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40,000

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THE EMPEROR'S GRACE

AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY



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The *Grace's* engines screamed in protest and Mikal could feel their pain. It knifed through his ragged nerves and he gripped the control column of his battered aircraft with greater ferocity as the Marauder bomber bucked and lurched through the outer atmosphere. It seemed that the only thing holding the aircraft together was its indomitable machine-spirit. He doubted there was an undamaged structure in the airframe. The instrument panel had so many warning lights on that he had long since stopped looking at it. He needed no reminder of how close they were to catastrophe.

Mikal peered ahead through the fractured canopy at the guiding lights of the *Implacable Advance*, the carrier that was their ultimate destination and sanctuary. The auspex was no longer functioning and he was reduced to visuals by which to navigate. He felt like a mythical sea captain from Holy Terra, in an age when its long dead seas had still existed, seeking the perilous entrance to a home port on a storm-ravaged night. Like his forbear, Mikal struggled to maintain a bearing as his vessel pitched and rolled in the turbulent elements. Each time the *Grace* yawed offline, he hauled her back, praying to the machine-spirit that the movement would not cause that final spar to break or hydraulic system to fail.

His arms ached with the effort, his neck muscles cramped with the physical and psychological stress he was under. It would be easy to give up the fight and accept the inevitable. It was far beyond what he thought he could have endured. But something inside him would simply not admit defeat. He would not show weakness. He would not. To show weakness was death. That was the lesson he had learnt from childhood, growing up on the tough streets of Vordrast, made tougher for him by the pox scarring that had covered the right-hand side of his face. His disfigurement had taught him there was no place for weakness in the Imperium. Adversity either broke you or forged you into something harder, physically and mentally. Iron will was the only thing keeping him and the

Emperor's Grace flying. For now.

The screaming from the starboard engine changed in pitch and he looked anxiously across to the massive engine cowling. He heard someone praying soothingly, 'Steady, *Grace*. Steady. We know it hurts. Do not show weakness. Do not. Weakness is death.'

He looked around the cockpit for the source of the prayer. There was no one there.

He was alone. It had not always been so.

'Stop, for Throne's sake, stop,' he heard someone whispering behind him. Mikal scowled and barked, 'Shut it.'

There was a sudden thud and the screaming of tortured metal stopped immediately. The crew elevator doors snapped open with a hiss.

'Time someone greased those cables,' muttered Bernd Hawlek.

Mikal turned to see his bombardier looking straight ahead with a wry smile on his face.

'You're not wrong, Bernd,' Mikal agreed. Behind Bernd stood the diminutive form of their navigator, Aleksander Jeronim.

'Sorry, captain,' mumbled Aleks, clearly embarrassed that his curse had been heard by the pilot. 'That noise was getting to me.'

At times Mikal wondered how Aleks managed to get into the Navy; he looked barely old enough to shave. His pale complexion from hours of studying charts and pict screens gave him an unhealthy, undernourished look. He wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the streets of Mikal's youth. Then again, a navigator needed a quick brain not quick fists.

'Report the problem to maintenance,' said Mikal. He found apologies difficult. They all knew that the maintenance crews had been pushed to the limits getting aircraft combat ready. Nonessential maintenance had been put on hold.

Aleks nodded, relieved. Mikal glanced at the rest of his crew standing rather stiffly behind them. Dudak, Krol and Jaworski looked back at him evenly. They knew enough not to say anything provocative when he was in his preflight mode. None of them wanted their captain's critical eye locking on them.

'We're on Station 8,' said Mikal, and he stepped out of the claustrophobic crew elevator into the enormous expanse of the launch deck of the *Implacable Advance*. Before an operational sortie, an Imperial Navy carrier was like an amphitheatre in which a numberless host of Naval personnel performed a frenzied ballet of ordered chaos. Servitors and deck crew jostled and pirouetted

amidst the blare of horns and warning sirens. Clouds of coolant and exhaust fumes created an eerie and disorienting sub-world beneath the cavernous superstructure, the true enormity of which was intermittently revealed by pulsating strobes of light from gantries and inspection rigs.

Mikal led his crew through the maze of moving and dissipating obstacles seeking out Station 8 and EMGR2243, the Marauder bomber to which they had been assigned for this, their first combat tour, and today, their first mission.

Mikal was so immersed in his thoughts that he almost knocked over a deck rating who had emerged from the gloom at the head of a line of servitors. The rating looked up, blanched and backed away.

‘Sorry... captain...’ he stammered. ‘My mistake.’

‘*Emperor’s Grace*,’ barked Mikal.

‘Sorry sir?’ repeated the rating.

‘Where is the *Emperor’s Grace*?’ Repeated Mikal,

‘Oh... EMGR2243, you mean? The *Grace*, sir? She... She’s over there...’ babbled the harassed-looking rating as he pointed over to the brooding hulk of a Marauder silhouetted against the glow of arc lights. ‘We’ve just finished fixing the auspex.’

‘Auspex?’ asked Mikal. ‘What’s the problem now?’

The 1167th’s hasty deployment from Vordrost had created all sorts of logistical problems, including a shortage of trained technicians across the fleet. As a result, many of the squadron’s ground crew had been reassigned. As a new crew, the *Emperor’s Grace* was one of the last to get attention, something which was a constant source of frustration for Mikal.

‘N... nothing sir,’ said the mechanic.

Mikal sensed the hesitation in the man’s voice and stepped forward so that his disfigured face was unpleasantly close to the wide-eyed rating.

‘There had better not be,’ he said.

‘Easy captain,’ murmured Bernd as he moved between his pilot and the cowering rating.

