

WARHAMMER
40,000



EDOARDO ALBERT

LAST FLIGHT

**AN AERONAUTICA IMPERIALIS
SHORT STORY**

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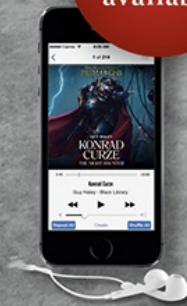
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LAST FLIGHT

Edoardo Albert

‘And having completed the attack run, return on the opposite bearing. The fleet will be steaming to meet you.’

Baruch Neriah, pilot commander of Marauder *Spirit of St Pascale*, glanced round the rest of the flight crews in the briefing room. Wasn’t anyone going to ask the obvious question? But they were all studiously staring ahead at the tactical simulation that the briefing officer was standing beside. The air in the room was heavy with what had not been voiced.

‘If that is all, gentlemen...’ The briefing officer bent over the desk and began to gather together the tactical readouts.

Neriah held his hand up.

The briefing officer paused.

Neriah raised his hand further.

The briefing officer straightened. ‘Yes?’ He peered across the brightly lit briefing room, squinting to see the name tag. ‘Pilot Commander Neriah?’

‘Sir, range to target is seven thousand miles.’

‘Current intelligence tells us that is correct.’

Neriah did not need to look round to feel the tension in the room.

‘Maximum range in my Marauder is ten thousand.’

‘The fleet will be making full speed towards you. Simulations suggest that the lead vessels should be coming into range just in time for your return.’

‘The carriers?’

‘They will be following.’

‘So we’ll be ditching.’

The briefing officer paused. ‘That is a possibility.’

‘I hope you all know how to swim, boys.’

The laughter that filled the briefing room was loud, and brittle. Pilot Commander Baruch Neriah watched the briefing officer gather his papers. Behind him, the tactical screens were showing the pictures that had led the fleet commander to authorise the mission: the heretic carrier fleet. To escape the hurricane that was turning the great northern ocean into a deathtrap, they had had to steam south. Within range of a flight of Marauders.

Well, within range so long as you weren't too bothered about the Marauders getting back again. But, so far as the fleet commander was concerned, the risk of losing a squadron of Marauders was worth it for the chance to attack the enemy carrier fleet. Sink them, and the long struggle for Sagaraya would be all but won.

Winning the war was worth a sacrifice.

Baruch Neriah looked around the briefing room at the silent crews slowly absorbing the knowledge that they were the sacrifice.

The briefing officer stepped back to the lectern. 'If you do have to ditch, use your life rafts. They have all been fitted with transponders. We will find you.'

Neriah held up his hand again. 'Have you seen the things that live in the sea?'

'We will find you.'

'Hopefully before they do.'

The world was water.

There had been cases, during the war for Sagaraya, of pilots losing themselves in the endless heave and shift, and flying on, in a wave-induced trance, until their fuel tanks were exhausted and their planes slid down from the sky to be embraced by the ocean. It was mainly a problem for the fighter boys, the single-seat jockeys, but Neriah had heard of Valkyries getting lost in the big blue, and there was a rumour that even a couple of Marauders had gone missing, flying on until they disappeared.

Pilot Commander Baruch Neriah pulled his focus back from the horizon. Under the respirator, he licked his lips. He had lost himself in the blue. His eyes flicked to the mission-time clock. He had been lost for at least ten minutes. And if he had been lost, then so were the rest of the crew – any comms talk would have snapped him out of his reverie.

Neriah glanced to his left, to his co-pilot and navigator, Mehem Radin, and saw the long stare and still face that told of a soul slowly flowing into the blue.

'Mehem.'

As the name sounded, Radin's face shifted, the co-pilot waking from his distant daze. He looked round, eyes still stupid with the sea, and saw Neriah looking at

him.

‘Sorry. Got a bit lost there.’

‘The forever stare.’

‘Not so much,’ said Radin. ‘I... I knew the crew of *Wind Bird* well.’

Neriah stared ahead. Losing one of the craft on take-off was not a good start to the mission. *Wind Bird*, burdened with the fuel drop tanks needed to extend its range, had failed to gain height from the carrier flight launch, instead scything into the sea in a welter of fracturing debris. Even with *Spirit*, who had always been a light-flying bird, Neriah had had to push the control stick forward on clearing the deck of the carrier to pick up enough speed for lift before he could haul the labouring plane upwards, and for a moment he had thought that he had overcooked it, and the wave ridges were going to trip the Marauder up and send it tumbling into the sea.

‘They sent out recovery craft.’

‘Didn’t look like much to recover.’

Neriah, never one to let silence fester, keyed the comm open. If he had gone into the blue, others might have too.

‘Crew, report status.’

As the comm began to squawk into life, Radin turned to his navigation panel.

‘*Shivkin reporting, pilot commander. All well.*’ The bombardier. During the approach run, he would be down in the blister below the fuselage – the glasshouse, they all called it – lining up the torpedo slung under *Spirit of St Pascale*’s belly. The torpedo was designed to run ten feet below the water’s surface. The enemy carrier, the size of an island, had barely noticed the munitions dropped from the sky on the very few occasions it had come within range of Imperial forces: the carrier’s decks and forecastles were heavily reinforced and had shrugged off the bombs that had managed to pierce the vessel’s fighter screen.

But the sea of Sagaraya was restless and hungry: give it a breach and it would push it open and wide, flooding in and pulling the vessel down into its dark deeps. The torpedo each Marauder carried was designed to do exactly that.

‘*Gasko, pilot commander. Nothing to report.*’ Eitan Gasko, nose turret gunner.

‘*Pilot commander, Salk reporting.*’ Tsvi Salk was the top turret gunner, the sky sight.

Neriah waited. He waited a beat longer. Then he sighed.

‘Plotnik. Are you still with us?’

Pinye Plotnik was the tail gunner. Like all tail gunners, he existed within a

separate world, all but cut off from the rest of the crew, to whom he sometimes reported, normally only to tell of the downing of some approaching enemy craft.

'...five...'

Neriah sighed again. 'Plotnik, report.'

'...six... seven, eight... nine, ten.'

Plotnik was not one to disappear into the blue.

'Are you reporting a contact, Pinye?'

'I'm counting,' said Plotnik.

Neriah glanced at Radin, who raised his eyes and shook his head – a familiar response to one of Plotnik's whimsies. But the man was the best tail gunner in the Circus, the Third Air Fleet, with an uncanny ability to down enemy aircraft – he had even taken out at least six locked-on air-to-air missiles, which was four more than any other gunner in the Circus.

'Counting what, Pinye?'

'Drop tanks. They make a nice splash. Some even float for a minute – until the sharks get them.'

'They're not sharks,' interrupted Radin, who when in his cups had been known to take an aviator aside and explain to him, with all the truthful sincerity of a man who would remember nothing of what he said in the morning, that the only reason he had joined the Navy was to see something other than the hive of his birth. 'They appear to be aquatic reptiles that returned to the water when the ocean covered all the land of Sagaraya.'

