



# VIGILUS DEFIANT

## DESPERATE MEASURES

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Pilot Second-Class Gereddan Ferne wrenched the *Skychild's* control stick hard. The Valkyrie veered up towards the artificial ridge of the Tzeller Line, the rest of the squadron in a close arrowhead formation behind him. He felt the G-force tugging at him as the flyer, already pushed beyond reasonable tolerances, took the turn at the most acute angle he could manage without ripping its wings off. But nine years in the Imperial Navy had given him a good eye for manoeuvres, and he pulled it off. The cliff-like bulk of the ridge lowered to show more of the flak-churned skies, and then the flyer was over the top.

The sight that greeted him punched adrenaline through his system with as much force as if he had been hit by a bucket of scalding water. Hundreds – thousands, perhaps – of Ork war effigies stomped towards the Deinos Trench Line, each idol epitomising a combination of idiot crudity and sheer brawn. The dust plains outside Mortwald were a sea of brown, rusted metal and hissing pistons, and they were coming for the trenches, step by thunderous step. Some of the contraptions were little bigger than a Sentinel, while others seemed like mountains given life. He watched, incredulous, as one of the biggest took a ponderous step forward and crushed a lesser machine as if it were no more than a beetle. A deafening roar reached him, so loud he could hear it through his plexiglass cockpit and thick headphones – not the heart-stirring thunder of engines, but the throaty, wordless warcry of the greenskin race.

He felt his lip curl, a hot sensation of bile at the base of his throat. ‘We’re doomed,’ he muttered. ‘Vigilus is doomed.’

‘Keep it together, Ferne,’ said Godfred. ‘We have a duty to do here.’

The gunner’s voice punctured his fatalist mood. Godfred had a point. They had a

passenger hold full of Reivers – each a giant clad in blue-white heraldry discoloured by blood and soot – and a responsibility to bear them into the thick of the fray. Ever since the broadcast they were calling the Vox Terribilis, the distinction between Astra Militarum, Imperial Navy and Adeptus Astartes had blurred when it came to matters of transport. There was no time for debate, for hierarchy or protocol. Death had come to Vigilus, from above as well as below. Anything human had to fight in whatever way it could to ensure the planet had a chance.

‘Head for the largest effigy,’ came the rough buzzing voice of Veteran Sergeant Astranicus. ‘Use flak clouds for cover. Entire squadron.’

‘Acknowledged,’ said Ferne, his tone flat. A sick feeling of vindication mingled with a bottomless pit of dread in his stomach; less than three hours ago he’d bet Godfred that Squad Astranicus would order them to go after the most dangerous target they could find.

Even then, he had not imagined in his wildest dreams they would be commanded to make an attack run on an Ork Gargant.



The skies were filled with corkscrewing trails of smoke, with bursts of fire hurling cinders and spinning shrapnel, with blossoming flak and white contrails. Every so often the vista was pierced with a white-tailed surface-to-air missile, or a darting swarm of bullets as an Ork fighter shot past on an attack run. Ferne felt his Valkyrie shake as solid shot punched into its wing, and altered his flight path just a little so that Godfred could get a firing solution. A spear of ruby light cut the gloom, and the next greenskin craft to veer towards them burst apart as if it had been full of explosives.

‘Nice,’ said Ferne.

‘One down, three hundred thousand to go,’ replied Godfred.

‘Wasn’t it you who told me not to be defeatist?’

‘Incoming! Break left!’ The urgent tones of Retrovic, his squad mate on his right wing, cut through the exchange. Ferne yanked the control column once more, and the Valkyrie shuddered as it banked hard. A fat greenskin missile veered under the wing.

‘Too close,’ said Ferne.

‘Target sighted,’ said Detherine, the pilot of the *Vengeful Blade* to his left. ‘Still oblivious, thank the Emperor.’

Ferne thought the Gargant’s evil-looking head, its eyes glowing red in the darkness, swivelled to lock onto them for a moment. It was a pagan god of destruction made of steel and bullets. At its side marched Stompa walkers half as tall, yet each capable of flattening a hab-block. Though the Gargant’s main cannons continued hammering the hive city behind them, one of its shoulder guns – a rotary cannon with six barrels each as long as the *Skychild* – drew a bead on the squadron. Ferne could see its barrels blurring, then a hail of shot thundered past. There was a deafening boom to the left.

