

WARHAMMER

40,000

ETERNAL CRUSADE



Black Pearl

Candles Guttered Low in Chapter Master Azrael's private chapel. They burned in sconces formed of greenskin skulls taken on the bloody fields of Piscina. Light shone from empty eye sockets and wax dripped from yellowed tusks. Azrael had taken the skulls himself, and remembered each blow with eidetic precision.

The sword that struck these heads lay on the obsidian altar he knelt before; its edge as keen as the day it left the artificer's forge. One of the legendary *heavenfall* blades, the Sword of Secrets was a relic from ancient days, a potent reminder of all he and the Chapter represented.

Like the masterfully-crafted bolt pistol sitting next to it, the weapon was bound to him by a duty without equal. Other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes had their oaths, some also stretching back to the lost days of the Arch-Traitor's betrayal, but none bore such a burden as the Dark Angels.

And none among the Dark Angels bore that burden as heavily as Azrael. He wondered, as he often did when in penitential solitude, if Naberius felt as he did. The previous Chapter Master had died on the hunt, but had never spoken of what it meant to lead so honourable a Chapter in war.

Azrael had always sensed a deep well of sorrow in the long-dead warrior, a depth of grief and shame that was now his to bear and which only now he truly understood.

A low fog of incense clung to the hooded statues at the edges of the small chapel, and weak starlight shone through the painted armaglass lancet windows. He knew he was not alone, but the watcher remained unseen in the darkness, its silent gaze never leaving him as he recited the familiar litanies of exculpation on his knees.

The altar was graven with images from the Chapter's history, Piscina, Mooraghen, Byzanthis, Dulan, Rebulus, Vraks and, of course, Caliban itself. Stone-cut warriors from ancient times, heroes all, fought xenos and the vilest of

the vile; those who had forsaken the Emperor and cast their lot with the enemies of Mankind.

Azrael knew every image upon the altar, had memorised every aspect of the wars they described, and sought the hidden meanings behind their waging. The litanies of battle revealed only what the Dark Angels wished, but only Azrael and those inducted into the Chapter's most secret mysteries understood the deeper truths behind them.

He felt the watcher retreat into the darkness and sensed a whisper of movement in the air behind him. A Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels was never truly alone, but this was no silent observer standing in judgement, this was another transhuman giant, one of his warriors. From the pregnant weight of expectation he sensed, he knew exactly who had entered his chapel.

Only one warrior would interrupt him during his devotions. He stood smoothly, lifting the sword and pistol from the altar as he rose. The blade captured the light, reflecting a blood red glow from its star-forged edge.

'Cassiel,' said Azrael, holstering the pistol at his side.

'My lord,' said the Interrogator Chaplain, taking a step into the cold chapel. His dark hair was pulled tightly over his skull, bound by a bronzed circlet. The candlelight didn't quite reach his hooded eyes, which were as dark as the ebon pearls moulded into the pommel of his sword.

'She is here?'

'Her ship awaits your decision, my lord.'

'What to the portents of the Librarian say?'

Cassiel hesitated before answering.

'They feel there is merit in hearing what the inquisitor has to say.'

'And you?' said Azrael. 'What do you say?'

Cassiel placed a palm over his sword's pommel, the fingers stroking the black pearls there. Azrael wondered if he even knew he was doing it.

'The Inquisition has no business aboard the Rock,' said Cassiel.

'That is not an answer, brother.'

'It is, my lord, just not the answer you want to hear.'

'If the threat she claims is rising is true, then we have a duty to act.'

‘Our duty is to—’

Azrael held up a hand. ‘Are you really about to tell me my duty, Brother Cassiel? Are you?’

Admonished, Cassiel bowed and said, ‘No, my lord. I would not presume to know the burden of your duty.’

‘No, you should not,’ agreed Azrael. ‘Grant Inquisitor Severina permission to come aboard. The Dark Angels will hear what she has to say of Arkhona.’

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Freezing air gusted into the stone-flagged airlock vestibule, patterning their armour in spiderwebs of hoarfrost. Vapour gathered in the vaulted ceiling and dripped from the carven stone grotesques over the arched entrance to the fortress monastery.

‘So this is the Rock?’ said Baltasar. ‘A curious mixture of aesthetic. Orbital star fort meets feudal castle. It reminds me of the noble houses of a Knight World. Cold too.’

‘What did you expect?’ said Vyctor, Cadian to the core and thus impervious to discomfort. ‘This area was open to the void not ten minutes ago.’

Damaris didn’t let the biting cold affect her demeanour. The Dark Angels were undoubtedly watching, and they would measure their response to her petition on her worthiness. Showing weakness in the face of something as trivial as cold would be a bad start to negotiations.

‘Couldn’t they have allowed us aboard via an active embarkation deck?’ said Baltasar, tapping his index finger on the skull atop his cane, a skull that had once belonged to the stunted Navigator of the Black Ship upon which Damaris had recruited him.

‘Expecting concessions to your mortality shows just how little you know of the Adeptus Astartes,’ grunted Vyctor, trying to keep his free hand from inching towards the textured grip of his Kasrkin laspistol.

Baltasar shrugged, shivering beneath his thick hessian robes. A child of an exterminated world where the temperature never fell below scorching, he tolerated the cold about as well as mortal flesh would tolerate a bolt round.

Damaris held her head high as a grumbling steel bulkhead slid aside. Only darkness beyond. Not even the subtle augmetics enmeshed with her eyes could penetrate the gloom.

Her gut told her it was empty.

Not a good start, but if the Dark Angels wanted to intimidate her they were going to have to try harder than this. Damaris Severina had personally ordered the death of ten worlds and met the enemies of Mankind blade to blade. She had suffered like few others had suffered, but returned time and again to the fight.

To be an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos was to submit to a vocation of the soul, a role that could never be denied.

‘Baltasar?’ she whispered.

‘Assaying now...’

Baltasar’s hooded eyes developed cataract-like mist as he stretched his power into the darkness. The keenness of his warp-sense had saved all their lives many times, and Damaris trusted him to discern who or what was waiting for them.

‘There’s something in there,’ he said. ‘Watching us, but...’

His words trailed off, as though he could not articulate what exactly he was sensing. His features creased in a slight frown of perturbation.

‘Dark Angels?’ asked Damaris.

‘No, something...else,’ said Baltasar, letting out a soft sigh, as though whatever he had sought now slipped away from him. ‘It’s gone. Whatever it was, it’s not there now. The chamber beyond is empty.’

‘Then where are the Dark Angels?’ said Vyctor, thin lips pursed together at the perceived insult. ‘Have they no respect for the Ordos of the Inquisition?’

‘It is for us to show respect, Interrogator Lucasta,’ said Severina. ‘Few mortals ever set foot in a fortress monastery of the Adeptus Astartes. Fewer still gain

admittance to the sanctum sanctorum of the First Legion. We are honoured to be here at all.'

Vyctor gave her a sidelong glance, but said nothing at her over-elaborate reply, understanding it wasn't for his benefit.

He gave a curt bow and said, 'Of course, mistress Damaris, we must honour our hosts with all the respect due to their august heritage.'

The Cadian wasn't normally given to such ostentation in his words, but had served her long enough to know when to follow her lead.

'Come on, our hosts will be waiting,' said Damaris.

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The chamber beyond the frozen airlock was larger than she'd expected, barrel-vaulted and coffered in marble panels emblazoned with faded murals and peeling frescoes. Arcs of splintered archways abruptly ended at the external sheet steel caisson walls, suggesting they had once been part of a far grander structure.

Ice-stiffened banners hung like guillotine blades from frayed ropes, and frost-rimed statuary of armoured Space Marines and hooded acolytes stood like sentries in shadowed alcoves. Another portal opened in the far wall, revealing a stone-flagged corridor lit by flickering lumens.

Damaris set off without a word, marching deeper into the Rock as though she had every right to be there. The passageway echoed to the sound of her boot heels, eventually leading to another empty chamber, a cloister of echoes, dust and abandonment. A single iron door slid open in the adjacent wall, offering continued progress, and Damaris passed through it without hesitation.

Onwards and deeper they went.

Corridor after corridor, chamber after chamber. Passageways of stone and steel, anterooms floored in cracked ouslite or hard-packed earth that reeked of age. Galleries filled with portraits so faded as to be unrecognisable and tapestries rotted with decay. Halls of armaments and vaulted spaces designed for feasting.

All empty. All capable of holding thousands of warriors, but now abandoned. The Rock was a deserted ruin, a crumbling palace of muttering shadows and haunted emptiness, where once it must have rung to the raucous cries of warriors; their boasts, their triumphs and their savage joys.

But now it was empty; the innumerable hosts of warriors long dead, and the great victories in which they once had revelled now consigned to the unremembered ages like the mouldering portraits.

At last they came to a heptagonal chamber, its stone walls lit with flickering torches and pierced by heavy timber doors banded with dark iron. Unlike before, none of the doors opened in anticipation of their onward travel.

‘Now where?’ asked Vyctor.

‘This way,’ said Damaris.

‘How do you know?’ asked Baltasar.

‘An inquisitor knows many things, Baltasar,’ said Damaris, gesturing to angular clefts gouged into the stone above each door. ‘Enough to read mason’s marks in the craft-cant of Caliban.’

‘Clever,’ said a voice from a pool of shadow Damaris would have sworn on a stack of Liber Xenotica hadn’t been there before. ‘Only a handful of people beyond these walls would know such marks, Inquisitor Damaris Severina.’

Vyctor spun to face the speaker, but Damaris pinned his hand in place with a burst of psychic force before he might do something as foolish as drawing his weapon. Baltasar sighed as the speaker stepped to meet them, a giant in robes of pale cream over inordinately bulky plate armour. The hilt of a sword emerged from the folds of robe at his waist, and seeing the pommel, she knew the kind of warrior she faced.

‘Chaplain,’ she said, with a bow.

He drew his hood back, revealing the blunt, pugnacious features of one of the Emperor’s Space Marines. His hair was dark, held by a bronze circlet, and his eyes had seen more pain than any man ever should.

‘My name is Cassiel, and the Grand Master will see you now.’

*

Cassiel opened a door, not the one Damaris had indicated, and led them yet deeper into the Rock. Once again they traversed empty hallways, reliquary chambers filled with war-trophies and honour banners as well as congregational spaces spacious enough to hold entire regiments of Astra Militarum.

At the end of a long processional, one clearly not as abandoned as the others, Damaris saw a detachment of colossal terminators in battle armour of bone-white plate. They carried vast polearms, bladed with iridescent metal, and these now lowered as they approached.

‘You will surrender your weapons,’ said Cassiel, as a group of hooded servitors emerged from an adjacent chamber, bearing sealed lockboxes of lacquered black wood.

‘Of course,’ said Damaris, sensing Vyctor’s irritation. An unarmed Cadian was virtually an oxymoron, but even he understood that bearing weapons in the presence of the Chapter Master would be forbidden – even though it was singularly unlikely they could actually harm him.

Every weapon they possessed; pistols, knives, digital lasers, augmetic lethalties and implanted shok-haptics were either surrendered or fitted with temporary blockers until a robed adept with clicking optics and antennae-like wands extending from the nape of its neck emitted a screech of affirmative binary.

The terminators flanked them as Cassiel led them into a long chamber with a soaring ceiling of panelled wood, rich in vein and tone, as though fresh from the forest. The walls were similarly organic, and the change was momentarily off-putting.

Perhaps that was the point.

Standing at the centre of an arc of green-armoured Space Marines swathed in surplices of pale cream was a warrior who could only be Azrael, Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels.

Vyctor and Baltasar's steps faltered in the face of such a magnificent warrior, his noble bearing and strength radiating from him palpably. This was a council of equals, but Azrael was entirely and incontrovertibly their master.

'Greetings, Inquisitor Damaris,' said Azrael. 'What do you think of my fortress monastery?'

The question was unexpected, but Damaris had faced worse.

'We are honoured to be allowed within,' she said.

'But you expected to be admitted.'

'I hoped for it.'

'A statistically unlikely hope,' said Azrael. 'Of the thousand of petitioners begging for my attention, only a handful are ever permitted to set foot within the Rock.'

'Then I am doubly flattered then, my lord.'

'Do you know why I allowed you to speak to me?'

'No, my lord.'

'Now would be a poor time to lie, inquisitor Severina.'

Damaris nodded. 'Apologies, Lord Azrael, but the duties of an inquisitor often require a level of secrecy when one is uncertain of whom to trust.'

'And you think that applies here?'

'No, my lord, but old habits die hard.'

'Then speak truthfully and if I like your answer I will hear the rest of what you have to say.'

Damaris nodded and said, 'You let us board because your forces are already poised to march on Arkhona. You have your own reasons for this, I am sure, and you wish to know how closely they align with mine.'

Azrael spread his hands wide.

'I have warriors deployed throughout the Imperium,' he said, one hand resting lightly upon the wire-wound grip of his vast sword. Damaris had the powerful feeling that were any of her answers not to his liking, he would have no qualms about ending them upon its edge.

She had come this far, and wasn't about to back down in the face of Azrael's implicit threat. She took a deep breath and continued.

'As far as they are known, the pattern of the Dark Angels' fleet assets suggests a common target. Baltasar's scrying reveals an underlying co-ordination to their movements that suggests a collective effort rather than individual objectives. I believe that collective effort is drawing in on Arkhona.'

Azrael nodded, and Damaris thought she saw a hint of grim amusement in his eyes, like a scholam teacher pleased by a particularly dense pupil achieving an answer by guesswork.

'If that is true, and you believe I already muster my warriors to Arkhona, why bother petitioning me in person?'

'Because of this,' said Damaris, reaching slowly beneath her storm coat, the motion careful and deliberate, to remove something from her inside pocket. 'A dying warrior of your Chapter gave me this, and with his last breath he whispered your name and the name of Arkhona.'

'What is it?' asked Azrael.

'That is what *I* want to know,' said Damaris, holding out her palm to reveal what she had taken from her coat pocket.

A single, obsidian-black pearl.

Space Marines, Descent on Arkhona

They Fall Like blazing teardrops through the skies of Arkhona. Five of them in a staggered, echelon formation. Too regular to be natural, too fast to be falling accidentally. They'd breached the troposphere in a blaze of squalling atmospheric, trailing scads of re-entry fire in their wake.

The hideous creatures swarming the embattled mountaintop outpost turned their bulbous, hairless heads to the sky. Dark eyes, glittering like polished garnet, reflected the tortured sky and the fiery trails.

Sawing blasts of gunfire from the outpost's turrets ripped through the swarm, detonating creatures from within or tearing strangely-jointed limbs from their glossy carapaces. The creatures' six-limbed bodies were segmented and chitinous, wet with secreted mucus and utterly lethal. They hissed and bared fangs at the approaching shapes, not knowing what they were, but understanding on a deep-seated instinctual level that they were hostile.

With unnatural synchrony, the swarm split in two. Half continued their assault on the outpost, clawing up its walls and gatehouse with a monstrous hunger. Enormous warriors stood against them, armoured in warplate of crimson and cobalt blue, jade green and winter frost. Their shoulder guards bore a host of differing icons, each a Chapter of legend. They fought with roaring chain-bladed swords and bulky firearms that spat explosive death.

The rest of the swarm scattered, manoeuvring with uncanny precision to meet the incoming threat with dripping fangs and sickle-like claws.

The first of the fiery teardrops broke through the low clouds with a shriek of displaced air. Re-entry burn obscured its flanks, but cobalt blue armour with a mother-of-pearl Ultima was visible through the flames.

At the last moment before impact, howling rocket boosters fired from its underside. A cherry red eruption of chem-flame vitrified the rock as it slammed down like a hammerblow of the gods. The beasts scattered at the force of impact.

A second fiery pod struck the mountainside with a thunderous crack of metal on rock. The sound was like a speeding mass-hauler smashing into a cliff-face. A third landed. A fourth, and then the others. Each struck the mountain like a fiery spear of light sent from the heavens.

No angry god had hurled them.

But they did bear angels.

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Pneumatic bolts fire with an explosive, metallic cough. The sides of the drop pod slam down. Noxious air pours in, hot and dry, freighted with the reek of alien blood.

Brother Sergeant Castor's grav-harness slams up and he strides forward, drawing his pistol and sword with perfect economy of motion. He takes a single step and jumps through the hot vapour of the drop-pod's landing.

He lands hard, the rock beneath his feet glassed by the fire of the pod's rockets. The plates of his cobalt blue power armour mist with condensate and particulate matter. A target presents; a leaping beast with tight-wound rear legs, four sword-blade arms and a jaw filled with tearing, needle fangs.

Hormagaunt. Gauntii gladius. Fast, agile. Combat evolved.

Castor puts a bolt round through its jaw. The back of its elongated skull blows out in a welter of black ichor. He steps in, shoulder low, to meet another of the creatures. His sword slashes in an upward arc. The roaring teeth of his chainsword splits the beast from end to end.

The nine warriors of his squad spread out, already firing and moving to link with the rest of the company. Tyranids are dying by the score with every volley, the bio-armour of their segmented bodies no match for the explosive fury of a mass-reactive bolt round.

No matter how many they kill, there are always more.

Hundreds of alien creatures surround them. They are vastly outnumbered, but

such odds are of no consequence. They are the Adeptus Astartes, the Emperor's Angels of Death.

They are the Space Marines, and they know no fear.

Brother Hellar takes position at Castor's right shoulder and raises his heavy bolter, a vastly oversized version of his usual sidearm. He depresses the firing trigger and its barrel vanishes in a blazing plume of muzzle flare.

A dozen gaunts vanish in a blizzard of rapid-firing shells. High explosive rounds eviscerate them, tearing them apart from within. Alien blood mists the air as Hellar works his weapon back and forth over his sector.

'Fodder for our guns,' he says.

'The sudden shock of our arrival has given us an edge,' replies Castor, ducking the bladed limb of a gaunt and driving his sword up through its neck. 'They will be quick to react.'

'True enough,' agrees Hellar. 'Any ordinary foe would already be fleeing at the sight of five Ultramarines drop pods landing in their midst.'

'Not so the tyranids,' says Castor. 'The beasts have no individual will, no capacity for fear or panic.'

'We'll see about that,' promises Hellar, racking the slide of his weapon for another volley.

These extra-galactic predators are driven by a terrible hivemind, a conjoined alien intelligence that overwhelms such biological imperatives. That much Castor has learned from the mission briefings and the intelligence gathered by the Tyranid Hunters of Chaplain Cassius.

To know it is one thing.

To see it in action is quite another.

A vector appears on Castor's visor, a communication from the outpost's commander, Sergeant Protus. A route inside. The outpost is a communications

array that allows the myriad forces of the Space Marines to stay in contact. To lose it would be a grievous blow to inter-Chapter communication.

A squad of Ultramarines has held the outpost against the tyrannids for the last six hours.

Castor looks up and sees the intensity of fire from a corner bastion intensify. The wall there is partially ruined, torn down by a vast creature with heavy plates of chitin protecting its skull and shoulders. It is a living battering ram with clawed, sledgehammer arms like mechanised digger blades. It tears the wall apart, ripping and bludgeoning its way inside.

Carnifex voracio. Armoured line breaker. Heavy assaulter.

Bolter fire barely scratches its toughened hide. Grenade fragments cut shallow grooves in its armour. It vomits a spray of sickly bio-plasma, emerald green fire that burns armour, steel and flesh alike. Castor sees warriors falling from the wall, and his heart hardens.

‘Hellar!’ he yells. ‘Get that thing’s attention!’

The heavy bolter swings around and a stream of shells batters the gargantuan creature’s body. Most simply detonate harmlessly against its armour, but a few explode within the fleshier regions of its body.

The beast convulses, but keeps attacking the wall, the implacable will of the hivemind forcing it to ignore the pain.

‘Sergeant Eusabian! Lascannon!’ orders Castor.

Sergeant Eusabian’s heavy gunner shoulders his lascannon and even over the screeching, chittering cries of the swarm, Castor hears the heavy thrum of its capacitors.

A coruscating beam snaps to the Carnifex and a portion of its right flank vanishes in a geysering explosion of molten chitin and scorched flesh. The monstrous beast staggers, and drops to one knee, its internal bio-structure hideously revealed.

Yet, still, it does not die.

This time it cannot ignore its pain, and the Carnifex lurches from the wall with a shrieking howl of pain and fury.

