

GOLD STEEL

DAVID GUYMER

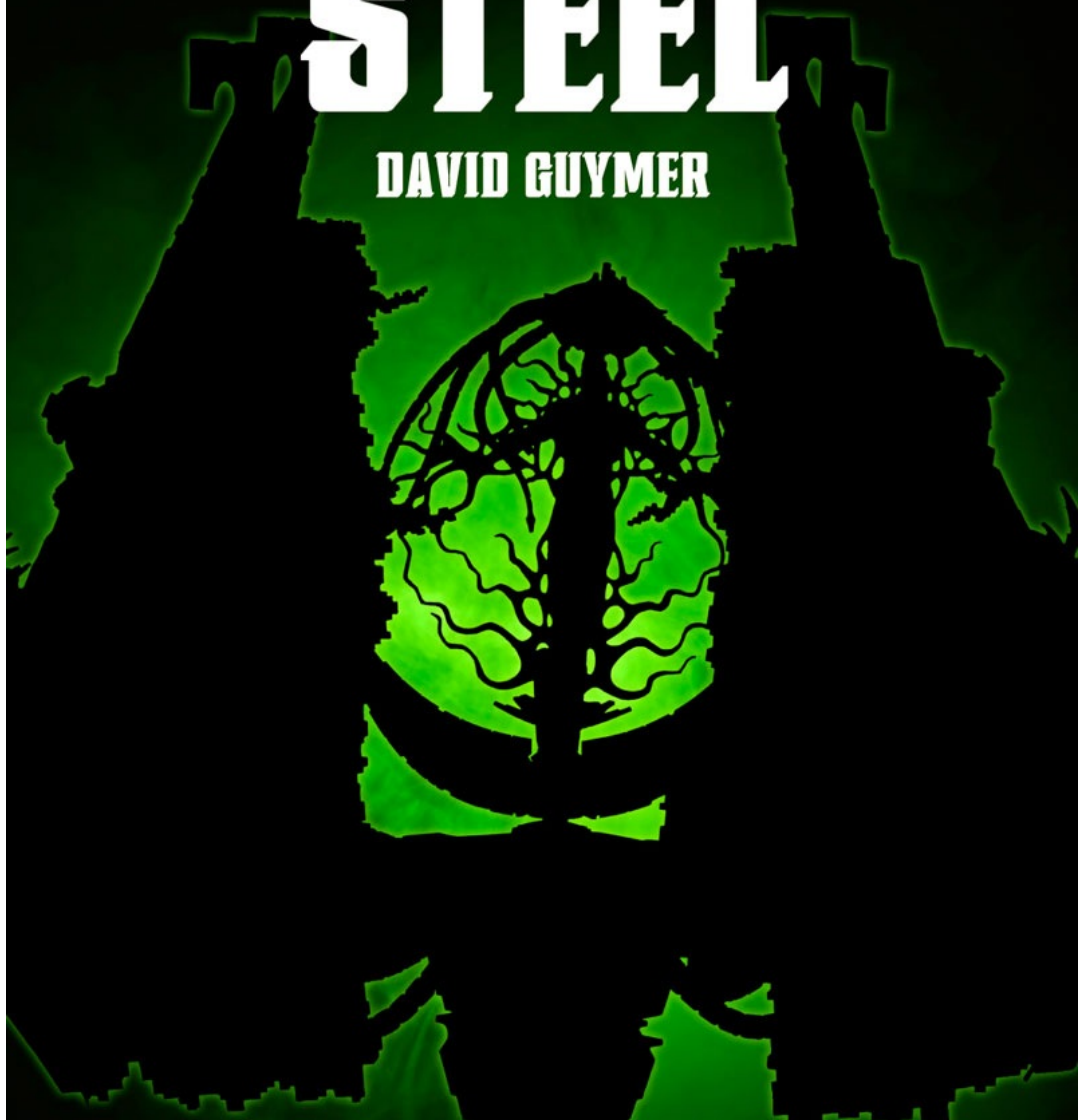


WARHAMMER[®]
40,000

AN APOCALYPSE SHORT STORY

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A distant tremor had the cell's single light source swaying in its fitting. It blinked ominously before humming back to its full, grey-shade wattage. The lumen filament was well past its prescribed life-span, but it was enough to describe three metres by one of dour rockcrete. Where just the day before condensation had lathered the walls, now bands of ice glittered in the uncertain light like claws of silver. Even the stench of the steri-sprays had been frozen into the walls. Another quake shook the light, sending a crystal drizzle onto the shaven head of the man strapped to an upright pallet beneath.

The facility was under attack.

Drax rolled his head back and to the left, watching the glittering particles as though nothing in a galaxy of horrors and wonders had fascinated him more. He didn't shiver. It only made the cold worse. He considered just how many kilometres of rockcrete separated the solitary confinement wing from the surface and then, with a smile meant for no one at all, relaxed back into his restraints. The leather straps creaked like a harness as the prison moon's pathetic gravity finally took a grip on his bulk.

Tough luck for the facility.

The walls trembled once again. Or, more truthfully, they shivered. Drax knew

the difference, knew earth like other men of other home worlds knew sky, and he remembered how it felt to be separated by a few hundred metres of crust from something that could crush him in a second if it ever cared he was there at all.

And it hadn't bothered him back on Caldera either.

He closed his eyes, as if determining to take a nap. A strange, regular stamp, like some kind of hydraulic press, was audible over the *crump* of impacts. It sounded almost like footsteps. They were drawing nearer, definitely footsteps, but caused by something much heavier and more ponderous than a man, its stride almost mechanically exact.

No.

Not almost.

Drax heard it thump onto his wing, halt for a half second as it hit the right-angle bend, then turn ninety degrees with a chill whisper of servos. Not Imperial. Too smooth. And coming closer. The narrow passage rang to the stamp of metal on stone. Drax tensed on instinct. The restraints bit into his wrists as he tried to press himself further into the pallet, turning his face from the light. One eye open, he stared through the bars of the face-high grille in the door. The unsteady illumination reflected off something silver.

Drax froze, rigid, as a gleaming skull passed before the grille and turned to glare into his cell. It must have been mere seconds but, bathed in the soulless glow of its dull green eyes, each of those seconds felt like long minutes. The metallic skeleton tramped past, the alien glare fading back into grey shadow.

The light source flickered.

