

Blood Price

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

‘Has there ever been a day like this?’ said Governor Tarqel Roschin, puffing out his chest and brushing imagined specs of dust from the puffed sleeves of his fur-lined pelisse. Gold thread woven through the material made it sparkle in the late morning sunlight and accentuated the deep crimson of his bronze-buttoned tunic and polished boots.

‘Not in living memory, my lord,’ answered Nuri, adjusting the golden scabbard at the governor’s hip.

‘How long has it been?’

‘Two hundred and sixty three years, my lord.’

‘A glorious day for Arkhona,’ said Roschin.

‘A glorious day for you, my lord.’

Roschin nodded, pleased Nuri understood the nuances inherent in this moment. He expected no less. His bodyslave was attentive to detail, and Roschin was forced to concede the man had done a commendable job in making sure he was presentable.

On a day like today, appearances were everything.

A shame, then, that Roschin was forced to share the dignitaries’ pavilion with his fellow planetary officials. The heads of Arkhona’s noble Houses had come with swollen entourages, military escorts, and a level of pomp that might be expected were the Emperor himself to set foot on Protos.

Not that any of the other nobles could match the spectacle the wealth of Protos could provide. Roschin glanced up, but the sky was heavy with low cloud and atmospheric disturbances from the fleet in low orbit.

No sign of any landers, but as far Roschin could see, Aquila Primus spaceport was awash with immaculately presented specimens of Arkhonan soldiery, epitomising his efficient, loyal and productive world.

Planetary Defence Regiments by the score mustered in the shadows of the bustling port's towering lifter-rigs and launch cradles. Tens of thousands of men, well-trained, well-armed and fiercely proud, arranged in resplendent ranks amid a sea of vividly-hued banners and glittering eagles. A hundred or more colours bands filled the air with rousing martial tunes as booming hymnals bore words of piety skyward from the Ecclesiarchy's Capitol Imperialis devotionals.

Orbital traffic had been grounded for the day, and though the parsimonious mercantile guilds had wailed in protest, Roschin's decree was absolute.

Today the skies belonged to the visitors.

Today the Imperium returned to Arkhona.

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Tamara of Aridus had come clad in voluminous *jilbab* of russet brown that did little to conceal her swollen belly in which she grew yet another heir. Roschin wrinkled his nose as he caught a faint whiff of industrial-grade chemical fertilisers in the folds of her robes.

'How many does that make now, Lady Tamara?' he asked.

'This will be my thirteenth child, Lord Roschin.'

'Thirteen? Emperor's Mercy,' said Roschin, with a shake of his head. 'I know Aridus is fertile, but it's crops you're supposed to be growing down there.'

Tamara dutifully chuckled as Roschin turned his attention to the other nobles. Losekin of Sylvae was clad in imitation of an Imperial Preacher, swathed in intricately arranged robes of gold and cream and with a pair of pistols belted at his hip.

'Taking the term, "defender of the faith" a little too literally, aren't we?' said Roschin.

Losekin shook his head. 'If you'd walked the *Vea Sacra* as often as I have, you'd know better than to mock, Tarqel.'

Roschin ignored the rebuke and turned to Edrek of Planus, whose dusky skin and stoic demeanour made him all but unreadable. Yet even the taciturn Edrek couldn't help but look to the skies every few minutes with anticipation.

'Worried they'll not come?' said Roschin.

Edrek ignored him and Roschin turned to the last of the nobles, Talabek of Volcanus. Alone of his fellow nobles, Talabek wore an expression that looked like he'd just bitten into something unpleasant.

'Something troubles you, Lord Talabek?'

The man looked over and gave him the kind of look Roschin remembered from the Scholam just before Pastor Alevant would beat a child for misremembering an obscure fragment of Imperial lore.

'This whole day troubles me, Lord Roschin,' said Talabek.

The man's voice was rasping and parched, which served him right for living on Volcanus. All that heat wasn't good for a man's constitution. Or his temperament.

'It troubles you?' said Roschin. 'This is a great day for us all. After...what is it again, Nuri?'

'Two hundred and sixty three years, my lord.'

'Yes, after two hundred and sixty three years, the servants of the glorious Emperor, amongst whose number we must all count ourselves, have returned to Arkhona. Today is a day for joyous celebrations and giving thanks for His beneficence.'

'Then you're an even bigger fool than I thought.'

Roschin's lifewards bristled at the insult, but Roschin ignored them. He'd sparred with Talabek enough in the palace debate chambers not to be fazed by the man's boorish manner.

'An unkind interpretation of that remark might be to consider it treasonous, Lord Talabek.'

'Is it treasonous to ask why the Imperium comes here now, after so long?'

'That all depends on how you ask.'

‘Then why do you think they are here, Lord Roschin?’

