

Space Marines, Descent on Arkhona

A Short Story by Graham McNeill

They fall like blazing teardrops through the skies of Arkhona. Five of them in a staggered, echelon formation. Too regular to be natural, too fast to be falling accidentally. They'd breached the troposphere in a blaze of squalling atmospherics, trailing scads of re-entry fire in their wake.

The hideous creatures swarming the embattled mountaintop outpost turned their bulbous, hairless heads to the sky. Dark eyes, glittering like polished garnet, reflected the tortured sky and the fiery trails.

Sawing blasts of gunfire from the outpost's turrets ripped through the swarm, detonating creatures from within or tearing strangely-jointed limbs from their glossy carapaces. The creatures' six-limbed bodies were segmented and chitinous, wet with secreted mucus and utterly lethal. They hissed and bared fangs at the approaching shapes, not knowing what they were, but understanding on a deep-seated instinctual level that they were hostile.

With unnatural synchrony, the swarm split in two. Half continued their assault on the outpost, clawing up its walls and gatehouse with a monstrous hunger. Enormous warriors stood against them, armoured in war-plate of crimson and cobalt blue, jade green and winter frost. Their shoulder guards bore a host of differing icons, each a Chapter of legend. They fought with roaring chain-bladed swords and bulky firearms that spat explosive death.

The rest of the swarm scattered, manoeuvring with uncanny precision to meet the incoming threat with dripping fangs and sickle-like claws.

The first of the fiery teardrops broke through the low clouds with a shriek of displaced air. Re-entry burn obscured its flanks, but cobalt blue armour with a mother-of-pearl Ultima was visible through the flames.

At the last moment before impact, howling rocket boosters fired from its underside. A cherry red eruption of chem-flame vitrified the rock as it slammed down like a hammerblow of the gods. The beasts scattered at the force of impact.

A second fiery pod struck the mountainside with a thunderous crack of metal on rock. The sound was like a speeding mass-hauler smashing into a cliff-face. A third landed. A fourth, and then the others. Each struck the mountain like a fiery spear of light sent from the heavens.

No angry god had hurled them.

But they did bear angels.

*

Pneumatic bolts fire with an explosive, metallic cough. The sides of the drop pod slam down. Noxious air pours in, hot and dry, freighted with the reek of alien blood.

Brother Sergeant Castor's grav-harness slams up and he strides forward, drawing his pistol and sword with perfect economy of motion. He takes a single step and jumps through the hot vapour of the drop-pod's landing.

He lands hard, the rock beneath his feet glassed by the fire of the pod's rockets. The plates of his cobalt blue power armour mist with condensate and particulate matter. A target presents; a leaping beast with tight-wound rear legs, four sword-blade arms and a jaw filled with tearing, needle fangs.

Hormagaunt. Gauntii gladius. Fast, agile. Combat evolved.

Castor puts a bolt round through its jaw. The back of its elongated skull blows out in a welter of black ichor. He steps in, shoulder low, to meet another of the creatures. His sword slashes in an upward arc. The roaring teeth of his chainsword splits the beast from end to end.

The nine warriors of his squad spread out, already firing and moving to link with the rest of the company. Tyranids are dying by the score with every volley, the bio-armour of their segmented bodies no match for the explosive fury of a mass-reactive bolt round.

No matter how many they kill, there are always more.

Hundreds of alien creatures surround them. They are vastly outnumbered, but such odds are of no consequence. They are the Adeptus Astartes, the Emperor's Angels of Death.

They are the Space Marines, and they know no fear.

Brother Hellar takes position at Castor's right shoulder and raises his heavy bolter, a vastly oversized version of his usual sidearm. He depresses the firing trigger and its barrel vanishes in a blazing plume of muzzle flare.

A dozen gaunts vanish in a blizzard of rapid-firing shells. High explosive rounds eviscerate them, tearing them apart from within. Alien blood mists the air as Hellar works his weapon back and forth over his sector.

'Fodder for our guns,' he says.

'The sudden shock of our arrival has given us an edge,' replies Castor, ducking the bladed limb of a gaunt and driving his sword up through its neck. 'They will be quick to react.'

