



WARHAMMER
40,000

NICHOLAS ALEXANDER

THE TROPHY

AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY



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‘Brace for impact!’ The pilot’s warning sounded like a death knell over the vox.

General Roman Slowacki looked across at the rest of his retinue. They were grim faced. This was supposed to have been a simple transfer to the forward command centre. It had turned into a desperate chase, low over the treetops of Balle Delta, their Aquila lander desperately trying to evade a squadron of ork fighters. The general knew there was only going to be one winner in that contest. The look on the faces of his fellow passengers told him that they knew it too.

The Aquila shook as further impacts hammered into its side. There was an explosion up front and the vox went dead. The stubby aircraft’s nose dipped and the stomachs of its passengers lurched as it dropped from the sky. There was a terrible tearing and banging sound as the Aquila hit the tree line. Its wings were wrenched from its body with brute force. Ancient trees splintered like matchsticks as the wrecked airframe smashed them aside like marbles. The doomed aircraft ploughed into the forest floor, throwing up debris as its momentum propelled it through soil, tree stumps and rocky outcrops.

Slowacki was flung against his harness straps and grunted in pain as his bodyguard’s heavy frame slammed into his side, crushing the air from him. He heard a sickening thud from the Master of Ordnance on his left and his body went limp under the combined weight of the general and his minder. A terrible screeching noise grew around them. Suddenly the men opposite him lurched forward as their seats buckled upwards. Shards of metal and plasteel exploded into the air and whistled through the compartment, ricocheting off surfaces and shattering the internal light. Slowacki clenched his eyes shut as fragments of glass lacerated his face. Someone screamed, adding to the fearful rending sound of the airframe and something warm splattered against his face. The scream stopped abruptly, but the banging, tearing, shaking and lurching didn’t. The reinforced crew compartment continued to cut a devastating path through the undergrowth until it emerged into the clearing that its pilot had been desperately

trying to reach. It continued its catastrophic path for hundreds of yards before it finally lost momentum and its limbless torso came to rest.

Inside the crew compartment, there was a shocked silence broken only by the moan of the injured. The fuselage had tilted on its side in coming to rest and light streamed in through a jagged rent in the roof. The general found himself lying on his back still strapped to his seat. He tried to look around, but a terrible pain down the side of his neck prevented it. Whiplash made it hard to move his head, as did the weight of his bodyguard crushed up against him.

His eyes looked down at his body, which was covered in shards of glass and spattered with blood. He hoped it was not his own. He peered up above his head to the seats on the opposite side of the crumpled compartment. The bodies of their occupants hung broken in their restraining harnesses. The moaning had come from the Officer of the Fleet, whose normally immaculate uniform was soaked in blood that leaked down onto the general. To his left he saw the crumpled form of the Master of Ordnance. Brain matter stained the bulkhead that had crushed his skull. The flyer had been transformed by the crash into an abattoir.

He felt movement to his right. The remaining bodyguard shifted his weight, releasing the pinned general from his seat. Slowacki realised that, despite crushing the breath out of his lungs, the bodies of his two neighbours had probably shielded him from the worst of the impact and flying debris.

The bodyguard rose gingerly to his feet, careful to avoid bumping into the body hanging above him. Like the general, the other survivor was covered in blood, some still leaking from a gash across his forehead. He seemed shaken but intact.

‘General,’ said the soldier. Slowacki couldn’t remember the man’s name. He was finding it difficult to focus. He thought the man was a sergeant.

‘Let’s get you out of that harness, general.’ The sergeant reached for Slowacki’s release catch. ‘We need to get you out of here before something blows. I don’t like the smell of these fumes.’

The thought of promethium igniting and cooking the pair of them in this man-sized oven helped Slowacki regain his focus, and with that recognition returned.

‘Thank you, Sergeant Ryszard. That seems eminently sensible.’

Ryszard nodded. He released the officer’s harness and held out a hand for Slowacki to raise himself from the padded seat. The general’s neck spasmed in pain, but he managed pull himself upright. The sergeant reached down between the seats and retrieved something that he handed to Slowacki. It was the

general's peaked cap, its gold filigree covered with glass and metal fragments. Slowacki took it and slapped it against his leg to remove the debris.

'Thank you.'

'Right, general, let's see if the release mechanism is working.' Ryszard turned and pulled a lever at the rear of the compartment. Amazingly, the hydraulics hissed into action and the rear hatch creaked open, allowing daylight and fresh air to pour into their battered cocoon. They both blinked, eyes adjusting to the light. Ryszard removed a lascarbine from its restraint and stepped out into the trench that had been gouged by the Aquila's crash landing.

A burst of automatic fire shattered the silence and Ryszard's head exploded in a mist of gore as his body fell back at the general's feet. Slowacki ducked back into the airframe, using its bulkhead as cover. He peered around the metal structure to identify where the shots had come from. In the distance he could see the low hills of Balle Delta and the forest that ran down to the river itself. At the far side of the clearing, beyond the makeshift trench, there was a smoking gap in the tree line caused by the Aquila's devastating descent. Pouring from this gap like an ugly green tide came a large mob of orks, pushing and shoving to be the first to reach the downed aircraft. Slowacki scanned the clearing to see if there was any chance of escape. At first the lush green vegetation seemed clear and he wondered if he would be able to make it to the trees and lose them in the forest. But then he saw other green heads bobbing through the tall grass, all converging on his position.

He turned and checked the passenger compartment again. The Officer of the Fleet had stopped groaning and hung motionless. There were no weapons or explosives that he could see. The vox was as dead as the passengers. He didn't need to be a general to know his tactical options were non-existent. Still, he wasn't going to die like a rat in a corner. He pulled his laspistol from its holster and checked the power pack. He drew his power sword from its scabbard, thumbed the switch and felt the energy surge up the blade. He stood, raised the blade to the peak of his cap to salute his enemy and stepped forward to meet his fate.

In the months leading up to the downing of General Slowacki's transport, Waaagh! Ugskraga had spread across the Imperial world of Balle Prime, overwhelming forces that were ill-prepared for the scale and savagery of the ork onslaught. Having lain waste to a score of Imperial worlds en route to the planet, it seemed only a matter of time before the infamous warboss did the same to its

capital Balle Major. An Imperial relief force had been assembled and despatched to blunt the Waaagh! and prevent another Imperial world from falling. The force's arrival some weeks earlier had provided a much needed morale boost to the hard-pressed defences. The reinforcements had been deployed immediately and, supported by squadrons of Marauder bombers, had initially stemmed the ork tide. But Ugskraga was relentless and seemed to have unlimited reserves to soak up the Imperial counter-attack. As Imperial losses mounted, the warboss unleashed a series of devastating thrusts at weak points in their defences, forcing local commanders to react rapidly to prevent whole sectors of the line becoming isolated and overrun.

At the Imperial Guard command centre on the Eastern Sector of Balle Delta, Commander Julius Lester surveyed the latest pict images on the wall of displays. He was surrounded by aides, all busy processing the huge amount of tactical data being fed back from the rapidly evolving front line. In this sector the orks appeared to be advancing on all fronts and such was their overwhelming superiority in numbers, his forces were close to being overrun. In some cases the line had broken and Lester had to respond by committing reserves to shore up defences, leaving other sections critically exposed.

Lester had sought to remain calm and dispassionate amidst the frenzy of activity. However, his steely resolve had been sorely tested by the vox conference he had been forced to endure from the planetary governor twenty minutes earlier. Governor August Pilatus had used a secure channel to brief Lester on the latest catastrophe to beset the Imperial forces.

‘Colonel Lester, I have just received a communication from Admiral Schiller of the Imperial Navy.’

The governor's bald head shone in the glare of an unseen light source as he sat facing the pict screen on his desk. Lester's eye was drawn to the huge painting of the Emperor mounted on the marble wall behind the large man.

‘Indeed, governor,’ said Lester. ‘Has the Admiral finally agreed to redeploy his Marauder squadrons planet-side? If so, his timing couldn't be better. Our ground forces would benefit greatly from that close range support.’

The transmission hissed with interference and dark lines across the screen seemed to detach the governor's head from his magnificent white and gold uniform.

‘No colonel, that wasn't what we discussed,’ said the governor, irritated that the commander seemed to think he was some sort of messenger. ‘I have something far more serious than that.’

‘More serious?’ said Lester, trying to hide the scepticism in his voice. From where he sat he found it hard to imagine anything more serious than establishing air superiority when his forces were taking such a pounding.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the governor, either mistaking or ignoring the implication of Lester’s question. The vox signal was intermittent and Lester suspected that the governor’s screen was suffering from as much interference as his.

‘The Admiral has advised me that General Slowacki’s shuttle has been intercepted by a squadron of ork fighters while travelling to the eastern sector. Despite the heroic efforts of the Imperial Navy fighter escort, none of which survived the encounter, the general’s aircraft was damaged and contact with it was lost. The final communication from the Aquila pilot indicated he was preparing to make a forced landing south of the river.’

Lester said nothing. He had a bad feeling about what was coming next. Static hissed and spat from the screen.

‘Are you still there Lester?’

‘Yes, governor. Poor signal.’

The governor frowned but Lester’s face remained impassive.

‘I need hardly remind you that General Slowacki is a key member of my administration, and the impact on morale if we were to lose such a high profile figure would be devastating to the population of Balle Prime.’

And to your reputation, thought Lester, but he did not give voice to his private thoughts. Pilatus continued as the static now bisected the governor’s head in a manner that Lester found strangely satisfying.