‘You have it’s attention, brother sergeant,’ says Hellar.

‘Squad Castor, with me!’ he yells, pushing into the swarming creatures. ‘Squad Furina, flank left. Squad Draken, right.’

Castor’s pistol and sword clears a path. He tramples alien corpses with every step. The insane fact that he is advancing towards a Carnifex is not lost on him.

Each of the assaulting squads is pushing towards the outpost behind synchronised volleys of bolter fire. The aliens see he is the leader of this force, either by his personal heraldry, the transverse crest atop his helm, or by some hideously acquired knowledge.

The gaunts before him trample one another in their bounding, leaping frenzy to reach him. Mass-reactive rounds shred them. Bladed killers are closing in. Now they are closer, salvos of bolter fire from the outpost enfilade the tyranids.

The carnage is incredible. Righteous.

From of the corner of his eye, Castor sees the warriors of squad Vaskro fighting a pack of larger beasts, tall, high-crested monsters with whipping blade tails, grasping claws and swollen, bone-fringed skulls.

Tyranicus gladius. Formidable warriors and hive leaders.

Tyranid warriors. These are the swarm’s leaders. Kill them and the host will be cut off from its directing overmind, making them easy prey.

Sergeant Vaskro bears a crackling, energy-wreathed power fist on his right hand. He can tear a battle tank apart with such a weapon. The bio-carapace of a tyranid warrior will offer no resistance to its awesome strength.

But Castor has no time to concern himself with Sergeant Vaskro.

The Carnifex is upon him.

It towers over him, a half-blinded, screaming killer. Its vast arms are reaping blades. Caustic slime and virulent organic acids drip from their unnaturally sharp edges.

Rippling bio-fire gathers in its gullet.

Castor shoots it, but his bolt caroms from its toughened skull. His battle brothers flay it with gunfire. A pair of rounds punch into its throat, and milky fluid squirts, like a ruptured hydraulic hose.

The bio-plasma boils in its throat, and Castor drives his sword into the creature's heaving, swollen gut. The blade drives home, its teeth chewing meat and alien organs. He tries to pull it out, but the suction of the Carnifex's flesh holds it firm.

Castor releases the blade and ducks beneath a scything blow that would have cut him in two at the waist. He rolls as the beast's elephantine leg tries to crush him.

He rises and leaps onto the monster's back, using the wounds torn in its body as handholds to haul himself up. The Carnifex bucks and turns, trying to throw him off.

Castor's grip is firm, and he climbs its body, unhooking a Krak grenade from his belt. An armour buster. The beast's arms claw for him, slamming into his body and tearing deep gouges in his armour. If he survives this fight, the artificers are going to have words with him at the state of his battle plate.

With one hand wedged in the Carnifex's flesh, Castor swings around to the beast's front. His boots slam against its chest and he is face to face with the monster. Even now, its eyes are dead, just blank orbs that speak of a hideous emptiness and synaptic enslavement.

Its fanged jaws are hinged open, sharklike and crocodilian at the same time, ribbed and filled with tearing, serrated teeth. Green white fluid fire ripples in its gullet and Castor flexes his arm as he plunges his fist into the roiling mass.

He grunts as he feels the bio-plasma eat into his armour.

Castor releases his grip on the grenade and thrusts with his thighs, powering away from the roaring Carnifex. He hits the ground hard, rolling amid a clawing pack of gaunts.

Their claws tear at him until he hears a muffled detonation and a bass rumble of something vast and organic rupturing from the inside. Castor rolls to his feet as the Carnifex crashes to its knees with its chest and thorax a gaping cavity of splintered ribs and wet meat.

It slumps over, an apocalyptic quantity of alien ichor spilling over the rocks. Squad Castor forms up around him, bolters aimed outwards to keep the gaunts from their sergeant.

But Castor sees there is no need.

The gaunts are not attacking. They mill in confusion, screeching in a strange mixture of fear and uncertainty. Castor looks to his right and sees Sergeant Vaskro standing amid the pulverised corpses of the tyranid warriors. He holds one of their skulls in his oversized powerfist.

‘Kill them all,’ orders Castor. ‘Before some other beast establishes control of them.’

The cull is merciless. Every one of the isolated packs of gaunts is bracketed and gunned down as their tiny, animal brains look for a neural connection that isn’t there.

Stripped of their hive creatures, the lower beasts are nowhere near as dangerous. Still a threat, but vulnerable.

In moments it is over, the last of the leaderless gaunts is slain. The squads of Ultramarines regroup, forming up their squads to assess their losses and attrition rates. At first glance, it looks as though twelve warriors are down.

Too soon to say who will live to fight again and who will not. That is for the Apothecaries and the will of the Emperor to decide.

Castor bends to retrieve his sword from the ruin of the Carnifex’s body. The blade is clogged with sticky black matter and bone fragments. He will clean it

when they return to Arkhona Ultima.

The gates of the outpost open, and four bloodied Space Marines march out. At their head is another sergeant, his own blade as choked with alien flesh as his own. Sergeant Protus of the Ultramarines. A proud warrior, perhaps too proud. Was it that pride that saw him trapped here?

Behind Castor come three others. The first is an axe-bearing warrior in the stormcloud armour of the Space Wolves. The second is clad in the crimson of the Blood Angels, his pale countenance streaked with alien blood. Last comes a Dark Angel, the hue of his green armour almost black.

‘On me,’ says Castor, and his squad follow as he marches towards sergeant Protus.

They meet as Ultramarines, as battle brothers. Wrist to wrist, in a clatter of plate. The Chapter symbols on their shoulder guards, ivory white Ultimas, are slathered in blood yet still shine proudly under this world’s strange skies.

‘Well met, Sergeant Protus,’ says Castor, casting his gaze over the warriors behind his fellow Ultramarine. ‘Some interesting company you’re keeping.’

‘These are interesting times, Sergeant Castor,’ says Protus. ‘Welcome to Arkhona.’

Death and the Maiden World

Laughter Always Made Ishar sad. It reminded her of the time before the Fall, when the laughter had been real. This sound, this imitation was not what she remembered. It was forced and empty, as if they all understood what had been lost, but could never admit that to one another.

The children knew. They heard its counterfeit nature and immediately turned from it. In their innocence, they were wiser than the adults.

Ishar lay on a mossy rock in the Glade of Autumn's Waning, letting the last rays of sunlight warm her ivory skin and listening to the faint sound of laughter from across the water.

She'd thought she was alone.

She wondered who was here and what they had to laugh about.

Her father repeatedly told her not to come to the Glade. He said it was a dangerous place; a reminder of grief and golden times passed. Ancient starlight glittered in the water, light freighted with dark memory. The stars saw farther and they saw deeper. They wept for the fair eldar, and to swim these cold waters was to taste that grief.

Ishar closed her eyes, wondering if today would be the day she would swim. Was it time for her bones to join the others at the bottom of the pool?

She sat up and let her feet dangle.

The water's cold was piercing. It drew a gasp from her.

She tasted the sorrow of the stars and wept for her race.

Entire worlds fallen to madness, cities cast to ruin, and a race that once beheld the galaxy in all its wonders burned to ash in a single cataclysmic night.

They called it the Fall.

Ishar thought that too small a word for a race's death.

Many years had passed since the anarchy of that terrible, endless night, but her memories and dreams were as potent as ever. Ishar doubted she'd ever be rid of them.

She looked down and her lips parted in shock.

Her mother's face floated beneath the surface, serene and beautiful. Spectrally pale, flame red hair billowed around her shoulders. A shroud spread from the lifeless skin of her arms like feathered wings.

Ishar slid from the rock and plunged into the water.

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Her eyes opened and she sat up with a cry of fear, clutching her breast and feeling her heart beating like the wings of a night-feeding moonfisher bird.

Night had fallen, and any charm the glade once held had vanished. Now it was a place of the dead. Water lapped beneath her, and the reflected stars were no longer sad, they were hungry.

She slid from the rock and followed the path back through the trees. Night mists crept from the water's edge, and branches curled overhead like clawing talons. Cold winds snatched her clothes and twisted the mist into moaning ghosts. She shouldn't have fallen asleep, shouldn't have let the dreams come. Now she must deal with the aftermath. Nor was sight her only sense memory of dreams from the Fall.

She tasted the ash of cindered corpses, felt the savage joy so many had taken in their murder. Echoes of lust surged through her and her skin reddened with the thought of secret desires given free reign.

'I will not fall, for I walk the Path of Balance,' she said, reciting the mantra her father had taught her since they had first come to Velioss, fleeing the disintegration of eldar society and its headlong plunge into excesses of all kinds.

Velioss had been a paradise, and its world spirit had welcomed them to its

bosom. It became the paradise their birthworld had been before the cults of pleasure had taken over, a Maiden world. Life had been joyous, a new beginning where fear and doubt were unknown.

Less than ten years after their arrival, the Fall had come.

The people of Velioss thought themselves safe. So far from the heart of their once-great civilisation, they believed the horrors their kin embraced would not affect them.

They were wrong.

The seeds of destruction that bloomed to dreadful life and destroyed the eldar lay in them all. Everyone on Velioss felt it, the surge-tide of psychic madness that gripped the hearts and minds of those they had left behind. It spread from the eldar homeworlds like a sickness, a species-wide insanity that almost dragged them into the same bloody abyss.

Yet they had endured, and upon the new dawn's break a bloated new star took its place in the firmament. It glowered where the greatest empire the galaxy had yet known had once shaped the heavens.

It was a leering, secret star. A star only ever half glimpsed. A terrible, unblinking eye that only ever revealed itself in the darkest nights. It stared down upon the eldar of Velioss with monstrous appetite and infinite patience.

It waited, unblinking. Always thirsting.

Ishar cried out as she saw a figure on the path before her.

He shone in the darkness, clad in a simple robe of pale cream and with his hands laced before him. Starlight dappled his silver hair and the shadows retreated from the radiance in his amber-flecked eyes.

'Father,' she said, relief flooding her.

'You were at the Glade.'

She saw little point in denying it.

'Yes,' she said. 'I was, what of it?'

'You should not go there without me,' said her father. 'The Eye is always hungry.'

It always seeks us, and our anguish draws its gaze like nothing else.'

'I like the Glade,' said Ishar. 'I go there when I desire solitude.'

Her father nodded and said, 'Solitude is valuable, but seek it elsewhere. When painful thoughts turn inward is when she comes.'

'The Thirsting God again?' said Ishar, smiling and raising an eyebrow. 'You still think she is real?'

'I know she is. I see her in my dreams. So do you.'

The smile fell from Ishar's lips.

Her father's name was Asurama, but no-one called him that.

On Velioss he was known simply as the Prophet.

He had the shealladh, the sight.

It had been Asurama who had spoken loudest against the corruption he saw at the heart of the eldar empire. His warnings had been scorned, his doomsaying drowned out by lunatic screams and lustful cries.

Even knowing his pronouncements would go unheeded, he never stopped, and his powerful oratory swayed tens of thousands to follow him to Velioss. Here, amid the bounty of this paradise world, he shunned any thoughts of leadership and spent his days seeking the places where springs sourced at the heart of the world bubbled to its surface.

Ishar had not seen her father in over a year, an almost insignificant span to a race as long-lived as the eldar, but which suddenly felt far too long.

He opened his arms to her and she let herself be embraced.

'It is good to see you again, father.'

'And you also, daughter.'

'What brings you back?'

'You,' he said. 'And the survival of our race.'

*

To Ishar's surprise, her father led her back to the glade, where the dark waters

were a black mirror. All was silence. No night-birds sang, and the whispers of chill wind were left behind in the forest.

‘Why are we here?’ she asked.

‘I need you to see something,’ was his cryptic answer.

Hand in hand they climbed the rock from where Ishar had heard the sound of laughter. She didn’t want to look down, fearful of what she might see, but did anyway. This time there was no sign of her mother, just the still waters.

‘You saw her, didn’t you?’ asked her father.

‘Who?’

Her father shook his head as though disappointed in her obtuseness. ‘You know who, your mother. I saw her too, in a place where the waters had become trapped. Where the energy of the world had grown stagnant with evil.’

‘What did you see?’

‘I saw her suffering,’ said her father, and Ishar saw how old her father had become. She had never seen it before now, but the weight of millennia bore down on him like a curse of Morai-Heg. ‘The Thirsting God has her.’

‘There’s no such god,’ said Ishar.

‘Once I would have agreed with you,’ sighed Asurama. ‘But there is now.’

He looked up to where the secret star glinted like a faint crack in the facet of the perfect gemstone.

‘We birthed her,’ he said with the regret of a man carrying a burden of guilt not his own. ‘She slumbered long, but the death scream of the eldar awoke her, and the ages yet to come will damn us for our folly.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Ishar, wanting to deny his words, but suddenly feeling their truth.

‘We will never be safe from her,’ said her father. ‘She is thirsting, always thirsting, always hunting us.’

‘But we are safe here?’ said Ishar. ‘That’s why we came here, to get away from

the danger and the horror. You said we would be safe.'

'Aye, child, and for a time we were,' said her father. 'In life she cannot claim us, but in death...'

His head bowed, memory of lost love robbing him of his words for a time.

'When we die she takes us,' he said. 'When we die she devours our souls and torments us for all eternity. Death for us is no longer a release, no longer a return to the galaxy's natural cycle of birth and rebirth, but an eternal nightmare of pain and suffering.'

The horror of what her father was saying paralysed Ishar.

'Why are you telling me this?' she asked at last.

'Because our race must endure,' he said, taking her hand and placing something rounded and cool there. She looked down to see a milky gemstone of polished marble in her palm, set in a golden clasp upon a leather thong. It shimmered with lambent light that swiftly matched her own heartbeat.

'It's beautiful,' she said.

'Put it on.'

She did so and felt a curious warmth enfold her, a sense that she and the stone were one. It was part of her now and she knew she would never lift it from around her neck.

'I call it a spirit stone,' said her father. 'It will keep you safe from the Thirsting God. So long as you wear it, you will be a ghost to her.'

There was something her father wasn't telling her about the spirit stone's properties, but that could wait for another day.

'You didn't bring me here just to give me this.'

'No,' agreed her father, taking her hand. 'I didn't. Look out over the water and let the shealladh guide you.'

'I don't have the sight,' she said.

'You are my daughter, of course you do,' replied her father. 'In time you will see farther than any of us.'

He smiled, something rare for him. 'Who knows, perhaps you could even be the one to bring the Path of Balance to our kind.'

Ishar didn't know what that meant, but did as he asked. She sent her gaze across the water. The reflections of the stars were brilliantly crisp, stark and clear.

‘I don’t see anything.’

‘You will,’ her father promised her.

The surface of the water rippled, and she gripped her father’s hand tightly as she saw things moving in its depths. Images churned below, terrors conjured from the skein of time and viewed through the warped lens of the water.

Too many to see all at once, too many to believe.

She saw monsters with leathery green skin; howling, tusked brutes with bloodstained axes and roaring contraptions of claws and spiked rollers. Smearred with blood and warpaint, they roared like beasts as the world burned around them.

The image was overtaken by battling phalanxes of warrior giants, clad in metal armour emblazoned with the sigils of their masters. They trampled this world beneath their booted feet, ramming gold-winged banners into the earth.

Hundreds of gangling, clumsy, creatures fought beside them, like hairless jokaero dressed in painted rags. She gasped as she realised the clubs they carried were in fact firearms.

Who would risk giving weapons to such primitive beings?

‘What are they?’ she said, disgusted by their appearance.

‘A race that will outnumber the stars in time and drive all before them. Even us.’

‘Never!’ cried Ishar. ‘They are animals.’

‘There’s truth in that, but they are many and they have a ferocious appetite for life. It is what makes them strong and what makes them so vulnerable. Their desires are so banal and so callow that the Thirsting God and her kind will ensnare them with ease.’

‘Are we to fight them?’

Her father shook his head. ‘One day they will come, but not until the galaxy completes its current revolution. All the hosts of the stars will come to the worlds orbiting the stars at the heart of this system.’

‘Why? What is there here for them?’

‘Many of them will not even know why they come,’ said her father. ‘To destroy

and shed blood is enough to sate their base appetites, but in time they will learn the truth of what has called them here.'

'And what is that?' asked Ishar.

'Look again,' instructed her father.

Ishar sent her sight deep into the pool, now recognising the elliptical dance of planets, the trinary stars at the heart of the Arkhona system. Her sight was drawn to the fourth planet, a blue green orb that rivalled Velioss in its verdant perfection. To all appearances, nothing Ishar saw warranted the murderous avarice she saw in the warring factions of the future.

'I don't understand,' she said.

'Look closer,' said her father. 'Look deeper.'

Ishar did, and as the truth of what she saw became clear, she slid to her knees.

'No...' she whispered, hoping she was wrong, but seeing the truth of it.

Tears flowed down her cheeks at the thought of having escaped one cataclysm only to have settled in the face of another.

Blood Price

‘**Has There Ever** been a day like this?’ said Governor Tarqel Roschin, puffing out his chest and brushing imagined specs of dust from the puffed sleeves of his fur-lined pelisse. Gold thread woven through the material made it sparkle in the late morning sunlight and accentuated the deep crimson of his bronze-buttoned tunic and polished boots.

‘Not in living memory, my lord,’ answered Nuri, adjusting the golden scabbard at the governor’s hip.

‘How long has it been?’

‘Two hundred and sixty three years, my lord.’

‘A glorious day for Arkhona,’ said Roschin.

‘A glorious day for you, my lord.’

Roschin nodded, pleased Nuri understood the nuances inherent in this moment. He expected no less. His bodyslave was attentive to detail, and Roschin was forced to concede the man had done a commendable job in making sure he was presentable.

On a day like today, appearances were everything.

A shame, then, that Roschin was forced to share the dignitaries’ pavilion with his fellow planetary officials. The heads of Arkhona’s noble Houses had come with swollen entourages, military escorts, and a level of pomp that might be expected were the Emperor himself to set foot on Protos.

Not that any of the other nobles could match the spectacle the wealth of Protos could provide. Roschin glanced up, but the sky was heavy with low cloud and atmospheric disturbances from the fleet in low orbit.

No sign of any landers, but as far Roschin could see, Aquila Primus spaceport was awash with immaculately presented specimens of Arkhonan soldiery, epitomising his efficient, loyal and productive world.

Planetary Defence Regiments by the score mustered in the shadows of the

bustling port's towering lifter-rigs and launch cradles. Tens of thousands of men, well-trained, well-armed and fiercely proud, arranged in resplendent ranks amid a sea of vividly-hued banners and glittering eagles. A hundred or more colours bands filled the air with rousing martial tunes as booming hymnals bore words of piety skyward from the Ecclesiarchy's Capitol Imperialis devotionals.

Orbital traffic had been grounded for the day, and though the parsimonious mercantile guilds had wailed in protest, Roschin's decree was absolute.

Today the skies belonged to the visitors.

Today the Imperium returned to Arkhona.

*

Tamara of Aridus had come clad in voluminous *jilbab* of russet brown that did little to conceal her swollen belly in which she grew yet another heir. Roschin wrinkled his nose as he caught a faint whiff of industrial-grade chemical fertilisers in the folds of her robes.

'How many does that make now, Lady Tamara?' he asked.

'This will be my thirteenth child, Lord Roschin.'

'Thirteen? Emperor's Mercy,' said Roschin, with a shake of his head. 'I know Aridus is fertile, but it's crops you're supposed to be growing down there.'

Tamara dutifully chuckled as Roschin turned his attention to the other nobles. Losekin of Sylvae was clad in imitation of an Imperial Preacher, swathed in intricately arranged robes of gold and cream and with a pair of pistols belted at his hip.

'Taking the term, "defender of the faith" a little too literally, aren't we?' said Roschin.

Losekin shook his head. 'If you'd walked the *Vea Sacra* as often as I have, you'd know better than to mock, Tarqel.'

Roschin ignored the rebuke and turned to Edrek of Planus, whose dusky skin and stoic demeanour made him all but unreadable. Yet even the taciturn Edrek couldn't help but look to the skies every few minutes with anticipation.

‘Worried they’ll not come?’ said Roschin.

Edrek ignored him and Roschin turned to the last of the nobles, Talabek of Volcanus. Alone of his fellow nobles, Talabek wore an expression that looked like he’d just bitten into something unpleasant.

‘Something troubles you, Lord Talabek?’