Breath misted from Drax's open mouth as he listened to the footsteps recede. He'd seen some horrific things in his time, but this...

He was still listening when a furtive shuffle heralded the approach of another set of footsteps. These were definitely human and, as they drew nearer, brought the flat creak of flak armour.

The newcomer paused a moment outside Drax's cell, then rapped softly on the metal doorframe. Drax said nothing. Nothing had changed his opinion that he was better off where he was. The anxious tap came again, cooling mist rising through the grille, followed by a curse and the fumbling of keys until one was inserted into the lock and twisted. With a clank, the locking bolt withdrew and the door listed open. A grey man in his mid-forties wearing a pitch-black stab-vest nudged it the rest of the way on the barrel of an autogun. The weapon was standard issue, stamped with the insignia of the Ixus II enforcers, but the knife lashed to the muzzle with electrical tape certainly wasn't.

‘Drax?’ the man hissed. ‘Calderan 18th Armoured?’

‘Couldn’t say,’ Drax answered, voice a hoarse rumble after so long in solitary. ‘No names here.’

‘Don’t screw with me,’ the warden growled, urgency cracking the frosty patina that filled his brow’s furrows. He pulled his rifle to his chest and edged into the cell. The corporal’s stripes on his left shoulder pad shimmered dully. He angled the back of his hand to the swaying light source, shivering at the meagre touch of its warmth. There was something scrawled in black ink on the skin. ‘Gamma 19119,’ the warden read. ‘That’s you, right. The driver?’

‘If that’s what the brand says,’ Drax shrugged, angling his face so the man could read the ident code tattooed across the left side of his forehead.

The warden grunted, setting his rifle against the wall as he thumbed through his ring of keys for the one that matched the padlocks on Drax’s restraints. He found it and started forward. ‘Didn’t say in your file you were this damned funny. What it said was that you killed your own crew, and that you didn’t last a month in gamma before murdering two good wardens. So I’d advise you keep that hatch of yours shut, Drax. You’re lucky I need a driver.’

‘We going for a drive, corporal?’ Drax gave the man a companionable smile and shrugged again, emphasising his last restraint. ‘They lock you up for that.’

The warden grunted as he tugged out the final strap, pocketed the keys and swiftly back-pedalled to recollect his autogun. ‘Vox is out, along with pretty much everything else except basic power. I’ve got someone on it. Enough to know there’s a real shak-storm going on up there.’

Drax wrapped his thick arms around his chest, rolling out his neck and listening to it click. ‘Shak-storm,’ he agreed, trying out the Ixus vernacular and finding it sorely lacking. The Ixus dialect was, like its women, anaemic and inoffensive. ‘Yeah, I’d say. And what’s up with the cold?’

The warden backed out into the passageway and gestured for Drax to follow. ‘It gets better. Environment went down with everything else. It’s online but there’s no one left alive to recalibrate it.’ He upended his wrist, then rubbed the film of frost from his chrono. ‘Would you rather suffocate or freeze?’

Drax’s grin failed to warm his eyes. He had always known that something in the universe loved him. Either that or the Emperor wanted him at arm’s length for as long possible.

‘I was in the Guard, corporal. It’s nice just to be asked.’

‘Spare me,’ the warden snarled, holding the rifle in one hand and fishing in his chest pocket with the other. He flourished a second, smaller set of keys. ‘Your

file said you drove Leman Russ for the Calderans. Can you drive a Chimera?’

‘Sure,’ Drax shrugged, eyeing the bump in the man’s carapace that hid a stainless steel ring and its two little ways off this rock. How different could they be?

‘Good.’ The warden cast another anxious look at his chrono.

‘What’s your name, corporal?’

‘What?’

‘Your name,’ Drax repeated. ‘I like to know a man’s name.’

‘Stannis,’ the man replied, letting his wrist drop to his side. ‘Corporal Gerralt Stannis.’

Drax extended his right hand. ‘Pleasure to work with you, corporal.’

Stannis nodded, distracted, transferring his rifle from right to left to accept Drax’s offered hand. The gun was still halfway between hands when Drax suddenly clapped both hands either side of Stannis’s face and, in the same motion, twisted his skull from his spine. There was a crunch of split vertebrae and the man hung limp, the dead lump of flesh and armaplas hanging sanguine in low-grav. Drax hooked the Chimera keys from his chest pocket and let the body float to the ground.

It only took one man to drive a Chimera, and he wasn’t about to start sharing oxygen with dead-weight.

Almost as an afterthought, he collected the warden’s autogun, jiggled the knife free of its bindings and slid the gun into his cell. For want of pockets, he held on to the keys and sheathed the blade carefully under his left sleeve. One-handed, he lugged the body in after the gun, then closed the door on them both. He glanced left, holding his breath for a moment, listening out for the metallic skeleton. Its clanking step was a distance away now and moving farther. Smiling grimly, he checked the cell door was fully closed and started right.

The roots of the Ixus IX penal facility sank deep into the moon’s frozen crust. Drax took branches as he came to them, ignored others, loping unerringly forwards in a complicated but deceptively efficient sequence of low-grav strides. He could’ve found his way to the surface with both eyes closed and a giant pteraworm hunting the resonance of his footsteps. Drax had always been firmly ambivalent about his upbringing. He had simply not experienced anything else. But surviving a childhood in the subterranean fortress-hives of Caldera certainly made life off-world seem as easy as falling asleep. And no more perilous.

What few doors he passed were empty, but that was unsurprising. A man of the

Gothic Sector's CXVII penal legion had to try hard to find himself confined down here. The appearance of one door in particular as he rounded a familiar bend had him double-checking the knife in his sleeve. It was a double door, centimetre thick steel with a wire-reinforced, plastek window. In either door, just beneath the window, was a plastek flap about the right size and position for an autogun muzzle or a stun baton. It had been a while since Drax had been this way, but he remembered the access to the guard room. He didn't remember it being unlocked though.

Or unguarded.

Shifting nearer, he tried to peer through the window, but it was one-way and all it presented was his own distorted reflection. He thought for a moment, then shrugged and nudged through.

Stepping into the guardroom was like entering a disturbing dream: not quite right, yet close enough to his memories to make the new reality all the more disturbing. Frost crept along the rockcrete walls and upturned tables. The hiss of snow from the security monitors banked along the right-hand wall filled the room with static.

