

IRON HARVEST

GUY HALEY



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AN APOCALYPSE SHORT STORY

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IRON HARVEST

Guy Haley

Triangular rocks, triangular hills; Agritha was a world of angles, sharp and unwelcoming.

The Baneblade *Cortein's Honour* led a column of tanks and men through Agritha's endless parade of spoil heaps. The heaps stretched to the horizon in all directions, their full extent revealed when the Baneblade hauled itself painfully up a rise in the road. Shattered fragments of shale comprised these tailings, innumerable blades of stone deposited by mining rigs as they scoured the bedrock, sucking up the mineral wealth of the world and spitting out the rest.

Honoured Lieutenant Bannick, hot inside the Baneblade, supposed Agritha must ordinarily grumble with the noise of its despoliation. Not now; the titanic rigs dotted the vale in judgemental immobility.

Great machines did move upon the surface, machines of war, come to seek the cause of this uncommon silence. The Baneblade was not alone. Ahead of the column ranged twin Warhound Titans of the Legio Crucis, their quartered black and white heraldry busy with extravagant crosses. Scout seemed an incongruous definition for such huge constructs. Bannick had seen them motionless, mechanical sentinels outside the dropzone camp, and had imagined them to be much like *Cortein's Honour* in motion – lumbering and loud. But as they stalked between the slag heaps, dog-faced cockpits swinging backwards and forwards as if they scented something upon the wind, he found himself amazed at their nimbleness.

Cortein's Honour rumbled past an open mine, a great, stepped horseshoe carved out of the ground. Such mines were infrequent features, and Bannick assumed they must be filled in quickly with fresh tailings when the rigs moved on. He could only guess; all was still, nothing worked on Agritha. Its entire population had gone missing.

'I don't like it,' said Meggen, his voice deep as the sound of the Baneblade's tracks running over the gravel. Chief gunner and sergeant, he watched through

his own screens in the turret above the command deck.

‘Can it, Meggen,’ said Second Lieutenant Epperliant, the tank’s comms and operations officer. He was the only other survivor from their last tank, *Mars Triumphant*, besides Bannick and Meggen. His tone was sharp over the vox. ‘You’ll scare the children.’

Bannick looked around the deck. His new crew. And they were children, freshly born to conflict. He hoped they would not see any, not yet. They were untested, unready. The new Baneblade was a different pattern to their old, it sounded different, smelled different beneath the scent of ten men living in close proximity. Its systems were less sophisticated, and the vehicle was more cramped as a consequence. In layout it was similar to *Mars Triumphant*. Bannick sat at the front in a large command chair, and behind him to the tank’s right was Epperliant’s long comms desk. Opposite the comms station were the sponson command stations, manned by Third Gunner Leonates and Third Loader Huwar, an Atraxian and a Paragonian of the Ganlick metallurgical clan respectively.

Directly behind Bannick, crushed into a pit at the rear of the command deck, was their new tech-adept aspirant, a tanker picked out from the First Kalidar Army Group by the Adeptus Mechanicus and given induction into the basic mysteries of the Machine Cult. His name was Kolios, fellow Atraxian to Leonates, although they had not known one another. Kolios treated his new vocation with the utmost seriousness. He rarely spoke to the men, but often to the machine.

Steps led down to the lower deck, just forward of the third gunnery stations.

In the shell room to the rear the feral Gollph was being tutored with increasing irritation by Dotrian Vaskigen, an experienced first loader brought over from Artamen Ultrus, the 7th Paragonian’s Hell Hammer, now many light years away. To the front, up and to the left of the driver’s cab was Second Gunner Jameron Lo Kalligen, also from Paragon. Ganlick and Kalligen carried the same clan names as two of Bannick’s dead comrades. The survivors of *Mars Triumphant* used the newcomers’ given names instinctively. The memories were too raw.

A new crew, a new tank, a new world, and Bannick fresh in command. His men were a mismatched bunch, and Bannick was struggling to get them to mesh. Bannick was a Vor, Paragonian aristocracy, and so his hold over those of his homeworld was reinforced by social convention. The Atraxians were highly militaristic, and deferred to his rank without question, even if their distrust of him was plain, but their culture sat ill at ease with that of the Paragonians. The Atraxians were all equal, the Paragonians were not. Cultural necessities to the

Paragonians were effete fripperies to the Atraxians. Both, at least, had an affinity for machines. The feral Gollph did not. He was a child, foolish and, so Bannick thought, mentally stunted, lacking all but the most basic appreciation of the chain of command, or the social graces. Bannick was loath to invoke corporal methods to discipline him, but Gollph's idiocy was getting out of hand.

