

Terra Nullius

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

For all intents and purposes, *Baal's Blood* had ceased to exist. An elegant sabre of a starship in crimson and black livery, it hung inert in the umbra of a colossal asteroid within the Veiloss Belt. The swept-forward prow was golden, with two feathered pinions flaring from a central blood drop.

The Blood Angels vessel drifted under strict emissions control, the Techmarines keeping the reactor core smouldering at its minimum output. Just enough to keep the serfs and non-Chapter personnel alive while maintaining the most essential systems operational.

The command deck was a tomb, its graceful lines frosted with a veneer of palest white. Mortals had been recused from bridge duty, the arched vault too cold and too lightless for them to function. The warriors who remained were frost-dusted giants, with only vented breaths and glittering beads of condensation on the hot edges of their armour indicating that living beings were within.

Standing before the oculus, a solitary figure clad in deep red battle plate and draped in a vermillion cloak stared into the darkness. Golden hair framed a face that was cruelly elegant, sculpted and regally pale; a face that might have been called beatific were it not for the emptiness in his eyes.

Mephiston they called him, the Lord of Death.

An unwholesome title, but one the Chief Librarian of the Blood Angels suited all too well. Once he had gone by another name, but seven nights of madness had shed that identity like something newborn might slough off its chrysalis.

A warrior in red gold armour approached, bearing a long-hafted glaive with a blade cast in the form of an elongated blood drop. He bore Mephiston's heraldic device beneath the winged icon at his shoulder guard.

'I know what you are going to say, Parahelio,' said Mephiston.

'You are the Chief Librarian, I would be surprised if you did not,' answered Parahelio.

Mephiston turned from the oculus and said, 'I need no powers of prognostication to sense how inaction chafes your soul. Trust me, I relish this even less than you.'

'I dislike hiding,' said Parahelio.

'You prefer dying?' replied Mephiston.

Parahelio ignored Mephiston's caustic tone. 'I concur with the wisdom of your orders, but it sits ill to do nothing when there are enemies within reach.'

'The blood of Sanguinius is a potent fire within you, Parahelio,' said Mephiston, 'but our gene-sire was never one for suicidal assaults. Even at his end.'

The Chief Librarian half turned back to the oculus, as if seeking something terrible he hoped never to see.

'Especially when made against *Planet Killer*,' he said.

The space-borne colossus said to be Abaddon the Despoiler's flagship had arrived in the Kharon system four days ago, ripping into realspace perilously close to the trinary stars at its heart. It charged toward Arkhona screaming its vile deeds into space. Astropaths went mad to hear its blasted name and the warp churned bloody in its wake. Packs of howling reaver-hulks and bloated warships followed its seething passage, like parasites clustered around an apex predator.

Baal's Blood had barely managed to break orbit with Arkhona and flee to the Veiloss asteroid belt before the first shoals of assault boats and pillager craft invested the planet.

Imperial retribution would soon fall on Arkhona, but until then the Blood Angels must perforce remain hidden.

'Is there no further word from the Wolves?'

'Nothing beyond young Blackmane's presumption of command,' agreed Mephiston.

'He is arrogant, that one,' said Parahelio. 'Without grace.'

'Which shows how little you know of our Fenrisian brothers,' said Mephiston. 'The facade of savagery is only half a mask. Believe that is all there is to them at your peril.'

Mephiston saw Parahelio remained unconvinced. It never failed to amaze the Chief Librarian that so few saw beyond the cultivated barbarism of the Space Wolves or took time to truly understand the truth of what made them so singularly lethal.

‘And the Dark Angels?’

‘Brother Chaplain Cassiel assures me the warriors of his Chapter are en route.’

‘I...do not fully trust him,’ said Parahelio, risking his master’s ire by casting doubt on so senior a warrior.

‘And you are right not to, for Cassiel is a son of Caliban. Intrigue runs in his blood as swiftly as noble fury runs in ours,’ said Mephiston. ‘He will have an agenda of his own, but for now our purposes align. As to the others? The Ultramarines will soon be reinforced, a cohort led by a Techmarine Suprema no less, and while the Fists and Raven Guard acknowledge our petition, it remains to be seen whether they will answer with warriors as well as words.’

Before Parahelio could say more, the soft glow of the passive auspex chimed. Mephiston’s gaze snapped to the stone-rimmed hololith.

‘Light it,’ he ordered the warrior before it. ‘Now.’

Like mist forming over a lake, shimmering veils of light rose up from the polished slate. Entoptic representations of local space swam into focus; the gnarled fist of the asteroid behind which *Baal’s Blood* sheltered, orbiting ejecta from a long ago explosion, gravity-captured debris from a drifting greenskin scrapship.

And a pulsing icon of a warship with its fangs bared.

‘Impossible,’ said Parahelio, racing over to the hololith.

Mephiston calculated the odds of an enemy starship achieving such perfect surprise, coming up with a number that was as close to zero as made no difference.

‘Battle stations!’ ordered Parahelio. ‘Turn us about and light the voids! Engineering, get power to the weapons. Now!’

‘Belay those orders,’ said Mephiston.

Parahelio rounded on him. ‘We are dead in the void, brother Librarian, but I will not make it easy for them to slay us.’

‘Look at their positioning,’ said Mephiston, approaching the hololith and calling up the unknown vessel’s attack vectors and engagement arcs. ‘Such brutal elegance in their approach, such mastery of the hunt. If this ship wished us harm, we would already be dead.’