Two men looked up at his entrance.

The first was clearly another prisoner. He was pasty and greasy-haired, garbed in a ratty black jumpsuit, sitting cross-legged with his back to an upturned table. The thing was on its side, legs out, bland top blocking the plastek windows onto the corridor beyond the far wall. The prisoner gave a callow smirk then dismissed Drax from his attention, drifting back to the patched-up vox between his legs. It was producing a hissing noise. The man turned his ear towards it, a grin twitching and fading as he fiddled with a dial on his near side.

The second man was on his feet, pacing out his frozen nerves. He was fiery haired and keen-eyed, armoured like a warder in black flak, similar to that of the late Corporal Stannis except that his was ill-fitting and absent of rank. Drax's appearance startled him from his stride, autogun swinging around to cover the door.

'You can't be Drax?' he said, chin lifting in acknowledgment of Drax's height, voice high and determinedly disbelieving. 'You're too big for a tanker.'

The second man rolled his eyes and didn't look up, as though discomforted by the manufactory-fresh lustre of the young warden's weapon. Despite his ill-fated attire, he was clean shaven and groomed, aside from the rash around his nostrils and upper lip that had chapped nastily in the cold. His boots, and even the zip that ran down the back of his jumpsuit, were buffed like a warmaster's

medals.

‘Where’s Stannis?’ the warden continued, as though filling in Drax’s side of the interrogation for him.

Drax smiled. Maybe it would catch on.

‘He took us down a wrong turn,’ he replied, spreading his hands to engender the lie that he was unarmed. The knife kissed his wrist beneath the sleeve. The kid with the autogun would have to go first. The tech would go easy, assuming he couldn’t be useful. ‘Walked right into one of those things.’

The warden swore, nervously and quiet. ‘Wait until I get one in my sights.’

‘They’re called necrons,’ murmured the tech. He shivered and twitched but, judging from his sheen of sweat and pinpoint pupils, it had nothing to do with the cold. He sniffed loudly, still not looking up from his hardware. ‘And it’s been over an hour since the power went down. Don’t pretend you don’t know where they are.’

‘Necrons,’ Drax’s voice echoed. ‘What are they?’

‘Before my... *heh*... reassignment, I was with the signals corps, Mordian 9th, Mechanicus liaison. We were a good three systems behind the front lines, when these... *things*... just appeared from nowhere. Four months. That was how long we held out...’

‘They’ll die like every other xenos,’ whispered the warden, clutching his autogun like a crozius.

The prisoner’s look was like acid. ‘They don’t die. They don’t even hurt.’

‘Enough, Sep,’ growled a third voice.

Drax turned into the snowy glare of the monitors and squinted. Featureless shadow-men waded through static. He could make out hallways, guardrooms, but he didn’t know the facility well enough to guess what he was looking at. Below the bank of screens, a second warden sat on the workstation. The light at his back hollowed his eyes, highlighting grey hair from brown and emphasising his padded bulk. His autogun rested on his lap, one hand on the muzzle as though it were a mastiff at its master’s charge. ‘Warden Rhain,’ he grunted. ‘And him,’ he pointed out the red-haired youth, ‘you call Warden Colddryn.’

‘And him?’ said Drax, angling his head to the tech, who gave a grin full of sour gums and mutual distrust.

‘Just more droppings from the wrong end of the Imperial Guard,’ said Rhain, patting his rifle as if willing it to go off of its own accord. Drax wondered how many penal troopers had gone that way on this man’s watch. ‘Like you. But we need a driver if we’re going to make it across the surface to the orbital pad.’

Stannis gave you the keys?’ Drax nodded. Rhain slid from the console and into a more normal light. He stood as though born to attention, jaw cleft to a military grade, blue eyes glaring like headlamps from a battered old battle tank. The warden turned to Sep. ‘Anything out of that thing yet? Survivors? Reinforcements?’

‘Lho-stick shipment?’ Sep asked sourly, pitching the frequency from his vox-unit to a whistle, then back down towards a dissonant bass as he manually scanned through the channels. The unit looked like it had been through a war zone or three, shot through once or twice and singed with las-burns, the whole thing crudely strapped together with tape, scavenged utensils, and what looked like the wire from a commissar’s dress cap. Sep played the dial back and forth over a particular wavelength, harsh voices drowned in static, the chaos lent order by a repeating click.

‘Sounds like miners’ code,’ said Drax, then shrugged when the two wardens turned to him. ‘We use it on my home world, to talk between tunnels that haven’t been wired.’

‘Background,’ said Rhain. ‘Probably from one of the void banks.’

‘Maybe,’ Sep muttered.

‘Where did you find this, anyway?’ said Colddryn. ‘Imperator, you’ve been in solitary my whole tour.’

Drax crouched to take a better look at the vox. An autopistol materialised between his eyes.

‘This is my stuff,’ Sep hissed, drawing a loud sniff that involved his entire face. ‘Hands off my stuff.’

Rhain swore quietly and shook his head as Colddryn dropped a hand to his newly empty pistol holster, then threw the hand accusingly at Sep. The tech leered, the pistol now aimed shakily at Colddryn’s padded chest. The warden’s face was furious, his outstretched hand dropping to his autogun.

‘Cut it out,’ said Rhain. ‘Both of you.’ Gun still on Drax, he turned his head to regard the monitors at his back. ‘They’re rigid in their routine. Always the same corridors at the same intervals. We’ve got a window to break for the control room. From there we can ride the elevator all the way to the main hangar.’ As Rhain finished speaking, his and Colddryn’s wrist chronos bleeped in unison. Each man mirrored the other in silencing the alarms.

‘Now!’ Rhain snapped, autogun sweeping to indicate the outer door.

Sep was already swinging the vox-unit across his shoulders while, with a little too much haste, Colddryn toed him in the back until he was on his feet,

shepherding him through the door on the muzzle of his rifle. Rhain circled behind Drax, autogun pointing the way.

‘After you. I wouldn’t want to take a wrong turn.’

Drax bared his teeth in a grin, then ducked through the doorway into a long corridor. The bare monotony of rockcrete was relieved only by the lumen strip inset into the ceiling. It flickered with the distant thumps that shook down from the surface. Coddryn and Sep were already well out of sight, but a tunneler’s instinct took him left, earning a grunt of respect from the old warden who easily kept pace with his arcing low-grav stride. Of the invaders, these *necrons* as Sep had called them, there was no sign.