'True enough,' agrees Hellar. 'Any ordinary foe would already be fleeing at the sight of five Ultramarines drop pods landing in their midst.'

'Not so the tyranids,' says Castor. 'The beasts have no individual will, no capacity for fear or panic.'

'We'll see about that,' promises Hellar, racking the slide of his weapon for another volley.

These extra-galactic predators are driven by a terrible hivemind, a conjoined alien intelligence that overwhelms such biological imperatives. That much Castor has learned from the mission briefings and the intelligence gathered by the Tyranid Hunters of Chaplain Cassius.

To know it is one thing.

To see it in action is quite another.

A vector appears on Castor's visor, a communication from the outpost's commander, Sergeant Protus. A route inside. The outpost is a communications array that allows the myriad forces of the Space Marines to stay in contact. To lose it would be a grievous blow to inter-Chapter communication.

A squad of Ultramarines has held the outpost against the tyranids for the last six hours.

Castor looks up and sees the intensity of fire from a corner bastion intensify. The wall there is partially ruined, torn down by a vast creature with heavy plates of chitin protecting its skull and

shoulders. It is a living battering ram with clawed, sledgehammer arms like mechanised digger blades. It tears the wall apart, ripping and bludgeoning its way inside.

Carnifex voracio. Armoured line breaker. Heavy assaulter.

Bolter fire barely scratches its toughened hide. Grenade fragments cut shallow grooves in its armour. It vomits a spray of sickly bio-plasma, emerald green fire that burns armour, steel and flesh alike. Castor sees warriors falling from the wall, and his heart hardens.

‘Hellar!’ he yells. ‘Get that thing’s attention!’

The heavy bolter swings around and a stream of shells batters the gargantuan creature’s body. Most simply detonate harmlessly against its armour, but a few explode within the fleshier regions of its body.

The beast convulses, but keeps attacking the wall, the implacable will of the hivemind forcing it to ignore the pain.

‘Sergeant Eusabian! Lascannon!’ orders Castor.

Sergeant Eusabian’s heavy gunner shoulders his lascannon and even over the screeching, chittering cries of the swarm, Castor hears the heavy thrum of its capacitors.

A coruscating beam snaps to the Carnifex and a portion of its right flank vanishes in a geysering explosion of molten chitin and scorched flesh. The monstrous beast staggers, and drops to one knee, its internal bio-structure hideously revealed.

Yet, still, it does not die.

This time it cannot ignore its pain, and the Carnifex lurches from the wall with a shrieking howl of pain and fury.

‘You have it’s attention, brother sergeant,’ says Hellar.

‘Squad Castor, with me!’ he yells, pushing into the swarming creatures. ‘Squad Furina, flank left. Squad Draken, right.’

Castor's pistol and sword clears a path. He tramples alien corpses with every step. The insane fact that he is advancing towards a Carnifex is not lost on him.

Each of the assaulting squads is pushing towards the outpost behind synchronised volleys of bolter fire. The aliens see he is the leader of this force, either by his personal heraldry, the transverse crest atop his helm, or by some hideously acquired knowledge.

The gaunts before him trample one another in their bounding, leaping frenzy to reach him. Mass-reactive rounds shred them. Bladed killers are closing in. Now they are closer, salvos of bolter fire from the outpost enfilade the tyranids.

The carnage is incredible. Righteous.

From of the corner of his eye, Castor sees the warriors of squad Vaskro fighting a pack of larger beasts, tall, high-crested monsters with whipping blade tails, grasping claws and swollen, bone-fringed skulls.

Tyranicus gladius. Formidable warriors and hive leaders.

Tyranid warriors. These are the swarm's leaders. Kill them and the host will be cut off from its directing overmind, making them easy prey.

Sergeant Vaskro bears a crackling, energy-wreathed power fist on his right hand. He can tear a battle tank apart with such a weapon. The bio-carapace of a tyranid warrior will offer no resistance to its awesome strength.

But Castor has no time to concern himself with Sergeant Vaskro.

The Carnifex is upon him.

It towers over him, a half-blinded, screaming killer. Its vast arms are reaping blades. Caustic slime and virulent organic acids drip from their unnaturally sharp edges.

Rippling bio-fire gathers in its gullet.

