-and-red streaked fog filled the chamber now. The screaming had started: one voice and then a second, and then a chorus. It was not the sound of panic, but pure human terror. The gas was at saturation, one half hallucinogen, the other half a fear inducer that the prosecutors of the Adeptus Arbites gave the simple name of 'scare'. The effect on anyone who breathed it was to make nightmares of the subconscious real, while plunging them into the most intense fight or flight response. The red-and-black colouring was simply for the spectacle.

A fat man in a gown of yellow and blue burst from the fog, hands ripping at his own face. Koleg blew the man's head to mist with a stutter of micro-rounds.

Koleg looked at the controls strapped to his wrist, and keyed a command. The disc on the floor extended upwards, rings telescoping to sections of a long silver rod. They spilt and branched, until a metre-high tree of gleaming chrome stood amidst the murk. Tiny blue crystal spheres tipped every twig. Even the most exalted of magi amongst the priests of Mars would have struggled to recognise the device or its purpose. Koleg keyed a second command and sparks began to run up and down the silver rods.

The sounds of screaming were getting louder. He paused, listening to their pitch rise as they echoed and shattered against the temple's roof. It was not that he was indifferent to the sounds - he knew the emotional content they denoted - he just felt nothing. That was the gift they had given him in exchange for his service. To pass through a universe where even happiness held the seed of sorrow, and feel nothing.

He holstered his pistol and took the spool of micro wire rope from a pouch, locked it to the edge of the gantry, and then clipped its end to a loop on the back of his harness. The tree-like device was sparking. Motes of light grew in each of the blue spheres. A shimmering haze surrounded it. Koleg drew his hand cannon, keyed the last command on the wrist controls and jumped into the red-and-black-swirled air.

He fell, the wire rope coiling behind him. The guns were heavy weights in his hands.

*'Why does it fly so high?'* asked a voice that came from the still depths of his mind. *'Why doesn't it keep lower?'*

*'So it can see the world.'*

*'All of it?'*

*A small face looking up, wide eyes under a frown.*

*'As good as all of it, yes'*

*'I want to be a hawk.'*

*He had laughed.*

*'Maybe you will be...'*

*And above them the hawk had turned in a cloudless sky.*

## **Signifier 2**

*'Faith is a powerful thing,' said the voice from the chapel door.*

*'Is it?' asked Koleg, without looking around.*

*The candle burned in front of his eyes. He had not looked up from it since he had entered the chapel. That had been six hours, and the candle had burned to almost a nub. The commissars and warders of the prefectus would find him soon enough. He had not made it hard for them to find him. Once they did there would be pain and then... nothing.*

*'In another context that question would be heresy,' said the voice. 'But I am sure that the punishments don't hold much fear for you, now.'*

*Koleg looked around then.*

*The man standing behind him wore grey robes, without mark or ornamentation. His face was dagger-sharp beneath his hood.*

*He looked something like a priest and a lot like a killer.*

*'Who are you?'*

*'I am your confessor.'*

*'Did they send you?'*

*'If you mean the commissars and your superior officers, then no, they did not.'*

*'Who then?'*

*'A higher power, shall we say.'*

*Koleg grunted and looked back at the candle. He did not have the energy to think about why the man who dressed like a priest, and talked like something else, was there. It just meant that the end was coming, at last.*

*'So what happens now?' asked Koleg, looking back at the candle.*

*'You beat your captain to the point that he has only just come out of a coma. There must be a consequence to that action.'*

*Koleg's face twitched as the fire rose in him.*

*'He should have got the grid coordinates for the fire drop right.' He turned his*

*gaze on the grey-clad man. He could feel the rage burning behind his eyes.  
'What are the consequences of that?'*

The hand was black. The fire had shrunk the skin around the bones, and hooked the fingers into claws, but somehow they still opened to reach for his hand.

*'You...'*

The fingers were cold. He looked at them, only at them, and tried not to hear the bubbling gurgle of air sucking into fluid-filled lungs. The inferno bomb had hit just the other side of the wall. The blast had ripped that down and then the liquid fire had drowned the remains. Pools of reeking, jellied promethium sat in depressions still burning with black-edged flames. He had seen corpses as he ran through the ruins - lasgun thumping into his back on its sling - pink mouths open on charred faces, silent amongst the guttering flames.

*'You... are...'* said the face that he could not look at.

'I am here, Kesh,' he said. Somehow the words were not a scream. He still did not look up at his brother's face.

Kesh jerked, a huge swallow of air sucking into his lungs and crackling back out.

*'You...'* he began, but the words never followed.

*The man in grey held Koleg's gaze.*

*'Regiments are raised to fight, soldiers to die. They are not meant to live, they are not meant to be family.'*

*Koleg's muscles bunched, the rush of fresh anger feeling cold in his guts, like water, like cold rain. The man gave the smallest shake of his head, and somehow that movement was enough to freeze Koleg to the pew. The man stood up and moved around to the shrine that Koleg's votive candle burned on. A statue of the Emperor as judge gleamed in the flame light, its features lost under layers of gold leaf.*

*'What do you pray for?'* asked the man, his voice soft.

*'I don't,'* said Koleg. *'I ask Him why He did this.'*

*The man in grey took an unlit candle from the box beside the shrine, and lit it from Koleg's flame.*

*'Because we are made by suffering,'* said the man.

*Koleg was silent for a second, and then felt his mouth open.*

*'I just... I just want not to feel that any more.'*

*The man in grey turned to look at him, candlelight dancing in hard eyes.*

*'That prayer, my son, is one that can be granted.'*

## Mission time sump 01:43:05

The floor of the cavern shot up towards Koleg as he fell.

Above him, the neuro-disruptor reached full charge. A ball of actinic lightning formed around it, held in place for an instant and then burst outwards. The pulse shivered through the temple. Exotic energies poured into toxin-laden synapses. It was a simple method, really. The gas mix created fear and altered perception. The neuro-disruptor took those nerve signals and shaped them into violent panic and paranoia. The aim was not just to kill; it was to make the targets tear each other apart. Pulses of grey, blue and white noise filled Koleg's ears as the disruptor energies washed through him. Motes of pain flared behind his eyes, but he felt only the steady beat of his heart as he fell. They had cut out the strings on which emotion played its song, leaving only echoes.

He could see figures hacking and tearing at each other on the cavern floor beneath him. One of them looked up, eyes bloodshot above a bloody snarl. The wire rope snapped taut. Koleg jerked to a stop, brought the hand cannon up and fired, three times. Three figures fell. He released the wire rope and dropped the last metre, spraying a long burst from the macrostubber in a circle around him. The gun clicked empty.

Koleg rose to his feet. A figure came out of the fog to his right, screaming, a bloody length of pipe raised above its head. Koleg put a hand cannon shell into its chest.

He looked down.

Three circular hatches stuck with prayer papers formed a triangle on the floor. Motes of lurid green light were bubbling and bursting through the metal. Koleg felt a greasy pressure slide over his scalp. This was the one facet of the mission that he could not leave to chance. The psykers held by the cult would not have been able to inhale the gas, but they would have felt the neuro-pulse.

Fear like that was a dangerous thing to inflict on a tortured soul whose thoughts could break reality.

He unfastened the krak charges from his waist and clamped the first one to a hatch. It armed with a dull chime. The floor began to shake. Ozone filled his nose inside his mask. Another charge clamped in place. The arming runes glowed amber at the edge of his sight.

Pain sliced across his right side. He pitched forwards, twisting, hearing the buzz and crack of the round that had gouged across his shoulder. A figure in bloody robes staggered closer, blood leaking from a torn face, a slug pistol clutched in

its hands. The barrel swung towards Koleg.

The floor hatch just behind the figure exploded upwards. Arcs of ghost light crawled through the air. The figure with the pistol twisted, as a shape rose from the broken hatch. Blood-streaked amnion fell from it. Wasted limbs scrabbled at the floor. A corona of pale light pulsed around its head. The hatch ring glowed and blackened under its touch.

Pain filled Koleg's eyes as he looked at the psyker. The floor was buckling. Heat ringed the other two hatches. The psyker opened its toothless mouth and howled.

And the world vanished into the past.

### Signifier 3

*The sun was high and he was laughing, Kesh running a pace behind him. High above, the hawk turned in the cold dawn air. They should not have been out, but had sneaked from the house while the sun was just a golden blush beyond the mountains, the heat of the day still to soak into the stones of the streets. Their mother and father had been asleep, and had stirred as Koleg pulled open the door on the hawk house. Kesh had fitted the red hood over the hawk's head as he took it from the cage. It had settled onto Koleg's leather-wrapped arm and kept still as they walked through the night-stilled streets to the edge of the settlement and up onto the hills. They had sung as they ran, the old nonsense rhyme remembered since the crib:*

*'Oh-ho, ho-nooo...*

*Which one did we know...*

*Knowww... ho...'*

*On and on in the sleep-rocked rhythm of the childhood they thought they had outgrown. They ran all the way until the town was laid out beneath them, its off-white buildings clustered around the aquila-capped spire.*

*When he took the hood from the hawk's head, it had given a sharp cry, stretched its wings and taken to the air. He had watched it, and laughed with joy as it had returned to his call, and then cast it back into the air, and they had run to track its shadow.*

*Kesh had stopped suddenly.*

*'You hear that?' he asked.*

*'No,' said Koleg, 'hear what?'*

*Then he had heard it too. Kesh had pointed, and Koleg had seen the black dot on the lightening horizon. He had stared at that dot for a long minute, watching*

*as one became two, became half a dozen. The drone of engines threaded the air. Lights lit in the town, and then he heard the blare of sirens. He stood for a second, frozen, the hawk crying as it wheeled above him. He began to run. Kesh followed an instant later. They were still running, feet stumbling on the rocky hillside as the first bombs began to fall.*

\* \* \*

### **Mission time stamp 01:47:26**

The flare of explosions died in his eyes. He was lying on the metal floor. The psyker's howl faded as it pulled the last of itself out of its prison. Koleg looked into its cataract-clogged eyes. It was shivering. Desperate. Terrified. The halo of ghost light above its head grew. Koleg raised his gun. It opened its mouth. He fired.

He pulled himself up. Blood flowed down his coat from his shoulder. The pain was bright, but he kept moving. Frost rimed the floor around the two remaining hatches. Above and around him rose the sound of the Seekers of Incandescent Truth slaughtering themselves. He blanked the pain in his shoulder, reattached the steel rope. He keyed his wrist controls. The air above the floor shimmered, greasy, fizzing with bubbles of light. The charge runes in his helmet display blinked green.

He triggered the explosives at the same moment as the cable recoil. The wire rope yanked him into the air as the krak charges on the hatches blew. Fire flashed through the smog of gas as Koleg rose.

In a closing box in the back of his mind, the memory of explosions rising into the blue sky shrank beneath the eye of a circling hawk.

### **Signifier 0**

The lid of the casket closed and locked. Koleg unfolded a green tarpaulin and spread it across the floor of the cell. He began to strip the macrostubber. His eyes noted the dust and soot on each component as he laid it beside the others. The grenade launcher and hand cannon would come then he would check over the neuro-disruptor. Everything would be mission ready within the hour. Viola was watching him from by the door, turning the data-stub from his mask over in her fingers. He did not return her look.

'Any problems?' she asked.

He split the firing block and laid the parts out, cold metal under his fingers. The

light feathered from the oiled edges, and for a second became the sun behind a spreading wing.

'Koleg...?'

'Yes, Mistress von Castellan.'

'There were no problems?'

'The mission was completed. The full details are in your hand. If you need further clarification I am happy to provide it, but anything I can add might be more relevant after you have reviewed the mission capture.'

A frown pinched her forehead for a second, but then she nodded and opened the door.

'Mistress Viola,' he said as she was stepping through the cell door. She paused and half turned. He looked up at her, fingers still moving to break apart the macrostubber.

'Yes?'

'There were no problems.'

'Thank you, Koleg,' she said.

She made her face smile and then closed the door.

On the cell floor Koleg began to clean the pieces of the pistol. Behind his eyes he remembered hawk feathers beneath a high sun, and candle flame, and felt nothing at all.

# **A DIRGE OF DUST AND STEEL**

**JOSH REYNOLDS**

Eerie shrieks pierced the gloom.

They reverberated through the broken field of toppled pillars and dust-shrouded statuary, riding the night wind. To Sathphren Swiftblade's ears, there was both damnable pleasure and promise in those cries. The Lord-Aquilor repressed a shudder and bent forwards in his saddle. 'Faster, Gwyllth,' he murmured into his mount's ear. 'We're almost there.'

The long-limbed, avian-headed gryph-charger squalled in reply, and increased her speed, despite the weight of the fully armoured Stormcast Eternal she carried on her broad back. Sathphren glanced back, checking on his warriors. Half a dozen armoured Vanguard-Palladors rode hard to either side of him. Like the Lord-Aquilor, they wore the silver-and-azure war-plate of the Hallowed Knights Stormhost, and rode atop lean, leonine gryph-chargers. The beasts were galloping flat out, the magic that flowed through their muscular frames enabling them to easily outpace their pursuers.

As one, they bounded over the fallen statue of some long-forgotten warden king. The square, bearded face glared sightlessly at the silver-armoured riders and their steeds as they raced on across the broken ground. The duardin had once ruled this unforgiving ground. Before the coming of Chaos, the Oasis of Gazul had provided shelter for traders and pilgrims alike. Now, it was a daemon-haunted ruin, shrouded in shadows and dust.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sathphren caught a glimpse of a pack of lithe, inhuman shapes as they raced along parallel to the Hallowed Knights. The creatures, at once serpentine and avian, leapt and scrambled over fallen pillars and broken walls, moving with a speed that defied comprehension. They were urged on by their cackling riders - slim, hideously sensual daemonettes, the Handmaidens of Slaanesh.

The daemonettes resembled women, with thick manes of snaky locks and pitiless, androgynous faces. Chitinous claws snapped wildly at the air, as the creatures gesticulated obscenely. The Hounds of Pleasure were on the hunt, and Sathphren and his warriors were their quarry. 'Looks like they've caught up with

us at last, eh, Feysha?' Sathphren called out.

'Took them long enough,' Feysha, his second in command, replied. The Pallador-Prime peered back over her shoulder. 'Though I've not seen such a pack of beasts since the Bitterbark. Every daemon in this desert must be on our tail.'

'Good. The more of them the better.' Sathphren glanced back, following her gaze. Behind them, daemons raced across the dust dunes with quicksilver grace. Brutal beast-kin loped in their wake, braying to the Wraith Moon above. There were mortals among them as well - strange figures those, clad in everything from silks to furs, bearing weapons and musical instruments in their tattooed hands. Some rode atop daemoniac steeds, while others capered through the dust. Golden standards, decorated with looted tapestries, mirrors and flayed hides, bobbed above the monstrous cavalcade.