Or no visible sign.

The heavy stamp of their feet beat from every door, around every corner, a metronomic counterpoint to the staccato rumble that sent shivers through the light fixtures. They had only passed a couple of doors when Drax started to feel the burn spread from his thighs to his chest. Each breath left his lungs half-full and froze his throat on the way down, failing then to thaw it as it headed back out. The facility wasn’t just losing heat, it was bleeding atmosphere too.

How long did they have?

A claustrophobic, semi-lit corridor led to a thick set of plasteel blast doors. They were open, the lighting giving an intermittent hum along a short passage towards a second set of doors. Las-resistant plastek boxes jutted in from both sides. The boxes were empty, frosted white. An unsecured communications hatch was affixed to the wall before the blast doors. It was a wired device, designed to retain function in case of power failure or haywire attack. The mouthpiece hung off the receiver, emitting a continuous null tone. A standard alert rune pulsed slowly across a plastek display, dappled by five bloody prints. It was the first sign that anyone had ever been here.

Where were they? Where were their bodies?

Drax’s fingers traced the ring of six tiny holes that sunk into the plastek casing around the receiver cord. There was something in its delicacy, its surgical exactness, that was more chilling than the most wanton carnage.

Just then, Rhain pulled up beside him, autogun sweeping on down the corridor. The warden’s lined face was tense, veined with silver. He glanced at his chrono, then prodded Drax in the ribs. He nodded towards the second set of doors when, from that direction, there came a tight burst of autogun fire.

Then another.

‘Damn that kid,’ Rhain swore over another blast of auto-fire, glancing at his

chrono and then taking his rifle in both hands to sprint for the second door.

Drax followed more cautiously. The beveled flooring dug through the soles of his boots, and the lingering sting of teargas made his nose run. As well as the vents in the floor, Drax's eyes were drawn to the tubes in the ceiling. They looked like grenade launchers. Death was promised in every window, under every tread. It felt like driving a lumbering Lemman Russ through an enemy hive. More relieved than he let on, Drax passed through the second blast door into the prison control room.

It was circular, large enough to accommodate the thirty or so penal staffers important enough to have had their duties secured under two kilometres of rockcrete. A sealed plasteel cage on the far side of the room denied admittance to an elevator shaft, but the remainder of the wall-space was dominated by flickering screens. Most of the displays were black, but a handful remained online, their stuttering blue screens issuing impatient decrees for start-up rituals. A dozen or so around the room were riddled with broken glass and bullet holes and at the nexus of that vandalism stood Sep and Colddryn, each man trying to pull the weapon from the other's hands.

'I'm taking them out!' Colddryn yelled, turning his greater strength to pry the other man's fingers from his rifle. At the same time, Sep dug his fingernails into Colddryn's throat, then kned him in the groin. Colddryn's moulded armaplas took the blow and he pulled Sep's fingers from his neck before shoving him back and downing him with a rifle butt into the collar. The young warden swung up his weapon, aiming over Sep and sweeping the bank of consoles. Sweat iced his brow.

'Stand down,' Rhain gasped, breathing a trial in the thinning air.

Colddryn didn't budge. His eyes urged them towards one of the damaged consoles.

'What on Holy Terra?' Drax murmured. Rhain immediately snapped his weapon around to cover the cogitator bank that Colddryn had been shooting at. He didn't fire, instead using his trigger finger to sign the aquila across his chest.

Sep got up, rubbing his chest and glaring hatefully as he moved towards the console. Brushing aside broken glass, he pincerd two fingers around a hand-length metallic limb and lifted an ugly, silver-bodied bug from the debris. Drax felt his insides knot. This one had been shredded by auto-fire, but there were more. They were everywhere, suckling at the cogitator cores, silver bodies glistening like coral under the blue glow of standby screens. Drax couldn't shake off the eerie alignment between those sharp little legs and the punctures on the

comms hatch in the passageway.

‘Are they what took the power down?’ said Rhain.

‘Scarabs, we called them,’ said Sep, dropping the dead lump and clearing a station of broken glass for him to sit and unburden himself of his vox. ‘They’ll put their teeth in anything.’

‘Stand off then,’ Rhain whispered, lowering his rifle and backing into the blast door to close it. There were two more doors either side, lightweight, probably leading back to the plastek firing boxes. ‘We can’t risk any more shooting. Do you think the necrons’ll come to investigate?’

Sep shrugged.

‘Well, do you?’ Drax prodded. Was he the only one that heard the closing stamp of metal on rockcrete passageways?

‘What d’you all want from me?’ Sep sniffed hard and thrust out his forehead and slapped the barcode tattooed there. ‘Does it say Saint Tannis bloody Sep of bloody Mordia now? It’s a *bloody* miracle.’

‘Easy,’ said Rhain, lowering his rifle and stealing a look through the blast door’s plastek viewport. ‘Just bring the elevator and get us out of here.’

Muttering vehemently, Sep tapped at one of the consoles, pale face blue in the stand-by glow. ‘It’d be here already if...’ his fists waved, cheeks bulging as though he was about to have a fit and swung an arm towards Coddryn. ‘If bleeding *Macharius* here hadn’t killed the bad panel.’ He thumped the side of the screen and it hummed to life. Sep grinned, muttering what sounded like an Adeptus Mechanicus chant and, after a few seconds of inputting commands, the light above the elevator slowly flashed to amber.

Drax watched it blink. It wasn’t going to be fast enough.

‘Get yourselves ready. And do it quick. We’ve got company.’

‘How do you—’ Rhain began, then gave a shallow wheeze, his face perilously blue. Drax wasn’t the only one whose chest felt like it was bound in cold steel. ‘How long?’

‘Maybe a minute.’

‘Sep!’ Rhain managed.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Sep, sucking his fingers for their warmth. ‘If this was easy then we’d be escaping all the time.’

Drax almost smiled. Almost.

Coddryn cast a last look towards the engineer as he took the opposite side of the blast door from Rhain. His eyes were wide and full of white, but excitement overcame breathlessness for a second and he chuckled. ‘How many do you—’

He was cut off by a slam of metal upon metal. It was the outer blast door. Condensation had greyed out the window, but Drax imagined clumsy fingers clawing at the doorway until it parted for the metallic clank of the necrons.