The man looked over and gave him the kind of look Roschin remembered from the Scholam just before Pastor Alevant would beat a child for misremembering an obscure fragment of Imperial lore.

‘This whole day troubles me, Lord Roschin,’ said Talabek.

The man’s voice was rasping and parched, which served him right for living on Volcanus. All that heat wasn’t good for a man’s constitution. Or his temperament.

‘It troubles you?’ said Roschin. ‘This is a great day for us all. After...what is it again, Nuri?’

‘Two hundred and sixty three years, my lord.’

‘Yes, after two hundred and sixty three years, the servants of the glorious Emperor, amongst whose number we must all count ourselves, have returned to Arkhona. Today is a day for joyous celebrations and giving thanks for His beneficence.’

‘Then you’re an even bigger fool than I thought.’

Roschin’s lifewards bristled at the insult, but Roschin ignored them. He’d sparred with Talabek enough in the palace debate chambers not to be fazed by the man’s boorish manner.

‘An unkind interpretation of that remark might be to consider it treasonous, Lord Talabek.’

‘Is it treasonous to ask why the Imperium comes here now, after so long?’

‘That all depends on how you ask.’

‘Then why do you think they are here, Lord Roschin?’

‘Because we are a world of the Imperium and it is our duty and honour to offer up our proud sons to fight in the Emperor’s glorious wars,’ said Roschin. ‘It is our solemn and most privileged task to serve His ineffable wisdom by being part of the holy machine that is His Imperium.’

‘Words were spoken by rote,’ sneered Talabek.

‘True,’ admitted Roschin, ‘But I believe them. Can you say the same? My House has been preeminent among the noble houses of Arkhona for centuries because my antecedents lived by them. You and others like you have grown soft; complacent and too much in love with the rewards position grants you, never once considering the duty such position requires, no, *demands*.’

Talabek hid it well, but Roschin saw his surprise.

‘Well said, Lord Roschin,’ said Talabek with a short bow, ‘but please do not mistake my natural caution with a lack of faith in the Emperor. I am, as are we all, dutiful and loyal subject of the God-Emperor, but where the Imperium walks, it does not step lightly.’

*

The first ship broke through the clouds an hour later. Not a single colours bands failed to miss a note in their playing and prayers faltered as every soul took an awed breath at the ship’s incomprehensible scale. It seemed impossible that something so vast, so *monumental*, could remain airborne let alone traverse the stars.

Like the craggy underbelly of an ocean-going leviathan, its metalled flanks were encrusted with gnarled growths, but of architecture and robust practicality instead of parasitic organisms. Vast holds gaped and spilled lambent illumination across Aquila Primus. The draught of enormously powerful repulsor fields made every banner snap and billow in electromagnetic thermals that made Roschin’s teeth hurt.

Only a portion of the ship was visible, its bulbous ventral structure protruding beneath the clouds. Who knew just how large it truly was? Thousands fell to their knees, weeping at its sheer magnificence.

‘Wondrous, just wondrous,’ said Roschin, the bass thrum of its vast engines almost obscuring his words. A bark of grating binary from the foot of the dignitaries’ pavilion drew his attention, and Roschin saw a number of red-robed priests of Mars making oddly geometric gestures across their chests.

‘*Ave Deus Omnissiah,*’ said Talabek, copying the gesture of the Martian priests and his earlier unease seemingly forgotten. ‘*Adeptus Mechanicus...*’

Roschin understood immediately. The lion’s share of wealth generated by Volcanus was largely thanks to the array of forges and mining facilities thrallled to the Martian priesthood. Roschin supposed it only natural for Talabek to now view the identity of this sky-colossus as a welcome sight.

Dozens of smaller craft split from the main vessel and dropped through the lower atmosphere. Most were boxy and ungainly, looking as they ought to be drilling into a mountain instead of flying, but Roschin saw one that swiftly outpaced the rest and dived towards the landing fields like a hunting raptor. Hard edged and angular, its armoured flanks were a rich cobalt blue with crimson edging.

‘Is that Mechanicus as well?’ asked Tamara, placing a protective hand across her stomach.

‘I do not believe so, Lady Tamara,’ replied Talabek.

‘It’s Adeptus Astartes,’ said Losekin.

‘Space Marines?’ said Tamara.

‘A Thunderhawk, if I remember correctly,’ said Losekin. ‘An assault craft. My great grandfather claimed to have seen such a ship in his youth and painted many years later. It hangs in the great hall of my villa.’

‘An assault craft, you say?’ said Roschin, now wary of the rapidly approaching aircraft’s predatory lines. His eyes were drawn to its brutal functionality, the enormous cannon on its dorsal surfaces and the sleek missiles on its wing pylons.

Losekin nodded. ‘A gunship,’ he said, one hand instinctively curling around his pistol grip.

Roschin raised an eyebrow and said, 'Are you planning on fighting these Space Marines?'

Losekin released the weapon with an embarrassed cough.

The gunship flared its wings, slowing its hurtling descent at the last moment. Shearing jetwash battered clear space for tens of metres around it and Roschin shielded his eyes as clouds of dust billowed over the platform, ruining the fabric of his pelisse and tunic. Hours spent polishing his boots wasted. Well, hours of Nuri's time wasted.

He coughed and waved away the fog of hot grit and exhaust gasses as a ramp beneath the prow of the gunship lowered. The dust obscured the disembarking crew, but even partially occluded, Roschin felt his heart thud against his chest at their inhuman scale.

He'd heard tales of the Adeptus Astartes. Who in the Imperium had not? Each retelling magnified their deeds and might until such warriors became little more than legends of immortal gods to walk in children's tales, mythic heroes conjured by fertile imaginations to vanquish evil.

The dust settled and Roschin now understood even the tallest of such tales fell woefully short of the truth.

One Space Marine would have been awe inspiring, but ten were marching from the gunship. Ten giants in strikingly blue armour, the heavy plates edged in crimson and the eagles upon their plastrons forged from purest gold.

They towered over a tall, elegantly willow-limbed adept in a robes of scarlet and slate-grey. Roschin had seen enough tech-priests to recognise another member of the Cult Mechanicus. The adept's lower jaw was a ceramic death-mask of acid-etched circuitry, his elongated skull tonsured with a fringe of silver hair. Arms formed from slender latticeworks of multiple-jointed articulations were in constant motion around him like mechanised snakes. A pack of goggled servitors bearing an assortment of books and analytical devices followed a respectful distance behind him.

The adept appeared not to notice the armoured giants surrounding him and

tapped a black-feathered quill stylus on a wood-framed dataslate with a pincer'd limb of engraved jet.

The guards at the foot of the ramp leading to the platform stood aside, understanding they could no more prevent the approach of the Space Marines than they could the approach of nightfall.

Roschin pulled himself together and stiffened his spine. The Adeptus Astartes were titans of flesh and blood, but the adept – augmented as he was – remained a man. Titans in war-struck plate were one thing, but a man he could deal with. Even one with ten Space Marines as an honour guard.

‘Welcome to–’ began Roschin, but the adept lifted a bronze hand, palm outward. He did not look up. His eyes, softly glowing augmetics, Roschin now saw, scanned the slate.

‘Confirm that this is planet Arkhona,’ said the tonsured Martian adept. ‘Segmentum Obscurus, Scyllan Sector, Atreyan sub-sector. Imperial Cartographae Designation Three-Nine-Nine-Seven, Lambda-Ultima Compliant.’

‘It is,’ said Roschin.

‘And you are its Imperial Governor, hereditary biological scion of House Roschin, as ratified in Imperial Edicts laid down by the Adeptus Terra in the two hundred and fifty first year of the thirty-eighty millennium.’

Roschin wasn’t sure if that was a question or a statement, but chose to answer as though it was the former.

‘I am Governor Tarqel Roschin, yes.’

‘Most excellent,’ said the adept, turning to the Space Marine nearest him.

Before he could speak, Roschin said, ‘And you are?’

The adept considered the question, as though his designation was of no relevance to Roschin. He paused, as though listening to an unheard voice.

‘I am Adept Nyla, Secutor Tributi of the Adeptus Mechanicus,’ he said, making a quarter turn to point his quill stylus at the nearest Space Marine. ‘And this is

Sergeant Protus of the Ultramarines Chapter of Adeptus Astartes.'

'It is an honour to receive you,' said Roschin. 'It has been two hundred and sixty three years since the Imperium last turned its benevolent gaze upon Arkhona. We—'

'Two hundred and sixty six, Terran sidereal,' corrected Nyla. 'The check digit in your planet's chronometers indicates an unverifiable deviation from Astronomican baseline.'

'Ah, well, then we have even more reason to be thankful for your return,' said Roschin.

'Enough, Nyla,' said Protus, his voice impossibly deep and sounding like rocks in a grinder. 'We do not come to Arkhona to discuss technicalities, we come to prepare for war.'

'What war?' said Roschin, taking a step back at the blunt force of the Space Marine's words. He *knew* the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes spoke, of course they spoke, but in the devotional holo-picts, their voices had the lofty tones of heroes, not this atonal rumble.

'You are governor of this world,' said Protus. 'Yet you know nothing of the threat pouring from the Eye?'

'Threat? I know of no threat.'

'The forces of the Ruinous Powers was strong, and our bitterest foe stands poised to unleash a Black Crusade. All strength of arms must be yoked to the Imperium's defence,' said Protus.

Roschin turned to Nyla for clarification.

The adept nodded and said, 'Arkhona lies within the Secundus tithe volume of the Ocularis Terribus, a spatial anomaly more commonly known as the Eye of Terror. As laid down in Arkhona's planetary charter, established in the two hundred and thirty second year of the thirty first millennium, you are oathbound to supply such and material as decreed by the Departamento Munitorum whenever a threat of sufficient magnitude is declared by the reigning Sector

Lord.'

Nyla finally deigned to meet Roschin's gaze.

'Such a threat has been declared.'

The nobles of Arkhona looked up as the sky split with a thunderous roar. The bands fell silent as hundreds of ugly slabs of blackened steel dropped through the clouds on blazing columns of blue-hot fire.

Enormous bulk haulers, freighters, refinery vessels and geoformers. All stamped with the cog-toothed skull of the Adeptus Mechanicus. A fleet of exploitation, designed to strip a planet's resources and bear them into hostile warzones. Vast troop transports dropped like falling hab-blocks, forcing entire regiments to scatter lest they be crushed beneath their inexorable descent.

'War demands its blood price,' said Protus, stepping in front of Roschin. 'And Arkhona will pay its share.'

X Marks Da Spot

It Shouldn't Be able to fly.

That was Captain Cymeon's first thought.

It's coming right at us, was his second.

The crew of *Belisarius Indomitus* hurried to carry out his orders, diverting power to the manoeuvring thrusters and forward voids. It wouldn't do any good. Alarm klaxons echoed from the high vaulted, wood-panelled bridge, its fittings more like those of a patrician's antechamber than the bridge of a starship.

Such was the way with vessels belonging to the great Navigator Houses of the Navis Nobilite. So much stock was placed in appearance and front that anything less would be seen as poverty-stricken weakness.

The main viewer was bordered by velvet curtains, and fronted by a vast proscenium, like a Terran playhouse of the Theatrica Imperialis. Cymeon had always liked its grandeur, but the image of the vessel hurtling toward them from the Veiloss asteroid field was grotesque and ill-befitting such splendour.

It shouldn't be able to fly.

The thought returned again as Cymeon stared at his doom.

A greenskin scraphulk of monstrous dimensions, asymmetrical and wrought from the bones of space debris and scavenged wrecks. A monster of the void, its rusted metal plates were held together by force of will as much as by its crudely welded seams, lashed cable-tethers and tens of thousands of punch-bolted rivets.

Its prow was a vast jaw of serrated iron teeth, each hundreds of metres high and caked in agglomerated junk like flesh from devoured victims. Enormous guns, hooks and cavernous openings covered its bloated bulk, and primitive glyphs covered its hull like warpaint.

Leering skulls and fang-filled jaws.

'Emperor preserve us,' said Cymeon. 'It's the *Reddgun's Revenge...*'

*

‘You’s e lot ready?’ shouted Kaptain Radrukk Reddgun over the roaring sound of the Skrullboyz roaring vehicles filling the cavernous hangar. His giant hammer was poised over the katapult release.

‘We was born ready, Kaptain!’ roared the Fragga from within the iron shell of his Deff Dread, its hulking, barrel-like form towering over Reddgun. Its stumpy legs wheezed and leaked oil. Its four mechanised battle limbs were festooned with rokkit, blades and crackling power claws. Two of those arms carried an enormous metal hook.

‘Then go get ‘em, boyz!’ bellowed the kaptain, swinging the hammer around in a crushing arc. The head slammed the katapult release and the clanking war-machine buckled the deck as its vast spring-loaded arms hurled the Deff Dread from the *Reddgun’s Revenge*.

Irregular booms of thudding metal swiftly followed as more katapult arms slammed forward. Kaptain Radrukk Reddgun grunted with amusement as he watched entire mobz of Deff Dreads fly from the hangar towards the fragile looking vessel ahead.

Hundreds of Boyz in Reddgun’s black and red gripped the thick metal links of chains attached to the hooks the Deff Dreads carried. Each wore a ridiculous oversuit of filth-caked orange to which was attached bowl helmets of smeared glass. Sheet metal axes, spiked mauls, shootas and motorised cleavers were slung at their shoulders.

No sooner were the Deff Dreads away than the chains pulled taut and the boys were yanked out of the ship in their wake. They howled and cheered as they flew through space towards the enemy ship, waving their weapons in anticipation of the coming fight.

Radrukk himself was a monstrous, leathery skinned ork with swollen muscles and a boulder-like skull. One side of his face was all but caved in, rebuilt with a patched eye in a metal mask and iron jaw. One fang was yellowed bone, the other a rusted butcher’s hook rammed through his thick bottom lip.

Like his Boyz, Reddgun wore a rudimentary space helmet, something that had once been the cockpit canopy of a human aircraft. He didn't bother with a vacuum suit, preferring to let everyone see his flamboyant kaptain's coat and patchwork overalls of many colours.

One leg ended at the knee, its replacement the steel haft of a human banner-pole and the foot a bent eagle. A chain-cutlass hung at his waist and a rotary-barrelled blasta was fully loaded with extra dakka.

'You ain't gonna bovver wiv a spacesuit, kaptain?' said Skrag, his scurvy gretchen slave-cum-whatever-he-needed.

'Nah, a bit of cold don't trouble me none,' said Reddgun.

'Wot wiv me already being dead.'

Scrag nodded and said, 'Good point, kaptain.'

'I ever tell you how I got killed, Skrag?'

'No, Kaptain,' said Skrag, rolling his eyes.

Scrag was spared yet another retelling of Reddgun deposing as Warboss by by a blast of fire from the Skrullboyz vehicles.

Radrukk had once been the master of da Bloody Waaagh until a sneaky git had challenged by him by whacking him on the head with a thunder hammer. Upon recovering consciousness in the drops, Reddgun had, naturally, assumed he was dead. No self-respecting challenger would leave a defeated rival alive. That he was able to get up and sneak out of the camp that had once been his did nothing to dent the confidence of his mortal diagnosis.

The Skrullboyz revved their engines again and a few couldn't wait for the order. Wheels spitting grit, they roared straight out of the cavernous hangar after the boyz. Their red vehicles arced through space, entire mobz of ladz clinging to their sides.

'Skrullboyz ladz is keen to get over there and stomp 'umies,' noted Skrag.

Reddgun grunted. 'Those ladz'd be keen even if there weren't no ship neiver.'

'True enough,' said Skrag as Reddgun grabbed the end of the rapidly unspooling length of chain attached to the Fragga's Deff Dread.

'Go get 'em, Skrullboy!' yelled Reddgun.

Like racers at the start line, Skrullboyz remaining vehicles wheelspun and roared from the hangar. Some were actually intended for use in space – or at least the air – but most were simply vast engines on wheels they hoped would hit the human ship. Some might even fly in through the holes the Deff Dreads were cutting.

‘See ya over ‘dere!’ laughed Reddgun as the chain pulled taut and yanked him from the ship.

*

Istobal gripped the bulkhead tightly as the colossal impact of the two ships coming together echoed through the *Indomitus*’s hull. It even overshadowed the sounds of battle ringing through its structure. Vox-thieves implanted in the bone of his skull were relaying inter-ship communications, and it made for grim listening.

Greenskin war-machines hurled into space had cut their way through the hull and hordes of alien warriors had swung in through the breaches on long lengths of chain. Ork vehicles roaring from the scraphulk had slammed into the ship, clamping themselves to the hull with giant magnets before blasting their way inside.

Those chains had winched the two ships together and now there was no escape. Frantic vox-traffic between the ship’s armsmen told the same tale of swarming hordes of orks on the rampage, killing and looting everything they could find. Istobal sat with his knees hugged tight to his chest, rocking back and forth on his sumptuous bed.

‘Greenskins are aboard the *Indomitus*. It’s going to be a massacre,’ he said, close to tears. ‘Why did Cymeon take us so close to the Veiloss belt? He knew the greenskins had bases there.’

‘It was a calculated risk,’ said Bacauda, swiftly arming himself with a selection of wide-bore pistols, thick blades and grenades from his lacquered supply cabinet.

Bacauda was Istobal’s Lifeward, a scarred veteran of the *Militarum Tempestus*.

The only survivor of a greenskin assault on a House Belisarius outpost on Armageddon. He'd kept the teeth of the warlord he'd killed that day, wearing them around his thick neck like a gory totem.

'House Belisarius doesn't require Cymeon to take risks,' said Istobal, his anger at the captain stiffening his spine. He adjusted the bejewelled bandanna over the third eye in his forehead. 'It requires him to get my family's valuables and the Charter to Terra in one piece.'

'The *Indomitus* is a fast ship and the odds against actually encountering an ork scrapship was low.'

'Not low enough it seems,' snapped Istobal, wiping his hands over his face. They came away wet with tears and snot. He cleaned them on the silk coverlet of his bed and took a deep, calming breath.

'I am a Navigator of House Belisarius,' he said, pushing himself off the bed. 'Such craven fear is beneath me.'

But the stories he'd heard of the greenskins...

Piratical raiders who lurked in the asteroid belts and preyed on Imperial shipping. Feral savages, brute murderers and pitiless slavers. As much as he'd thrilled to Bacauda's tales of killing orks, the thought of actually facing one had all but unmanned him.

'Give me a gun,' said Istobal, striding to where Bacauda had packed himself with enough weapons to assassinate a moderately populated hive district. 'Something big enough to put down a greenskin.'

'Not a chance,' said Bacauda.

'You're refusing my command?' said Istobal. 'Aren't you forgetting your place?'

'You're not trained, sire, and I don't want you behind me with a loaded weapon.'

'I *need* a gun, Bacauda,' insisted Istobal. 'If a greenskin gets past you—'

'The only way a greenskin is getting past me is if I'm dead, and if I'm dead then so are you. Gun or no gun.'

Istobal was about to protest when Bacauda put his hand on his shoulder. A breach of protocol and entirely too over-familiar, but, under the circumstances,

Istobal let it go.

‘It’s noble you want to fight, sire, but you will be a distraction to me, and in combat, distractions get a man killed.’

The Lifeward guided him to the dresser where the gold and ouslite chest that had seen them abandon Arkona sat.

One of the Sector Charters of House Belisarius sat within the chest, a document of incalculable value. Signed by High Lords Xavier Belisarius in ages past, it granted the Navigator House exclusive, sector-wide trade rights in perpetuity. House legends claimed it had been touched by the hand of the Emperor himself at the dawn of the Great Crusade.

With the outbreak of the tyrannid infestation and the increase in system-wide fighting, the Belisarius elders had chosen to withdraw all House personnel from Arkhona. Istobal and the *Indomitus* were bound for Terra, but now this...

‘You are the bearer of the Belisarius Charter,’ said Bacauda. ‘Stay behind me and move as I move and we will reach the saviour pods. You will not die here. I will not allow it, do you understand?’

Istobal nodded, Bacauda’s certainty giving him strength.

‘Where are the Wolfblades?’ he asked as Bacauda opened the door to the corridors beyond. ‘Shouldn’t they be here too?’

‘Where do you think they are?’ replied Bacauda. ‘In the thick of the bloodiest broil.’