It was not an army. A horde, at best. A moveable feast of frenzied indulgence. A celebration of blood and pain. And at its head, crouched atop a massive chariot, made from bone and gold and pulled by a darting, hissing herd of daemon-steeds, was the host - the creature known as Amin'Hrith, the Soulflayer.

The Keeper of Secrets was a monster among monsters. It towered over the tallest of its followers, even squatting as it did on its nightmarish conveyance. Its elongated torso bore a quartet of long, milk-pale arms. One of these ended in a vicious, snapping claw, while the hands of the others rested upon the bejewelled hilts of the various blades sheathed about its person, beneath the cloak of skins it wore. Its head was that of a bull, with great, curving horns capped with gold, and a ring of silver in its wide, flat nose. A mane of thick spines draped across the back of its neck, and its pale form was covered in the marks of ritual scarification, as well as various gemstones clinging to its chest like barnacles.

Sathphren's gaze was drawn to the largest of these - a massive ruby, set between the daemon's uppermost pectorals. Something flashed within the facets of the gem, and he turned away, frowning. 'Into the oasis - go!'

Lone pillars and broken statues gave way to more substantial ruins - stone watercourses and shattered aqueducts cast elongated shadows in the moonlight. And beyond them, the high, narrow summit of Gazul-Baraz. The ruins spread out around the immense tower of limestone, spilling forth from the caverns beneath it, following the ancient watercourses. There were greater ruins by far within those caverns, stretching into the deep darkness. This was but the uppermost level of that vast fiefdom. One the Soulflayer had destroyed, and now claimed as its own.

'Swiftblade - beware!'

Feysha's shout was all the warning he needed. He ducked low, folding himself over Cwyllth's neck. A crustacean-like claw snapped closed where his head had been, as a daemon-steed drove itself into Cwyllth's side. The gryph charger stumbled and spun, shrieking in rage. Sathphren hauled back on the reins, and snatched his boltstorm pistol from its holster. He levelled the weapon at the daemonette rider and loosed a bolt. The bolt struck it in the eye and sent it tumbling from the saddle. Its serpentine steed staggered, off balance, and Gwyllth smashed it from its feet, tearing open its elongated neck.

More daemons closed in, moving quickly. Sathphren holstered his pistol and unsheathed his starbound blade. The blade gleamed like a distant star as he parried a darting claw, and removed a daemonette's head. It spun away, trailing gory locks.

The rest swirled about him, cackling and shrieking, and he dealt with them swiftly. Even in death, they laughed, as if pain and pleasure were both but a singular sensation. The stink of strange incense rose from their glistening flesh. Black eyes, empty of all save malice, bored into him. Their smiles were at once alluring and repulsive. Their claws gouged his silver war-plate, but failed to penetrate.

'Who will ride more swiftly than the storm-winds?' he roared, laying about him.

'Only the faithful,' came the response, as the boltstorm pistols of the others cracked and starstrike javelins hissed, further distracting his pursuers. A moment later, Feysha's lunar blade joined his own, as her gryph-charger bore a squealing daemon-steed to the ground. The surviving daemonettes retreated in disorder, a frustrated tenor to their shrieks. Sathphren hauled Gwyllth around and thumped her ribs. The gryph-charger leapt back into motion, speeding to join the others, followed closely by Feysha. 'Keep moving,' Sathphren bellowed. 'Our allies are waiting.'

They led their pursuers down a slope into a narrow defile, between twinned limestone crags that acted as a gateway into the cavern-city beyond. The crags had felt the touch of hammer and chisel at some point in antiquity, and alcoves had been carved into their inner slopes. Immense statues occupied these alcoves - ancient duardin kings and heroes, Sathphren thought. Their countenances were uniformly, grimly stoic, as if humour were somehow taboo among their folk.

Having met them, Sathphren could well believe it. The Gazul-Zagaz were a sombre folk, as befitted those who worshipped death. Their ancestors had taken the name of their fallen god for their own, in the dim, ancient epoch when Nagash, the Undying King, had warred with the old gods of death and emerged

supreme.

Theirs was a society built on a legendary defeat, and the bones of those it had claimed. Where they had once ruled, they now merely persisted... huddled in the ruins of former glory, waiting out the days. Hunted by creatures like those even now pursuing him and his warriors. The servants of the Soulflayer had made these ruins their playground. But not for long. Not if Sathphren's gambit was successful.

It was a simple enough plan. Bait the foe in and chew them apart, piecemeal. With the aid of Sathphren and his warriors, the Gazul-Zagaz might rule the Sea of Dust once more. And in return, they would help the Swiftblades complete their mission. 'So far, so good,' he muttered, as they passed through the shattered gateways and into the cavern-city beyond.

It had been hacked from the stalactites and stalagmites of the vast caverns, built into the very bedrock. Despite the situation, he could not help but marvel at the extent of that ancient undertaking. Crumbled structures and ruptured aqueducts rose over sloped avenues. Moonlight shone through great wells carved in the uppermost reaches of the cavern. The silvery radiance was reflected in the sluggish waters that still slithered through the broken aqueducts, and poured down into the ruins in haphazard waterfalls.

'Look,' Feysa called out. She pointed. Sathphren laughed.

'It appears our newfound allies are as good as their word.'

A line of duardin waited for them, their stocky, armoured forms set in a rough battle-line. They were clad in coats and cowls of burnished gromril. Each wore a steel war-mask wrought in the shape of a stylised skull, and carried a heavy, baroque hand cannon. Dust sifted off the broad forms of the duardin Irondrakes as they raised their weapons. '*Uzkul-ha!*' they roared, as one.

The ancient drakeguns belched fire as the Vanguard-Palladors leapt over their wielders. The volley cut through the front rank of daemons and mortals like a scythe of fire. Mortals fell screaming from their abominable mounts, and daemons were ripped to shimmering rags. In the ensuing confusion, the duardin fell back into the ruins, reloading their weapons with a speed born of precision and experience, clearing the path.

Monstrous chariots rattled on in pursuit, over the broken bodies of the fallen. These were bombarded from on high, by hurled chunks of stone. Many slewed wildly, crashing into one another or flipping and rolling. Daemon-steeds screamed as they were pulled to the ground or crushed beneath the tumbling chariots. Even the Soulflayer's massive carriage was brought to a halt, as a chunk

of stone shattered one of its wheels, and killed several of the beasts pulling it. The Keeper of Secrets leapt from the wreck with a bellow of frustration.

'Remind them that we're here, brothers and sisters,' Sathphren shouted. As one, the Hallowed Knights emptied their boltstorm pistols into the stalled horde. The Lord-Aquilor took aim at the Soulflayer, and sent a shot smashing into its chest. The daemon whipped around, eyes narrowing. Sathphren gave a mocking wave and glanced at Feysha. 'Think that'll do it? I'd hate to think the beast is getting bored of us.'

The daemon flung out a claw and bellowed. Its followers surged past it, clambering over the wreckage in their eagerness to catch their prey. Feysha jerked on the reins of her gryph-charger and turned the beast about. 'I think so, my lord,' she said. Sathphren laughed and jolted Gwyllth into motion.

Drakeguns spat death from the ruins, as the Irondrakes fired again. Followed by the echoes of that volley, the Vanguard-Palladors split up. Several turned back, arrowing through the ruins. They would harass the flanks, and bleed the enemy, striking and fading as only they could. It was what they had been forged for. The rest continued on, racing down what had once been a grand avenue, pursued by the main body of the enemy.

Sathphren looked ahead. At the end of the avenue, between two crumbled structures, a shield wall of duardin warriors waited. '*Gazul-akit-ha!*' The words echoed through the cavern, accompanied by the crash of weapons against shields. '*Uzkul! Uzkul! Uzkul!*' The wall of duardin shields parted, allowing the Stormcast Eternals to pass through.

Mourning bells, mounted on iron standard poles, tolled grimly as the duardin beat on their shields. Warriors wearing white vestments over their armour and golden war-masks, lifted stone tablets marked with crudely carved runes. As they paced up and down behind the battle-line, they began to sing an eerie dirge. The sound rolled across the line, and sent a chill down Sathphren's spine.

'That doesn't sound like any duardin battle-song I've ever heard,' Feysha said. The Vanguard-Palladors slewed to a halt behind the shield wall, their gryph-chargers yowling in protest. The beasts hated standing still, almost as much as their riders.

'They're mourning the dead yet to be,' Sathphren said. 'Singing their souls to the caverns of their god.'

'Their god is dead.'

'I don't think they care.' He gestured to the duardin. 'Can you support them until Thalkun gets his Vanguard-Raptors into position?'

Cadres of Stormcast marksmen were even now scaling the broken heights of the oasis-city, seeking the best vantage points to deliver their lethal volleys. They would farther bleed the foe, dispersing their strength. The enemy was caught fast in the jaws of the trap now, though they didn't yet realise it.

Feysha nodded. 'Aye, if we must. I still think one of us should go with you, at least.'

'One soul more or less won't make a difference.' He gestured. 'Remember, don't fight too hard. Let the beast through. If we're to win this, it must reach the oasis.' The shield wall was only there to blunt the initial rush of the foe. Once they'd bloodied them, the duardin would retreat, as the Irondrakes had, and regroup in the ruins.

'You can count on us,' Feysha said. 'It's the duardin I'm worried about. They look set on dying here.' The dirge swelled up, rolling through the ruins. The song of a dying folk, as they made what might be their last stand. Sathphren frowned and shook his head.

'They know what's at stake, as well as you.' The Gazul-Zagaz had set the price for their aid, though it meant duardin blood would be shed, as well as that of his warriors. For centuries, they had suffered the depredations of the Soulflayer. Now, at last, they had a chance to free themselves. Whatever the cost.

Feysha met his gaze solemnly. 'Much is demanded...' she said.

'To those whom much is given,' he replied, completing the canticle. They clasped forearms. 'Fight well, sister. And don't let them catch you standing still.'

'Never,' Feysha said, cheerfully. 'Hup!' She thumped her steed, and the gryph-charger leapt into motion. Sathphren watched her. She would circle through the ruins in order to flank the horde flooding down the avenue. Several of the remaining Vanguard-Palladors followed her, while the rest readied their javelins and drew their boltstorm pistols.

Sathphren twitched the reins and urged Gwyllth deeper into the ruins, seeking their heart. The beast growled low, unhappy at being denied the chance to savage the enemy. 'Soon enough, old girl,' he said, stroking the bright green plumage on her neck. 'Now let's go bait ourselves a trap, eh?'

Traps within traps. That was how the Swiftblades waged war. Sathphren had learned the art of the oblique approach in those harsh, bloody days before he had been called to Sigmar's side. Those lessons had stayed with him, even as he had been reforged, body and soul, on the Anvil of Apotheosis.

And if there was one place where such an approach was needed, it was Shyish. The Sea of Dust was a harsh land of broken mountains and dust storms that

could strip flesh from bone, as easily as guilt from sigmarite. It had its secret roads and hidden paths, and the Swiftblades had sniffed them out, one by one. This was not merely aimless wandering on their part, but a quest given to them by the God-King himself.

The Swiftblades had been sent to Shyish to find the ruins of Caddow, the City of Crows. And in that broken city was the Corvine Gate - an ancient realmgate linking Shyish with Azyr. Only a scant few such transdimensional apertures remained, in the wake of the War of Death and Heaven. Sigmar had commanded that it be rediscovered and reopened. Sathphren did not know why they sought it, or what might await them there. Nor, in truth, did he care. That the quarry was named was enough. He would find it or perish in the attempt, and explain his failure to the God-King in person.

But first he had a daemon to slay. And a bargain to make good on.

He smiled. It was the Soulflayer he'd set this trap for, and it had proved very obliging, thus far. The creature had been easy to provoke - one whiff of fresh prey and it had been on their trail. Then, in his experience, daemons were many things, but rarely shrewd. They had provoked and teased it for days, leading it into the ruins. Now, it was time for the trap to snap shut. A thrill of premature satisfaction surged through him. He forced it down. The hunt wasn't done yet.

Gwyllth loped through the ruins, carrying him down long, aqueduct-lined avenues towards the central plaza, where the waters of the oasis still ran fresh and clean within the great temple of Gazul. The remains of that edifice rose up around the softly bubbling spring like a forest of stone. It was a massive rotunda of pillars and glowering statues - as with everywhere in the city, the faces of the dead had been captured forever in stone.

Sathphren could hear the soft susurrus of the water as it swirled about its stony prison, deep within the forest of pillars. It filled the watercourses, which stretched from the base of the temple and connected to the closest aqueducts. He hauled back on the reins, bringing Gwyllth to a stop before the vast, flat steps leading up into the temple. A group of duardin awaited him. They wore soot-blackened robes and armour, and their beards and hair were covered in ashes. Some carried weapons, but most had their hands free. They were rune-singers - the last members of an ancient priesthood. Once, they had guided their kin through life. Now, they warded their souls in death.

One of them stepped forwards. 'You have returned.' The War-Mourner of the Gazul-Zagaz was clad in black, and his armour was bronze. Several heavy tomes were chained to him, the cover of each marked with the Khazalid rune of death.

He bore an iron staff, surmounted by a dirge-bell and a heavy hammer. Unlike his companions, he wore no mask, though his face had been painted with ash and soot to resemble a skull.

'As I promised, Elder Judd,' Sathphren said as he slid from Gwyllth's back. Heart pounding, he could hear the whistle-crack echo of the hurricane crossbows wielded by the Vanguard-Raptors. Thalkun and his warriors were unleashing a blistering fusillade against the pleasure-maddened warriors flooding into the ruins. But even that wouldn't hold the Soulflayer back for long. Nor did he wish it to. 'Is our trap ready?'

'It waits, manling.' Judd frowned. 'Are you certain the Soulflayer will come?'

A roar of frustration echoed across the ruins. Sathphren smiled. 'Fairly certain.' He clapped Gwyllth on the haunch. 'Go. You know what to do.' The gryph-charger screeched and turned, scraping its beak against his war-mask. He caught hold of its feathered skull. 'Go, sister. And wait for my call.'

The great beast squalled and loped swiftly into the forest of pillars, tail lashing. Sathphren drew his starbound blade and laid it across his shoulder. The avenue trembled beneath his feet. He turned, keen gaze sweeping across the ruins. He felt no fear. Only the anticipation of a hunter who closes fast on his moment to make a kill.

'Take your kin, and get out of sight, tune-singer. Best we not distract our prey.'

Judd hesitated. The duardin was old, even by the standards of his people. So old that he might have witnessed his people's fall in person. His hair and beard were the colour of ash mixed with snow, and his weather-beaten flesh resembled worn leather. But his voice was strong, as were his shoulders. 'Are you certain you wish to do this, manling? It may well mean your death.'

'Then we are in the right realm for it, no?' Sathphren looked down at him. 'I swore an oath. And I will hold to it, with every breath in my body.'