Drax threw himself to the floor, skidding the rest of the way to the inner door and coming up between the two wardens. He demisted the window on his sleeve. Three of the skeletal aliens were halfway down the passage, clutching their long rifles with a simian hunch, marching in file as though directed by a single will. Their dully gleaming eyes bored through the plastek and into Drax's soul.

As if he had anything to envy.

A fourth warrior guarded the outer blast door and a fifth was just arriving. More were on the way. The metallic stamp drew nearer.

Was this all they had? It would take more than that to bring down Drax.

'I didn't sign up to the penal legions for *this*,' Rhain hissed.

'The Emperor protects,' said Colddryn, excited smile frozen solid. Drax spread his arms, covering the hands of both Colddryn and Rhain. A kind man would have ascribed their shaking to the cold.

No one had yet charged him with kindness.

'The Emperor protects,' he repeated. Colddryn's grip tightened. Rhain's might've frozen into his for the sweat between them.

It was always the tough ones.

And then the wait was over. The door shook as if shelled, a terrific slam ringing through Drax's buttocks and into the cold ground as hands tougher than plasteel hammered down and then pushed. Damn, they were strong! Colddryn screamed pure adrenaline. The doors began to give but the rockcrete ground was rough, resisting the slide of his boots.

Praise the Emperor for small mercies.

'Drax,' Rhain rasped, heels scraping helplessly forwards. 'Can you hold it on your own?'

He hoisted an eyebrow as another hammer blow rang through the door. A metallic fist punched through the window. Colddryn nearly choked as he was showered with plastek shards and flattened himself from the grasping arm. With an insipid moan, Rhain unholstered his autopistol and sprayed the clip around the metallic limb, emptying it in under ten seconds. Ignoring the superficial bruising, the metal skeleton forced its arm through the window until it was clawing at Colddryn's shoulder. Rhain kept the trigger pressed long after it became clear that the clip was empty. In a broken epiphany, he threw the pistol aside and hugged his autogun close.

‘Sep!’ Drax roared, twisting his own head from the necron’s reach. ‘How long?’

Instead of answering, Sep started to whistle, switching on his vox-receiver to smother the racket in white noise, then dialling up the wavelengths as if trying to match its pitch to Colddryn’s cries.

‘Turn that shak off!’ Colddryn shouted, but Sep just increased the volume.

‘Colddryn,’ Rhain said, speaking over the static, lending strength to his voice. ‘Take the right hand firing platform. I’ll take the left. Take a couple down. Buy some time.’ He nodded to Colddryn, then to Drax. ‘Ready?’

Drax braced, setting his legs wide as both men rose and ran.

Colddryn was a second faster, ripping open his door and pounding up the steps to the shielded box overlooking the walkway. No sooner had the iron ring of boots on stairs subsided than auto-fire burst over the vox static. Bullets ricocheted between the plastek las-shields that flanked the passage. A living man would’ve been minced, but the necrons were not men and nor, Drax was coming to realise, were they truly living. Even after Rhain opened up from the opposite side, the combined strength of three necrons continued to bear down across Drax’s shoulders. He roared, sinews knotting his neck like rope as, millimetre by millimetre, the blast door budged out behind him. The din of twin autoguns roared through the open door like an ork battlewagon stuck in neutral.

What he’d do for a proper weapon right now.

He felt out the knife under his sleeve. A blade was a blade pretty much anywhere in the galaxy. Even out here in the sticks they couldn’t mess that up.

A necron warrior forced its knee through the door. It was as hard as steel and, without warm blood to deny the elements, chilled Drax’s spine where it touched. Drax grimaced and thanked the Emperor for his back-handed benevolence.

Better an alien’s kneecap than a stray autogun round.

The light above the elevator doors flicked to green. It was more beautiful than Drax’s first and final Calderan sunrise. Still whistling, Sep tugged on his vox-set and rose, just as the elevator arrived in a hiss of hydraulic brakes and the doors slid wide. Sep backed into the elevator cage, depositing the vox and drawing up his autopistol. His hand hovered over the ascent rune, eyes lingering on Drax’s, pale lips tugging into a leer.

Bastard, Drax thought, feet gritting out another centimetre.

‘You coming then, driver?’

Drax smiled and flung himself forward, low-grav hanging his body to dry as three necron warriors stamped into a hail of autopistol rounds. Hands and feet

flapping in a weirdly frictionless doggy paddle, Drax kept himself moving towards the elevator. From behind there came a gathering hum of charge and a wasp of greenish energy flashed past his head. It wasn't hot, it smelled of nothing, but it made a sound like a tank across gravel. Drax could almost see the disassembled singlets of oxygen and nitrogen raining from the path of the beam. Half running and half flying, he fell into the elevator, pulled himself up against the inside wall of the cage and slammed the rune to ascend.

The doors began to slide closed.

So, so slowly.

The pulsing barrel of a necron rifle thrust into the cage before the doors could fully close. Sep screamed. The doors stalled and slowly began to re-open. Drax cursed, mashing the ascent rune and flattening the rifle to the still-retracting door.

The necron fired.

The energy flare reduced the left-hand side of the elevator cage to molten slag. Sparks geysered from a damaged conduit. Drax turned his face away, losing his grip on the rifle as the doors widened far enough to admit the chilling xenos warrior. With a snarl, Drax drove his fist into its jaw. Metal dented around his knuckles and the machine stuttered back. Drax chewed down the pain, slipping the knife from his sleeve and burying it in the wrist with which the necron held its rifle. Implacable as an ablative plate, its grip held, but Drax sawed through the synthetic sinew and ripped the rifle away.

Taking it in both hands, he stepped back, birthing its cold stock to his shoulder. The alien weapon was almost as long as he was tall and pulsed with raw energy as he levelled it point-blank on the damaged skeleton. He closed his fingers around the grip.

Then stared down at the pulsing rifle.

'Where's the damned trigger, Sep?'

Sep answered with a moan, blindly punching the ascent rune, causing the doors to stutter and retract around the necron's body. The dent in the alien's face was already flattening out, the lacerations in its arm closing even as Drax watched. With a howl, he smashed the rifle through the skeleton's ribcage. It fell hard, but was already starting to rise before Drax broke the useless weapon across its skull. One of the two by the blast doors aimed its weapon, only for a sudden storm of autogun fire from the right to throw off its aim. Emerald lightning sheared across the control room, eating into the ceiling and sending monomolecular vapour streaming to the floor.