Bernd nodded to the rating to get on with his checks and the man scurried away, his posse of servitors snaking along behind him. Mikal scowled at the way in which Bernd had dealt with the situation. The bombardier’s easy-going manner and sense of humour was in sharp contrast to his pilot’s irascible attitude, and at times Mikal resented him for it. Deep down though, he knew Bernd was right. A pilot picking a fight with a deck rating? What was he thinking?

‘Get a grip,’ he muttered to himself and led his crew towards the imposing presence of the Marauder bomber.

The *Emperor’s Grace* was the latest addition to Vordrost’s 1167th Bomber Wing. When the Imperial High Command had received reports that Waaagh! Ugskraga, the massive ork incursion into the Segmentum Pacificus, had reached the Imperial World of Balle Prime, the 1167th had been deployed aboard the carrier *Implacable Advance* as part of an Imperial relief force despatched to bolster the desperately stretched defence forces. The 1167th had a reputation for getting the job done. This was in no small part due to the uncompromising leadership of the 1167th’s commander and squadron leader, Aaron Ryll. He believed that hitting the enemy hard with overwhelming force was the best way of limiting the number of missions needed to complete a tour. As a consequence, he insisted that all planes in the 1167th carry a full payload of bombs and missiles and that pilots maintain a tight defensive formation to maximise the number of bombers reaching the target. His brutal logic was compelling and the crews respected him for it. The message had been repeated at the briefing on today’s mission, designated Operation Arc Light.

The 1167th assembled in the briefing room, each aircrew already kitted out in pressure vest, flight suit and fur-lined flying boots. Mikal sat there quiet and sweating, wedged in between Bernd and Aleks and surrounded by other similarly clad officers talking with noisy familiarity around them.

‘Here comes Ryll,’ whispered Bernd as a short, broad figure stepped onto the raised platform at the front of the briefing room. The officer had close-cropped black hair, a flat nose and a button chin and stood with his weight balanced like a pit-fighter. Though not a big man, his authority was unmistakable and the 1167th rose from their chairs to acknowledge their squadron leader. ‘Looks a bit serious to me.’

‘He always looks serious,’ muttered Aleks nervously, craning his neck to peer over the shoulders of the ranks in front of them. Mikal said nothing as he waited for the squadron leader to speak.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, sit,’ instructed Ryll and the 1167th sat back down on their benches, attentive and silent, all eyes on their commanding officer.

‘The picture on Balle Prime is changing rapidly. The greenskins have captured the star port at Balle-Delta and are using it to land more troops and supplies to support their advance towards the planet’s capital, Balle-Major.’

Ryll looked out across the intent faces of his squadron. He had their full attention.

‘The orks have established a forward air base at Balle-Delta where the bulk of their fighters and fighter-bombers are launching sorties against the retreating Imperial forces. Balle-Delta star port is of critical strategic importance to the fate of Balle-Major and ultimately the planet itself.’

Ryll paused to make sure his brief strategic summary had sunk in. All heads were steady and unwavering. He continued in a more aggressive tone.

‘Gentlemen. At 05:00 hours, the 1167th will launch from the *Implacable Advance*, proceed directly to Balle-Delta and then pound the star port to rubble.’

There was a stamping of feet, which echoed off the steel bulkheads and reverberated around the room. This was the typically pragmatic means of signifying approval that the 1167th used in briefings when assembled officers held data-slates with mission details in their hands. Mikal found the hairs on the back of his neck rise at the sound as it rumbled up through the deck plates and shook the bench on which he and his comrades perched. He sat forward a bit straighter as Ryll continued.

‘At the far side of the star port, the orks seem to be constructing some sort of tower, the exact nature of which is unknown.’ He flicked up a pict screen that converged on a dark mark at one end of the star port. The perspective changed and from the side it was clear that the shape was an irregular but enormous construct, twice as wide as the airfield at its base and narrowing gradually as it rose skywards.

‘The images are unclear, as the construction is shrouded by thick clouds, caused either deliberately to screen what is being built, or more likely by the exhaust gases of the construction engines that are building it,’ said Ryll. ‘Either way, a huge effort is being made by the orks to build this thing. Whatever its purpose, we intend to destroy it before its construction goes any further. So once you drop your bombs, get missile lock on this thing and take it down.’

‘Not going to be difficult to miss,’ said Bernd under the noise of stamping feet.

Ryll resumed his briefing when the noise had died down. ‘You will be pleased to know that we will not be going in alone. Thunderbolts of the 38th Fighter Wing will lead the first wave and target the star port’s air defences.’

There was a noticeable lack of stamping at this. Bomber crews knew from experience that whatever the fighters did, there would still be plenty of ground fire coming at them on the attack run. Ryll continued.

‘There are reports of significant numbers of ork flyers operating from the star

port. So you'll be pleased to hear that we have an escort of Lightnings from the 717th Imperial Navy Fighter Wing as well.'

This news was greeted with more enthusiasm. Any sort of protective screen would be a welcome distraction for the ork fighters, who often sought out personal duels with the Imperial fighters. Ryll wanted no complacency among his crews. It was going to get rough over the target, whatever support they had from the Navy.

'As you know, greenskin pilots are reckless of their own safety and will seek any means of preventing us from reaching our target. It is imperative that we maintain formation and press on to the objective whatever they throw at us.' He paused to make sure they heard his next few instructions clearly.

'Do not, I repeat, do not break off from the rest of the squadron. Our strength is in our discipline and that is how we shall prevail.'

That and a curtain of bolter fire, thought Mikal as more stamping thumped through the deck plates.

'So stay close, release your bombs and get out of there,' he said as he looked out across the grim faces. Ryll decided it was time to lift the mood.

'I have a particularly fine bottle of Amasec for the first crew to destroy that tower. Do not disappoint me. Dismissed.'

Chairs scraped back as the crews digested what they had just heard. The crew of the *Emperor's Grace* shuffled along amidst the hubbub.