'They've got teeth and they're in the sea – they're sharks.'

'We'll leave aside questions of xenobiology for the moment,' Neriah said. 'Give me a visual check on the flight, Plotnik and Salk.' With the mission flying in vox silence, the tail and top turret gunners had the best visual for the other two Marauders in Neriah's flight.

'Glory Two, check,' said Salk.

'Glory Three, check,' said Plotnik.

'Waymark four,' Radin added.

'Noted,' said Neriah. 'Is it time to descend?'

The navigator checked then rechecked the distance readings before looking to the auspex.

'On the mark, descend to flight level one – three, two, one, mark.'

Neriah gently eased the control stick forward, bringing the nose of *Spirit of St Pascale* down. Rolling blue filled the world beyond the cockpit canopy.

The ramjets, set for maximum fuel economy during the approach, were quiet –

it would have been possible to speak to Radin without comms.

‘Salk, Plotnik, check that Glory Two and Glory Three are following us down to flight level one.’

Neriah heard the confirmation as he concentrated on bringing *Spirit* down to the correct altitude. The ramjets, appreciative of the richer air, struck up a deeper, more full-throated note.

‘Listen to the music,’ Radin called out.

‘Just got to make sure I don’t choke it,’ said Neriah.

Flight level one was wave tops plus three hundred feet. But on this world of water, waves exceeding three hundred feet were not uncommon, even far from storm zones. On a previous mission, Neriah had been flying at flight level two – wave apex plus sixteen hundred feet – when a water wall had come at him from the horizon, the meeting of sky and sea, that had him hauling back *Spirit*’s control stick and keying the afterburners for every pound of additional thrust they could give him, and still spray had rung like las-rounds on the underside of the plane.

Flight level one took them down below reliable auspex coverage. At that level, they could get in close to the enemy carrier. Even overflying fighter patrols would have difficulty picking out the Marauders moving that low over the wave tops. But flying at that altitude meant that Neriah, as pilot commander, was going to earn his stripes.

‘Time to go surface,’ said Neriah, a grin of concentration on his face. This was what flying was about. Yes, you could throw a Lightning around over the water banks, letting it ride the rollers and surf the breakers, but to keep a Marauder touching the wave tops – and then to bring it down to flight level zero for the attack run, using the wave troughs as protection and cover until close enough to let the torpedo run – that was real flying. This was what the war on Sagaraya had taught him, and he had learned the lessons of the water world well.

Eyes slit against the glitter glare that splintered through the filters of his goggles, Neriah read the water as much as the air – for he had learned that the two obeyed many of the same laws.

‘ETA to final waymark?’

Radin checked the navigation console. ‘Fifteen minutes, thirty seconds.’

‘Did you hear that, Shivkin?’

‘*Loud and clear.*’

‘Torpedo ready to release?’

‘*Primed and ready.*’

‘Say again – when we make our run, I’ll give the signal when I’ve got as close in as I can. Drop the torpedo as soon as the track is clear.’

‘Understood, pilot commander.’

‘Gunners, keep watch. We can expect hostile fighters from here on in.’

Gasko, Salk and Plotnik chorused their readiness.

‘Crew, we are at flight station amber. Flight station red expected in– Radin?’

‘Ten minutes and five seconds.’

‘You all heard that. We’re going to make those traitor scum drink seawater.’

Neriah, while keeping both hands on the control stick and his eyes scanning the blue, keyed voice-to-voice to Radin. ‘Listen on the vox-channel. Wrath Flight should be making their run soon. Let me know if you hear anything.’

They flew on in silent concentration until, from the slight tremor Neriah saw with his peripheral vision, he knew that Radin had heard something.

‘What’s happening?’ he asked over his direct channel. ‘They’re supposed to be keeping vox silence.’

‘Doesn’t sound good,’ said Radin.

‘Patch it through.’

‘...size of that thing... Contacts, twelve o’clock... Torpedo running... miss... Can’t lose them...’

‘I’ve heard enough,’ said Neriah. Squinting ahead, where blue met blue, was that...?

It looked like land.

‘Auspex,’ he said to the navigator.

‘Contacts,’ said Radin. He stared at his screen. ‘No, contact. It’s the size of a city.’

Rising up on the horizon, battlemented, turreted, prowed and proud, was the carrier. It was the size of a floating island, tended and surrounded by a flotilla of craft that, in comparison, looked no more than rowing boats, but were themselves cruiser- or even battleship-class. Next to the carrier, they seemed but toys.

‘Flight station red.’ Neriah adjusted the mask over his face.

‘It’s buzzing like a rockmite mound over there,’ said Radin, his face lit orange by the auspex streaks.

‘I always liked poking them when I was a kid,’ said Neriah, ‘and running away before they could catch me. Time to do it again.’ He took a breath. ‘Going to flight level zero.’

‘Glory Two and Glory Three following.’ The report was from Plotnik.

Neriah banked beside a mile-long wave, running its ridge, the exhaust from the ramjets sending up trailing water spumes that would look, to any carrier deck observers, as if the wave were cresting.

Hiding behind the wall of water, even the vast bulk of the Chaos carrier was out of sight. More importantly, *Spirit of St Pascale*, with Glory Two and Glory Three following close in its wake, was invisible to the carrier and its surrounding convoy, the heretics distracted by the attacks coming in from the first two flights.

Neriah glanced left, saw his wing tip all but slicing the water, and eased the control stick over.

‘Bane Flight attacking,’ Radin reported.

‘Acknowledged.’ Neriah’s glance flicked to the altimeter, then back to the blue. According to the instrument, he was running below sea level. Neriah grinned. He continued shooting the wave trough, using it as the attack channel, and pulling Glory Two and Glory Three along behind him, the water flattened out by the ramjet wake.

‘Bane Two reports hit,’ said Radin.

‘Acknowledged.’

‘Bane Three down.’

Neriah said nothing. He glanced at the auspex trace. The wave trough was beginning to lead him away. He was going to have to rise above wave height and vector towards the target.

‘Contact! Five o’clock.’ The signal was from Plotnik.

‘Contact. Hell Blades. Nine o’clock.’ Salk, the top turret gunner.

‘Engage.’ Neriah had his gaze fixed on the blue, his peripheral vision tracking the auspex reading of the carrier and its fleet, while another part of his mind, working in the pilot’s cold calm of vector space, calculated angles of approach and attack runs.

‘Shivkin, you ready?’ he asked.

‘Torpedo ready, pilot commander.’

Even as he heard the answer, Neriah felt the percussive thump of heavy bolter fire. Salk had opened up. A moment later, the counterpoint judder of the tail gunner. The water in front of *Spirit* suddenly thrashed, fountaining in a diagonal stream, as a burst of fire raked just clear of the plane’s nose, the spray rattling against the canopy like talons.

Radin ducked, despite himself, but Neriah barely blinked, his focus so tight on the wave tops that he hardly registered the spray.