*

Godric Widdowsyn sang as he slew the ork boarders. A lusty drinking song taught to him by the Fell-Handed on one of his rare wakings in the shadowed halls beneath the Fang. He buried the smile of his axe in the guts of a bellowing greenskin.

He wrenched it clear and the ork folded up, hewn asunder with the blade having bit deep into its spine. Godric grimaced at the stinking blood coating the blade.

Crafted on the ice of Fenris under the baleful gaze of the mightiest storm to ravage the Fang in centuries, it was a frost-bladed thing of beauty.

‘Too fine a weapon for greenskin blood!’ he roared.

‘No weapon is too fine to sup that red feast,’ answered Aelfan Slayfell as he shoulder barged a greenskin brute and rammed his storm-bladed sword up and under its rope-strapped breastplate.

The two Space Wolves stepped back and fired their bolt pistols down the corridor. Half a dozen ork skulls detonated under the explosive fusillade. Scores more pushed forward from the ruptured bulkhead and the hewing began again.

‘You think we should get back to Istobal?’ asked Godric.

‘When there’s killing to be done here?’ roared Aelfan, slamming his helm into a greenskin’s face. Fangs snapped and blood sprayed his visor. ‘The Wolfblades are sworn to House Belisarius, and what better way to keep Istobal’s pretty little hide attached to his bones than by killing the greenskins before they get to him?’

‘Good point,’ agreed Godric, hammering his axe down through an ork and splitting it from neck to groin. ‘Besides, Bacauda never leaves his side.’

‘Aye, that one’s handy, right enough.’

‘For a mortal,’ said Godric.

‘For a mortal,’ agreed Aelfan.

*

Bacauda shot an ork through the eye socket, another in the heart. A third he put down with a thick-bladed knife across its throat. It took another three stabs of the blade before its collapsed. He lobbed a grenade and ducked behind a projecting stanchion, keeping his body in front Istobal Belisarius.

The blast filled the companionway with shrapnel and put down another two orks. Even as the echoes faded, Bacauda spun out and searched for targets. One ork was still alive and he put a high-calibre shell through a gaping wound in its skull.

‘Come on,’ he said, all but dragging Istobal behind him.

‘You killed them all,’ said his charge. ‘So quickly.’

‘It’s what you pay me for.’

He moved down the companionway, gun tracking left to right. Hard to pinpoint any one threat. Sounds of battle were coming from all around. Certain to be more greenskins ahead. They passed over crossways and past the sites of furious battle where orks corpses had been so thoroughly dismantled it looked as though they'd been put through a threshing machine.

Human corpses were thick on the ground and Bacauda heard Istobal snivelling in fear at the sight of their butchered remains. Orks didn't kill cleanly or surgically, their weapons were wrought to cause as much bloody harm as possible.

Vox-reports put orks on the starboard laterals, but they'd cut a number of the transverse links. The armsmen were being pushed back to the portside halls. Three upper decks, where the greenskins had first breached, had already fallen. Not long before the fighting was over and the slaughter began.

And all this for an old piece of paper.

The ridiculousness of it all was not lost on Bacauda, but ridiculous or not, he'd sworn a life-debt to Belisarius. That was a sacred bond, and he'd be damned if he'd renege on it, even if Istobal was a spoilt brat without a spine.

They pushed on and Bacauda brought his gun around as a huge shape loomed out of the smoke and shadow before him. He managed a single shot before his arm was wrenched to the side.

'Ho there! Watch where you aim that thing,' said a gruff, heavily accented voice that could only belong to a son of Fenris. 'You've scraped the paint of my plate.' 'Some lax fire discipline there,' said Aelfan Slayfell, moving past him to get behind Istobal.

'Mortals,' said Godric Widdosyn. 'What do you expect?'

'Where in the name of the Emperor have you two been?' demanded Istobal.

'Wolfblades are sworn to protect the heirs of House Belisarius!'

The two Space Marines laughed, the sound incongruous in this place of death.

'What do you think we've been doing?' grinned Widdowsyn.

'You think you'd have reached this far without us clearing the way for you?' added Slayfell.

*

Kaptain Reddgun swung his hammer and a bunch of humans came apart in a red shower. He grunted with laughter and stomped through the ruin that remained. He was annoyed these humans weren't giving him a better fight, but his gut told him there were rich pickings to be had here.

His ladz were running amok through the ship's cramped hallways, their whoops and belled yells telling him they were getting some good killing done. A kaptain had to make sure his boyz had a steady supply of enemies to fight. More fighting meant stronger boyz. Not enough fighting meant they'd turn on you.

That was the mistake that got him killed the first time, resting up after a big fight instead of going looking for the next one. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

He paused as he smelled something out of place.

Even amid the spilled blood and guts, it was unmistakable.

'Wot is it, boss?' said one of the ladz, blood drooling from his tusks and caking his blades.

'I smell da big meat,' he growled.

*

The two Wolfblades led the way, talking in a guttural tongue that sounded no better than the grunting bellows Istobal heard from the orks. He was out of breath, far from used to this kind of physical exertion, and the chest was heavy in his arms.

'How much farther is it?' he wheezed.

'Two more decks,' said Bacauda.

'I can't make it that far,' said Istobal, stopping and leaning against the bulkhead. It was hot to the touch.

'You don't have a choice, sire.'

Istobal held out the chest. 'Carry this for me.'

‘I can’t fight holding that.’

‘And I can’t walk with it weighing me down!’

‘Ho now,’ said Godric Widdowsyn. ‘What’s occurring here? We don’t stop, we keep moving.’

‘Orks breathing down our necks,’ said Slayfell. ‘We’d happily kill them, but we’re oathbound to keep you alive.’

‘How inconvenient for you,’ snapped Istobal.

‘True,’ agreed Widdowsyn.

Slayfell spun and raised his sword. ‘Greenskins.’

‘Where?’ said Bacauda.

‘Everywhere,’ said Widdowsyn.

The bulkhead behind the Space Wolf tore open as a vast circular sawblade ripped through it. Widdowsyn had barely begun to turn as the roaring, toothed blade clove him from breastbone to spine. Apocalyptic quantities of blood sprayed the corridor as his shorn remains collapsed.

Istobal screamed as he was drenched in the stuff. He threw the chest away, wiping the sticky mess covering him from head to foot in horror. He saw what happened next through a haze of sticky red gore.

A clanking mass of iron and rust barged its way into the corridor. Bulkily rotund, its mechanised arms snatched up Slayfell and tore his armour with enormous claws.

The Wolfblade hacked his sword through the arm’s hissing feed-pipes and the Deff Dread released him. Its guns battered his armour with chugging blasts of gunfire that filled the corridor with choking clouds of tar-black smoke. Slayfell roared and fired back. His rounds spanked from its armour.

Greenskins forced their way into the corridor behind the Deff Dread and Bacauda picked them off one by one. Their howling bloodlust was primal in its ferocity and they didn’t care how many of them died. If anything it only seemed to spur them to greater heights of bloodlust.

Slayfell hacked his blade through the hissing, creaking pneumatics at the Deff Dread’s knee and the lurching machine toppled onto its side, squirting jets of reeking oil. He vaulted over it and Istobal saw a pair of grenades wedged

beneath an overlapping plate of its rusted armour. Bacauda turned and threw himself at Istobal, slamming him to the deck as the grenades detonated.

The noise was deafening, and Istobal yelled as something sharp embedded itself in his leg. Bacauda's weight pinned him to the deck.

'Get off me, damn it!' he yelled, but the Lifeward wasn't moving. He squirmed out from beneath him and saw why.

In saving Istobal's life, Bacauda had sacrificed his own. The man's back was a bloody mess of burns and shredded meat. Spars of sharp metal jutted from his body like grotesque spines and the white gleam of bone was clearly visible through the churned mass of ripped flesh.

Istobal sobbed and pushed Bacauda's corpse away. He pushed himself to his knees and fled, only to see a baying pack of greenskins coming back towards him.

At their head was an oafish, outlandish figure that had all the appearance of an animal in a menagerie dressed in rags for the amusement of gawpers. The riot of colours in its overalls and long stormcoat would have been laughable were it not for the blood caking it and its gore-smearred warhammer. The monster's face was a mask of metal and it wore an archaic, tricorn hat jammed down over its bestial features.

'Dis one looks important,' said the creature, and Istobal's horror was magnified a hundredfold at the abhorrent notion of the monster possessing even rudimentary intelligence. 'I fink we'll keep him as a pet.'

Istobal dropped to his knees and closed his eyes.

'In the Emperor's blessed name, protect me from—'

A heavy fist slammed into the side of his head and the prayer was over before it had truly begun.

*

Reddgun let out a frustrated sigh as he stomped up and down the corridor.

‘I was ded sure I smelled...’ he paused and held up his hand, his brow furrowing as he stared at his fingers, ‘...two of ‘em.’

‘I dunno, kaptain,’ said Skrag. ‘I can only see one of da big humies. Mind you, he’s in two parts if dat helps...’

Reddgun smacked Skrag on the side of the head.

‘Don’t be clevver, Skrag, it don’t suit ya.’

‘Sorry, boss.’

Reddgun had already pulled the teef from the dead humie in the animal skins and heavy armour. The warrior had an axe with a shiny blade, but it was too small and too fragile for Reddgun. It had broken on his first test swing at the wall. The other wolfy human was nowhere to be found, but Reddgun wanted his teef more than anything.

A humie that could put down a Deff Dread? His teef *had* to be good and sharp. The skinny runty one was already in chains, snivelling and wet with his own soil. He’d make a fun plaything for a while before Reddgun got bored of him and tossed him to Skrag.

The ship was his now, and he’d already heard from Skrullboy’s mobz that the holds were full to bursting with gold, precious-looking statues and plunder. This had been a prize ship to scalp.

‘A good haul, kaptain,’ said Skrag, reading his expression.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Reddgun, scraping his face with the tip of his hook hand. ‘Loads of plunder to spread around.’

‘Too much maybe,’ ventured Skrag.

‘Wot you mean?’

‘We don’t got no room for it all on da *Revenge*,’ said Skrag. ‘We’s already pretty stuffed wiv salvage and loot.’

‘We ain’t leaving it,’ Reddgun warned him.

‘No, course we ain’t!’ squealed Skrag. ‘Wot I meant was that we could, y’know, bury it somewhere.’

‘Bury it?’

‘Yeah, stick it somewhere safe and come back for it later.’

Reddgun nodded. That made sense, but it was Skrag's idea, so he had to claim it for his own. No sense in letting the little zogger get ideas above his station.

'Yeah, we'll bury it,' he announced. 'We'll take it to the planet the 'umies came from and bury it. Then we'll come back and dig it up when we've got da room.'

'Good idea, boss,' said Skrag.

'How we gonna remember where we put it?' said Reddgun.

Skrag thought about it for moment before his cunning little eyes lit up and he ran back down the corridor to where a shiny box had broken open. Its contents had spilled onto the blood-slick deck.

'Here,' said Skrag, holding up an old-looking piece of parchment with a lot of humie writing on it and a bright red X at the top. 'We can make a map. X marks da spot, don't it?'

Death Mark

The Cards Before Madrona were wafers of stiffened vellum, threaded with psycho-active crystal filaments sourced from the basalt slopes of Varsavia's largest volcano. They thrilled to his touch, even through the silver gauntlets of his battle plate, and he felt the power within him stir.

With the death mark so close, a reading was unwise, but Sergeant Sachar had insisted.

The central card laid upon the splintered corbel displayed the Emperor reversed, crossed with the twin Lightning Rods.

'A foe of terrible power,' he said, his eyes closed as the sense of the cards filled him. 'A bearer of the Warp. His every step is rich with the misery he has wrought.'

Madrona laid a card to either side. Even with his eyes closed he felt their identity.

'The Blade in the Night. The Eye of the Archenemy.'

'A kill mission and a target from the ancient days,' hissed Sachar from behind, concealed amid the convergence of structural support girders holding up the shattered roof. 'You were right.'

'Two cards remain,' said Madrona.

'The cards of chance and certainty,' said Sachar. 'You can tell which is which?'

'Only the greatest Prognosticators can divine such truths,' said Madrona.

'Our lives depend on it,' snapped Sachar. 'Deal again.'

'No. The death mark is approaching. The slaughter that has drawn him will set the cards to screaming wildly differing possibilities.'

Sachar did not reply, but Madrona could feel his frustration at such lack of certainty. The Prognosticators of the Silver Skulls had been reading the tides of the future to direct the campaigns of its warriors for millennia, and to hear one speak of uncertainty was anathema.

‘For all we might wish it to be, prognostication is not a precise art, brother sergeant. It shows us the path, but even the best of us cannot know where that path ultimately leads.’

‘It has led us here, Brother Madrona,’ said Sachar, nodding down at the charnel house of the cathedral floor. ‘Squad Kyanite will live or die by your vision.’

The cavernous space in which the ten warriors of the Silver Skulls were concealed had once been the city’s grandest cathedral, a monolithic fane dedicated to the glory of the Emperor in his aspect as the eternal crusader.

A thousand pyres smouldered hundreds of metres below them, the remains of the temple’s last defenders. The preachers and worshipers had fought the warriors of the Archenemy hard, but against gene-forged traitor legionaries, there had been no hope of survival. Tortured beyond mortal endurance and burned at the stake, their corpses sagged on iron fetters, the meat of their bodies now a fatty gruel pooled at their feet.

The silver of Madrona’s battle plate was muted, its lustre dulled by the smoke and ash of that layered each of them after weeks spent infiltrating the enemy-held city. He reached across his breastplate to touch the deep blue gemstones set within the eye-sockets of the skull on his shoulder guard.

A Prognosticator normally stood apart from his battle brothers, but Madrona had chosen to replace the Carnelian gemstones of his skull icon with Kyanites wrought on Gildar Secundus. Sachar had appreciated the gesture, as had the warriors of his squad. It bonded them even as Madrona led them towards an uncertain future.

The sergeant drew his blade and Madrona savoured the raw, feral edge of his battle-lust. Ascension to the ranks of the fighting companies of the Silver Skulls bred out many things from the Varsavian tribes, but taking savage joy in bloodletting wasn’t one of them.

‘How much longer?’ asked Sachar. ‘It sits ill with me to remain in this cursed place longer than we must. It offends me to see the sacred halls of the Emperor profaned.’

‘Cool the fire in your blood, Sergeant,’ advised Madrona, gasping as a spasm of soul-sick evil twisted in his gut. ‘The death mark is here. The Black Sorcerer

approaches. ‘

*

‘Murder is a poor substitute for willing sacrifice,’ observed Ash’hy Mok, picking a path through the blackened pyres filling the cathedral, ‘but it has its uses.’

The death screams of the Emperor’s lackeys still echoed in the aether, lingering notes of desperation, agony and terror. Only a pitiful few had clung to their faith in their last moments, the rest so consumed by pain as their flesh slid molten from their bones that they cried out to any god who would listen to deliver them from agony.

The sorcerer’s robes were cut from fuliginous cloth, edged in subtle teals and woven with azure runes suggestive of hooked and predatory talons. The base of his bladed staff traced geomantic patterns in the slurry of congealed fat and bone coating the tiled floor. Corpasant licked along its length, idiot warp scraps drawn like moths to a candle and slithering through cracks in the veil.

They flickered and died as soon as they were born, an instinctual hunger for souls drawing them to their own dissolution even as they gluttoned on slaughter.

Behind Ash’hy Mok, sorcerer of the Black Legion, came eight warriors in warplate of midnight black. Bronze stars upon their shoulder guards and breastplates glittered in the firelight, their lustre dulled by bloodied ash. A hundred-strong pack of mutant devotees in tattered robes followed Abaddon’s warriors like scavengers shadowing an apex predator.

‘Your cruelties are as inventive as ever, sorcerer,’ said Kastagar, glancing at the pyres, ‘but this world has been long since been bled dry. Why do we linger?’

‘We linger because I choose to,’ said Ash’hy Mok. ‘This world may have little left that can serve the Despoiler, but there is much yet that can serve the immortal powers of the warp. Knowledge won through suffering and pain...such choice secrets should not lightly be discarded.’

‘You speak as a philosopher, but I speak as a warrior,’ said Kastagar. ‘One whose life is forfeit if I do not return to the Warmaster with ships filled with slaves and supplies for his crusade host.’

Ash'hy Mok shook his head. 'There is...something here that yet vexes me, Kastagar, a sense of potential yet unrealised. Besides, you have slaves by the million and enough war-plunder to wage a crusade of your own.'

Kastagar increased his pace and halted their march with a growl, the red of his helm's eye-lenses flaring in anger.

'Aye, and with every day our ships remain in orbit, the greater the danger of Imperial retribution. The Warmaster does not tolerate delays, and our crusade is in dire need of fresh worlds to supply the upcoming crusade into Imperial space. We must go, and we must go now.'

Ash'hy Mok hammered his staff against the flagstones, and a blizzing corona of lightning burst from its point of impact. The corpses chained on the pyres threw back their heads and screamed, blue fire flaring from heat-fused jaws.

Kastagar stepped back and his warriors formed a circle, their weapons raised.

'Who are you, Kastagar, to order me?' hissed Ash'hy Mok. 'I am the Warmaster's seer, his mystic counsel and his link to the powers of the warp. Do you fancy that your victories here make you indispensable? That you might walk with one upon whom the gods have turned their gaze and berate him as an equal?'

Power coruscated along Ash'hy Mok's armour, pellucid flames of violet fury. The lenses of his beaked helm blazed with the light of aborted stars and a dark corona of immaterial energies leeches from the warp thickened around him. Muttering *things* pressed at his back, drawn by his anger and pressing upon the veil between worlds.

With a gesture he could release them, and they would tear the presumptuous warrior of the Black Legion to shreds before he could blink.

Kastagar saw his death in Ash'hy Mok's eyes and dropped to his knees, arms raised before him in supplication.

'Forgive me, lord,' he said. 'All shall be as you command.'

'You are but my servants.'

'We are but your servants,' agreed Kastagar.

His body ablaze with warp-energies, Ash'hy Mok's senses were preternaturally sharpened. The fire blazing from the mouths of the corpses filled the cathedral with lambent light from the Empyrean.

It illuminated the silver-armoured warriors dropping from the roof space an instant before they landed.

*

Madrona fired his jump pack the instant before he slammed down on the flagstones. The marble shattered under the impact, sending a cloud of dust and fragments pluming around him. His sword and pistol were in his hands an instant later. His first shot punched through the helm of a traitor warrior, his second detonated within the chest of a ragged wretch behind him.

Sachar landed a second later, swiftly followed by the gleaming warriors of Squad Kyanite. As if the rapid descent from the rafters had cleansed them of their concealing ash, their armour shone brighter than ever.

Surprise was total, six of the Black Legion were already dead, killed at the instant of landing. The last few fell back to the sorcerer's side, knowing their fate was sealed.

The cards sang in the leather pouch at Madrona's hip, and powerful currents of warp energy surged through his flesh with every breath. The death-marked sorcerer was limned in fire, bearing a staff ablaze with psychic force.

His robes and armour were black and etched with hair-fine inscriptions of glittering blue, catechisms of dark power and unholy dogma. The sweeping wings of his helm spoke to his true nature, the unweaving of his mortal flesh and its reshaping by the tides of the warp.

'I name the unclean and abject creature of loathing,' cried Madrona, hacking his sword through a pair of howling blood-cultists. 'A death mark of the Silver Skulls is upon you.'

The monstrous sorcerer laughed, the sound tearing through Madrona like a grand

mal seizure. 'I am Ash'hy Mok of the Black Legion,' he said, 'death is *mine* to lay upon others.'

Sachar lunged towards Ash'hy Mok, his pistol blazing and sword swinging for the sorcerer's neck. Ash'hy Mok spun his staff and a tracery of indigo light burned the armour from Sachar's body in the blink of an eye. Madrona had an instantaneous glimpse of the sergeant's skeletal structure before even that was boiled to vapour.

The blood cultists mobbed the Silver Skulls, emaciated ghouls with dead eyes, clawed fingers and yellowed teeth. Swords reaped them by the score, but their purpose was never to fight the Space Marines, merely to clog their blades and empty their guns of killing shells.

Madrona kicked through the mob and moulded the power that had marked him since birth into a lance of killing fire. He unleashed it through the blade of his sword and roared with savage joy as the argent flames engulfed the warrior the cards had marked for death.