'I'm rather partial to Amasec,' said Bernd.

'The first waves will get it for sure,' said Aleks. 'By the time we're there the target will be scrap metal.'

'We'll make sure then,' said Mikal, determined to keep them all focused on both objectives, although he privately thought Aleks was most likely right.

'Someone had better get a target lock on that tower,' said Bernd. 'I have a bad feeling they'll be sending us back there if it's still standing.'

Mikal was certain of it.

Mikal adjusted his helmet straps, checked his instruments for the third time and took a deep breath. He turned to Bernd on his right and nodded.

'Number off, crew.'

'Nose turret, clear,' said Dudak,

Mikal looked up at the twin-linked lascannons projecting from the *Grace's* nose turret. It gave him some comfort to know that the most powerful defensive weapons on the Marauder bomber were facing forwards. He knew from

intelligence briefings that ork fighter pilots loved nothing better than playing chicken with Imperial bombers. Fortunately the orks' insane courage was not normally matched by their marksmanship. Mikal hoped that Artur Dudak, the *Grace's* nose gunner, would be able to deal with anything coming straight towards them.

'Upper turret clear,' said Krol, calm and measured. Maciej Krol was a cool one thought Mikal. Never gave anything away. He had heard rumours that Krol was popular with female crew members. The hydraulics whirred behind Mikal as Krol pivoted the turret. Fine, thought Mikal. As long as Krol nailed those ork fighters, he didn't care what targets he sought off duty.

'Tail turret, clear,' said Jaworski, unable to hide the eagerness in his voice. Fyodor Jaworski seemed unperturbed at occupying the most vulnerable position in the *Emperor's Grace*. Survival rates for tail gunners in Marauders were appallingly low. Taking out a tail turret gave enemy fighters the chance of an easy kill. There again, Fyodor seemed to relish the challenge. Mikal could not work out if this was raw courage, martial zeal or a mental imbalance. Not that it mattered to him as long as Fyodor kept those heavy bolters firing.

'Navigator, clear,' said Aleks.

'Bombardier, clear,' said Bernd, steadily.

'The *Emperor's Grace* clear for launch,' confirmed Mikal, looking up to the control room above the huge blast door entrance.

'Thank you, *Emperor's Grace*, duly noted,' came the mechanical voice of Flight Controller Danoz Borkowski. The former pilot sat, hard-wired into the console of the control room, bathed in the green light which illuminated the auspex screens and glowed out through its reinforced glass panels. The glowing cupola gave the impression of an insect's bulbous eye, surveying its hatching pupae before they flew out into the world beyond.

'Another novice crew,' Borkowski said to himself, 'about to give their all for the Emperor.'

He could imagine the mixed set of emotions coursing through the bomber below him. Adrenaline-charged excitement, mind-numbing fear, hopeless optimism about a successful conclusion to their first mission. None, he thought, would be prepared for the brutal, chaotic reality of what they would experience over the combat zone. That, he could do little about. His job was to see them off and, with the Emperor's grace, safely home. He checked the squadron manifest again and was surprised to see his words staring up at him. The *Emperor's*

Grace. His augmented vox box grimaced into what might be interpreted as a smile.

‘The *Emperor’s Grace*, you are cleared for launch.’

He heard the pilot’s acknowledgment, ‘For the Emperor.’

Four Ramjet engines roared and Borkowski felt the glass panels vibrate as the Marauder bomber catapulted forward. The *Emperor’s Grace* shot through the launch bay doors and out into the darkness of space.

Mikal tracked the path of the other bombers of 1167th on the auspex while keeping a visual through the plexiglass canopy. The auspex was a blur of hundreds of dots, each marking the location of a bomber or fighter, moving into position in their respective formations. He felt the control column move in his hands as the sensors adjusted his course to ensure their trajectory didn’t converge with the other flyers. The main formation of the 1167th had already formed up in the distance and looked like a grey cloud against the darkness of space. The cloud flickered as identification lights blinked on each of the aircraft and Mikal felt some comfort from the size of the formation. A full Navy squadron of Marauders was an admirable sight and he was reminded of what Ryll had said about combined defensive firepower.

‘Impressive,’ said Bernd, as if sensing Mikal’s thoughts.

Mikal ignored him.

‘Heading for our designated location,’ he said and checked the auspex again. He tracked the blip that signified his wing leader’s aircraft, adjusted the controls and headed towards the outer edge of the formation where the remaining aircraft were already forming up. He lined up on the nearest bomber and adjusted their trim so that they completed the outermost point of the diamond formation. He breathed out slowly, relieved that bit was over. Bernd looked as if he was going to say something but decided not to. He simply nodded instead. Mikal nodded back.

‘*Emperor’s Grace* in position,’ Mikal confirmed over the vox.

‘*Divine Retribution*. Acknowledged, glad to have you with us,’ came the reply from the nearest bomber.

Katarzyna Ostrowski, pilot of the *Divine Retribution*, looked across at the Marauder.

‘Rookies,’ she thought. Katarzyna buzzed her tail gunner Marek Zajac .

‘They’ll be below us on our starboard flank, Zajac, keep an eye on them.’

‘You’re not getting all sentimental in your old age, captain, are you?’ said Zajac in mock surprise.

‘If they go down, you’ll be next in line for those ork fighters, Zajac. So make sure they are still there to soak up any punishment.’

Katarzyna tried to sound more callous than she felt. This was her third tour and she had seen more than enough novice crews downed on their first mission. She hoped that today would not be another one. Besides, she rather liked the look of their upper turret gunner.

‘Makes sense to me, captain,’ acknowledged Zajac. He looked across to the *Emperor’s Grace*. He could see the face of the pilot and bombardier through the cockpit window. He lifted his hand in greeting. The bombardier responded in kind. The pilot just looked at him, unmoved.