‘Throne,’ said Godfred. ‘That was Detherine, I think. *Blade*, report!’

Nothing but static.

‘Evade!’

Another Ork fusillade stitched past. The plexiglass of the *Skychild*’s canopy crazed as something struck it a glancing blow, and red alarm icons flared on the cockpit display as one of the wings took heavy damage. A slamming impact shook Ferne badly, smashing into his failsafe and sending sirens blaring. A sensation of numbness spread through his body, sticky wetness on his legs.

‘Veer left!’ came the voice of Astranicus. ‘Veer left and open the side door!’

Ferne didn’t have it in him to argue. He pulled the Valkyrie hard left, punching the toggle that would release the side door hydraulics. A second later the chugging roar of the Valkyrie’s heavy bolter rose above the din of the battle

below, a thick staccato boom that invariably spelled death to anything in the crosshairs. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the Ork gunner on the Gargant's rotary cannon torn apart in an explosion of gore. The punishing storm of fire coming from it stopped. Shuddering, wounded, but not out of the fight, the *Skychild* tore on.

'Get within thirty yards,' said Astranicus. Ferne gritted his teeth and dived, the sharp curve bellying out in terrifying proximity to the mountainous Ork machine's blunt head. Godfred released the Valkyries' hellstrike missiles and they shot down, blasting into the mountainous thing's shoulder and tearing away a huge slab of metal. It did not slow.

'What on Terra are they...' began Godfred.

'Report!' said Ferne. He saw a grapnel shoot into his peripheral vision and catch on the eye socket of the Gargant. A moment later the Valkyrie listed sharply to the right, its new curving trajectory so violent a cascade of alerts blossomed across the cockpit display. A klaxon bleated next to his head as the *Skychild* described a tight circle over the massive war effigy.



'Now!' shouted Astranicus. Ferne saw the Reiver Sergeant and his men jumping, grav-vanes flaring, to land atop the Gargant's shoulders amid a fusillade of Ork gunfire. A moment later they were in amongst the greenskins, knives flashing. Then they were out of sight.

Ferne hit the klaxon override and whispered a prayer to the aircraft's machine spirit as the *Skychild* curved around once more. Bullets thundered past the cockpit, their trajectory all but vertical. He felt several of them punch into the wing, and grimaced. Valkyries were built to last, but with this level of punishment they would not ride out another minute.

'I said report!'

'They mag-locked their grapnel to the fuselage and tied us to the infernal machine!' shouted Godfred. 'I can't get it free!'

'Just shoot it or something!'

The Valkyrie roared around once more, wrapping the thick cable around the Gargant's head. It dragged and crunched across the thing's head, ripping out a complex eye-gun jutting from its right socket in a spray of sparks. Ferne saw the Reivers planting something on the head and shoulders of the effigy – explosives, no doubt – and then leap for the cable, grabbing it one after another as Astranicus kicked the grapnel's barbed head free.

The *Skychild* jerked away with a scream of engines, the grapnel cable trailing behind it. Judging by the additional weight Ferne could feel in the steering column, all five Reivers were in tow. He heard a thunderous detonation in the middle distance, and a roar of dismay from the Orks they were leaving in their wake.

'I'll be burned,' said Godfred. 'They did it. Reckon they will all be able to hang on 'til we get clear?'

Ferne shook his head, gunning the engine as he blasted over the milling Ork rearguard below. Desultory fire reached them, but it did little more than ping from the *Skychild's* armoured fuselage. The greenskins always put their heaviest guns to the fore, and when the war lust was upon them, they had little time for targeting anything that wasn't right in front of them. There was a chance that the Valkyrie would make it intact to Oteck, the hivesprawl's pollution-spouting towers glimmering on the horizon.

'They are Space Marines,' said Ferne eventually, his tone somewhere between grudging admiration and raw bitterness. 'They do as they damn well please.'

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