Judd nodded. 'Aye, you did at that. And so did we. If we are victorious, we will guide you to the ruins of the City of Crows. And we will aid you in opening the way for your kin, as best we can.' He patted the hammer that rested in the crook of his arm. 'And if we fail - we will add your name to the Great Dirge.' He smiled mirthlessly. 'It is the least we can do.'

Sathphren laughed. 'Don't start singing yet. There's never been a foe to catch me, if I didn't wish to be caught.' He jerked his head. 'Go. It's close. As soon as I lead it into the temple...'

'We know what to do, manling. And so do they.' Judd glanced meaningfully at the statues that glared down at them. Sathphren grunted, trying to ignore the chill

that swept through him. In Shyish, the dead did not rest easy, whatever their race.

'Let us hope so. I have no wish to fight the dead, as well as a daemon.'

Judd gave him a gap-toothed grin. 'Have no fear on that score. They know their enemy.' He turned and barked an order in his own tongue. Swiftly, the rune-singers disappeared into the ruins. The duardin of Gazul-Baraz had learned well the art of vanishing from sight. So skilled were they that even Sathphren's warriors had been impressed.

'We have much to learn from each other,' he murmured 'Perhaps after this is over.' An old refrain, but a comforting one. It implied an end to strife. Something he had not truly believed possible in his mortal life. But now, he had hope. That, in the end, was perhaps the greatest gift that Sigmar had bestowed upon him.

He sank to one knee and planted his sword point-first into the stones before him. Somewhere in the cavern, he heard the tolling of dirge-bells. He could see the battle-lines breaking in his mind's eye. The duardin would retreat, and the foe would splinter, greedy for victory. Softly, he began to pray. As a mortal, his faith had not extended itself to prayers. Here, now, it was another weapon in his arsenal. Each canticle was a wall, a gate, a tower - defending him from what was to come.

He was still praying when the first of the daemons burst into view. Smoothly, without missing a beat, he rose, starbound blade hissing out. A daemonette fell, its unnatural skull cleft in two. Another leapt on him, claws clacking. He swept it off him, and sent it crashing into a pillar. Before it could rise, he pinned it to the pillar with his blade. He twisted the sword, silencing its shrieks.

Two more came at him and met their end. More of them loped down the avenue - some bore wounds, their limbs stained with black ichor. Over their sibilant cries, he could hear the crash of steel and the shouts of his warriors, echoing through the cavern. They had fallen back, as he ordered, opening the way for his prey. He smiled and lunged to meet the daemonettes.

Before he could reach them, a sudden jangle of bells caused them to stop short. With disconsolate hisses, the creatures retreated. They flowed back up the avenue, around a massive form that strode into view. 'You have teeth, then. Good.'

The Soulflayer.

The daemon's voice was like syrup over coals. 'It is always better, when the prey has teeth. A bit of fight makes the triumph all the sweeter.' It flung back the edge of a cloak of mortal flesh and hair, heavy with plundered duardin gold, and

clashed its bronze bracers, setting the dozens of bells that hung from them ringing. 'You've led me a pretty chase, little glow-bug. I've followed your scent for days. The stink of your soul teases me in exquisite ways. It is like lightning on the tongue.'

'You haven't caught me yet,' Sathphren said. His hand dropped to his boltstorm pistol. 'But here I am. Come and get me.' He studied the gems that marked the daemon's flesh. Each one flickered with an inner light, some of them brighter than the rest. Thanks to Elder Judd, he knew that the gemstones held the souls of those slain by the daemon. It was called the Soulflayer for good reason.

The Keeper of Secrets bared lupine teeth in a hideous parody of a smile. 'I will. But in my own time. The hunt is ever more pleasing than the kill.' It spread its uppermost arms. 'Why else would I leave the stunted inhabitants of this wasteland with their souls intact?'

'Not all of them,' Sathphren said. The stink of the daemon flooded his nostrils. It was a cloying fug, like perfume over rot. He shook his head to clear it.

The daemon's head twitched, like a bull shaking away flies. 'Ah. Does word of my magnificence reach so far then?' A bifurcated tongue slid across the thicket of fangs 'I am flattered.' A claw-tip caressed the ruby. In its facets, something that might have been a face, contorted in agony, formed briefly before dissipating. 'Yes. I took their prince. The last prince of Gazul-Baraz. He is precious to me. I keep him with me always and will until the day I grow bored of these arid lands, and the scuttling prey that inhabits it.'

Sathphren laughed. 'That's not the story I heard.'

'Oh?'

'I heard that you remained here out of fear.' Sathphren forced a laugh. 'Shyish has claimed so many of your kind. They say that Amin'Hrith hides in the wastes, hoping the war will pass him by. That the Soulflayer is nothing more than a scavenger, picking the bones left behind by more faithful celebrants.'

The daemon snarled. It thrust its chitinous claw at Sathphren. 'Choose your words with care, little glow-bug. You are alone.'

'I'm done with words.' Sathphren snatched his boltstorm pistol free of its holster and loosed a shot. One of the gemstones on the daemon's abdomen burst as the bolt struck home. Amin'Hrith shrilled in rage as a soft wisp of soul-light fluttered upwards, through the daemon's grasping hands.

'Thief!' The daemon capered, trying to catch the light as it swam upwards and away towards the roof of the cavern above. Sathphren fired again and again, backing away with each shot. Gems burst like blisters, releasing soft puffs of

radiance - souls, long denied their rest by the daemon's greed. With every shattered bauble, the daemon grew more enraged. It loped after him.

'I will tear your soul to pieces, to replace that which you have taken,' it screamed. It drew the blades that hung from its war-harness as it ran, and slashed apart a nearby pillar in a fit of petulance. Sathphren raced up the steps and into the temple through the slabbed archway that marked entrance.

The rotunda was full of pillars, each carved with thousands of runes - names, he knew. Or so the Gazul-Zagaz had claimed. The names of the dead, going back to the founding of the city. At the heart of the rotunda was the vast pool from which all the water in the city flowed. It bubbled and flowed, as fresh as the day the first duardin had discovered it. A colossal statue of Gazul sat atop a dais of dark stone, overlooking the waters. The god's statue was draped in a burial shroud of shadows and dust, his features obscured.

Sathphren lost himself among the pillars, moving as quietly as possible. He could hear the clop of the daemon's hooves on the stone floor. 'I can taste your fear and your desire on the wind,' it growled. Its voice was thick with silky menace and promise, all in one. It echoed through the pillars. 'I will add your soul to my collection, little glow-bug. You will dangle 'pon my chest, and your screams will soothe me to sleep, 'ere I grow tired of my games.'

Sathphren didn't answer. He heard a voice chanting – Elder Judd. The rune-singers were gathering outside the temple now. They had waited centuries for this day. The jaws of the trap were clashing shut. He heard the scrape of chitin on stone, and tensed. It was close.

'Why do you not answer me, little glow-bug? I thought your kind liked to talk. So boastful, you storm-riders. You wield declarations like swords.' It chuckled again, and he could almost see the ghastly smile on its twisted features. 'Do you tremble at the thought of my gentle touch, glow-bug? As well you should.'

A fug of perfumed musk suddenly enveloped Sathphren. He spun. A chitinous claw thrust itself towards him. He leapt aside. The claw gouged a pillar in half, casting rubble across the floor. The Keeper of Secrets lunged into view, hauling itself around another pillar. Its eyes blazed with a monstrous greed. 'Oh, I have such sights to show you,' it snarled. 'Nightmares and ecstasies beyond any you can conceive. I will flay your soul from the meat. I will make adornments from your bones, and wear your screaming skull into the eternities yet to come.'

Sathphren lunged, his starbound blade licking out across the daemon's taunting muzzle. Amin'hrith jerked back with a shriek of pain. Sathphren twisted aside, narrowly avoiding a wild slash from the daemon's blade. He whistled sharply,

and Gwyllth leapt down from the top of the pillars, where she had been waiting. The gryph-charger's weight caught the daemon by surprise, and knocked it stumbling. The great beast clung to the daemon's broad back, tail lashing. Her beak stabbed down into the alabaster flesh, releasing a spurt of sickly-sweet ichor.

Amin'Hrith shrieked, clawing at its attacker. Sathphren ducked beneath a flailing claw and drove his sword into the daemon's elongated torso, twisting it upwards with all his strength. It gave a tooth-rattling shriek and dropped a heavy fist onto him, driving him to one knee. A second blow caught him on the chest, and sent him skidding backwards. The daemon tore the screeching gryph-charger from her perch and hurled her into a pillar. She crumpled to the ground with a muted whine.

Sathphren rolled onto his stomach. Pain beat at his temples, and his chest felt as if it had been caved in. He coughed, and tasted blood. The chanting was louder now, beating at the air like hammer strokes. The air felt heavy with something - anticipation, he thought. He glanced towards the statue of Gazul, and it seemed as if the god's eyes were gleaming.

It was time. The trap snapped shut.

Amin'Hrith touched the ragged wounds opened in its flesh with something akin to wonder. 'How exquisite. It has been centuries since my flesh was ravaged so.' It fixed Sathphren with its yellow gaze. 'I thank you, glow-bug. Let me show you my gratitude properly.'

'Let me show you mine, first,' Sathphren wheezed, hauling himself upright. He rose to one knee, spots swimming across his vision. 'For the gift.'

'Gift?' The daemon hesitated, head tilted.

Sathphren held up the ruby. He'd managed to chop it loose, just before the daemon had swatted him aside. It pulsed with an unsettling warmth, as if there were a fire within its crimson facets. Amin'Hrith looked down at its chest, and then back at him. It took a heavy step towards him, claw extended. 'Give it back, glow-bug. Or I will ensure your torments are legendary, even by the heady standards of the Pavilions of Pleasure.'

'A kind offer, but not one I care to take.' Sathphren slammed the flickering gemstone down on the stone floor, shattering it. Outside the temple, the song of the rune-singers rose to a rolling crescendo, shaking the very stones underfoot. They fell silent as the echoes of the ruby's demise faded.

In the quiet that followed, Amin'Hrith laughed, and Sathphren felt his sense of triumph ebb. 'And what was that supposed to achieve?' the daemon sneered.

'What did you think would happen, glow-bug? I am no mere courtesan, to be banished at the whim of a mortal. I am Amin'Hrith, the Soulflayer. I have wallowed in the dust of a thousand worlds, and seen reality itself shatter beneath the awful weight of my lord's gentle gaze. I have worn ghosts as baubles and hunted entire peoples to extinction, in the World That Was. And I will do the same here. I—'

The shards of ruby shone suddenly with a soft light, interrupting the daemon. Blood-red shadows crawled across the pillars and floor. Curls of cerise smoke rose from the fragments, twisting and coalescing with one another, until they became a vaguely duardin-shaped mass. Something that might have been a face turned towards the daemon, and twisted into a wrathful expression. A wordless cry boomed out of the stones and air, and the daemon stepped back. 'What is this? You could not challenge me while you lived, little prince. What makes you think you can do so now?'

The smoky shape took a step forwards, its hunched form sprouting an amorphous shield and something resembling an axe. The temple seemed to shake with its tread. Sathphren caught sight of ghostly shapes drifting through the pillars - the dead, come to answer their long lost prince's call. 'He isn't alone,' Sathphren said.

While the daemon held the soul of their prince captive, the Gazul-Zagaz had been unable to act against it. Now, with tile ruby shattered, and the soul free, the dead of Gazul-Baraz, raised up by the song of the rune-singers, could have their long-delayed vengeance. Sathphren smiled. A good plan. A fitting plan.

A grim dirge rose from the spectres as they gathered, encircling the daemon in a ring of insubstantial bodies. Sathphren could hear the faint crash of steel, and the crack of stone. Motes of pale light floated within ghostly skulls - the eyes of the dead, fixed on the author of their torment. *Uzkul*, they moaned, as one. *Uzkul. Uzkul. Uzkul.*

The Keeper of Secrets turned, trying to keep all of the gathering spirits in sight. 'Begone, shades. There is no joy to be had from your pallid essences.' It swept out a claw dismissively, trying to disperse the horde. The dead struck, as the claw passed through them. Ghostly axes and hammers caught the limb, and ichor spurted. Amin'Hrith screamed in rage and pain. The daemon jerked its injured limb back. 'No. No, this isn't right.' It whirled, eyes fixed on Sathphren. 'What have you done?'

'What I do best,' Sathphren said, as he rose to his feet. Gwyllth was on her feet as well, if somewhat battered. He caught hold of her and hauled himself into the

saddle. 'And now, I leave you to it.' He thumped the gryph-charger in the ribs, and she leapt away with a shriek, even as the daemon lunged for them.

Amin'Hrith crashed awkwardly into a pillar as they avoided its grasp, and screamed in fury. It clattered after them, smashing rubble aside in its haste, and the ghosts boiled up around it like storm of louds. A typhoon of spirits - led by the crimson essence of the prince - surrounded the blundering daemon, striking at it from all sides and angles, they blinded it, slowed it. Trapped it.

And there was another presence there as well, something greater than any ghost, and mightier than any daemon. It seemed to gather itself in the limits of the temple, readying itself as Sathphren urged Gwyllth towards the entrance. The shadows thickened and the voices of the dead were echoed by a deep tolling, rising up from somewhere below. Not a bell, this, but a wordless cry, like the crash of stone into the sea.

It roared out as the gryph-charger leapt through the archway and down the steps. Sathphren turned his steed about, sword in hand, to face the archway. The Keeper of Secrets clawed at the entrance, hands gripping either side of the aperture. It strained, as if against unseen bonds. Its mouth was open, but Sathphren could hear nothing save that roaring cry.

A wind rose up from somewhere and caught at the creature, forcing it back. Beneath the roar came a grinding sound, like stone rasping against stone. One by one, the remaining gemstones on the daemon's flesh burst. Ghostly hands clutched at the Soulflayer's limbs and head. The daemon's eyes bulged as it fought against the dead.

*'Uzkul. Uzkul. Uzkul.'*

Sathphren glanced around. Judd and the other rune-singers chanted as they approached, their bells tolling sombrely. With every peal of the bells, the daemon's grip on the aperture seemed to grow weaker, its claws digging deep trenches in the stone. Then, with a final thunderclap, a dark shape, massive and indistinct, caught hold of the Soulflayer and jerked it backwards, into the dark of the temple and out of sight.

It did not even have a chance to scream.

The rune-singers ceased their song. The sound of the bells faded. All was silence, save for the burble of water.

Judd thumped the ground with the ferrule of his staff. Slowly, the spirits of the dead emerged from the darkness. Their prince stood among them, his form as indistinct as before, recognisable only by the raw, red radiance.

Judd lifted his staff, and murmured. The spirits of the dead duardin wavered

like smoke and dispersed, in shreds and tangles. They drifted upwards, towards the roof of the cavern and the moonlight streaming through. Something like thunder rumbled in the depths, and Sathphren felt its reverberations in his bones. He thought it might be laughter.