‘Rookies,’ he muttered under his breath. ‘Emperor protect us.’

Mikal kept the crew busy with in flight checks and mission protocols. Tension built as they descended through the outer atmosphere of Balle Prime. Above them the darkness of space receded as dawn rose on the far side of the planet, the system’s white sun casting strobes of light through the canopy and turret windows. Mikal dropped the visor on his helmet and peered down towards the deep blue of the ocean as they descended towards the planet surface. Clouds shrouded the main land mass but the large ocean regions were clear and featureless. Aleks updated them on their position at regular intervals, his voice sounding tighter with each announcement.

‘Fifteen minutes to target.’

Mikal scanned ahead as the rest of the squadron spread out to form a geometric cloud that would bring its own lethal rainfall to Balle Prime. In the far distance he could just about make out pinpricks of light that would be the engine trails of Thunderbolts from the 38th Fighter Wing leading the assault.

‘Dudak, Krol, Fyodor, any sign of the Navy fighters?’

Fyodor replied immediately from the tail turret. ‘Yes, captain, they are coming up behind.’

Krol confirmed the same from the upper turret. ‘Captain, I can see them now. They are climbing above our formation and look like they are holding position there.’

Mikal felt slightly more reassured, though he knew that feeling wouldn’t last long.

As the three squadrons descended, their formations tightened further. Vox traffic had dried up as each crew focused on the task ahead. They were coming in fast and low over the turquoise-blue ocean to the south-east of Balle-Delta. Mikal looked down at the tranquil beauty of the only part of the planet free of orks. Then he spotted patches of oil where Imperial vessels had been destroyed and it reminded him that ork flyers would be scrambling to meet this new threat coming in from the sea.

Ryll must have seen the same and his squadron leader's voice cut in over the vox,

'Expect ork fighters to be heading our way, they'll know we are coming. Check guns.'

Mikal relayed the order.

'Gunners, check guns.'

The *Emperor's Grace* shook as Krol and Fyodor pivoted their turrets and squeezed a short burst of bolter fire out over the ocean. The shuddering noise seemed to break the artificial peace of their approach. Dudak sent a pulse of energy down towards the waves from the nose-mounted lascannons and the smell of the energy discharge seeped back through the cockpit.

'Ten minutes to target, captain,' said Aleks.

'Bernd, activate bomb sight,' said Mikal.

Bernd swung the viewscreen in front of him and adjusted the face rest which covered his eyes like a rubber mask. Through this the Marauder's forward sensors and cameras would provide him with digitally constructed image of the target, allowing him to guide his bombs' trajectories onto the star port's landing strip and hangars. Whatever smoke, obstructions or enemy countermeasures may impair the warzone, Bernd would ensure that their bombs found the target.

Mikal peered ahead and saw what looked like a severe weather system developing over the land mass of Balle-Delta. He frowned.

'Navigator, I don't remember a weather system being forecast over Balle-Delta?'

Aleks checked the briefing notes from his data-slate.

'No captain, nothing forecast.'

Bernd raised his head from the bomb site. Mikal heard Aleks leave his station and climb up to the cockpit to get a visual.

'That's odd,' murmured the navigator, frowning.

Then Bernd spoke in alarm, 'That's not a weather system, it's an oil cloud. Engine oil.'

As if on cue, a series of orange blooms appeared in front of the formation as a dozen Thunderbolts from the 38th exploded in midair. Out of the dark cloud ahead of them emerged a swarm of black and red dots with twinkling lights along their wings. The lights spat lethal cannon and machine gun fire which raked the first wave of the Imperial formation. The Thunderbolts responded immediately and a score of the approaching black dots disintegrated in fiery comets before each formation passed through each other.

Ryll came over the vox.

‘Ork fighters heading our way. Maintain formation and make your shots count.’

‘How come the auspex didn’t pick them up?’ asked Aleks, staring ahead at the carnage.

‘Never mind that,’ said Mikal, as he briefly remembered the frightened face of the hangar rating. ‘Get back to your station.’

Aleks needed no further encouragement and ducked below. Bernd, his bomb site forgotten, was scanning the scene in front of him.

‘Holy Emperor, there are thousands of them,’ he blurted out, all calm assurance gone.

‘Bombardier, bomb sight, now!’ ordered Mikal.

Bernd buried his head back into the bomb site mask. Mikal stared ahead as the epic scale of Waaagh! Ugskraga rolled towards the 1167th. Some ork fighters had peeled off to pursue the Thunderbolts, but the rest seemed hellbent on ploughing into the bigger bombers that followed. Imperial Lightnings swooped overhead as their fighter escort accelerated forward to meet the oncoming threat.

‘Dudak. Mind those Lightnings. Choose your target and wait for my command,’ said Mikal.

‘No shortage of targets,’ said Dudak aloud and his turret hydraulics whined as he adjusted aim on the fast approaching ork fighters.

‘Five minutes to target,’ said Aleks, sounding more composed now that he was cocooned below with his familiar screens and charts.

The gap between the two opposing formations closed rapidly. They flew at each other like ranks of cavalry from the sagas of ancient Terra. Suddenly, lights flickered across the mass of ork aircraft and a score of the lead Marauders exploded. Immediately lascannons opened up from across the Marauders first wave, then the second wave and finally...

‘Fire!’ commanded Mikal. The flash and burn of Dudak’s lascannons announced the arrival of the *Emperor’s Grace* to war.

A speck atomised in the distance, followed by another and another as Dudak fired and traversed his turret like a forge worker stitching a line of rivets into a steel wall. Then the *Emperor's Grace* came within range of the ork guns and Mikal heard the whistle of hundreds of projectiles zipping past the Marauder like supercharged hornets.