The guns fired again, the tenor thrum of the nose lascannons constant under the

baritone and bass of the top and tail heavy bolters. *Spirit of St Pascale* resonated with them, the note different according to where in the fuselage they were located.

Together, the three turrets formed a choir. They sang, their music making a bass threnody to the high-pitched chatter of the Chaos Hell Blades' autocannons. It was a familiar melody, and one that allowed Neriah to concentrate on what he had to do: fly the plane to the target.

'Call the vector.' With the pursuit so close, Neriah had to keep *Spirit* flying low over the water.

'Vector three-thirty degrees, on my mark. Three, two, one, mark.'

Neriah caressed the control stick to the left, floating *Spirit* up to the top of the wave that they had been running alongside. As they reached the crest, they saw it. Radin gasped. Gasko swore. Neriah rode the plane down the rolling level, hiding it in another trough.

Now, within visual, they could see what they were attacking: a fortress island, rising from the sea.

How could you sink something like that?

He began vectoring north-east across the line of travel, waiting for the final moment to turn for the approach run. Then, they would be running perpendicular to the wave front, flying over the top of the waves, a target for the full brunt of the anti-aircraft fire from the Chaos carrier.

The brief glimpse over the wave tops had shown that the hits claimed by Wrath and Bane Flights had barely damaged the carrier. It was steaming onwards, as inexorable as a tsunami, bringing the full weight of its thousand aircraft to the battle for the southern ocean. It was their job to stop it.

Seeing it, Neriah realised why the fleet commander was willing to sacrifice a flight of Marauders for the chance of stopping its progress. Any sacrifice would be worth making to send it under the sea. The Imperial Navy had nothing on Sagaraya to match this behemoth.

It had to be stopped.

Neriah scanned the auspex. The carrier appeared on it as a monstrosity, a blight in the orange-and-black world of the screens, with minor traces scurrying around it. Glory Two and Glory Three were still with him, riding along the wave troughs, their progress covered by Plotnik's and Salk's gun turrets.

The bolter music thrummed again, the whole body of *Spirit* resonating in harmony with the twin heavy bolters in the tail and on top of the plane. Through the comm, Neriah could hear the steady stream of curses that Plotnik spat at the

Chaos aircraft: the pilot commander had sometimes wondered if the curses were as effective as the bolter shells in bringing down the enemy, for otherwise it was hard to explain the extraordinary tally of downed aircraft that Plotnik had claimed. Salk remained wreathed in the song of his own weapons, speaking only to claim a hit.

‘Three.’

Neriah had missed the first two.

He glimpsed, in peripheral vision to starboard, the cartwheeling impact of a Hell Blade plunging into the sea.

The pilot commander keyed the comm live. There was no point maintaining vox silence any longer.

‘Glory One to Glory Two and Glory Three – prepare for attack run.’ Neriah glanced at Radin, whose eyes were flicking to his screens. ‘Call the vector, Mehem.’

‘Vector three hundred degrees on my mark. Three, two, one... mark.’

Neriah pulled the control stick left. At the same moment he engaged the ramjets’ afterburners. The twin engines kicked *Spirit* up and over the wave crest, taking the plane to flight level one.

There it was. An island rising from the sea, with cliffs and promontories and headlands, forested not with trees but gun emplacements. Its flanks were bristling with weaponry. Above the carrier, the air was abuzz with planes, moving like a hive swarm. From their movement, however, Neriah could tell that the attacks launched by Wrath and Bane Flights had exhausted the fuel reserves of the carrier’s fighter cover: most of the hastily scrambled birds were returning to the roost. How far before Shivkin could let the torpedo run?

The size of the thing made it impossible to judge distance by eye.

‘Range?’

‘Thirty miles. It can’t avoid. We could release now.’

Neriah looked ahead, over the wave caps, and saw, looking like upended triangles, the upturned hulls of at least five ships around the Chaos island carrier. While the carrier was unable to manoeuvre to avoid being struck, its flotilla of fast protective destroyers and cruisers was able and willing to interpose itself between the bombers’ torpedoes and their target. Already, five ships were sinking, taking their crew down into the black below the blue, so that the carrier might sail on.

The only way to ensure that his torpedo was not blocked was to get in close, past the screen of destroyers and cruisers. Right in under the cliff walls of the

island carrier.

‘Negative. Shivkin, release at half a mile. Glory Two, Glory Three, Glory One going in.’ Neriah keyed the channel to Gasko, the nose gunner. ‘Clear a path for me, Eitan.’

‘*We will.*’

Neriah felt *Spirit* judder as the lascannons in the nose turret ate into their powercells, the electric thrum building and falling with each shot as he lifted the plane over a wave crest. Ahead, a light vessel disintegrated, the sea bursting in through the gaping holes the lascannons had left in its hull.

Over the vox, crackling in through the scrapcode jamming from the island carrier, Glory Two announced he was starting his attack run.

‘Range?’ Neriah asked Radin.

‘Twenty-five miles. One minute to target.’

‘Release at ten seconds.’

‘*Order acknowledged, pilot commander,*’ said Shivkin, like all good bombardiers a stickler for protocol.

‘Fifty seconds,’ counted off Radin.

The island carrier was looming ahead, bigger than a mountain. From its cliff sides spat red lines of tracer fire, lacing over the blue, kicking waves into spindrift. But Neriah held *Spirit* level and true at flight level one. Coming straight in, low and fast, they were a tiny target. Even the best gunner would be hard put to catch them, but the barrage was frothing the ocean all around – any stray shot might be fatal.

Spirit of St Pascale lurched and heeled left, the movement all but simultaneous with the sound of autocannon rounds ripping into plasteel. The wing tip cut into and caught in the blue. Neriah fought with the control stick, trying to haul the wing back out of the water’s friction grip before it pulled the nose down and into the wave top. Acting without thought but with the experience of ten thousand hours of flight, Neriah throttled back the twin ramjets on the right wing and gunned those on the left, adding engine torque to the yaw and roll he was imparting with control stick and rudder.

It was the engine torque that did it, the thousands of pounds of thrust from the twin ramjets pushing the wing tip out of the water’s grip. But, with the drag on *Spirit* suddenly ended, the plane yawed violently and pitched vertically upwards, its belly suddenly open in an exposed crucifix to the tracking gun turrets on the carrier island.

Autocannon rounds, las-beams and bolter fire ripped through the air, while

Neriah fought to push *Spirit's* nose down again as he gunned the starboard jets to maximum.

‘Hang on!’

Neriah pushed the control stick hard over, going with the plane’s motion rather than fighting it, rolling the forty-ton bomber through the sort of barrel roll manoeuvre that she was never designed to carry out. Neriah felt the wings straining under the pressure, like limbs being pulled from their sockets, the strain transmitting through the metal substance of the plane and to his fingers, locked on the controls.

‘Come on, come on, you can do it.’

The worlds of blue, sea and sky, inverted, held, then returned to their proper positions. But the evasive action had turned them round: the traitor carrier was now off the port side and vectoring away. They had missed their attack run.