Judd smiled sadly. 'Gazul is pleased. Our oath is fulfilled at last.'

Sathphren looked at him. 'They say Nagash devoured the other gods of the dead, and added their might to his own.'

'Yes, that is what they say.' Judd shrugged. 'And yet, what is death to a god?' He scooped up a handful of dust, and let the wind pull it from his hand. 'Dust, and less than dust. He sighed and looked at Sathphren. But that is a matter for another day. For now, we will fulfil our oath to you. We will lead you where you wish to go.'

Sathphren nodded solemnly. 'I expected no less.' He laughed suddenly and turned Gwyllth about, towards the sounds of fighting. 'But first - our task is not yet done. There are still daemons to hunt, and an oasis to free. As I promised.'

# **THE BATTLE OF BLACKTHUNDER MESA**

**PHIL KELLY**

# **THE FISTS OF DAL'RYU**

## **DAL'RYU TRANSMOTIVE TERMINUS T'AU SEPT WORLD DAL'YTH PRIME**

'Do you realise these weapons will get us all killed?'

'If that is the correct course, then so be it.' Commander Bravestorm made a cutting motion with the blade of his hand as he cast an admonishing glance at Shas'vre Furuja. Just like her to undermine what little morale they had left.

Bravestorm looked askance at the munitions pod that had finally arrived in the terminus dome, then at Commander Farsight's clearance sigil blinking red upon its hex screen. The pod was large enough to contain a Crisis battlesuit with room to spare, but if anything its cargo was even more lethal.

'It contains a sacrifice for the Greater Good,' said Udakoa, the big warrior lacing his thick fingers in the sign of the Tau'va. 'The humans have no concept of such dedication. They will not expect so bold a course.'

'The same could be said of our caste mates,' replied Furuja. 'Honoured Shadowsun withdrew her teams several decs ago. There is no shame in spending our lives elsewhere. against more realistic odds.'

The thunder of heavy munitions boomed in the distance as the Imperial artillery pounded another of Dal'ryu's domes to rubble. They had fired indiscriminately for days now. How could a species so wasteful, so inefficient in the ways of war, possibly prevail?

And yet, upon Dal'yth, the Imperium was doing just that.

Bravestorm frowned. Perhaps Furuja was right. There was something ominous about the white pod in their midst its low hum of potential energy audible under the rumble of distant war. The thing was sleek with smooth panels and curves, a little like a transmotive carriage in miniature. A typical example of the earth castes aesthetic, it was as if its very minimalism hinted at the lethality inside

'No, in staying behind, we are already committed to this strike,' said Bravestorm. 'This is not a discussion.' He made the sign of the impeccable kill, and touched the hilt of his bonding knife by way of reinforcement.

'With respect, commander, you are not thinking clearly,' Furuja continued. 'Aping the Imperial mindset will end in disaster. This brutes do not fight with the mind, only the fist. You cannot expect us to do the same.'

'Are we truly supposed to *punch* these tanks?' asked Aae'sho, her beautiful eyes wide as she walked out from behind the weapons pod.

'Be still, Furuja.' Bravestorm's tone brooked no argument, the rigid set to his shoulders sending a clear message. 'You set a poor precedent.'

The commander knew full well how counter-intuitive the weaponry in the pod seemed. He and Farsight had sketched out the commission themselves. Prototypes, optimised for extreme close range. Bravestorm had asked after just such a development from the genius O'Vesa not twelve rottaa ago, and here they were.

The devices were thuggish, almost human in their conceptual design. Now the time had come to put the things into use, Bravestorm felt excitement mingling with uncertainty and an awkward sense of shame.

Perhaps Shadowsun was right. Farsight's obsession with close-quarters warfare, known to his students as the Way of the Short Blade, was risky in the extreme. But if it worked...

Bravestorm shook his head, and turned to face his team. 'You will never earn honorific names with a conventional approach to warfare,' he said, smiling ruefully as he ran a finger along the pod's length. 'If these things embody sacrifice, so be it. It will be *Lhas'rhen'na*, that of shattered jade, made for the Greater Good.'

'I shall earn a new name in time,' said Furuja, 'it is my destiny.'

Aae'sho raised her brows in mild disdain. 'Not soon.'

Furuja shot her a stabbing glare in return. 'They shall call me Twinblade one day,' she said archly. 'And not because some *naysayer* teammate is lucky enough to call me batch-twin.'

'Nai-sai-er,' said Bravestorm carefully, the syllables unfamiliar. 'I do not know this word.'

'It is a term for an individual who perpetrates negativity as a character trait,' said Furuja, her tone blithe and matter-of-fact.

Bravestorm's olfactory chasm wrinkled in distaste. What a typically *human* concept, for an individual to be known for undermining his fellows as a matter

of course. No t'au could ever truly be accused of such a thing, but if the word fitted anyone, it better fit Furuja's personality than Aae'sho's. Still, even he knew better than to voice that sentiment out loud.

The thunder of artillery rumbled in the distance. It was growing quieter with each passing hour as it moved away from their position. The time to move out from their improvised command centre was encroaching.

It was a peculiar trend amongst younger t'au to adopt the terms of the *gue'vesa* - those Imperials who had seen the light of the T'au Empire and worked towards the Tau'va, or 'Greater Good' as it was known in the water caste's parlance. Of late, even some warriors of the fire caste had begun to use Imperial words, ostensibly to improve their understanding of the human mindset.

The habit had the tang of fashion about it. It had always sat ill with Bravestorm, and his fellow commander, the traditionalist Sha'vastos, despised the very idea. After all, these were the same terms used by the unenlightened savages that had invaded Dal'yth Prime in a storm of brute force. The same creatures that had fashioned the walking tomb Bravestorm had faced on Gel'bryn's transmotive sidings, and the crippled, hateful *thing* inside its life-support cocoon. It had leaked blood-streaked fluids from its burst sac of milky liquid and coiled wires, spitting its fury even as it died.

Humans. Already he had learned to condemn them.

'Twinblade - isn't that what you hope to be called, Furuja?' said Udakoa, bringing Bravestorm back from his painful reverie. 'Twinfist would be just as fitting. My lower jaw still aches from Gel'bryn.'

Bulkily built to the point of risking expulsion from the fire caste, Udakoa had too soft a heart in Bravestorm's estimation. He had become ever fonder of Furuja since his *ta'lissera* bonding with Commander Bravestorm's XV8 Crisis team. The big warrior's ribald sense of humour had made several water caste diplomats cringe in the past and resulted in a Vior'lan standoff more than once.

'Two of these systems could be a formidable load-out,' said Commander Sha'rell, the veteran leaning back against the open plexus hatch of his bright blue XV8. The suit's camo circuits had been damaged at Gel'bryn, and Sha'rell had kept it that way since his promotion as a badge of honour. It had been a rallying point ever since. *"If you are to be in dagger's reach,"* he quoted from the code of fire, *"you must ensure that the first strike is enough."*

'Do we have to use them, then?' asked Aae'sho, brushing a stray strand of her scalp lock back into place with a practised twist. 'I thought Tro'ari Shendu had declared them sub-optimal? Or are we to grace the screens in promotion of their

capability?'

'Have you not graced them enough, Aae'sho?' said Tro'ari Shendu, checking over the weapons pod with a fire caste data-wand. 'Would your admirers think less of you for using such bulky tools?'

Bravestorm stood up to his full height, impressive even for one of the fire caste, and set his shoulders.

'Enough. We will be using these prototype systems within the cycle. We have tried a conventional retaliation cadre approach on three occasions, and been forced to withdraw each time.'

None of the assembled fire caste met his gaze. There was no shame in retreat to a t'au, provided it conserved resources, but in truth they had very little of those left. 'We are almost out of ammunition,' continued Bravestorm, 'and Commander Shadowsun has already cut off resupply as a waste of resources. This is the only method I can see left to us - to step inside their reach.'

'Just as the wrestler Ba'tan stepped inside the reach of the swordswoman Mesme,' said Udakoa, his fleshy cheeks crinkling as he smiled sidelong at Aae'sho, 'and bore her to the ground.'

'Something like that, yes,' said Bravestorm.

'Technically speaking, closing within conventional range parameters could be a very effective tactic,' said Tro'ari Shendu.

Several of the t'au made the right-chopping-left sign that signified the Broken Sword.

'The situation worsens further in Dal'ryu,' continued Bravestorm, 'though the water caste coverage dissembles it as ever. We remain here by choice, and we will make a difference before we yield to the withdrawal order. Faithful Oe-saya, please attend us and relay your findings before resuming your patrol.'

The flat, broad disc of a drone aide moved in from the periphery of the transmotive terminus and hovered in close, its limited holo array purring softly as it projected an airborne visual.

The bombed-out domes of the youth training complex showed the hexagonal learning nodes beneath, each hemispherical centre like a smashed eggshell with its jagged edges and cracked walls. Only a few of the ochre and beige domes, in places blended into one another to form larger buildings, were still intact. The rest were smoking black craters.

Inside the cracked domes were the barely recognizable ruins of learning chambers, communion halls and even dwelling cells ranged around the outside. Movement could be seen inside some of them. Not all of the students had made

it out before the transmotive network had been disabled by artillery fire.

An infographic appeared to the side of the footage, relating the mounting death toll with stark and shocking objectivity. Bravestorm zoomed in by bringing together his index fingers and slowly widening the gap between them. The drone Oe-saya blipped an affirmative in response, and the footage focused on the scattered, burned bodies of t'au student diplomats.

The silence that stretched between the battlesuit teams was profound.

'If we do not act swiftly,' said Bravestorm, 'there will be no one left to save.'

The commander stepped over to the weapons pod and brushed his fingers over its authority sensor. It hissed open, a burst of chill air emanating from within, to expose twelve oversized gauntlets packed in shaped cellfoam.

Each clenched fist was fully as large as a fire warrior curled in a foetal ball, gold lights winking near each wrist mounting to show the prototypes were at full charge.

Bravestorm tapped the air above the revelation panel. A sheet of glowing light unfolded like a paper sculpture unmade in front of him until a stylised holo of an earth caste weapons scientist appeared. The instructional holo made the sign of the Tau'va in respect, simplified schematics flickering around it.

Onager gauntlets, O'Vesa had called them. Devices of immense power. To those who used them, thought Bravestorm, almost certainly a death sentence.

## **THE KILLING BLOW**

### **BLACKTHUNDER MESA, NEAR DAL'RYU T'AU SEPT WORLD DAL'YTH PRIME**

The Manta *Guardian's Strike* slid gracefully through the purple clouds of the Dal'yth sunset. The missile destroyer was large enough to carry an entire hunter cadre to war, and despite its great size, at cruising altitude its engines were little louder than those of a Sun Shark bomber.

Better yet, its electronic signature was masked by extensive dampener suites. Three times had Commanders Bravestorm and Sha'rell used the *Strike* to attack from a vertical vector, and three times they had landed the first blow without the Imperial tank companies having the slightest chance to parry.

It was what came after that posed the problem.

A wide view of the landscape beneath the Manta, relayed from its ventral

cameras to the ten Crisis battlesuits within its modified hold, showed the infamous Blackthunder Mesa. So high its rugged clifftops had a weather system unto themselves, the ridge overlooked the Dal'ryu settlement and the hexagonal system of transmotive rails that linked it to the conurbations beyond.

It had once been a popular pastime amongst Dal'ryu's youths to hike to the top of the mesa and watch the sun set over the domes. Now, its ridge was host only to spent shells and rotting corpses lousy with indigo maggots.

Since the Imperial invasion had begun, the mesa had been littered with the broken bodies of those t'au who had defended it. Many of the cadavers had since been ground beneath the tracks of the squat, badly camouflaged lumps of metal that the Imperials used as their main-line tanks.

Bravestorm felt his mouth twist in bitter disapproval as the Manta's scanners penetrated the cloud cover to relay long-range scans to his command-and-control suite. The vehicles atop the ridge were not true fighting machines, but brutish demolitions engines, inelegant even in comparison to the earth caste's building-levellers.

Each of the Imperial battle tanks was dark green and olive drab. It was a colouration appropriate enough for a verdant world, perhaps, but worse than useless against the mauves and purples of Dal'yth's plains.

'Is that supposed to be camouflage?' said Tro'ari Shendu. The tactician's tone was that of a rifleman being charged by a distant adversary wielding nothing more than a sharp stick.

'Another sign of Imperial arrogance,' said Bravestorm. 'That is one of their many flaws. Laziness of the mind, and a habit of underestimating their enemy.' He paused, deep in thought. 'It will lead to their downfall.'

'Some might say there is good reason for their pride,' said Furuja. Bravestorm blipped across the crossed-forearms sign of censure and opened a single communion link.

'Keep those thoughts to a closed link, if you must express them' he said. 'The ethereal caste has a way of hearing such sentiments.'

He signed off before she could respond, but a small voice in Bravestorm's mind admitted she had a point. There were literally hundreds of armoured targets down there on the ridge.

He cued up the Manta's analysis, spooling through direct to his link. Eight hundred and eleven war vehicles in total had fought their way to the top of the outcrop, despite the battlesuit teams Bravestorm had led to stop them in the early stages of the invasion.

Far too many for them to engage effectively, even if the Imperials had no infantry support to speak of.

Bravestorm blink-clicked a hostiles filter and scanned anxiously for signs of the squat, bipedal Dreadnoughts the Imperials used as heavy battlesuit analogues. He breathed a slow sigh when he found nothing that matched his recorded readings.

The walking war engines were formidable indeed; he had learned that the hard way at Gel'bryn. Even if he overcame another such an adversary, he was not sure if he could stomach the spectacle of the thing laid open in defeat, the shrunken and limbless near-corpse inside staring up at him with a mixture of impotent loathing and undiluted hatred.

That sight still swam into his thoughts at least once per dark-time dec, its cursing words stuck fast in his mind.

*Die in pain, foreign worm-thing.*

Bravestorm put the memory from his mind and forced himself to focus on the enemy disposition below. The vast majority of the vehicles were the thick, cannon-turreted battle tanks the wain caste's gue'vesa informants called Leman Russ - given the unusual terminology, Bravestorm assumed the model was named after the machine's inventor in a typical display of *gue'la* vainglory. The things were grouped in squadrons of nine, each with a command tank marked out by ostentatious heraldry and command-link aerals.

Those on the outside of each echelon had far longer barrels than the others, the tanks known as Vanquishers. Those at the fore were Demolishes, their stubby barrels so wide a human could have slept inside one.

The artillery pieces ranged on the far side of the fissure that split the mesa were little more than canted, long-barrelled guns on tracks. It was these Basilisk squadrons that were hurling solid shot munitions into the farthest training domes. Though formidable at long range, their efficacy at close fire was so poor, Bravestorm had effectively discounted them from his calculations. He had already assigned the Manta the duty of neutralising them as the Crisis suits took on the Leman Russ battle tanks.

