

WARHAMMER
40,000



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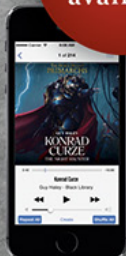
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ANARCHY'S END

By Rob J. Hayes

Those who serve the machine-spirit are, in turn, served by the machine-spirit.

Magos Domina Saleesa Vain

The engine of *Anarchy's End* gave a rattle, a hiss, and then fell silent. The tank rumbled to a halt, its massive treads caked in weeks' worth of stinking mud. It was not quiet inside the Mars-pattern Baneblade. With the constant percussion of heavy bolter fire, the scratching of quill on parchment as dozens of servo-skulls reeled off data no one but the engineeer could read, and the muted thuds of spines and bioplasma impacting ineffectively against the tank's armour, it was *never* quiet. But with the engine silent, there was an odd sort of detached peace, though the atmosphere within the close confines of the interior quickly became unbearably hot and stale.

Vi stepped over the lifeless body of Jacob Waynee. It looked like a pressure build-up had caused a panel to tear free at head height, cracking the loader's skull like an egg. One moment he was assisting the engineeer, spreading the holy oils and blessing the machine-spirit, and the next he was face down on the metal floor, blood pooling beneath him and running off to seep into the nearby consoles. *Anarchy's End* was a thirsty one, always had been. Vi couldn't remember how many Guardsmen she had seen die down in the sweltering heat of the Baneblade's innards. Engineeer Verman was hunched over in the cramped corridor, tapping at a panel

while her wasted servo-arm idly welded the hole in the plating that had killed Waynee. She wore a mask over her face, covering everything but her left eye, and Vi wondered what the woman looked like under all her augmetics. She was blocking the passageway, and Vi needed to get past. The demolisher cannon needed more ammo, and Hershen Mould wouldn't hesitate to report Vi if she took too long fetching it. He was an arsehole like that, but he knew his job better than any gunner Vi had ever seen.

The voxcaster next to Vi crackled to life. *'Adept,'* shouted Lieutenant Hamad, his voice tinny and distorted. *'Get my tank moving! The swarm won't wait for your incompetence, and we're the only ones with the firepower to break their lines and kill that accursed tyrant. The weight of the war is upon my shoulders, and I will die before I fail our brothers and sisters of the 612th!'* The lieutenant was a taskmaster and no mistake, but then all good commanders were, though Vi had to admit he was a little obsessed with his own legacy. Some people wanted to be heroes, needed it more than they needed life itself. Vi just wanted to survive long enough to see the next drink and the next bunk.

Engineer Verman glanced up at Vi, her servo-arm still working away at the damaged panel. The red light of her bionic eye flared for just a moment, accompanied by a frown. 'Where is the damage?' the engineer asked, her voice hoarse and crackling through her personal voxcaster.

'Lower level,' Vi said, stifling a grin at the thought she knew more about the tank than its engineer. 'Fourth quadrant. She took a bad hit a few weeks back, and the wound keeps opening up, leaking coolant she needs to keep her heart running.'

Again the engineer's eye flared brighter. 'Your connection to the machine-spirit is worrisome, Loader Madine. It borders on heresy.'

Vi placed a hand on a nearby panel, between two whirring servo-skulls. 'There's a difference between heresy and experience, adept,' she said. 'I've just been here long enough to know her quirks.'

The engineer stood up as straight as she could in the close confines, her servo-arm finishing its idle repairs and going dormant at her side.

'Praise the Emperor,' Vi said quickly, removing her hand from the plating and snapping off a crisp salute.

The voxcaster next to Vi crackled to life once more. The voice of the tactical officer, Frist Makin, came through loudly. *'Brace!'*

Both Vi and the engineeer wasted no time in thrusting hands out to nearby panels to steady themselves. A moment later, the tank's main cannon roared to life with a thunderclap that nearly deafened Vi and shook the Baneblade with its recoil. Some tanks weathered the firing of their main cannons better, but *Anarchy's End* was old and her stabilisers were shot through. Each time the cannon fired, panels tore loose and gun housings groaned with the pressure. Behind Vi, there was a loud pop followed by the sound of an old bolt shooting free and clanging about the passageway. A hiss of steam rushed out, adding oil-tainted moisture to the sweltering heat.

'Out of the way,' the engineeer said, barging past Vi and quickly setting to work cutting off the venting steam and welding the panel back into place.

The vox opened up again. '*Emperor's teeth, Raffi,*' said Sabatha Tre, the driver. '*Do you think you could hit something next time? Or do you need a bigger gun?*'

Vi heard Primary Gunner Rafael Beadle laugh. '*Might be I need a bigger target than this swarm, Tre. Why don't you climb out and I'll see if I can hit your ego.*'

'*Quiet, both of you,*' the lieutenant said. '*Adept. Fix. My. Tank.*'

Vi turned and crossed to the vertical hatch. She clambered down onto the ladder and slid five feet to the bottom. If anything the lower level of *Anarchy's End* was even more oppressive. The atmosphere was thick and cloying. Her faded green uniform, already dank with stale sweat, clung to her body and rode up in all the wrong places. The smell of grease mixed with the fumes of the engineeer's sanctified oils. Some Guardsmen found the smell abhorrent, some even choked on it. Not Vi. She breathed in deep and the air tasted sweet. Vi loved the lower levels. Despite the cramped confines, it felt as if she were closer to *Anarchy's End* down in the bowels. It felt as though the mighty Baneblade had deemed her worthy of sharing her inner sanctum.

Nearby, Vi heard twin heavy bolters roar, cutting through the general din of the tank's interior. Barnabus Gee, the tertiary gunner, was in his sponson, dealing out death to the tyranid swarm, no doubt. He hadn't been with *Anarchy's End* for long, and Vi wasn't sure she liked him much. Nervous as a new recruit and far too proud of his beard, was Gunner Gee.

Shell casings littered the floor and made the footing treacherous. With Jacob dead above, it would fall to Vi to clean up the spent shells. One more job to add to her ever-increasing list. One more job no one but *Anarchy's End* would ever thank her for. She crouch-walked along the passageway, unable to stand and unwilling to crawl, to the forefront of the tank. The loading mechanism for the demolisher cannon sat open, the rack of shells, each more than three feet long, secured against the closest wall. A nearby servo-skull, embedded into the outer bulkhead, blinked red lights.