‘Punch it!’ Drax roared. Sep needed no urging.

The doors slid closed, slow enough for Coddryn to clutch his steaming autogun, bound past the sluggish warriors, and throw himself through just as they clanged shut behind him. The man scrambled for the rear of the cage. He didn’t say anything as the elevator cage shuddered and began to rise, just gasped great nebulae of mist that were struck with short-lived stars where the cage’s left side scraped sparks from the walls of the shaft. Drax looked at him. He looked at Drax.

No one mentioned Rhain.

Drax wrapped his arm through the bars of the cage. It was more than just weakness from being in solitary. The air was thinning. The cold was getting harder to ignore. He looked up and took the deepest breath his lungs could hold. The citadel must have been breached. It was only going to get worse.

‘You’re a tough nugget, driver,’ said Sep, scraping little jewels of sweat from his brow and sinking down beside his still-hissing vox-unit. He tweaked a dial, causing the repeating *click* to rise above the static. Opening a hatch from the back, he withdrew what looked like a diagnostic slate. He tapped at it a few times to no effect, then ground his thumb into the plastek display with a snarl of frustration.

‘You know what you’re doing with all this?’ Drax shouted over the cry of plasteel, eyeing the man and his instruments with suspicion.

Sep glanced over the top of his pad and grinned coldly. The whites of his eyes were etched with little red lines. ‘Apparently there are some itches that even servitors can’t scratch.’ The non-answer made Drax scowl. ‘I hear Caldera’s a death world,’ Sep went on, returning his eyes to the data-slate.

‘So I’ve been told.’

‘Ahh, the old “my home world is tougher than your home world” routine. Add a quart of amasec and some laspistols – and make it a bit less damned cold – and it could be just another day.’

Drax grunted. It was a shame they had so little chance of making it off-world. He would have *really* liked some alone time with Tannis Sep when this was all over. The data-slate in Sep’s hands projected a sequence of runes onto the man’s face. His bloodshot eyes roved across them.

‘What’s it say?’

‘Do I look like I can read this shak?’

‘Then what the hell?’

Sep shushed him with a wave, fiddling with the vox-dial and driving the pitch

to a squeal. ‘Some telemetry packaged up in the signal. Maths being the universal language and all that “Glory the Omnissiah” shak. Signal came from out of system, about a day ago, received by something about eight or nine kilometres beneath us.’

Drax watched the walls shriek by in a flurry of sparks. The shaft ran deep. So very deep. He thought of the quarrying that had been his days and his nights before his temper – and a couple of necks – had snapped and he’d landed in solitary. A powerful impact, numbingly near at hand, caused the cage to rattle.

‘We’ve a saying on Caldera: the deeper you dig, the deeper in it you get.’

In the corner of the cage, backed into the angle between the two prisoners, Coddryn looked up, flak suit clapping with the shaking cage. ‘So there are necrons below the surface and necrons from off-world. Does that mean they’re fighting each other?’

Sep shrugged.

The necron code was still pulsing from the vox, voices slowly bleeding through the bordering static. Drax moved from the side of the cage, shoving aside Sep’s angry twitch to lay his own hands to the frequency dial. He could make out the top of the shaft now. They must be near enough to pick up intra-unit transmissions. Deep voices emerged from the white noise; screams, howls, each running through the next and broken up by the explosive crump of gunfire. It was too heavy for auto-rounds. This was bolter fire.

‘...Sabaktes has the main hangar. Dispatch two phalanxes to hold... Make them bleed, brother... Enemy reinforcements on auspex... Will choke on their hollow skulls...’

Hope animated Coddryn’s frozen armour. ‘Those voices. Those weapons.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Sep muttered, quietly flicking off the vox.

‘Adeptus Astartes,’ the warden breathed. ‘We’re saved.’

Sep and Drax shared a calculating look. Neither one was going back to their cell.

Hissing to a halt, the elevator cage clanked against the roof of the shaft, the chatter of bolter fire rising to a blood-hungry howl as the doors shuddered wide and sucked the air out into a cauldron of fumes. Drax gasped, flooding his lungs with cold air that tasted like it had been filtered through an organic solvent.

Crimson tracers and emerald lances criss-crossed the cavernous hangar the elevator had brought them to. Smoke rose from hundreds of hobbled vehicles, snatched at and dragged, caught in the crossfire between the metallic xenos warriors and the bronze-armoured colossi that poured through the breaches in

the far, left hand wall. The air screamed over the angled, oddly *slick*, hulls of Predator tanks as it forced its way out.

Drax recognised the standard template construct.

The vehicles charged into the hangar, jumping and snarling as they rammed aside the broken Imperial transports that littered their path. Sponson heavy bolters gnawed through the shattered vehicles and raked the necrons that moved between them. Lascannons punched down those that still walked, steaming holes the size of a power fist passing right through their torsos.

Get up from that you metal bastards, Drax thought.

Space Marines and lighter vehicles ran in the Predators' wake, kicking aside rubble to form a barricade from which to drop to one knee and open fire. Drax watched as a Dreadnought stomped ahead of the line, bellowing an incomprehensible blend of blood rage and High Gothic from its loudspeakers as it swept a pair of necrons from their feet. The spinning claws of its power fist shredded them like confetti.

Drax cursed as a good chunk of necron fell his way. He threw himself the ten or so metres from the elevator towards the crippled Munitorum walker that lay broken-legged on its side. He pressed his back to it and swore, then looked up. The pieces were still falling, just clattering against the elevator as Sep and Colddryn joined him in cover.

He still wasn't quite used to the gravity here.

Colddryn spun around, gasping hard, slamming the barrel of his autogun on the walker's splayed leg.

'Put it away. And keep your head down.'

'They need our help,' said Colddryn, a necron warrior locked in his sights. A second later that warrior fired, emerald lightning stripping the Dreadnought's legs down to naked servos and sending the raging machine crashing to the floor. Colddryn screamed in anguish. 'This is your chance for absolution.'

Sep held up a hand and looked away, blinking away airy tears. 'Wait for it. Wait for it. Any second now, I'll start to cry.'

'I told you to put it away,' said Drax.

'But—'

'It's useless and you know it. Just ask Rhain.'

Colddryn gripped the gun tighter, then surrendered a nod and lowered it. 'The Chimera's in bay 18.'