‘It is an absolute priority that we launch a search and rescue mission for General Slowacki. The nature of this mission must be kept secret. Word cannot leak out that the general has gone missing.’

When Lester spoke, his voice was calm. The screen seemed to respond and for once held its resolution and volume in perfect balance.

‘A search and rescue mission to recover the general?’ He paused to ensure that the governor was forced to confirm what he was asking Lester to do.

‘A search and rescue mission, yes,’ said the governor.

In the static-free quiet that followed, the tension between the men was palpable.

‘What intelligence do we have that the general is alive?’ Lester’s tone was neutral.

‘His tracking device,’ said the governor.

Static erupted across the screen and all that Lester could see was the

Emperor's image staring down at him, his features noble and pure.

'What tracking device?'

'Each of my senior aides has a tracking device so that I may contact them whenever the need arises,' said the governor.

Or keep an eye on their movements for political purposes, thought Lester.

'And General Slowacki has such a device?' he asked.

'Yes, he has,' said the governor. 'The device is activated and sending, commander.'

The screen corrected itself and Lester could see the hint of desperation in the man's features as he came back into focus.

'What makes you think this device is not in a pile of wreckage, buried with the remains of the general and his retinue?' asked Lester.

The governor could not hide the note of frustration in his voice.

'It is operational, commander. That is all you need to know.'

'And you want me to send a unit behind enemy lines to find out if this tracking device is indeed with the general?'

'No, Lester,' said the governor, his voice bullying now as he sought to assert his authority. 'I am ordering you to locate and rescue the general and bring him back alive. This is the sort of daring mission that will give hope to our people in their darkest hour.'

And secure a governor's re-election, thought Lester. The static began to build again, this time removing the image of the Emperor from the top of the screen. Without this, the governor was laid bare for what he was. A frightened, pompous bureaucrat whose safe and secure world was spiralling out of control.

'This is critically important commander, do you hear? I want your best unit on it. This mission cannot fail.'

Fortunately for Lester, the pict had then been cut dismissively from the governor's end before he could reply. Had it not been, he would probably now be staring at a firing squad rather than a display of tactical screens.

An aide approached the colonel with a data-slate. He seemed unusually formal, even for a senior guard officer.

'Commander Lester, there is a storm trooper to see you, sir.' Bale then put undue emphasis on the visitor's rank. 'Tribune Leander.'

'Thank you, Bale. I'll see the tribune in my private briefing room.'

'Yes, sir.' Bale saluted and turned smartly to collect the visitor. Lester smiled, understanding what had put his adjutant's nose out of joint. The unit he had chosen for the rescue mission had that sort of impact on regular Guard

personnel.

When Bale returned with the visitor, Lester noticed a change in atmosphere in the room and a number of other aides seemed to pause in their duties. They were all watching the outsider who had entered their domain. Following Bale was a shaven-headed man with a calm expressionless face. He wore carapace armour that bulked out his broad shoulders and accentuated his presence in the crowded command bunker. The sergeant chevrons on his sleeve indicated he was probably the most junior ranked person in the bunker. He looked round as the others stared at him, unconcerned by the reaction he had caused. By contrast, each person in the room felt that they had been logged and assessed, their vulnerable points noted by those grey, intelligent eyes.

Lester wasn't surprised. Storm troopers were a breed apart. Orphans of Imperial officials, they were brought up by the schola progenium and honed into merciless pragmatic killers. They seemed to operate by their own set of rules and doctrines. This meant they were treated with suspicion, if not fear, by the regular Imperial Guard. This was exacerbated by the fact that they were often deployed for special operations considered too difficult, or suicidal, for regular Guard units, even experienced veteran squads. Storm troopers didn't seem to care. They simply followed orders, no matter the odds. Their steadfast loyalty to the Imperium was more than sufficient to justify any mission required of them.

Lester watched as Bale stopped at a steel door with a circular viewing window set high in the frame. His adjutant entered a code into the panel on the wall. There was a click and Bale pushed open the door to reveal a bare room whose cool stale air was always a welcome relief to the warm, sweaty atmosphere of the command bunker. The strip lights in the ceiling cast a cold, white glow that added to the functional utility of the space. In the centre of the room there was a raised steel table ensuring that all attendees remained standing, a technique that Lester employed to keep briefings short. On top of the table stood a hololithic projector, currently turned off. The vox conference screen was mounted on the far wall, the chair where he had sat for his briefing by the governor still facing it.

Bale entered the room and held the door for the storm trooper. The tribune walked past him and moved to the far end of the room. He didn't take the seat but moved it instead under the tall table. Then he stood there, relaxed and looking towards Bale in the doorway. The aide frowned as if he had expected the tribune to sit in the chair rather than tidy it away. Lester smiled. He saw the tactical action for what it was. The storm trooper now had complete freedom of movement at the far end of the room and a clear field of fire towards the door.

The tribune's cold eyes were locked on those of Bale, who stiffened. Perhaps, for the first time, his aide realised what had just happened. That he was now in a killing zone.

'Wait here, tribune. The commander will see you shortly.'

The tribune saluted. 'Sir.'

Bale nodded and left the room, shutting the door behind him. He turned and seemed startled to find Lester watching him. Bale saluted smartly.

'Tribune Leander is waiting in the briefing room for you sir.'

'Thank you, Bale,' said the commander, 'Ensure we are not disturbed.'

'Sir,' said Bale. He reached down and entered the code in the door. Lester knew the aide would not be happy that his commander was meeting the storm trooper alone. It couldn't be helped. The governor had made it clear that the mission had to be kept secret. If that bruised some egos, so be it. He was sure that the storm trooper couldn't care less what others thought. Lester entered the briefing room and shut the door. He activated a switch and the viewing window slid shut, sealing them off from Bale and the other disgruntled officers.

'Tribune Leander, sir!' said the storm trooper, saluting the commander crisply.

Lester returned the salute. 'Tribune.'

Whatever the attitude of the rest of the Guard towards storm troopers, it was in situations like this that a commander was glad to have men like Leander under his command. The man deserved respect for what he was about to be sent out to do.

The Valkyrie pitched and rolled as the Navy pilot pushed the gunship as hard as he dared, hugging the tree line in the pre-dawn darkness above Balle Delta. Tribune Leander and his men sat in two rows facing each other, their faces painted to match the camouflage of their helmets, armour, uniform and webbing. No one spoke. They had no need. Each man knew what they had to do. They had been briefed by Leander immediately after his meeting with Lester. The mission was a simple one.

'You will be dropped close to the crash site of an Imperial aircraft. Locate the site and check for survivors. General Slowacki is equipped with a tracking device. Recover the general and take him to the primary extraction point where you will be airlifted out at 1400 hours. If that location is compromised, move on to your secondary extraction point where the airlift will be at 1800 hours. If that too is compromised, head for the river and notify us of your position by vox. Deployment and extraction will be by Valkyrie.'

‘And if the general is dead, sir?’

‘Abort the mission and head for extraction.’

‘What do we know about ork forces in the area, commander?’

‘Some significant ork concentrations. The area is heavily forested so it is difficult to say precisely. The picture is changing by the hour.’ They both knew what that meant. The storm troopers were going into a hostile environment and they were going in blind.

‘Get in, get the general and get out, Leander,’ Lester had said.

Simple. Leander liked simple. He prided himself on getting things done and for that he needed a clear objective. Which is what Lester had given him. The fact that he would be dropped deep behind enemy lines, surrounded by high concentrations of enemy forces to chase down a mobile target in dense forest, didn’t bother him at all. Like all storm troopers he had been schooled on the virtues of obedience, excellence and efficiency. It was for missions like this that he and his men had been trained. That was their purpose in the Imperium of Man. A purpose in which he and his men believed without question.

Leander looked across at Trooper Bernadus. He and Bernadus had been together since their first year at the schola progenium. They had made it through the brutal training regime, when so many others had fallen short. What they had experienced together over two decades as storm troopers had forged in them a shared understanding that bordered on telepathy. Leander checked his chronometer. Three minutes to deployment. He looked up at Bernadus, who held up three fingers. Leander nodded. Like telepathy.

The voice of the Navy copilot came over the vox.

‘Three minutes to drop zone.’

Bernadus smiled. Leander looked down the two lines of men and began the pre-drop routine.

‘Final approach, helmets on,’ he said.

There was movement down the two lines of troopers as helmets were pulled into place and straps adjusted. Leander used the vox-link that was integrated into each helmet to communicate with his men.

‘Check weapons.’

Unlike normal Guardsmen, storm troopers were issued with hot-shot lasguns. These used a more powerful, external energy cell incorporated into a backpack. There was a low thrum of noise as each cell was activated and weapons charged. Storm troopers were trained to be experts in this and four other types of weapons. Over time, some individuals developed a clear preference for one

weapon or another.

Nerva and Draco, the two heavy weapons specialists, checked their grenade launcher and flamer respectively. All storm troopers were large men, but Nerva and Draco were huge, their bulk made greater by the extra equipment they carried. Squeezed next to them were Cephass and Sepp, experienced troopers who had proven their resourcefulness many times before. Both were experts in explosives and booby traps and carried a range of lethal munitions and detonators strapped to their webbing.