'This time we will forsake the purely vertical strike for the Shadowsun mask,' said Bravestorm. 'I have patched across the relevant data suite.'

'Commander?' said Aae'sho. 'I have not studied this. What is the core concept?'

'Each gue'la tank has a predictable and limited arc of effect. Much like a plains tortoise, the Imperial vehicle is hampered by its own focus on defence. By extrapolating and overlapping their fields of fire, we can ascertain the zones

where it is safest to land, and work from there. Look for the gold wedges on your top-down display, and position yourself inside at all times. I shall take point, and make myself an obvious target.'

His team sent symbols of assent, each initiating their command suites accordingly.

As the *Strike* moved in, its hex-linked informationals showed that the blackened wrecks at the rear of the vehicle echelon - those that Bravestorm and Sha'rell had taken down with their previous assaults - had not been salvaged, nor even cleared out of the theatre of war, but simply left there to rust. A small flame of pride burned in Bravestorm's heart at the sight. His team had taken a heavy toll in destroying them, and withdrawn only because their suits were running low on ammunition and energy charge.

This time, in theory at least, that concern would not be a problem.

The low, threatening hum of the onager gauntlets filled the *Strike's* passenger bay. Many of Bravestorm's fellow warriors flexed the broad digits of the unfamiliar weapons systems, the motions of dextrous fingers inside their control cocoons aped by the XV8s' giant electrified fists.

Some amongst them were eager to test the new systems in a live-fire environment - Bravestorm included. His gamble would determine whether ten of the Dal'ythan fire caste's brightest and best would live or die, and he was anxious to tip the balance in his favour. More than that, their strike would seal the fate of those from the youth academies yet to evacuate, and likely make a difference to morale across the entire war effort.

It had to work. It had to.

'Location arrival in twenty microdecs,' said their air caste pilot, a coolly competent battlefield specialist who had earned the name Trueflight. 'Preparing debarkation sequence.'

'My thanks, Trueflight,' said Bravestorm. 'Team, make your final preparations'

'Not long until our fates are met, commander,' blipped Furuja to Bravestorm on a personal communion link. 'With next to no training in this weapon system, I do not feel confident.'

'Just channel all that doubt and anger into violence,' said Bravestorm. 'We've seen you do it before.'

This time it was Furuja who shut off the communion link.

The rear portal of the Manta destroyer chimed loudly, and a sliver of violet sunlight lanced through its primary door as it slid open. One by one the Crisis

teams of Bravestorm and Sha'rell, racked on the dual internal rails of the customised Manta's lower passenger deck, ejected from the craft's rear.

Bravestorm's iridium-skinned XV8-02 prototype was first out, as ever. His onager gauntlet's hex informational flared brightly next to those of his shield generator, plasma rifle and flamer. Magnetic impulsors pushed his battlesuit clear of the gunship's engines in a single smooth shunt.

His team ejected behind him in quick succession, and Sha'rell followed close behind with Loa'thon, On'st, Bel'uatta and Adha'vamatel forming up in skyfall pattern around their commander's sky-blue battlesuit. Their distribution was textbook, each XV8 dropping down through the clouds and firing its jets to ensure maximum group cohesion.

Visible far below through the thin veils of water vapour was Blackthunder Mesa, a jagged cliff with an edge that wound like a serpent towards the indigo plains below. Its foremost edge was clustered with enemy tanks, from this distance looking like a swarm of beetle-backed insects all gathered to stare at the training academies of Dal'ryu beyond.

Bravestorm was about to send the gold icon of a successful aerial deployment when a hail of large-calibre flak rounds detonated close by. Illuminated by the halo of his own undampened shield generator, Bravestorm had likely been the target, but it was Shas'vre Loa'thon who took the brunt. The impacts tore at his battlesuit in an explosion so powerful it was startling even with Bravestorm's audio dampeners on combat mode. The shock wave sent Sha'rell spinning away in a gout of black smoke.

More flak came up an instant later. Bravestorm's shield generator flared as it took a glancing impact, and Loa'thon himself was hit by a stray wedge of shrapnel. Blood trailed from his plexus hatch like a crimson ribbon. The stricken battlesuit tumbled into a patch of cloud.

'Disperse!' shouted Bravestorm, zooming in on the quadruple muzzle flare of what looked like anti-aircraft guns far below. He eye-flicked new vectors of attack onto the central hex-screen, each aimed in one of the gold triangles where the Imperial flak tanks could not find them.

Bravestorm tucked his XV8-02's limbs in close, streamlining his suit so that its feet formed the tip of an arrowhead. He eye-flicked trajectories for Furuja and Udakoa to match his descent, sending Aae'sho and Tro'ari Shendu on a parallel vector of attack.

Now more of the Imperials were taking the bait. An insistent warning chime of incoming fire rang out in his control cocoon. He dived forwards sharply, his

XV8-02 pivoting forwards and bringing its shield round even as high-velocity rounds exploded against its force field. Fire blossomed around him, a flaming disc of energy revealed by the tremendous impacts.

Bravestorm could feel each shell's aftershock rattle him in his cocoon. His shield generator readout flickered from gold to bronze in a matter of seconds, already a third depleted. Still, the hammering shells were held at bay - and Furuja and Udakoa behind him had been kept safe.

Bravestorm plummeted through the last thin veil of cloud to see the flak tanks below, their quad-barrelled cannons raised high. He sent a volley of plasma bolts diagonally down at the rear of the closest tank as it tracked its guns around. The burning blue parcels of energy cut into the legs of one gunner and the hip of another. They tumbled away into the dirt.

A sharp boost from his thrust/vector suite, and Bravestorm shot towards the next flak tank. His flamer system chimed as its rangefinder ticked into gold, and he sent a lance of superheated fire to wash across the open gunnery platform at the vehicle's rear. The humans manning the tank flailed, limbs blackening in the conflagration.

The commander was already past. He hit the third tank like a hurled spear, swinging a wild haymaker punch with the onager gauntlet at full energy discharge.

The prototype weapon hit the quad-barrelled weapons turret so hard the entire structure, despite being twice the size of an XV8, was ripped away with a scream of tortured metal.

Bravestorm grinned widely as a trio of bolts spat from his plasma rifle. A microdec later a whirling storm of fire and shrapnel engulfed the tank and the t'au commander alike as its ammunition feed cooked off.

He staggered heavily backwards from the detonation alerts bleeping and caution indicators flaring on the holographic doppelganger of his damage control suite. Bravestorm felt a spike of hot aggression mingle with relief. His iridium Crisis suit had ridden out the explosion with little more than a layer of synth paint stripped from its exterior.

All around Bravestorm the brutish human crews of the anti-air tanks were shouting, waving their arms and barking in their guttural tongue. Weapons turrets swivelled towards him, desperate to draw a bead. He crouched low. A storm of solid shot ammunition whipped overhead, enough to rip a Razorshark fighter to chunks of scrap metal. But the tank's guns had not been designed for close engagements, and not a single round struck his battlesuit's armour.

To the right, a quad-barrelled mortar tank was accelerating towards him. Its engines roared.

His soul alight with the fire of battle, Bravestorm roared back.

Leaning in his XV8-02, the commander charged straight forwards to meet the tank headlong. It loomed closer, a slab of dull green. At the last moment he leapt and brought his onager gauntlet down hard, smashing into the tank's glacis. With the vehicle's momentum meeting the blow, the fist struck hard enough to lift the tank's rear several feet into the air.

Bravestorm aimed his next punch right at the vision slit. There was a moment of hard resistance from the gauntlet's neural relay as his fist ploughed straight through the tank's hull, its thick metal shell giving in sharp triangular segments that caved inwards. Bravestorm extended his fingers sharply, reaching for the crew member inside, and was rewarded with a piercing scream as the driver was impaled on his gauntlet's thumb.

There was a loud clank of metal, and a shouting gue'la trooper emerged from the vehicle's top hatch, seizing the pintle weapon system and sending a volley of low-calibre bullets pinging from Bravestorm's iridium battlesuit. The gue'la's face was twisted and animalistic, his mouth a red-black hole surrounded by discoloured teeth and coarse hair.

The commander ripped his gauntlet free in a spray of blood, his shoulder-mounted weapon system spearing the gunner through the chest with a bolt from his plasma rifle.

Good riddance, thought Bravestorm. The galaxy is a cleaner place for his death.

Ducking down behind the glacis of the flak tank, Bravestorm took stock of the situation. Already Sha'rell had taken down another of the graceless vehicles, his dual flamers sending out a blast so fierce it turned the gunners at the rear to flailing effigies of blackened flesh.

One of the burning humans launched himself at Sha'rell's battlesuit, clinging to the shoulder as the commander landed and took cover. Sha'rell shrugged him free, pivoting round to stamp him into the dust.

Udakoia landed nearby with an earth-shaking crunch. He had been eager to adopt the new weapons system; so eager that with Sha'rell's permission he had taken two gauntlets in order to replace both his primary systems. He stormed forwards, placed both of his fists under the nearest flak tank, and braced for a moment.

'Udakoia,' said Bravestorm, 'you're not—'

His words were cut off as Udakoia lifted the Imperial tank high enough to put

his shoulder under it, the metal buckling where the onager gauntlets' thick fingers bit into the hull. Udakoa straightened suddenly with a thrust from his jet pack, flipping the tank onto its side and spilling the crew into the dirt beyond.

One of the crew got his leg trapped beneath the tank's superstructure, and started screaming like a wounded kroot ape. The other rolled with the momentum, scrabbling a pistol from his hip holster and squeezing off a bolt of ruby energy. Udakoa walked into the shot, the blast scorching his plexus hatch but doing no real damage. He backhanded the fallen human so hard the top half of his body was mangled into a featureless ruin.

Udakoa chuckled over the cadrenet. 'My compliments to O'Vesa when you see him next.'

'Just stay in the densest areas,' called Bravestorm. 'It is the only way we will survive this.'

Udakoa blipped a golden sign of assent before striding towards another Imperial tank. Its quadruple cannons tracked around to draw a bead on him. That one was dangerously close to overconfidence, thought Bravestorm, and here it would likely get him killed.

The commander sent a volley of plasma shots winging over that burned a hand's breadth from one of the quad-cannons' ammo cases - just like the idiotic Imperials to mount their ammunition on a vehicle's exterior. He shifted his aim, and was rewarded by a series of sharp explosions as the shells of two of the cannons cooked off. The other two pointed straight at Udakoa as the shas'vere burst into a run.

He was still nowhere near close enough.

'Furuja!' shouted Bravestorm.

'Engaging.'

Dropping down from above she came, slicing through one of the flak tanks barrels with a beam from her fusion blaster even as Aae'sho grabbed the other with her onager gauntlet. The young warrior squeezed it so hard the metal cylinder twisted at a strange angle, then came clean away in her fist.

Furuja spun fast on the spot in her XV8 - something Bravestorm had only ever seen his comrade Commander Brightsword pull off - and slashed her fusion blaster beam across the gunners at the rear, bisecting them both with one sweep of superheated energy. Aae'sho hurled the barrel of the gun sidelong, the improvised projectile taking out two more crew on a nearby flak tank.

Only then did Udakoa hit the tank like a charging rhinoceros, fists pounding the front to mangled scrap metal.

'This is most cathartic,' he shouted over the cadrenet.

'It's already dead, lackwit,' said Furuja, already boosting away to land on a nearby tank that was slowly reversing to get a better bead on them. Udakoa clambered atop his target and grabbed hold of its frontal shield, tearing it free and hurling it in what seemed to be her direction. Furuja leaned to one side, and the torn slab of metal sent a knot of tank crew that had been advancing upon her scattering for cover.

'Watch your aim!' shouted Furuja over the cadrenet.

'She is right,' said Bravestorm. 'That was too close.'

'I would offer contrition,' said Udakoa, 'but it worked.'

Bravestorm's command-and-control suite bipped loudly, and he flicked an eye towards the distribution array. There was a tank squadron converging on their position, unaware that Sha'rell and his team were sprinting around behind them to initiate a swift *mont'ka* strike.

The first of the tanks spat twin tongues of fire from its barrel as it took a shot. Bravestorm was forced to kneel behind his shield generator as the crashing impact was obliterated in a storm of energy. It had depleted the weapon system's reserve once more; now its metallospectrum was the colour of cold steel. A few more of those and it would be the charcoal black of death.

There was a thunderous roar from Bravestorm's left flank. He glanced at his suite to see Shas'vre On'st blasted backwards, ripped limb from limb with his plasma rifle spinning into the middle distance.

A massive, blunt-muzzled super-heavy war engine was crunching its way across the mesa's ridge, three times the size of the Lemman Russ tanks around them. Bravestorm called up his directional audio, narrowed its scope to a thin beam and pointed it at the tank's turret. As he suspected, he heard the whine of capacitors as the giant laser cannon atop it reached full charge.

'It readies to fire again!'

Sha'rell leapt, his jet pack giving him enough lift to send him soaring in a long parabola, and landed atop the tank. He stuck the nozzle of his right-hand flamer right in the vision slit and squeezed off a long burst.

Flames burst from vents and barrels as a raging inferno filled the interior. The screams of two crewmen filtered over the XV8-02's sensors, rendered reedy and thin by their incarceration in that white-hot furnace. Bravestorm grimaced. That was a bad way to die, even for a gue'la.

Somehow, the super-heavy still ground on, tracking around to take a bead on Bravestorm's team. Its cannon roared once more. This time Bel'uatta took the

brunt, the thick laser beam blasting her Crisis suit to molten slurry and killing her in an instant.

'Break left!' he shouted. 'Get behind it!'

Sha'rell had already leaped to the rear of the tank Aae'sho with him. From his new vantage point Bravestorm watched Aae'sho grab hold of the rear hatch of the tank and brace herself before ripping it wide open, mangling a massive slab of its hull with a screech of protesting metal.

'Get clear!' shouted Sha'rell, pushing her battlesuit roughly away. Aae'sho stumbled back, stunned, before jetting away to join Furuja as she engaged a Demolisher squadron at point-blank range.

Bravestorm watched in disbelief as Sha'rell grabbed the mangled rear of the tank and forced it open even wider, half climbing inside with his flamers billowing out an inferno all around him.

'No,' he said, 'Sha'rell, you must—'

A titanic explosion stole his words, blasting the giant tank to a tangle of smoking black metal in a detonation so massive the nearest three Leman Russ were consumed in the firestorm. Of Sha'rell, there was no sign. *Lhas'rhen'na*. The sacrifice of shattered jade.

A distant boom from the west. Then another, a few microdecs afterwards.

Bravestorm's command-and-control suite pinged an alert at the third. These were not detonations, not gun-fire, but seismic events, each like a miniature earthquake.