The sorcerer vanished in a magnesium-bright conflagration, and Madrona heard his piercing scream. He swept his blade left and right, playing the blinding fire across the remaining warriors of the Black Legion.

They fell to their knees, wracked by Madrona's righteous fire. Its heat was vengeance, its light that of the Emperor himself. Even as it faded, and Madrona tasted the bitter ash of its use, he saw it hadn't been enough.

Ash'hy Mok remained unbowed and untouched.

He and a Black Legion champion were all that remained of the traitors, but their armour bore not so much as a blemish from Madrona's cleansing fires.

'You have power, little mystic,' said Ash'hy Mok. 'A lifetime of drawing from the warp has given you strength.'

Incorporeal winds billowed around the sorcerer as he rose to his feet, the dark energies playing about his staff and armour more vivid, more elemental, than before.

‘But I have woven the warp and weft of the Empyrean for a thousand lifetimes, and you wield nothing I cannot endure.’

Madrona reached deep within himself for more power, but he had little left of worth. But he had one thing that a damned soul like Ash’hy Mok did not.

He had *brotherhood*.

‘Warriors of Varsavia!’ yelled Madrona. ‘Lend me your strength, your blades and minds both!’

The Silver Skulls formed around their Prognosticator, and Madrona felt the purity of purpose wrought within their gene-forged bones. None were psychically gifted, but their very presence renewed him.

‘We place the death mark as one!’ yelled Madrona.

They charged.

*

Ash’hy Mok cupped the psyker’s heart in his hands, watching the pattern formed by the blood droplets in the carven palms of his gauntlets.

‘What does it tell you?’ asked Kastagar, his voice bubbling and wet where the side of his helm had melted into a fused mass of bone and steel and flesh. The revealed skin was leathery and scaled, indigo blue and reptilian. The revealed eye was yellow and dotted with multiple pupils. A favoured son, then. Perhaps one not to so lightly dismiss in future.

‘It tells me that I now understood the source of the vexation keeping us bound to this world when all sense dictated we leave. I did not know it, but I was waiting for these warriors.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of what brought them here,’ said Ash’hy Mok, holding up a ripped leather pouch from which a number of scorched cards spilled.

‘Imperial Tarot?’

‘A version of it, yes,’ agreed Ash’hy Mok, nodding at the body beneath him. ‘A primitive variant similar to that once practiced by the Night Haunter. A brute

means of reading the tides of the warp, but that it drew them to me is what is of most interest.'

Kastagar grunted, a bovine, animal sound.

'You flatter yourself.'

'Not so. This psyker knew me, claimed I was marked, but the death he saw was his own. He came to slay me personally. I would know what he saw that drew him to try and end me.'

Ash'hy Mok dropped the heart back in the ruptured, empty vault from which he had torn it. Blood splashed. The droplets landed amid the spatters at the sorcerer's feet and he grinned as he saw the alignment of curves and lines, ovals and ellipses.

He drew in a breath, feeling the surge tides of the warp fill him. He recognised stars wheeling in their universal dance, a procession of galactic vistas passing before him in the blink of an eye.

And then he saw it, an arrangement of systems and planets, a conjunction of alignments that matched the blood pattern in the ash of murdered faithful.

A name came to him, one he had known from the age of the fallen Warmaster's time. A world of little consequence as far as he knew, but that these warriors had come to kill him for what he might do there gave it fresh significance.

'What are you seeing?' Kastagar asked.

'I see a world,' said Ash'hy Mok. 'A world ripe for reaving, a world rich in secrets. A world worthy of offering to the Warmaster.'

'Where is this world?'

'In the northern marches,' said Ash'hy Mok. 'A world named Arkhona.'

The Hound of the Warp

Ash'Hy Mok Had Known pain before, had even embraced it on occasion, but the pain caused by the Phoenix Lord's blade was a new species of agony entirely. Sharper than any natural edge could possibly be, the eldar weapon's ancient power was anathema to those whose flesh seethed with the warp.

His right arm ended just below his ebon black shoulder guard, the jagged bronze trim now spattered red with impossibly vivid blood. Ash'Hy Mok hauled himself across the wetted floor towards the Lazarus Requiem, knowing he had but moments to complete its unlocking or his very soul was forfeit.

Centuries had passed since anyone had spilled his blood.

Even the Silver Skulls warlock, whose agonising death had drawn Ash'Hy Mok's gaze to this auspicious system, had not laid a blade upon him.

The Phoenix Lord's purity of hate was primally potent, something Ash'Hy Mok could almost admire. Even as the opening of the Lazarus Requiem had consumed the entirety of his focus, he'd felt the arrival of her manifold soul and gasped in wonder at such razor-like purpose. Such all-consuming fury!

Flanked by a howling coven of her bone-armoured handmaidens, she slid from a portal of amber light, a triskele blade of black fire cocked at one shoulder, a whip-bladed polearm held out like a lance.

Jain Zar she was called, a deathly warrior-queen from a long extinct epoch of her doomed race. Ceramic-smooth armour encased her lithe form, and violet hair billowed around an elegantly tapered war-mask; beautiful beneath a magnesium sky.

But the radiance overhead was no sky.

And this was no terrazzo floored temple.

The molten heart of the world's core burned all around a peeled sliver of the planet's surface, floating inviolate within a warp-sphere of Ash'Hy Mok

creation.

Ash'Hy Mok had come to destroy Velioss, opening the Lazarus Requiem within its heart and offering every soul upon it to the Dark Prince. The polished, lacquered sides of the box were gloss-black and utterly smooth, with the seams of its myriad parts all but but invisible. With each segment of its fiendish complexity he unlocked, he drew closer to revealing the legendary hand of the withered eldar goddess.

And with it in his possession, he would master Fate.

The box hung in the centre of the peeled shard of the planet's surface, its impossible angles and multi-dimensional intricacy confounding even his genhanced senses with its violation of perspective and psychic geometry.

And just as he had come to destroy Velioss, the Phoenix Lord had come to save it. Her flashing triskele blade, its edges wreathed in black fire, sheared his arm from his body in a shrieking blaze of unlight, leaving him sprawled in agony.

His warriors and the daemons of the warp birthed from the Lazarus Requiem's opening rose to his defence. Warriors of bone white and ebon darkness clashed in a swirling melee of blindingly swift blades, psychosonic screeches and lustful howls. Just as beautiful as the eldar in their own way, the Slaaneshi daemons fought with claws instead of blades, teeth instead of pistols. Seeking to inflict wondrous agonies as much as kill.

The Dark Prince had claim on Velioss, but ever the eldar sought to thwart the designs of their ancient nemesis.

That could not be allowed to happen.

Power had been promised, pacts struck and bargains sealed in the currency of souls. Velioss *had* to die. The consequences of failure were too fearful to contemplate. Even death in this moment would not save him from the Dark Prince's spite.

The final configuration of the Lazarus Requiem spun in frenzied agitation, aching to be unlocked, demanding he finish what he started and open the gateway to the Emyrean.

Ash'Hy Mok pushed himself to his knees, his one remaining hand extended before him as he turned the last psychic key in the gateway's last, quivering alignment.

It remained closed, and Ash'Hy Mok felt a soul-deep dread swallow his soul as he heard the Dark Prince's wail of frustration and fury.

How had he failed?

Everything had been done as Moriana's scrolls had instructed. He had spoken the words that were not words, poured the rancid blood upon the Pictograms of Ruin and solved the alchemical wards woven into the Requiem's structure.

How had he failed?

Ash'Hy Mok lifted his wracked gaze and looked into the heart of the nightmarish lattice at the heart of the Lazarus Requiem, seeing a host of unblinking eyes at the centre of a beguiling vortex of unimaginable power.

In their depths he saw endless labyrinths of glassy geometries, crystalline pyramids of enormous scale, and a web of glittering strands of fate that bound all living things.

And then he knew why he had failed.

The Changer of the Ways, the unknowable sentience that lay at the heart of every conspiracy, had gifted much of Ash'Hy Mok's arcane knowledge and made him more powerful than all save Zaraphiston himself.

But the Architect of Fate was a jealous patron, and such a being did not suffer those who served him seeking power from its rivals for men's souls.

'No,' hissed Ash'Hy Mok. 'I am your faithful servant!'

Tearing agony ripped through Ash'Hy Mok as a slender, bone-pale spear haft burst from his chest. He looked at the blade in wonder, its structure harmoniously curved. It would be no disgrace to be slain by such a weapon.

He felt Jain Zar's presence at his shoulder, a weight of ages and suffering; laced with the charnel horror of millennia of the souls she had consumed to sustain her existence.

'You are a fool, sorcerer,' she hissed. 'Arkhona will burn the galaxy!'

And then the Lazarus Requiem opened.

*

The Immaterium bloated into the heart of Velioss. The Dark Prince's daemons chorused their ecstasy as the warriors who served Ash'Hy Mok became phantoms of ash, burned from existence by an onrushing tsunami of warfire.

The eldar fared no better.

Not even their preternatural speed could save them, and even as Ash'Hy Mok was borne up by fate's consuming fire he laughed at their screams. They fled for the web-gate that had brought them to the world's heart, but the Dark Prince would not be so easily cheated of his soul-dues.

Spirit stones flared to cinders in the blaze and Slaanesh laughed as their wretched souls were loosed. Their screams were unending, as would be their torments at the hands of the very power they had birthed.

Jain Zar was the last of the aliens to die, her body shrieking as her armour came apart in a clatter of glowing fragments. Swirling, multi-coloured light billowed from within as the host of souls within were silenced. Her weapons and armour flew into the eldar web-gate as shockwaves from the portal to the Immaterium tore ever wider. The molten core of the planet churned at the cancer in its heart, shuddering in primordial agony and splitting the world above asunder.

Even as the warp swallowed him, Ash'Hy Mok laughed as he felt Velioss die, its bones shattering into void-borne fragments of dead rock.

The Dark Prince would devour every screaming soul upon this world.

Including his.

*

A sense of time stretching. Snapping. Reassembling, but out of joint. Events flowing in an acausal fashion. Reaction no longer following action, a fractured narrative of existence.

Ash'Hy Mok had no perception of when the world changed, just an awareness that it had.

His body must surely be dead, for Velioss was gone and this was the Immaterium. The warp was no place for flesh and bone, only spirit and soul.

And yet...

He felt pain. Indefinable until he followed it to its sources. A burning canyon torn through his chest and a void where his arm ought to be. Blood coiled in slow, slippery arcs from the wounds. Each gem-like droplet rippled with life, unnaturally fecund in this place of dark miracles, where every breath was laden with potential.

How long had passed since the doom of Velioss?

Ash'Hy Mok had no sense of time's passage, but what else could he have expected in a realm where such concepts were as meaningless as mortal conceits of right and wrong. To traverse the warp was so be cast adrift on time's ocean, a leaf in a hurricane, where a moment could stretch to infinity or a thousand lifetimes pass in the blink of an eye.

Yet there was purpose to his movements, an implacable will guiding him as fair winds might carry lost souls on the seas. He was being borne away from Velioss, and the distant howl of a thwarted god promised a debt that would never be forgotten.

Where this apparently fair wind might guide him he neither knew nor cared. That it was away from Velioss was what mattered.

Ash'Hy Mok kept his mortal eyes shut tight. Only screaming lunacy awaited

those who stared too long into the warp, and he had madnenses enough. The voices that muttered in the darkness of his shadow were enough to convince him of that.

Sometimes he allowed himself to think they were the souls of those his sorcery had consigned to the warp. At other times they seemed more akin to the tutelaries once conjured by the dead sorcerers of Prospero. They babbled and gossiped, they argued and advised, whispering secrets wrapped in nonsense, wisdom masked by insanity.

They yammered and gabbled to him now, whispering in a torrent of interleaved voices. Some accusing, some hateful, some pleading and others laughing maniacally. He could make no sense of it, until one voice cut through them all.

One voice that spoke his name.

Ash'Hy Mok knew that voice.

It had condemned worlds to die, had cursed the names of gods and led all the legions of the lost and the damned to glory and blood.

Silver lines, parallel and bright as mercury cut the darkness behind his eyes, the meat of the Immaterium sliced open by a talon that once belonged to an all-too mortal god.

These blades had taken the life of a demi-god brother and all but ended the False Emperor of Man. Redolent with such potent blood, they effortlessly reached through immeasurable distances of space and time.

The warp was quick to seize on this breach in the veil between worlds, but it churned in fury as it found itself denied passage. A will of unbending power stood in the breach, bound to a titan in the blackest armour and bearing the favour of all the powers that claimed dominion of the Immaterium.

The god in black spoke again, and his words were terrifyingly clear.

'I am not done with you, sorcerer,' said Abaddon.

*

The Despoiler they called him. The Arch-Heretic. The Damned One. In ages past, men had once known him as Ezekiel, but such men were all dead and consigned to the forgotten ages, many by the Despoiler's own hand.

Ash'Hy Mok's flesh felt cold and hard, inflexible and horribly *solid*. After so long a time – *or was it the briefest instant?* – adrift in the warp, where change was the norm and constancy anathema, his body felt entirely too heavy and too real.

Here he was flesh and bone, wrought by long-forgotten science to be an apex killer, an angel of death. But in the warp he could be so much more...

'Sorcerer!' snapped a voice like a dagger's cold blade.

Ash'Hy Mok opened his eyes, wincing as harsh reality pressed in around him with its unbending angles and rigid hierarchy of form. He recognised his surroundings immediately.

The strategium of the *Vengeful Spirit*, the Despoiler's flagship.

His senses were assailed by physical stimuli; hot oils, decaying flesh, blood and – most potent of all – fear.

Fear saturated every breath taken here. Fear guided every action and haunted every heart. Fear was everything; and the being that was the focus of that fear now stood above Ash'Hy Mok, framed in the crimson light bathing the strategium.

A god amongst warriors, a tyrant and a liberator.

He was Abaddon the Despoiler, the son of Horus, the inheritor of the galaxy and lord of the Ruinous Host.

His aquiline face was cruelly angled, with a hooded brow and sardonic lips, his porcelain pale skin striated with black veins. Armoured in black and bronze, his ubiquitous topknot was unbound, framing his part-shaven skull in midnight black strands of hair.

But it was his eyes that drew Ash'Hy Mok's attention.

Eyes that had once beheld an age of legends, a time when gods had walked among their people. A time when the galaxy had burned as Mankind's worth hung in the balance and been found wanting. Abaddon had tasted bitter defeat, and the ashes of that fire still clung to his soul like widows' weeds.

Where lesser warriors had broken or turned their hate inwards in bitter reproach, Abaddon had returned even stronger. Tempered by defeat and made wise by hardship, he had learned the lessons taught by loss and wrought them into a singular purpose that would eventually overturn the galaxy.

'Get up,' said Abaddon.

Ash'Hy Mok struggled to obey, feeling a gut-deep nausea that was utterly new to him. His post-human physique was immune to such things, but wrenched from the warp into realspace was a sensation few survived.

He reached down to push himself upright before realising his arm was missing. The wound had long sealed, though he had no memory of any healing process.

Just how long had he drifted in the warp and what else might he not remember?

He looked down at his chest, where the Phoenix Lord's blade had cloven his heart and lungs. No wound remained, only a jagged seam across his breastplate. Whatever power had returned him to the Despoiler, had also undone the catastrophic damage to his body. He struggled upright, the last words he had heard on Velios ringing in his ears.

'Arkhona will burn the galaxy...' he said.

'What does that mean?' demanded Abaddon.

'It was the last thing the Phoenix Lord said before she died. Before Velios was destroyed.'

'A Phoenix Lord is dead?'

Ash'Hy Mok nodded. 'A warrior queen with a banshee wail.'

'Then your mission to the Kharon system was not a total failure,' grunted Abaddon. 'But eldar riddles are for another day.'

The Despoiler feigned indifference, but Ash'Hy Mok saw the Phoenix Lord's words had lodged deep Abaddon. His interest was piqued, and that realisation, together with the whispering voices, made Ash'Hy Mok bold.

'It was not a failure, my lord,' he said. 'The Imperials will no longer be able to resupply their fleets at will.'

Ash'Hy Mok lifted the stump of his arm and said, 'It may have cost more than I intended, but it was no failure.'

Abaddon spun and the talon he had torn from the corpse of his fallen father glittered in the blood red light. The killing blades punctured Ash'Hy Mok's breastplate and lifted him from the deck without effort.

Abaddon's eyes bored into him.

'Not a failure?' said the Despoiler. 'You were to *bring* me that world, sorcerer, not destroy it. With the resources you promised to seize, the Blackstones would already be in my possession. Or did you forget the oath you swore when I granted you leave to pursue your warp-visions to Velioss?'

The voices whispered in his ear, cautioning restraint.

'No, my lord, I did not forget,' said Ash'Hy Mok.

'Arkhona's time will come,' said Abaddon, turning away and gesturing to a hololithic sector map of worlds on fire, system-wide void engagements and an entire sector poised on the brink of defeat.

'The Gothic War awaits,' said Abaddon.

The Silent Death

Glass-smooth where acids and bio-plasma had melted the bedrock, knapped where chitinous claws and grinding teeth had gouged it. The walls of the subterranean tunnels cored through the heart of Arkhona were a mixture of the two, streaking past in a blur of twisting, intestinal loops.

A column of graceful, sleek-prowed vehicles sped through the tunnels, though to label them as such belied their effortless grace, their artful curves and deadly aspect. Wrought from crystalline glass and wraithbone, the thirteen Falcon grav-tanks flew in the wake of a host of shrieking jetbikes and Vypers.

The riders of the darting jetbikes were Saim-Hann, wild riders armoured in flex-armour of cerulean and ruby, bare-headed and tattooed. They whooped as they flew looping spirals, flamboyant double helix patterns and lunatic zigzags through the narrow tunnels, a feat of flying only the inhumanly fast reflexes of the eldar could achieve.

Hunched low on the back of a speeding Vyper jetbike, a figure of impossible grace bent into the hurricane wind of their flight. Barely a handspan separated her helm and the rock.

Armoured in bonesung plates of gold-edged white and azurite, the figure's blood-red mane streamed from her snarling helm like a whipping tornado. Slender limbed and feline in grace, she was a hero of the ancient days, returned from death to serve her people and slake an unquenchable fury in the blood of her foes.

Her name was Jain Zar, and she was a mortal god reborn.

Once, long ago in a forgotten epoch, she had been a single soul, but now she was legion.

Uncounted life-threads were woven into the tapestry of her being, a legion of eldar souls ensnared over millennia to sustain her vampiric existence. An endless procession of jumbled memories and stolen lives, each one jagged edged and

hostile, warred within her. They fought for dominance, but the *thing* she had become, yoked them to a singular purpose.

She was a cutter of threads, an ender of lives.

She was the Silent Death.

*

She remembered running the branching paths of the webway like this. Fleet of foot and laughing with the joy of a hunt. A soul rose from the ocean of her violent memories, its potency a white hot spike of pain.

She knew that soul; a warrior of Alaitoc, consumed a thousand years previously as he fought alone on a burning wraithship.

Ydresil, the Blade of Khaine.

He too had run the webway. Was this his memory or hers?

She could no longer tell. She saw images of chittering spiders of diamond and starfire, laughing warriors in splintering rainbows of light who danced as they slew. Jain Zar had fought with them, but was this a battle in which she had *actually* fought or a memory woven into her imperfect recall?

In truth, it no longer mattered. What one had lived, she lived. What they knew, she knew. Experience and memory fused as one, making her a killer unmatched in skill or lethality.

Whatever she had once been, whatever she had once dreamed was gone forever and no longer mattered.

All that mattered now was the hunt.

*

She sensed the breath of corpse-ripened air before the light of the world above glimmered from the fairings of the Vyper. Burned metal, flames, vitrified earth

and hot, aerosolised blood misting the air.

The smell of battle was her boon companion, an old friend to be welcomed with a glad heart and bared blade. With barely a flex of movement, Jain Zar had her weapons in her hands; one a black-edged triskele, the other a shivering polearm with a wickedly hooked wraithbone tip.

‘Be ready,’ she said, her voice grating with the pressure of myriad interleaved souls. Her words enflamed the hearts of her warriors, blowing the fires behind their war-masks from embers to furnaces. She felt their eagerness to be unleashed; Khaine’s legacy a curse and blessing both. She felt the souls of every eldar within the grav tanks and aboard the jetbikes, tasting the duality within each and every one of them.