Further down the line, Leander could see Tycho, checking the scope on his long las with a scrutiny that bordered on compulsive. Tycho was the unit's sniper and his hot-shot lasgun was the modified variant issued to those troopers who specialised in this form of weapon. Opposite him he saw Tacitus run a camo stick down the length of his stiletto knife, dulling the blade before returning it to the scabbard attached to his thigh. Tacitus caught Leander looking at him and their eyes met. Leander could feel the intensity in the trooper's gaze and nodded. Tacitus nodded back. The man rarely spoke and killed with silent efficiency. Leander was glad that he had a scout of Tacitus's calibre in the squad.

Next to him Trooper Ambros, the squad's vox set operator, was peering at the screen of an auspex that was tuned in to the general's tracking device. The other auspex was held by Trooper Vitalis, who sat next to Bernadus. Both Ambros and Vitalis were relatively new to the squad, but Leander had been impressed with their progress and willingness to learn from the others. He and Bernadus liked to keep new troopers close to ensure their learning curve was as rapid as possible.

'Auspex?' asked Leander.

Ambros showed him the screen. The tracker signal was flashing with a steady green pulse due south of them.

'One minute to drop zone,' came the copilot's voice.

'Prepare to disembark,' said Leander.

The squad rose as one and turned to face forwards, each man gripping handholds tightly for support. Leander and Bernadus moved to the doors, ready to slide them back. The light above the doors switched from red to green and the cabin lights went out.

'Switch to night goggles,' said Leander, reaching up to activate his. The others did the same, and the interior of the cabin turned green.

'Doors open.'

He and Bernadus hit the door release catch and the two side doors slid back. The wind howled as it rushed into the transport compartment. As the Valkyrie

slowed to hover mode, Leander and Bernadus released rappelling lines that hung from brackets above the doors. Troopers Cephas, Sepp, Ambros and Vitalis stepped forward and snapped harnesses onto the lines.

‘Go,’ said Leander.

The four troopers dropped. Then Nerva, Draco, Tycho and Tacitus stepped forward and attached themselves to the ropes, now taut with the weight of their colleagues.

‘Go!’ repeated Leander.

Four more troopers disappeared into the dark. Leander and Bernadus attached their own rappelling harnesses to the lines and faced each other across the now empty hold.

Go, thought Leander and, as one, they jumped into the void.

The wind rushed past him as he fell, his harness buzzing with friction against the thick rappelling rope. He looked down and saw the small clearing into which they were descending. He controlled the speed as he neared the ground and bent his legs in preparation for landing. His boots brushed through thick ferns and he felt a sharp jolt as he hit the ground beneath. He immediately rolled to one side to cushion the impact and bring himself up in a defensive crouch, lasgun ready and trained towards their perimeter. He felt barbed fronds snag his clothing and the downdraft from the Valkyrie sent the pungent smell of rotting vegetation into his helmet’s rebreather. No incoming fire or other enemy activity had greeted their arrival as far as he could determine.

‘Clear,’ he said over the vox.

The noise from the Valkyrie’s vectored engines intensified as it pulled up and away from the drop zone and then faded as the aircraft sped for the safety of Imperial lines. The unit lay there for a moment, partially concealed by the wicked-looking ferns. These had been temporarily flattened by the downdraft but now began to sway upright as a natural breeze reasserted itself. The nearby tree line looked dark and ominous in the early morning light, trunks wrapped in corsets of grey vines and long, drooping branches covered with spiked leaves. They waited and listened, but could hear no movement from the trees, no calls of alarm from forest birds, mammals or worse. Their senses told them what they had experienced on scores of previous missions. They were on their own.

A misty dawn rose above the forests of Balle Delta. Leander surveyed the Aquila crash site through his magnoculars from the safety of the tree line. It had taken them a couple of hours to make their way from the drop zone to their first

objective. They had moved cautiously, Tacitus taking point, aware that orks were roaming the forests but unsure where they were and in what strength. Until now, there had been little sign of the alien presence. That had changed when they got to the crash site.

Leander could barely see the Imperial flyer amidst the horde of orks scrambling over the wreck. Some seemed intent on salvaging components while others were mocking the gruesome remains of the human crew. Spikes had been driven into the ground and the torsos of the Imperial personnel had been skewered onto them. All of the bodies were headless and Leander had no doubt that these had been taken as trophies by the largest of the orks. While this mutilation might have sickened regular Imperial Guardsmen, Leander simply registered the fact and switched to identifying the bodies by their uniforms. The task was made difficult by the gore that covered the torsos and the jostling aliens spoiling his field of vision.

‘Move, you alien rabble,’ he muttered in frustration.

A fight broke out between some of the orks by the shuttle’s crumpled cockpit. The creatures had managed to tear away the fuselage and had dragged the pilot’s limp body from the wreckage. They were now arguing and tugging it between them like a child’s doll. The mob surged towards the brawl, bellowing in excitement at the prospect of more violence. Leander saw his opportunity.

‘Tycho, the corpses. Can you make out their uniforms?’

Tycho was lying alongside him and Trooper Ambros at the tree line. The rest of the squad were fanned out in a defensive circle in the trees.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Tycho who was looking through his scope at the scene in front of them. ‘I see five bodies.’

‘Rank or insignia?’ asked Leander.

‘Two Guardsmen,’ replied Tycho after a moment.

Bodyguards, thought Leander.

Tycho scanned the other bodies with his scope.

‘One... no, two Guard officers.’

‘Rank?’ asked Leander.

Tycho paused. ‘Ordnance... Can’t make out the other.’

‘Could it be a general?’ asked Leander.

‘Not unless he needed a new tailor.’

‘Meaning, Tycho?’ said Leander, not appreciating the remark.

‘Plain uniform,’ said Tycho, admonished. ‘Not the general.’

‘And the other body?’

‘Navy officer,’ said Tycho.

‘Navy? You’re sure?’ asked Leander, peering through his magnoculars again.

‘Blue tunic. Gold epaulettes. Imperial Navy,’ confirmed Tycho.

Leander turned to Ambros. ‘Auspex?’

‘Two miles to the west of here, sir,’ replied the trooper.

Leander considered this for a moment. Slowacki’s body did not appear to be at the crash site. His tracker was transmitting within hours of their location. The general had either escaped and was hiding out in the forest or had been captured by orks. Whether he was alive or dead was impossible to say. The only way they would know was if they located the tracking device.

‘Squad, the general is not here. We’re moving out,’ said Leander, clear in his mind. ‘Ambros, we need a bearing on that tracking signal. Tacitus, take point.’

The storm troopers dispersed into the forest undetected, leaving the orks to cavort over their spoils.

Tacitus led them away from the clearing and back into the dense tangle of trees, vines and bushes. Despite their carapace armour, most of the squad had been snagged by thorns, and spines and rents in their uniforms revealed livid red weals on their legs and arms. Storm troopers often operated in hostile environments and they bore the discomfort without complaint. However, the constant process of disentangling themselves from clinging branches made for slow going. Leander was also concerned about the amount of noise they were making, although so far they had detected little evidence of orks away from the clearing.

When Tacitus found a trail that seemed to be made by some sort of forest animal, he paused for guidance. It was well worn, and weaved through the undergrowth in the general direction that the auspex indicated they should be heading. The fact that the vegetation either side of the track had not been hacked or beaten down with wanton destruction suggested that orks had not discovered it.

‘Use it,’ instructed Leander over the vox-link.

Thereafter they made much swifter progress. So much so that it was almost a surprise when Tacitus stumbled upon their first real obstruction – a ravine that cut through the forest, bringing rainwater from the upper slopes of the hills down to the river delta. The track turned left and ran parallel with the ravine. Looking down the slope a section of forest had been cleared to create some sort of crossing point. The orks had used the felled trees to create a rudimentary bridge.

Leander surveyed the construction through his magnoculars. Like many ork constructions there wasn't a regular angle to be seen on any of the crudely fashioned joists that spanned the ravine walls. Nonetheless, it looked sturdy and this was evidenced when an ork patrol lumbered over it in the direction of the crash site as they watched from their vantage point. A score of large orks stomping over it, without so much as a glance down into the chasm below, suggested that it was robust enough.

'That's our way across,' he said. 'Move out.'

The storm troopers navigated their way down the slope through the trees until they were level with the thoroughfare. Looking left, they could see the ork patrol heading away down the crudely fashioned thoroughfare through the forest. To their right, the bridge seemed clear. There were no signs of any guards, but Leander didn't want to get the unit caught out in the open with ork patrols in the vicinity.

'Tacitus, check it out.'

The scout slipped from cover and moved swiftly across the bridge while the rest of the unit covered him. He had almost reached the other side, when two orks emerged from the trees carrying a large, black-haired creature suspended on a pole between them, no doubt the maker of the forest tracks the storm troopers had followed. The carcass looked like a bear, only larger, its enormous claws bound cruelly over the pole with forest vines. Its wolf-like head dragged across the ground, leaving a bloody smear from its mangled mouth. Around the neck of the lead ork hung a necklace of fresh ivory tusks, each still red with blood after their brutal extraction. Leander processed all of this in an instant as he and the rest of the squad raised their weapons.

Before any of them could fire, the first ork saw Tacitus and uttered a grunt of surprise. It dropped its end of the pole and reached for a crude-looking gun strapped to its thigh. Tacitus didn't hesitate. He ran towards the ork and, before it could react, hurled his knife, which smacked with a wet thud into its throat. The creature reached for its neck as dark blood erupted from its neck and staggered to its knees. Its partner bellowed a challenge at Tacitus and ran at him, raising a huge metal cleaver already covered in fur and blood. There was a cough beside Leander as Tycho's long las fired a single shot from the trees. The charging ork's head jerked back as the las-round took it through the eye and exploded out the back of its skull. It fell in a heap at the scout's feet. Tacitus stepped neatly to one side and approached its struggling companion. He grabbed the hilt of his knife and ripped it through the sinewy neck, almost decapitating the creature. The ork

toppled forward with a thud, its dark blood flowing over its ivory necklace.