Vi slapped open the holding catch on the first cannon shell, and it tumbled free of its housing. She fell to her knees and grabbed at it, catching the munition before it hit the floor. Its weight was an oppressive thing and Vi felt a sharp crack of pain as it crushed one of her fingers to the metal grille below. She screamed, and the depths of *Anarchy's End* swallowed her pain. Vi cursed herself for a fool. She was rushing and hadn't performed the Rite of Release properly, and now she was paying the price. *Anarchy's End* was a cantankerous old devil, her machine-spirit demanding that rites and rituals were performed with appropriate zeal. Even Vi was not exempt from such duties. She dragged the shell over to the loading mechanism and shoved it inside, then pulled the lever to slot it into the cannon's chamber. Only then did she allow herself to look at her finger.

There wasn't much blood, only a few spots where the flesh had been scraped away. It throbbed with a pain like fire running through her veins, but she could move it. Only bruised, not broken. Vi knelt in front of the rack of shells and whispered the Rite of Release while her hands worked at the straps.

'Blessed be the machine-spirit, grant me this ammunition that we might use it to break your foes.' This time the munition stayed in place after Vi had released the catch. She gathered the shell into her arms and carried it over to the loader, then repeated the process twice more.

Vi pressed the button on a nearby voxcaster; the devices were everywhere within the bowels of the tank, placed so that the entire crew could hear their orders no matter where they were. 'Demolisher cannon reloaded,' she said. 'Maximum load.'

A moment later, Hershen Mould replied. '*It's about time.*' As brusque as always. Gunner Mould had no time for anyone who wasn't a higher rank

than himself.

The engine was still silent, the only noise coming from the clatter of shells hitting the ground, the impotent impact of the swarm's weaponry against the tank's hull, and the whirring of servo-skulls as they performed their countless tasks. They were, perhaps, the only inhabitants of the tank with even more duties than Vi herself. She crouch-walked aft, stopping by the Wall of Glory, where countless litanies were pinned detailing *Anarchy's End's* most glorious accomplishments.

Vi lifted a scrap of parchment that detailed the Baneblade's involvement in the Third War for Armageddon. It had almost disintegrated due to its extreme age. Underneath, where the engineeer would never think to look, she kept a count of all the lives spent in the service of *Anarchy's End*. Vi was the battle tank's longest surviving crew member, and she needed the reminder of how many she had seen come and never leave. Besides, *Anarchy's End* didn't mind a few more scratches on a bit of plating; she, too, wanted the reminder of how many souls had died in her service. Twenty-one scratches in the plating, each one carved by Vi's own hand. She pulled an old, rusted bolt from her pocket, the same tool she had used to carve all the scratches, and added a new line to the tally for Loader Waynee.

The vox in a nearby panel crackled, Tactical Officer Makin's voice coming through, frantic. *'Impact port side. Brace!'*

Something hit the tank so hard it rocked, throwing Vi against the Wall of Glory. She crumpled to a heap on the oil-stained grating and then scrambled back to her feet and reached for the vox. 'What in the Emperor's name was that?' she shouted.

'Get off the channel, loader,' Lieutenant Hamad shouted. *'Gunner Beadle, shoot that carnifex before it tips us.'*

The tank shifted again, the port side lifting slightly. The noise coming from the hull was terrifying, the scraping of a thousand claws tearing away at the armour, a horrifying sizzle that sounded like acid trying to eat its way in. Vi braced her hands against the walls of the corridor and scrambled aft. Carnifexes were huge monsters, as big as a Leman Russ tank and just as armoured, with four clawed arms and the sort of mutations one usually only saw in a nightmare.

From somewhere above came a grinding noise as motors screamed to

life. The vox crackled again, this time Gunner Beadle. *'Baneblade cannon is stuck. This bloated spawn of a freak has the barrel pinned.'*

'Gunner Gee,' the lieutenant's voice again, *'use the lascannons and beat it back.'*

No reply.

'Gunner Gee, respond!'

The tank shifted again as the carnifex outside struggled for footing, pushing and lifting. Judging by the tilt, the port tracks had to be off the ground. Vi could almost feel *Anarchy's End* panicking as thrums of power surged through nearby consoles.

The vox crackled open. *'Aye, sir!'* said Tertiary Gunner Barnabus Gee. *'Firing.'*

Vi heard the whine of a lascannon powering, and then a crack as it discharged. A scream of fury ripped from the carnifex and echoed around the tank's interior so loudly Vi clapped her hands over her ears. The port side of the tank dropped, throwing her to the oily grating once again. On hands and knees scraped raw, Vi crawled aft until she could see the open hatch into the sponson, and Gunner Gee grimacing, an expression of anger mashed together with fear.

'Again, gunner!' the lieutenant roared.

The whine and crack of the lascannon sounded again, followed by a roar and something scraping against the hull of *Anarchy's End*.

'Barrel is free,' Gunner Beadle said over the vox. *'Targeting. Acquired.'*

'Fire!' the lieutenant screamed.

Vi grabbed hold of the sponson hatch just before the Baneblade cannon roared, rocking the tank on its treads. The explosion was so close it enveloped the tank, the thunder of raging flames all around them. The tank settled back onto its treads, and the noise died down.

The vox crackled. *'Target eliminated,'* said Gunner Beadle. Vi was about to let out a cheer, but Beadle continued. *'I'm getting an error. It looks like the impact was too close. The barrel is damaged.'*

'We're all going to die,' said a quiet voice, not coming through the vox. Tertiary Gunner Gee was staring at his shaking hands, tears falling like Adeptus Astartes drop pods, breaking apart on the armoured plating of *Anarchy's End*.

The vox-channel opened again, this time with the tinny voice of the

engineer. *'I will determine the cause and extent of the damage to the main cannon, gunner,'* she said. *'You have neither the expertise, nor the faith.'* The lieutenant said something else, but Vi had stopped listening. She was straining her ears to hear Gunner Gee over the din.

'I saw it!' hissed Gunner Gee. 'Like a nightmare wrapped in claws and armour. I saw into its maw and there was nothing but death there. We're all going to die! Those things will eat us all.'

A vox-channel opened, separate from the argument taking place between the lieutenant and the engineer, a private channel between the sponson and someone else. Vi could just about make out what was said, but not who was talking.

'... has no idea what he's doing,' said the voice. *'It's a suicide mission. We have to retreat.'*

Tertiary Gunner Gee nodded. He was facing away from Vi, had no idea she was standing outside the sponson hatch, listening to his conversation. 'This old bucket can barely move. We've no chance of finding one monster amidst a million of them.'