‘*Glory Two, releasing torpedo.*’

The vox message was almost inaudible amid the screech of jamming scrapcode, but Plotnik confirmed.

‘*Fish running.*’

‘Glory Two, get out of here.’

A burst of scrapcode ate any acknowledgement.

‘Hit!’ Radin shouted, turning to the pilot commander. ‘The torpedo hit.’

Neriah began to haul *Spirit* round and saw the last settling of the water from where the torpedo had struck.

‘*We’re hit, we’re hit.*’ Glory Three, on fire, streaking low over the sea, her progress marked by streams of las-fire.

A Hell Blade, little more than a blur of movement, flashed overhead, stitching the waves with a stream of autocannon fire as it went after Glory Three, only to jerk sideways as it was hit by wild las-fire from the carrier, before a targeted burst from *Spirit's* lascannons punched it into a shower of flying wreckage.

‘*Got it.*’ The voice was Eitan’s, from the nose turret.

Neriah pushed *Spirit's* nose back down, sending her to the wave tops, and engaged the afterburners on all four ramjets.

‘Shivkin, we’re following Glory Three in – aim for where they hit.’

If he were flying a burning coffin, knowing that he was about to die, Neriah knew that he would try to take some of the heretic filth out with him. Pilot Commander Mar Rossoff of Glory Three was an old friend: Neriah could picture him nursing the controls, squinting through the smoke at the looming bulk of the enemy carrier and singing through the litany of flight that he might keep Glory

Three, *Soul of the Valiant*, in the air long enough to finish his attack run in person.

And Neriah would follow in behind it, using the distraction of the enemy gunners to make his own renewed attack run.

But it meant that Neriah, and Radin, and Gasko in the nose turret, saw the slow death of *Soul of the Valiant*, its turrets disintegrating into shards of armourglass, its wings peppered with multiplying holes, trailing fire and glory.

‘How is it still flying?’

Neriah heard Radin’s question but he could not answer it. The Marauder was little more than fire and fragments, yet there was still purpose at the heart of the flames, a purpose and striving that overcame even the clutch of gravity and the increasingly frantic fire from the cliff turrets of the carrier island.

Soul of the Valiant struck the enemy carrier just above the waterline. For a fractured moment, it seemed as if the plane had exhausted itself in getting so far. Then the explosion came. The torpedo, still clutched to the belly of the Marauder, followed by the fuel tanks and all the remaining munitions. The side of the enemy carrier was torn asunder, cracks sending gun emplacements tumbling into the seething water.

Neriah, following after Glory Three, holding *Spirit* down to the wave tops, called for the mark from Radin then keyed Shivkin on comms. ‘Send our torpedo into that hole. Radin, mark at five seconds.’

‘Five seconds.’ Radin licked his lips. That would give them almost no time to pull out before smacking into the side of the carrier themselves.

‘Count it,’ said Neriah.

The walls of the enemy carrier were higher than he could see now, an endless expanse of metal and plasteel carved into obscene, stomach-churning shapes.

‘On my mark,’ said Radin. ‘Release in five... four... three... two... one – mark!’

‘Torpedo running!’

Even as Shivkin released the torpedo, Neriah was hauling the control stick starboard, his foot hard down on the rudder, gunning the port engines.

‘Come on, come on.’

Spirit’s nose was coming round, autocannon and bolter fire flashing past, but they were so close and travelling so fast that none of the gunners could traverse their guns quickly enough to keep up with the Marauder.

‘Hit! Hit!’

The yells came in two voices, Plotnik’s and Salk’s, but Neriah was too busy

fighting with *Spirit's* controls to do more than barely register what they said, as he slowly brought *Spirit* back level before engaging all four afterburners. The safest place was as near the enemy carrier as he dared.

He glanced to his left. The wing tip was all but scraping the blur of gun emplacements. He would run the length of the island carrier before turning – any of the screening flotilla trying to get a lock on them would risk shooting their own vessel.

Then, he felt it. A judder and ripple. The cliff wall of the carrier island jerked forward, and Neriah had to roll *Spirit* hard to starboard. From above, falling in cascading streams, came gun turrets and munitions and gantries and, among them, flailing, tumbling figures.

Then the carrier island juddered again.

They heard it this time. Over the roar of the ramjets, a low, gathering rumble, interspersed with metal screams, that built to a physical crescendo of sound which shoved the forty tons of the Marauder sideways through the air.

'By the Emperor's grace,' said Plotnik – and Neriah knew that something extraordinary must have happened, for never before had he heard the tail gunner use anything but an expletive as an exclamation.

Still riding *Spirit* on the leading edge of the explosion, and with the carrier now directly to the rear, Neriah could only see the front edge of the blast wave rocking and overturning the vessels in the flotilla.

'What's happening?' he yelled into the comm.

'It's... it's like the end of the world,' said Plotnik. *'The carrier – fire, erupting, splitting it open.'*

Neriah turned *Spirit* through sixty degrees so he could see. He saw the heretic carrier erupt into fingers of fire, ammo and fuel stores catching, bursting, paring open its innards to the sky. He saw the sea seethe, and react, as things beneath the waves swarmed to feast on drowning heretics.

Neriah turned away. *'Radin, what's our heading?'*

The navigator started. He had also been caught up with watching the end of the leviathan. *'Set course to one-seventy degrees.'*

'Check.' Neriah brought *Spirit* round to the return bearing. *'Fuel?'*

Radin leaned forward. He tapped the gauge. He tapped it again. Then he looked to his pilot commander. *'Fifteen per cent. One of the tanks must have been hit.'*

Neriah nodded. *'She's a good girl. She'll get us there.'* He keyed open the comm. *'Crew, shut down every system that doesn't directly keep us in the air.'* He looked to Radin. *'Get rid of everything. We killed that thing. Now we're*

going to make it back alive.’

While Radin closed down the systems, Neriah gentled *Spirit* higher. Sea level provided the richest air mixture for the ramjets, but had the highest resistance. Normal cruising altitude would require the oxygen circulation systems to be restored. In the end, Neriah decided on five thousand feet as the best altitude: low enough to allow both jets and crew to breathe, high enough to reduce drag a small but significant amount – and, with a glide ratio of 20:1, the height would provide a further twenty miles of travel when the fuel tanks ran dry.

As Neriah coaxed *Spirit* further on her heading south, feeling for any thermal and updraught he could find, Radin unstrapped himself and began stripping the cockpit of everything that could be moved. From further down the plane, Neriah could hear thumps and banging and dragging as everything detachable was moved to the hatches.

In the middle of shutting down systems, Radin stopped. ‘What about the auspex?’ he asked. ‘If I shut that off, we won’t be able to see if we’re anywhere near the fleet.’

‘Shut it off,’ said Neriah. ‘We’ll try firing it up when the juice runs out – there should still be something left in the batteries to run it.’

The orange displays flared and died. As Radin headed down the aircraft, Neriah looked around. The cockpit looked different without the constant ruddy glow. Colder. More dead.