Static howled from ceiling mounted grilles, and every set of eyes on the bridge snapped to the vox-station. All transmissions in or out were supposed to be offline, but a low chuckle built from the speakers.

‘Oh, Mephiston,’ said a voice with the wet vowels of a predator licking its lips. ‘You and your men have so much to learn from the Space Wolves.’

‘Brother Blackmane,’ said Mephiston.

Again, that chuckle, that insouciant superiority.

‘I’ve just killed your ship, you can call me Ragnar,’ said the young Wolf Lord.

A grenade with the pin half-pulled was a phrase Mephiston had once heard in reference to Ragnar Blackmane. Apt, though it failed utterly to capture the Wolf Lord’s sheer dynamism.

He reclined on his starship’s stone-carved command throne, its rough form draped in a multitude of pelts. A barbarian king in all but name, one leg was cocked over the armrest, an arm ruffled the neck of an enormous black furred wolf at his side. Its lupine twin stalked the darkened hall somewhere out of sight, hackles raised and fangs bared.

Even seated, there was a savage sense of *potential* to Ragnar, a coiled ferocity that seemed ill-suited to confinement in flesh, even transhuman flesh. Though the Wolf Lord remained outwardly relaxed, Mephiston was acutely aware of the thrumming steel chord within Ragnar that could propel him from stillness to ferocious motion in the blink of an eye.

The darkness of what the yellow-eyed Chapter serf had called the *aett* ought to have presented no impediment to the Blood Angels, but Mephiston was acutely aware of how little he could perceive in this chamber: piles of weapons and ammunition; platters heaped with cold meat and rich fruits; the indistinct outlines of an unknown number of Space Wolves lounging on spread furs.

They watched him and his Honour Guard with glittering eyes, like pack hunters shrouded at the edge of a winter forest. Some drank acrid liquor, beating their knuckles in a soft, low rhythm against the plates of their armour. Others sharpened blades or cleaned disassembled bolt guns hung with fangs and furs. Three were tattooing a fourth, his bared back a canvas of runic talismans and looping whorls. Too dim to identify their provenance, yet visible enough to send a tremor of disquiet down Mephiston's spine.

'Tell me again why I would follow your counsel?' said Ragnar, outwardly courteous, but the blade beneath unmistakable. 'Arkhona is Space Wolf territory, not a fiefhold of the Blood Angels.'

'None here are disputing that, Lord Blackmane,' said Mephiston.

'I told you, I am Ragnar. Only the Stormcaller still uses my pack name.'

'Very well, Ragnar,' said Mephiston. 'I merely sought to present you with a plan I believe has merit. I concede that Arkhona is Space Wolf land, taken by Primarch Russ in ages past. Wolfhold bears the roots of your claim upon it. I know this, as do all those who serve me.'

'You concede it?' said Ragnar, swinging his leg around onto the floor and resting his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward. He grinned and black braids woven with adamantium cords swung at his stubbled cheeks. 'How gracious of you.'

The wolves of the *aett* grumbled in amusement.

'Your man with the spear thinks different,' continued Ragnar. 'Don't you?'

'The Ultramarines have the truth of it,' said Parahelio.

'Be silent,' warned Mephiston.

‘He can speak freely,’ said Ragnar, baring sharp teeth and rising with feline grace from his throne. ‘I won’t bite.’

The Wolf Lord’s armour was frost blue, but almost no light reflected from its burnished plates. Even the red-hilted sword belted at his waist glimmered only reluctantly. A thick pelt, midnight black like his wild hair, mantled the Wolf Lord’s shoulders and talismans of fur and claw hung from his ears.

Ragnar wound a spiralling path around the Blood Angels. Even amongst allies, he could not help but move as a predator, circling his prey and already aware of where he might strike. Mephiston felt motion all around and realised the lounging Space Wolves had shifted position while his attention was focused on Ragnar.

Each was now poised in a perfect flanking position.

‘The Ultramarines?’ said Ragnar, rolling the word around his mouth, as though testing its fit.

‘Guilliman’s warriors have no claim to Arkhona. They never have and never will. Why do you believe they can claim stewardship of this world of Russ?’

‘You abandoned Arkhona,’ said Parahelio. ‘It is Terra Nullius, land to be held by those who have shed blood in its defence.’

Ragnar paused and cocked his head to the side, as though listening to a voice that went unheard by all save he. His brow knitted and he wagged a calloused finger at Parahelio.

‘Ultramar’s warriors kill some ragamuffin orks and they think that carries greater worth than the oath of a primarch? No, Arkhona is Space Wolf land in word and deed for all eternity. Do you dispute this?’

‘He does not,’ said Mephiston.

‘I asked him, Death Lord,’ snapped Ragnar. ‘I don’t like it when others speak for those I address.’

Finally seeing sense, Parahelio shook his head. ‘No, Lord Blackmane, I do not dispute this, but Ultramar sends a warrior who will claim the blood shed by their warriors gives them greater claim on this world.’

‘Let him try,’ said Ragnar. ‘He will find me less inclined to...*concede*.’

‘Arkhona is Space Wolf land,’ reiterated Mephiston.

‘Good,’ said Ragnar, grinning as though he had not all but threatened the warriors of the Blood Angels. ‘Then let’s go and get it back.’