



WARHAMMER
40,000

IN SERVICE ETERNAL

AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY BY MATT SMITH



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IN SERVICE ETERNAL

Matt Smith

It hung there unfeasibly in the foetid air, a black mark on the already ugly aerial landscape. A utilitarian city of giant towers, enormous power generators and vast manufactoria, all held aloft upon dozens of anti-gravity platforms, each the size of battle tanks. Its name was Gamma One and it was one of many of its kind that floated in the upper atmosphere of Antropia, a ball of noxious brown gas around a dense mineral core that sat isolated within the Artran system of the Segmentum Obscurus. The space around the city was in a state of constant flux. Its tallest towers forever inhaled the toxic gases around it, filtered and repurposed them on an atomic level and fed them into the ever-hungering generators. Slaved mining servitors swarmed around helix-shaped ports atop sprawling refineries in their thousands, docking only long enough to unload their meagre cargo of ore before returning once more to the planet's uninhabitable core miles below. All to feed the Imperial war machine.

Far from the largest of Antropia's floating cities, Gamma One was still of singular importance as it formed the centre of the planet's deep-space communications and long-range augur.

Shapes emerged from the dull shadow cast by the city as it blocked what little light had found its way to Antropia from its distant star and fought through the cloying atmosphere. Mere pinpricks against the forge city's vastness, they broke away from the city's imposing presence and formed shapes of their own. Short squat trunks carrying pairs of engines upon their backs. Angular sloping wings and long twin tails.

Valkyries.

Embarking on a final shakedown mission, they were flown by pilots of the 41st Antropia Aerial Division, veterans no longer fit for the front lines but whose

flying skills could not be left idle, their service to the Emperor still incomplete.

‘All systems green. Confirm,’ said Wing Commander Arden Graves from the pilot’s seat of the lead Valkyrie Assault Carrier. His voice was calm and confident. The sound of a man who knew exactly what he was doing through decades of experience.

‘Confirmed, commander,’ came the clipped response from his co-pilot Corporal Ryker Ness, sat above and behind him in the Valkyrie’s second seat. Despite their physical differences they looked the same now, their features masked beneath helmets, dark visors and respirators, their bodies encased in grey flightsuits that seemed to blend with the dull metal of the cockpit.

‘Get me status reports from the rest of the group.’

‘Yes, sir. Reports coming in now... Gryphonne Five reports sub-optimal power to primary armament. Still within acceptable mission parameters. All other craft report status green. We are ready to proceed, commander.’

‘Thank you, corporal,’ Wing Commander Graves said before opening the group-wide vox channel. ‘This is Gryphonne One to all craft,’ he said, with a casualness born of years of camaraderie with those in the ships around him. ‘Let’s keep it tight out there today and stay alert. Mirehawk sightings are up fifteen percent over last cycle. We don’t want to get caught out like Third Wing.’

Mirehawk was a generous nickname given to Antropia’s apex predators by the Navy pilots. There was nothing hawk-like about them. Leathery, scaled reptilian beasts the size of gunships with claws that could punch through a Valkyrie’s armour like paper. The pilots had become strangely fond of them. Their appearance leant some excitement to often otherwise dull test flights. No one knew where the name originally came from, but somehow it had stuck.

On the Wing Commander’s order, the Valkyries fell into formation. The nine craft were painted a plain dull brown, the same as any built in Antropia’s great forge cities. It served the dual purpose of camouflaging them from the world’s predators and showing the least of the sickly, sticky build-up that always formed upon the hulls after even the briefest exposure to the toxic atmosphere. On the front port side of the hull the insignia of the Antropia 41st Aerial Testing Division, First Wing, had been lazily applied in white, no concern given for markings that would be covered up as soon as the Valkyries were sent off to the front lines. These very craft were destined for Lord Militant Vanderbee’s holy undertaking to hold back the ork horde of Waaagh! Gutslasha in the neighbouring Torpral system.

‘We’re coming up on Waypoint Alpha,’ Corporal Ness dutifully reported.

‘I see it,’ Wing Commander Graves replied as his trained eyes picked out the beacon of flashing red and white lights through the dull haze. ‘Gryphon One to all craft. Waypoint Alpha. Weapons live. Fire on my order.’

The Valkyries passed the beacon and Wing Commander Graves picked up targeting data ahead. More beacons, larger than the waypoint and enveloped in powerful refractor fields. They hung in threes, mirroring the formations of the Navy.

‘Second Squadron. Target’s dead ahead. Open fire.’ Graves watched out of the starboard side of his cockpit as the three Valkyries on his right flank opened fire, the multi-lasers mounted on the far side of their cockpits spitting streams of bright yellow light through the dull haze and striking the stationary beacons. The shields on the targets flashed wildly as they dispersed the energy of each hit, then faded.

‘Hits confirmed,’ Ness reported as the formation flew by the first targets and banked hard to the left to line up on a second set.

‘Third Squadron, fire.’ To his left side Graves watched Third Squadron open fire with their lascannons. The longer, brighter beams cut through the air, two of them striking ferociously against their targets.

‘You’re better than that, Gryphon Eight. I don’t want to see you miss again, understood?’ Graves berated the crew behind the inaccurate shot, receiving fervent promises to do better in response. The Valkyries banked right and ascended to target the final beacons.

‘Message coming in from Gamma One, commander. It’s the Dominus,’ Corporal Ness said dourly, knowing that for the Forge City’s Mechanicus leader to contact them personally and interrupt their flight could only mean bad news.

Arden Graves sighed.

‘Put him through.’