‘You’ll make it, old girl,’ whispered Neriah, patting the control panel. ‘You’ll make it.’ But the control panel was dead too. He was, he realised, slowly killing the machine that had brought him back alive from over two hundred and fifty sorties.

He drew his hand back from the control panel. There was nothing else to say.

Pilot Commander Baruch Neriah looked to the horizon, searching for the distant flecks that might tell of the approaching fleet. But there was only blue.

There was only blue.

In her final service to them, *Spirit of St Pascale*, fuel exhausted and systems dead, had settled upon the ocean with the gentleness of a seabird. Safely evacuated into the life raft, Baruch Neriah, Mehem Radin, Mark Shivkin, Eitan Gasko, Tsvi Salk and Pinye Plotnik watched in silence as the plane – their home, their protection and their refuge – slowly sank.

The auspex, fired up during the long glide downwards, had shown not a single trace. If any of the other planes from the mission had survived, they were out of

range – as was the fleet. From the altitude at which the always temperamental auspex had finally restarted – three thousand feet – its effective range was only ten miles.

Sitting in the life raft, ten miles seemed a long way away.

Pinye Plotnik took off his flight helmet. He tossed it from hand to hand. ‘Catch, anyone?’

Neriah shook his gaze away from the blank patch of water that had surged over his last glimpse of *Spirit of St Pascale*. It had been her tail fin, raised as if in final farewell.

‘We paddle.’

Plotnik opened his mouth as if to make one of his usual smart comments then, catching sight of Neriah’s expression, he closed it again.

‘Yes, pilot commander.’

They paddled. The life raft had two paddles, and Neriah assigned the men shifts, while the rest took shelter from the fierce sun under the shade that they rigged over half the raft.

There were emergency rations for ten days, water for two. Water took much more storage space than rations.

Along with the emergency rations, the raft was supplied with five flares and an emergency transponder, with an effective battery life of twenty-four hours. Calculating, in his head, the likely range to the vanguard of the approaching fleet, Neriah decided that they should paddle south for a full day before activating the transponder.

But he did not get the chance.

The rip of a flare launching pulled Neriah from his doze.

‘Plane, plane!’

He stared around, still stupid from sleep, and saw the flare trailing orange into the sky. He heard the rumble-thrum of jets approaching, the sound catching and springing off the waves. Salk and Shivkin were on their feet, waving; the others were shouting, while Neriah looked round, trying to locate the sound. He saw Radin loading another flare.

He knocked the flare gun from Radin’s hand. ‘Get down!’ he yelled, pulling Salk and Shivkin off their feet.

‘What are you doing?’ yelled Radin, scrabbling in the bottom of the life raft for the flare gun. ‘They’ll miss us.’

‘It’s coming from the north. It’s coming from the wrong direction.’

At that, the men in the life raft fell silent.

The flare trail hung in the sky, pointing down at them like a finger.

And, following the mark from the north, came a red bird, crouched and hooked and barbed. The Valkyrie was covered in foul heretic sigils, its autocannons held in silent readiness as its ramjets cycled to hover and the great red death bird settled above the sea a hundred yards away from them, the water beneath its jets turning to fume.

With the island carrier drowned, the crew of the remaining Chaos aircraft had nothing left but the search for vengeance before it was their turn to drown.

The pilot vectored his Valkyrie closer. The downdraught rocked the raft.

‘What’re they doing?’ asked Radin. ‘Why don’t they just finish us?’

‘They want to watch the kill,’ said Neriah. ‘They want to unman us.’

‘Well, frag that,’ said Pinye Plotnik, standing, determined to die on his feet telling the heretics exactly what he thought of them. And Radin got up next to him, and Gasko, and Salk and Shivkin, copying Plotnik, yelling and cursing and screaming at the enemy. Neriah, picking up the flare gun, levelled it at the cockpit of the traitor Valkyrie. It was a pop-gun against the heavily armoured craft.

The flare bounced off the armourglass. The pilot, hidden beneath the heretical symbols sprawled over the viewport, manoeuvred their craft in closer and lower.

He *really* wanted to watch them die.

Neriah stared into the multi-laser. He would not close his eyes. He would stare death in the face. Beside him, the crew of *Spirit of St Pascale* screamed defiance.

Then the sea opened.

It thrust up a mouth, a hand, a forest – Neriah could not make sense of the monstrous shapes he saw – and seized the aircraft hanging so low above it, dragging it down into the blue.

‘Yes, *yes!*’

They were all screaming triumph as death disappeared beneath the waves.

Then death, impersonal and implacable, came back for them.

The sea opened again, a sucking void made by the sudden descent of whatever vast creature had plucked the Valkyrie from the sky, and the edge of the life raft began to slip downwards into the vortex.

‘Get out! Jump!’

Neriah tumbled into the water. It closed over his head. He looked down, with water-blurred eyes, and saw Radin reaching up to him, reaching...

Fingers touched.

Radin was jerked downwards, into the blue dark, eyes wide and staring, a

bubble trail streaming up to the surface.

Neriah broke, gasping, into the air and light. He looked round, wildly, searching for his crew. Items from the life raft – a paddle, ration packs, a life vest – were bobbing on the surface, but no men. He pushed his face under the water again, searching, looking. But all he could see was the blue, fading to the black of the abyss.

The last surviving member of the flight crew of *Spirit of St Pascale* floated on the ocean, bobbing up and down with the motion of the waves, an orange speck in an endless expanse of blue. The sun burned down on him from a cloudless sky. Floating in a world of water, Neriah felt his lips begin to crack with thirst. A plane flew past, high above, and he yelled and waved but, of course, it did not see him. Another went past, to the west.

They were searching, quartering the sea, looking for survivors.

But with no transponder and no life raft, he was invisible.

Day slid down to dusk, then night. The stars came out, the livid scar of the Great Rift cutting across the sky. Around him, the sea began to glow in drifts of pulsing, living colour. Phosphorescent plankton, cool blue on the night black.

Neriah stirred the light into shapes, and words. He wrote his name in lingering light.

Then he heard the plane. The thrum of jet wash over water.

It was coming in low and slow. Heading back to the fleet now, but still looking for survivors.

Neriah looked at the shapes of light he had drawn on the water.

He drew another.

The shape of a double-headed eagle.