‘Because we are a world of the Imperium and it is our duty and honour to offer up our proud sons to fight in the Emperor’s glorious wars,’ said Roschin. ‘It is our solemn and most privileged task to serve His ineffable wisdom by being part of the holy machine that is His Imperium.’

‘Words were spoken by rote,’ sneered Talabek.

‘True,’ admitted Roschin, ‘But I believe them. Can you say the same? My House has been preeminent among the noble houses of Arkhona for centuries because my antecedents lived by them. You and others like you have grown soft; complacent and too much in love with the rewards position grants you, never once considering the duty such position requires, no, *demands*.’

Talabek hid it well, but Roschin saw his surprise.

‘Well said, Lord Roschin,’ said Talabek with a short bow, ‘but please do not mistake my natural caution with a lack of faith in the Emperor. I am, as are we all, dutiful and loyal subject of the God-Emperor, but where the Imperium walks, it does not step lightly.’

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The first ship broke through the clouds an hour later. Not a single colours bands failed to miss a note in their playing and prayers faltered as every soul took an awed breath at the ship’s incomprehensible scale. It seemed impossible that something so vast, so *monumental*, could remain airborne let alone traverse the stars.

Like the craggy underbelly of an ocean-going leviathan, its metalled flanks were encrusted with gnarled growths, but of architecture and robust practicality instead of parasitic organisms. Vast holds gaped and spilled lambent illumination across Aquila Primus. The draught of enormously powerful repulsor fields made every banner snap and billow in electromagnetic thermals that made Roschin’s teeth hurt.

Only a portion of the ship was visible, its bulbous ventral structure protruding beneath the clouds. Who knew just how large it truly was? Thousands fell to their knees, weeping at its sheer magnificence.

‘Wondrous, just wondrous,’ said Roschin, the bass thrum of its vast engines almost obscuring his words. A bark of grating binary from the foot of the dignitaries’ pavilion drew his attention, and Roschin saw a number of red-robed priests of Mars making oddly geometric gestures across their chests.

‘*Ave Deus Ommissiah,*’ said Talabek, copying the gesture of the Martian priests and his earlier unease seemingly forgotten. ‘*Adeptus Mechanicus...*’

Roschin understood immediately. The lion’s share of wealth generated by Volcanus was largely thanks to the array of forges and mining facilities thrall to the Martian priesthood. Roschin supposed it only natural for Talabek to now view the identity of this sky-colossus as a welcome sight.

Dozens of smaller craft split from the main vessel and dropped through the lower atmosphere. Most were boxy and ungainly, looking as they ought to be drilling into a mountain instead of flying, but Roschin saw one that swiftly outpaced the rest and dived towards the landing fields like a hunting raptor. Hard edged and angular, its armoured flanks were a rich cobalt blue with crimson edging.

‘Is that *Mechanicus* as well?’ asked Tamara, placing a protective hand across her stomach.

‘I do not believe so, Lady Tamara,’ replied Talabek.

‘It’s *Adeptus Astartes,*’ said Losekin.

‘Space Marines?’ said Tamara.

‘A Thunderhawk, if I remember correctly,’ said Losekin. ‘An assault craft. My great grandfather claimed to have seen such a ship in his youth and painted many years later. It hangs in the great hall of my villa.’

‘An assault craft, you say?’ said Roschin, now wary of the rapidly approaching aircraft’s predatory lines. His eyes were drawn to its brutal functionality, the enormous cannon on its dorsal surfaces and the sleek missiles on its wing pylons.

Losekin nodded. ‘A gunship,’ he said, one hand instinctively curling around his pistol grip.

Roschin raised an eyebrow and said, ‘Are you planning on fighting these Space Marines?’

Losekin released the weapon with an embarrassed cough.

The gunship flared its wings, slowing its hurtling descent at the last moment. Shearing jetwash battered clear space for tens of metres around it and Roschin shielded his eyes as clouds of dust billowed over the platform, ruining the fabric of his pelisse and tunic. Hours spent polishing his boots wasted. Well, hours of Nuri's time wasted.

He coughed and waved away the fog of hot grit and exhaust gasses as a ramp beneath the prow of the gunship lowered. The dust obscured the disembarking crew, but even partially occluded, Roschin felt his heart thud against his chest at their inhuman scale.

He'd heard tales of the Adeptus Astartes. Who in the Imperium had not? Each retelling magnified their deeds and might until such warriors became little more than legends of immortal gods to walk in children's tales, mythic heroes conjured by fertile imaginations to vanquish evil.

The dust settled and Roschin now understood even the tallest of such tales fell woefully short of the truth.

One Space Marine would have been awe inspiring, but ten were marching from the gunship. Ten giants in strikingly blue armour, the heavy plates edged in crimson and the eagles upon their plastrons forged from purest gold.