'My lucky number,' Drax smiled, risking a look over the debris and finding the numeral CLIX rendered in peeling white paint beneath the frost. The bay to the

right was one higher, to the left one less. That meant closing with the Space Marines. Drax glanced back at Colddryn, then decided the boy was too simple to be any kind of liar.

And at least it was on the way out.

Keeping low and to the wall, Drax abandoned the fallen walker for a Trojan tanker, then another, and another, stop-motion snippets of inhuman violence flashing through the gaps between their frost-bitten bodies. The light cast by bolters on baroque bronze; smoke, crackling with green lightning like a thunderhead; the fitful spark of hypoxic fires; the eerie march of the metallic dead. He thought he could hear the stutter and snap of auto and las-fire and the *crump* of grenades, but the smoke was too dense to see.

The ranks of Trojans gave way to Chimeras, cold and dark as a death in space. Through the strip of unoccupied rockcrete, a squad of five Space Marines stood shoulder-to-shoulder, voice amplifiers curling from their helmets like daemonic horns, throwing out the most feral howls as their boltguns tore a swath through a swarm of scarabs. And yet they retreated. A sixth figure was behind them, two and a half monstrous metres of cracked bronze armour, embossed with strange, quasi-mechanical devices. Half a dozen sinuous servo-arms trailed limply around his feet. Another pair swayed threateningly above his head, unleashing bursts of flame, plasma, and weird coruscating electricity over the heads of his guardians and into the swarm as he backed up against the rear hatch of a Chimera. Yet still the scarabs came.

Drax was smiling. He studied the painted numeral beneath the Techmarine's feet.

XVIII.

Who said the universe didn't have a sense of humour?

Unseen behind him, Colddryn let out a righteous roar and stepped out from the rank of Trojans, controlled bursts of auto-fire shredding scarabs by the dozen. It hardly mattered since they swarmed by the thousand, and no sooner had the boy left cover than a storm of bolter fire drove him back.

'Human!' Colddryn wheezed, waving his rifle around the back of the tank.

Another shower of explosive shells was his response, and the amplified cry went out like a vox-echo. '*Bleed!*'

Drax left him to it. There was a reason the Imperium had too few heroes.

In Bay 19, he crouched and took a look around the vehicle's flank. Colddryn had drawn the Space Marines' fire. Scarabs swarmed their ankles. Only the Techmarine himself was continuing to retreat, limp servo harness sending cutting

beams slicing through the swarm. He was neither too powerful, nor too inhuman, to betray a very real fear.

Taking advantage of their distraction, Drax started from cover, only to be stopped by Sep's sweaty hand on his. Terror pinned the man between the spurs of the Chimera's 'dozer blade. Drax patted him on the side to indicate that he should stay and made the short hop from bay 19 to 18.

The glaxis plate of the Chimera radiated an empyreal chill. White frost that was something far colder than mere water ice filled the cracks between ablative plates. He kicked open the driver's hatch and, grunting at the cryo-blisters, stepped up onto the angled plate.

'Forgetting something, driver?' Sep hissed, freeing a hand to display a ring of keys hanging from his finger.

'Are you?' Drax returned, an autopistol in his grip.

'You *bleedin-*'

'Toss them over.'

Sep hesitated for a second, then swore and slid the keys across the floor. Drax stamped on them and bent, pistol steady, to gather them.

'You think you're getting out of here alive?'

Smiling, Drax climbed back onto the tank, looking past the turret just as a Space Marine charged down a full magazine of auto-fire to drive Colddryn screaming from cover. Even Drax couldn't watch what happened next. He turned back to Sep, aimed the autopistol to the ceiling and squeezed off a few dozen rounds. He wasn't counting. Even amidst the carnage, it went off like a klaxon. Sep gaped, and Drax tossed the weapon to him.

'Keep them busy for me.'

Before the man could react, Drax was pivoting to feed his feet into the hatch and then slither through on his belly. He fell into freezing cold leather, reaching up to seal the hatch on Sep's curses and plunge himself into darkness, bolter fire and screams receding to a hollow tinnitus. He was cocooned in plasteel, a bubble of cold damp and engine grease. Grav-harnesses and oxygen feeds slithered across his face as he groped for the ignition, found it, slid in the key and twisted. The engine choked on petrochem fumes and growled into life. Lights flickered on. The broken auspex emitted a shrill tone that Drax quickly silenced, then he gripped the gear stick and slid it into reverse.

The tank lumbered backwards, rear rising as it passed over something unyielding and then crashed back down. Bolt rounds pattered harmlessly off the hull as he shifted into forward gear. The tough little box-screen to his right

showed black and white images from pict-feeds to front and rear. It showed a Techmarine and a pair of Space Marines crushed in his tread marks. Mechatendrils jerked like electrocuted serpents and then were still.

Behind them, Sep was clambering onto the neighbouring tank, clinging to its roof as bolter rounds blazed over him, and pulling uselessly at the turret hatch. He fell a second before Drax looked away, a flurry of auto-fire accounting for him and for the Space Marine that was ripping into Colddryn's corpse with his bare gauntlets. A squad of dull-eyed men in black jumpsuits and with barcodes tattooed across their foreheads shambled into view of the pict-feed. One was punched from his feet by a bolt round, the blood spray eliciting an ecstatic howl from the surviving Space Marines. The other troopers twitched, small scarab-like machines clasped to the roof of their spines, and sprayed the Space Marines with auto-fire.

What in the Eye of Terror? He supposed that explained the lack of bodies.

With a noxious snarl, the Chimera leapt forwards and away.

The breach in the outer wall was about three hundred metres ahead. It was thick with smoke and the hellish glow of bolter fire. The Space Marines that were currently running through it turned their weapons his way and fired. Explosive rounds pranged off the thick frontal armour. One of the Space Marines dropped to one knee and hefted a missile launcher. Drax gritted his teeth, slamming the accelerator to full just as the krak missile burst from the tube.

The warhead struck the glacis plate just to the left of the right hand track. The hull-mounted heavy bolter flew across his visual field and the whole tank tipped towards its left side. Drax swore and held on. The track flapped through thin air before crashing back down, threatening to drag the vehicle into a skid before Drax brought it under control. The Chimera powered ahead and the Space Marines scattered. Bolt rounds peppered the rear hatch, but a second later he was out, jumping across the cratered moonscape. The perimeter lights of the orbital pad blinked in the distance as, unnoticed, the Chimera left the road and veered left.