'Be ready,' said the other voice over the private vox-channel. *'I won't let him kill us all for his blaze of glory.'*

'Loader Madine!' shouted the lieutenant over the vox.

Vi startled, her foot scraping across the gratings. Gunner Gee's head snapped around and there was panic in his eyes, tear tracks down his oil-smearred face and sweat dripping from his beloved beard. For a moment, they just stared at each other, but Vi could tell he knew. He was talking mutiny over a private vox-channel, with someone else inside *Anarchy's End*. The lieutenant wouldn't need a hearing, he could execute the traitors on the spot.

The gunner snatched a knife from his boot and lunged towards Vi, a snarl twisting his face into something almost inhuman. She froze, unable to comprehend a crewmate trying to kill her while a battle raged around them. The knife gleamed, the metal polished to a shine, and stopped just a finger's width from plunging into Vi's chest. The gunner was still strapped into his chair, the belts that secured him restricting his movement.

Their eyes met again and Vi saw that panic and fear had driven away all humanity and reason from the gunner. 'Why?' she asked.

Gunner Gee reached for the clasp securing his belt, his knife still pointed

towards Vi, ready to lunge for her again. Then the sponson's pressure door slammed down so fast, Gunner Gee's hand was severed and dropped to the grating, still holding the knife in its grasp. The pressure door was designed to close only in extreme circumstance, when the sponson was compromised by damage. In all the years Vi had been aboard *Anarchy's End*, she'd never seen it close.

Through the small glass window on the pressure door, she saw Gunner Gee clutching his wrist just above the mangled flesh. He was screaming, his face contorted in agony, but Vi could barely hear him. She ducked down and snatched the gunner's severed hand from the floor, then prised open his fingers and freed the knife. She dropped the hand and pressed the button to open the door. She wasn't sure how it had closed without orders, nor why, given that the sponson looked undamaged, but she would march the gunner up to the lieutenant at knife point and let command deal with his mutiny. The pressure door didn't open. On the other side of the glass Vi could see the gunner clutching his mutilated arm to his chest, blood everywhere. He was bashing his remaining hand against the door, shouting something Vi couldn't make out. Behind him, Vi saw a flash, a single spark from a console, and the sponson went up in a ball of flame, engulfing Tertiary Gunner Gee.

After a few seconds of inferno, the fire guttered out, the suppression system kicking in. Through the flame-scorched glass of the window, Vi saw the charred ruin of Gunner Gee's body slumped in the chair.

The vox crackled. '*Loader Madine*,' said the lieutenant.

Still staring through the glass window, Vi reached up and pressed the button on the vox outside the sponson. 'Gunner Gee is gone,' she said, her voice sounding dull and lifeless.

'*How?*' demanded the lieutenant.

'Oil leak, I think,' Vi said into the vox. She shook her head to clear the fuzziness she was feeling, and tucked the gunner's knife into her boot. 'The pressure door closed and a spark sent the sponson up in flames. He was talking to someone and...'

'*The pressure door closed?*' asked the lieutenant. '*On its own?*'

Vi hesitated a moment, then pushed the button on the vox. 'Yes.'

The vox was silent for a few seconds, then the engineer's voice came across, tinny but clear. '*Praise the Omnissiah.*'

'Get across to the starboard sponson and man the bolters, Loader Madine,' said the lieutenant.

Vi pressed the button on the vox again. 'Lieutenant, Gunner Gee was talking to someone about—'

'Get across to the starboard sponson now, Loader Madine!' the lieutenant shouted over her. *'Adept, how many times must I tell you? Get my tank moving! The lines have moved past us, but they cannot hold for long. We are the only ones with the firepower to kill that tyrant, but we can't find it if we cannot move!'*

'It is done,' said the engineeer.

A moment later the heart of *Anarchy's End* sputtered back to life. Lights flared a little brighter down in the dim confines, panels glowing with renewed vigour; vents gusted warm, stale air into Vi's face, and the ambient noise became a dull roar once more. She could feel the vibrations of the heart through the gratings at her feet, and the tank seemed stronger than it had since the war began. The last time Vi had felt *Anarchy's End* so invigorated was during the battle for Angel Gate, so many years ago now it felt like another lifetime. The ork horde then had seemed as endless as the tyranid swarm now, but *Anarchy's End* had held the gate with two of her sisters and earned a new accolade on the Wall of Glory by being the last one standing. Vi remembered it well, like no one else, because none of the other crew were still around.

She shook herself out of her reverie and scrambled along the cramped passageway starboard, ducking under pipes, and squeezing past sections where the plating had been repaired and reinforced time after time, making it a bulky, haphazard mess. But she couldn't get the thought out of her head: there was another traitor on board; someone had been plotting mutiny along with Gunner Gee. The voice had been quiet and distorted by the vox, and she had no idea who it could have been. Any one of the other crew, she supposed. Anyone but the engineeer. She'd warn the lieutenant once she was manning the bolters.

Vi reached the starboard sponson and marvelled at the messy state the previous gunner had left it in, strewn with oily rags and empty ration bar wrappers. She climbed in even as she felt the tracks of *Anarchy's End* rumble to life, the tank fighting against the mud it was mired in. The sponson's interior made the guts of the Baneblade look positively

spacious. Vi wasn't large, but she barely had room to breathe seated in the gunner's chair. She strapped herself in and flicked the switch to bring the controls to life. She'd always hated being drafted into operating the starboard sponson as *Anarchy's End* had a fault no engineer had yet been able to fix, occasionally showering the gunner in heated shell casings.

Another flick of a switch and the auspex sensors and display screen flickered on. It had been years since Vi had been in a gunner's seat, and she had to fight against the horrifying memory threatening to rise up, to consume her and take her back to the day she was demoted to loader. It wasn't her fault, after all. The bolters had jammed. No matter what the adepts had said afterwards, or the readouts from the servo-skulls, the guns had jammed.

'Loader Madine,' the lieutenant said over the vox. *'Termagant swarm at fourteen point five point two-one-six. Give our boys some cover over there.'*

Vi pressed a button on the vox to transmit. 'Yes, sir. About Gunner Gee, sir. I think he might—'

'I don't have time for your grief, Loader Madine,' the lieutenant shouted. *'Fire the damned bolters!'*

Vi swung the twin heavy bolters around, using the auspex sensors to pick friend from foe targets. The viewscreen was next to useless, a dirty image fuzzy with static and blinded by the constant flash of lasgun fire and explosions. She could see little in that screen but a moving mass of armoured flesh and the muddy ground passing by underneath, dotted with the corpses of men and monster alike. She pulled the trigger and the heavy bolters let off a devastating burst that ripped through the armoured hides of the termagants and blasted apart the foul flesh beneath. Each burst of fire made her ears ring with a noise like a hundred thunderclaps all overlapping. Spent shell casings cascaded down, most falling into the mud outside, a few ricocheting back into the sponson and singeing her skin wherever they fell.