They were coming from the north-east, to the east of Dal'ryu. A fourth boom, then a fifth, close behind. Like the drumbeat of some ancient god's funerary procession.

Fighting the urge to climb a wrecked tank and take the high ground, Bravestorm darted right, backhanding his onager gauntlet into a trundling tank as it drove in close to sideswipe him. The vehicle's track came away, and it veered with the impact, overcompensating only to slam into another that was attempting to cut him off. Ahead of the stricken tanks was a channel, a gap down the endless ranks of lumpen vehicles. Along it, Bravestorm could see the edge of the mesa and the field of violet grassland beyond.

Two massively built behemoths loomed down there, bipedal war machines so big they made the Leman Russ tanks look like cleaner-drones hovering at the heels of a Broadside.

Imperial Warlord Titans.

The monstrous Warlord Titans were already legend upon Dal'yth. They were known as god-machines to the *gue'vesa* who had spoken of them, and Bravestorm could see why. Bipedal, the approaching war engines were vast mockeries of the Hero's Mantle. They had been built by a race that respected only raw power, with none of the earth caste's thought for grace, manoeuvrability, speed - or practicality, for that matter. These war engines were crippled by their own immensity. They could not fight effectively in a city, a forest, nor any built up area at all.

But on the open plain, engaging an elevated target, they would be in their element. The nearest, ahead of its companion by some four hundred metres, had honorific banners fluttering from the long-barrelled cannon that formed its right arm.

'Do you see those things, commander?' asked Furuja.

'Of course,' he replied. 'They disturb me too. But only elite warriors could pilot those things, and Farsight him-self has said the *gue'ron'sha* have their own barbaric code of honour. Such souls would not fire on valued troops'

'Are you sure?'

'Even the critically wounded Imperials are forced to fight on. Here, amongst the ranks of its allies, we will be protected from its fury.'

'Then thank the Tau'va we followed your course and stuck close, commander,' said Udakoa.

The ground-shaking booms of the nearest Titan's footfalls were growing louder as it changed heading to approach the ridge directly, its inexorable approach leading it closer with every earth-shaking footfall. Flocks of Dal'ythan ground-gulls were startled from their burrows, white specks flitting against the giant cliff of metal advancing upon the mesa's edge.

There was menace in its hunched posture, its gait and the dull glow of the eyes set into its massive, blunt head. It was stamping forwards like a Fio'taun executioner weighed down by his own honour blade.

Upon its shoulders it bore massive missile launcher housings, each the size of a small building. A payload devised to level cities, and likely with a single volley. The giant's entire right arm was a cannon in form, long and tapering at the end in the manner of some vast laser weapon. The left was a gauntlet of colossal size, its ironwork talons articulated and crackling with ropes of electrical discharge.

Bravestorm saw the Titan's guns turn until they were pointing right at his team. The tip of its primary gun bar-rel grew to such brightness that his blacksun filter overlaid a polarised cut-out.

'We should run,' said Udakoa, tension straining his words.

'Have faith,' replied Furuja. 'Even these gue'la would not fire on their own kind.'

'I am not so sure,' said Udakoa.

'Do not give into fear,' said Bravestorm. 'They are not that stupid. I give you the word of my honour. We are safe here. Remain in close formation.'

The barrel of the titanic machine's laser arm glowed even brighter. At the same time a payload of missiles launched from its shoulders, arcing down towards them like a flock of killer raptors plunging in for the kill.

'Into cover!' shouted Aae'sho.

The world erupted into searing light.

Bravestorm was hurled back, his battlesuit flipping end over end as it was suddenly blown like a leaf on a gale. He slammed into the broad flank of an Imperial battle tank, and the impact knocked out a handful of teeth. Choking on his own vital fluid, he spat blood. Pain wracked every nerve. His head felt like it had split open, as if struck by an axe in each temple. The stench of cooked meat filled the control cocoon; the scent of his own flesh, charred to dark ruin.

Realisation sent fresh waves of pain, his stunned and reeling mind fighting against an animal sense of panic. Death was near. A cold shroud of fear and guilt wrapped around Bravestorm's spine. The Titan had fired indiscriminately.

The gamble had failed, and they were as good as dead.

He had to concentrate. The others relied on him.

Agony consumed him as Bravestorm forced himself to focus, manually punching the stimulant injector. Nee-dles pricked the nape of his neck, but he barely felt them.

It was a system intended to provide a boost in times of extreme duress, not to revive a warrior who had been charred from scalp to heel. Nonetheless the salving fluids flowing through his system brought a measure of cool relief against the white-hot pain.

As the commander's vision cleared he could see a streak of light at his flank. There was a ragged wound torn in the side of the suit. Hot air seared in, spiking the pain in his right flank still further. An old hairline split in the battlesuit's iridium plating, a caulk-sealed wound from a bolt-round at Gel'bryn's transmotive sidings, had been ripped into a gaping fissure. Now the XV8-02's systems were flickering, glitching manically as they attempted to cope with the vast trauma they had sustained.

The entire control suite suddenly cut out, and darkness swallowed him. Slowly

his vision adjusted to the bio-luminescent glow that formed his XV8-02's emergency lighting.

Bravestorm felt the acid of his stomachs scarring the inside of his throat. Nothing remained of the cadrenet link to his team; every hex was dark. Only a few lights winked on the interior panels. The commander frowned and shut the system down manually before initiating it once more.

A thunderous footfall came from half-a-mile distant, terrifyingly close. Panic threatened to consume him like a primal tide. He had to escape.

The iridium Crisis suit restarted a microdec later, its display hexes unfolding one after another until his command suite was fully functional once more. The sub-screens that reflected his comrades were all the flat black colouration of the void.

Aae'sho. Furuja. Adha'vamatel. Tro'ari Shendu. Udakoa. All dead.

All obliterated in a single, blinding moment.

The team's hexes folded back in on themselves, leaving only the symbol of the Greater Good.

There was a ground-shaking, seismic boom. This time it was louder, so close Bravestorm could feel it through his torn and blackened battlesuit.

Then another, and then a third.

Patient. Unstoppable. Terrifying.

The despair and pain consuming the commanders mind were pushed down by a fierce desire for revenge. It was a sudden, intense pressure that crushed his intent into a single point, like a thousand burning coals compressed all at once into a diamond blade.

He alone had survived. The experimental iridium alloy of his modified XV8-02 was the only thing that had come between him and brutal annihilation. His guilt would drive that blade into the enemy, or burn him up completely.

Bravestorm slid his targeting lock aperture to maximum as his command suite reinstated. The ground was the sky, and the sky the ground; it came to him that his battlesuit was upside down; that he was at the edge of a massive crater. Ranged around him were the wrecks of dozens of Imperial tanks, scattered around the edge of a wide, steaming circle strewn with the disembodied remains of Crisis battlesuits and mangled Imperial vehicles. His sensor vanes panned around to full panoramic; behind him were the wrecks of a dozen more. An inferno roared still, bubbling paint on the flanks of those vehicles at the edge of the crater hastening to move from the Titan's crosshairs.

The pain and doubt came back for a moment, unwilling to be sidelined so

easily. Against such horrific force, such merciless disregard for the life of ally as well as enemy, how could any sane mind prevail?

Then the diamond blade in Bravestorm's mind cut through the fog of confusion and guilt, parting the clouds to reveal the cold and stark answer.

With rage.

The commander felt an unnatural tingle, intensifying to send crashing waves of pain across his nervous system before the stimulant injector numbed them to a dull ache. The Imperial engine's power field, invisible but potent nonetheless, had washed over him.

The beast was within a stone's throw, and it was readying for the kill.

Bravestorm felt white blossoms of raw pain blind him for a moment as he twisted in his control cocoon, but his scrabbling black claw found the indent of the defence override nonetheless. He channelled the last of the battlesuit's energy from recovery protocols into attack parameters, pressing his fingers in the deep-set nodes until every iota of available energy was channelled into the XV8-02's thrust/vector suite.

His command-and-control suite was on backup, still hazed and glitching with its retinal scanner controls out, but it was operative at least on manual. His ranged weapon systems were out completely. The guns themselves had melted into drooping, molten fingers of metal, rendered useless by the Titan's devastating assault.

Bravestorm leaned hard and sent a burst of thrust from his repulsor jet pack's left vent, rocking his fallen machine until it toppled over to one side with a crash. He moved one arm experimentally, the blackened flesh splitting open to show a delta of red cracks, and the XV8-02 followed suit.

Above him, the Titan loomed. He could see its vastness blot out the Dal'ythan sun through the gaping wound in his flank.

Slowly, agonisingly, Bravestorm pushed himself onto front, then onto all fours. Fires still crackled across his battlesuit's back, and he manually silenced the alarms with stabs of a finger that was more blackened bone than flesh.

Another crushing, heart-stopping impact. There it was, raising a massive foot over the smoking ruins of his team as if it were about to stamp them from history altogether.

'No,' he shouted, his throat on fire. 'You will fight me alone.'

The commander boosted upwards, his onager gauntlet leaving trails of crackling electricity behind it as his jet pack array flared on maximum. The Titan filled his vision, a giant of metal and hatred, cold and inviolable next to the

embers of the t'au attack.

The repulsor jet pack's twin columns of energy carried him higher, past the heraldic armour plates of the war machine's armoured legs, then the swivelling gimbals of its hips and the turntable of its waist. Faster he flew, angling his flight. He aimed straight for the jutting, gargoyle-like head unit that held the war machine's crew, and rerouted all power to his gauntlet.

This close, within its reach, the giant could not bring its mighty guns to bear. Its hubris, its haste to snuff out all resistance from its fallen prey, would be its doom.

The onager gauntlet arced towards the Titan in a haymaker sweep, striking not at the armoured head but at the underside of its throat. In a long, tearing gouge Bravestorm ripped away thick ropes of armoured cabling. Oily fluids drizzled from the giant machine's neck in a crackling storm of electricity and red-hot sparks.

The commander felt his blow slam into a giant pipeline, standing proud like a tendon. He grabbed hold, rerouting power to the jet pack's thrust, and closed his grip. Turning upside down, he placed his battlesuit's feet on the underside of the Titan's head and pulled as hard as he could. With an agonised scream of tortured metal the pipeline gave way, milk-white fluids gouting across the XV8-02 and splashing into the control cocoon through the gaping wound in its front.

Bravestorm shouted in triumph as the Crisis battlesuit fell away, its energies spent. A moment later he saw the Titan's own gauntlet, massive enough to crush the XV8-02, swing in towards him.

The giant's fist swatted him like a bloodwasp.

The commander felt gravity release its grip for a moment before he crashed heavily into a missile crater, his iridium battlesuit as mangled as the XV8s of his dead comrades around him.

With a last effort, Bravestorm craned his neck and squinted through the fissure in the suit's front, intent on one last glimpse. The Titan was turning away, fluids still drizzling from its neck. In the skies behind it he saw the distinctive triangular shape of a Manta missile destroyer, two more cresting the horizon beyond.

Then the ground around him trembled once more, and not only at the pace of the vast war effigy. The armoured company that had claimed Blackthunder Mesa was on the move, redeploying from their exposed position at some unseen command.

As consciousness began to slip away, Bravestorm felt a dull throb of relief. The

Way of the Short Blade had proved successful, in a way. By forcing the Imperials to redeploy, they at least achieved Lhas'rhen'na.

Farsight would be proud.

\* \* \*

'That one looks largely recoverable,' said Fio'vre Dala'dao, pointing to the fallen XV8-02. Around him, his earth caste teammates picked through the blackened wreckage of Blackthunder Mesa. 'Incredible fortune,' said Dala'dao. 'Mark it as a priority for rescue, please, Oe-shirudo. We do not have long.'

The worker drone at the recovery team leader's shoulder slid forwards, casting a markerlight across the fallen iridium suit's torn flank. Its beam illuminated a withered, blackened form inside, clawing at nothing and wheezing feebly as it clung to life.

A light lanced Bravestorm's consciousness like a spear. He was adrift upon a dreamlike sea of red and black, the ocean of pain threatening to rise up over his head. Somehow he was clinging to a disc of white, the sign of his salvation, keeping him afloat. But it was shrinking, diminishing with every moment. Some distant part of his brain equated it with his emergency bio-support.

Always the last system to go, it was nonetheless running out.

Swimming towards him through the agony were hairy, gangle-limbed creatures with pig-like eyes and gnashing, bloodstained teeth.

Gue'la, revealed to him in their true form.

The beasts were swarming. Their competitive nature, their selfish lust for violent gratification, saw them tearing at one another in their haste to be the first to sink their teeth into his flesh. But none of them could quite scabble its way atop the edges of the white disc.

The paradoxes of mankind's nature hit him like a hailstorm as the creatures fought one another for the kill. How could a species so advanced in the art of conquest be so self-defeating? Why would those so individually strong make their communality so weak? How could they ever defeat those who had given body and soul to the Tau'va? These creatures had no conception of the Greater Good. They would wastefully kill their own kind in order to promote their individual interests. How then could they be so successful?

One of the gue'la monsters surged forwards, pushing down on its nearby kin. It seemed to Bravestorm that one of its pack-mates had started to drown beneath its claws, but the callous act gave the beast support enough to clamber onto the disc

holding the commander afloat. Slowly the floating white circle began to break apart.

Then, staring into that creature's porcine, red eyes, Bravestorm saw the answer.

Humanity had its own twisted conception of the Greater Good, though its individual components did not realise it. A concept that involved killing every threat against its race, no matter the cost.

Like a hive of insects, Humanity cared little if a hundred warriors died, so long as the multitude overall survived. The gue'la would go to any lengths, fire upon one another gladly to ensure their species' propagation. It was as callous as it was effective.

More and more gue'la creatures clambered over the disc of white towards him. The waters of painful revelation reached up to cover Bravestorm's mouth, filling his lungs and bearing him down into the blackness.

A voice floated through the vision of pain.

'Remarkable,' it said in a perfect Dal'ythan Tau dialect. 'He is alive. Gather the lifter drones. We will recover the whole suit, Fio'vre, and convey it to the laboratories to save what we can.'

Bravestorm struggled to comprehend the words, but the gue'la terrors closing in on him robbed them of meaning.

'I will replenish the battlesuit's injector array in the meantime, and petition O'Vesa to prepare a life support suite for the fallen hero's arrival.'

'He bought time enough to save the training facilities,' came a second voice. 'The water caste would never for-give us if he died.'

A needle of cold fear pierced Bravestorm's heart. 'Knowing honoured O'Vesa's love of a challenge,' replied the first voice, 'he could well fight on for many kai'rotaa to come. Though with burns these deep, he will never leave his battlesuit again.'

Bravestorm frowned for a moment before understanding filled his mind, and a cold terror mingled with white-hot rage.

This was not over.