His attention was riveted to the pict-feed, its silent series of grainy stills reporting devastation on a planetary scale.

The confinement habs had been levelled, there was nothing left of them but three new craters and vast overlapping rings of scrap. The ruins crawled with necrons. Like creatures from beyond the grave, they dug themselves from the frozen ground, joining the thousands of others already marching in unison towards the eastern face of the valley where once there had stood mountains.

The range had been demolished, rock and ice scattered across the cratered plain. In its place, the twisted and bloody wreckage of a starship lay under a pall of slow-settling methane snow. Drax whistled nervously, then finally took stock of where he was going. Hab-dome gamma lay immediately ahead, and it seemed to be the nexus of the necron activity. Ring after ring of unfeeling warriors surrounded it like a wall, taking their punishment and offering it back while, behind them, scarabs and more warriors waded through the ruins and dug.

The rubble there was shifting, something rising from its ashes. The moon shook with it and it rattled the tank like a broken egg.

A quintet of hypersonic flyers arrowed overhead, all gleaming silver alloy and sleek metallic lines. Pulling impossible turns, they swept around, strafing the Space Marine lines before banking into a holding pattern. Drax stared into the pict-feed, up past the flyers into what should have been a night sky. But even the galactic behemoth, Ixus IX, had been dragged into the fight, the vast black hemisphere glinting with the gold, white, and crimson of weapons-fire and explosions.

A sudden fury overcame him then. He was Drax, of Caldera. He'd fought on fifteen worlds and left each of them the worse for having him. *Chaos take them all*, he swore, and banked hard.

Hab-dome alpha spun across the pict-feed, heaped with the ice that had belonged to the toppled mountain range. Weapons fire of a hundred different types stitched across the plain as the Space Marines brandished power spears, unleashed boltguns into the sky, and charged towards hab-dome gamma. An immense war engine of a type Drax had never seen led the assault. It *was* the assault. Frozen gore bled from its humanoid chassis, gatling gun chaining in airless silence through the unfeeling ranks of the necrons. More monster than machine, it had taken damage enough to drop a Titan, and fury alone drove its tracks into one final charge.

The murderer's blood in him bubbled just watching it.

The weight of gees pressed him to his seat as the Chimera swung fully about. The orbital pad lay directly ahead and he hit the accelerator.

He was the hardest, the worst, he lived where other men died and, by the cold body of the Emperor, it'd take more than this to put Drax in the ground.

Turning to his rear-view feed, he watched with a contagious grimace as pylons and lumps of ferrocrete gave way before an ascending monolith. It was a pyramid, black as deep space, and it was rising. Rock and ice crumbling from its sleek geometric sides, the rubble of hab-dome gamma gave and, impossibly, it

continued to climb, gravity just another force it had elected to disregard. Drax hit the accelerator for all it was worth. Only something huge could be getting so much further behind him and yet grow no smaller. Small arms fire and hot blasts of las and plasma deflected off its monolithic hull and, as though aligning itself to the turnings of the cosmos, the pyramid turned slowly about its vertical axis.

And then it was as if the world broke in two.

The pyramid split down the centre, the pict-feed dissolving into static as a golden brilliance roared through the cracks like the birth of galaxies. A shockwave thumped through the moon's crust, tossing aside mighty Space Marines like spent cartridges from a magazine. A kilometre away, even the Chimera jumped like water in a hot pan. With a curse, Drax held it steady.

The pict-feed was clearing up, capturing a ring of devastation around the opening pyramid. There was a being inside it, bound in chains of stellar matter as though caged within the heart of a star.

Except it wasn't.

Drax watched as the earth fell away, a vast canyon that tracked, to the precise degree, the pyramid's rotation and the eyeline of that shackled entity. Where its gaze fell, Rhinos and Predators were flipped into the air and torn open, infantry consumed by withering waves of fire. Drax couldn't believe what he saw, but he couldn't look away. As he watched, a string of meteors materialised out of the sky, hanging like beads on a necklace before they spontaneously ignited, hyper-accelerated, and hammered through the Space Marine advance in huge explosions of ice and fire.

No, Drax thought, as the pyramid continued to turn, that arc of devastation coming inexorably towards him, like an asteroid destined to cross the orbit of a sun. This being had brought the star into the cage with it.

'Try it!' Drax roared at the screen. It heard him, he knew. He could feel it, just as he had felt its first stirrings from within his cell. 'Come on. Come get some.'

It turned full face.

And then Drax really did feel it, the full epochal malevolence of the c'tan.

The ignition spluttered. The lights flickered and failed and Drax found that he couldn't move, not even to put his fingers to the ignition keys. He was a child, left in his crib of cold leather and plasteel by a cruel star-god. It saw him, but his eyes couldn't begin to fathom it and he saw only darkness. Drax might have wept then, but it didn't matter. The transcendent shard of the c'tan took the time to study him. Not because Drax was special. He was not. It took the time because it could, because time ran to its command. The instant stretched, to an

infinity if the c'tan had so willed, but time enough for Drax to comprehend.

The universe didn't love him. The Emperor would never know his name. Only this entity, this god of ancient stars, would remember.

And in the second that followed, the Chimera flipped onto its back, its belly splitting open. Air, heat and Drax himself were ripped through the hull and out onto the surface of the moon. He floated, falling so slowly. The world was black and silent. It was cold.

And the c'tan looked away.

>>Message reads:

>>Ignoble scion of a forgotten dynasty, your awakening disturbs the quiet of space, that stillness to which the necrontyr aspire. Your world will be calmed, your minds quieted, your bodies restored to order. The Tesseract Vault and its transcendent shard shall return to Sarkon, that the c'tan may again purge the stars of disquiet. As it was after the Wars of Secession, so it shall again be. Thus decrees the Emperor of the Severed.

>>Message ends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID GUYMER is no stranger to the worlds of Warhammer, with exciting stories in *Gotrek and Felix: The Anthology* and *Hammer and Bolter*, and much more on the way. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding. When not writing, David can be found exorcising his disappointment at the gaming table and preparing for the ascension of the children of the Horned Rat.



The Death Korps of Krieg arrive at a mining world overrun by necrons, determined to win this brutal war at any cost...

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