This one a poet whose mask shut away all thoughts of rhyme and meter as she opened the throats of her victims. That one a crafter of the finest jewellery who painted her gauntlets in blood. Take away the masks and they could never do the things they must, the things the eldar needed to survive.

Only by walking the Path of the Warrior could the eldar revel in such slaughters. And only by stepping from that path could they endure the things they did to ensure the survival of their race, letting them fade as nightmares must.

There! Light ahead, tainted a sickly purple by the mesh of writhing vines fringing the edges of the sinkhole giving egress from the tunnels.

The rock beneath the diffuse light was undulant, carpeted in thousands of wriggling, grub-like creatures. Each had six limbs – all but vestigial – and they ripped apart the dead meat tossed in from above. Their bodies were segmented, fat and glossy, little more than lamprey-like jaws and digestive systems.

Shuriken fire from the jetbikes burst them apart like milky bladders, the acidic stink of their internal fluids rank beyond belief. The screeched as they died, and Jain Zar felt the tearing of the raw psychic connection they shared with the rest of their vile species.

The host above would know something was wrong.

The Wild Riders whipped their speeding jetbikes around in right angled turns,

shooting skyward with underslung shuriken tearing the net of vegetation above.

Jain Zar twisted as the Vyper spun skyward. The other jetbikes tipped over and angled back towards the ground, the riders standing tall in their saddles and loosing wild yells as they dived into the fray.

Jain Zar felt the souls within her gather, their keening battle-lust like the pregnant tension before a thunderstrike. She let the stampede of memories come, a jostling flood of a million blows struck and hordes of foes slain; battles a host of others had fought that now combined in a dizzying array of perception. Pain came too, for no boon was without a price.

She channelled that pain into a building crescendo in her chest, holding it fast and letting it build and grow stronger with each quickening breath.

Purple-hued fronds whipped past her, their touch as repugnant as she imagined they would be.

Then, from darkness into light.

*

The jetbike inverted. Jain Zar dropped, a bladed angel from the skies. Arms wide, one leg straight, the other out to the side. The enemy host filled the valley, a sea of heaving, alien bodies with chitinous carapaces and pallid flesh the texture of mummified meat. She could not say for sure how she knew what a tyrannic beast's flesh felt like. Had she laid hands on one or was that a memory of another?

She hoped the latter.

Overhead, jetbikes duelled with leprous, bat-winged things with hooked tails and barbed teeth. They swooped and dived like insects in a bizarre mating ritual. She paid them no heed; their fight was their own. She had her own kill to make.

She landed on the run, the flexing haft of the *Zhai Morenn* quivering in her grip. A pack of hunched, screeching things turned to face her, Hormagaunts with clacking, fanged jaws and massively overgrown sickle-claw forelimbs. They

rushed towards her in bounding leaps, barging each other in their frenzy.

She bent a knee and unleashed the *Jainas Mor*, the triple blades flaring with dark-edged flame as it scythed into their midst, slicing through hardened carapaces and soft flesh with equal ease. It flew as if with a life of its own, killing silently and reaping a decapitating path through the alien pack.

They scattered and Jain Zar leapt into the gap, whipping the long polearm around her body in blindingly swift arcs that left nothing alive in their wake. She punched through the Hormagaunts without breaking stride, killing anything that came near her with barely a breath.

She was aware of every aspect of the battle, the souls within her giving her an unparalleled situational awareness. Killing blows, lethal streams of flesh-eating borer-beetles, sprays of acid bio-plasmas. She evaded them all with ease, twisting her lithe body around in feats of acrobatics to match even the dancers of the Laughing God.

Shuriken fire carved paths through the aliens as the eldar cut into the host's flank. She slew horde killers, and leader beasts. Floating minds without limbs, serpentine burrowers and lumbering biological battering rams that spat fire.

All died to her blades and all were irrelevant.

She was not here to defeat these tyranids, only to split their attention.

Her true objective stood at the far end of the valley; an ugly *mon-keigh* stronghold, its towering walls of poured stone breached by insidious creepers and secreted acids. A gory ramp of alien corpses lay piled before the walls, hook limbs buried in acid-eaten stone that ran like heated wax.

A handful of brutish humans fought from behind the stronghold's tumbled walls and makeshift barricades of folded metal. Titanically armoured in plate of dark green and swathed in knightly robes, these were the best of the human fighters. Bred in laboratories and wrought from ancient science to render them stronger, they were faster and harder to kill than their flimsier brethren.

Though the notion of any kinship between these Space Marines and mortal humans was laughable.

Their guns were clumsily effective, relying on pure kinetic force and explosive force, rendering a kill all but certain. What skill was there in wielding such a weapon, what finesse?

She saw them register the presence of the eldar, felt their simplistic psyches react at the lessening of the pressure on their defence. She grinned as she understood they were warily relieved to see the eldar, utterly mistaking their intent.

The sun climbed over the edge of the valley, glittering from a gold finial atop a war-banner of green and ivory held aloft by a warrior on his knees and whose torso was a molten ruin.

‘This is the moment,’ said Jain Zar, grinning beneath her mask. ‘This is a doom of which Farseer Kseniya spoke.’

A pair of aircraft flew in over the mountains with the rising dawn, a transport with graceless lines and a primitive, fire-breathing fighter. The *mon-keigh* named them Thunderhawk and Dark Talon with a bombast typical of their literal species. The fighter banked low, strafing the onrushing horde with explosive gunfire and blasting a cratered path of shattered corpses.

Jain Zar planted the blade of the *Zhai Morenn* and vaulted a towering beast with vast swords of crackling, psychically charged chitin. The *Jainas Mor* cut through the beast’s neck as it returned to her hand, and she felt the abrupt howl of a thousand minds suddenly shorn from the yoke of its enslaving thoughts.

She sprinted up the ramp of broken bodies, vaulting from corpse to corpse and gaining height with every leap as she climbed to the walls of the stronghold.

With a final diving bound, Jain Zar cleared the chewed up parapet and landed in an elegant crouch upon the rampart. Metallic casings lay thick upon the stone and blood that was too bright, too *chemical*, to be natural gathered in thick, coagulated pools.

Jain Zar heard the roar of the Thunderhawk as it banked, feathering its engines as it dropped hard to the stronghold in a blaze of landing jets. The eldar attack had bought the stronghold’s beleaguered Space Marines precious moments, but Jain Zar’s strike had never been about aiding the *mon-keigh*.

It had been about keeping them alive long enough for the gunship's commander to risk a combat extraction. The Thunderhawk's frontal ramp slammed down and a Space Marine in a surplice of palest cream tied with a belt of keys over darkest plate emerged. His armour was elaborate, hung with knotted cords and emblazoned with personal heraldry of an ebon fist gripping a split-bladed sword. His white, fur-edged cloak billowed in the raging jetwash from the engines.

A Dark Angels battle captain of rank and station, one who had fought hard already, the eagle on his shoulder guard cracked where a blade had struck it.

_The Broken Eagle and a Broken Sword.
The veteran of Vraks, a servant of Belial.
A slayer of seers._

Jain Zar had pictured this warrior since Kseniya had spoken of his fate-line, hating him for the eldar seers he would kill if he were allowed to live. She had pictured how she would kill him a thousand times, and now that the moment was at hand, she revelled in the power such foreknowledge granted.

She sprinted over the cracked ramparts as the tyrannic horde spilled over the parapet. Gunfire shredded them, alien flesh detonating as explosive rounds blasted them apart.

The Dark Angels' captain saw her coming and unlike the warriors he sought to rescue, he did not misread her intent. Too wise in the ways of war to ever mistake her approach for anything other than a killing dance. He swung his weapon to bear, a gold-chased gun with eagle carved fairings.

Fast for a human, but laughably slow to an eldar.

To Jain Zar it was as though he wanted to die.

She was happy to oblige such a death wish.

Jain Zar bent low and unleashed the crescendo held fast in her chest and lungs, a cry of purest rage and hate that buckled the air between them. Amplified by the ancient artifice woven into her helm, her shriek all but lifted the battle captain from his feet.

He dropped to one knee as the psychosonic assault blew out his armour's senses and rendered him insensible. He recovered a moment later, but it was already too late. She skewered him through the chest with the *Zhai Morenn*, moving like liquid to spin around behind him as his warriors saw what she had done.

They shouted with voices that were the rumblings of grinding stone, grunts little better than greenskin savages. She ignored them and dragged the *Zhai Morenn* out through their captain's back, cranking the blade as it went and ripping apart his heart and lungs. Bitter experience of multiple lives had taught her just how resilient such warriors could be.

Death had its claws lodged in him and even without the sight of a Farseer, she felt the thread of his fate snap.

He twisted in her grip, still fighting though his life was over. Part of her admired that even as she brought the enflamed blades of the *Jainas Mor* to his throat.

His last breath was not a curse upon her as she might have expected, but a question. The most important question of all.

He simply said, 'Why?'

'Because the Farseers will it,' she spat. 'Because of the lives I save by ending yours.'

She wrenched the *Jainas Mor* across his throat, cutting down to the bone. Blood jetted, hot and urgent from the warrior's neck.

And because it pleases me.

Salvork

Beams From Portable lumens cut the frozen air of what Myllar's rough schematics identified as the void derelict's embarkation deck. Drifting clouds of debris filled it from end to end, as if the space had been a dumping ground for the crew's junk.

A ramshackle host of vehicles filled one end, secured to the deck by rusted lengths of chain. Broken skull glyphs and tusked poles twisted in the zero gravity, bumping into floating scraps of machinery and spinning off in another directions.

Gelatinous blobs of molten metal spun in the air around the hole Colyns' melta-bore had cut through the ice-locked hull. Motes of drifting ice made the air glitter with a cold beauty.

'Overlord class,' said Myllar, slowly sweeping his lumen pack around the devastated bay.

Colyns shook his head.

'No. Vault radius isn't big enough,' he grunted, aiming a beam towards the curving girders overhead. 'It's a Lunar, maybe a Gothic. Or at least this part was.'

Full augur-penetration hadn't been possible thanks to the thickness of ice, but what data they'd been able to gather on the derelict's internal structure appeared to indicate the presence of at least six distinct vessels; some human, some xenos, all bound by a haphazard agglomeration of rock, ice and metal.

Ejected from the Veiloss belt, most likely the result of a cometary impact, the hulk had been on course to bypass the Kharon system's trinary stars. But the orbital salvage vessel *Ulixes Explorer* had located the derelict, and dragged it through space to the breaker yards in orbit over Arkhona.

Every such piece of spatial wreckage was a potential treasure trove of raw

materials and lost technology. Enormous docking clamps and e-mag tethers were already attaching to strategic locations across the hulk.

‘Still got atmosphere,’ said Colyns, stepping into the icy blackness of the derelict. ‘Saves having to suit up the breaker servitors.’

‘And I know how you hate that,’ grinned Myllar as the ten-man boarding team moved out, guns raised and the mag-boots of their vac-suits keeping them locked to the deck. Underslung targeting beams criss-crossed the vault.

‘No signs of life,’ said Myllar, reading the feeds from the threat-auspex.

‘Thankfully.’

‘Agreed,’ said Colyns. ‘Let’s find archaeotech, rare minerals, and structurally sound metals, but life? No thanks.’

‘Remember that hulk drifting out of the Kailexor Reach?’

Colyns touched the Aquila on his vac-suit’s bronze chest-plate. ‘Don’t even say it. You’ll bring us bad luck.’

Myllar grinned. Colyns was always superstitious in the opening moments of a salvage operation, while it was just the two of them and their armed guards. Once the rest of the crew got on board it was all business, but until then, the man was as jumpy as a Whiteshield facing his first battle.

‘You want me to get everyone else aboard?’

Beyond the integrity-sealed breach in the hull, the salvage yard’s thousands of lifter-servitors, hulk-breakers and Tech-Scavs awaited, ready to bring myriad cutting tools to bear.

‘Not yet,’ said Colyns, as a warning rune blinked on the threat auspex.

‘What have you got, Nicodemus?’ asked Myllar, pushing through the clouds of spinning debris and junk. A tusked helmet bounced from his vac-suit’s armoured shoulder guard and spun away, its jagged-toothed visor leering at him.

‘Organics,’ said Nicodemus, the squad sergeant of the armed detail. ‘Non-human. Two hundred metres dead ahead.’

‘Couldn’t have said *straight* ahead,’ muttered Colyns. ‘Had to say *dead* ahead.’

Milo Nicodemus was a humourless man, but the Arkhona Void Salvage Corp hadn’t hired him for his sunny disposition. Ex-Militarum Tempestus, grievous

wounds had seen the man rendered unfit for active service, but perfect for life as a mercenary.

Clad in a bronzed vac-suit with armour plates at his shoulders, groin and chest, the inside of Milo's faceplate was illuminated by the red glow of his ocular augmetic. The Hellgun was his favoured weapon; powerful and without any casings or solid rounds to ricochet wildly in zero gravity.

'What have you got?' asked Myllar.

'Greenskins,' said Milo, gesturing with the muzzle of his shouldered rifle.

Colyns made another aquila, not easy when you were holding a lumen pack in one hand. Even Myllar felt a knot of tension settle in his gut at the thought of orks.

He needn't have worried.
These orks were very dead.

Two of the largest specimens floated with their meaty hands locked around each other's throats, their bestial faces twisted in mid-bellow, as though they'd frozen to death in the instant of murder. Dozens more were pinned by heavy machinery or drifting in in a silent dance of brutal mayhem.

'Were they fighting each other?' asked Colyns.

'Looks that way,' agreed Milo.

'*Greenskins*,' said Myllar, shaking his head.

*

Beyond the hull of the derelict, crudely-fashioned generators wheezed with the faint accumulation of power. Frozen solid and starved of light in the icy density of the Veiloss belt, ancient power-gathering panels finally drank of the triple star's light. Anchored in low orbit around Arkhona, mechanisms that would have confounded all but the most radical priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus drew power to hissing, clanking, bellowing furnaces deep in the frozen heart of the derelict.

Ice-locked corridors that had not known light and heat for hundreds of years

flickered with light, and shards of ice changed back into water. Primitive motors belched smoke and fumes, and ancient machinery crafted by dead alien races screamed as their function was yoked to the most primitive and barbaric of technologies.

Power spread through the derelict without rhyme or reason, rising up from the depths at ever-increasing speeds. Its engines burned hot, and its sudden lurch towards Arkhona's gravity ripped the salvage yard's docking clamps away in a blaze of hydraulic fluids and electrical discharge.

It would take six planetary revolutions before the derelict's flaming wreckage finally impacted on Arkhona's surface.

And when it did, the terror and devastation would be like nothing the planet's inhabitants had ever experienced.

*

Myllar had never been this close to an alien.

Brutish and with solid musculature swollen beyond imagining, the ork was armoured in steel plates riveted directly onto its body. An extravagant bicorn hat was jammed on its skull and one eye had been sealed off with a plate of black iron. A long, multi-coloured coat streamed at its back, and with the hand that wasn't attempting to throttle its frozen enemy, it carried an enormous axe with jagged fangs running around its edge.

Its opponent was no less garishly attired, with a baggy white overshirt sewn together from a number of Imperial war-banners. Black and yellow striped britches were tucked into high boots of brown leather and steel reinforcement. The ork was without a hat, instead sporting a crimson bandanna tied around its brow-heavy skull. It too boasted a black iron patch over one eye, and like its foe, its lip and ragged ears were pierced with gold rings and barbed hooks.

'Colourful pair, aren't they?' said Myllar, leaning forward and tapping a fingertip against the nearest ork's iron-sheathed fangs. As long as his hand, the beast could disembowel him and drag out his entrails in one bite.

Its eyes were a lifeless, frost-rimed crimson.

‘Freebootaz,’ said Colyns.

‘Then let’s hope they had a profitable haul before their power failed and they froze,’ replied Myllar.

Before Colyns could reply, Myllar felt the full weight of his vac-suit settle upon him as gravity returned. He grunted as he remembered why he hated wearing the heavy rig. All through the deck, machinery and floating scrap crashed to the deck with the thunder of metal on metal.

The mercenaries threw up their arms as broken spars of metal fell like rain. Three men went down, hammered to the deck by chunks of rusted iron. Milo shouted for a medicae. An insistent buzz of vox from the *Ulixes Explorer* sounded in Myllar’s helmet, but he couldn’t hear it over the crash of falling debris.

Blocks of ice shattered of the buckled iron deck plates and began flowing like liquid. Overhead lumens burst to life with a rumble of incoming power.

Light flooded the deck.

Polarisation filters in Myllar’s helmet plunged him into darkness in response. The opacity lifted a second later, and Myllar found himself staring into the face of the Freeboota with the bicorn hat once more.

It blinked.

*

Shock paralysed him.

The ork blinked again and the two greenskins threw off their coating of ice as their brawl continued. They throttled one another as though no time at all had passed since freezing temperatures had halted their struggle.

The rest of the orks threw themselves at one another, hacking with toothed blades that sprayed ice chips as the motors thawed.

Myllar's vox exploded with voices. Warnings from the command decks of the orbital salvage yard and shouted orders from Milo Nicodemus. Stabbing beams of lasfire blazed, strobing as the armed team rallied around their wounded.

'No, don't shoot!' cried Colyns. 'Let them kill each other!'

The two orks who had been locked in an eternally frozen battle now paused and turned to the humans in their midst. Myllar was no xenobiologist, but even he could see the dawning light of comprehension in their porcine features.

The orks looked at one another and both let out a series of grunting, hooting barks like augmented fingers down a scholam slate. It took Myllar a moment to realise the horrendous sound was greenskin laughter.

Almost instantly, the battling orks ceased their struggles and turned towards the salvage crew. Whatever hostility there was between them was snuffed out in an instant at the prospect of fresh opponents.

'Run!' shouted Myllar.

But it was already too late.

*

Kaptain Grimlug Toofbreaker wrenched his axe from the back of the humie who'd eyeballed him first. He'd looked right at Grimlug and hadn't even flinched. But then he'd run like a grot with a squig biting his backside.

'I's never gonna get wot dese humies fink,' he said, wiping the blood from his blade then licking it from his palm.

'Wot's dat, kaptain?' said Bludface, his jaw swollen and voice mangled where Grimlug had punched out his teeth.

'Dese 'ere humies,' said Grimlug. 'Where did dey come from?'

'Dunno, kaptain,' said Bludface, trying to jam a pair of fangs back in his mouth.

'Yeah, last fing I remember was the natter we was having about which was da best choppa, an axe-choppa or a cleava-choppa.'

'Cleava choppa,' said Bludface with confidence.

Grimlug raised his blood-smeared axe.

‘I fink you’ll find it was a axe-choppa.’

‘Oh yeah, so it was,’ nodded Bludface.

Things had gotten heated when each weapons fans started trying to show theirs was the superior weapon by demonstrating just how good it was by chopping limbs off their rivals.

Then it got *really* out of hand.

Bludface, Grimlug’s loyal first mate had smelled opportunity and decided to use the developing scrap as a chance to prove he was the best. Grimlug remembered the ship had been shouting at them throughout the scrap, humie words that didn’t make much sense. Stuff about things failing, critical this and critical that. Wazzaka had shot the shouty-horns on the wall with his Big Dakka just to shut them up.

Then it got a bit cold and a bit hazy.

He’d been strangling Bludface then suddenly Grimlug couldn’t move and felt *really* cold. He must’ve had a bit of a nap then, because the next thing he knew, there was a humie with his head in a glass bubble looking at him like he wasn’t afraid or nothing.

All the lights had come on and Grimlug didn’t feel as cold.

Things got shooty and choppy after that, and now all the humies were dead. He could feel the ship moving again, but had no idea where they were going. Felt like someplace warmer than that place where all the big icy rocks were. And if it were getting warmer, that meant there’d be planets where humies wot needed a good stompin’ and all their stuff looted could be found.

‘Ere?’ he said, pointing to a big hole torn in the side of the ship. ‘Dat wasn’t dere before, was it?’

‘Nah, kaptain,’ said Bludface. ‘Never seen it before. Wot d’you reckon’s on da uvver side?’

Grimlug thought about that for a moment, scratching the iron patch over his

finkin' eye. The glacial thought processes of his brain shifted gears. Grimlug Toofbreaker weren't Kaptain of *Toofjaw's Revenge* for nuffink. He had a finky-head, and knew the best wot-nots for finding humies to stomp.

