



SHADOWSPEAR

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The landing pad was lit by flickering lumen on tall stands, up which razor wire had grown like ivy. Iron spikes were driven into the ground around the pad's circumference, the bodies impaled upon them reduced to contorted mummies by the passage of time. Four sentries, renegade guardsmen in patchwork armour, prowled around the edge of the cracked ferrocrete expanse, peering out into the darkness in search of threats. They didn't look especially alert, thought Brother Gerio as he observed them through his autosenses.

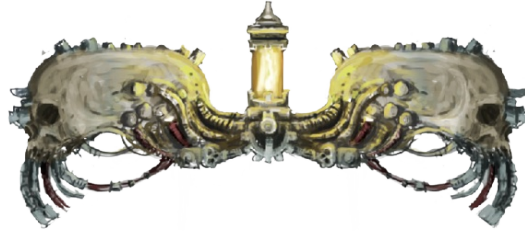
Good. That would make his task that much easier.

A single, battered-looking Arvus cargo lighter sat at the southern edge of the pad. It languished on a rusted landing gear, the oily streaks and patches of verdigris on its hull suggesting the craft had not flown in a long while. It was towards the dark bulk of this machine that Gerio directed his near-silent flight. The emitter-vanes of his grav-chute gave the slightest thrum of energy as they kept the Ultramarines Reiver aloft. He did the rest of the work himself, angling his body with expert skill and swooping down towards his chosen landing zone.

Four of Gerio's battle-brothers were describing similar arcs of descent towards the surface of Nemendghast, he knew, aiming for the string of small cargo transfer pads that dotted Shemloch Ridge. Once, Imperial shuttle craft would have thrummed busily to and fro here, ferrying consignments of rare ores and precision components so that they could then be borne onwards to Forge Endurance some fifty miles north along arterial forty-four.

Now the skies through which the Ultramarines Reivers fell were dark and vaporous. Where before the lights of labour settlements, auto-refineries and hab stacks would have blazed all around, now the landscape below the ridge was

wreathed in coiling shadows. The only light, beyond the faint haloes of the landing pads, was the infernal glow on the horizon to the north where the Daemon-tainted mass of Forge Endurance still loomed.



This planet had suffered in the grip of the Chaos Gods, thought Gerio. Yet right now, the devastation they had wrought and the darkness they had ushered in also aided him in his duties.

Quiet as a zephyr despite his armoured bulk, Gerio crossed the final hundred yards of his descent at the speed of a discharged bolt shell. At the last instant the energies of his grav-chute flared and he tucked himself into a crash-roll. He hit the ferrocrete with a muffled thump and controlled his tumble so that it carried him into the shadows beneath the defunct lighter.

There the Reiver came to a halt. He crouched beneath the rusted vehicle like an arachnid, listening carefully and sweeping with his helm's autosenses. If any of the sentries showed signs they had heard him land, he would need to act quickly.

They hadn't. All four rag-swathed figures continued their slow patrols, each at least one hundred yards distant from the next and visible to one another only when they passed through the light-pools of the lumen.

'Arcturos three down,' Gerio said into his vox, secure in the knowledge that not a whisper of sound would escape his skull-faced helm. 'Doesn't look as though the heretics expect visitors. Security is lamentable.'

'Received, brother,' replied Sergeant Arcturo. 'Make them pay for that.'

'In the Primarch's name,' said Gerio by way of confirmation, then killed his vox.

He wondered for a moment how he would look, should one of those heretics chance to peer under the lander. Huge, lithe, wreathed in shadows, the coals of his eye lenses burning crimson in his skull helm.

He looked like vengeance, he thought, vengeance and terror. And so would he

be.

Gerio crawled along the length of the lighter and eased himself out until he crouched beneath the craft's stubby nose-cone. One heretic sentry was receding away from him, passing through a pool of actinic light-glare then vanishing again into shadow. The next man in the chain was passing this way; Gerio could make him out using the thermal augurs built into his autosenses. He would pass before the Reiver's hiding place within seconds.

Gerio could have burst from hiding, hurled stun grenades, howled his ultrasonic war cry and gunned these heretics down in an instant, but that was not the plan. Stealth was needed for now. Dead was not enough – the traitors had to be silenced so that no word of the Ultramarines' presence escaped this place.

And so, as his first victim passed before him, Gerio reached out and snatched the heretic by the face. He wrenched him off his feet and into the darkness. There came the dull snap of the man's neck breaking, a sound like knotwood bursting in a campfire, and the Reiver laid his corpse quietly beneath the lighter's nose.

One down.



He moved swiftly now, doubling back around the lighter towards where the next sentry followed in her comrade's footsteps. At any moment she would notice that her fellow was missing. Gerio didn't wait for that to happen. He burst from behind the lighter at a run. His victim had time to stiffen, her eyes to widen, then he hit her full force. The Reiver swept his victim through the shadows and clean off the landing pad.

Gerio landed atop the heretic and heard bones crunch. He rose. She did not.

Two.

The Reiver kept moving, loping like a circling predator along his enemies' patrol route. With two already fallen it was twice as likely the remaining two would notice something amiss. That he could not allow.

The Reiver stepped from the darkness just as his next victim entered a pool of lumen-light. The heretic's moment of dazzlement was all Gerio needed; his fist pistoned out and caved in the man's throat, sending him crumpling to the ground.

Three.

A hundred or so yards away Gerio saw the last sentry recoil in alarm from the monstrous being that had just stepped out of nowhere to murder his fellow. Before the heretic could even reach towards the vox set he wore at his belt, Gerio's hand whipped out and metal flashed in the light.

The last heretic staggered as the dagger struck him in the chest. He fumbled at the hilt, managed to emit a bubbling wheeze, then toppled forwards onto his face. Gerio swiftly moved the two corpses off the pad and into the darkness, then crouched down to clean his knife upon the withered grass.

Four.

'Pad three, clear,' he voxed, and confirmations came swiftly back from his brothers that they, too, had finished their work.

'Excellent, brothers,' said Sergeant Arcturo. 'Landing pads secure. Time to call in the strike force...'

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