Through the auspex sensors, the battle seemed more like a simulation, just a series of red dots and green dots across the wavy white lines of terrain. This was how the gunners handled the stress. Stare into the viewscreen and things became too real, but through the sensors everything had an unreal quality to it, allowing Vi to distance herself from the death

happening outside. She felt no remorse for cutting down the tyranids; they were nothing but monsters of claw and teeth and bile. They felt nothing, not fear nor joy, nor hate nor love. They were more akin to insects than people, giant bugs with a singular mindless purpose – to consume everything. Colony to colony, world to world, system to system, the tyranids devoured and moved on. Vi felt only regret that she could never kill enough of them to save the other men and women out there, facing down the swarm with nothing but lasguns and the enduring determination of the Imperial Guard.

Vi lost herself in the battle, falling into an old rhythm. Acquire target, short burst of heavy bolter fire, short burst, short burst. Acquire new target. It was a shock when she felt a hand touch her arm, and she started, squeezing the trigger hard and sending a looping arc of bolter fire sailing over the battlefield. The engineeer was at the sponson hatch, her brow creased into a frown and her bionic eye shining red like a dying star.

‘What happened to the port sponson?’ said the engineeer through her personal voxcaster.

Vi told her. In between bursts of bolter fire, she explained to the engineeer what she had overheard, how the gunner had tried to kill her, and how the pressure door had snapped shut. When she was done, the engineeer was silent for a moment, hands against the nearby bulkheads to steady herself against the trundling movement of the Baneblade.

‘All praise to the machine-spirit, its vigil unwavering and its wrath unyielding. A name is more than just words, loader. It is purpose and conviction. *Anarchy’s End* will suffer no mutiny within its sacred decks. And neither should we. Keep your wits about you, there may be another traitorous soul waiting to reveal themselves for judgement.’

Vi let the heavy bolters fall silent, her hands trembling on the trigger. ‘Adept, are you saying the tank killed Gunner Gee?’

The crackle that emitted from the engineeer’s vox almost sounded like laughter. ‘The machine-spirit...’

‘*Incoming!*’ shouted Secondary Gunner Mould. It was followed by a scream at the same time as something massive hit the front of the tank with such force the aft lifted from the ground.

Vi felt her stomach lurch upwards and tasted bile, and then the tank slammed back down onto the ground. Lights blinked on console panels all

around her, and she heard the overlapping cacophony of a dozen alarms all going off at once. Servo-skulls whirred and auto-scribes reeled off data. The engineeer was on the floor, groaning and bleeding from a head wound that leaked blood almost as dark as oil down into her one human eye.

Vi snapped open the clasp securing her to the gunner's chair and launched out of the seat and through the hatch. The engineeer was already trying to get back to her feet, mumbling something Vi couldn't understand. She pulled her upright and saw a deep gash on the crown of her head, blood pooling around a metallic skull.

'I am fine,' the engineeer said, her voice sounding slow and a little slurred through the vocaster. 'Get back on the guns, loader.'

Just as Vi was about to clamber back into the sponson, a vox-channel clicked open again, heavy with static, distorting the lieutenant's voice. '... *Mould, respond.*' More static. '*Gunner Mould, respond. Adept... get... malfunction... Emperor save us... nothing works... Fix it!... Loader Madine, check on Gunner Mould... Report...*' The channel went silent save for the static.

Vi wondered if Gunner Mould was still alive after the scream that had torn across the vox-channel. 'It didn't sound good,' she said with a bitter laugh devoid of humour. 'Gunner Mould's been with *Anarchy's End* almost as long as me.' She squeezed past the wounded engineeer.

'*Anarchy's End* has existed for far longer than either of us, loader,' the engineeer said, and again her vox crackled like laughter. 'No matter what atrocities you may witness, believe that the machine-spirit has seen worse. May the Omnissiah guide my hands, I will beseech the machine-spirit. Its pain is great and...' The engineeer paused, head cocked as though listening to something. 'There is a corruption inside. A festering wound crawling with maggots.' She shook her head and stalked away into the cloying gloom of the tank's innards, steadying herself with hands on the nearby bulkheads, looking like a spider crawling down a tube.

Vi turned and made her way fore, stopping to climb a ladder up to the second level. She had to pass the access hatch to the driver's compartment and poked her head inside. Sabatha Tre was busy filling the air with every curse she knew, and rumour had it she had been in an underhive gang before joining the Astra Militarum, but with the vox-channel out there was no one to tell her to shut up. The tank was still moving at least. Despite the

impact and the fact Vi could feel it listing to the port side, it was still moving.

Vi reached the hatch to the secondary gunner's position, where Hershen Mould manned the demolisher cannon. She pressed her ear against the hatch, but could hear nothing over the noise of the engine thrumming throughout the tank, the sound of the treads crushing everything beneath them, and the irregular percussion of impacts against the hull. She turned the handle on the hatch and pulled it open.

Secondary Gunner Mould was dead. His chest was torn open, dripping gore onto the gratings below, more blood for *Anarchy's End* to drink her fill. A sickening, crunching gurgle filled the compartment, almost like a beast cracking bones and sucking out the marrow. The gunner's head jerked, spasmodic twists accompanied by more crunching. Vi saw a flash of bloody teeth tear through the flesh of his neck, and then Hershen Mould's head toppled sideways to land on the metal floor with a dull thud. The brutish face of a maggot-like creature rose up out of the bloody wound, teeth gnashing and little bladed appendages either side of its head clawing at the ruined mess of a man. A ripper. Small tyrannid bioforms that devoured everything they came in contact with, and they were never alone. Vi saw a second of the little monsters claw a wound in the dead gunner's side and chew its way free. The first of the rippers swallowed down a chunk of flesh and spotted Vi, standing at the hatch door. It let out a shrill scream and slithered free of the corpse, launching itself at her.