'I fink dat's where da humies came from,' he said, the thought slowly grinding its way through his brain. 'I fink dey thought we was all dead and dat they could steal our ship.'

'Why'd dey fink we was dead?' said Bludface.

'Dunno. Humie's are a bit stoopid like dat,' said Grimlug. 'Maybe it was on account of us being all frozen, like.'

Bludface nodded without understanding.

Grimlug lifted a stomped humie helmet from the deck. The glass visor was broken and there was still a head inside. He shook it out as he heard voices coming from inside. He held the helmet to his chewed ear.

'Wot's it sayin', kaptain?' asked Bludface as the rest of the boyz geared up with their preferred choppas and gathered round.

'Dunno, it's humie speaks.'

Bludface's eyes lit up as something almost like a thought surfaced in his skull.

'You fink dere's any left on board da uvver ship for us ta stomp?' said Bludface.

Grimlug grinned, exposing his iron-jacketed fangs.

'Ya know? I fink dere just might be,' he said.

Eldar

Sarielle was a creator of delicate sculptures ,but with the donning of her Banshee mask ,she was now a howling killer .The urge to fight ,to drop in amongst the lun

But Farseer Kseniya and Jain Zar's orders were clear.

When the fallen eagle shines as gold .Strike .Kill.

She and her fellow Howling Banshees perched amid the velvet shadows of protruded
god lay shattered opposite the broken window .A buckled effigy of their winged i

The temple was grandiose by human standards ,but little more than a hovel to one
tan .The soaring wraithbone towers and graceful palaces ,wrought into being by t

The walls of the temple were fire blackened ,its roof little more than a shadowed

That the temple was still standing at all was a miracle .The orks of Warlord Skarb

Sarielle watched the greenskins with a haughty disdain ,the purity and depth of w

The orks wore rough garb fashioned from oil-and-mud-
stained rags ,over which scraps of hammered sheet metal plates were strapped to

'It is a wonder to me that such uncouth ,savage beings can function at all ,much l

Sarielle looked up in surprise.

Exarch Drytha was not given to speaking in the moments before blood was to be

Sarielle envied Drytha her slayer's prowess ,but in her more introspective momer
mask and return to her artistry without guilt for the lives she had ended ,but Dryth

The exarch was doomed to be a killer until the end of her days.

'They are no better than club-
wielding savages ,'continued Drytha . 'What cities do they build ?

What works of art do they create ?
Their legacy is naught but death and destruction writ large on the canvas of the st

‘Their existence may serve no purpose ,’said Sarielle ,‘But that they can fight is in
Drytha’s aspect helm turned to Sarielle .Even though the exarch’s sculptural featu
‘Fight ?’said Drytha .‘Their clumsy flailings cannot be called fighting.’

Sarielle said nothing ,feeling the exarch’s aggression filling her with killing lust .’

What must it be like to stand in the presence of the reborn Jain Zar ?
Since the Phoenix Lord’s arrival through the damaged webway ,the lust for war h

Her fingers curled into fists ,and she filled her lungs with the stale ,metal-
tasting air of this world .She heard the clanking ,rumbling of an ork vehicle nearb

Sarielle swayed with the motion ,her balance flawless.

The clouds shifted and shafts of dirty sunlight shone into the temple .Clouds of d

A shaft of golden light pierced the gloom .It struck the fallen effigy of the human

Its radiance filled the temple.

Drytha saw it too ,and drew her twin mirrorswords with a hiss of razored edges .]

The exarch dived from the beam ,arcing downwards like a hunting shrike .Sariell

Sarielle released the breath she had taken ,giving form to her killing wrath and lus

Their screams shook the dust from the walls .It shattered the last pane of glass in

Their howls were amplified in the confines of the temple and the very walls bega
bladed sword the instant before she landed .Her blade sliced upwards ,and the ork

Iron-hard sinew and dense bone parted like molten glass before a shaping wire.

It pleased Sarielle that the blood jetting from the ork’s body matched the vivid rec

The orks were reeling from the sonic assault ,but the very crudity of their alien ne
Ork guns ,more like portable carronades than sidearms ,boomed with deafening r
edge cleavers and axes belched filthy clouds of oilsmoke.

The Banshees sliced through the orks like a troupe of dancers at play .Swords mo
edged shuriken discs that sliced flesh and severed limbs.

A Banshee was the aspect of the eldar war god in all his savagery .Harbingers of
To lose control of that fury would be dangerous ,but she had trained for years in t
Now it served her.

She killed two more orks without breaking stride ,swaying aside from chugging c
To Drytha ,it must seem like the orks were not in motion at all .The exarch spun a
called to the Banshee shrine.

An ork armed with a heavy rotary cannon of rusted iron turned a crank on the box
Drytha sprinted towards the ork gunner .She sprang into the air ,pushing off the a
Her mirror swords flashed and the gunner found himself on his knees without kno
shod feet standing on the cracked flagstones of the temple a metre behind it .Sciss
sheened blades took the ork's head ,and it crashed forward with its clawed finger

Pressed into the ground ,the weapon bucked and heaved ,flipping the enormous b
Sarielle saw two of her sister Banshees struck by the wild fire .An eldar frame wa
Sarielle knew them both :Yirent and Raera.

Two lives ended that could never be replaced .Their loss would diminish Biel-
tan and the eldar race .When she removed her war-
mask ,Sarielle would mourn their passing in full ,but for now ,fury was all that ru
Barely a handful of the orks still lived.

Some ,displaying a faculty for clear thought that surprised her ,were fleeing throu

Sarielle felt the ground shake and heard the throaty bellow of the approaching ork
‘Fly my Banshees !’cried Drytha ,sprinting away from the source of the crushing
Sarielle ran up a pile of heaped bricks fallen from the upper reaches of the temple
She looked over her shoulder as the far wall exploded inwards .A hulking behem
Drytha and the Banshees were already gone ,and watched the temple’s destruction
block a hundred metres away.

Farseer Kseniya was waiting for them ,her long cream and rune-
stitched robes billowing in the wind .The eye lenses of her antlered helm shone w
‘You killed the ork with the great cannon ,’said Kseniya ,but Sarielle could not de
‘I did ,’said Drytha.

‘Good ,’replied Kseniya .‘The threads of Arkhona’s doom weave tighter .Though
‘You already know why they are here ,’said Drytha .‘You are just afraid to be righ
‘Do not presume to imagine that the weave of the future can be known by unpick
Sarielle forced her gaze from the terrible power of the Farseer and the doom cont
She looked back at the temple as the ork vehicle rampaged through its ruined pre
The demolisher vehicle slewed around and smashed the altar and its glowing eagl
Even as it crushed many of their number the orks brayed with porcine laughter .S
‘They kill themselves and still they laugh ,’she said.

‘It is all they live for ,’said Kseniya ,and Sarielle saw her glance at the exarch as s
‘Then why fight at all ?’asked Sarielle.

‘Because is is all they know ,’said Kseniya .‘It is all they care for and all that driv

‘To fight is to live ,and to live is to fight ,’said Drytha ,turning and sheathing her sword.
And Sarielle wasn’t sure who the exarch was talking about.

Terra Nullius

For all intents and purposes ,Baal's Blood had ceased to exist .An elegant sabre on forward prow was golden ,with two feathered pinions flaring from a central blood

The Blood Angels vessel drifted under strict emissions control ,the Techmarines and Chapter personnel alive while maintaining the most essential systems operational

The command deck was a tomb ,its graceful lines frosted with a veneer of palest dusted giants ,with only vented breaths and glittering beads of condensation on the

Standing before the oculus ,a solitary figure clad in deep red battle plate and draped Mephiston they called him ,the Lord of Death.

An unwholesome title ,but one the Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels suited all

A warrior in red gold armour approached ,bearing a long-hafted glaive with a blade cast in the form of an elongated blood drop .He bore M

'I know what you are going to say ,Parahelio ,'said Mephiston.

'You are the Chief Librarian ,I would be surprised if you did not ,'answered Parahelio

Mephiston turned from the oculus and said ,'I need no powers of prognostication

'I dislike hiding ,'said Parahelio.

'You prefer dying ?'replied Mephiston.

Parahelio ignored Mephiston's caustic tone .'I concur with the wisdom of your or

'The blood of Sanguinius is a potent fire within you ,Parahelio ,'said Mephiston ,sire was never one for suicidal assaults .Even at his end.'

The Chief Librarian half turned back to the oculus ,as if seeking something terrible

'Especially when made against Planet Killer ,'he said.

The space-borne colossus said to be Abaddon the Despoiler's flagship had arrived in the Khulks and bloated warships followed its seething passage ,like parasites clustered

Baal's Blood had barely managed to break orbit with Arkhona and flee to the Veil.

Imperial retribution would soon fall on Arkhona ,but until then the Blood Angels

'Is there no further word from the Wolves?'

'Nothing beyond young Blackmane's presumption of command ,'agreed Mephist

'He is arrogant ,that one ,'said Parahelio . 'Without grace.'

'Which shows how little you know of our Fenrisian brothers ,'said Mephiston . 'T

Mephiston saw Parahelio remained unconvinced .It never failed to amaze the Chi

'And the Dark Angels?'

'Brother Chaplain Cassiel assures me the warriors of his Chapter are en route.'

'I...

do not fully trust him ,'said Parahelio ,risking his master's ire by casting doubt on

'And you are right not to ,for Cassiel is a son of Caliban .Intrigue runs in his blood

The Ultramarines will soon be reinforced ,a cohort led by a Techmarine Suprema

Before Parahelio could say more ,the soft glow of the passive auspex chimed .Merimmed hololith.

'Light it ,'he ordered the warrior before it . 'Now.'

Like mist forming over a lake ,shimmering veils of light rose up from the polished captured debris from a drifting greenskin scrapship.

And a pulsing icon of a warship with its fangs bared.

'Impossible ,'said Parahelio ,racing over to the hololith.

Mephiston calculated the odds of an enemy starship achieving such perfect surprise.
'Battle stations !' ordered Parahelio . 'Turn us about and light the voids !Engineering
'Belay those orders ,'said Mephiston.

Parahelio rounded on him . 'We are dead in the void ,brother Librarian ,but I will not
'Look at their positioning ,'said Mephiston ,approaching the hololith and calling out
Static howled from ceiling mounted grilles ,and every set of eyes on the bridge stared at
station .All transmissions in or out were supposed to be offline ,but a low chuckle
'Oh ,Mephiston ,'said a voice with the wet vowels of a predator licking its lips . 'You
'Brother Blackmane ,'said Mephiston.

Again ,that chuckle ,that insouciant superiority.

'I've just killed your ship ,you can call me Ragnar ,'said the young Wolf Lord.

A grenade with the pin half-pulled was a phrase Mephiston had once heard in reference to Ragnar Blackmane

He reclined on his starship's stone-carved command throne ,its rough form draped in a multitude of pelts .A barbarian

Even seated ,there was a savage sense of potential to Ragnar ,a coiled ferocity that
suited to confinement in flesh ,even transhuman flesh .Though the Wolf Lord remained

The darkness of what the yellow-eyed Chapter serf had called the aett ought to have presented no impediment to them

They watched him and his Honour Guard with glittering eyes ,like pack hunters scanning

'Tell me again why I would follow your counsel ?'said Ragnar ,outwardly courteous

'None here are disputing that ,Lord Blackmane ,'said Mephiston.

'I told you ,I am Ragnar .Only the Stormcaller still uses my pack name.'

‘Very well ,Ragnar ,’said Mephiston .‘I merely sought to present you with a plan .

‘You concede it ?’said Ragnar ,swinging his leg around onto the floor and resting

The wolves of the aett grumbled in amusement.

‘Your man with the spear thinks different ,’continued Ragnar .‘Don’t you?’

‘The Ultramarines have the truth of it ,’said Parahelio.

‘Be silent ,’warned Mephiston.

‘He can speak freely ,’said Ragnar ,baring sharp teeth and rising with feline grace

The Wolf Lord’s armour was frost blue ,but almost no light reflected from its burn
hilted sword belted at his waist glimmered only reluctantly .A thick pelt ,midnight

Ragnar wound a spiralling path around the Blood Angels .Even amongst allies ,he

Each was now poised in a perfect flanking position.

‘The Ultramarines ?’said Ragnar ,rolling the word around his mouth ,as though to

‘You abandoned Arkhona ,’said Parahelio .‘It is Terra Nullius ,land to be held by

Ragnar paused and cocked his head to the side ,as though listening to a voice that

‘Ultramar’s warriors kill some ragamuffin orks and they think that carries greater
No ,Arkhona is Space Wolf land in word and deed for all eternity .Do you dispute

‘He does not ,’said Mephiston.

‘I asked him ,Death Lord ,’snapped Ragnar .‘I don’t like it when others speak for

Finally seeing sense ,Parahelio shook his head .‘No ,Lord Blackmane ,I do not dis

‘Let him try ,’said Ragnar .‘He will find me less inclined to...concede.’

‘Arkhona is Space Wolf land ,’reiterated Mephiston.

‘Good ,’said Ragnar ,grinning as though he had not all but threatened the warriors

Wolf Blood

The Wolfhold .The name conjured up the tales skjalds told of when Upplanders 'd
Raudr Finnvulf knew the Wolfhold did not meet that expectation ,not by a long w

Through frost-
rimed armaglass he watched the frozen landscape flash below as Arngeir Halfm

'Blue ice ,'he said as the Iron Priest skimmed the glaciers and hugged the mist-
shrouded peaks at the top of the world . 'This land has deep roots.'

'Not like Fenris ,'said Arngeir ,flexing the metal of his augmetic right hand on the
Raudr nodded . 'Aye ,this land knows permanence.'

'You have been here before ,Wolf Priest?'

'Once ,'said Raudr ,his mood darkening and his gauntlet tightening on the leather
wound haft of his skull-
topped maul . 'A century ago .It is a red memory ,but not a good one.'

'The Curse?'

'Aye ,Arngeir Halfrmund ,'said Raudr ,pulling the lacquered leather mask down c

'As you wish ,'said Arngeir , 'but tell me one thing.'

'What?'

'If this world brings out the Curse ,why do we return?'

'Because Lemman Russ swore we always would ,'said Raudr.

*

Gunnvardr Svartraska and his wolves were waiting as Raudr and Arngeir disemb.
bladed fist ,the other a perforated ,heat-blued multi-melta.

The thick, dappled-black hide of a thunderwolf slain and skinned by Gunnvardr in his youth, draped encased in cybernetics. Their steel jacketed fangs were bared, and their hackles w

‘Welcome back to the Wolfhold, Brother Finnulf,’ said Gunnvardr. ‘My brother

‘Your Aett brothers are glad to see you,’ answered Raudr.

‘Your wolves seem less sure of that welcome,’ said Arngeir.

‘Ach, ignore them, Iron Priest,’ said Gunnvardr. ‘This world brings out the Blood

The dreadnought turned back to Raudr. ‘Tell me, Wolf Priest, have you brought u

‘I have,’ said Raudr, as eight swaggering Blood Claws in gleaming battle plate m tempered pack sorely in need of beating into shape.’

Gunnvardr’s fist clenched and his augmitters crackled with laughter that cut throu

‘Then they have come to the right place.’

*

Solvor Guthrikr’s fist cracked hard into Styrkar Skammlaus’s cheek, sending him

‘By the Allfather, I think you killed him!’ said Trygg Vishalfr, bending to the fall

Arngeir Halfmund pushed the kneeling Blood Claw away and took the unconsci

‘He’s alive,’ said the Iron Priest, ‘but I’ve half a mind to kill him anyway for goin

‘Solvor hits hard,’ said Vikar Snaerhundr, the only one of their number not to be v effect of the Canis Helix suspected Raudr, one that rendered him all but immune :

What other side-effects might he have?

Three weeks of intense training in the mountains and tempers had been fraying w

This world does not want us here.

The very air was anathema ,stoking discord and unrest in their souls .Even Raudr

On more than one occasion he'd had to hold his temper and fist in check .Memor
heard tales whispered around low-
burning fires kept him from lashing out ;tales of Aett brothers who had been on A

Every day spent on this planet made them more susceptible to the curse woven in
sire's legacy.

Trygg said , 'At Solvor's naming ,the skjald's sang how he bore every block of ma
hall upon his back.'

Raudr remembered that tale ,and looking at Solvor's powerful form ,he could wel
hunger was ebbing from the young warrior ,and he shook off his earlier fury.

'A blow like that and he'll be as ugly as Ljotr ,'said Trygg ,the bastard son of an /

Ljotr Hookbeard's face was obscured by his helm ,but Radur knew Trygg's comm

'None are as ugly as me ,'said Ljotr ,fiercely proud of his battle-
scars and battered features.

Styrkar Skammlaus groaned and pushed himself up onto his elbows .He rubbed a

'Did Brother Gunnvardr hit me ?'he said.

'No ,'said Solvor Guthrikr ,offering his hand .'I did.'

'Why?'

'I...I don't remember ,'said Solvor.

'Strange ,'replied Styrkar .'Neither do I.'

'Blood Claws ,'said Arngeir Halfrmund .'Only they would start a fight and forget

More than ever ,Raudr wanted to be done with this world .Whatever buried hate v

'Brother Gunnvardr ?'said Radur .'Is something amiss?'

‘Aye ,Wolf Priest ,something’s amiss ,’said Gunnvardr ,his booming ,augmetic vo

‘Our training mission is incomplete ,’said Raudr.

‘Their training is over ,’said the dreadnought .‘We have an enemy to slay.’

‘What enemy?’

‘Orks ,’spat the dreadnought.

*

The refinery was on fire .Raudr had smelled the burning promethium from fifty k

Five kilometres out he saw the smoke and the ember undersides of chem-stained clouds as they roiled over the Imperial facility .A minute later ,they were stamped forge temples.

A raging battle between the greenskins and a host of mortal soldiers was being fought in situ skitarii defending the site.

‘They’re losing ,’said Arngeir ,launching the gunship’s stormstrike missiles into t

‘Fine strikes ,’said Raudr.

The Iron Priest’s agumetic hand clenched to a fist as he watched the orks burn .‘It

Raudr had already reached that conclusion .The ork forces numbered in the thous

‘A rabble of a host ,’sneered Ljotr Hookbeard.

‘So it appears to the untutored eye of youth ,’said Raudr ,‘but I have fought the gr

‘So we find this master and slay him !’roared Vikar Snaerhundr ,grasping the hilt

‘Aye ,that we will ,’promised Raudr.

‘Then we’ll need to hurry ,’said Arngeir Halfmund ,angling the Stormfang’s pro reactive shells from the heavy bolters.

‘Bones of Russ !’said Raudr ,seeing what Arngeir had seen.

A towering warlord at the forefront of the horde ;monstrously powerful and scaff
belching frame of mechanised armour that encased its enormous body .Easily the

And crashing through the horde towards the warlord were two frost-
white wolves and a howling dreadnought.

‘Take us down ,Arngeir !’ordered Raudr .‘Take us down now!’

*

The stormstrikes had created a landing zone ,and salvoes of heavy bolter fire tore
teams looking to bring the gunship down in its terminal manoeuvre .Howling pac
guns .Impacts spanked the hull like a Fenrisian shard storm ,but the armour was p

The Stormfang came in low and hard ,throwing up icy vortices as Arngeir Halfm

The Helfrost destructor was a weapon the Iron Priests spoke of in fearful whisper

An anguished wail built in the belly of the gunship ,a tormented shriek torn straig

‘From hel’s heart I stab at thee !’he said.

A streaming howl of freezing energy roared from the gunship’s prow in a blue-
white fist of cryo-
energy .As cold as the breath of an ice drake from the permafrost glaciers ,as mer
zero temperatures in an instant.

Those orks that weren’t instantly encased in ice were flash frozen beyond even th

‘Lead them out ,Raudr Finnvulf !’he yelled .‘For Russ and the Allfather!’

*

Raudr dropped from the gunship ,hunkered low and with his skull-
topped maul held in both hands .The Blood Claws dropped with him ,blades bare

‘Hold to me !’ordered Raudr ,ducking out from under the Stormfang and racing a

Roiling blasts of toxin-laden mushroom clouds illuminated the cold mist wreathing the gunship ,and the

Shapes moved in the freezing fog surrounding the gunship .Raudr put them down fired blasts of his fetish-hung plasma pistol .The blue-hot bolts left voids in the mist ,and Raudr saw hulking ,iron-bulked monsters with flaming grates in their bellies.