‘Clear,’ said Tacitus over the vox-link.

‘Go,’ said Leander.

The remainder of the unit left the trees and filed rapidly across the bridge.

‘Bernadus, the bodies. Sepp, I want charges on the bridge. Don’t blow it. We may need to come this way later.’

While the others covered them, Bernadus, Vitalis, Nerva and Draco swung the dead orks into the ravine, followed by the body of the forest predator. Sepp and Cephas clambered down the supporting struts of the bridge as if it were an obstacle on an assault course. They fixed charges and electronic detonators, smearing dirt over the tape that held them in place. Leander knew that if he found the general and had to make it back to their extraction point in a hurry, the ravine could prove a useful obstacle for any pursuers. He looked up and saw Tacitus wiping his blade on the bark of a tree further up the slope. The scout nodded at him and indicated something in the trees.

‘Tacitus?’

‘A track,’ he said simply.

‘We follow it,’ said Leander.

As the storm troopers closed in on their objective, the enemy’s presence grew significantly. So did the noise. The sound of vehicles and large mobs of orks converging on the location, indicated by the auspex, convinced Leander that they were heading towards some sort of ork camp or assembly point. Eventually, Tacitus signalled ‘Contact,’ over the vox and the unit dropped to the floor of the forest. Leander moved forward carefully, bringing himself level with his point man, who squatted at the base of a vine covered tree. The tribune surveyed the scene in front of him.

There was a shallow depression in the forest leading down to a large open area that had been cleared of trees. The felled timber had been fashioned into some sort of marshalling yard, where thousands of orks and their ramshackle assortment of vehicles were gathered. The noise of so many aliens in one place was shocking. The sound of them roaring, hammering and banging had been partially masked by the dense forest, but now, on the perimeter of the clearing, it assaulted the senses of the watching storm troopers. So did the smell. Even through his rebreather, Leander flinched as the pungent stench of the aliens hit him. He had smelt orks before in numerous war zones, but you never got used to it.

At the far end of the clearing, a makeshift landing strip had been built and as they watched, a steady stream of crude and ugly craft were queuing up to land, or in some cases crash, in a cloud of dirt, smoke and ork body parts. Intact aircraft were swarmed over by smaller greenskins that appeared to be refuelling or rearming each contraption in a chaotic frenzy of activity. For all its mayhem, Leander knew he was seeing a staging post for a major enemy thrust towards Balle Delta. Imperial Command would need to know of its existence. But that was not his mission. His mission was to find and retrieve the general.

Forty-six metres to their right was a crude watchtower fashioned from timber cut from the surrounding forest. Four roughly hewn trees supported a large platform. The platform itself had a timber parapet that could be accessed by a ladder that ran up the side of the structure. The watchtower had a roof over which was stretched some sort of dark brown awning. Leander hoped it was stitched-together animal hide. Jutting out above the parapet was a pair of twin-linked heavy machine guns manned by a pair of orks. The tower would provide a perfect observation point from which the storm troopers could identify the location of the general.

‘Cephas, Sepp,’ he whispered over the vox.

The two troopers edged forwards to join him.

‘Clear that watchtower, without alerting the camp. We’ll use it as a forward observation post. Go.’

The two storm troopers headed off to approach the tower through the cover of the trees. Leander waited. Then he saw two dark shapes snake across the ground to the base of the tower. They ignored the ladder that was on the side facing the camp. Instead the two figures began climbing the legs of the tower that faced outward towards the forest. The roughness of the ork structure meant that there were plenty of branch stumps to use as hand and footholds. When Cephas and Sepp reached the superstructure, they paused. Leander trained his magnoculars on them. Then in one fluid movement, both leaned over the parapet and fired their las pistols. He barely heard the cough of their guns above the din of the camp, but he saw the two ork figures jerk and disappear from sight. Cephas and Sepp slipped over the watchtower parapet and Leander thought he heard more sharp coughs.

‘Tower clear,’ came over the vox-link.

‘Ambros, Tycho,’ he whispered into the vox. ‘The watchtower. With me.’

He rose from the trees and, crouching, ran across the open ground to the tower. He used the same method of ascent as the troopers and hoisted himself over the

parapet onto the platform. Cephas and Sepp squatted there, peering over the embrasure towards the encampment. Two orks lay slumped on one side of the tower. Both had dark holes through their foreheads and eye sockets. Orks were remarkably resilient creatures so three head shots was standard practice for storm troopers.

Ambros and Tycho followed Leander onto the tower platform, settled themselves behind the rampart and looked across the ork stronghold. Ambros held the auspex for Leander to see. The green signal light indicated that the general was somewhere in the centre of the bowl ahead of them. Tycho unclipped the cover of his scope and aimed his long las in that direction. Leander raised his magnoculars and followed his lead.

In the centre of the camp was a large stockade. It was surrounded by strange ork totems and glyphs, some crudely painted on the walls, some fashioned into statues or thrust up on poles in the air. There seemed to be hundreds of orks concentrated around this structure. Leander could tell it was some sort of focal point, although he couldn't make out its purpose.

'Tycho, any idea what that is?'

'No,' said Tycho simply. 'Wait... It's... It's some sort of arena.'

Leander looked again and saw it now. In the centre of the stockade was a cleared space, a dark stain in a sea of green alien bodies. He had little doubt what had stained the ground. He looked again to the totems around the amphitheatre. Hanging from each one was a collection of rotting skulls and limbs from captured Guardsmen.

'Tribune?' asked Tycho urgently.

Leander refocused back to the pit itself. A massive ork stomped into the centre of the arena and the horde went wild. They fired their guns in the air, beat their weapons against armour and bellowed to the skies. Leander had never seen anything like this before. Even at this distance he was awed by the scale of the colossus that had entered the ring. It dwarfed any other ork there, the axe in its hand easily the size of a man. Its enormous head was crowned with a horned helmet and his shoulder guards had spikes with skulls rammed down on them. More skulls hung from chains at his waist, and they swung grotesquely as he lumbered around the amphitheatre, soaking up the adulation of his followers.

There could only be one ork with that sort of presence. Warboss Ugskraga.

Leander stared down at the notorious destroyer of Imperial worlds, who stood there in front of him, less than a mile away. The tribune looked down again at the blinking green signal on Ambros's auspex, then back at the grisly

amphitheatre.

‘Tycho. The trophies.’

‘Tribune?’

‘The heads. Can you identify the general’s head on the shoulder spikes?’

The sniper went quiet as he focused his scope on the massive ork. Leander waited, then raised his own magnoculars.

‘Yes sir. General Slowacki’s on the right shoulder pad.’

Leander increased the magnification on his magnoculars to maximum and, stabilising them on the rampart, focused on the ork’s right shoulder. For a moment the creature’s massive helmet obscured his view. Then Ugskraga raised his cleaver in the air and bellowed. His roar rose above the combined din of his followers, but Leander wasn’t distracted by that. He had seen the general. Or what was left of him. Slowacki’s skull had been rammed forcefully onto a thick spike jutting up from the warboss’s heavy shoulder armour. The spike was caked in fresh gore that streamed down from its point over what was unmistakably a black and gold peaked cap. Beneath the cap, blood ran from the dark eye sockets of General Roman Slowacki, flowing like red tears over his waxy pale skin.

The mission was over. They had located the general, but there would be no rescue. It was time to leave.

‘Tribune?’ said Tycho. ‘I have the shot.’

‘The shot?’ asked Leander, momentarily confused.

‘The ork,’ said Tycho. ‘I have the shot.’

Leander looked back at the warboss in the centre of the horde. He had been so focused on their mission, he hadn’t even considered this. All his training, all his conditioning as a storm trooper, had been to follow orders and get the job done. Even Leander’s promotion to tribune had been because he led his unit by example, not because he was in any way strategic. Orphans at the schola progenium with that type of potential were made into commissars. Leander was used to delivering a mission, not improvising one. That is what made him and other storm troopers so effective. They did what they were told, no matter the odds.

But here he was, with a kill shot on the enemy’s leader. Not the mission objective. But it had led them here and given them this opportunity.

‘Tribune?’ asked Tycho. ‘Should I take the shot?’

Leander was in no-man’s land. For the first time in his career, he didn’t know what to do. He looked back at the ork horde and the way they worshipped their warboss. A warboss who would shortly lead them against the beleaguered Imperial

defences and then no doubt onto the capital Balle Major itself. Another planet ripped from the heart of the Imperium by the alien. The Imperium of Mankind that he had sworn to defend.

He heard the words before he knew he had said them.

‘Take the shot.’

Time seemed to slow as Tycho let out a long, low breath through his rebreather. Despite the noise of the orks, their machines and their weapons, the space around the prone sniper seemed to go quiet as he focused all his attention on the image through his scope. His finger rested gently against the trigger as he waited for the target’s head to settle. The ork leaned its head back, opened its enormous maw and bellowed to the heavens. Tycho saw the gap between the huge tusks of ivory, exposing a clear shot to its brain cavity, and squeezed the trigger. The long las bucked as a hot-shot las-round sizzled across half a mile of humid air in the blink of an eye. It was the perfect kill shot.

Leander looking through his magnoculars saw an electric blue membrane fizzle in front of Ugskraga’s bestial features. Tycho’s las-round dissipated harmlessly in the ether. A force field.