# **A LESSON IN IRON**

**DAVID GUYMER**

The ork kill-kroozer shook hard, shuddering off vast quantities of its ramshackle superstructure as it boosted for the malformed abscess of an event horizon.

The anomalous region was a smear of abused reality a million kilometres across, compressed by hideous internal forces to a fraction of that in height and a depth that auspex read, impossibly, as zero. Sensor readings terminated there. The universe ceased to exist at that point. There were half a dozen known warp rifts in the growing Imperium. In a region of space containing ten billion stars, that made them about a million times less abundant than black holes. The standing edict of the Navis Nobilite and the Naval academies of Terra was to give them a wide berth and, a handful of apocryphal tales from rogue traders aside, no one had ever dared venture this close.

The Venom-class destroyer *Strontium Wave* broke off pursuit almost immediately as ether distortions smoke her void shields.

The kill-kroozer plunged on, heedless, chasing after the two equally massive junk ships that were already dissolving into the bent reality at the eye of the anomaly, its drive stacks sun-hot, its crude shields spasming under the unnatural onslaught.

It was not the *Strontium Wave* they fled.

Darkening the void to their stem came the *Fist of Iron*. A Gloriana-class battleship. The most advanced ship of the line to be launched from the yards of Luna since the death of Old Night. Flagship of the Gorgon.

For her to be committed with only a single escort was not uncommon, for Ferrus Manus understood war and its instruments in a way that the wolves of Russ and Horus never would. The *Fist of Iron*, unique amongst the warships of the recently warranted 52nd Expedition Fleet and the newfound primarch's command, had the firepower to win this alone.

It was an efficient use of his resources.

The primarch sat upon a throne of black iron and Karaashi basalt, following the flicker-flash of the bridge's main oculus as metal debris from the kill-kroozer burned up on the navigational shields or before the fury of the point-defence

guns. He was a rugged, brutal giant, carved in stone, slabbed in plates of blackened ceramite and hung with heavy mail. His eyes glittered like empty silver vessels as they beheld the pyrotechnics.

'That's more than far enough,' said Harik Morn, veteran sergeant of the Avernii Clan's First Order, eyeing the stained oculus view as though it left a sour taste in his mouth.

'The orks seem to think it can be done,' said Santar, grinning at the tanned old Terran from the left hand of Ferrus' throne. Ferrus' gene-seed imparted little beauty, and joviality still less, and none in the Legion typified the absence of those traits like Sergeant Gabriel Santar. His grin was like a tectonic fracture.

With the first captain that Ferrus had inherited from Amadeus DuCaine and the era of the Storm Walkers falling in battle to the alien gorge, it would be one of Morn or Santar who bore the mantle next. Both of them knew it, but Ferrus was in no hurry to make that decision.

He wanted to see them prove their worth, knowing there was another ready to claim the honour should they fail.

'Well-known thinkers, orks,' said Morn, dryly, arms folded over the elaborate design of his antique breastplate. 'Never an edge they wouldn't leap off. You want to follow them in...?' He inclined his head towards the oculus.

There was a devil in them, Ferrus' children: they were independent, prone to rash action, ruled by emotion and pride. It was Medusans like Santar in whom the flaw was most pronounced, but they *strove* to control that fire with the same objectivity and logic that Ferrus had learned on the same harsh parent world.

A parallel spectrum of colours bled through the oculus as the lead ork cruiser vanished into the rift. The mortal crew groaned in dismay and averted their faces from the vivisected rainbow that radiated off the event horizon. Even Santar stuck out his lower lip.

The display glinted off Ferrus' eyes, impermeable as mirrors.

'Warning,' Xanthus chittered. The Mechanicum representative to the 52nd was a bent figure in a frayed scarlet cloak, standing with the aid of a copper-inlaid metal staff in a specifically modified operations pulpit. One metal-scaled hand was clamped to a hub augur display. A febrile mass of manipulator arms whipped from slits in his robes to attack a myriad of haptic controls even as he turned towards Ferrus and his legionaries. 'I have no data with which to predict conditions within a warp anomaly.'

'Then we will be the first,' said Ferrus.

*'Lords!'*

The battleship's mortal commander, Laeric, was a thickset man, already balding in his thirties. The sweat on his scalp was stained purple and green by the distortions in the oculus, as if by oil, his hands gripping the safety rail that surrounded the five unequal figures on the bridge's command platform, eyes filled with terror.

But Ferrus did not know terror. He feared neither death nor failure.

Only being outshone.

'Dismantling the Rust empire was our responsibility. Even if the Seraphina Offensive was waged before my leadership I will not have my Legion's most famous victory tarnished by the existence of survivors. After them, shipmaster. Ahead full.'

Liquescent tendrils of energy burned across the *Fist of Iron's* bows, an aurora of pinks and blues that ignited her navigational shields as though she plunged headlong into the atmosphere of an as-yet unrealised world. Eerie harmonics looped through the internal comms grids, mangled, distorted sounds that emerged from the ship's augmitters as pleas for mercy, cries of anguish, the begging whispers of familiar voices. A resonant effect from the voids. An onslaught of some kind. But Ferrus was accustomed to terrain that could kill, an instinctual understanding that he had poured into the design of his flagship.

He considered informing Laeric and his crew of sound's origin, but decided against it.

On Medusa, he had battled the giant elementals that dwelled within its mountains, conversed with ancient spirits that spoke in magmic eructation and the shaking of earth, aided an Iron Father in exorcism of an enraged machine, and he knew the Emperor's 'Truth' for a useful lie.

Let the mortals be afraid.

Let them face their nightmares, endure and emerge the stronger, or else fail and strengthen the collective by their expulsion, for Ferrus' Legion had no place for the frail of spirit.

'Augur sweeps of the interior,' said Ferrus. 'I want them now.'

'Aye, sir,' said Laeric, holding tight to the rattling handrail and shouting the instruction down to his junior officers.

'There is a tremendous degree of signal distortion,' said Xanthus calmly, a moment later, plugged directly into the battleship's abrasive spirit. 'False reads. Sensor echoes. The effect worsens progressively with distance from the *Fist of Iron*, but not to any mathematical corollary. Interesting.'

Still gripping the handrail in both hands, Laeric took his juniors' reports and relayed them to the primarch. 'We've a reliable augur radius of a few hundred metres at best.'

'They are in here somewhere,' scowled Santar.

'Maybe we can look through a window?' suggested Morn.

'Maybe you should.'

'I am programming the augurs to scan for particle traces from the orks'...' The Mechanicum adept hesitated for a moment, his thought processes marked by a clockwork tick as he struggled for an acceptable terminology '... engines. Our entry vectors were identical. Their drive emissions should be traceable.'

'And?' said Ferrus.

'Plotting.'

Ferrus grunted. 'Weapons are functioning, at least?'

'Lances at full charge, lord.' Laeric read from a fitfully glowing screen. 'Macro-batteries loaded and locked. Targeting matrices... Well, they're online, lord. We'll see how well they function when the time comes.'

The curl of a smile threatened Ferrus' lips. If there was one thing he admired, it was candour.

'At least we know the shields are working,' added Morn, frowning as another squeal of feedback harrowed through the bridge's comms.

*'Contacts!'*

The female voice yelled up from the sensorium pits - no formality of chain of command here and Ferrus expected none. He nodded an acknowledgement, ignoring the hammer-thump of his hearts, the urge to beat his fist on his armrest that Horus or Russ would undoubtedly have indulged had they been in his place, and presented his bridge with iron.

'Real-views on the source. Now.'

'Aye, lord. Working.'

'Mass signatures,' the woman continued, speaking over the other officers, a screed of consciousness direct from the augur reports as they spilled onto her screens. 'Two thousand kilometres off the port bow. I think. Distance is... elastic. Mass equivalent to four capital-sized xenos vessels'

'Four?' Ferrus frowned down at her. 'We pursued only three.' The woman paled under his direct regard. 'A fourth vessel already within the anomaly perhaps?'

'They were not fleeing us,' said Morn. His gaze dragged from Ferrus to Santar, lingering a pointed moment, then on to encompass Laeric and his mortal crew. 'They were luring us into a trap.'

'The *Fist of Iron* can still best four ork cruisers,' said Santar.

Laeric nodded, but kept his obvious doubts for himself.

'And if there are more beyond our detection range? We are barely a dozen light years from the old Krooked Klaw Empire. If their remnants have begun to rebuild here—'

'Impossible.' Xanthus interjected.

'If they have begun to rebuild inside this anomaly,' Morn repeated, more forcibly, 'if they have adapted their systems to its effects.'

Ferrus forestalled the Terran's counsel with one raised cold metal finger. He welcomed it, but his decision, once made, was absolute. 'It is equally likely that the mass readings are 'elastic' as well.'

Santar grunted agreement.

'Real-view established,' announced Xanthus, cutting further argument short as all eyes turned to the oculus.

The large oval screen was plagued by static, untranslatable energetic features assuming physical shapes as one viewed them, like images in a cloud. If any man could be so degenerate as to see naught but contorted faces and grasping hands in a cloud. Xanthus' beetling industry and the efforts of the crew succeeded in smoothing out the bulk of the audio, leaving only sporadic bursts of static as the real-view centred on the mass of four capital-sized vessels, becalmed on a storm of elemental colour...

...their wreckage strewn over several thousand kilometres of tormented space.

'What did I say?' muttered Morn. 'Edge. Leap.'

'What happened?' Ferrus asked of the bridge at large.

'Analysing,' said Xanthus.

Laeric leaned over the handrail, the curved bar rattling up against his gut with the shearing forces currently flexing and bowing the ship's hull, as a gaggle of decorated under-officers whispered urgently up at him from the main deck. Ferrus could not make out what they were saying, but he heard Laeric dismiss them angrily, going so far as to raise a hand to strike a young lieutenant who did not withdraw speedily enough to his station.

'A problem, shipmaster?' Ferrus asked.

'Nothing, lord. Another sensor ghost.'

'I will be the judge of that.'

Laeric cleared his throat nervously, evidently wishing he had not dismissed his juniors so hastily. 'My crew are certain that these are indeed the ships we pursued into the anomaly but thermal decay and material analysis would appear

to suggest they were destroyed years ago. Decades.'

'Impossible,' said Xanthus.

'Lord.' Santar pointed to a shard of darkness within the oculus' clearing view-frame.

A ship.

Its ram-like stem bowed under the caress of evanescent flames, its dorsal spine shorn messily in half. Its hull armour was monstrously thick, but pitted as the surface of an asteroid. A few shavings of black paint remained in harder-to-attack spots - between armour plates, beneath the cupolae of macro-batteries. The weathered shadow of an aquila was just visible on the slab keel of its fortress bow.

A Legiones Astartes strike cruiser.

'It is one of mine,' Ferrus breathed.

'Impossible,' Xanthus said again.

'Most definitely impossible, lord,' said Laeric, even more rattled, if anything, by the presence of the Imperial derelict than he had been by the penetration of the rift itself. 'I know every ship in the Fifty-Second Expedition.'

'I have other children. Those still fighting under the Emperor in the First Expedition Fleet. Those in the Eighteenth, or the Thirty-Third?'

'No, lord!' Laeric bit back something he would have later regretted. He rubbed the back of his head. 'I'm not even confident I recognise the class.'

Ferrus returned his silvered gaze to the oculus, the derelict growing incidentally more massive as the *Fist of Iron* moved relative to it. Close enough to see chunks of orkish debris bounce soundlessly from its broken shell, coils of unnatural flame, self-igniting somehow despite the empty vacuum of the anomaly, gyrating down its length.

'Prepare boarding parties and ready my gunship. Santar, Morn, Xanthus, you will accompany me.'

It was a mystery. A challenge.

And Ferrus never could dismiss a challenge.

Arkal Metrician tapped the side of his helmet, the square section of welded plasteel and micro-rivets that contained his armour's vox-antennae. Pathetic. The warzones he had fought over. Afrik. Ionus. Rust. All without the benefit of Mk II. How quickly one came to depend on it.

Pathetic.

'Still no contact with Sergeant Boros?'

Ruugal's lean face was white in the beam from Metrician's lamp, dark eyes narrowing to pins, a plastek breath mask strapped over his nose and mouth. His helmet was open, a glossy piece of black carapace, but fitted with tracking systems and short-range vox capability that those legionaries who had battled on through the intermittent communication blackouts of Mk I power armour would have envied.

'Don't worry yet, boy. During the Oorianian uprising, my squad and I went three entire days without vox contact.'

Ruugal frowned, in no way enlivened by yet another anecdote from the Unification Wars of Greater Sol, and turned to pad up the unlit corridor from the blown access hatch.

The stressed metal creaked: with the Scouts' tread; with the impacts of what was left of the ork ships; even with the barely perceptible gravitic shifts as the *Fist of Iron* fought to hold at anchor in the storm. It groaned.

It struck Metrician as odd, now he thought about it, that this lifeless wreck did not have to fight as hard as the primarch's flagship to remain still.

The light beams of the other Scouts, spearing from lumens clipped to the stocks of shotcannons and autoguns, painted the bulkheads. Bare metal glittered like silver in the after dark, and Metrician suppressed a shiver.

Exposed to the void, but sheltered from the worst effects of the rift by a labyrinth of internal corridors and doorways, everything was exactly as it must have been when the ship had been lost. There were exterior maintenance tools in hatches. Danger notices inscribed in Imperial Gothic. Atmosphere suits sized for mortal wear hung in glass-fronted lockers. One was open. The black fabric erupted with returned light as Metrician's helmet beam panned across.

Everything was familiar and yet... different.

The sound of something metallic clattering on a deck-plate echoed up from the distant halls of the listing ship, and six lumen beams converged on the far end of the corridor. They wavered. The sounds of breathing labored through the squad link.

Deeply pathetic.

'It'll be Lagethar,' he grunted. 'Two decks down.'

The Scouts relaxed, a loose clatter as grips un-tensed and gunstocks dropped to sit tight against chest-plates, light beams scattering as if for cover.

The rawest and the eldest: that was who the primarch always threw in first. Prove the former. Purge the latter. Metrician couldn't complain. He would probably do the same.

'Could there be orks still alive over here?' whispered Ruugal.

'Not a chance,' he said, before adding, in the hermetic privacy of his Mk II powered helm. 'Answer me, Boros. In the Emperor's name, *answer me.*'

Sharik Borrgan was driving into the pumping chamber the second that Hemtaal had the door forced. The shorn-off muzzle of his combat shotgun led, lumen beam scoring glancing hits off steel jackets and vent covers. Everything was greased and shiny, as though it had been tended that very day. That very hour. The huge pistons bracketed to the walls were for cycling air through the deck, but they were still now, quiet. The great bellows lay empty.

'Sergeant?' he called out as he pushed deeper into the cave of inert iron.

The gunfire he had heard had definitely come from this chamber, but it was empty. No sign of the Scout Sergeant. No sign of orks. Sharik's query echoed out through the gaps in the metal as he manually dialled the frequencies of his helmet vox-attachment. Nothing there but faint giggles of static.