The vox crackled. ‘This is Magos Dominus Omicron-231 to Wing Commander Graves. Do you acknowledge?’ The voice had a flat metallic monotone that Graves knew would still sound as if it was spoken through an old vox-caster even if he had been standing face to face with the speaker. Projected through the Valkyrie’s own vox system it bore a metallic edge that made the commander wince.

‘I read you, Dominus.’

‘Commander. We have just lost contact with seventy-eight of our mining servitors.’

‘Why are you telling me this, Dominus? I thought you had been losing servitors

for some time,’ the Wing Commander asked impatiently.

‘Affirmative. Ever since we were able to penetrate to the third level of the planet’s core. However, the servitors in question in those circumstances were always working at that lowest level. These disappearances are occurring on all levels and are seemingly rising out of the core itself. You are required to perform reconnaissance and report back.’

‘I am in the middle of a test flight, Dominus. I don’t have time to—’

‘That is an order, Wing Commander.’

Beneath his respirator, Arden Graves clenched his jaw and ground his teeth. ‘Understood, Dominus. I’ll do a fly-by and report back. Commander Graves out.’ Graves abruptly cut the channel. He opened a new one to the group. ‘Change of plan. The Mechanicus need us to make a little detour. Stay on me. Do we have coordinates, corporal?’

‘Yes, sir. Transmitting to all vessels now.’

One by one, the nine Valkyries banked hard to port and dived, falling back into formation with experienced precision. As they descended closer to the planet’s core the air grew thicker and darker. A rancid smell like rotting vegetables seeped through into the pilots’ respirators, the air filtration systems unable to fully handle the increased weight of noxious fumes being forced through and, behind him, Graves could hear Corporal Ness beginning to gag.

Lights across the Wing Commander’s control panel flared red as an imminent collision was registered by the Valkyrie’s targeting sensors, and Graves was forced to thrust his control stick forward hard to dive under the unknown object. He winced, as despite his efforts the object struck the top of his craft with a loud metallic clang that reverberated through the cockpit. Seconds later reports flooded in from the rest of the group as they struggled to avoid more of the floating debris.

‘Throne!’ Graves said, ‘What was that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ness replied, ‘but Gryphonne Four is reporting a direct hit to its starboard engine. Minor damage.’

‘Put me through to them,’ said Graves.

‘Yes, sir. Channel open,’ said Ness.

‘Sergeant Huddock, did you see what hit you?’ asked Graves.

‘Negative sir, but Bates here insists... I’m sorry, ignore him, commander. He’s seeing things,’ reported Sergeant Huddock.

‘Spit it out, sergeant,’ said Graves.

‘Sir, my wingman insists he saw an arm and a head pass us by,’ said Huddock

hesitantly.

‘Confirmed, commander,’ said Ness. ‘Reports coming in from Gryphonnes Five and Seven. Five claims to have been hit by a dismembered torso. Seven narrowly avoided what she thinks was a servitor cargo carriage.’

‘A torso?’ asked Graves.

‘Yes, sir. A direct hit to the cockpit. No damage,’ said Ness.

‘Well, it seems we may have found some of the Dominus’ mining servitors,’ said Graves.

‘What could have done this, sir? Mirehawks?’ asked Ness.

‘I don’t think so. They don’t come down this low. Tell Gryphonne Four to stay the course. We’ll be heading back soon. I don’t want to stay down here any longer than we have to. Let’s take it steady.’

The Valkyries levelled out and reduced speed. At this low altitude, visibility was drastically reduced and the group were forced to take regular evasive action as they encountered more parts of the sundered bio-mechanical miners.

‘This is strange, commander,’ said Ness.

‘That’s quite the understatement, corporal.’

‘No, well, yes sir, but that’s not what I mean. The servitors, they should be falling to the core but they’re not. In fact, from the reported impact velocities they seem to be doing the opposite,’ said Ness.

‘You mean they’re going up?’ said Graves.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘How...? I don’t like this, corporal. Have we reached the Dominus’ coordinates?’ asked Graves.

‘Yes, sir. This is the spot,’ said Ness.

‘Do you see anything?’ Graves asked.

‘Only more broken servitors, sir. The atmosphere down here is interfering with our sensors though. I’m having trouble getting a clear view of anything.’

Graves shook his head. ‘Me too – whatever it was though, hopefully it’s gone now. We’ll make one more pass then head back up.’ The Valkyries turned in a slow arc and passed over the target coordinates uneventfully for the second time. ‘I’m calling it. There’s nothing down here. Form up, we’re returning to Gamma One.’

Something exploded. Gryphonne One was thrown hard to port and Commander Graves fought to steady himself. A wave of heat flooded through the cockpit, emanating through the metal walls and threatening to cook both crewmen alive inside their flight suits. The internal lights turned red and warning signals lit up

all over the control panel. ‘Throne! What just happened?’ Graves barked.

‘Second Squadron Commander. They’re gone,’ Corporal Ness replied in subdued disbelief.

‘Gone! What do you mean gone?’ Graves said. ‘Get Huddock on the vox.’

‘I can’t sir. I can’t reach Four, Five or Six,’ said Ness.

Graves leaned forward to look out of the starboard side of the cockpit. Where moments before had been a trio of Valkyries, there was now just empty air. ‘How...?’

‘Hostiles! Rising from below!’ cried Ness.

‘All Valkyries, attack speed!’ Graves ordered, gunning his engines and lurching forward. He watched in disbelief as the space once occupied by Second Squadron was bisected by two unknown craft. They were the shape of crescent moons, their hulls a dull silver that seemed to shimmer beneath the unsettling green glow of alien runes. They shot past him in dangerously close formation and banked in perfect unison, coming about for a second attack run.

