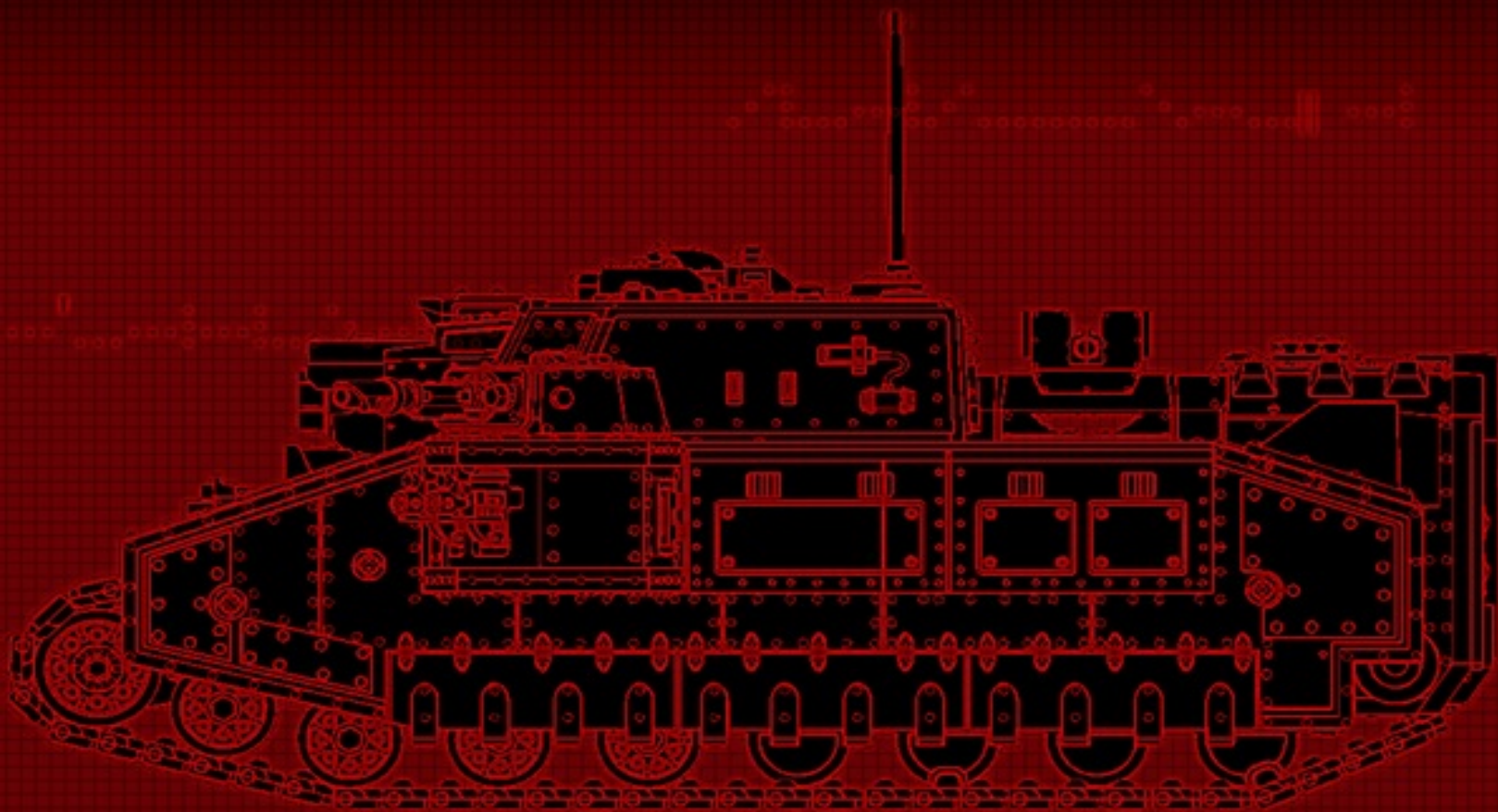


WARHAMMER
40,000

STORMILORD

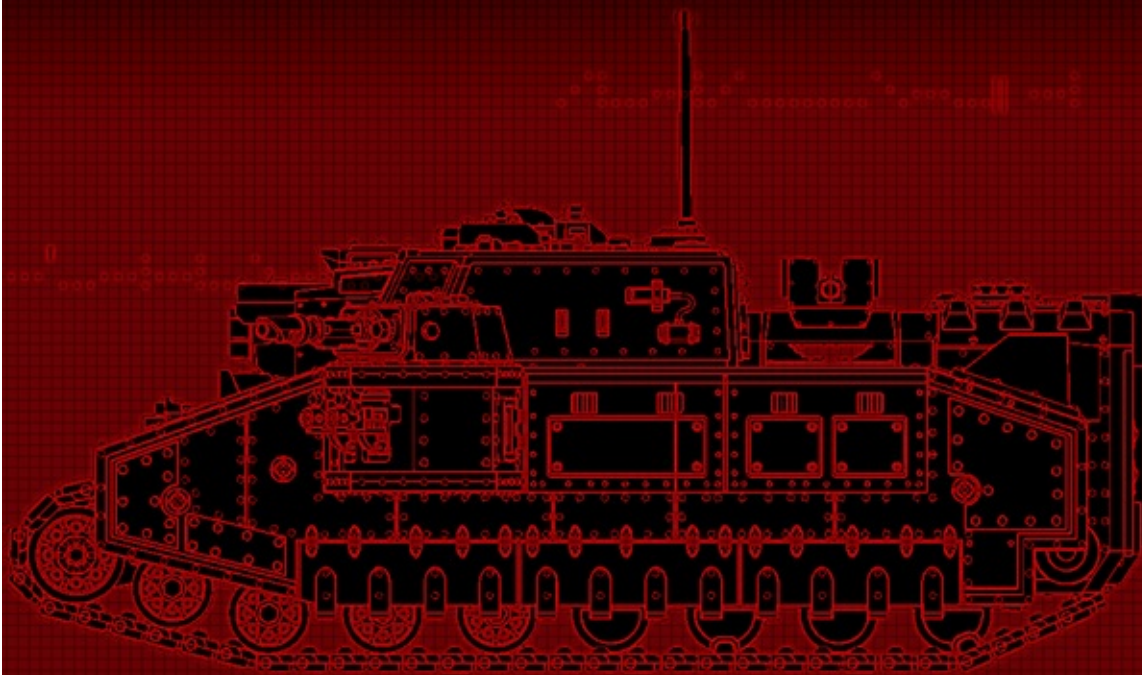


AN IMPERIAL GUARD SHORT STORY BY

GUY HALEY

WARHAMMER
40,000

STORMLORD



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STORMLORD

Guy Haley

Lieutenant Jonas Vor Artem Lo Bannick of the 477th Paragon Foot surveyed his troops.

They were men of Paragon, all of them, arrayed in uniforms filthy with the mud of Gullen. They waited behind the high earthen bank shielding the siege-lines, the safety of their camp four kilometres behind them.

The men stared at the granular surface of the wall. Their time on the front had battered the fear out of them. So many were dead already that they had ceased to believe in their own survival, and their faces displayed grim acceptance of their fate.

Jonas had his back to the berm. Watching his men was preferable to staring at the bank that marked the end of the world.