He waved for the rest of the squad to spread out. 'Sergeant Boros?'

A sudden creak and pop of metal spun him around, shotgun thrust out at neck height, as a crippling wave of distortion ran through the port bulkhead. Hemtaal shouted something in warning. Steel buckled and split, and Sharik cried out, squeezing himself into the scant cover of a piston jacket as bolts shot out from the crumpled section. One thudded head first into his rerebrace, leaving a meaty bruise over the bicep. Another drove point-first into his unarmoured throat.

He gargled, blood spewing between his fingers as he groped for it, the idea careening through his skull of yanking it out. He found it, couldn't get purchase, fingers slipping in blood from metal to flesh and over again. He was still breathing though. Still breathing. And he was a Space Marine of the Iron Tenth: he would come back from worse.

Swallowing on pain, he staggered from cover, pointed his shotgun at the bulkhead and tried to concentrate.

There was something there. Difficult to define. A corposant in the metal.

The wound in his neck bubbled as he tried to make words. 'What. In Old Night?'

A cry from the chamber's entrance called on his attention. Hemtaal. There was a gunshot, the hard thud-thud-thud of auto-fire, the whoosh of Zaegerr's flamer.

Sharik stumbled around a half-circle to see *something* rip Jerek in two from left shoulder to right hip. His body emptied, enhanced transhuman viscera slapping the deck-plates as though someone had upended a slop bucket, and then, for no

reason at all, catching fire. The eviscerated Scout burned pink and hot, throwing off an oily smoke that left Sharik gagging despite his breath mask, pain stabbing him through his throat.

Zaegerr let rip with his flamer again, howling as he sprayed burning promethium across the chamber and set walls and piston jackets alight.

It distressed the creature - the *thing* - but little more. Its supersonic shriek was raw fury, punishing the bulkheads with wave after wave of manifest violence, tearing the delicate system of bellows to shreds. Enough of an opening, however, for Sergeant Salem Hektor to drag Zaegerr back into the corridor and thrust his bolt pistol into the entity's 'mouth'.

The Terran veteran was immense in his power armour and battle honours, an awe-inspiring presence.

His bolter's report was deafening.

The beast was an uncertain blur of nightmarish configurations, as though it were spinning through an infinite bestiary of surreal and impossible forms, uncertain which to adopt, but Sharik thought he glimpsed something in the heart of it. It was emotion rather than form, and yet the impression it evoked in him was of long limbs, sweeping horns, heavy claws - although none in any ratio that would correspond to a naturally proportioned creature, nor anything that corresponded even to itself from moment to moment.

The volley of shells passed through it without contacting anything with a mass before detonating in the burning wall behind it.

And yet it could touch. It could lift a Space Marine and it could kill.

What breed of xenos strain was this?

A chainsword revved to full speed with a terrific shriek as Sergeant Hektor set such questions firmly to one side.

The whirring adamantium teeth of the veteran's blade battered the surrounding metal as he hacked through the chimeric apparition. It retaliated in kind, as if feeding off the Iron Hand's own passions, claws solidifying from thin air to rake the sergeant's armour, drawing particular relish from shredding the victory laurels and oaths papers affixed to his plate. Air whistled from broken seals. Liquid sealant gurgled up from the wounded ceramite.

With a snarl, Sharik turned his shotgun towards the fight. It was slippery with blood, his forearms slick with it. He managed a roar, trusting that Hektor's power armour could shrug off his grapeshot for they had practised such melee tactics many times, and fired.

The shot whizzed through the ethereal beast, tearing through it like a hand

waving through thick mist. He pumped the action, shells spitting from the breech, raised the gun and fired again. The thing gave a shriek that was felt in the heart and in the gut, rather than heard through the ears and processed by the brain. Sharik worked his pump action a second time, but the alien was already beginning to dissipate, leaving a lingering trace of anger and the murder-shriek of Hektur's chainsword.

This was no ork.

How did all the weapons and physical enhancements available to the Legionnaires avail them against an alien that could not be touched?

*'Behind you.'*

The sound of Sergeant Boros' voice pulled him short.

He turned around, and immediately gasped as he felt something strike through his chest carapace, through his chest, carving his primary and secondary hearts, and erupt from his back plate. He looked down, growing dizzy, to see himself impaled by a bone-spear of sputtering energy. He felt cold, as though opened to the void.

He could still hear the roar of Hektur's chainsword, but it was dimming, changing, becoming the roar of something else altogether.

In the narrow antechamber adjoining the main bridge they found the first evidence of a crew.

The servitor was enshrined within a hub nexus of carbonised steel beneath a wire halo, most of which fed into the huge set of doors that blocked access to the bridge proper. Ferrus was familiar with the control setup, but had never seen it assembled with such exaggerated occultism, not even in the cabalistic tech-shrines that persisted still in some of Medusa's most isolated and challenged regions. Harik Morn tilted the lobotomised unit's head back. It was vacuum-desiccated, eyes staring at the ceiling more blankly even than usual through a rimy cataract of void frost. The Terran checked it over for signs of life - or causes of death - while Santar and the rest of the veteran squad moved ahead to manhandle the doors.

Ferrus watched them, the heavy doors thunking as the power-assisted strength of seven legionaries tested the locks, listening to the sporadic reports of combat that trickled from his helmet vox. He had seen nothing, but an ill-feeling followed him regardless. As if he had been led here. Toyed with.

Metal hands heated the haft of *Forgebreaker*, the great warhammer of his brother's making, until it glowed red spitting like a melta-torch in his grip.

'I had assumed the vessel abandoned, the crew taken or killed,' he said. 'Everyone has heard the stories of ghost ships adrift in the warp.'

'We've seen no real crew member yet,' said Morn.

'And yet this is here.' Ferrus indicated the dead servitor. Morn shrugged. 'You can't run a ship with just a servitor. Or servitors.'

'If you have concluded your... analysis, Sergeant Morn.' Adept Xanthus appeared much the same as he had aboard the *Fist of Iron*, but for a flex-plastek tube that emerged from the dark of his hood, looped over his shoulder and disappeared again under the folds of his robes. 'If this is indeed a Tenth Legion vessel then I should be able to overrule the servitor's codewalls and open the bridge doors'

'Then do it,' said Ferrus.

A clutch of mechadendrites emerged through the tattered layers of robe covering the magos' chest, suckering onto interface ports across the servitor's mortal husk with an audible slurp of suction. The servitor gave an involuntary twitch. Morn swore and struggled to bring his bolter up.

'An autonomic reaction,' said Xanthus. 'A response to code inputs. Do not be alarmed.'

'You could have said that before you started,' muttered Morn.

Bolter up, the Terran moved to join Santar and his Avernii Clan brothers at the doors, crouching into fire positions or readying grips on power weapons.

Ferrus forced his grip to relax, his hands to cool to a simmer.

'What is taking so long?'

'Either the codes are subtly dissimilar from the standard protocols or the servitor's command algorithms have suffered degradation over time. It may take — *correction*: inputs accepted. Doors opening.' There was an ascending sequence of clunks as the locks disengaged and the goliath doors ground apart.

Spot lamps mounted on helmets, pauldrons and the barrels of boltguns stabbed into the gloom of the bridge. Metal plates and a mess of ceiling ductwork glinted back, the massive outline of an Icon Mechanicus. For a second even Ferrus held his breath, but there was nothing, just the faintest scent, like anodised steel, that carried despite his armour's hermetic seals and the utter absence of an atmosphere.

Santar and Morn were first in, youngest and eldest, each taking two warriors with them and leading them left and right respectively onto the gangwalks that circled the primary command platform. Ferrus followed in with the last two Avernii Clan veterans in tow and Xanthus scuttling to keep pace, driving straight

towards the command hub.

'More servitors,' came Santar's vox-growl. 'You were right, lord. No sign of crew. Or anything else.'

'Same.' Morn. 'But these rune inscriptions on the bulkheads - they're not Gothic, nor any form of Medusan I've seen.'

'Lingua Technis,' said Xanthus quietly.

'This is no Mechanicum warship,' said Ferrus.

'It is not.'

Enthroned upon the command platform they found an answer, and several more questions.

It was clearly a legionary of the Iron Hands, the Clan Raukaan and Legion markings on his armour confirmed it - but he had been butchered, pulled apart and put back together in the crudest way imaginable, the base mechanics of what made a legionary maintained at the expense of the perfection that the Emperor had crafted into His children's flesh. It reminded Ferrus of greenskin work: powerful, functional, ugly. The runaway reconstructive surgery had left little of the wearer's original armour intact, but what remained was unusually baroque in design, engraved with unfamiliar symbols and of a pattern that did not conform to any iteration of Legiones Astartes armour.

'If I might tender an extrapolation,' Xanthus muttered. 'The warp is known to render space and even time mutable. Is it possible, under such a conjecture, that a Tenth Legion vessel could have become snared in this warp anomaly at some indeterminate point in the future, only to emerge - for want of a more appropriate immetereological nomenclature - *now*?'

Ferrus looked down at the bionically abused corpse.

An ugly future.

'Not while I live.'

A cry split through the vox-unit, and Ferrus turned to see an immense xenos creature manifesting over Gabriel Santar. The legionary's left arm was already gone, the evidence of a bite mark left in the bubbling ceramite of the screaming warrior's shoulder. The creature roared and the whole ship seemed to vibrate to it, as though it served as nothing more than the vox-piece for something even larger, even deeper in the warp.

The burnt electrical stench was powerful enough to taste. Answering cries retook the Legion vox-bands, the sudden eruption of bolter-fire lighting the abandoned bridge in flashes.

In burst of muzzle flare, Ferrus saw more of the xeno-forms come. They

crawled out or the bulkheads, running together, burning with pinkish flame, as if they had been drawn in from the outer hull and given gibbering, capering independence.

Morn shredded one with bolter fire. It wobbled and cackled. Like shooting into a fire. Ferrus took two giant strides off the central dais and obliterated it with a single thunderclap-blow from *Forgebreaker* that simultaneously demolished a square metre of deck. It did not laugh at that. 'Absurd life forms,' he heard Xanthus mutter, as the two veterans assigned to their protection took defensive postures and began methodically carving the bridge into halves with bolter fire.

On the other side of the platform, to Ferrus' left, Santar was being dragged to his feet, the second legionary blazing into the inconstant behemoth that had taken his sergeant's arm. Shrugging off the helping hands, Santar deactivated his gladius' mag-sheath and hurled himself at the beast with a roar.

The creature recoiled from the blade, suffering under its edge even as the concomitant bursts of bolter fire passed straight through it.

But Ferrus had the prickling feeling that it was not the blade doing the damage. It was the man. Perhaps it was the unnatural conditions inside the rift, but even from afar Ferrus could *feel* Santar's pummelling fury. It was like Medusan galefrost, and the relentless battering chill of it was slowly tearing the abomination apart.

Morn, however, was being swamped. The Terran was positively incandescent, and it drew the creatures to him like a targeting hex.

Ferrus bludgeoned another streaming entity midair. It blasted apart, soupy spatters of corrosive matter glowing as they rained over him, hissing as they ignited on his armour. Gripping the weapon tightly in both fists, he gave a clangorous cry. He was a god of war, born to fight, bred to win, and every superhuman sinew in him strained to do so now. But to what end? Santar had delivered a potent lesson in iron.

Passion was a weapon borne by all who took the Gorgon's blood, but it was logic and reason that could make it a tool.

'Ferrus Manus,' he said, activating the Legion frequency that would be heard by every legionary aboard the cursed derelict, and on the *Fist of Iron* too. 'Fighting withdrawal. Back to the gunships.'

'No!' Morn panted, laying into the maelstrom of hungering xenos with bolter and power axe. 'This... is a Legion... vessel. I will not... leave it... in the hands of these... *things*.'

'This vessel is a wreck,' Ferrus replied, remaining on the wider frequency so

that all could hear. 'Honour be damned.'

Xanthus looked up, barely two-thirds of Ferrus' stupendous height. The backwards tilt caused the adept's hood to slip, exposing for a moment the metal plates and writhing inner workings concealed within. 'Disregard honour, lord primarch. Be logical. Think of the technological advances that a vessel from two, three, four thousand years into sidereal future could confer. Think of the disasters that foreknowledge may avert.'

The two veterans shepherded the adept and the primarch back towards the blast doors, constricting the kill-zone of relative safety between them. Santar had cut his way through to Morn, practically dragging him off while their brothers continued firing. If Ferrus had one lesson for his children it would be that there was no such thing as defeat, provided there were lessons to be learned.

If nothing else, he had found his new first captain today.

He afforded the wretched refuse of an Iron Hands legionary on the command platform one final look.

'Whatever this future has to offer, magos, I will have no part of it.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**David Annandale** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novel *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar*. He has also written *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, several stories involving the Grey Knights, including *Warden of the Blade*, and *The Last Wall*, *The Hunt for Vulkan* and *Watchers in Death* for The Beast Arises. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction set in The Horus Heresy, Warhammer 40,000 and Age of Sigmar universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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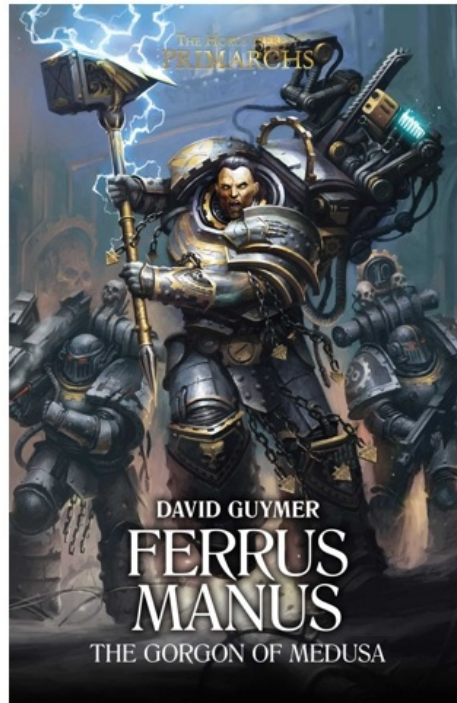
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**C L Werner's** Black Library credits include the Space Marine Battles novel *The Siege of Castellax*, the Age of Sigmar novel *Overlords of the Iron Dragon*, the novella 'Scion of the Storm' in *Hammers of Sigmar*, the End Times novel *Deathblade*, *Mathias Tlmlmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang*, the Brunner the Bounty Hunter trilogy, the Thanquol and Boneripper series and Time of Legends: The Black Plague series. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the worlds of Warhammer 40,000 and the Age of Sigmar.

With the Great Crusade drawing to a close, and a Warmaster to be chosen from among the primarchs, Ferrus Manus takes command of a failing campaign to prove that he is the man for the role.



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