And then there was their driver, the Savlar Karlok Shoam. Thieves, murderers and rapists drawn from the sumps of a prison world, the Savlar were scum of the highest order. To have one appointed to his command was an insult. Bannick's crew did not like him, and Bannick did not trust him.

What to do about Shoam?

Separated from the rest of his company by this Inquisitor's errand, Bannick had no one to answer that question but himself.

Honoured Captain Hannick of the Paragonian 7th Super-Heavy Tank Company had called Bannick into his quarters after the fleet dropped from the warp a week out from Shen-Li. Bannick was surprised at how cramped Hannick's billet was, not much bigger than his own. Rank bought few privileges.

Hannick was distracted; he shuffled papers and needlessly tidied neat piles of items from one place to another as he enquired after the Lieutenant's health. 'And the men?' he said.

'Permission to speak freely sir?'

Hannick waved a hand at Bannick. The honoured captain was much governed by his emotions. At times he was prone to a brittle formality to hide the strength of his feelings; at others, when off guard or under certain pressures, an overly familiar sentimentality came over him. Today it was the latter. The CO was haggard, upset. Much like he had been on the rooftops of the surface city after the battle for Hive Meradon back on Kalidar. Today was a day Bannick could speak freely in safety.

'Permission granted. And do sit down, Bannick, we're not on the parade ground.'

'Thank you, sir.' Bannick pulled a lightweight chair out from Hannick's desk. 'They are mostly young and untried, Vaskigen excepted,' said Bannick. Hannick glanced at him at that. Bannick was no seasoned Baneblade commander himself.

'Vaskigen is a good man. We'll miss him on Artamen Ultras.'

'I'm having some trouble getting them to integrate,' Bannick continued. 'I've three more Paragonian, but the rest are not from home.' His voice caught ever so slightly on the word. 'Two Atraxians seconded from the 18th Atraxian Super-

Heavy Tank—’

Hannick tossed a battered notebook onto his desk and sighed. ‘Yes, yes, good. You’ll need them, got experience.’ He sat on his bed and rubbed his face.

‘That’s it sir, they have no experience,’ said Bannick. ‘They were new recruits to their own company, nothing more. And then there’re the others. A scrawny little fellow who speaks no standard gothic, I’ve no idea what regiment they dug him up from.’

‘A Bosovar. Bosovo’s a feral world,’ said Hannick. ‘Not ideal.’

‘Sir?’

‘A raising of theirs joined the fleet at Mold Quartus. They’re little more than savages. I argued against his selection hard, for what it’s worth.’

‘And then there’s the Savlar,’ said Bannick slowly.

‘Yes,’ said Hannick bluntly.

‘He and Meggen are not getting along.’

‘The Savlar...’ Hannick glanced at a crew manifest on his desk. ‘Shoam? You worked with him before?’

‘Yes, at the mine action in the desert on Kalidar, before the final push. He accompanied us on the scouting run. Look, I have no issue with him—’ That was a lie; Bannick’s prejudices against the Savlar ran as deep as everyone else’s, ‘—but the rest of the crew don’t trust him. I...’ he paused. ‘I don’t think I do either.’

Hannick puffed out his cheeks and ran his hand over hair that was uncharacteristically greasy; he did not look well. ‘I’m not going to drench this in gleece to make it more palatable. You’re going to have to make it work,’ said Hannick. ‘You know how the tech-priests interfere with crew allocation. We cannot pick and choose. Their numeromancy, the rituals and the rest — they insist on it. They insist the machines make their own choices.’

Bannick nodded. His own appointment had been the result of one such interference by the Machine Cult. ‘Sir.’

‘Who are we to second-guess the Ommissiah? The methods have worked well.’ Hannick forced brightness into his voice, but it could not outshine his weariness. ‘They’ll all have something, these new recruits. Your job is to find out exactly what it is, and make it work for you, and for *Cortein’s Honour*. This is part of what it means to be an Honoured Lieutenant. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes sir.’