Priests went down the line, muttering benedictions. No other spoke. The men of Paragon faced death silently, as death waited for them silently beyond that bank, in the sucking bog, in the trenches on the other side and in the kilometres of gun emplacements and bunkers; their fields of fire carefully planned, zigzag defence lines that reached out in the points of a deadly star to embrace any assault with ungentle arms of fire and bullet.

The rebels had massed on the Palatine Redoubt. The redoubt housed a defence laser, projecting out on a spur of fortifications away from the main walls so that it could fire clear of the palace void shields. With the defence laser operational, the fleet could not bombard the city. If the fleet could not bombard the city, the void shields would not stay down. If the void shields could not be brought down, then the rebels were safe.

And so the flesh-grinding fortifications of the defence laser must be breached by the infantry. The detachment of the Second Recovery Force had been attempting this task for a fortnight, without success, and with much blood.

The men kept their minds clear of all that, if they could. They kept their eyes away from the muzzle of the starship-killer projecting over the siege line berm

and looked to their officers, as if these men of nobler birth could shield them from the las-beams of the rebels. The officers feared as much as their lower-born countrymen; their stoicism was an act, a keeping of face. Both men and officers knew it to be so. This shared, unacknowledged fear forged a comradeship between high- and low-born that none could have anticipated when they faced the maws of the dropships together and bade farewell to Paragon.

Together still, they faced the maws of death. Highborn men who would not have looked twice at those who followed them on Paragon glanced back repeatedly, checking the soldiers in their charge over and over, their concern open, and not just for their own fates.

Jonas had had many advantages in his life: his tall, athletic build was of far cleaner form than those of his men. Literally head and shoulders above the common soldiery, he was healthy in a way the lower orders of his world could never be. He owed it to his men to be the leader they needed him to be, and that meant concealing his own terror.

The front was still. The flag carried by Jonas's ensign, Bosarain, stirred in the chilly wind. The vox channels were silent, somewhere out in the endless marshland, a native aerial lifeform cawed as if nothing were amiss. The war here operated with obscene decorousness. That the rebels would be shown little mercy when the palace fell had no bearing on the proceedings. Every day, the bombardment took place at the same time. Every day, the men of the Second Recovery Force would march from their camp and head toward the berm. Every day, they would go over the top, and they and their foes would grapple for metres of sodden ground. The two sides would part like exhausted lovers, head wearily back to their lines and prepare to do it all again the next morning.

The defence laser boomed. Its repetitive firing marked time for both sides. Every fifteen minutes the air cracked with man-made thunder as the great weapon discharged, a searing column of superheated air revealing the passage of its beam as it sought out the ships in orbit.

Jonas's hand went to the grip of his laspistol. He flicked open the holster with his thumb. Crusted mud fell from his weapon. Gullen was a boggy world; it was impossible to keep anything clean.

The defence laser blast was the signal for the commencement of the day's hostility, and the artillery of Jonas's side replied. The rumble of scores of guns firing simultaneously made the lieutenant start in a way the defence laser had not.

'Be steady, lieutenant. If you cannot inspire your men, look to your men for

inspiration.’ A gloved hand, impossibly white in a warzone where dirt was ubiquitous, took Jonas by the shoulder. ‘War and fear make all men equal in the eyes of the Emperor. Brotherhood is the gift of the Emperor to the warriors who serve him.’

Commissar Suliban treated Jonas with a certain compassion, although Jonas knew the man would shoot him at the slightest sign of cowardice. Suliban’s fervour annoyed him, but it was impossible to be unmoved by his faith.

‘I wish they would get on with it,’ muttered Jonas. He glanced at the commissar. His uniform, from the shining peak of his cap to the gleaming toes of his boots, was immaculate. Jonas had no idea how he kept his kit so clean.

Commissar Suliban’s hand released him. ‘Impatient for the fray? Good, I applaud your valour, lieutenant. Your desire to close with the enemy is a credit. *Fervor vincit omnia, fervor vincit omnia.*’ He nodded his approval.

Jonas did not apprise the commissar that it was his weariness of fear, and not bravery, that prompted his eagerness to get it over and done with.

The company priest and his acolytes reached Jonas, the smell of bitter incense from their censer driving out the stink of unwashed bodies and damp. The priest began his litany, blessing Jonas with a touch of scented oil. Jonas mumbled the cant responses with half an eye on his platoon until the priest finished his benediction and moved on.

A wave of small movements made their way down the line, men shifting, turning their heads.

‘Looks like we’re getting ready,’ said Bosarain, standing up straight.

‘Look sharp,’ said Jonas to his command squad. Besides Bosarain there were Troopers Tabor and Micz, grizzled veterans from an earlier raising that had been blended with their own. Tabor carried the long-range vox and Micz was armed with a flamer. His final companion was Medic Lin Coass Lo Turneric, another Paragonian noble like himself and a genuine doctor besides. The Emperor alone knew how he’d got himself assigned to a unit of lowborn ground pounders like the 477th.

A brittle crackle sounded.

‘Vox net’s online, sir,’ said Micz. He and Tabor exchanged a glance. They had an understanding born from years of shared war. Jonas was jealous of it, he felt it undermined him.

‘Very good. The day’s orders will be with us soon. See to your weapons, men.’ His words sounded pompous in his own ears.

The orders would be the same as they were every day, and Jonas considered

ordering his heavy weapons squad team to the top of the bank to save some time, but one did not anticipate orders, no matter how obvious; one only followed them.

A half second later, the voice of Colonel Vertor Lo Strabannick issued from the vox: five minutes, mass assault, the usual run at the guns and see what happens. Now Jonas ordered his heavy support into place.

He shifted his vox pickup from his lips, and brought his whistle to them. He filled his lungs with the dank air of Gullen and held it in for what seemed to be a very long time.

The artillery cut out.

Jonas blew hard.

Shrill whistles sounded up and down the line. Without hesitation, the men of Paragon shouted and ran for the top of the bank. Bindarian's platoon, stationed to the left of his own, was over first. The chatter of automatic fire broke out, followed by screams.

An instant later, Jonas and his command squad were over the berm. They were down it fast onto the slope that led into the shell-pocked bog fronting the rebels' rockcrete defence line. Muzzle flashes twinkled in the slit of a bunker two hundred metres away. He tried not to flinch as heavy bolts tore up the ground by his feet.

'Squad five, kill that bunker!' he shouted over his vox.

Plumes of smoke shrouded the view below as rockets launched by his support squad rushed toward the bunker. There was an explosion he could not see. When the rocket exhaust drifted off, the bunker burned. He breathed a little easier.

'Platoon six!' he shouted. 'Forward for the glory of the Emperor, for Paragon!'

His men rushed after him down the slope. Weapons fire exploded all around him. Somewhere nearby, someone died loudly. The chunter of the Hydra batteries hidden behind the defence line scared off their air support.

At least it's not raining for once, thought Jonas.

He and his men reached the bog.

It was slaughter, as it had been the day before, and the day before that.

Bindarian rapped on Jonas's tent flap. If it made a sound, it was lost to the insistent drumming of the rain.

'Bannick! Are you in there?' It was the height of ill-manners for one Paragonian noble to call another solely by his clan name, but Jonas had noticed the convention slipping, and Bindarian was not from Paragon in any case. He

was a refugee from a shattered regiment; where he was originally from, he wasn't telling. Jonas was an outsider too, in his own way, and their shared status had brought the two men into an uneasy, if reliable, friendship.