Anything that could live through a helfrost blast was a threat to be taken seriously

He rounded the hovering prow of the Stormfang ,the bronze carvings and intakes

‘There !’shouted Raudr ,hearing the thunderous sound of metal on metal and the l

The mists were thinning ,burned away by the heat of the burning refinery ,and mo

Born to the ice ,Raudr and the Blood Claws were as surefooted as ever ,where the slick ground .With Raudr at the tip of the wedge ,the Space Wolves carved through

Raudr vaulted from the icy canyon gouged by the helfrost and the breath caught i

Gunnvardr Svartraska fought the titanic warlord of the horde like Bodulfr the Wa
Wolf facing the one-armed monster ,Sceadugenga .Surrounded by a host of bellowing greenskins ,the

They hammered body blows against one another ,each impact sounding like the b

Gunnvardr’s claw arm tore the greenskin’s belly armour ,sending torn ,molten-edged shards of iron flying .In return ,the ork’s roaring blade carved through the c

‘To the Old One !’ordered Raudr ,but the Blood Claws were already in motion .T range mass-reactives detonated within their repulsive alien bodies.

Raudr took the fight to the orks with his skull-topped maul ,bludgeoning the aliens from his path with crushing impacts that spli

His armour was slathered in gore to the waist ,coated in the enemy’s unclean ,cau

Then he heard it.

A stricken howl ,as pained and as bitter as though ripped from the twin throats of Raudr blinked away the red haze of slaughter ,drawing a hot breath into his lungs Gunnvardr Svartraska crashed to the ground ,his claw arm ripped from its shouldr stained body.

‘No !’bellowed Raudr as the warlord’s screaming cleaver finally punched through Raudr vaulted from the back of a fallen greenskin ,swinging his maul like a fellin jawed head .His aim was true ,his mind’s eye already seeing the utter destruction Its arc complete ,the maul slammed home.

And shattered into fragments as a blazing green aura of energy exploded around t He spat blood ,feeling heat gather within his chest as his genhanced body fought t What in the name of Freki and Geri?

He looked up to see a hunched ork swathed in rags and bearing a bent copper staf Trygg Vishalfr vanished in a stream of coruscating psychic fire ,his armour peeler ‘Maleficarum ...’hissed Raudr ,struggling to regain his feet .One of his legs was l ‘I can stand ,damn you !’he barked.

They nodded and released him .The pain was immense ,tearing at the barriers ere Raudr turned in a slow circle ,seeing only an unbroken wall of bloodthirsty orks , ‘What is that ?’said Styrkar .‘A war-chant?’

Years of fighting the greenskins had given Raudr a rudimentary understanding of ‘No .It is their warlord’s name ,’he said .‘The nearest translation is...Skarblitz.’ Vikar spat on the ground ,helmetless once again.

‘What happened to Solvor?’ he asked, hefting his chainsword and rolling his shoulders.

‘Dead,’ said Styrkar in disgust. ‘Defiled.’

The fury that had all but blinded Raudr earlier returned. He drew his plasma pistol and pelted the wolves.

How could any warrior stand against such a foe and live?

Raudr shook off such unworthy thoughts.

This would be a death any warrior ought to relish. A good death would earn a warrior a name.

Such an ending was to be sought.

His helm-vox spat static.

‘Brother Raudr!’ called Arngeir Halfrmund aboard the Stormwolf. ‘Hold firm, I am here.’

‘Do not,’ replied Raudr.

‘I can—’

‘No,’ repeated Raudr. ‘For we are already dead and I will not see your thread cut.’

‘I will not abandon you!’

‘You must. Fly to the Wolfhold,’ said Raudr. ‘Wake Gunnvardr Svartraska’s brother.’

‘I cannot leave...’

‘Do as I order, Arngeir Halfrmund!’ yelled Raudr, as the greenskin warlord raised his fist in a shaking bellow of primal rage.

‘Return to Arkhona with our brothers,’ said Raudr, taking aim at the warlord as the others fled.

‘Return and avenge us...’

Findaz, Keepaz

The Ork o 'War ,heaved to ,the ragged cloth of its tar-cloth sails billowing in the swirling thermals of battle .Its battered metal prow cut

The debris scattered through the crater floor was still glowing cherry-red from its fiery descent through the atmosphere ,and choking banks of burning

Bludface Eadbasher spun the battlewagon's wheel ,hauling the clanking ,rumbling sized chunks of green meat.

Ork o 'War had once been a piece of agricultural machinery ,but Redgun Razzun; armoured it and weaponised it into a deth-wagon of fiendishly killy power .Now it boasted a bladed prow of harvester thres arms to drop victims into a hopper of crushing ,pulping machinery and a host of stamped crow's nest turrets with more dakka than you could shake a pointy stick

The deck shuddered beneath him as something exploded in the gubbinz ,and a pl black smoke pumped from the engines .They were still going ,so it couldn't have

He held the battlewagaon at full speed ,roaring around the vast oval crater blasted

Trouble was ,some of the big bad warlord's boyz had roared into the crater not lo

'How many of 'em d'you fink are here ?'he asked.

'Lotz ,'said Pugzwas.

His gretchen spotter stood against the mast beside Bludface ,a pair of crooked br

'I can see dat !'snapped Bludface . 'Use dem eyes of yours!'

Pugzwas craned his scrawny neck ,trying to see all around him ,which wasn't eas

'Lotz and lotz ,'said Pugzwas.

'Dat's better ,'said Bludface.

You could look through the goggles stitched to the back of Pugzwas's head and see
'Don't look like they's even interested in the loot ,'said Pugzwas . 'Looks like they
Bludface nodded .He'd seen that most of the new orks vehicles were red .They ro
Whoever won this fight (and it was hard to tell who that might be in the swirling
'Evil Sunz ,'he grunted ,watching a bright red buggy flip over onto its side and sk
But he was enjoying this screeching ,slamming mess of vehicles .Freebootaz were
'Thar she blows !'shouted Pugzwas.

Bludface looked to where the gretchen was pointing his head and grinned .A squa
Nazgrag's boyz were busy bashing their heads together in celebration .The nob hi
Bludface took a potshot at him with his blasta ,and Nazgrag ducked back as the fi
'Gettin 'too big fer iz boots ,dat one ,'said Bludface.

'Who's dat?'

'Who'd ya fink ?'snapped Bludface . 'Nazgrag .Gonna haf ta keep a close eye on
'Aye ,kaptain ,'said Pugzwas.

'I ain't kaptain ,'said Bludface ,remembering the krumpin 'he'd gotten from Toof

But then Skarblitz had arrived on a big fiery rok ,thinking he was all big and clev
more or less
in one piece .Da Big Red Rok they called their big fort ,like it was some fancy 'u

Bludface had only seen it once ,when they'd ran the Ork o 'War past it to see how
Really big and very red was the answer.

A truck bashed into the side of Ork o 'War and Bludface forgot about strategy th

Ork bodies tumbled through the air ,laughing and yelling .Gunfire blazed past Bl
A boarding action ,Speed Freek style.

‘Stand by to repel boarders !’he shouted.

A dozen orks with red and yellow bandanas wrapped around their heads nodded a

‘Wot you doin ?’yelled Bludface ,when none of them charged in and got to killing

‘You said stand by ,’said Pugzwas .‘Dat’s wot they’s doing.’

Bludface slapped a palm against his face .‘Well stop standing by and stomp ‘em!’

*

Brakenek Wazcrash slapped out the fires burning on his legs and pushed himself i

He’d make them pay for that mistake.

A big ork at the wheel shouted at them ,and they ran at him shouting things that n

He roared and threw himself into their midst ,hacking with a vast cleaver with a n

The deck became a mad ,whirling free-for-
all of blades and booming shootaz .Brakenek fought whooping orks along planks

It was a strange kind of battlewagon ,more like something that should be on the w
stompin’.

Though this had been a good scrap .The crater was a great place to get some prop

He landed on the deck in front of an ork wearing a baggy white shirt made from v
banners .Black and yellow striped trousers were tucked into brown leather stompi
torn ears.

‘Pretty boy ,aint’cha ?’said Brakenek.

‘Prettier than you’ll ever be again ,’grunted the Freeboota.

They hurled themselves at one another ,fighting without thought for defence ,only
bashed pit-
fighters .Brakenek had to admit ,this ork was pretty handy with his cleava-
choppa .Most of his riveted armour was lying in carved chunks around his feet .B

‘Wot they call you ?’asked Brakenek ,as they broke apart on the sagging bowsprit

‘Bludface Eadbasher ,’said the ork.

‘One of Redgun’s boyz?’

‘Yeah ,wot’s it to ya?’

‘Nuffink ,’said Brakenek ,‘Just wanted to know ,so’s I could tell Skarblitz who yc

‘Skarblitz ain’t here.’

Brakenek pointed his notched and buckled cleaver over Bludface’s shoulder.

‘Yeah ,he is...’

*

Bludface saw the two orks standing in in the path of the wildly careening battlew

But ,standing where they were ,neither would be living or breathing for much lon

Wheezing ,groaning struts of mega-
armour surrounded the warlord’s colossal form ,but even that wouldn’t be enough

Bludface’s opponent turned and leapt from the battlewagon with a wild yell ,leavi

He roared and lifted his cleava-choppa high.

‘Waaagh !’he yelled as a booming flare of green light erupted from the smaller of

Its tapered prow crumpled as though it had run into a cliff face .Momentum carri

‘Zog me !’said Bludface as he was catapulted into the air.

The blazing wreckage described a perfect arc over the two orks ,before crashing c

*

Bludface tried to open one eye ,realised it was the one covered by the eye patch a

‘Would ya credit it ?’said a voice with a grunt of amazement .‘You was right ,bos.

All Bludface could see was a grainy ,blood-filled smear of light and smoke and the end of a dirty finger holding his eyelid op

He was lying on his back ,that much he could tell.

The last thing he remembered was the Ork ‘o War ramming the Weirdboy and the

Rough hands pulled him upright and he found himself face to face with the two o

The Wierdboy cackled with a lopsided grin ,his eyes dancing with green fire and covered skull.

‘Told ya I could do it ,’the Weirdboy said to the hulking brute of a warlord .Straig

‘Skarblitz ,’he said.

The warlord leaned down ,his armour clanking with the movement and venting a

Skarblitz was the biggest ork Bludface had ever seen.

Bigger than Grimlug Toofbreaker ,bigger even than Redgun Razzung.

Almost as big as a Killa Kan.

‘You’se one a Redgun’s lads ,ain’t ya ?’said Skarblitz.

Bludface thrust out his tusked jaw .‘Yeah .Wot about it?’

Skarblitz hooked him under the jaw with his claw ,lifting him into the air .His bo

‘This ‘ere’s my world ,innit ?’said the Warlord with a steel-fanged grin .‘Redgun made a deal wiv me ,and it’d be a shame if I hadda kill ‘im

Bludface tried to shrug ,which wasn't easy when he was hooked like a fish.

'Redgun knows 'e made a deal ,Skarblitz ,'said Bludface . 'An 'e ain't about to try
'I fink e's lyin 'to ya ,'said the Weirdboy . 'I smells it off his thoughts as sure as d
Skarblitz grinned ,exposing yet more metal-sheened fangs.

'Is Guzzagug right ?You lying to me ,freeboota?'

Bludface considered lying again until he looked into the Weirdboy's sizzling gree
To lie was to die.

'Well ?Is ya lyin ?'said Skarblitz.

'Little bit ,yeah ,'admitted Bludface.

Skarblitz swept a powerful arm around the crater ,a crater that was now being pic
'So you was plannin 'to keep all dis booty for Redgun ,eh?'

Bludface tried to nod ,but only ended up working the warlord's claw deeper into l

'Yeah ,findaz ,keepaz and all that ,'said Bludface , 'but it won't 'appen again ,Mor
Skarblitz dropped him to the ground ,and Bludface landed in a numb heap before

'Yer right it ain't gonna happen again ,'said Skarblitz ,leaning down . 'You go bac
This time Bludface did nod.

'Ya can't send im back like this ,'said Guzzagug with a manic gleam in is burning

'Howzzat ?'said Skarblitz.

'You send 'im back in one piece ,Redgun's gonna think you's gone soft.'

Bludface shook his head . 'No ,no ,no ,I'll tell Redgun dat you'se pure ded hard ,d

'Yeah ,but how's he gonna know that ?'said Guzzagun.

'Guzzagug's got a point ,'nodded Skarblitz . 'You got's ta go back wiv a good wo

'Right ,'agreed Bludface before realising what Skarblitz meant .Before he could p

He howled in pain ,staring at the blood jetting from his arm .It hurt ,Gork it hurt ,
blade gubbinz Doc Zogin 'Eck kept wanting to bolt onto him.

He clamped a hand over the bloody stump.

'Yeah ,'he said . 'I gets ya.'

Unnatural Selection

Noxious purple mist clung to the rocks ,leaving a glistening residue that was sticky.
‘Tyranid ?’asked Hellar ,his heavy bolter slung low at his waist .The rest of Castor
Castor nodded .‘Without doubt.’

‘They’re near ,’said Gudrik Skraemir ,bent low over the path farther down the slope
hung shotgun and an ice-
rimed axe were slung crosswise at his shoulders .The Space Wolf’s helmet was slung
stiffened hair was spiked behind him like an ocean predator’s fin .His braided beard
Like a stalking predator.

‘A blind man could see that ,’Fenris-
born ,’said Scout Sergeant Varrio ,his gaze never once leaving the scope of his sniper rifle.

‘Aye ,that he could ,’replied Gudrik ,springing to his feet and spitting a mouthful of blood.

‘Because a wolf-
sense is keener than any sight of ours ,’said Castor ,before Varrio could retort .‘Let’s see.’

Varrio shrugged ,unwilling to concede ,but knowing better than to show dissent before the sergeant.

‘I fought alongside the Wolves on Ichar IV ,’continued Castor ,‘Their warriors led by example.’

The younger scouts drew in startled breaths at so unlikely a scenario ,but Castor held his ground.

‘What makes you so sure the beasts are establishing a hive anyway ?’asked Varrio ,his eyes narrowing.

‘Because I’ve seen this pattern of behaviour before ,’said Castor .‘On Armageddon.’

‘The attack on the communications array was not the work of animals ,’grunted Fenris-
born .‘It was ordained to be random.’

‘And it wasn’t the only one ,’said Castor .‘Which means there is likely to be a hive here.’

‘Does Protus agree?’ said Varrio, nodding towards the summit of the mountain, with
‘He will,’ said Castor.

*

Gudrik led them from the path and across a scree-covered slope of broken stone and gravel. Cold winds blew from the high valleys

Despite his best efforts, Castor’s every step sent avalanches of fist-sized rocks tumbling downhill. Gudrik moved without leaving so much as a foot

Patches of rough gorse and sickly bracken dotted the slope, hardy grasses sickening

The Space Wolf held up a fist and the Ultramarines halted, keeping low to the ground

The Space Wolf’s eyes flicked open, and Castor saw his yellowed irises flare. Gudrik

At first, Castor thought the Wolf was mistaken. Then saw undulant forms moving along
edged hook limbs.

Hormagaunts.

A surge of battle-stims gathered in Castor’s system, ready to instantly transition him from rest to combat

The creatures appeared to be unaware of their presence, too fixated on something

‘Wait,’ said Gudrik. ‘These won’t be the only ones.’

Castor nodded. He’d already begun quartering the landscape to find another swarm

‘There,’ said Varrio, aiming his rifle at a host of shapes moving along a partially lit

‘Another swarm-pack,’ said Gudrik. ‘Two score creatures at least. The first group are outriders, guarding

‘Then what are they guarding?’ said Castor, adjusting the filters on his auto-senses to better penetrate the fog wreathing the stream bed.

Immediately ,he saw Gudrik's assessment of their numbers was conservative .At

'What in the name of Guilliman is that ?'hissed Castor.

'You're the prodigy of Cassius ,'said Hellar .'You tell me.'

Castor glanced over at Gudrik ,who shrugged and said ,'Not anything I've ever se

The creature's ruggedly ovoid skull was distended ,but not with any natural grow

No ,not uncontrolled.

Unconsciously accelerated .Competence without comprehension.

'Hyper-
evolution ,'said Castor ,thinking back to a beast Chaplain Cassius had described k

'What ?'said Gudrik.

Castor's mind raced as he articulated his theory as it formed in his mind .'The sw
strands trigger mutations in each new iteration of creatures .They cycle through a
synapses to form.'

The Space Wolf grinned and racked his shotgun.

'Then let's make this an evolutionary dead end ,eh?'

*

Castor picked his target ,a creature with one eye-
socket that was little more than a sliced ruin .Across the iron sights of his bolter ,t

Internecline conflict brought about by territoriality?

An avenue to explore at a later date ,but Castor would settle for simply killing the

'Two volleys ,advance to cull ,'said Castor .'On my mark.'

Affirmative icons appeared on his visor almost instantaneously .Gudrik just nodd

‘Mark ,’said Castor.

The mountainside lit up as eight mass-reactives punched into the guardian swarm .Armour-piercing tips blasted through the organic plates of the hormagaunts and exploded

Varrio’s Scouts felled four more with silent spits from their sniper rifles and Gudr

A second volley tore through the beasts ,and more alien creatures collapsed to the

Gudrik moved effortlessly ahead of him ,moving over the loose rocks with inhum shifting landscapes had given him preternatural balance.

Castor vaulted the rocks in which the tyranid creatures had concealed themselves

A hormagaunt missing its body below the thorax writhed in a morass of pulped ei

‘Clear ,’he shouted as Gudrik sliced the lower jaw from a spasming creature and :

The scouts took position on the rocks as Varrio and Castor led the combat squads

Only now did Castor see how large this pack truly was.

At least fifty beasts ,broad of shoulder and sinewy of limb ,with elongated hook-claws and curled ,dew claws .Brutes of the genus and powerful killers.

‘Don’t let them reach the waterfall ,’shouted Gudrik.

Castor was about to question that when he saw the outline of a cave entrance behi

A narrow gorge of scum-frothed water churned with toxins and bio-acids at the base of the falls .At its centre was a spur of black rock ,scummed and

‘Hellar ,Varrio ;pin the pack in place ,’ordered Castor .‘Circle sweep to kill .Gudr

The Space Wolf grinned as he saw what Castor intended.

‘We shall be as the hunters of the hrosshvalur !’he yelled ,leaping into the pool an

More gunfire blazed through the purple mist behind Castor and Gudrik .Mass-

reactives raked the river bed and sniper fire punched through skull after skull .Full
Half would have to do.

Castor ran along the edge of the gorge ,gaining height with every powered step .E
The ground continued to rise ,and Castor suddenly veered to the side .He leapt fro
Castor sprinted to the end of the spur ,drawing his combat blade and hurling him
armoured skull.

Slick with bio-
secretions ,Castor had no chance of keeping hold ,but he had no intention of rema

He swung his legs around ,using the momentum of his enormous weight to drag t

Castor was thrown clear ,fighting a fleeting disorientation as he fought to get his l
deep pool ,combat blade in hand as the mutant beast reared up in a cascade of dar

Its hormagaunt protectors threw themselves at him .He killed the first with a blad
thrust through its jaw ,the second with an elbow smash .A third died with its thro

Claws raked his armour ,envenomed fangs skidded over his visor and bio-
toxins burned the ceramite of his battle plate .The water churned with alien blood

An ululating howl echoed from the sides of the gorge ,and even the tyrannic mon:

Like Castor before him ,he leapt from the spur of rock ,having climbed it from wi
born aimed to deliver the death blow.

His ice-
rimed axe glittered with killing light as it swung for the synapse mutant's neck .F
forged steel split the unclean flesh of the mutant creature ,cleaving meat and bone

No executioner ever swung a finer blow ,no butcher ever made a deeper cut.

The monster's head screeched even as Gudrik sheared it from its body and black
linked minds apart.

The Space Wolf landed in the water beside Castor ,his stiffened hair hanging lank

‘A good kill ,Brother Gudrik ,’said Castor .‘Chaplain Cassius would have approv

‘A slaying worthy of a telling by the skjalds ,Brother Castor ,’agreed the Fenrisia
We’ll make a Skyclaw out of you yet.’