He felt a shudder and flinched as a bang reverberated through the airframe. A red warning light immediately lit up on the starboard outer engine. Mikal glanced over Bernd's hunched shoulders and saw orange flames streaking from the exhaust cowling above the wing.

'Bernd. Starboard outer's gone. Douse it.'

Bernd lifted his head from the bomb site wide-eyed. He looked to his right and swore. 'Throne of the Emperor.'

He reached forward and hit a control switch and a white cloud instantly streamed back from the engine cowling, dowsing the flames and freezing the overheated turbine in seconds.

Mikal turned just in time to see what seemed like a huge black cloud expanding in front of the cockpit. He realised too late that it was another of Dudak's kills exploding in a mass of burning promethium and smoke. Mikal instinctively closed his eyes as the *Emperor's Grace* flew straight through the firestorm and he heard sickening thumps as debris collided with their leading edges.

The *Emperor's Grace* shuddered again as Krol's storm bolters opened up, followed immediately by Fyodor's. The lead ork fighters had screamed past them and come within the fire arcs of the *Grace's* eager upper and tail turrets.

Mikal tried to track some of the ork flyers. He had never seen aircraft like these before. Bizarrely proportioned airframes were distorted by oversized engines spouting filthy flames and oily exhaust clouds. Crude black, yellow and red markings adorned rivet-strewn wings and fuselages. Most striking of all though were the ranks of guns chattering incessantly from cowlings to blunt wing tip. For the first time since joining the Imperial Navy, Mikal began to feel that the Marauder's defensive armament may be, in fact, inadequate.

He was snapped out of this revelation by a sharp series of bangs that fractured the armoured glass canopy in front of him. Through the cracks he saw an ork fighter hammering towards them, guns blazing. At the last moment the fighter moved out of their flight path and Mikal had a brief impression of a leering green face in goggles. It had a long white scarf trailing out of an open cockpit, like some sort of bygone fighter ace. The alien's mouth, an enormous maw

surrounded by tusk-like teeth, was wide in a roar of either anger or laughter as it flashed past them. Recoiling from this bizarre image, he stared ahead into what could only be described as a nightmarish vision of hell.

Marauders were plummeting downwards, pouring flames in their death spirals. The sky was full of dismembered wings and engines, separated from doomed airframes and cartwheeling through the air like macabre confetti. Dense clouds of black smoke marked the final catastrophic location of obliterated aircraft of unknown origin. Tracer and lascannon fire stitched the sky in all directions and he felt the *Grace* shudder as some of these found their mark whether by intent or by accident.

Mikal looked up to his left and was relieved to see the *Divine Retribution* still there, its turrets spinning and firing like deranged eye balls. The sight of another Marauder bomber flying straight and true helped him regain his focus and suppress the growing sense of panic that was bubbling up from his stomach. His composure was further strengthened by the urgent but continuous communication between the *Grace*'s gunners.

'One coming port side, Krol.'

'Dudak, tracking him... He's yours, Fyodor.'

'Got him.'

'Fyodor. Watch out, there's another, seven o'clock.'

Mikal could hear both Krol and Fyodor's bolters hammering away as the *Grace* juddered with fresh impacts on his port side. Then there was a dull thump from somewhere behind them and Krol yelled in satisfaction. 'Yes!'

'Some help there from the *Divine Retribution*'s tail gunner, captain,' said Krol.

Mikal looked across at their sister vessel, glad that they were not alone.

Then from the corner of his eye he saw the port inner engine streaming oil and fluids from a jagged line of holes in its side. He checked his instruments and saw a blinking red warning light indicating a major fuel leak in that engine. Mikal turned to Bernd, whose head was buried in the targeting console, his hands on the joystick and release button. Before he could say anything, Aleks called out from below.

'Two minutes to target.'

'Bomb bay doors open,' responded Bernd.

The *Emperor's Grace* lurched slightly as the opening doors created drag from below. Mikal gripped the control column more firmly and kept the Marauder flying true and level.

He glanced quickly to his left and saw that the port inner engine was now

emitting wisps of smoke and knew he had no choice but to shut his down. He reached in front of the preoccupied Bernd to hit the engine shutdown switch.

‘Bernd, I’m shutting down the port inner engine, keep focused on the target.’

The *Grace* yawed slightly at the loss of thrust and Mikal adjusted the rudder pedals with his feet. As the *Grace* responded, Bernd called out.

‘Target identified, starting bomb run.’

Mikal peered ahead but all he could see was billowing black smoke rising that obscured the star port, the result of whatever damage the first waves of Thunderbolts and Marauders had done to the target. As they approached the dense black cloud, Dudak’s front turret was deprived of targets. Krol and Fyodor were still firing almost continuously from the upper and tail turrets. Bernd, hunched over the bomb sites as if in prayer, started intoning over the vox.

‘Steady... Steady... Keep him there, captain...’

Mikal looked ahead and saw that the *Divine Retribution*, with all its engines still operational, had pulled ahead. The *Retribution*’s bomb bay doors were open and its tail turret was twisting and spitting bolter fire at targets behind both aircraft.

‘Steady... Steady...’ continued Bernd, his back hunched and hands rictus-like on the trigger mechanism.

Mikal saw tracer arcing up from the star port below them like a fountain of orange and red shooting stars. He knew he couldn’t dodge them even if he had wanted to, committed as they were to their bomb run.

‘Steady... Holy Terra...’ yelled Bernd as flak ripped up through the port wing.

Mikal fought with the controls and saw the *Divine Retribution* drop its bombs.

‘I’ve got her Bernd, just get those bombs away,’ he said, straining at the effort.

Bernd seemed to pause for a split second, frozen over the bomb site and then said, ‘Bombs away.’