‘Gryphonne Three and Gryphonne Nine, form up. You’re Second Squadron now. Execute evasive pattern Gryphonne Aquila Two. Weapons free,’ Graves ordered, calmly and assertively. The six remaining Valkyries reformed seamlessly and broke formation, splitting off in pairs. The hostile craft opened fire, crackling green energy projecting from twin cannons slung beneath their scything hulls. Graves’ manoeuvre was already taking him away from the weapons’ path but still they glanced the end of his wing, shaking the Valkyrie violently.

‘Sir, what are those things?’ Ness asked, fighting to keep the fear from his voice.

‘I don’t know, corporal, but they just killed three of my pilots. I don’t intend on letting them get away with it,’ said Graves.

The enemy ships pulled an impossible turn that would have crushed a Valkyrie pilot under the weight of G-force, and fell in behind third squadron. Graves could only watch as another of his allies was struck by green lightning and exploded. With a low, primal growl he banked left, corkscrewed and shot straight down, bringing First Squadron directly above the enemy. He squeezed the trigger on his control stick and filled the air with multi-laser fire. He cursed as the aliens pulled sharply away and the weapons fire passed by harmlessly.

‘We’ve got them, commander,’ the cocky female voice of Sergeant Enzo flying Gryphonne Three came over the vox. The new Second Squadron looped around behind the enemy and opened fire. Streams of las-fire hammered into the xenos

craft, punching scorched holes into their hulls. Second Squadron yelled victoriously, but all jubilation faded as the metal of the hulls shimmered, melted and reformed, unscathed.

‘More hostiles, commander!’ Ness reported.

‘Enzo! Below you!’ barked Graves.

Out of the impenetrable haze below emerged two more of the alien craft. Second Squadron banked wildly but Sergeant Enzo was struck, strange alien energy shearing off her port-side wing. The Valkyrie fell from the sky, trailing black smoke and spirally uncontrollably into the unknown. Only four Valkyries remained.

‘Gryphon One to Gryphon Two, arm Hellstrike missiles,’ Graves ordered over the vox. Pulling sharply out of his dive and quickly ascending, they rose from beneath the original attackers and fell into a wide turn behind them.

‘Missile locked!’ Ness reported. Graves depressed the button on top of his control stick and the high-powered missile slung beneath his left wing detached and speared towards the target. It struck true, tearing the rear of the alien ship asunder and engulfing it in fire, but as the flames dissipated the vessel was simply gone. ‘Where did it go?’ Corporal Ness asked.

‘Away from here. That’s good enough for me,’ Graves replied bluntly.

The second missile, launched from Gryphon Two, flew wide and exploded harmlessly ahead of its target. The enemy ship banked right and avoided the blast.

‘Doran? What happened?’ Graves asked.

‘I’m sorry, commander. It’s the atmosphere. I couldn’t get a lock,’ Gryphon Two’s pilot, Lieutenant Bo Doran replied mournfully. Graves growled with frustration.

‘We’ll be slaughtered down here. We’re falling back to Gamma One. Form up, evasive pattern Gryphon Omega Five.’ The four survivors broke apart and rose quickly, turning in sharp unpredictable arcs.

‘Where did they even come from?’ said Ness quietly, murmuring to himself in disbelief.

Graves shook his head. ‘There’s not supposed to be anything down there but ore. Open a channel to the Dominus, maybe he’ll have some answers.’

‘I can’t, commander. We’re too far out.’

Lightning arcs from the alien ships triggered proximity alarms as fast as the commander could dismiss them. As the Valkyries rose and the noxious atmosphere thinned, the full extent of the threat became apparent. Sensors lit up

with signals of twelve pursuing enemy ships. The air became a death trap of alien energy and the four gunships jinked and banked violently in their attempts to stay ahead of it. All thoughts of victory had been temporarily dismissed as survival instinct took over. As they closed the distance to the potential sanctuary of Gamma One, a green light blinked on Corporal Ness's control panel.

'Channel open, commander,' Ness informed him.

'Dominus. This is Wing Commander Graves. We are under attack. I repeat we are under attack,' the commander reported desperately through the vox.

'We know, Wing Commander,' responded Omicron-231 in his machine voice. 'We are detecting a massive non-human energy signature rising from the core. Appropriate countermeasures have been initiated. All available gunships are being scrambled. The full force of the 41st Division are already in the air. Form up with them and take command.'

As the distance closed, the hulking form of the Gamma One Forge City came into view and for a moment Commander Graves' heart soared as he identified the shapes of dozens of Valkyrie Assault Carriers and Vendetta Gunships heading towards him, closing in attack formations. Surely there was nothing that could stand before such a weight of blessed Imperial firepower.

'Commander. The sensorum...' Corporal Ness trailed off.

Graves looked down. It had to be malfunctioning and the Wing Commander slammed his hand down onto the panel, hoping to jar the machine-spirit into functionality. Nothing changed.

'That's impossible,' Graves murmured.

Over a hundred of the scything crescent xenos interceptors followed them. It was what came in their wake, though, that plunged the commander's heart into his stomach. It was massive and drove forth a macabre debris field of scorched limbs and propulsion carriages from the depths. Easily the size of any Imperial warship, it even matched the colossal forge city above it for size. Shaped like the smaller craft around it, the harsh curve of its hull threatened to enclose and swallow anything that drew too close. It too was lit by hundreds of menacing alien runes that glowed with a deep green light. On its back were all manner of structures, tall square towers and wide-stepped ziggurats. At the centre was a monolithic pyramid, seemingly formed of obsidian. It absorbed all light that drew too close to it, surrounding the pyramid in a haunting unnatural shadow. The only thing that pierced the darkness was a crystal at the pyramid's base. Easily ten times the size of Graves' Valkyrie, it was shaped like a flawless cut diamond and stood upon an ornate plinth, pulsing with the same green energy

that ran throughout the enemy force. Even with his glare visor down Graves had to avert his gaze as the sight sickened him.