Jonas sat up on his bed. 'Yes, yes, Emperor forsake us. Just come in, you're letting in the cold and the wet.'

Bindarian came through, water sheeting from his poncho. He looked at the floor, centimetres deep in mud.

'I think it's let itself in already, hey?' He grinned widely. His accent was outlandish, a vibrant dialect with the characteristics of song, peppered with strange words. 'You been sleeping, or are you always this grumpy?'

Jonas rubbed his head. 'I was trying to sleep.'

Bindarian pulled out Jonas's chair from his field desk and sat his impossibly lanky body down. Like Jonas, he was smeared in mud, some fresh, some old. 'No time for sleeping, hey?'

'When is there time to sleep?'

'We've got a briefing, friend of mine, we've got to go real soon. You better shake that sleep out of you.' Bindarian looked expectantly around the tent. 'You got any of that syrupy stuff you Paragonians like to drink, hey?'

'Gleece?'

'Yeah, that it. I'm deadly parched.'

'No,' said Jonas levelly. 'You drank the last of it.'

'So I did.' He smiled widely. 'Best get your boots on quick, hey. Big news round the camp. They think we got a way into the Palatine. Finally.'

'Really?'

Bindarian pulled an admonishing face. It seemed to Jonas that the off-worlder could take nothing seriously. 'Is that sarcasm I'm hearing? Sometimes I think you don't like being in the Guard at all, my friend. What would Commissar Suliban say?'

Jonas rubbed his eyes and gave his fellow lieutenant a doleful look. 'My reasons for being here are simple. About five years ago, some cousin or other of mine that I've never met brought disgrace on the entire fiscal stem of Clan Bannick. My relatives are still paying the price, and will be for, oh, about three generations.'

Bindarian whistled through his teeth. 'Look at you, you think you been dealt a bad hand? You think again. You think on your men, what kind of lives they got.'

'Are they all revolutionaries on your world, Bindarian?'

Bindarian just grinned. He refused to be drawn on the smallest detail about his

home.

Jonas yanked his boots on. His damp boots. Everything was damp. ‘If my thrice-blasted cousin wasn’t probably already dead, I could murder him. I’m not sure of what Colaron Artem Lo Bannick did, but I had an easy life planned, all dancing girls and gleece and a sinecure running the books for one of the foundries or somesuch. But after... Well, a career in the Imperial Guard looked mightily attractive compared to the alternatives I was offered.’

‘Friend, what did he do?’

‘I have no idea, no one will talk about it. It’s the Paragonian way. Put it like this, I’m a nobleman from a planet renowned for its tank companies. How badly do you think my cousin upset the Unified Clan Council for me to be assigned to an infantry regiment?’

‘Sounds nice, this clan council of yours.’

‘Pompous stuffed shirts. Big on ritual, short on brain.’

‘Ain’t that always the way?’ said Bindarian. ‘What happened to this cousin of yours a-then, hey?’

Jonas gave a grim smile. He stood and pulled his damp coat from the end of his damp bed and shrugged it on. He pulled his poncho on over the top of that. It was wet. He shivered. ‘Why, Lieutenant Bindarian, after he ruined his family, Colaron ran off to join the Guard.’

They hurried hunched through the rain. The rumble of the defence laser’s quarter-hourly updates troubled the sky, its monstrous voice shushed by the rain hissing into puddles.

The field camp was laid out in a grid, simple lumen-posts marking each intersection. Under the sharp smell of the rain and mud was the chemical stink of burning fossil fuels running the generators. It added to the stew of scents of five thousand men living together: sewer smells and rotten wounds.

Their feet plashed through slurry. Jonas’s feet had gone from damp to soaking.

He kept his head down, to stop the water from streaming into his eyes. He was dimly aware of other officers en route to the briefing tent, but none spoke, lost in their own private spheres of misery. Gullen retreated around him, the sounds of rain and his warm breath catching in his upturned collar; his body was a core of feeble warmth wrapped in soaking cloth. So disassociated did he become from his surroundings that he walked straight into the back of Lieutenant Lo Carrigen of the Fifteenth Platoon.

‘Watch where you’re going, Bannick,’ he growled. Carrigen was a squat, ugly

individual, somebody's useless fifth son, packed off to the military when the priesthood wouldn't have him. A small crowd of other officers stood about him, blocking the road. They turned briefly from whatever they were staring at, but Jonas was not enough to hold their attention. Jonas couldn't see, there were too many bodies in the way, and the rain cut visibility down to nothing.

'You shouldn't be standing in the middle of the street then, Carrigen. The marshalling yard's right in front of you. Get going, man.' If Carrigen didn't have the manners to use the proper form of his name, then Jonas was damned if he would.

'Right, so I should walk right through this then, should I? Think I'm one of the saints to be doing miracles, Bannick?' Laughter came from the group. 'Let's show him, shall we?' There was something triumphant in the man's tone, but it struck Jonas suddenly that it wasn't meant for him; in his bluff way Carrigen was sharing something rather than mocking him.

Carrigen and the others stepped aside, Carrigen waving his arm at the obstruction blocking their path.

Jonas got a view of a vast shape as long as the officers' mess tent.

He was looking at the track unit of a superheavy battle tank. It filled most of the marshalling yard, obscuring the briefing tent on the other side.

Jonas took a step back to get a better view. It was huge, the track units taller than two men, so big he could only just make out the squat, raised command deck at the fore of the vehicle's superstructure, the cowled, twin mounts of a Vulcan mega-bolter jutting out of it. Heavy flamers were housed in a side sponson over his head, the long barrel of a lascannon projecting over them. From where he stood he could not see the large, open-topped troop transport compartment he knew occupied much of the back of the tank.

'When did this roll in?'

'About an hour ago,' said Carrigen. 'They flew them in to the landing field under the cover of the rain. Rumbled in here like there was no mud at all.'

'A Stormlord? This is the plan to get at the Palatine Redoubt? We *drive* there?' said Jonas. Armoured assault had been tried before, and had not been successful. The burned-out hulls of Chimeras littered the bog before the defence line.

'Three Stormlords. Not one, *three*,' said Carrigen. 'A whole superheavy tank company. Those rebellious scum have nothing that can bring one of these down, nothing at all.'

Jonas was not so sure, but he shared some of their awe. He remained with the others as they stared at the tank in the rain until the regimental peacekeepers

came out and rounded them up. They were late for the briefing.

The air in the briefing tent was unpleasantly soupy with moisture and the warmth of damp bodies.

A holo flickered over the chart desk in the centre of the tent. The space was crowded, and the officers of the 477th constantly shifted to get a better look. Their twitchiness put Jonas on edge.

The colonel and his staff leaned on the edge of the chart desk, furious as they watched the holo.

A man with a reasonable face spoke reasonable-sounding words that were the blackest of treacheries.

‘We desire nothing but peace,’ he said, his eyes beseeching, his arms held out before him. ‘We are all brothers, all sons of man. Lay down your arms and join us, brothers. We have no need to fight. The Imperium crushes us all with its demands, bearing down with such weight the blood is squeezed from the very stones...’

The image broke up for a space, and a buzzing filled the tent. A tech-adept fiddled with the equipment and the picture stabilised.

‘...taken from your homes to fight on an alien world, our world, a world battered by war. We do not betray the Emperor, for He is the light of all mankind. The Emperor is the benefactor of all mankind. The Emperor is our lord and master as He is the lord and master of all mankind.