Castor shoots it, but his bolt caroms from its toughened skull. His battle brothers flay it with gunfire. A pair of rounds punch into its throat, and milky fluid squirts, like a ruptured hydraulic hose.

The bio-plasma boils in its throat, and Castor drives his sword into the creature's heaving, swollen gut. The blade drives home, its teeth chewing meat and alien organs. He tries to pull it out, but the suction of the Carnifex's flesh holds it firm.

Castor releases the blade and ducks beneath a scything blow that would have cut him in two at the waist. He rolls as the beast's elephantine leg tries to crush him.

He rises and leaps onto the monster's back, using the wounds torn in its body as handholds to haul himself up. The Carnifex bucks and turns, trying to throw him off.

Castor's grip is firm, and he climbs its body, unhooking a krak grenade from his belt. An armour buster. The beast's arms claw for him, slamming into his body and tearing deep gouges in his armour. If he survives this fight, the artificers are going to have words with him at the state of his battle plate.

With one hand wedged in the Carnifex's flesh, Castor swings around to the beast's front. His boots slam against its chest and he is face to face with the monster. Even now, its eyes are dead, just blank orbs that speak of a hideous emptiness and synaptic enslavement.

Its fanged jaws are hinged open, sharklike and crocodilian at the same time, ribbed and filled with tearing, serrated teeth. Green white fluid fire ripples in its gullet and Castor flexes his arm as he plunges his fist into the roiling mass.

He grunts as he feels the bio-plasma eat into his armour.

Castor releases his grip on the grenade and thrusts with his thighs, powering away from the roaring Carnifex. He hits the ground hard, rolling amid a clawing pack of gaunts.

Their claws tear at him until he hears a muffled detonation and a bass rumble of something vast and organic rupturing from the inside. Castor rolls to his feet as the Carnifex crashes to its knees with its chest and thorax a gaping cavity of splintered ribs and wet meat.

It slumps over, an apocalyptic quantity of alien ichor spilling over the rocks. Squad Castor forms up around him, bolters aimed outwards to keep the gaunts from their sergeant.

But Castor sees there is no need.

The gaunts are not attacking. They mill in confusion, screeching in a strange mixture of fear and uncertainty. Castor looks to his right and sees Sergeant Vaskro standing amid the pulverised corpses of the tyrannid warriors. He holds one of their skulls in his oversized powerfist.

‘Kill them all,’ orders Castor. ‘Before some other beast establishes control of them.’

The cull is merciless. Every one of the isolated packs of gaunts is bracketed and gunned down as their tiny, animal brains look for a neural connection that isn’t there.

Stripped of their hive creatures, the lower beasts are nowhere near as dangerous. Still a threat, but vulnerable.

In moments it is over, the last of the leaderless gaunts is slain. The squads of Ultramarines regroup, forming up their squads to assess their losses and attrition rates. At first glance, it looks as though twelve warriors are down.

Too soon to say who will live to fight again and who will not. That is for the Apothecaries and the will of the Emperor to decide.

Castor bends to retrieve his sword from the ruin of the Carnifex’s body. The blade is clogged with sticky black matter and bone fragments. He will clean it when they return to Arkhona Ultima.

The gates of the outpost open, and four bloodied Space Marines march out. At their head is another sergeant, his own blade as choked with alien flesh as his own. Sergeant Protus of the Ultramarines. A proud warrior, perhaps too proud. Was it that pride that saw him trapped here?

Behind Castor come three others. The first is an axe-bearing warrior in the stormcloud armour of the Space Wolves. The second is clad in the crimson of the Blood Angels, his pale countenance streaked with alien blood. Last comes a Dark Angel, the hue of his green armour almost black.

‘On me,’ says Castor, and his squad follow as he marches towards sergeant Protus.

They meet as Ultramarines, as battle brothers. Wrist to wrist, in a clatter of plate. The Chapter symbols on their shoulder guards, ivory white Ultimas, are slathered in blood yet still shine proudly under this world’s strange skies.

‘Well met, Sergeant Protus,’ says Castor, casting his gaze over the warriors behind his fellow Ultramarine. ‘Some interesting company you’re keeping.’

‘These are interesting times, Sergeant Castor,’ says Protus. ‘Welcome to Arkhona.’