Vi fell backwards, dragged Gunner Gee's knife from her boot and thrust it forwards even as she hit the ground. The ripper landed on top of her, impaling itself on the blade and thrashing about. Two foot of snake-like body whipped about, trying desperately to find purchase on something and drive its gnashing teeth down into Vi. Its bladed appendages, stunted and grotesque, flailed at her, clawing open new wounds on her arms, but Vi held the knife firm in both hands and screamed back at the ripper, heaving it up and slamming it down onto the grating. She dragged the knife down along its blood-slick length, gutting it. The ripper died with a mournful, mewling howl.

Another shriek filled the air and Vi turned to see the second ripper pull itself free of the gunner's corpse and claw its way towards her. There was no malice in its flat stare, only hunger. An all-consuming hunger. Vi kicked

the hatch shut and threw her weight against it even as the tyranid hit the other side. She spun the wheel lock, trapping the little monster inside with the corpse of Gunner Mould. Vi could hear the ripper on the other side of the door, clawing uselessly at the metal. She stood in a daze, hands slick with gore, and reached for the nearest voxcaster. She pressed the button, but received nothing but static.

The tank rocked again, almost throwing Vi back to the floor, and the engine guttered out once more. The treads rumbled to a halt, and *Anarchy's End* stopped. An immobile target amidst a deadly battlefield. Vi took a deep breath, breathing in the scent of blood mixing with the vaporised tang of the engineeer's sanctified oils, and smoke. Something was burning. She needed to tell the lieutenant what had happened.

Vi struggled back down the passageway, squinting against the rising smoke and coughing with each breath of air. She found the nearest ladder and clambered down onto the bottom deck. The engine was silent, but *Anarchy's End* thrummed as though raring to continue her battle. Vi paused at the starboard sponson. Something else must have hit them as a section of the bulkhead had bent inwards, blocking the passageway and exposing the still treads of the tank. She saw mud and gore mixed together, bits of white bone and purple shards of tyranid exoskeleton, all mangled in the gaps between the treads. She heard the battle taking place outside, lasgun fire, cannons roaring, distant screams and terrifying, inhuman cries. Vi turned away from the collapsed section; it was too small for her to squeeze through – even one of the servo-skulls was struggling to get past.

There was a crawlspace, mostly used by the servo-skulls, but just about large enough for a person to traverse, that led to the port side of the tank. Vi crawled inside and shuffled forwards, wriggling to stop herself from getting stuck and pushing with her feet. She heard a scrabbling noise like claws on metal and realised she was directly below the secondary gunner's position. She could only hope the remaining ripper was still locked inside. She emerged from the crawlspace into the compartment with the loading mechanism for the demolisher cannon. The engineeer was there, her servo-arm sealing a wound in a nearby console, while she put out the fire with a small extinguisher. Behind her, the Wall of Glory burned, the litanies detailing *Anarchy's End's* accolades being consumed by fire, leaving

nothing but Vi's scratches in the panel behind. Leaving nothing but a list of all the souls the Baneblade had claimed since Vi had come aboard. She needed to add two more tallies to that count, but now was not the time.

'The machine-spirit is willing, but it is in pain, loader,' said the engineeer as Vi passed her. 'Its wounds are too great and its heart too old.'

'Can you get her working again?' Vi asked, pausing with her hands on the ladder leading up to the command deck.

'If it is the Ommissiah's will.' She sounded uncertain.

'Adept!' Vi pressed.

The engineeer turned to her, face smeared with dark blood, but there was a light in both her eyes. 'I will ease its pain and coax the machine-spirit to life one more time, loader.'

Vi nodded to her and started up the ladder, climbing quickly. She heard the lieutenant long before she saw him. He was shouting, profanities mixed with threats mixed with prayers to the Emperor. Vi poked her head up out of the hatch to see Lieutenant Garon Hamad bashing a handheld vocaster against the bulkhead in a fruitless attempt to get it working. Primary Gunner Beadle was doing his best to ignore the tantrum, his eyes on the auspex sensor readouts. Tactical Officer Makin had eyes only for the lieutenant, and a snarl of rage on his face.

'You will kill us all with this suicide mission!' the tactical officer hissed. Vi saw him reach down and draw his laspistol. 'This tank is a broken-down wreck, and still you try to ram us down the enemy's throats. I won't die for your misguided attempt for glory.' He pointed the laspistol at the lieutenant, and Vi cursed herself for not finding the opportunity to warn Hamad about the second mutineer. 'As soon as the adept has this heap working again, we will turn it around and make for the salvage point at all speed.'

The lieutenant's eyes went cold, his hand dropping towards his bolt pistol. 'This is madness,' he said in a quiet voice. 'We are the only ones with the firepower to kill the tyrant. Without us, the war is lost. There is no salvage point where the tyranids are concerned. Stand down!' he screamed the last two words.

Frist Makin hesitated, caught between his fear of death and the discipline of the Imperial Guard drilled into them all from the moment they enlisted. In that moment of hesitation, Vi launched herself up and out of the hatch,

colliding with the tactical officer and reaching for the laspistol. They wrestled for a moment, face to face, and Vi saw the blind panic in the man's eyes. It was the same panic she had seen in Gunner Gee as he reached for her with his knife. The laspistol went off – once, twice, the shots ricocheting around the command deck with a deafening percussion. Vi caught a punch to her face and fell away. A moment later another shot rang out and Makin collapsed sideways with a spray of blood, bone and brain.

Lieutenant Hamad's bolt pistol smoked from the final shot. He shuffled a little closer in the confines of the compartment, barely able to move, and stared down at the body of his tactical officer. 'Traitors are no better than heretics in the eyes of the Emperor,' he said and squeezed the trigger twice more.

Vi heard a pained grunt and clambered away from the corpse. Gunner Beadle was slumped over his cannon controls, wheezing and bleeding in equal measure. One of the tactical officer's shots had taken him in the side, and he was clutching a bloody hand to the wound. It didn't look good. Above him, the auspex sensors were a smoking ruin, having caught the other shot.

'Damn,' said the lieutenant in a flat voice. 'Gunner?'

'Alive, sir,' said Beadle. 'Barely. I wouldn't mind a medic.'

'Shame, that,' said the lieutenant. 'Our only medic just shot you.'

'Bloody typical, sir.' Gunner Beadle attempted to laugh, but it quickly turned to a grimace. 'Auspex sensors are shot, sir. Cannon is working, but we're blind here.'

The lieutenant tore a handheld auspex sensor from the wall and tossed it to Vi. 'Congratulations, Loader Madine. You're my new tactical officer. Now open up the hatch to the pintle-mount and find my gunner some targets. Preferably the damned monster controlling this swarm.'