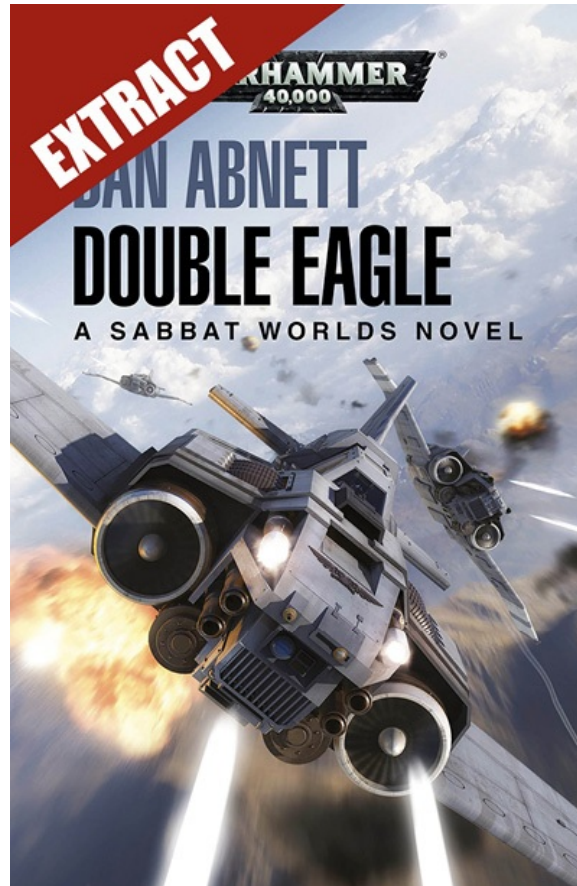
The downwash of the jets stirred away the pictures of light.

Baruch Neriah raised his arms in praise and thanks and guilt as the winchman descended and raised him from the sea.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edoardo Albert is a writer and historian specialising in the Dark Ages. He finds that the wars and cultures of the early Medieval period map very well on to the events of the 40th and 41st millenniums. His Black Library fiction includes 'Green and Grey' and the novella *Lords of the Storm*.

An extract from *Double Eagle*.



Over the Makanites, 06.32

In the side rush of dawn, the peaks glowed pink, like some travesty of a fondant celebration cake. Hard shadows infilled the cavities like ink. Streamers of white cloud strung out in the freezing air three thousand metres below.

Hunt Leader was just a cruciform speck in the bright air ahead. He started to turn, ten degrees to the north-west. Darrow tilted the stick, following, rolling. The horizon swung up and the world moved around. Slowly, slowly. He heard the knocking sound and ignored it.

At least the inclinometer was still working. As he came around and levelled the column, Darrow reached forward and flicked the brass dial of the fuel gauge again. It still read full, which couldn't be right. They'd been up for forty-eight minutes.

He took off a gauntlet and flicked the gauge once more with his bare fingers. He felt sure the lined mitten had been dulling his blows.

The dial remained at full.

He saw how pinched and blue his hand had become, and pulled the gauntlet back on quickly. It felt balmy in his insulated flightsuit, but the cabin temp-stat read minus eight.

There was no sound, except for the background rush of the jet stream. Darrow looked up and around, remembering to maintain his visual scanning. Just sky. Sundogs flaring in his visor. Hunt Three just abeam of him, a silhouette, trailing vapour.

The altimeter read six thousand metres.

The vox gurgled. 'Hunt Leader to Hunt Flight. One pass west and we turn for home. Keep formation tight.'

They made another lazy roll. The landscape rose up in his port vision. Darrow

saw brittle flashes of light far below. Artillery fire in the mountain passes.

He heard the knocking again. It sounded as if someone was crouching behind the frame of his armoured seat, tapping the internal spars with a hammer. Pulsejets always made a burbling, flatulent noise, but this didn't seem right to him.

He keyed his vox. 'Hunt Leader, this is Hunt Four. I've—'

There was a sudden, loud bang. The vox channel squealed like a stabbed pig.

The world turned upside down.

'Oh God-Emperor! Oh crap! God-Emperor!' a voice was shouting. Darrow realised it was his own. G-force pummelled him. His Commonwealth K4T Wolfcub was tumbling hard.

Light and dark, sky and land, up and over, up and over. Darrow choked back nausea and throttled down desperately. The vox was incoherent with frantic chatter.

'Hunt Four! Hunt Four!'

Darrow regained control somehow and levelled. He had lost at least a thousand metres. He got the horizon true and looked around in the vain hope of seeing someone friendly. Then he cried out involuntarily as something fell past his nose cone.

It was a Wolfcub, one wing shorn off in a cascade of torn struts and body plate. Flames were sucking back out of its pulsejet. It arced down and away like a comet, trailing smoke as it went spinning towards the ground. It became a speck. A smaller speck. A little blink of light.

Darrow felt his guts tighten and acid frothed inside him. Fear, like a stink, permeated the little cockpit.

Something else flashed past him.

Just a glimpse, moving so fast. There and gone. A memory of recurve wings.

'Hunt Four! Break! Break and turn! There's one right on you!'

Darrow leaned on the stick and kicked the rudder. The world rolled again.

He put his nose up and throttled hard. The Wolfcub bucked angrily and the knocking came again.

Throne of Earth. He'd thought his bird had malfunctioned, but it wasn't that at all. They'd been stung.

Darrow leant forward against the harness and peered out of his cockpit dome. The aluminoid skin of his right wing was holed and torn. Hell's-teeth, he'd been shot.

He pushed the stick forward to grab some thrust, then turned out left in a hard

climb.

The dawn sky was full of smoke: long strings of grey vapour and little black blooms that looked like dirty cotton. Hunt Flight's formation had broken apart and they were scattering across the heavens. Darrow couldn't even see the bats.

No, that wasn't true. He made one, bending in to chase Hunt Five, tracer fire licking from its gunpods.

He rolled towards it, flipping the scope of his reflector sight into position before resting his thumb on the stick-top stud that activated the quad cannons in the nose.

The bat danced wildly across the glass reticule of the gunsight. It refused to sit.

Darrow cursed and began to utter a prayer to the God-Emperor of Mankind to lift his wings and make his aim true. He wagged the stick, pitching, rolling, trying to correct, but the more he tried, the more the bat slipped wildly off the gunsight to one side or the other.

There was a little smoky flash ahead, and suddenly Darrow's Wolfcub was riding through a horizontal pelt of black rain.

Not rain. Oil. Then debris. Pieces of glittering metal, buckled machine parts, shreds of aluminoid. Darrow cried out in surprise as the oil washed out his forward view. He heard the pattering impact of the debris striking off his nose plate and wing faces. The bat had chalked Hunt Five and Darrow was running in through the debris stream. Any large piece of wreckage would hole him and kill him as surely as cannon-fire. And if so much as a demi-mil cog went down the intake of his pulsejet...

Darrow wrenched on the stick and came nose-up. Light returned as he came out of the smoke belt, and slipstream flowed the oil away off his canopy. It ran in quivering lines, slow and sticky, like blood.

Almost immediately, he had to roll hard to port to avoid hitting another Cub head on. He heard a strangled cry over the vox. The little dark-green interceptor filled his field of view for a second and then was gone back over his shoulder.

His violent roll had been too brutal. He inverted for a moment and struggled to right himself as the mountains spread out overhead. That knocking again. That damn knocking. He was bleeding speed now, and the old pulse-engines of the K4T's had a nasty habit of flaming out if the airflow dropped too sharply. He began to nurse it up and round, gunning the engine as hard as he dared. Two planes rushed by, so fast he didn't have time to determine their type, then another three went perpendicular across his bow. They were all Wolfcubs. One was venting blue smoke in a long, chuffing plume.