The warboss rocked back a step, startled by the impact. There was a momentary hesitation in the noise of the horde as the slow-witted orks processed what had just occurred. Then Ugskraga looked up to see where the shot had come from. The ork scanned the perimeter and watchtower where the storm troopers were hiding. Its fiery red eyes seemed to fill Leander’s magnoculars as if it was staring directly at him. Then it roared in fury, the mob of orks joining him as the forest shook with their rage.

‘Tycho, Ambros, move!’ said Leander. He turned to Cephas and Sepp and indicated the ork heavy machine guns. ‘Covering fire until we reach the trees.’

Then he slid down the ladder as the nearest mob of orks ran up the slope towards the tower. Shots rang out and rounds tore splinters from the ladder above him as Leander hit the ground and rolled. Ambros and Tycho were already sprinting for the forest, weaving as they ran to make targeting them difficult.

The sound of heavy machine guns opened up above him and the tower shook as Cephas and Sepp sprayed fire into the first wave of orks, cutting them down with short devastating bursts. The rest of the squad opened up from the trees. Leander sprang to his feet and began running as he heard the thump of Nerva’s grenade launcher lobbing projectiles over his head. Moments later their loud detonations blanked out the sound of the orks’ cries. Leander reached the forest and ducked behind a tree as a round smacked into it above his head. He raised

his lasgun and joined in the murderous fusillade from the forest. The machine gun was still hammering away on the watchtower and the leading orks were being butchered in the crossfire. But a whole army was now heading in their direction.

‘Cephas, Sepp. Spike the guns and pull back,’ Leander yelled over the vox.

There was one more burst and the machine gun fire stopped. The orks bellowed in triumph and came charging up the slope. Moments later Cephas and Sepp pivoted neatly over the parapet and left the tower the same way they had entered, scrambling down the supporting legs using the broad tree trunks to protect them from incoming fire.

‘Covering fire!’ Leander ordered over the vox, and the rest of the squad responded with a withering volley. Nerva pumped more grenades into the air, each detonating with devastating effect in the midst of the ork horde. Cephas and Sepp were sprinting for the forest when the watchtower blew, igniting the remaining ammunition in a spectacular explosion that momentarily threw the attackers into disarray. The two remaining troopers reached the trees, unslung their lasguns and immediately began firing into the disoriented orks. Leander, however, had no intention of waiting for the aliens to regroup.

‘Squad, skirmish formation. Back to the bridge.’

If the bridge was not held against them, they could blow it and hold up their pursuers.

The squad quickly formed up into pairs. Tacitus and Tycho led the way. Cephas and Sepp on the right. Nerva and Draco in the centre. Bernadus and Vitalis on the left. Leander and Ambros brought up the rear. No one spoke. They knew the drill. Each man ran, his weapon ready, scanning the trees around them for signs of contact. As they ran, Leander decided Lester should know about the general.

‘Ambros. Send the signal. General dead.’

‘Yes sir,’ said Ambros before repeating the message through the transmitter.

‘The tracking device led us to Ugskraga. He had taken the general as a trophy.’ Ambros transmitted this too.

‘Heading for primary extraction point,’ said Leander.

‘Yes sir,’ repeated Ambros.

Tacitus set a blistering pace, using his natural scouting instincts to navigate his way through the maze of trees and tracks. The fitness and agility levels of storm troopers were legendary. Even heavy weapon specialists like Nerva and Draco could maintain this pace for hours.

This area of the forest sloped down towards the river delta and there were leaves and fallen branches spread across the floor between rocky outcrops. Where light filtered through the tree canopy, green and yellow ferns sprouted upwards in clumps that could easily hide an enemy, even one as large as an ork. Broken tree stumps and fallen trees that oozed large flesh-coloured fungi formed natural barricades that had to be leapt over or weaved around. But the storm troopers didn't slow down. They needed to get to the ravine before the orks did or they would be trapped.

They made good time. But the unmistakeable din of the pursuing orks could be heard behind them. Leander had been taught as a child that orks were inferior in physique and intelligence to regular Guardsmen, but he knew from experience how tough and mean these aliens were. Once roused, they would not give up the chase until every man in his unit was butchered and stuck on a spike.

Still, as time went on and thanks to Tacitus, the orks' bellows didn't seem to be getting any nearer and Leander began to think that they would make it to the ravine in time. Then, without warning, there was a burst of automatic fire from ahead followed by a chorus of bestial roars.

'Contact!' yelled Tacitus.

The squad dropped to the ground as fusillade of shells whipped through the trees, splintering trunks and bringing down branches and leaves. A score of large shapes came lumbering towards them. It was the patrol they had seen earlier by the bridge, no doubt alerted by its missing foraging party.

'Engage!' said Leander, raising his lasgun. Hot-shot rounds ripped into the oncoming orks, head shots dropping the leading brutes. This was followed by a series of thuds as Nerva fired his grenades, which landed in the midst of the mob and exploded in a blast of limbs and broken trees. The remaining orks were almost upon them when Draco stepped forward and bathed them with his flamer. And still the orks came on as the storm troopers rose to meet them.

In front of him, Leander saw Bernadus fire point-blank into the face of a huge ork before ducking a clumsy swing from another. Vitalis was there to ram his combat knife into the ork's eye socket. Leander didn't wait to see the outcome as he lined up an ork that was coming at him with a huge gun, swinging it like a club. He swerved aside as the ungainly weapon whistled past his head and smacked into a tree. He rammed his rifle butt down on the ork's arm and heard it snap as it bellowed in pain. He thrust the muzzle of his gun into the ork's mouth and blew the back of its head off.

Then he ducked and moved as another ork swung an axe at him, burying it in a

tree where it stuck fast. He pulled his combat knife from his belt and thrust it up and through its armpit, deep into its chest cavity. The creature bellowed in pain and swung its arm towards him. He grabbed the arm and, using the creature's momentum, pivoted it into a tree, which it hit with a sickening thud. Before it could recover he pulled his combat blade from its body and rammed it up through the ork's huge chin and into its brain cavity. The ork dropped to its knees and he pulled the blade out as it fell forwards onto the forest floor.

He looked up and realised that the sound of fighting had ceased as the last of the orks lay at his feet. The chasing horde would be upon them any minute.

'Squad reform,' he said. 'Head for the bridge.' He turned, looking for Ambros, but the trooper lay prone on the ground next to him, a bloody hole where the face of his helmet used to be. Leander didn't flinch. He reached down, removed the unit's vox transmitter from Ambros's body and slung it over his shoulder. He ran towards the remaining members of the squad.

'Casualties?'

'Vitalis,' reported Bernadus, carrying the man's auspex.

'Ambros too,' he said as he handed the radio transmitter to Bernadus.

'Cephas, take Vitalis's auspex. Tacitus, Tycho, point. Bernadus, with me.'

Nerva was lifting Ambros's body. He placed a charge underneath it and rested the dead trooper's back against the firing pin. He nodded to Leander. 'Primed.'

'Good. Move.'

They headed out again, leaving the two troopers' bodies behind. They couldn't afford further delay with an entire ork horde on their heels. Leander could already hear the noise of the chasing orks crashing through the forest behind them, attracted by the sound of the firefight. The storm troopers ran through the last half mile to the bridge, Leander hoping that that the ork patrol had not left any of their number to hold it.

Bernadus ran alongside him.

'Back at the watchtower,' said the veteran storm trooper. 'Why the shot?'

Leander heard the words as if they were from a stranger. For some reason their telepathy seemed to have gone awry.

'The mission was over, the general dead,' he said as they ran. But this didn't seem to be enough so he added. 'It was an opportunity.'

Bernadus didn't say anything. He neither challenged or agreed with Leander, just kept running alongside the tribune. For once, Leander had no idea what Barnabus was thinking. Then they heard an explosion behind them and the moment passed. Leander caught the sound of a chuckle from Nerva. Nerva

prided himself on his prowess with explosives, and booby traps were his speciality. Leander wasn't sure it would delay the orks much, but it was as good a send off for Vitalis and Ambros as they could fashion in the circumstances. He wasn't sure the rest of them would do as well.

Leander noticed more light streaming through the thinning canopy of the forest and suddenly they were running through the last of the trees and out into the clearing by the ravine. He was relieved to see the bridge apparently deserted.

'Make for the tree line on the far side!' he yelled over the vox. 'We'll blow it from there.'

The others needed no further encouragement. They sprinted for the far side of the bridge, their boots thumping over the sturdy construction. They had just reached the far side when a huge roar could be heard behind them. The first of the orks had emerged into the clearing and was bellowing in triumph. It was quickly followed by more, bursting from the trees with bits of branch and undergrowth hanging from their arms and weapons. The orks had clearly just bludgeoned their way through the forest in their reckless pursuit.

Their roars were answered by others, this time from up ahead. Another force of orks could be seen running towards the storm troopers from the direction of the crash site. They were a good mile away but had spotted the storm troopers and were bounding down the forest thoroughfare to engage them. Leander's unit were trapped between the two closing forces. Shots rang over his head as the storm troopers ducked into the trees on the far side of the ravine and went to ground. They turned to face the chasing orks who were rushing onto the bridge. He had to take the closest enemy force out of the equation.

'Cephas and Sepp. Are your bridge charges primed?'

'Yes, sir,' they acknowledged.

Leander saw that the leading orks were on the bridge and charging towards their side of the ravine.

'Blow it,' he said.