The interceptors that had been harrying First Wing from the depths broke off their pursuit and there was a tense moment of calm as, for the first time since the attack began, the Valkyries were not under fire. The pursuing craft fell seamlessly into line with the rest of their brethren. At the same time the survivors of the Wing Commander's group reformed and used their vectored engines to brake and turn sharply, almost on the spot. The Valkyries tails swung around in a wide arc, drawing pained groans from the ships' hulls. Graves sneered with pious hatred beneath his mask as he once again faced his unholy enemy head on. Behind him the rest of the 41st Division caught up and, a short way behind them, Gamma One itself had prepared for war.

The high enclosing walls of the city bristled with servitor turrets slaved to the targeting systems of hydra autocannons and batteries of lascannons. Further into the city, surface-to-air missile launchers rose from concealment on the roofs of manufactoria and refineries, every building constructed with thought to its own defence. From barracks, seemingly nestled amongst the grander manufactorum buildings, the fighting arm of the Adeptus Mechanicus flooded the streets. Hundreds of bionically augmented skitarii troops, supported by loping walkers and spider-legged tanks. A sea of deep crimson and glinting silver.

Commander Graves opened a channel to all of the 41st Division. 'Warriors of the Imperial Navy. You are here today because you have seen too much, because you have seen more of the evil of the galaxy then any man or woman should be expected to face. You bear the scars of those days, we all do, but you are here because you have overcome. You have stared down evils that have driven men to insanity and you are still here, still fighting. You are pilots of the Imperial Navy. You are Valkyries. You are Vendettas. You are the masters of the Emperor's skies and today he calls upon you. Once more face down the evil of this galaxy and banish it back whence it came! In His name! For the Emperor!'

The vox channel filled with a roar of pride and defiance as the other pilots echoed the war cry of the Imperium of Man.

'Second Wing, break left. Third Wing, break right. Try to envelop them, pattern Sky Wolf. First Wing, with me, attack pattern Alpha Two.'

The aircraft gunned their engines and broke into smaller battle formations. The aliens responded in kind, surging away from their capital ship to meet the human fleet. First Wing closed into range with the leading enemy ships and the sky was set ablaze. The space between them became a killing field. Beams of pale yellow

light and the exhaust streams of missiles criss-crossed with crackling beams of green lightning. First Wing jinked, dived and rolled to escape the incoming fire but the weight of it left little room to manoeuvre. Graves saw a Vendetta explode to his left and bathe its wingman in flames. To his right Gryphonne Twenty-Six took a direct hit to its port engine and spun uncontrollably out of the sky. Graves struck what looked like the cockpit of an oncoming alien fighter with his multi-laser, but could only look on dissatisfied as the ship vanished, robbing him of the chance to witness its true demise.

The two lines collided with the force of a cavalry charge. Graves saw more green blips on his sensorum display disappear as more of his pilots were killed. Gryphonne Seventeen blinked out as Graves watched the Valkyrie shoot past above him, Sergeant Wreave engaging too fast and colliding with an alien ship, assuring their mutual destruction. The Imperial craft broke off into squadrons and rounded on the enemy ships.

The air between the gargantuan structures of the forge city and the xenos capital ship was like an angered beehive. Ships from both sides were diving and banking, stitching lines of bright fire in a swirl of barely contained madness. Gryphonne One and Gryphonne Two looped back on themselves from the initial charge and rolled to right themselves. Alien laser fire cut through the air ahead of them, narrowly missing the tips of their craft and striking the tail of a Vendetta to Graves' left. The Imperial ship went into a shaky dive and fell out of view. The ship that had fired shot past them seconds later. The twin Valkyries threw themselves into a deep banking dive and dropped in behind them. The enemy were fast, as fast as anything Graves had encountered and he tried to hit them with his main weapon, but missed by frustratingly narrow margins.

'Stay on him, Two,' he said. Gryphonne One pulled up sharply and was buffeted on its underside by the flames bursting from another slain Valkyrie. As Gryphonne Two remained in dogged pursuit of the target, Graves watched from above like a hawk, waiting for his moment. As the enemy ship pulled a wide arc and came about, Gryphonne One dived. The pressure crushed the crew into their seats and the commander could feel himself on the brink of blacking out. The alien ship was caught mid-roll evading the fire from Lieutenant Doran and was too late to respond to the threat above. Gryphonne One hammered it with laser fire and the enemy ship fell from the sky.

Graves noticed a group of alien ships break off from the main battle and head towards Gamma One. The city opened fire. Hydra autocannons filled the sky with a storm of flak. Graves watched as the aliens dodged and dived with

unbelievable speed and passed over the city walls unharmed. More menacing green light emanated from beneath each of the alien craft, growing in intensity. They pulsed brightly then faded.

‘Gryphon Two, form up and break off. I need to see something,’ Graves said. The two Valkyries split from the main battle and headed towards the city.

Where the alien ships had passed over the narrow city streets now stood an army of alien warriors.

‘Ness, bring up the vid-picter and magnify,’ said Graves.

A grainy close-up image of the city streets popped up on Graves’ console. Even from the poor image quality, Graves could make out the enemy as hunched, pseudo-skeletal forms of the same dull metal colour as the interceptors. Already the enemy ground forces had begun an implacable advance while the skitarii scrambled to redeploy against the new threat.