‘*Hunt Leader! Hunt Leader!*’ Darrow called. Two of the Cubs were already climbing away out of visual. The sun blinded him. The third, the wounded bird, was diving slowly, scribing the sky with its smoke.

He saw the bat clearly then. At his two, five hundred metres, dropping in on the Cub it had most likely already mauled. For the first time in his four weeks of operational flying, Darrow got a good look at the elusive foe. It resembled a long, sharp, elongated axe-head, the cockpit set far back above the drive at the point where the bow of the blade-wings met. A Hell Razor-class Interceptor, the cream of the Archenemy’s air force. In the dispersal room briefs, they’d talked about these killers being blood red or matt black, but this was pearl-white, like ice, like alabaster. The canopy was tinted black, like a dark eye-socket in a polished skull.

Darrow had expected to feel fear, but he got a thrill of adrenaline instead. He leaned forward, hunched down in the Wolfcub’s armoured cockpit, and opened the throttle, sweeping in on the bat’s five. It didn’t appear to have seen him. It was lining up, leisurely, on the wounded Cub.

He flipped the toggle switch. Guns live.

Closing at three hundred metres. Darrow rapidly calculated his angle of deflection, estimated he’d have to lead his shot by about five degrees. God-Emperor, he had it...

He thumbed the firing stud. The Wolfcub shuddered slightly as the cannons lit up. He saw flash-flames licking up from under the curve of the nose cone. He heard and felt the thump of the breechblocks.

The bat had gone.

He came clear, pulling a wide turn at about two hundred and seventy kilometres an hour. The engagement had been over in an instant. Had he killed it? He sat up into the clear blister of the canopy like an animal looking out of its burrow, craning around. If he’d hit it, surely there would be smoke?

The only smoke he could see was about a thousand metres above in the pale blue sky where the main portion of the dogfight was still rolling.

He turned. First rule of air combat: take a shot and pull off. Never stick with a target, never go back. That made *you* a target.

But still he had to know. He *had* to.

He dipped his starboard wing, searching the peaks below for a trace of fire.

Nothing.

Darrow levelled off.

And there it was. Right alongside him.

He cried out in astonishment. The bat was less than a wing's breadth away, riding along in parallel with him. There was not a mark on its burnished white fuselage.

It was playing with him.

Panic rose inside pilot cadet Enric Darrow. He knew his valiant little Cub could neither outrun nor out-climb the Hell Razor. He throttled back hard, and threw on his speed brakes, hoping the sudden manoeuvre would cause the big machine to overshoot him.

For a moment, it vanished. Then it was back, on his other side, copying his brake-dive. Darrow swore. The Hell Razor-class were vector-thrust planes. He was so close to it that he could see the reactive jet nozzles on the belly under the blade-wings. It could out-dance any conventional jet, viffing, braking, even pulling to a near-hover.

Darrow refused to accept he was out-classed, refused to admit he was about to die. He twisted the stick, kicked the rudder right over and went into the deepest dive he dared execute. Any deeper, and the Wolfcub's wings would shear off its airframe.

The world rushed up, filling his vision. He heard the pulsejet screaming. He saw the glory of the mountains ascending to meet him. His mountains. His world. The world he had joined up to save.

Behind him, the pearl-white enemy machine tucked in effortlessly and followed him down.

Theda MAB North, 07.02

Sometimes – times like this perfect dawn, for instance – it amused August Kaminsky to play a private game. The game was called 'pretend there isn't a war'.

It was relatively easy in some respects. It was quiet, and the night chill was giving way to a still cool as the sunrise came up over the city. From where he sat, he could see the wide bay, hazy in the morning mist, and the sea beyond it, blue-grey, glittering. The city of Theda itself – a mix of pale rockcrete towers, low-rise hab-stacks and pylon steeples – was peaceful and quiet, huddled on the wide headland in a quaint, antiquated manner, as it had done for twenty-nine centuries. Sea birds wheeled overhead, which spoiled it slightly, because he envied them their wings and their freedom, but still, at these times, it was easy to play the game.

Theda was not Kaminsky's birth-town (he'd been delivered, a silent, uncomplaining infant, forty-two years earlier and three thousand kilometres north in the Great Hive of Enothopolis on the far side of the Zophonian Sea), but he had, unilaterally, adopted it. It was smaller than the Great Hive, prettier, a littoral town that understood the mechanisms of the sea and, with its universitariat and its many scholams, was famous as a seat of learning. It was older than the Great Hive too. The Old Town quarter had been standing for three hundred years when the first technocrats began sinking their adamantine pilings into the Ursbond Peninsula to raise Enothopolis. Theda, dear old Theda, was one of the first cities of Enothis.

Kaminsky had adopted Theda partly because of its distinguished past, mostly because he'd been stationed there for six years. He'd come to know it well: its eating houses, its coastal pavilions and piers, its libraries and museums. It was the place he'd always longed to return to every time he snapped the canopy shut and waved the fitters away. And it was the place he always had come back to.

Even the last time.

'You there! Driver!'

The voice broke through his thoughts. He sat up in the worn leather seat of the cargo transport and looked out. Senior Pincheon, the Munitorum despatcher, was coming over the hard pan towards him, three aides wobbling along in his wake like novice wingmen. Pincheon's long robes fluttered out behind him and his boots were raising dust from the dry earth. His voice was pitched high, like the seabirds' calls.

Kaminsky didn't like Pincheon much. His game was ruined now. The senior's call had made him drop his eyelids to take in the ground and the airfield. And no one could pretend there wasn't a war when they saw that.

Kaminsky opened his cab door and climbed down to meet the senior. He'd been up since five waiting for despatch, sipping caffeine from a flask and munching on a coil of whisp-bread.

'Senior,' he said, saluting. He didn't have to. The unctuous man had no military rank, but old habits, like Kaminsky himself, died hard. Pincheon had a data-slate in his hands. He looked up and down Kaminsky, and the grubby transport behind him.

'Driver Kaminsky, A? Vehicle 167?'

'As you well know, senior,' said Kaminsky.

Pincheon made a check in one of the boxes on his slate. 'Fuelled and roadworthy?'

Kaminsky nodded. 'As of 05.00. I was issued coupons for sixty litres of two-grade, and I filled up at the depot before I came on duty.'

Pincheon checked another box. 'Do you have the chit?'

Kaminsky produced the paper slip from his coat pocket, smoothed it flat, and handed it to the senior.

Pincheon studied it. 'Sixty point zero-zero-three litres, driver?'

Kaminsky shrugged. 'The nozzle guns aren't really accurate, senior. I stopped it when it wound over sixty, but the last few drops—'

'You should take care to be more accurate,' Pincheon said flatly. One of his aides nodded.

'Have you ever fuelled a vehicle from the depot tanks, senior?' Kaminsky said lightly.

'Of course not!'

'Well, if you had, you might know how tricky it is to get the wind exact.'