‘The High Lords are not a benefactor or the light. The High Lords of Terra are uncaring of the lives they spend, they set our tithes too high. We have the choice between starvation and insurrection. We take this road unwillingly...’

Colonel Vertor Lo Strabannick slapped the chart desk, causing the image to break up. ‘We’ve seen enough. I want this perfidious drivel blocked. Search out the transmission frequency and jam it, do you understand?’

A regimental intelligence officer gave a curt bow. ‘Yes, colonel.’ He hurried from the tent out into the rain.

The departing man’s superior, Captain Askro Lo Verlannick, stood up straight and looked around the room. ‘It goes on in this vein for some time. Note the repetition of the request to lay down arms. You must watch your men for signs of disobedience. This tactic might seem crude, but it can work.’

‘Governor Juvis is dead,’ said the colonel. He was a gruff man, white in beard, his skin wrinkled by decades of strife. ‘Perhaps the terms we offered him were acceptable. It looks like he died for his wisdom. Unless this is some ploy,

lowborns are in charge now, men who have decided the order of the Imperium is not for them, who would take and execute their anointed ruler. If they will decry order and reject our offers with blood, they will have disorder and death. We strike before dissent seeds itself in our ranks. This siege has gone on too long. Gentleman, you have seen the superheavy tanks we have been assigned: they are the Eighth Paragonian Assault Heavy Tank Company. Honoured Captain Ardoman Kosigian Lo Parrigar is their company commander.'

A man detached himself from the mass of officers in the room. He wore a long coat, tank commander flashes on his cuffs and collars, badges that were familiar to them all but with strange variations; superheavy tank companies were rare. The honoured captain – the rank too, was unusual – let them all get a look at him. 'Gentlemen,' he said, and nothing else.

'Honoured Captain Kosigian Lo Parrigar has recently been fighting at Kesseltown; the garrison there capitulated four days ago. This palace is the last major source of resistance on Gullen. I won't mince words with you. That the defence laser here is still operational is an intense personal embarrassment to me, and a mark on the honour of the 477th. Tomorrow, that installation will be in our hands, or we will all die trying. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir!' said the officers of the 477th.

The colonel nodded approvingly. 'Very well. Let us draw up our plans, and finish this rebellion once and for all.'

Jonas volunteered the tattered remnants of his platoon to join the lead elements of the assault, and so, the following morning, found himself in the cramped command deck of *Righteous Vengeance*, Parrigar's command tank, listening to the muffled detonations of artillery shells falling on the far side of the siege line, as Honoured Captain Parrigar gave him a quick tour of the machine.

The deck was jammed with Adeptus Mechanicus devices beyond his comprehension. Several Paragonians were intent on their screens. Parrigar's command throne took up the centre of the deck, directly behind the machine's massive main armament. The ceiling was low and every available surface not taken up by tactical displays or controls was criss-crossed by webbing crammed with personal effects. The place smelled as a confined space occupied by eight men for long periods of time will smell.

'Fire control, primary weapon,' said Parrigar. He was a man of few words, snapping off those he chose to expend as rapidly as sniper fire. He pointed to a recessed chair by the Vulcan's back. 'Ammo hoppers, first loader's position.

Tertiary – sponson,’ he deigned to explain, ‘– fire command.’ Two desks, one by the other, on the right side. ‘Third gunner and third loader.’

‘Where’s the second gunner, sir?’ asked Jonas. He found his curiosity piqued. It was not every day one stood upon the command deck of a superheavy tank. Paragon was unusually blessed with superheavy tanks, but even if all were gathered in one place, the Paragonian superheavies would number fewer than a hundred.

Parrigar shook his head. ‘No second gunner; that’s for the Baneblades, Stormhammers and suchlike, all of which have a secondary weapon. We keep the same rank structure. Allows crew transfer without anyone getting uppity. Space on my charge is taken up by passengers, the likes of you, lieutenant.’

Parrigar leaned in close when he said this, flashing a grin that was only just the right side of sane. The way Jonas figured it, you’d have to be crazy to drive right into the heart of the enemy, even in a two-hundred tonne behemoth. He reminded himself that he was going along for the ride.

Parrigar returned to his rapid-fire tour. ‘Comms desk, that’s where my SIC sits, Lieutenant Gulinar.’ He indicated a long desk that ran the length of the left-hand side of the deck, every centimetre of it filled with one arcane device or another. The officer there held up a hand without stopping what he was doing. He pointed at a station half recessed into the floor at the rear. ‘Tech desk – we’ve a tech-adept all our own, you know. But we’re not a sophisticated machine. Simple. Big battle carriage. Get you men in, get you out, mow down the other man, give your grunts a chance. Privilege. Can’t go fast, but that’s not the point.’ He patted the low ceiling. ‘Not many of these in the Imperium, not many at all.’ That febrile grin, there and gone again. He signalled to Gulinar. The man barely paused in his multiple tasks to flick a switch. A harsh klaxon blared out. ‘Hear that once, you’re off over the side of the fighting deck. Hear it twice, get back in double-quick time or as sure as the Emperor watches us we’ll all be leaving you behind. Questions?’

‘Not really, sir.’

‘Good. Now get off my command deck.’

Jonas emerged from the dark onto the enclosed fighting deck that occupied the rear two-thirds of the tank. The plasteel parapet that surrounded it was as high as his shoulders. He blinked at the sudden watery brightness of Gullen’s orange sun. It was cloudy as always, and raining, but today the rain was soft, barely worth Jonas’s notice. Thunder rumbled, but of no atmospheric source; the big

guns sounded louder now he was out from behind *Righteous Vengeance's* armour plating. Bosarain, flag furled on his shoulder, nodded at him.

The berm rose up in front of *Righteous Vengeance*. Atlas engineering tanks mounted with dozer blades and earth scoops dug at it, clearing part of it away to allow the superheavies through. The Stormlords were drawn up in a shallow arrow formation, *Righteous Vengeance* slightly ahead of *War Forged* and the *Saint Josef*. The heavy tank company would form a hammer blow on the defence line, breaking it utterly in one place and allowing the 477th to pour through. The infantry and Chimeras of this final push waited behind them for the signal to advance. Far back in the camp, on the sodden landing field outside its ordered, muddy streets, Jonas could just about make out the whine of Valkyrie engines as they went through their pre-flight checks.

Their main objective was simple. Once Jonas and the others had secured the Hydra batteries defending the redoubt, three squads of Paragonian Commandoes would land atop the Palatine Redoubt, fight their way in, and blow up the laser's geothermal power plant. Then they could watch the Navy blow the palace to pieces, rebel leaders and all.

Simple. They just had to get through the defence line first, a line that had claimed the lives of fourteen hundred men in two weeks.

Jonas's remaining platoon members were crammed onto the deck. From the three full infantry squads, command group and fire support team – forty-one men all told – he had arrived on Gullen with, he had twenty-one soldiers left. Of the twenty casualties, twelve were fatalities. The survivors leaned on the armoured wall around the deck, caught halfway between resentment at having been volunteered for first wave duty, and gratefulness for doing it from the back of a giant war machine. They were tattered, cold, wet and dirty. Several of them had been gifted with sawing coughs. Jonas tried to ignore the accusing stares of the resentful ones.

'A good day for victory.' Commissar Suliban stood by one of the two passenger-operated heavy stubbers, his black and white uniform spotless.