The two troopers activated their detonators and huge explosions erupted upwards out of the ravine, hurling rock, timbers and alien bodies up into the air, high above the trees. The smoke cloud momentarily screened the storm troopers from the pursuers on the far side who roared in frustration. The few orks who had made it across had been knocked flat by the concussion and were only now struggling to get up.

'Finish them,' said Leander.

The storm troopers cut down the survivors in a volley of hot-shot rounds.

Leander didn't let the team dwell on their narrow escape. The other ork force on this side of the ravine was closing in on their position.

'Move out. Primary extraction point. We have less than an hour. Go!'

His men formed up and set off again, bellows of anger from the orks on the far side of the smoking ravine encouraging them on their way.

As they closed in on their extraction point, it was clear to Leander that the pursuing orks were gaining on them. He could hear the noise of the aliens crashing through the trees behind them and occasionally he thought he saw shadows in his peripheral vision on their flanks. Despite the incredible fitness levels of the storm troopers, Draco and Nerva were labouring with the weight of their heavy weapons

'Bernadus,' he said,

'Grenades?' said the other.

'Now would be good,' said Leander, relieved that they were both of one mind again. They each drew a frag grenade from their webbing and, as they ran, pulled the pins and lobbed them back towards their pursuers. There was a breathless pause as they sprinted after their heavy weapons team before the grenades exploded. The shockwave almost knocked Leander from his feet, but he kept going, encouraged by the yells and screams behind him. Tacitus's voice came over on the vox.

'Primary extraction ahead, ninety metres.'

Extraction would be from a volcanic knoll that jutted up from the forest canopy. No trees grew on its acidic slopes, which were crisscrossed with rocky outcrops and trench-like fissures. The top of the knoll had been levelled off by millennia of erosion and provided a patch of rough, uneven ground that would serve as a makeshift landing pad for extraction. If they could hold the orks at the tree line, Leander hoped they could make it to the Valkyries before the orks realised what was happening.

A burst of automatic fire came from the left.

'Contact!' yelled Sepp over the vox.

Leander heard the retort of lasgun fire.

'Keep moving!' he said. 'Hold at the landing site.'

He noticed the ground rising slightly and he looked up to see the knoll looming up ahead of them out of the forest canopy.

'Tacitus, Tycho,' he said over the vox. 'Form perimeter. Covering fire.'

He heard shots behind him and bullets whistled overhead, a couple impacting

trees as the remains of his squad ran on. Glancing to his left he saw a group of orks converging on them, firing wildly at Sepp and Cephas, who were ducking and weaving through the trees. It was going to be touch and go. Suddenly Sepp stumbled and went down with a smoking black hole through his shoulder. Cephas saw his partner fall and slid to a stop. The orks hollered in triumph and closed in on the storm troopers. Leander was about to turn and intervene when hot-shot rounds dropped the three leading orks. They fell at the feet of the struggling Sepp.

Tycho, thought Leander.

A fusillade of las-rounds zipped through the air, taking down more orks as Sepp staggered to his feet. Cephas stood over him and lobbed a grenade back down the slope before turning and hoisting the wounded Sepp upright. They stumbled on through the thinning trees.

Then Leander could see Tacitus and Tycho kneeling behind a rocky outcrop at the base of the knoll. The remaining members of his squad burst out of the forest and up the slope falling into position behind the rocks on either side of their comrades. Sepp had kept hold of his lasgun despite his wound and propped himself up on a rock. Without pausing for breath, they immediately began pouring fire into the forest as the vanguard of the ork pursuers emerged from the trees.

The orks were intent on the hunt and heedless of their safety. As a result, they ran into the maelstrom of fire that scythed through their ranks with murderous effect. Nerva began pumping grenades into the tree line, causing it to collapse on the main horde in a series of thunderous explosions. Leander checked his chronometer. Five minutes to extraction. Automatic weapons opened up from the forest as the orks regrouped. It wasn't particularly accurate but the weight of fire was such that the storm troopers had to duck behind cover. Two rockets shot from the trees, one exploding in front of their position and showering the pinned storm troopers in debris, the other looping above them to explode behind them, sending vicious fragments of volcanic rock into their backs. Nerva yelled as a fragment buried itself in his shoulder and knocked him to the ground. Emboldened by the break in defensive fire, the orks charged again.

The storm troopers opened up and poured death into the front wave, but still they came. Nerva was struggling to raise his grenade launcher and pulled a laspistol from his holster. He began blasting away with his good arm. Leander could see that they were about to be overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers.

'Draco, flamer!' he yelled.

Draco stood from behind his cover and pulled the trigger on the squad's flamer. Blazing promethium sprayed down the slope and into the battle-crazed orks. The impact was catastrophic. The approaching orks were incinerated. Those that ran heedlessly into the wall of flames collapsed into a fiery barricade of burning flesh. Some turned and staggered back down the slope like burning torches. They stumbled into the trees, setting them on fire in a frenzied and futile attempt to douse the hungry flames. As the ork charge faltered, the storm troopers poured lasgun fire into any remaining orks that stood trapped between the burning wall of their colleagues and the blazing forest. The carnage was appalling. But still the orks refused to give up the hunt.

Bernadus called over the vox. 'Extraction team have visual on our position.'

Hardly difficult, thought Leander, as the forest fire poured dense black smoke into the air.

'Bernadus, Tycho. Secure the extraction point. Take Nerva with you. We will hold here.'

Bernadus hefted the wounded Nerva up by his good shoulder and began scrambling up the slope as Tycho covered them with his long las. Tacitus, Sepp, Cephas and Leander fired into the burning tree line as Draco checked his tank.

'How much do you have left, Draco?' asked Leander.

'Enough for one burst,' said Draco.

Leander could hear the Valkyries now. He looked north and saw them closing on their position. They looked like a pair of hawks swooping in for the kill.

'Bernadus, I need the Valkyries to provide covering fire as we withdraw. Keep those orks pinned in the forest.'

'Yes, sir,' came the reply over the vox.

The noise of the approaching Imperial aircraft seemed to rouse the orks. There was a huge roar from the forest.

'Grenades!' said Leander.

Tacitus, Cephas and Sepp lobbed frag grenades through the smoke. Bright orange flashes lit up the dark clouds, followed by the crash of explosions. As the noise subsided, the ork battle cry rose to a crescendo.

'Ready,' said Leander.

The first orks emerged out of the wall of smoke and charged up the slope, guns blazing, axes raised and bloodlust in their eyes.

'Fire!' said Leander.

The storm troopers opened up again. Lasgun fire came from the top of the knoll as Tycho, Bernadus and Draco made good use of their vantage point. A

score of orks fell, but still they came on. It was as if they knew this would be their last chance.

‘Now, Draco!’ said Leander.

Draco squeezed the trigger on his flamer and began his lethal spray again. Then an ork round hit his promethium tank and it exploded, covering the storm trooper in a fountain of burning liquid. Draco screamed and flailed against the rock as he was burned alive by his own weapon.

Leander had no time to react – the orks were almost on him. He shot the nearest through the head. The next raised a crude-looking cleaver as it charged him. Leander drew his power sword and thumbed the energy cell. He slashed across the creature’s neck, severing the head mid-cry. He stepped to one side as its torso toppled forward, pumping dark blood onto the ground. Another ork ran at him and died with a hot-shot round between its red eyes, and Leander thought about Tycho as he looked around for the others.

To his right he saw Tacitus stabbing his stiletto knife blade through the eye socket of an ork that lay wounded on the ground beneath him. Tacitus seemed so intent on his kill that he failed to turn in time. Another ork emptied its gun’s magazine into Tacitus’s back. Leander shot the ork through the head.

He turned to his left and saw Sepp go down. An ork split the trooper’s chest open with a blade. Beside him, Cephas had lost his lasgun and was firing point blank with his laspistol at a huge ork that towered over him. Another shot from the knoll took that ork down as Tycho continued to cover them.

Leander heard a bellow and turned just in time to parry a thrust at this ribcage from his next attacker. The force of the monster’s blow sent him staggering backwards and it was all he could do to parry the next blow. Suddenly there was a huge rushing noise above them, followed by a deafening series of bangs as a Valkyrie opened up with its missile launchers into the advancing tide of orks. His attacker hesitated for a moment, distracted by the shape hovering above it, and Leander seized his chance. He thrust forwards with his power sword up through the creature’s sternum and out through its spine.

Heavy bolter fire hammered into the melee of orks advancing up the slope as the waist gunner on the Valkyrie opened up on them. Leander glanced over to Cephas, who was back on his feet and firing his laspistol at the enemy in front of him. Blood was dripping down the storm trooper’s left arm from a jagged gash.

‘Cephas, fighting withdrawal.’

‘Yes, sir,’ gasped the wounded trooper.

He and Cephas began backing up the slope, alternately firing and moving to

cover each other. Those orks that tried to reach them were hit by well aimed shots from Bernadus and Tycho or by their own short range shots. Meanwhile the Valkyrie's gunner continued to cut swathes through the horde of orks at the bottom of the slope.

Finally a gap opened up between Leander and their pursuers. He grabbed Cephas and propelled him up the slope. Looking up at the Valkyrie he caught sight of the pilot looking down from his cockpit. He was calmly holding the aircraft steady to provide his gunner with a stable platform from which to cover their withdrawal up the slope. Too stable, as it turned out.