Despite Mikal’s efforts, the *Emperor’s Grace* bucked upwards, not from any more hits, but from the release of three tonnes of high explosive ordnance that whistled down towards the primary target. The Marauder surged and so did Mikal’s spirits. First job done. Now for the secondary target: the ork tower. He peered ahead through the rising clouds of ash and smoke.

‘Bernd, switch to missiles and scan for that tower.’

Aleks called up excitedly from below. ‘By my reckoning it should be directly ahead.’

Bernd toggled the joystick as he scanned the targeting auspex seeking the new target.

Mikal watched the *Divine Retribution* disappear through the rising column of black smoke ahead of them, and knew he would have to follow them through it blind.

‘Got a lock on that tower, Bernd?’ asked Mikal urgently.

‘Not sure, captain, I think the auspex is a bit shaken up,’ replied Bernd tersely. Mikal cursed. ‘Keep looking. Dudak, can you see anything?’

Dudak’s nose turret had begun tracking an ork fighter that had raced across in front of them.

‘Captain?’

Before Mikal could reply, the *Emperor’s Grace* was enveloped by the column of smoke. Soon after, all his guns fell eerily silent as Dudak, Krol and Fyodor were momentarily deprived of targets. Amplified by the relative silence, Mikal’s next question seemed unnecessarily loud.

‘Dudak, have you seen that ork tower yet?’

‘No, captain, not yet... Holy God Emperor!’ yelled Dudak.

The *Emperor’s Grace* emerged from the smoke and there immediately in front of them was the heavily damaged, but still standing, ork tower. Its monstrous and crude construction loomed over them like a huge tombstone about to mark their imminent demise.

In the moments that followed, time seemed to slow for the crew of the *Emperor’s Grace* and several things happened at once.

Bernd convulsively pulled the targeting trigger and two hellstrike missiles shot forth from the starboard wing mounts.

Mikal instinctively yanked the control column to port and kicked the rudder pedals hard to accelerate the turn.

The port wing dipped, her starboard wing swung to the vertical and yells of panic came from the remaining members of the crew. With spine-compressing G-forces, the *Emperor’s Grace* banked away from the ork tower.

As she did so, an ork fighter with a white scarf billowing from its cockpit hammered past them and into the tower.

The combined force of two hellstrike missiles and a promethium-laden ork airframe created a huge fireball around the tower. The *Emperor’s Grace* was caught by the shock wave and catapulted away like a slingshot from the 1167th’s secondary target. As he hauled back desperately on the control column, Mikal heard Fyodor yell from the tail turret.

‘Captain, the tower! It’s falling.’

Mikal couldn't spare a glance backwards as he fought to pull the *Emperor's Grace* out of her dive. Mikal righted the bomber slowly, his hands shaking with adrenaline. Then his brain processed the fact that they were still flying and not tumbling to their deaths in burning ruin. The *Grace* had responded sluggishly, as if, like him, she needed to catch her breath after their close escape from death.

Bernd looked up from the bomb site for the first time since he had started the bomb run. His eyes squinted as he adjusted to the kaleidoscope of colours that assailed his senses. Planes were still buzzing across the sky from all directions, bombers were burning, flak was bursting around them, and tracer fire crisscrossed the air like a multicoloured light show.

Mikal saw the look of shock and confusion on Bernd's face. The normally composed bombardier struggled to digest the nightmarish world into which he had emerged. For the last two minutes he had been shielded from it by the comparative calm of the targeting screen. Was it only two minutes? It had seemed like two hours.

'Bernd, check the port wing. I think we took a hit,' said Mikal urgently but firmly. He needed to snap Bernd back fast. He needed his help to get the *Emperor's Grace* and her crew away from Balle-Delta fast.

'What? Right, captain,' said Bernd. He looked over Mikal's left shoulder. His face went pale with shock. 'Captain. The outer wing's a mess.'

Mikal couldn't help himself and twisted in his seat. Bernd was right. There was a jagged rip just beyond the port outer engine and nothing beyond that. That explained why only two starboard missiles had fired at the tower. The two port missiles had been lost with the rest of the wing. Mikal didn't want to think about what would have happened if one of those missiles had exploded while still attached to the bomber. He tore his eyes away from the mangled airframe and spoke urgently but clearly to the crew.

'Aleks, I need a heading to get us out of here and back to the *Implacable Advance*. Bernd, check how much fuel we've lost and whether we have enough to get us back into the upper atmosphere. Gunners, how are we doing on ammunition?'

'I'm down to my last 500 rounds,' reported Krol.

'Slightly less,' said Fyodor.

There was no reply from Dudak.

'Dudak? Are you there? Dudak?'

Static on the vox.

'Bernd, get forward and see what's happened to him,' ordered Mikal.

‘Orks, captain,’ cut in Krol’s voice urgently. ‘Fighters, five o’clock.’

Almost immediately Krol and Fyodor’s bolters opened up. Mikal kicked the rudder pedals to starboard as tracer fire whipped past the canopy. Bernd was thrown against the fuselage as he attempted to get forward to Dudak’s turret.

‘Fyodor, seven o’clock!’ said Krol, all coolness lost from his voice. Bolters chattered in unison. Mikal hauled the joystick over to port to change direction again and heard Bernd groan as he was flung to the other side of the fuselage. A pair of flame-coloured rockets sped past, their greasy vapour trails spiralling over the *Grace*’s starboard wing.

‘Terra, that was close,’ said Aleks as he heard the rockets explode ahead of them.

Mikal banked the *Grace* again and Bernd staggered back into view, gripping the bomb site for support.

‘Dudak?’ asked Mikal.

‘Shock. That tower. Thought he was dead,’ said Bernd as he struggled back towards his seat. Mikal kicked the rudder hard again. Too late.

There was a huge bang behind the cockpit and Mikal instinctively ducked. The whole airframe shook and Krol’s bolters stopped firing.