Vi scrambled past the gunner and onto the platform for the pintle-mount. It would be an exposed position, but a Guardsman's duty was always dangerous. She reached up and pushed against the hatch. It didn't budge. She tried again, but it didn't move, even unlocked. She braced her back against it and pushed with all her might, but still her efforts were in vain.

The lieutenant growled. 'Nothing in this piece of junk works right. He turned the lock on his own hatch and threw it open, standing up to stare out

at the battlefield. Vi caught sight of a flash of spindly limbs and a chitinous claw speared the lieutenant through the chest and carried him off. His bolt pistol clattered to the floor of the command deck along with a spray of blood.

Vi met the gunner's shocked gaze for a moment, then she scrambled over to the lieutenant's hatch and pulled it closed, locking it once again. She stooped and picked up his bolt pistol. She wasn't sure why, but just holding it made her feel safer.

The engine roared to life once more and *Anarchy's End* thrummed with power. A moment later, the vox static cleared and the engineeer's tinny voice came through. *'The machine-spirit is willing one final time, lieutenant,'* she said. *'But I do not think it will last much longer, such is its pain.'*

No sooner had the engineeer stopped talking than Driver Tre's voice came across, loud and clear. *'Emperor's eyes, it's about time you got the vox working again. I can see it, lieutenant. That damned tyrant, I found it. Actually I think it found the 416th Russ unit. There's not many of them left, sir.'*

Vi glanced at the gunner again. He looked pale, flagging, his wound still soaking blood into his uniform. He shook his head. *'I'm not in charge.'*

Vi pressed the button on the vocaster. *'Take us to it, Tre,'* she said.

After a moment of silence, the vox crackled again. *'Madine, is that you? What happened to the lieutenant?'*

Vi glanced up at the hatch above her. *'He, uh, stepped out for a breath of fresh air.'* A bark of humourless, hysterical laughter burst from her before she could control herself. *'Take us to the tyrant and get us close enough for a solution.'*

'Aye,' said Tre. *'Commander.'*

The treads ground into motion and Vi felt the tank turn to port before putting on a burst of speed. It felt different, the vibrations of *Anarchy's End's* movement more jarring than before. Panels rattled and consoles beeped in alarm. The servo-skulls around the command deck flashed violently, but whatever they needed to convey was lost to Vi. More impacts rattled against the tank's armour, and Vi felt percussive blasts nearby rocking them. With no sensors, she couldn't tell what was happening outside, but it felt as if the driver were taking them right into the thick of

it, the heart of the battlefield.

'Emperor's breath,' the driver said over the vox, *'that thing is big. It's seen us, commander. It has a venom cannon. Brace for impact.'*

Vi didn't feel the impact, but she heard Sabatha Tre die, her scream of agony ripping over the channel, blessedly cut short by her death. Venom cannons fired poisonous crystalline fragments that penetrated armour and liquefied flesh. A painful way to go, but a quick way at least.

The tank trundled to a halt and Vi felt the thrum of energy vibrating through the hull lessen. The vox-channel opened again and this time it was the engineer. *'The machine-spirit is at its limit, commander. Its heart is dying. It will move no more.'*

'Are we close enough?' Vi asked the gunner.

Beadle let out a groan. 'I have no idea, sir. I need coordinates.' He raised a shaking, bloody hand and pointed at the handheld auspex sensor Vi was holding.

Vi looked up at the hatch. Even from inside, behind such thick armour, she could hear the scrabbling of claws over metal, could feel the impact of Emperor only knew what hitting the tank. She took a deep breath, then another, faster and faster, psyching herself up for what she knew to be suicide. But such was the lot of an Imperial Guardsman.

Vi opened the hatch onto the madness of a battlefield in chaos and emerged into the fight bolt pistol first. Tyranid monsters swarmed over *Anarchy's End*; most were clawing uselessly at the armour, but some had managed to inflict real damage, such was the potency of their claws or venom. A nearby 'gaunt noticed Vi, hissed and leapt at her, bloody talons flailing. Vi levelled the bolt pistol and squeezed off a shot. It hit the 'gaunt in the thorax and the beast tumbled away, bleeding and howling. It caught the attention of others, and Vi had to fire off five more shots to buy her the time she needed.

The tyranid swarm was all around her. Smaller beasts skittered past, followed by hulking brutes with weaponry grown right out of their carapace. Horrific winged monsters flitted through the sky, spraying green acid from swollen glands, and here and there giant Bio-Titans lumbered forwards, huge even from a distance. The Imperial Guard forces were outmatched, but that had never stopped them before. Fluorescent lasgun fire flashed across the battlefield in a thousand different locations, and

whole regiments of Guardsmen stood their ground against monsters beyond their worst nightmares. Artillery behind the Guard's lines peppered the battlefield with explosions that wiped out dozens of tyranids at a time, but the swarm was endless, its hunger eternal.

Vi emptied three rounds into a flying tyranid and the thing tumbled from the sky, hitting the armour of *Anarchy's End* with a splat, its acid glands splitting open and making the armour sizzle. She searched the battlefield for the tyrant and found it tearing the last of a Leman Russ tank squadron apart. Standing at over eighteen feet tall, it was grotesquely armoured in spiked purple carapace and wielding a massive cannon, its upper arms terminating in wicked talons that tore through the tank like a chainsword through flesh. Vi watched as it ripped the Leman Russ' turret from the hull, tossing it aside as though it weighed nothing, then placed the barrel of its venom cannon into the opening and fired. It turned its horned head her way, and its beady eyes met hers across the field. Vi saw intelligence there, savage and horrifying, and hungry. She fixed it with the auspex sensor and fired her bolt pistol again, putting down another 'gaunt as it scabbled up the side of the Baneblade towards her.

'Coordinates locked,' Vi screamed down into *Anarchy's End's* command deck. 'Shoot it, Beadle, shoot it!'

The turret started rotating, metal grinding against the carapace of dead tyranids. Vi held off as many of them as she could, keeping the auspex locked on the tyrant while firing her bolt pistol at any of the swarm that came too close. The turret stopped, the tyrant in sight. It was moving towards them, its brutish guard hustling around it like a shield of living flesh.

'Fire, gunner!' Vi shouted again as she squeezed off another couple of shots, felling a beast that slithered along the ground like a snake with bladed arms. 'Shoot it now!'