Commander Graves’ vox burst to life. ‘Magos Dominus Omicron-231 to Wing Commander Graves. We are already receiving reports of enemy ground forces on Gamma One. Confirm.’

‘Confirmed Dominus. I don’t know how though. We haven’t let any of their craft land,’ Graves reported.

‘Then it appears our foes are possessed of advanced teleportation technology,’ said the Dominus.

‘But where are they coming from? The capital ship?’ Graves asked.

‘Currently unknown,’ Omicron-231 said.

‘I’m breaking off third group to provide air support,’ Graves replied.

‘Negative, commander. We are going to end this before it gets any further. Deathstrike missile launch is in progress. We shall blast the capital ship to dust. Ensure that the missiles reach their target. The skitarii will deal with the invaders.’

‘Understood,’ Commander Graves replied.

At the centre of Gamma One stood the city’s primary forge shrine. It was a colossal tower, taller than any of the others. From above it formed the cog shape of the Adeptus Mechanicus, each spoke of the cog matching the size of the largest of the city’s exhaust towers. From its roof and the ground around it arose ten domed silos. They opened like the unfurling petals of a metallic flower and from within each arose a battery of five missiles. Deathstrikes. They rotated to aim towards the capital ship. Propulsion rockets roared and the missiles launched.

‘Deathstrike missiles in the air. First Wing break off and cover them,’

Commander Graves ordered.

The Wing Commander rolled and fell in behind an enemy vessel pursuing Gryphon Two. With a barrage of multi-laser fire the alien craft was broken apart. It began to lose altitude then vanished. The two Valkyries formed up with the rest of the survivors of First Wing who had looped over Gamma One and taken up escort positions around the missiles. There were fewer craft than Graves had hoped.

The xenos immediately responded to the emerging threat – Arden could tell because their attack patterns changed simultaneously. They broke off their pursuit of the Imperial gunships and dived towards the missiles. Enemy interceptors were destroyed as Vendetta gunships, free from their dogged pursuit, turned and hammered them with lascannons. There was no doubt in Commander Graves' mind though that this had all been calculated by whatever intelligence controlled the xenos force. For every ship destroyed, two more were free to open fire. Graves watched as alien weapon fire punched through the first of the escorting Valkyries. Gryphon Twelve was blown to pieces, shards of its shattered body punching through the cockpit of its wingman, and Gryphon Thirteen tumbled lifelessly from the sky. Gryphon Nineteen was attacked from above and bisected by alien fire, breaking apart in two jagged halves. An alien ship banked close in front of a Vendetta directly ahead of Graves. The gunship blasted the xenos ship with lascannon fire that sent it into a wild spin. The tip of its crescent form slammed into the port side of the Vendetta's cockpit, crushing it in on itself and slamming the gunship into one of the missiles it was trying to protect. The Deathstrike and Vendetta fell out of formation together until the missile detonated and claimed them both in searing flame.

'We are losing missiles,' Corporal Ness reported, drawing an angry growl from the commander.

The Imperials were outnumbered and the missile barrage was wide reaching, aiming to shatter the capital ship across its extensive hull. Too many of the human ships could do little more than fight for the next second of life as they were systematically isolated from their allies and picked off with precision bursts from the terrible xenos weapons.

While First Wing fought to cut off the enemy's attack runs, driving them away before they could account for more of the incoming ordnance, they were too few and the enemy too many. One by one, missiles were blasted from the sky, the alien weapons eating holes through their outer shells and leaving them to fizzle lifelessly.

‘Nearly there. Fifteen missiles remain – no – fourteen. Impact in T minus twenty, nineteen...’ Ness began the countdown.

‘Stay close,’ Graves ordered the escorts. Closing on the capital ship, a feeling of unnatural dread threatened to overcome him. He knew the others felt it, too, as once brave pilots defied his orders and broke formation, wheeling away and fleeing from the target. Graves swore and promised that when this was over each of them would pay for their cowardice. Even so, the desire to give up welled inside him too. This close the true magnitude of the ship became apparent. The Deathstrike missiles seemed mere gnat bites on the hide of a grox, not the instruments of the Emperor’s divine fury that they were. Point defence batteries on the capital ship’s surface opened fire.

‘This is futile, Wing Commander. I’m not dying here,’ said Airman Dux in Gryphonne Twenty over the vox.

‘Dux! No!’ barked Graves. The Wing Commander looked down just in time to see Eighth Squadron abandon their missile, only to be blown from the sky by precision fire from the enemy turrets seconds later, their undefended missile following shortly after.

The display threatened to break Graves’ resolve and thoughts of fleeing this place, abandoning the battle and flying as far as his craft could carry him filled his mind.

‘Six, five!’ Ness yelled behind him, snapping him from his despair.

‘Break off!’ the commander ordered, and the survivors of First Wing peeled away. With seconds until impact alien interceptors threw themselves in front of the ordnance, sacrificing themselves for the safety of the capital ship, but they could not stop everything. The remaining missiles struck within seconds of one another. Where each impacted, the ship’s hull was torn asunder. Great smoking black craters pockmarked its surface. For a moment the nauseating alien runes seemed to fade and Commander Graves allowed himself a moment of hope as the capital ship began to list heavily to starboard. His hope was dashed, though, as swiftly as it had formed, as the runes returned to their painful brightness and the ship righted itself. For all the Deathstrikes’ destructive power, there had simply been too few left. As the smoke and flames dispersed, few signs of the damage wrought upon the ship remained.

‘Magos Dominus Omicron-231 to Wing Commander Graves. Damage report.’

‘Minimal damage, I repeat minimal damage. Hostile capital ship is still active,’ he said dourly.

‘But...’ said Ness.