'Don't you blame me for your inaccuracies, driver!' Pincheon sputtered. 'Essential resources such as fuel must be managed and rationed to the millilitre! That is the task of the Holy Munitorum! There's a war on, don't you realise?'

'I had heard...'

Senior Pincheon ignored him and looked at the nodding aide. 'What's zero-zero-three of a litre two-grade at base cost?'

The aide made a quick calculation on his pocket slate. 'Rounding down, ten and a half credits, senior.'

'Round up. And deduct it from the next wage slip of driver Kaminsky, A.'

'So recorded, senior.'

Pincheon turned back to Kaminsky. 'Transportation run. Personnel. Pick up within thirty minutes from the Hotel Imperial in—'

'I know where it is.'

'Good. Convey them to the dispersal point at MAB South. Do you understand? Fine. Then sign here.'

As he signed his name, his stiffened fingers struggling with the stylus, Kaminsky asked: 'Are they fliers? Navy fliers at last?'

Pincheon huffed. 'Not for me to say. There's a war on.'

'You think I don't know that, senior?' Kaminsky asked.

As he took back the slate and the stylus, Pincheon looked up at Kaminsky's face and made eye contact for the first time. What he saw made him shudder.

'Carry on, driver,' he said, and hurried away.

Kaminsky climbed up into his battered transport and turned the engine over.

Blue smoke coughed and spurted from the vertical exhausts. Lifting the brake, he rolled the ten-wheeler down the gentle slope of the hardpan and drove off along the field circuit trackway, following the chain link fence.

The game was certainly ruined now. No pretending any more. Here were fuel bowsers, smeared with treacly black promethium waste, armoured hangars, repair sheds reverberating with the noise of power tools, lines of primer coils on their trolleys, electric munitions trains parked and empty on verges of swishing sap-grass.

And airstrips. Cracked rockcrete looking like psoriatic skin in the early light, with eight-engine bombers sulking on their hardstands, props like sabre-blades raised in threat, hook-winged Shrike dive-bombers under tarps, fitters and armourers working around them.

Beyond the strips, facing the sea, lay the long launch ramps of the Wolfcubs, stretched out like exposed spinal chords, glinting and skeletal in the rising sun.

Five Wolfcubs sat on taxi-racks at the head of the ramps. Bottle green with grey undersides, they were tiny, one-man planes with stubby wings and tails, their rocket engines raised above their backs, their nose guns muzzled. They looked squat, leaden.

But Kaminsky knew how they felt to fly. He knew how they rose off those catapult ramps, throttles right back, pulse-engines farting and popping as the airflow fired them to launch velocity. The belly-dropping jink as they cleared the ramp end and lifted up into the blue, raw and throbbing. The cold smell of the cockpit. The reek of rubber and steel, promethium, nitrous, fyceline. The feel of being aloft, alive...

God-Emperor, how he missed it.

At the gate, beside the staked revets and the heavy blast-fences, he pulled over to let a munitions convoy roll in. He glanced up into the driving mirror and, for a moment, saw himself.

More than anything, more than even the airfield full of prepping warplanes, the sight of himself reminded August Kaminsky that his cherished game was only pretend.

There was, inescapably, a war on.

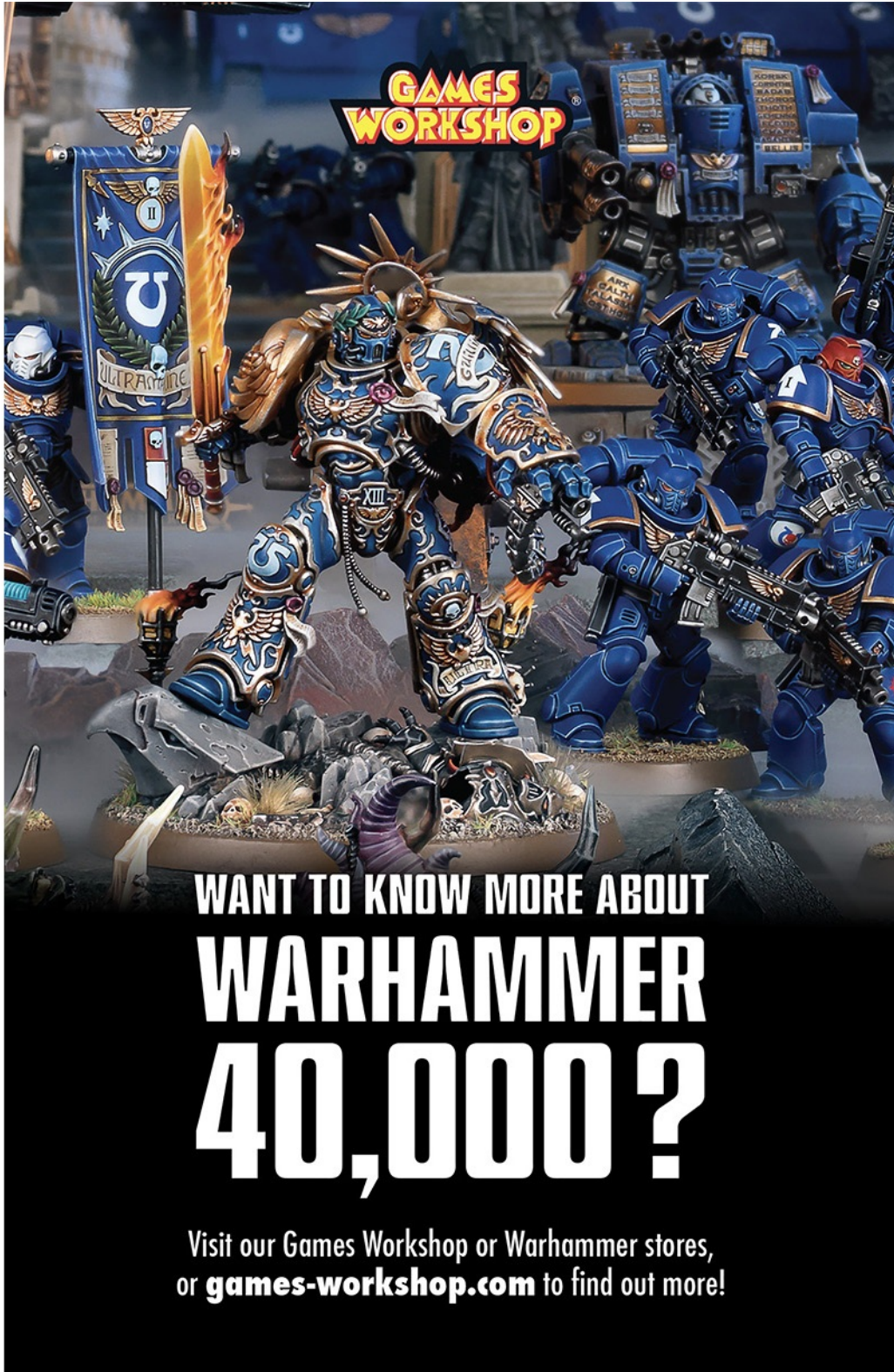
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