Nothing. Vi knew then, with a sickening certainty, that Gunner Beadle had succumbed to his wound. She would have to fire the cannon herself.

A tyranid warrior leapt up onto the turret. Taller than even a Space Marine, and covered in spines and talons, the creature flung itself at Vi. She fired three shots, each one blowing a hole in the monster's skull, but it slammed into her and she felt a talon pierce her flesh, driving into her shoulder and pinning her against the hatch. The warrior slumped, dead, but

Vi couldn't move. Trapped in place, all she could do was wait for the next monster to come for her. In a vain hope, she kept the auspex sensor in place, locked on the tyrant. A pitiful fate for the *Anarchy's End* and her final crew.

'In the name of the Emperor,' Vi said, tears of pain rolling down her cheeks, 'somebody kill that thing!'

The Baneblade cannon fired and *Anarchy's End* rocked with the force of it, shaking the warrior loose. Vi slumped forwards and watched the shell strike the tyrant with such terrible violence that it ripped the monster in half, killing it instantly.

The swarm faltered. Many of the tyranids turned and fled, while others slowed to a halt as though they couldn't remember what they were doing. Beneath her, Vi felt *Anarchy's End* give a final shudder as the engine went cold for the last time, then the tank fell deathly still.

She slumped there, bleeding from her shoulder and unable to summon even the energy to move. Without orders, the swarm continued to fragment or fall dormant. The remnants of the Imperial Guard forces gave chase, lasguns blasting apart xenos flesh as they slaughtered as many of the monsters as they could. Vi saw brutish ogryns leaping upon confused tyranid warriors, hacking them apart with monstrous bayonets. A unit of Guardsmen led by a screaming commissar charged towards the remains of the tyrant, and lasgun fire turned the dead monster's guards into smoking husks. A trio of Leman Russ tanks, all that was left of the 416th mechanised unit, trundled past, cannons roaring, crushing the smaller tyranids under their tracks.

All around them the Imperial Guard forces surged past the fallen Baneblade that had won them the battle. Its armour was dented, scorched, buckled and broken. And it was dead. *Anarchy's End* was dead.

The pintle hatch opened and Adept Verman clambered out. Her servo-arm was broken, hanging limp by her side, and she was bleeding from her head wound again. She helped Vi climb up onto the turret of the tank and they collapsed together next to the body of the warrior that had come so close to killing her. The battle was beyond them now, and Guardsmen were pouring past. They would need to flag down a medic and soon, before she bled out from the gaping hole in her shoulder.

'Gunner Beadle is dead?' Vi asked.

The engineeer nodded.

‘Did you fire the cannon?’

‘I was below, keeping the engine alive for as long as I could.’ Her vox crackled with static as she spoke.

‘Then how...?’ Vi asked, exhaustion and pain making her voice crack on the words. ‘How did it fire?’

The engineeer was silent on the matter, her bionic eye flickering on and off, her human eye fixed on the battle lines in the distance.

Vi sighed, remembering a passage from the *Mechanicus Primer* she had been given on her first day of duty aboard *Anarchy’s End*. She gave the thought voice.

‘Those who serve the machine-spirit are, in turn, served by the machine-spirit.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob J Hayes has been a student, a banker, a marine research assistant, a chef and a keyboard monkey more times than he cares to count. But eventually his love of fantasy and reading drew him to the life of a writer. He's the author of the Amazon bestselling title *The Heresy Within*, the SPFBO-winning piratical swashbuckler *Where Loyalties Lie*, and the critically acclaimed *Never Die*. 'Anarchy's End' is his first story for Black Library.

An extract from [Shadowword](#).



Black plasteel boots rang on deck-plating. Chaplain Meodric strode through the dark corridors of the strike cruiser *Excellent*, two brothers of the Reclusiam marching after him. The hour was late, if only according to ship time. They were deep in the warp. There was no temporal law which affected that dread realm, no turning of worlds to bring day and night, nor spinning atoms to count the passing of seconds. The least of its insanities, Meodric thought, but still he regarded himself as safe, even in the heart of the enemy's territory. The Geller field cocooned the plasteel skin of the ship the same way that his faith protected his ceramite-armoured body. To know that dread powers were all around and they could not touch him was proof of the Emperor's might.

Further evidence of this was that he had been called out during the last watch. The Emperor was reaching out to the Michaelus Crusade, and he had to respond.

The spinal corridor of the *Excellent* was quiet at that hour. A sole brother on penitent's patrol stepped smartly past, clashing his fist against his chest armour in salute. In dark rooms servitors performed mindless maintenance routines. A Chapter cenobite hurried across a transverse corridor, head and arms engulfed in his habit. The unaltered man was tiny, emaciated by fasting, but Meodric touched the forehead of his skull helm out of respect to his holiness.

The Sanctum was the lesser of the cruiser's two chapels, yet it was still vast, occupying a space three decks deep. Its spires and towers extended into the void either side of the spinal way. The thoroughfare split either side of a steep stair that plunged down towards the Sanctum's doors. Meodric and his guard descended past trophies from ancient crusades half-

hidden in niches, or encysted in time-yellowed bubbles of protective plastek resins. The guard-of-the-watch had two sentries stationed at the chapel door at all times. These warriors saluted their spiritual leader, and pushed the gates inwards. Meodric went through without breaking stride, his footsteps echoing from the high chapel vaulting. Starlight shone through tall armourglass windows trapped in traceries of pure adamantium. Forests of candles in heavy stands flickered in the draught from his passing. The Sanctum's nave was deserted but for a handful of red-robed cenobites, these bound to tend to the chapel and never depart its precincts.

Adelard waited for Meodric by the archway to the confessional. He was dressed in the bone-white-and-black robes of the order, emblazoned with a red gothic cross. In the gloom he blended into the heavy curtains blocking the archway.

'My lord Chaplain,' Adelard said. 'I thank you for breaking your rest.'

'I am at the Emperor's call. I come when He commands.' Meodric's voice was harsh from his vox-emitters. 'It has happened again?'

'Yes, my lord,' said Adelard. 'Bastoigne woke me an hour ago in a state of agitation.'

'And Brother Poldus has already seen him?'

'Yes, my lord. The apothecarion report that he is healthy, and that no biochemical imbalance is present.'

'Then rejoice, brother, for it is likely Brother Bastoigne has the favour of the Emperor.'

'Praise be,' murmured Adelard.

'You are concerned for his welfare?'

'He was my neophyte once. The bond never truly goes.'