'We need to finish this today,' said Jonas. The commissar took that as agreement and nodded.

'This warzone delays us. We are needed elsewhere. It is a time of brushfire wars, traitors everywhere. It is our duty to make sure the Emperor's rule is not overthrown as the crusading forces strive to bring more planets into the glory of the Emperor's light.'

You can blame the crusaders for our troubles, thought Jonas, dragging over

half the military assets of the sector with them on their crusade and milking a thousand systems dry to supply it. This he did not voice.

‘Indeed,’ he said instead.

Jonas noted that Carius Killek had commandeered the heavy stubber for his own personal use, probably because of the big shield it had attached to the front. He glared evilly at anyone who came too close. A born survivor, that one.

Suliban turned to him suddenly. ‘I sense some discord between us. You don’t agree with the rebels’ sentiment, do you?’

‘Are you seeking to entrap me, sir?’

‘If I thought that were the case, you would not be here. If you were to rebel, you would have done so long since.’

‘Then why ask?’

‘I desire to hear your opinion.’

‘My opinion does not matter, commissar. The galaxy is as it is. Whether I think the High Lords are right or wrong is irrelevant. How could I possibly put myself in their position? They govern trillions of lives; I command barely twenty. What they do is as beyond me as calling upon a sun not to rise. I follow my orders, as must we all, for the greater glory of the Emperor.’

‘That is the correct answer,’ said Suliban.

‘So you do seek to entrap me, sir.’

Suliban snorted and turned back to looking over the vehicle parapet. Taking this as a sign the commissar had finished with him, Jonas climbed a firing step so he could look over the roof of the command deck to the front. One of the crew sat on the lip of the hatch, looking toward the berm. He acknowledged Jonas wordlessly.

The Atlas engineering tanks were done and withdrew. A gap one hundred metres wide had been dug from the berm. It was not a subtle manoeuvre, and had taken the best part of fifteen hours. The enemy would have noticed the activity some time ago, but Jonas supposed that didn’t matter. The armour on the front of the Stormlords was formidable. He took out his magnoculars, ratcheted up the magnification to maximum, and scanned the gap. The picture fizzed. Water must have got into them again.

‘Basdacks,’ he said.

The bunker his men had destroyed had been repaired during the night. The entire line had been patched. How could they have managed it?

‘Prepare your men, lieutenant, we’re moving out shortly,’ said Parrigar, talking through his short-range vox headset. The crewman in the hatch waved his hand

around in a circle, looked to the other two tanks, then climbed inside, clanging the hatch closed after him.

‘Affirmative,’ replied Jonas. He re-settled his cap on his head, and checked his weapons. ‘Prepare, men.’

Bosarain unfurled their flag.

There was an almighty roar. The *Righteous Vengeance*’s engine turned over under their feet. Black smoke belched from the exhaust stacks. The engines pulsed a second, then a third time, before settling into a growling rhythm, the smoke from the pipes turning blue-white. The tank shook. Bosarain looked down nervously.

‘Sir, the engine is directly under our feet!’ shouted Bosarain. ‘What happens if that goes up?’

‘I’d not think about it if I were you, ensign,’ said Jonas.

The Stormlord lurched, and began to move forward. Jonas climbed down from the firing step, taking refuge with the rest of his men behind the superstructure of the command deck.

‘To the parapet! We’re going in!’ he shouted.

His men were already moving, lasguns out and resting on the plasteel walls of the fighting deck.

The attack had commenced.

The artillery kept up as the 477th Paragon Foot and the Eighth Paragon Superheavy Tank Company advanced, seeking to pin the enemy in position for as long as possible. The ground trembled from the combined shock of the approaching tanks and the bombardment. The Stormlords moved slowly, just faster than a brisk walking pace. The men of the 477th followed, sheltering behind the giant vehicles. The Eighth drew no fire to begin with, then they were over the low hump left by the removal of the berm’s central section and that changed.

Incoming fire blazed in intensely and suddenly, the air filled with a storm of focussed light and shards of metal. Plumes of mud were raised from the soaking earth. Shrapnel pinged off the parapet, water and sod rained down on Jonas’s platoon. Killek rattled off a brief burst from the leftmost stubber, cutting it dead when he realised he was out of range.

There was a bang of superheated air. The glaring ruby beam of a lascannon scored a bright line of molten metal into the armour of *Righteous Fury*’s left track guard. One of Jonas’s men shrieked and put his hand to his face as a gobbet

of melted plasteel scorched his cheek.

Through his vox set Jonas heard Parrigar. ‘Take that heavy weapons team down! Primary weapon, open fire on my mark, three, two...’

The tank lurched as it turned ten degrees to the right, and the men tottered, grabbing for the straps set into the parapet’s sides. A deep thrum joined the rumble of the engines, changing the vibrations in the deck of the fighting platform, as the Vulcan mega-bolter’s twin barrel assemblages began to rotate. The thrum turned to a whine as the barrels accelerated to firing speed.

‘One!’

The mega-bolter was a terrifying wall of noise, so loud that Jonas’s ears rang painfully. Heavy bolter-calibre rounds shot from the multiple barrels, and the front of the tank lit up like a victory fireworks display as the bolts’ flight charges ignited, sending them screaming at the enemy. Jonas risked his neck taking a peek over the foredeck to see a section of defence line reduced to a cloud of rockcrete dust, explosions all over it as the bolts buried themselves in the defences and detonated. The fate of the lascannon teams sheltering behind it was invisible, but final. No more heavy fire troubled *Righteous Vengeance* from that quarter.

The tanks picked up speed as they headed down the slight slope from the siege line to the bog in front of the Palatine Redoubt’s outer defences.

If the rebels hoped the tanks would be snared by the bog, they were surely disappointed.

The Stormlords plunged into the morass without slowing, their noses dipping low and exposing the fighting deck to incoming fire for one terrifying second. Then they were in, slipping into the muck like groxes taking to water. The vehicles’ wide tracks churned the bog to froth. The great machines sank up to the bases of their sponsons, so deep Jonas thought they would disappear under the reeds and filth, but they did not. Tracks hit the firmer substrate beneath hard enough to shake his bones in his flesh. Then they were moving forward, ungainly ships sailing in a sea of mud. Fountains of dirty water whooshed skywards in front of them. They were approaching the barrage zone.

Again, the terrible rattle of the mega-bolter. Incoming fire slackened, then picked up again, the ‘tunk-tunk-tunk’ of shells hitting home on the armour of the Stormlord as an enemy autocannon tracked across the front. A wave of dirt slopped into the fighting deck as another shell detonated. There was a garble of words in Jonas’s ear.

‘Artillery! Cease fire. Cease fire!’

The explosions grew fewer and closer, the work of the enemy, not their own side.

The bog shallowed, and they came between the outermost points of two limbs of the defence line. Enfilading fire hammered in from both sides. The Stormlord's lascannon sponson turrets swivelled outward, their beams searing themselves into Jonas's vision as they responded. He blinked hard at the retinal after-images.

'Platoon six. Return fire!' he roared.

His men's lasguns were toys in comparison to the armament of the tank, but they made the enemy keep their heads down behind their walls, and the heavy stubbers mounted on the Stormlord's sides helped.

Jonas drew his own pistol and looked behind. The first wave of Chimeras were plunging into the bog in the wake of the superheavies. One took a direct hit and burst apart, its metal skin inadequate to the task of holding in the explosion birthing inside it. The turret came free, and the burning hull flipped over and sank into the bog. No one got out.