Smoke and a cloud of shattered glass blew around the cockpit. Even through his respirator Mikal picked up the distinctive smell of cooked meat. Confused, he looked up and saw Bernd staring incongruously down at his flight suit. A fist-sized hole had punched straight through his chest and out through the front fuselage. Bernd turned his head slowly towards Mikal and, as the life left his eyes, he toppled forward onto the control column. The *Emperor’s Grace* dropped her nose and fell from the sky. Bernd’s body pinned Mikal helplessly against the cockpit wall and he could feel the bomber begin to accelerate into a death spiral down towards the sea of Balle Prime.

‘Holy Emperor. Aleks. Get him off me. Get him off!’

Mikal wrestled with the dead weight of Bernd’s body as the control column lay jammed between them. The *Grace*’s remaining two turbines began to whine worryingly as their airspeed increased. Mikal felt desperate. This was not how he was going to die. Not this way. Not today.

He felt his ever-present rage build inside him and this time he did not attempt to contain it. He used years of frustration and anger and channelled them into this death struggle which he simply refused to lose.

‘You useless lump! Get off me!’ he screamed into Bernd’s lifeless face, inches

from his own, and with an inhuman surge of adrenaline he hefted Bernd's blood-soaked chest away from him. The body pitched across the cockpit and crashed into Aleks, who had struggled up from his station to help. The diminutive navigator was sent flying back down onto his chart table, with Bernd pinning him to it like a drunken lover. Aleks stared horrified at his friend's flaccid features before rolling Bernd off him and onto the floor. He saw the gaping wound in his friend's chest, pumping arterial blood in crimson fountains across his normally ordered workspace. Aleks screamed.

'What was that?' asked Fyodor over the vox. 'Krol? Krol?'

Mikal had no time to respond. He had grabbed the control column, now sticky with blood, and wrenched hard, using the adrenaline still coursing through his body. He pushed hard on the rudder pedals and gradually the *Emperor's Grace* responded. Slowly the spin corrected. Mikal clenched his teeth and hauled the control column back into his midriff and the nose of the crippled bomber gradually edged upwards.

'Krol? Krol?' continued Fyodor.

'Shut it, Fyodor.' Mikal barked.

'Captain. Who's screaming? Is it Krol?'

Mikal disengaged Aleks's vox on the panel in front of him and the screaming was abruptly cut short.

'Fyodor. The fighters? Where are the fighters?'

'Fighter, captain,' corrected Fyodor, 'Krol got one. Before we got hit.'

The *Grace* was now flying level and so Mikal risked a look over his shoulder to see what had happened to Krol. He saw the shattered remains of the upper turret. Krol's headless body was hanging in his harness straps. Mikal turned back to his instruments. Bernd and Krol. The Marauder's interior was looking like an abattoir, he thought callously.

'Fyodor, listen,' he said firmly and clearly. 'Krol and Bernd didn't make it.' He heard nothing from the tail gunner.

'Fyodor,' he said. 'Ammunition status?'

There was a further pause.

'Fyodor,' he repeated, louder.

'None, captain. I'm dry,' said Fyodor.

Mikal wasn't surprised. Fyodor had been firing almost continuously since they started their bomb run. 'Right, I need you to keep alert. Report any orks that come stalking us,' said Mikal in a measured tone.

'Like that one, you mean,' said Fyodor.

‘What? Where?’ said Mikal. He swung round in his chair and gaped. There, just off the shattered stub of the port wing, was an ork fighter. In it was an ork pilot, leering at him with fiery red eyes.

The ork aircraft was painted black with chequered trim around its huge engine nacelle. Beneath its wings hung empty missile racks. Its forward facing guns were silent.

‘Out of ammunition,’ said Mikal.

As if reading his mind, the ork pilot shook his huge head and broke into a wicked smile. He jabbed a clawed thumb back towards the rear of the fighter’s cockpit. Mikal looked at the back of the ork’s grimy cockpit and saw a diminutive greenskin manning a pair of rear-facing, heavy machine guns. The second greenskin was desperately trying to pivot the guns round to get a shot on the stricken Marauder. Mikal realized that the angle was too acute. Then the greenskin began jabbering to its pilot, who nodded and, with a belch of oily smoke from its multiple engine exhausts, the ugly aircraft started to pull ahead of the *Emperor’s Grace*. Mikal knew that the ork pilot intended to get far enough in front of the Marauder to allow his gunner to get the kill shot. A mistake, as it turned out.

The twin-linked lascannons of the *Grace’s* nose turret burst into life, sending a blaze of energy straight through the fighter and out the other side. There was a blinding flash and the ork aircraft, pilot and crew vaporised in a shuddering explosion.

Mikal was momentarily stunned.

‘For Bernd and Krol,’ said a voice over the vox.

‘Dudak,’ said Mikal.

A laugh came from the tail turret. Or was it a sob?

Then there was silence on the vox and it dawned on Mikal that for the first time since the attack began they were alone in the air. They were clear of Balle-Delta and heading out to sea. And they were still flying. Barely.

Mikal knew he had to grip his remaining crew if they were to have any chance of getting back to the carrier. He looked over to the navigator’s section. Aleks was rocking back and forth on his chair, Bernd’s body face down at his feet. Aleks wasn’t screaming any more. Mikal reconnected his navigator’s vox.

‘Aleks. I need you to plot us a course for the *Implacable Advance*.’ No response.

‘Aleks? Can you hear me? I need a course from you.’ Mikal said. The navigator continued to rock back and forth.

Dudak responded instead. ‘Captain, I can see a Marauder ahead of us.’

Mikal peered ahead and sure enough he saw pinpricks of light from afterburners in the distance. It was the *Divine Retribution*.