‘It is not ours to understand the alien, corporal. Only to destroy it. We fight on,’ Graves replied, steel returning to his voice.

‘Wing Commander Graves, return to Gamma One,’ the Magos Dominus blurted through the vox. ‘Skitarii forces are being overrun.’

‘You heard him, corporal, signal the division. All Valkyries to return to Gamma One and support skitarii ground forces. They know the city. Tell them to use it to their advantage. Vendetta Gunships are to maintain aerial supremacy,’ said Graves.

‘Yes, sir. Relaying your orders,’ Ness replied, buoyed by his commander’s resolve.

As they fell back, the surviving Valkyries formed up into ad-hoc formations. Even from range, the magnitude of the attacking force now deployed to the surface of Gamma One was clear, their dull metal bodies advancing in an unrelenting tide. Large, spider-like walkers, floating coffin-like barges and swift serpentine constructs, now supported the pseudo-skeletal forms of the xenos foot soldiers. In the early stages of the battle the alien ships had flown solo; now they attacked in large, precise formations. Defensive fire from the city had slackened as turrets were systematically destroyed by the invaders, leaving wide gaps in the defensive grid for them to slip through unopposed. Graves watched as five alien aircraft weaved their way through feeble defensive fire. The runes on the hulls of the escorting interceptors faded together, while those of the leading craft brightened. More of the spider walkers appeared on the ground, their terrifying beam weaponry immediately slaying a squad of Mechanicus Automata that had been defiantly holding a narrow side street. They stayed standing but slumped lifelessly and were swept away by the uncaring force of the alien advance.

Commander Graves and the Valkyries that had formed around him passed over Gamma One’s outer walls and into the close confines of the city. The immediate transition from high to low altitude flying was hard to get used to, but it was a part of the testing of every craft built within any of Antropia’s cities. From within, Gamma One was imposing and claustrophobic. Its tall towers and narrow streets threatened to envelop and crush, punishing the slightest of mistakes. Every pilot of the 41st Division, though, had been stationed upon Gamma One for at least a year, most of them for many more. They had flown through it hundreds of times. They knew every street and alleyway and every twist and turn of their city like hive-world orphans.

Alien ships chased the humans into the shadows. The attackers were picked off as hovering Valkyries emerged from side streets in storms of fire. Others were

baited into ambushes or forced into turns even their alien agility could not manage, leaving them crashing through walls of reinforced rockcrete. Slowly and for the first time, the battle was swinging in the Imperium's favour.

Gryphonne One turned sharply around the next bend and rolled ninety degrees to slip through the narrow alleyway, barely avoiding another volley of fire from a pursuing enemy craft. Below, Commander Graves registered the position of entrenched skitarii armour through his sensorum. Instantly plotting a return route in his mind, the commander drew his pursuer through the streets, mere nanoseconds ahead. Swooping back towards the skitarii position, he passed over the armoured force. Graves watched with satisfaction as the Oneger Dunecrawlers turned their weapons to the air and blasted the alien down in a burst of energy. Freed, Wing Commander Graves reformed with Lieutenant Doran in Gryphonne Two.

'Commander, I'm picking up a distress signal. Skitarii troops pinned down by snipers, two hundred metres ahead,' reported Ness.

'Acknowledged. Moving to engage,' said Graves.

From a swift fly-by overhead, Graves could see that the xenos had placed themselves in the high windows of a hab-block built for the Adeptus Mechanicus' indentured workers. Their precision fire had accounted for dozens of the skitarii troopers; red-robed augmented bodies littered the street below. The remaining skitarii were hunkered down behind scraps of fallen rubble, only moving to loose off bursts of ineffectual return fire. Locating the enemy, the Valkyries switched to their vectored engines and strafed the hab-block with multi-laser fire. Alien warriors were punched off their feet and crushed as the inner floors collapsed beneath them.

Throughout the battle Graves was fed constant updates from Ness as his co-pilot gathered scattered reports and bursts of vox-chatter. Gryphonnes Ten and Eleven had plucked two squads of skitarii vanguard from certain death in a dead-end street with a daring extraction landing. Attack runs by Valkyries from Second Wing had allowed forces from Sigma Maniple to reform their lines and redouble their defence. Omicron-231 fed Graves reports of turrets brought back to life, his tech-priests returning to work, relieved from deadly storms of incoming fire by the strafing runs of guardians overhead.

Together Gryphonne One and Gryphonne Two strafed the rear armour of a hovering alien weapon platform, drawing its attention and that of its escorting warriors. The Valkyries narrowly avoided the return fire until a column of Ironstrider Ballistarius emerged from hiding in a nearby alleyway, cutting the

attacking force down in a hail of fire from their heavy cognis cannons. Steadily the enemy on the ground were destroyed, each vanishing from sight leaving only the destruction they had wrought as evidence of their existence. With their superior knowledge of the terrain, the skitarii and their Navy allies enveloped pockets of the xenos assault, cutting them off from their support and overwhelming them with fire from rad weapons, laser fire and all manner of esoteric Mechanicus weaponry until even the survivors disappeared too. The enemy were broken down, piece by piece and inch by inch as the Imperium reclaimed Gamma One.

‘You’ve done it, commander,’ came Omicron-231’s voice over the vox. ‘We are receiving reports from across the city. The alien forces are withdrawing. Emergency repairs are being conducted on defensive systems. The rites to unleash a second Deathstrike barrage are almost complete and both Gamma Two and Beta Four have estimated they will be in range within seventeen minutes. We shall destroy this menace together.’

‘I didn’t do it alone, Dominus. We’ve lost a lot of good pilots today,’ said Graves. He let out a deep breath and relaxed. His body was sore from the tension and forces imposed upon it since he first left the city and he let out a low groan of relief.