They towered over a tall, elegantly willow-limbed adept in a robes of scarlet and slate-grey. Roschin had seen enough tech-priests to recognise another member of the Cult Mechanicus. The adept's lower jaw was a ceramic death-mask of acid-etched circuitry, his elongated skull tonsured with a fringe of silver hair. Arms formed from slender latticeworks of multiple-jointed articulations were in constant motion around him like mechanised snakes. A pack of goggled servitors bearing an assortment of books and analytical devices followed a respectful distance behind him.

The adept appeared not to notice the armoured giants surrounding him and tapped a black-feathered quill stylus on a wood-framed dataslate with a pincer limb of engraved jet.

The guards at the foot of the ramp leading to the platform stood aside, understanding they could no more prevent the approach of the Space Marines than they could the approach of nightfall.

Roschin pulled himself together and stiffened his spine. The Adeptus Astartes were titans of flesh and blood, but the adept – augmented as he was – remained a man. Titans in war-struck plate were one thing, but a man he could deal with. Even one with ten Space Marines as an honour guard.

‘Welcome to–’ began Roschin, but the adept lifted a bronze hand, palm outward. He did not look up. His eyes, softly glowing augmetics, Roschin now saw, scanned the slate.

‘Confirm that this is planet Arkhona,’ said the tonsured Martian adept. ‘Segmentum Obscurus, Scyllan Sector, Atreyan sub-sector. Imperial Cartographae Designation Three-Nine-Nine-Seven, Lambda-Ultima Compliant.’

‘It is,’ said Roschin.

‘And you are its Imperial Governor, hereditary biological scion of House Roschin, as ratified in Imperial Edicts laid down by the Adeptus Terra in the two hundred and fifty first year of the thirty-eighty millennium.’

Roschin wasn’t sure if that was a question or a statement, but chose to answer as though it was the former.

‘I am Governor Tarqel Roschin, yes.’

‘Most excellent,’ said the adept, turning to the Space Marine nearest him.

Before he could speak, Roschin said, ‘And you are?’

The adept considered the question, as though his designation was of no relevance to Roschin. He paused, as though listening to an unheard voice.

‘I am Adept Nyla, Secutor Tributi of the Adeptus Mechanicus,’ he said, making a quarter turn to point his quill stylus at the nearest Space Marine. ‘And this is Sergeant Protus of the Ultramarines Chapter of Adeptus Astartes.’

‘It is an honour to receive you,’ said Roschin. ‘It has been two hundred and sixty three years since the Imperium last turned its benevolent gaze upon Arkhona. We–’

‘Two hundred and sixty six, Terran sidereal,’ corrected Nyla. ‘The check digit in your planet’s chronometers indicates an unverifiable deviation from Astronomican baseline.’

‘Ah, well, then we have even more reason to be thankful for your return,’ said Roschin.

‘Enough, Nyla,’ said Protus, his voice impossibly deep and sounding like rocks in a grinder. ‘We do not come to Arkhona to discuss technicalities, we come to prepare for war.’

‘What war?’ said Roschin, taking a step back at the blunt force of the Space Marine’s words. He *knew* the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes spoke, of course they spoke, but in the devotional holo-picts, their voices had the lofty tones of heroes, not this atonal rumble.

‘You are governor of this world,’ said Protus. ‘Yet you know nothing of the threat pouring from the Eye?’

‘Threat? I know of no threat.’

‘The forces of the Ruinous Powers was strong, and our bitterest foe stands poised to unleash a Black Crusade. All strength of arms must be yoked to the Imperium’s defence,’ said Protus.

Roschin turned to Nyla for clarification.

The adept nodded and said, ‘Arkhona lies within the Secundus tith volume of the Ocularis Terribus, a spatial anomaly more commonly known as the Eye of Terror. As laid down in Arkhona’s planetary charter, established in the two hundred and thirty second year of the thirty first millennium, you are oath-bound to supply such and material as decreed by the Departmento Munitorum whenever a threat of sufficient magnitude is declared by the reigning Sector Lord.’

Nyla finally deigned to meet Roschin’s gaze.

‘Such a threat has been declared.’

The nobles of Arkhona looked up as the sky split with a thunderous roar. The bands fell silent as hundreds of ugly slabs of blackened steel dropped through the clouds on blazing columns of blue-hot fire.

Enormous bulk haulers, freighters, refinery vessels and geoformers. All stamped with the cog-toothed skull of the Adeptus Mechanicus. A fleet of exploitation, designed to strip a planet's resources and bear them into hostile warzones. Vast troop transports dropped like falling hab-blocks, forcing entire regiments to scatter lest they be crushed beneath their inexorable descent.

'War demands its blood price,' said Protus, stepping in front of Roschin. 'And Arkhona will pay its share.'