'Then put your trust in the Emperor, brother. All will be well, for whatever the cause, it is in the Emperor's plan. He who seeth clearly, seeth far. And none sees so far or so clearly as the Lord of Man.'

Meodric thrust aside the curtains and went inside. His warriors took up station side by side, blocking the archway. Adelard opened his hand, then let it drop and went to pray before the great effigy of the Emperor Vengeful that dominated the forward wall of the chapel.

Bastoigne looked up at Meodric's entrance. Sound baffles kept the room isolated to preserve the shame of the brothers within from those who

might be listening without. Black Templars confessed their failings in squad groups, and so the room was circular, set around with a bench big enough to accommodate a dozen or more of the giant, transhuman warriors. That night Bastoigne was alone. Like Adelard, he was garbed in the loose bone habit and black tabard the Black Templars wore when not in armour.

‘Lord Chaplain,’ Bastoigne said, and fell to his knees. He bowed his head, oiled hair falling forwards to obscure his face.

Meodric held up his crozius over the younger warrior’s head. The disruption field ignited with a crack, filling the cell with the smell of ozone.

‘You swear all that you speak to me in here shall be the truth?’

‘I do, my lord,’ said Bastoigne.

Meodric thumbed off the field and touched Bastoigne’s shoulders with his crozius. ‘Then the blessing of the Emperor be upon you. Rise.’

Bastoigne did so hesitantly. Sweat gleamed in the stubble of the shaved sides of his head.

‘Sit and be at ease, my brother,’ said Meodric, ‘and speak unto me, for I am the priest of the Emperor.’

The Space Marines sat at opposite sides of the room. Meodric’s helm lenses glowed, highlighting the bones cast into his armour in wicked red.

‘I have had another vision, my lord. I... I am sorry to seek your guidance at this hour, I...’

‘Do not apologise,’ said Meodric sternly. ‘Tell me of your vision.’

‘I was in battle. There was a fire that burned no material, but that seared the soul. From a doorway of flesh many beings came. I...’

‘Go on, my brother.’

‘They were, they were creatures. Fell beings.’

‘Xenos?’

‘Not xenos, no, Chaplain, but something else. I do not know what they were. They were...’ He searched for a word to fit. ‘Hellish.’

‘Describe them to me.’

‘They were humanoid, lithe as eldar, swift, of mixed gender, neither male nor female. They had claws in place of their hands, and black, soulless eyes.’

‘And they came through a gate, you say?’

‘A gate made of flesh, with arms and legs.’

Meodric made a low noise. Bastoigne was yet of the Outer Third Circle, and was not privy to certain truths. Meodric knew what the warrior spoke of.

‘Where did this happen?’

‘In a square, by a palace, on a world where the sky was black.’

‘Did you recognise it?’

‘No. But I *knew* it.’ Bastoigne’s face was changed by doubt. ‘How can this be, lord Chaplain?’

‘The Emperor works through us in strange and unpredictable ways. Do not be afraid. Continue.’

Bastoigne swallowed and nodded. ‘In my dream, in the vision, I knew it as the world we sail to. Geratomro. I knew that as soon as I saw it. Is this blasphemy? I am but twenty years in the order.’

‘That depends.’

‘A black sword appeared to me, my lord. Wreathed in a pure light that the creatures shrank from. I am not worthy to bear it. Why do I see it in my sleep... I—’

Meodric held up his hand. ‘It is for others to decide your worth, brother. Was there anything more?’

‘Yes. Yes!’ Bastoigne’s eyes rose, and he looked into Meodric’s helm lenses. ‘A voice!’

‘And what did it say?’

‘It said, “Seek my light, so that it might banish the darkness.” Then I saw myself clawed down and laid open, and I died, but not before the most glorious light struck across the sky and slew the creatures, and threw apart their gateway, and they all fell to ruin.’

‘The end was in our favour?’

‘Assuredly yes. Victory, though I perished. What does it mean?’ His voice dropped to a whisper, not daring not contemplate the possibility. ‘Have I been touched by the Emperor? Can it be true?’

Meodric stared at him a moment. ‘That remains to be seen, brother. Wait here. When summoned, return to your cell immediately and pray until your duties recommence at first watch. Do not speak with anyone else of these dreams.’

‘There will be no penitence? Perhaps I am prideful, and dream myself

better than I am.'

'True vision and dreams are hard to tease apart. That is my task. Do not concern yourself over it. I will discuss matters with Sword Brother Adelard.'

Meodric was glad of his impassive helm. He had always been poor at hiding his emotions, especially regarding matters of faith, and now the light of revelation was upon him. He pushed his way back through the heavy curtains, letting them and the sound baffle fall back across the confessional chamber.

'Well?' said Adelard.

'Leave us,' said Meodric to his guard. They departed without comment. 'It could be. Bastoigne shows no pride.'

'Praise be!' said Adelard.

'You know of his visions?'

'He dreams of the war we sail to, the rebellion on Geratomro. A possible incursion there.'

'You have given no instruction yet as to the nature of this most great of enemies?'

'No, of course not, and I would not until he is admitted to the Inner Circle, or must face this enemy in battle,' said Adelard.

'Then it is more likely that he is genuine. He dreams of the sword, Adelard.'

Adelard drew in a sharp breath.

'He has heard the voice of the Emperor. He must be tested.'

'Praise, praise, praise!' said Adelard. He paused. 'We should warn army group high command. As of yet, there is nothing untoward about this uprising. It is one of many, but if Bastoigne's visions are true, we may be heading for disaster.'

'We shall not speak of this,' said Meodric firmly. 'We shall tell Marshal Michaelus. Let the choice be his. My counsel to him will be to remain silent. If we inform high command, we shall expose them to the details of the unspeakable truth and bring many complications upon them. Furthermore, if we are believed, then the planet will likely be subject to exterminatus at great loss of life.'

'But if it could be stopped sooner—'

'Brother, this is meant to be.' Meodric waited for Adelard to relax. 'The

Emperor demands we face the dark upon Geratomro blade to blade. This is His will. It is plain to me that He commands this threat must be met with steel and ceramite, not orbital bombardment.'

'If the Emperor wills it,' Adelard said.

'There are preparations to be made. Tests. Bastoigne has many travails ahead of him before he can claim the Black Sword.'

'I have every faith in him.'

'Speak to no one of this. The invasion must go ahead as planned. Silence, brother. Let that be our watchword. Ave Imperator.'

'Praise be.'


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