Jonas said a quick prayer for the men who had perished, thinking that it could so easily have been him.

The Stormlords rose out of the bog, water streaming from their sides.

'We are approaching the defence line,' Parrigar shouted over the vox. 'All passengers brace!'

'Brace, brace, brace!' yelled Jonas. 'Brace, brace, brace!'

His men hastily shouldered their weapons and hung on to the straps for grim death. The *Righteous Vengeance* hit a section of wall. It reared up as its tracks bit into the rockcrete. The sheer weight and momentum of the tank caused the section to come off its mounting and shift backwards underneath squealing tracks. The tank pitched to the left. Jonas's men were shaken from the straps and sent falling all over the fighting compartment. Then the tank was steady again, rearing high. Jonas saw the rear of the enemy lines, rebels running directionless and scared as the metal beast breached their walls; a brief glimpse. *Righteous Fury's* climb reached its zenith, and it plunged forward hard. Jonas's teeth clacked painfully together. He tasted blood in his mouth where he had bitten his tongue.

'To the walls, to the walls!' he shouted. The sides of the tank were exposed.

His men scrambled into position, their weapons now proving their worth. Screams rose high and shrill as the tank's heavy flamers turned broad swathes of the rear lines into a promethium inferno. One of his men went down, clutching at

his throat, another wept on the floor, cradling a shattering hand. It was pandemonium, weapons fire coming in from all sides, men running at the *Righteous Fury*, and all the time the awful roar of the mega-bolter. Enemy vehicles raced over the flat from the palace to reinforce the redoubt, only to be torn to metal shreds by the mega-bolter's phenomenal rate of fire.

Jonas stood with his men, loosing shot after shot from his laspistol, the weapon growing uncomfortably hot in his hand. He scored a direct hit, his victim dropping without performance. One second alive, the next dead. A man like himself, wearing a uniform not unlike his own. These were no foul xenos, nor were there unclean icons or fetishes in evidence. These were desperate men, calling out in pain to those who ruled them, asking to be bled a little less hard.

Jonas pushed the doubts from his mind. It was not his place to question.

'Incoming!' shouted Bosarain. 'Enemy anti-tank, nine o'clock!'

A squad of well-armed and armoured rebels were running toward the *Saint Josef* driving out fifty metres from *Righteous Vengeance's* left. They paced the vehicle, ducking under the sightlines of passengers and keeping from the fire arcs of the sponson flamers.

'Make sure we are not also marked.' Jonas pointed to Killek, Lorigar, Jenilek and Corden. They nodded, and leaned out over the power plant to gain better vantage. Lorigar was instantly shot down. The other two wavered, but Commissar Suliban was suddenly beside them, standing tall, bolt pistol in hand, and they took heart.

'Honoured captain? Honoured captain?' Jonas shouted over the vox, but could not make himself heard, that or Parrigar was not heeding him. He had to deal with this on his own.

'Squad three, take them down. Don't let them close with the other tank!' he ordered.

Ruby stabs of light streaked the smoke-choked air. Killek's stubber clattered angrily. Three of the anti-tank squad fell. Not enough. They reached for their grenades.

'They're going for the passengers! Take them down! Take them down!' Jonas's voice became shrill. Bindarian's men were in the other tank.

Two more of the anti-tank squad fell, but too late. Four grenades were sent up in steep parabolas over the parapet of *Saint Josef's* fighting deck. Jonas thought he heard shouts of alarm over battle's tumult, but he could not be sure.

Body parts were lofted high into the air as the grenades detonated. Blood ran from the drainage gutters along the tank's sides. Firing from the passenger

compartment ceased. Screams took its place.

The *Saint Josef* rumbled on, oblivious.

‘Sir!’

Bosarain pointed. They were nearing the anti-air battery, two squadrons of three Hydras, hunkered down behind banks of earth close by the feet of the Palatine Redoubt. A small network of rockcrete-lined trenches joined directly to the redoubt protected them. Heavy bolter nests were emplaced near each end, sandbags heaped high all along the trenches’ length. The Hydra’s gun platforms were only just visible over the top.

As if sensing their intrusion, the defence laser fired into the sky. The noise of its rapidly expanding air column was deafening.

The Hydra crews pointed, waving urgently. The quad barrels of each gun dipped toward the oncoming tanks.

Before they could fire, the *Righteous Vengeance* spoke. The Hydras were well dug in, but the Vulcan threw out such a volume of fire they were not safe. One stopped dead, the remains of its crew hanging like tattered rags from its machinery, another’s gun was battered into scrap.

‘Everyone down!’ yelled Jonas.

The remaining four Hydras opened fire. Their explosive shells hammered into the three Stormlords. Heat washed over Jonas. Explosions drowned out all other sounds. Shrapnel rained over them all. The *Righteous Fury* drove on, guns blazing, ripping a further two of the guns apart. They were now hard by the edge of the trench network.

The klaxon blared once.

‘Deploy! Deploy! Deploy!’ he shouted, waving his men over to the access ladders. *Righteous Fury* ground around, trying to keep the men in its lee and maintain line of sight on the Hydra battery.

Jonas went down with the first of his men. He ordered them to spread out with rapid hand signals, keeping his command squad by his side. Seventeen men were all he had left in fighting condition. He sent the remnants of his heavy support to shelter by a pile of toppled sandbags, the agglomerated remnants of his infantry squads he directed towards a shell hole. His men threw themselves into position. Jenilek, running with the ad-hoc infantry squad, took a bolt in the chest and fell down. Jonas’s last surviving sergeant, Keslo, stooped as he ran by and did not stop. Jenilek must have been dead.

Jonas would not have thought it possible, but out of the tank the battle was worse. The ground was churned up, body parts and blood mixed in freely with

the mud. Some sort of mesh had been laid over the top of the ground to make it easier to traverse, but this had been ripped up and now served only as a trip hazard.

Jonas threw himself behind a lump of smoking rubble and took stock, his command squad and Suliban by his side. He checked his men. Bosarain was missing. He looked out to the tank driving away from them.

A voice on the vox, wracked with pain. Bosarain. ‘Sir... injured...’

‘Wait here!’ Jonas shouted, and took off.

He ran across the broken ground, bent double, the air crackling with las-fire coming in from the bastion above. Away to his right, the *War Forged* had taken a hit and thrown a track. Unable to turn, it could not bring its mega-bolter to bear on the swarm of men approaching from the rear. The 14th platoon fought a desperate battle there, seeking to repel those who would destroy it, even as they were raked with fire from the bastion.

Jonas found Bosarain lying in a crater in the ground near to where they had deployed. *Righteous Fury* had rumbled onward now that its cargo had been released, laying down suppressive fire to the rear of the enemy’s lines.

‘Ensign!’

To Jonas’s relief, the ensign answered him

‘Sir? Sorry sir, got a little snagged.’

The ensign gestured to his foot. An ugly piece of ground mesh had embedded itself in the man’s ankle. Blood oozed through the cloth of his trousers.

‘I’ll get you out of this, here, cover me.’ Jonas thrust his laspistol into the ensign’s hands and knelt by his tangled foot.

Jonas flinched as a stray las-bolt burned through the air close by. He could see no way of removing Bosarain from the mesh easily.

‘This is going to hurt. I’m sorry.’