‘The Ommissiah shall remember them, Wing Commander,’ said Omicron-231.

‘And may the Emperor welcome them with open arms,’ said Ness.

Graves turned in his seat to see his co-pilot make the sign of the Aquila across his chest and bow his head. ‘The Emperor protects,’ Graves added.

The air changed. Graves felt it first as a vibration through his chest, like standing too close to a large vox-caster. Then his skin tingled under his jumpsuit and the hairs on his arms stood on end. Peering back over his shoulder he could tell Corporal Ness was feeling it too.

The city was struck like the wrath of ancient gods. A single lancing, crackling beam of green lightning, sparking white with its intensity, punched clean through Gamma One, leaving a jagged hole wide enough to swallow a Valkyrie several times over. Even without seeing its source it was clear where the destruction had begun. Only one thing could have borne such a weapon. The capital ship. The weapon narrowly missed Gryphon One, but Two had not been so lucky. Caught on the edge of the blast the beam hit the left side of the Valkyrie. Lieutenant Doran and his co-pilot were killed instantly as they were atomised along with half their vessel, the remains left to plummet to the ground and explode. The city listed heavily as the anti-gravity plating responsible for

holding it up failed, either directly destroyed by the catastrophic blast or giving out as its power was cut. Graves saw skitarii troops thrown to the ground as the world shifted beneath them. They were crushed as buildings weakened by the fighting collapsed on top of them. Secondary explosions were already ripping through Gamma One. The lights of the power plants were fading. The defensive turrets that had still been active moments before were falling dormant again. Arden Graves could only look on in despair as the place he had called home for the past five years crumbled beneath him.

The vox came to life again.

‘This is... Magos... Dominus... Omicron-231. Are you out there Wing... Commander Graves?’ For the first time in all the years he had known him Arden could detect emotion in the magos’ voice. It was pain, as the city’s leader struggled for every word.

‘I’m here, Dominus.’

‘It seems... that I... spoke... too soon.’ The magos’ mechanical voice was broken by bursts of harsh static that Graves could only interpret as coughs. ‘I have been... analysing battlefield... archives. I believe what we are facing are called... the necrontyr.’

‘Do you know how to defeat them, Dominus?’ asked Graves.

‘Negative, Wing Commander. Imperial records on them are... incomplete. However, I believe in destroying us... the necron ship, a tomb ship... has given us... hope,’ said Omicron-231.

‘There are too few of us remaining to form a worthy defence. I will lead the survivors back to Gamma Two. There we can—’ said Graves.

‘No... there is no time. The necrons must be destroyed, here... now. If they escape...’

‘We cannot fight them.’

‘You can. I was attempting to analyse the... tomb ship when it attacked. I was able to see... glimpses of its power network. If I am correct, its central power nexus is the crystal at the base of the primary... structure. Rites of launching for a second Deathstrike barrage are complete.’

‘But the barrage was useless.’

‘The ship is weak now... I believe it has not reached its full strength and... firing its main weapon has left it... vulnerable. Our previous attack was unfocused. Its targets too broad. We will focus our second barrage on... the nexus. My analysis returns a sixty-three point four nine one percent chance that a strike of sufficient force will... trigger a chain reaction that will cripple the

vessel. There is, however... a problem,' said the Dominus.

'What is it?'

'Our... higher sensorum was damaged in the attack. I cannot precisely target the nexus from here. I am afraid, Wing Commander, I must ask... a great deal of you.'

'Anything, Dominus,' said Graves.

'You must... activate your Valkyrie's emergency homing beacon. I shall target you with the missile strike. You, Wing Commander... will have to... show them the way.'

'That's suicide!' said Ness.

'Quiet, corporal. Activate the beacon,' said Graves.

Ness paused for a moment. 'Yes, sir. Activating now.'

'Beacon active, Dominus.'

'I see it, Wing Commander. Targeting... go now. You will not be able to outrun them... for long. Ommissiah guide you. Omicron-231... out.'

Gryphon One gunned its engines and emerged from the shadow of the dying city.

'Sir, I think if we deactivate the beacon late enough we will be able to escape the blast zone without compromising the attack. I'm calculating now only a ten per cent margin of error if we disengage within—' said Ness.

'No, corporal,' said Graves sternly. 'There can be no margin of error. We will see this through to the very end.'

Ness paused. 'Understood, commander.'

Where once had been a cyclone of aerial combat there was now little more than sporadic dogfights. Commander Graves estimated the 41st Division had taken seventy percent casualties. He knew, though, that those who remained would fight to the very end if he asked them to. That was what he was about to do.

'Signal all surviving vessels to form up on us,' said Graves.

All the ships fell in around him. Each was scarred by the burn marks of overheated weapons, the scoring of glancing enemy fire or trailing thin streams of black smoke from injured engines. Where once had been near eighty craft, now only seventeen remained.

'Our target is the capital ship's main power source, the crystal at the base of the primary structure. Deathstrike missiles are incoming, targeting me. I will lead them to their target but I need you all to keep both the missiles and I flying. If you wish to pray, now would be the time.' Behind him Graves could hear Corporal Ness quietly reciting the Litanies of Faith.

The formation turned in a wide arc that brought them into line with the tomb ship, and from behind them the second barrage of Deathstrike missiles was launched from the crippled city. Fewer in number now, where before they had launched in a wide-reach fan, now they flew in a tight cluster chasing Gryphon One at the centre of the Imperial gunships.