‘Good spot, Dudak,’ he said, relieved. ‘That’s our course.’ Mikal eased the control column back and pointed the *Grace* towards their wingman. He reached forward to wipe dried blood from the instrument panel in front of him and noticed for the first time that his hands had stopped shaking.

On the *Implacable Advance*, Ryll swung down from the forward hatch of his aircraft, the *Emperor’s Wrath* and headed across the launch bay towards the control bridge. Crews were disembarking from their battered aircraft, those who could still walk. Medicae units were scurrying from plane to plane, retrieving burnt and tattered bodies or in some cases clambering aboard to perform emergency procedures on crewmen whose injuries were too critical to allow them to be moved. Losses had been high, one aircraft in four. Of those bombers that had survived, most had taken a beating. Ryll was not happy as he strode up the gantry to the control room. There he found Borkowski, bent over auspex screens, checking off the returning bombers.

‘Borkowski, who’s still out there?’ he demanded.

Borkowski studied the auspex for the serial number of the last aircraft.

‘EMGR2243.’ Borkowski reported in a mechanical tone.

‘Who’s that?’ said Ryll as he came over to look down at the manifest.

‘The *Emperor’s Grace*.’ Borkowski said.

‘The rookies?’ said Ryll surprised. ‘I thought they had ploughed into the ork tower?’

‘It appears not,’ said Borkowski.

They both looked down at the landing bay to survey the clusters of surviving crews who stood waiting for the final aircraft to arrive. Some started pointing and both officers watched the launch bay entrance as the *Emperor’s Grace* eased herself into view.

‘Holy Throne of the Emperor,’ said Ryll.

Borkowski’s steel jaw twitched but he said nothing.

The *Emperor’s Grace* hovered uncertainly just above the landing bay deck on her two remaining engines before dropping a little unsteadily to land with a bump. All eyes around the landing bay were on her, transfixed by the appalling damage she had sustained.

The Marauder’s mangled port wing leaked hydraulic fluid like an amputated

limb. Her two useless engines were blackened and blistered, flanked by their overworked, smoking twins. Her interior airframe was visible through the countless holes and tears in the bodywork and light shone through the multiple perforations of the tail section. The upper turret was shattered and there was the unmistakable stain of frosted blood trailing back along the fuselage. Little could be seen of the Marauder's original paint scheme under the soot and scorch marks that covered most of its surfaces, the result of the fireball from the near miss with the ork tower.

In the landing bay, no one moved, no one ran forward to assist, as if none could imagine anyone was still alive inside the aircraft. They were looking at a flying coffin. Ryll left the bottle of Amasec in the control tower as he headed for the landing bay.

Inside the *Emperor's Grace*, Mikal unstrapped his respirator and sat motionless for a few moments. From the tail turret, Fyodor broke the silence.

'Permission to disembark, captain.'

'Right,' said Mikal. He didn't know what else to say. He knew he should be relieved, glad even at surviving his first mission. Instead he felt ashamed. He felt ashamed of how he had felt towards Bernd when his shattered body had almost brought them to ruin. He could not bring himself to look at Krol's corpse hanging like a broken doll behind him. The other member of his crew he had failed to bring back alive.

Dudak's voice broke into his darkening thoughts.

'The squadron leader, captain.'

Mikal looked out through the shattered window panel and saw Ryll emerging from the assembled crowd.

Not now, he thought.

He struggled up from his chair and sought out Aleks. The navigator was still rocking back and forth on his seat, his eyes tight shut.

'Aleks,' said Mikal leaning down into the navigator's area. 'Aleks.'

The navigator continued rocking back and forth.

Mikal reached over to rest his hand on Aleks's shoulder. At that moment someone began opening the crew hatch from the outside. The tortured metal of the *Grace's* fuselage screeched as the buckled housing was wrenched apart.

Aleks stopped rocking at the sound and opened his mouth wide. He began to scream.

Mikal gripped his navigator's shoulders. 'Aleks, stop.'

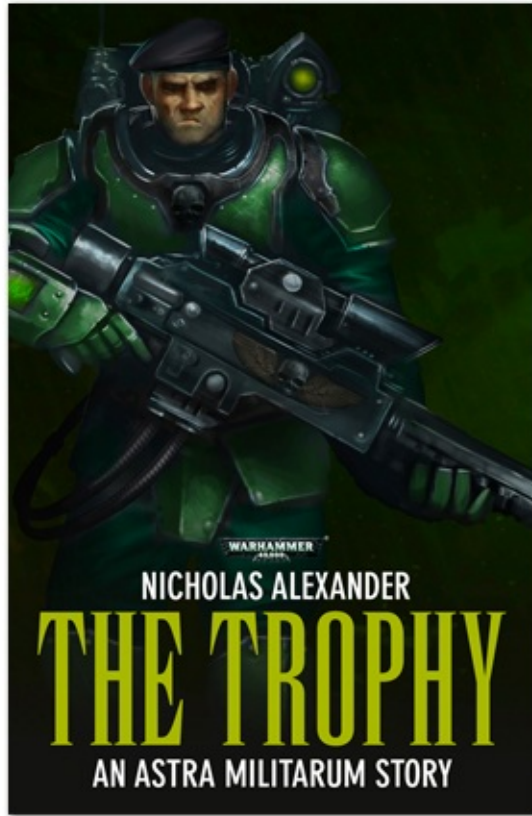
Aleks kept screaming. Mikal wrapped his arms around the hysterical navigator and lifted him down onto the *Grace's* gory deck.

That is where Ryll found them, the pilot, navigator still in his arms, wedged next to the corpse of the bombardier. All were covered in dried blood. The pilot looked up at the squadron leader, his eyes cold as he repeated the same mantra from cracked lips.

‘We must not show weakness, we must not. To show weakness is death...’

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