Bosarain bit his lip and nodded.

Jonas grabbed the mesh and pulled at it hard. It was springy, and took two agonising tugs to get free. Bosarain choked back a scream.

‘I doubt you can walk. Lean on me.’

He scooped the ensign’s arm around his neck and hauled him upright.

‘Wait! The flag, the platoon flag.’ Bosarain pointed. The banner was on the ground, folded in half and smeared with mud. Jonas leaned forward so that Bosarain could reach out and pluck it out of the muck.

‘Come on!’

They returned to the rest of the platoon at a hobbled run. The men were

hunkered down in their shell holes and the battlefield debris Jonas had directed them to, taking pot shots at whoever strayed into sight.

Suliban stood there, one hand behind his back, unconcerned by the bullets and las-beams flying around him, boltgun held in the other outstretched hand, the muzzle pointed directly at Jonas.

‘I can’t leave my standard bearer and platoon flag behind,’ panted Jonas. ‘I’d not stand the dishonour.’ Medic Coass Lo Turner took Bosarain from the lieutenant, and propped him up against a lump of rockcrete.

‘It was as I thought. You returned,’ said Suliban.

‘Why the gun?’ asked Jonas, gesturing at the bolt pistol in the commissar’s hand.

‘In case I was wrong.’ The commissar holstered his weapon.

‘Are you ever wrong?’

‘No. This is why I did not shoot you.’

Jonas’s platoon worked themselves round until they were close in behind the Hydra emplacements. The raised banks that protected the remaining tanks kept the attacking Imperial Guard safe from harm. Now they were off the tank, they did not have to worry about the quad-gun’s firepower. They did have to worry about the two heavy bolter nests protecting the emplacement, however, and the firing slits in the bastion above. Fortunately, the defenders of the fortress seemed to be occupied with the immobilised *War Forged*.

He had his men trot from cover to cover to get to the side of the position. The *Righteous Fury* had moved off, mowing down any who approached and keeping the area from being reinforced, while the men aboard the *War Forged* also kept attention off Jonas’s depleted command from attacks at ground level.

They sheltered in a cracked bunker that had been hit by the mega-bolter. They ignored the pulped flesh, all that remained of the previous occupants, as best they could and scoped out the Hydra emplacement. The sound of fighting had intensified in two spots – around the *War Forged* and back towards the forward defence line where they had broken through.

‘Looks like they’re getting caught up at the bridgehead,’ said Micz. ‘We’ve been left hung out to dry.’

Jonas looked up out of the vision slit of the bunker, then out of the door facing the Palatine Redoubt. ‘No, we’ve been given an opportunity. As soon as we get those Hydras down, the glory hogs will swoop in, disable that weapon and this whole war will be over. We can either hang around here and wait for the battle to

go one way or another, or we can play our part in bringing it to a conclusion right now.'

His men looked back at him, smeared in blood and soot. He did not need their agreement, but sought it anyway. They nodded.

Jonas had Bosarain wait in the bunker with the medic, and placed his last three heavy weapons troopers on the roof of the bunker. He divided the remainder of his men into two groups; both of six, the second to be led by the commissar. He waited for the second group to reach the other end of the trench line before he ordered the missile team on the roof to open fire.

The missile team revealed itself long enough to launch a fragmentation round into the heavy bolter pit at the near end of the Hydra emplacement line. It didn't matter if they killed the crew, just as long as they kept their heads down. Suliban nodded at Jonas, and led half of the men off toward the other end of the trench system. Jonas waited for them to get going.

'Now!' Jonas shouted. He, the remains of his command squad and half the rest of his men, ran over the open ground toward the bolter nest. His remaining missile team kept up a respectable amount of fire. Lasgun fire streaked at them, bringing Trooper Stann down, but there were thankfully no bolts. His own weapons team had succeeded in keeping the bolter crew pinned. He vaulted the low wall, landing in the trench behind, and shot a rebel in the chest. He drew his sword. They were in.

They worked along the trench line embracing the Hydras, sheltered to some extent from the outside battle. Jonas waved a fire team of three men forward to the next junction. He, Micz and Tabor, carrying Bosarain's banner as well as the long range vox set, ran after, taking the next point. Killek and Sergeant Keslo swept the line behind them, bayoneting the dead and throwing grenades into dugouts, work that Keslo had much experience in, and Killek a certain inborn flair. They reached the first bolter pit. Jonas took a deep breath and threw himself into the round, sandbagged emplacement. One of the two crew was dead, killed by the frag missile. The other raised a pistol in a shaking hand. Jonas shot him without hesitation.

'Clear!'

The network was lightly manned. They encountered groups of three enemy at the most. Weapons fire and shouting came from the far end of the network, his other Guardsmen, led by Suliban, working their way towards them.

Jonas's men shot a fleeing soldier as he threw down his lasgun. They reached a

point where the trench went up five steps, to where the Hydras were situated.

Smoke billowed from one of the two tanks wrecked by *Righteous Vengeance*'s assault. The smell of burned meat tainted the air.

They ran bowed over to the first wreck.

'This is too quiet,' Jonas said.

'Four still operational, sir. No crew that I can see, though,' said Micz.

Jonas checked the ground. 'They all need to go. Into your teams, take them one at a time, but be careful.' He sent Sergeant Keslo back to cover the trench exit. The rest split into two groups, one comprising Tabor, Micz and Jonas himself, the other Killek and Corden. Tabor brought the platoon flag.

Sure enough, as soon as Jonas's group attempted to cross the gap from the first wreck to the next, they came under heavy fire. He caught sight of a fresh barricade close by the foot of the Palatine Redoubt, strung between two of the flak tanks.

'Basdacks were waiting for us,' said Tabor.

'Not like we made a quiet entrance, is it?' said Jonas. 'We've got movement up in the redoubt too.'

He signalled with his hand to Killek and Corden, lurking behind the crewless Hydra. They planted charges on the gun's platform and ran off around the far side. Jonas needed to outflank the barricade. He crept slowly forward, only to come under fire from a second position.

'Dammit! Up in the redoubt. They've spotted us.'

Tabor opened up the vox. 'Platoon six, this is platoon six, we are pinned down, request immediate assistance...'

The sound of fighting came from the rear. 'They're coming up through the trenches, sir!' said Micz.

Jonas lay there a second, undecided. 'Let's hope Sergeant Keslo can keep them occupied. He has a good position. Vox back to the bunker. Get the missile squad to throw down suppression to the trench mouth, stop any more getting in.'

'The Stormlord might have bought it, sir,' said Micz. 'They were doing a good job of keeping the enemy back, I can't see anyone getting through if it was still there.'

'Not part of our game right now,' said Jonas. 'Let's go. Come on, we can work our way around to the back of the barricade and hope that Commissar Suliban can get past the other bolter nest and support us.'

The three ran, las-fire singeing them from above. Micz lobbed a grenade without breaking stride. It sailed over the wrecked Hydra they'd just vacated,

towards the barricade.

‘Throne! This is no use,’ shouted Tabor.

Gunfire intensified. They were forced back into the lee of a sandbag wall. The smell of fused sand wafted hot from the other side as las-beams belted into it. Jonas wondered how long it would hold before it disintegrated. They dared a couple of shots up, aiming for the slit in the redoubt wall that now glittered with laser light. Tabor took a round through the face on his second try. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Micz grabbed at his friend’s shoulder. ‘Dead! We’re trapped!’ said Micz.