Suddenly there was movement in the cockpit as the co-pilot pointed at something in the forest. The pilot's head jerked round and he immediately banked his aircraft. The gunner was thrown back, the heavy bolter swinging upwards and sending a burst of fire uselessly into the air as he fell backwards. Leander heard a whoosh from below and saw a brightly coloured missile spiral up from the forest. His eyes followed the trail of oily black smoke and saw it smash through the exposed underbelly of the Imperial flyer as it desperately sought to take evasive action.

For a moment he thought that luck had favoured the aircrew because there was no explosion. A dud, he thought. Then there was a deafening explosion and a ball of flame erupted from the crew compartment, hurling the burning gunner out across the sky in a flailing fireball. Secondary explosions ripped through the twin cockpits, incinerating the pilot that had made the fatal mistake of offering the orks a stationary target. With its engines disintegrating in the air, the heavy airframe lost its battle with gravity and began to fall.

'Run!' yelled Leander. Cephas needed no second warning. They ran across the slope and had covered eighteen metres before the Valkyrie hit the ground. Leander felt the jolt through his boots before he was thrown through the air by something which hammered into his back. He landed, felt a pain in his side and rolled to lessen the impact. He came to rest at the edge of the tree line, wincing as Cephas tumbled into him.

Leander raised his head to look back at where they had been moments before. The scene was one of utter devastation. The Valkyrie had exploded on top of the main horde of orks like a missile strike. Its remaining munitions and fuel had erupted, engulfing the lower levels of the knoll. The alien charge had been shattered and survivors were milling about in confusion.

He looked to the top of the knoll and saw that the other Valkyrie had taken its opportunity and was now landing. He could see Bernadus helping Nerva into the

crew compartment as Tycho scanned the slopes for signs of survivors. Leander was about to signal their location over the vox when three insect-like aircraft buzzed over the forest canopy and converged on the Valkyrie.

Each of these flyers resembled some sort of bizarre aerial bike. Their wheels had been replaced by metal runners and each vehicle was kept in the air by a set of rapidly spinning rotor blades. Ork pilots squatted in front of their noisy engines, which belched out dirty black exhaust trails, marking their erratic progress across the sky. These strange flying machines would have looked comical, but for the fact that protruding from each stubby nose was an arsenal of rockets and machine guns, all aimed at the prone Valkyrie.

Before Leander could vox a warning, rockets streamed from two of gyrocopters and the other opened up with automatic fire. He saw Tycho turn and take a shot at one of the aircraft before the rockets hit the Valkyrie and it exploded in a sickening detonation. The top of the knoll burst into flame as the Valkyrie's fuel tanks ignited. He watched in horror as lumps of burning debris shot into the air as if the volcano was erupting again after millennia.

When the noise subsided, Leander could hear the sound of orks cheering. The three gyrocopter pilots weaved their way back through the smoke shaking their fists in triumph. He and Cephas just lay there on the ground peering up at the summit, watching the fires rage on their squad's funeral pyre.

Leander decided it was time to leave. He began to get up and felt a pain in his side. He looked down and saw smoke rising from a bloody gash across his hip. Some burning debris must have struck him and thrown him through the air. He smothered the smoking fabric with his glove and inspected the wound. Blood seeped from it but he had been lucky. The burning shrapnel had partly cauterised the wound as well.

'Bad, sir?' asked Cephas who peered at the wound from his prone position.

'No,' said Leander, because it wasn't. Pain was part of a storm trooper's life. Leander checked his chronometer.

'Secondary extraction in four hours.'

Cephas looked back at him and nodded. Keeping a wary eye on the triumphant orks, the two storm troopers slid back into the undergrowth and disappeared into the forest.

It had been almost three hours since Leander and Cephas had left the devastation of the volcanic knoll behind then. Once hidden in the forest, they had applied skin adhesive to close their wounds and a field dressing to minimise further

blood loss. Once these had been attended to, they had divided their remaining power packs between them. Both had laspistols and combat knives, and a frag grenade each. Leander still had his power sword, now notched from the battle on the knoll, the auspex he had retrieved from Ambros and couple of smoke grenades.

They had then begun their trek to their secondary extraction location. Cephas took point and Leander monitored the auspex to ensure they maintained their bearing through the dense vegetation. He and Cephas moved cautiously, not wishing to bump into the numerous bands of orks that seemed to be roaming through the forest in the same general direction. Leander didn't think they were being hunted, but the orks were agitated and he didn't want to attract attention by having to fight their way through a surprise encounter.

Their secondary objective was a patch of open ground in the flood plain. It ran along the flanks of the broad river that flowed from the hinterland to the sea just south of the capital Balle Major. Although open ground would allow a Valkyrie easy access, it would also be an exposed landing. Leander hoped that the river valley wouldn't be overrun with orks by the time they reached it. Having lost the unit's vox transmitter, he had no means of contacting command to alert them of their survival from the disaster at the knoll. All Leander and Cephas could do was get to the extraction location and wait at the edge of the clearing. At 1800 hours the Valkyries would sweep the area and they could signal to the flyers with smoke grenades for extraction.

They were approaching the clearing when Cephas held up a fist and dropped silently to the ground. Leander did likewise, wincing with the pain in his side. He lay there motionless, straining his senses to determine what had concerned the trooper. Then he heard it. To their right he saw an ork creeping forward stealthily, a jagged-looking knife in one fist, and a huge hand gun in the other. Unusually for an ork, it had some sort of camouflage paint on its skin and a filthy bandana around its head. It was moving very slowly and seemed to be sniffing the air as it went. Leander heard another noise to his left and caught the glimpse of another ork, similarly attired, moving on a parallel course, checking the ground as if searching for something.

Leander knew what their hunters were from intelligence briefings. Ork Kommandos. These specialist units liked nothing better than to sneak up and slit the throats of their prey before they were even aware of their hunters' presence. He didn't know how long they had been tracking the storm troopers but it was only a matter of time before they were discovered. Despite their primitive

intelligence, orks had an acute sense of smell and he was surprised that they hadn't homed in on their position already. He looked down at his uniform and saw that it was covered in ork blood and filth, as was Cephass's. This had probably masked their scent sufficiently to buy them a few more seconds before discovery.

He looked at Cephass, who looked back at him. The trooper's eyes were calm, but he had his laspistol ready and a hand on his combat knife. Leander released the safety on his own laspistol and began reaching for a grenade, when he heard a noise in the distance. It sounded like aircraft. The orks heard it too and froze. Leander checked his chronometer. It was early but it could be the Valkyries, performing their pre-designated extraction run. He could hear the noise of aircraft turbines whistling above the treetops. Using the noise to mask his command he whispered over the helmet vox.

'On my command, grenades. Then go for extraction.'

'Yes, sir,' confirmed Cephass.

The two storm troopers withdrew the pins from their remaining frag grenades. Leander looked at Cephass and nodded.

'Go!' he whispered.

They both lobbed the grenades behind them and sprang to their feet. Cephass shot the ork nearest to him in the side of the head. Leander shot his in the face and ran. Behind him he heard yells of alarm as a whole squad of Kommandos ran from the grenades that had landed in their midst. Leander was already half way to the clearing when for the second time that day, he felt himself thrown forward by the force of the blast. He was pitched into the dirt, rolled, and grunted as the temporary wound dressing tore open. He ignored it and looked for Cephass. The other storm trooper wasn't so lucky. He had been thrown into a tree trunk and lay there motionless. Leander looked back at the orks. Some had been taken down by the grenades, but others were getting to their feet and were already searching for the storm troopers. He ran over to Cephass and rolled him over. A wooden splinter protruded from the storm trooper's chest and dark arterial blood was pouring from the wound.

Cephass stared down at the mess that was his ribcage and ripped his respirator from his mouth. He looked up at Leander and blood spattered from his lips as he said, 'Go!' A shot hit the tree trunk next to them.

'Go!' he said again.

Leander looked back. He could see more shapes converging on their position. He looked briefly at Cephass.

‘For the Emperor,’ he said. Then he turned and sprinted for the clearing. Shots zipped past his weaving body and Cephass’s laspistol barked a defiant response, buying him precious seconds. Leander broke from the forest and was momentarily dazzled as he ran into the sunlight. He squinted as he headed for the aircraft that was hovering near the middle of the clearing. He pulled the smoke grenade from his belt, released the pin and dropped it on the ground to indicate his position.

As the red smoke billowed forth from the canister an eerie calm seemed to descend on the clearing. Cephass’s laspistol had gone silent. So too had the ork guns. He looked back at the tree line and saw orks emerging from the undergrowth, one holding Cephass’s head by his helmet’s chinstrap in one hand, and a bloody knife in the other. Angry, Leander turned to the Valkyrie, wondering why it hadn’t opened up on the orks.

But it wasn’t a Valkyrie that was landing in the centre of the extraction zone. It was an ugly ork air transport, its twin rotor blades straining to keep the overloaded airframe in the air. The contraption had a massive engine at the rear. It was this that emitted the thunderous roar that Leander had mistaken for a Valkyrie’s vectored turbine. The engine powered both rotors, which were linked by a rapidly spinning drive belt that buzzed over the heads of the aircraft’s passenger. Guns jutted forward from its nose section and from under its stubby wings. Its fuselage was a crude patchwork of black and red armour plates that were decorated with alien glyphs and oil stains. Four legs protruded beneath the airframe body, long metal runners hanging limply from the end of their pneumatic limbs. Each of these squealed and hissed in protest as the bizarre vehicle settled unsteadily on the ground.