The necron interceptors outnumbered them two to one and the target was still hundreds of metres away. The surviving Vendetta gunships ranged ahead as necron craft turned on them. The twin beams of heavy alien weapons fire from beneath their metallic hulls cut the first Vendetta from the sky, only to be cut down in turn by retaliatory lascannon fire. More of the interceptors swarmed, coming at the Imperials from all angles. A damaged Valkyrie to Commander Graves' right was cut to ribbons by arcing green lightning from below. Another ship below him fell away as its engines exploded and Gryphon One's wing tips were caught in the blast.

'We've just lost Gryphon Eleven and Eagles Six and Twelve. Two missiles have been disabled,' reported Ness.

'Just give me the range, corporal.'

'Three hundred metres and closing, commander.'

Fourteen ships remained. A trio of necron ships came at them head on. Graves could only watch as their massed firepower destroyed another Vendetta and the Valkyrie behind it as the second craft collided with the burning wreckage of the first, the commander only narrowly able to avoid being caught himself.

'Two hundred metres.'

Twelve ships became eleven as an already damaged Valkyrie from Third Wing finally gave in. Its engines choked and shuddered as it began to lose altitude, its pilot guiding it into a pair of rising necron ships in a final act of defiance.

'One hundred metres.'

Point defences from the tomb ship and the attack runs of the interceptors cut down more of the Imperial vessels sending them spinning and crashing against the ship's hull. Gryphon One was struck again and again, glancing blows that shook the vessel. A console blew out to Ness' right and showered him in sparks. Graves' knuckles turned white on the control stick as he fought to maintain his course.

'Keep them off me!' Graves barked into the vox.

The Imperial pilots now paid little heed to their own survival. Graves watched a necron interceptor come about, and Gryphon One was a sitting duck until a Valkyrie trailing thick black smoke hammered into it. Graves had no doubt it

was intentional. Even in death the pilots fought to protect their wards.

‘I didn’t think I would die today,’ said Ness.

‘Did you think you would live forever?’ asked Graves.

‘No, sir.’

‘Then know that the Emperor is watching you, and he will greet you with open arms,’ said Graves.

‘It’s been an honour, commander,’ said Ness.

‘And you, Ryker, and you.’

‘Impact in five, four, three... The Emperor protects,’ said Ness.

‘The Emperor protects,’ echoed Graves.

Gryphon One struck the base of the crystal at full speed and exploded. Moments later the barrage followed. The first Deathstrike struck the exact point of the Valkyrie’s impact turning alien metal to molten slag. The next struck close to each side, destroying vast chunks of the crystal’s plinth. Another struck the crystal’s base, destroying its mounting and sending a thick crack snaking up its length. More punched through the holes created by the first and penetrated deeper into the ship, their detonation sending great plumes of fire bursting from the ship’s hull. Secondary explosions tore through the tomb ship, spreading out uncontrollably from the impact site. Another Deathstrike carved a large piece of the crystal free and the greater mass began to topple. The final missile hit the crystal head on as it fell and split it down the length of the weakened fissure.

The crystal fell in two. From the break a vast ball of energy like a raging green star erupted. The front half of the tomb ship was engulfed and those few surviving fighters, human and necron alike, were disintegrated as forks of unconstrained alien energy plucked them from the sky. As quickly as the miniature star formed, it exploded. The shock wave hit Gamma One and more of its once proud buildings crumbled to dust.

The runes across the tomb ship’s surface pulsed wildly then shattered. Green lightning arced across the hull, leaving flames and scorch marks in their wake. Then everything went quiet. The tomb ship fell from Antropia’s foetid sky, breaking apart as it did so, and disappeared back into the darkness of the core whence it came.

Magos Dominus Omicron-231 was dead. His body was slumped forward but was held up by a cradle of mechadendrites plugged all along his mechanical form that gave him the appearance of a grim marionette. All around him, Gamma One’s central control shrine lay in ruins. The floor was strewn with the

bodies of dead tech-adepts and servitors. Consoles sparked and set fire to pools of sanctified oil. Antropia had been defended but at great cost. Even now one of its great cities fell from the sky to meet its foe in death.

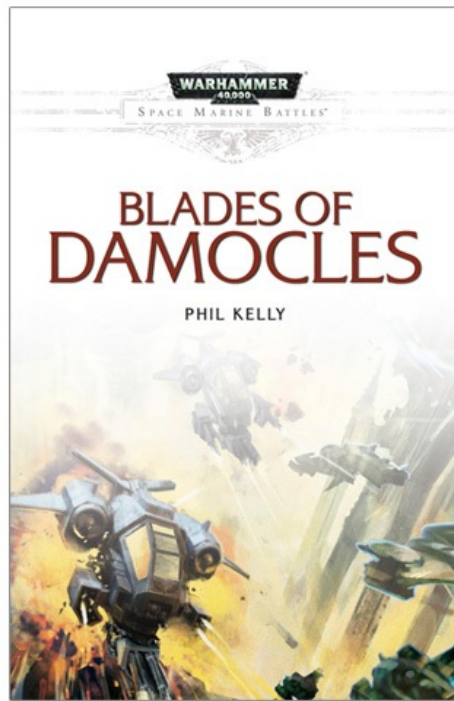
On the Magos Dominus' control panel a single screen still flickered with life. Numbers streamed across it, a packet of condensed binary code. A message, a warning no one would receive.

Waaagh! Gutslasha had reached the Artran system. The orks were coming to Antropia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Smith is one of Black Library's newest authors, and the Warhammer 40,000 short story 'In Service Eternal' is his first. He is based in Norwich and spends his spare time working on his Raven Guard army and training in martial arts.

Setting out to exterminate the upstart Tau Empire before they become a threat, the Ultramarines discover that the xenos may be more of a menace than they originally believed...



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