A mechanical roar answered Micz’s cry. The Stormlord rolled over the trench line as if it wasn’t there, crushing sandbags and rockcrete flat. Its great height blocked them from the slit. Jonas grabbed Micz’s shoulder. ‘Come on!’ he said, snatching up the fallen banner.

They ran furiously to the side of *Righteous Vengeance* and clambered up into the fighting deck. The tank was firing into the remaining Hydras, ripping them apart with its mega-bolter, grinding round in a slow circle to bring each into range. Explosions rocked the ground. Jonas and Micz threw themselves from the top of the ladder and rolled through the dirt and the blood of the fighting deck. Too late, the rebels in the redoubt realised that they had moved to the top of the vehicle. They flung themselves either side of the slit. In a second the rotation of the tank would take them away from the redoubt and leave them exposed. A second was all they needed.

‘Flame these basdacks, trooper.’

‘With pleasure, sir,’ said Micz grimly.

Micz thrust his flamer nozzle into the slit and squeezed the trigger. Screams and fire burst outwards. Micz and Jonas saved themselves from falling just in time, leaping back as the tank moved away from the redoubt’s soaring walls. There were three more slits at their height. They watched them warily, but no more fire issued forth.

Jonas risked a look over the superstructure. Commissar Suliban and his team had made it to the barricade. It looked like he’d lost one man, but at this distance Jonas couldn’t tell who. Most of the enemy were dead. A few were fleeing. He saw no sign of Corden, but Killek ran about, smeared in blood and roaring like a maniac, clubbing at running rebels with his lasrifle butt. Suliban stood over a pleading rebel soldier, his bolt pistol out. Jonas turned away before Suliban executed him.

The Hydras blazed, rounds cooking off in the fires. The sound of fighting was

intensifying; through the smoke he could see the rebels falling back from the defence line, chased by Chimeras and running Paragonians. Outside the Hydra emplacement, *Saint Josef* circled back toward the *War Forged*. It opened up, driving off the remaining enemy troops trying to take the damaged superheavy. From the passenger compartment of *War Forged*, Jonas heard a ragged cheer.

Gripping his bloodstained platoon standard in shaking hands, Jonas held it high and let the rainy wind carry it tight. He keyed his short-range vox to speak, hoping that someone was close enough to relay his message over the wider net.

‘This is Lieutenant Jonas Vor Artem Lo Bannick. The enemy Hydras are destroyed, repeat, the way is open.’

Five heartbeats later, he received an answer, blurred by relay. ‘Acknowledged lieutenant, *Glorious Wrath* inbound.’

Almost immediately, a trio of specks rose into the air back over their camp six kilometres away. They grew rapidly as they cleared the siege line berm. Engines screeching, they swooped over the rout of the Gullen rebels, dodging sporadic fire from the Palatine Redoubt. They swung upward rapidly through the drizzle and the smoke. A bang, and one veered sharply away, smoke billowing from a wrecked engine. The other two were lost to sight as they soared over the top of the redoubt. Shortly afterwards, explosions and the racket of a close-ranged firefight drifted down from above.

The defence laser fired one last time, its rumble rolling out across the boggy plains about the palace, before falling silent for good. A few more seconds passed. The klaxon of *Righteous Vengeance* sounded twice. The vox burst into life.

‘Fall back, fall back! Commando teams report demolition charges in place. Clear the area!’

Commissar Suliban and his remaining men clambered up the tank’s access ladders as it swung around and drove determinedly from the base of the redoubt. Turbines howled as the two Valkyries took to the skies. Men and machines moved quickly from the redoubt.

There was an explosion, a dull crump from deep within the redoubt. Fire spat from the firing slits of the fortification, a great eructation of it rushing from the top of the building, three storeys up. Fragments of metal and rockcrete pattered down everywhere. The complicated spire of the defence laser’s muzzle fell sideways, clanging from the top of the redoubt, then falling to spear the soft ground.

Their objective was fulfilled. The defence laser was down.

Righteous Vengeance squatted by the broken defence line. Files of captured soldiers marched past under the watchful eyes of Paragonians, hands on their heads. Jonas sat in a corner of the fighting deck of the *Righteous Vengeance* on a box of ammo, a flask of gleece Micz had produced from nowhere in his hand. The last members of his platoon were around him, those who could still walk and point a lasgun in the right direction. Medic Lo Turneric fussed around them all, dressing minor wounds and dispensing medication. Sixteen left altogether, only nine fit to fight. Jonas expected the tally of dead to rise as Kurillo, Corden and Stann succumbed to their wounds. The fighting deck, which had been cramped before, seemed open now that there were so few of them, and Jonas would have felt exposed if he hadn't been so damned tired.

The peaked cap of Commissar Suliban emerged over the side of the tank. Suliban pulled himself over the edge, gleaming boots landing on the metal deck with an officious click.

'Drinking on duty, lieutenant?'

Jonas shook his head. 'We've officially been relieved, sir. We're off back to base. Besides, you'll have to forgive me. Twenty-five of my men have been killed or crippled these last few weeks, with more sure to join them. I'm feeling rather down about it. This helps.' He raised the flask in a mock toast and took a deliberate swig. It was rough stuff, not as smooth as a good gleece should be, but right then, it tasted perfect.

'Do not be defensive, lieutenant. If you are off duty, then as an officer you are entitled to a drink. The Emperor permits small mercies to his loyal warriors.'

'That it, Suliban? None of your lectures, your roundabout repositioning of my words to make me feel like a hero?'

The commissar stared at him, unprovoked by Jonas's insolence. He was quiet a space.

'This war is over. You did as you were ordered. You deserve a rest, even from me.'

'Why, you're not going to tell me I've become a man are you, commissar?'

Suliban nearly smiled. Nearly. 'I've watched many officers, lieutenant, and I have seen some become men in circumstances similar to this, but you've been one for quite some time already.'

'Your health too, sir.' Jonas took another drink.

Suliban put his hands behind his back and stared out over the boggy landscape. 'Enjoy that while you can, lieutenant. Your capability or otherwise is of little consequence in the great plan of the Emperor. Guns. Guns and bodies to

hold them, those are the pieces in our game of survival. The important fact of this engagement is that you'll live to fight another day, and fight you will.'

Commissar Suliban gave a brisk salute that Jonas wearily returned, and stalked away.

Jonas finished the flask of gleece, the last on Gullen, for all he knew, and that meant the last he might ever see in his lifetime. He savoured it as he watched lance fire stab down from orbit. It was getting dark, and the first void shield flared spectacularly as it deflected the beams of light, glowing brighter and brighter, until it abruptly winked out, leaving after-images on Jonas's eyes. The beams stabbed down. The next shield collapsed, then the next.

Jonas thought of home. What season was it now, he wondered? Paragon was so far away, he found it hard to picture the place any more. Here it was cold, still raining, but he had gleece and the Stormlord was warm beneath him as Navy bombers swooped in from the ships far above and brought the Gullen rebellion to an end.

Small mercies, indeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GUY HALEY began his career on SFX Magazine in 1997 before leaving to edit Games Workshop's *White Dwarf*, followed by SF magazine *Death Ray*. Since 2009 he has been a wandering writer, working in both magazines and novels. He lives in Somerset with his wife and son, a malamute and an enormous, evil-tempered Norwegian Forest Cat called, ironically, Buddy.



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