The twin rotor blades continued to throw up dirt even as the pilot powered down the engine. Leander could just about make out the huge figure that rose from the aircraft’s central transport section. It jumped down, landing with a thud on the soft earth. It remained motionless as the cloud of dirt cleared, and Leander finally understood why none of the orks were firing. Warboss Ugskraga stood there and grinned maliciously at the last remaining storm trooper. The monstrous creature uttered a growl of triumph that rumbled above the whine of the aircraft’s engine, and stomped towards its prey.

Leander looked at the approaching warboss with professional detachment. It must have been almost twice the height of a storm trooper. The arms that hung either side of its massive chest were the size of tree trunks, its hands as large as

power fists. In one it carried a pistol that Leander would not have been able to lift, in the other an axe that would have cut through a battle tank. On its head the horned helmet framed eyes that were fixed on him with a look of utter malice.

Leander returned that stare, raised his laspistol and fired. His lasbolts hit the force field and were dissipated in the same manner as Tycho's ill-fated sniper shot had been earlier that day. Leander kept pulling the trigger, searching for a weak spot in the shield, Ugskraga stomping towards him, shrugging off the lethal hail of fire like irritating flies. Suddenly his pistol fell silent, his hot-shot pack was empty. Leander looked into the alien's eyes and could see a hatred combined with fierce cunning. The ork had anticipated where the storm troopers would be. It had played with them, sending its hunters after the squad, whittling their numbers down like a pack of wolves, worrying their prey, until now, the last of them was alone, served up for the kill.

Leander discarded his empty pistol and drew his power sword. Ugskraga's recognised this defiance and grinned. It was going to play with its prey before killing it. The other orks that were gathering around the clearing broke into roars of approval.

Leander didn't hesitate. He pulled his last smoke grenade from his belt and tossed it at the ork. The grenade exploded in the ork's face, blinding it momentarily. He darted in and swung his power sword in a vicious arc. The sword shuddered as it bit into something solid, and Leander could smell burning flesh. Then an explosion of pain erupted up his side and he was flying, out of the smoke and into the air before landing in a heap on the soft ground. The left side of his body was numb from the force of the blow, but he could feel broken ribs grind as he tried to stand. He struggled to his feet using his power sword to lever himself up. He turned to see the warboss emerging from the smoke, dark blood seeping from a deep cut to its thigh. Ugskraga gripped the axe in both hands and charged, all mirth gone from those baleful eyes.

Leander was still reeling from the last blow, but he managed to block the lethal swing that once again sent him flying across the ground to land sprawling face down in the dirt. He pushed himself up and spat bloody teeth and bone from his broken mouth. The ground shook and a shadow blocked out the sun. Ugskraga stood over him. Leander raised his power sword, but all he held now was a ragged stump of metal, the blade sheared off by the monster's last blow. The warboss reached down for him. Its talons ripped into the storm trooper's chest. It gripped the front of his uniform and plucked him up from the ground like a child's toy. As his head lolled up in the air, Leander had a fleeting glimpse of his

mission's objective. General Slowacki's rotting skull was still stuck to the monster's right shoulder guard, the spike rising up through the gold braided cap like a macabre hat pin.

Then the ork's massive helmeted head filled his vision. The putrid smell from its cavernous maw assaulted his senses, despite the storm trooper's broken and bloody nose. Dizzy with pain from fatal internal injuries, Leander tried to focus on the red eyes that bored into him. They widened for a moment in surprise and then looked down. Leander's combat knife was buried in the ork's armpit, the tribune's last weapon used.

Ugskraga bellowed, not in pain, but in laughter. Its shoulders shook and Leander's body danced in its huge fist like a marionette. The storm trooper's energy was fading now, he couldn't feel his left side at all and he was struggling for breath from his damaged chest. With a final act of defiance, he tilted his head back and then spat a goblet of blood into the ork's face. Ugskraga blinked it away. The warboss brought up its other clawed fist and, with a roar of triumph, ripped the head from Leander's body in a spray of gore.

Commander Lester was grim-faced as he headed into the apothecarium followed by the scurrying Bale. The adjutant was struggling to read from a data-slate as he attempted to keep pace with his superior.

'Sir. Governor Pilatus wants an immediate report on the status of General Slowacki. He says if he does not hear within the hour he will come down here for a private conference with you in person.'

'Tell the governor that due to reports of rioting among the local populace any non-military personnel approaching the command bunker will be shot. He is advised to remain in the safety of the governor's palace.'

'I wasn't aware of any reports of rioting,' said Bale.

'Well write some, you idiot, and send them to the palace,' said Lester, making no attempt to hide his anger. 'If that man takes one step into my command bunker, I'll shoot him myself.'

From the look on his commander's face, Bale had no doubt that he meant it.

'Now, this casualty,' said Lester, his voice businesslike again as he strode past startled medicae staff. 'Tell me what we know.'

'We recovered him from the first extraction site, sir. Not much left of him. The site had been torched when the first extraction failed.'

Lester pushed through the doors to the operating theatre and headed across to the table where the casualty was being treated. The apothecarium staff stepped

back when they saw the commander approaching to reveal what looked like a charred mummy laid out on the sterile surface. Tubes had been inserted into different parts of the patient's anatomy and a cocktail of drugs and pain suppressors were being administered to allow the commander this interview. Had Lester not insisted on being allowed to speak with the man, they would have ended his suffering some time ago.

Lester stood over the table and looked down at the burnt husk of what had once been a tall and athletic frame. It was hard to believe that the man was still alive. Much of the muscle was burned away revealing internal organs and blackened bone. The stench of roasted flesh was overwhelming and, on catching a whiff of it, Bale turned and gagged. Lester looked down at the skull, its lidless eyes staring up at the apothecarium lights, the blackened teeth bared in what seemed like a rictal grin, the lips burned away like the rest of his skin.

'Trooper, this is Commander Lester. Can you hear me.'

There was a pause, and then from behind the teeth came a noise. It sounded like a click. Lester realised the man was conscious.

'What is your name, trooper?' asked Lester.

Another pause.

'Ty...cho.'

So it was one of Leander's men. Lester felt his heart rate quicken and he leaned forward. He knew he didn't have long.

'Trooper Tycho, I need to know about the mission. Did you find the general?'

The man's breath wheezed between his teeth, making an eerie whistling noise.

'General dead... ' The man wheezed,

'We received a garbled report about the tracking device and Ugskraga. Did you see Warboss Ugskraga?'

'Ugs... kraga... Skull.' The breath whistled weakly again. 'Tracker ...'

An alarm rang on a nearby apparatus and the storm trooper's body convulsed. The apothecary staff rushed forward, but Lester needed to know. He leant across the body and spoke into the wide, staring eyes.

'Trooper Tycho! Is the tracking device on Warboss Ugskraga?'

The man's eyes stared up at Lester's as more alarms sounded from the banks of machines monitoring his vital signs. Lester held his gaze amidst the turmoil around them and bent his head closer to the man's ravaged features. He heard a simple sound from the man's throat.

'Yes, sir...'

Lester leaned back and stepped away from the body. It lay still, its lifeless eyes staring blankly at the apothecarium ceiling.

He turned and strode past his appalled adjutant.

‘Bale, get me a direct link to Admiral Schiller. I want a missile strike on General Slowacki’s tracking device. Let’s see if we can at least salvage something from this debacle.’

The missile punched through the outer atmosphere of Balle Prime and plummeted earthwards. Its sensors locked onto its target. It adjusted course towards the river delta. The warhead hurtled from the sky like a bolt of lightning, many times faster than the speed of sound. None of the orks in the clearing were aware of their doom until the missile ploughed into a gold braided cloth cap, lying next to a discarded, rotting skull. The projectile crushed the miniature tracking device sewn into the lining of the cap before continuing its vertical trajectory down through millennia of compacted vegetation and rock.

Moments later it detonated.

The huge explosion sent a shockwave across the river valley of Balle Delta. For thousands of metres in all directions every form of life – insects, trees, vegetation and orks – were instantly vaporised. Beyond the primary crater, any surviving trees were knocked flat by the shockwave, their trunks splintering and flying through the air like straw in a gale. Then a rolling wall of flame burned through the debris and onto the surrounding forest, sending dense black clouds of ash into the atmosphere. When the firestorm reached the river the heat was so intense that it boiled the surface water, cooking fish, snakes and amphibians for a mile in both directions, clogging the surface for days with their lifeless remains. And for Lester and those observing the hololithic display in the command bunker’s briefing room all this devastation was hidden beneath the mushroom cloud that rose upwards, an expanding, black skull-like tombstone over the virtual map of the delta.

Warboss Ugskraga turned in his massive battlewagon to look back at the rising column of smoke to the rear of his advancing army. The ork frowned for a moment as he realised this came from the site of the recent duel. Ugskraga looked down at the scar the human had made in its thick thigh and grinned at the memory. That one had been worthy of a new trophy. Still grinning, he turned and

watched as his Waaagh! of ork Stompas, transports, tanks and aircraft poured out of the forest to mount its surprise attack on the Eastern flank of the enemy positions. As the warboss did so, a toothless skull that sat on its shoulder spike, blood still dripping from its battered features, stared back with sightless eyes at the mushroom cloud rising high above the river.

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NICHOLAS ALEXANDER has written a number of Warhammer 40,000 short stories for Black Library, featuring the Astra Militarum and the fighter aces of the Imperial Navy. He lives and works in Cambridge, UK, and is a huge Space Wolves fan.



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**Published in 2014 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,
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Cover illustration by Hardy Fowler.

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ISBN 978-1-78251-298-1

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