Hannick nodded. His attention wandered, and he stared off at the corner of his desk. He reached out a hand, hesitated, then pulled a grubby folder festooned in seals and ribbon from under a pile of similar binders.

‘I’d better get this over with,’ he said briskly. ‘I’ve more bad news, I’m afraid. You’ve been seconded.’ He held out the folder. ‘Inquisitorial requisition. There’s nothing I can do about that either. There’s not a lot I can do at all, at the moment. I’ll be glad when we’re off ship.’

‘Sir?’ Bannick took the folder, looked at the skull and ‘I’ stamped wax seal that occupied much of the centre of the card cover. He flicked it open. Much of what was written on the flimsies within had been blacked out.

Hannick shrugged. ‘It happens. It’s rare for a full company of super-heavy tanks to fight together for long. There are benefits to our role, you know. You get to travel more than your average soldier, see more places, get more action. You’ll rejoin us later, that’s always part of the arrangement. Where they can, and if needed, they bring us back together. Always. The tech-priests insist upon it. Logistics, and the lore of god.’

‘The tank will return home, even if we do not?’ said Bannick. He stared at the folder’s redacted contents. They told him nothing.

Hannick pulled a face. ‘Something like that. Look, Bannick, I’m not going to pretend this is easy. Being sent on an individual secondment can be hard. You’ll be alone, without the support of the company, away from men of your own world. You might well find yourself senior ranking officer, trying to command men from every part of the sector. I know you’re new to all this, and it is a little early for you to be taken out of the fold, if you want my honest opinion. But this is what we do, this is the way it is for us. Not always does the Emperor need his might gathered in one place. We are stretched thin, thinner than usual thanks to the Lord Solar’s crusade. But sometimes, one blow is enough. Strategically placed, one blow can shatter stone. You can be that hammerblow, Bannick. That is your honour and your duty. You were chosen, chosen by the *Mars Triumphant* itself.’

‘Emperor and Ommissiah rest its soul,’ said Bannick. Hannick bowed his head in acknowledgement, then continued.

‘As far as the tech-adepts are concerned, that means you’ve something about you, and they are right. I would never have promoted you if I did not think so myself. I have that much authority, at least.’ Hannick gave a weak smile. His teeth were yellow, his skin sickly. His face contorted and he coughed.

‘Sir?’

Hannick waved Bannick’s concerns away. Bannick watched, feeling helpless, as the honoured captain’s chest convulsed. The coughing subsided after a minute. When he spoke again, his voice was hoarse. ‘Enginseer Adept Brasslock

is to go with you, accompanied by a portion of the 7th's support staff. Try to bring them all back in one piece, eh? Requisitioning replacements from the Departamento Munitorum is among my least favourite activities. I'm still getting query orders for requests made four hundred years ago.'

'Yes sir.'

'Very good,' Hannick stood. 'See you on Geratomro – we'll try to make sure we don't kill everything before you get there.'

'Sir.' Bannick stood and saluted.

'Remember what I said, Honoured Lieutenant Bannick. How well you serve the Emperor is down to you alone; I won't be there to hold your hand. Do the 7th proud, do you hear?'

The growl of *Cortein's Honour's* engine filled the silence of the desolate world. The road narrowed, bounded on both sides by towering piles of slag. The vibration of the tank's passage shook loose daggers of shale, sending them down the heaps' sheer faces in short-lived avalanches.

'Honoured Lieutenant, something ahead,' said Epperliant.

Reticules leapt up on Bannick's bank of displays as the operations officer sent information into the command station. Bannick leaned in close for a better look, then his eyes widened in disgust and he recoiled. Bodies, hung by the road. He turned to Epperliant; the second lieutenant shook his head.

Bannick gripped his headset, angling the vox-mic close to his mouth.

'Column halt! Shoam, dead stop!'

'Yes sir,' said the Savlar. The driver's voice was overly blessed with sibilants, making his every statement sly.

Orders came over the column's vox-net as Bannick's command was relayed by the squadron and platoon commanders trailing the Baneblade. The column stopped. The all-pervasive rumble of *Cortein's Honour* subsided to quiet reactor hum.

Bannick stood, snatched up the greatcoat from the back of his chair. The tank interior was always hot, and his crew fought stripped to their vests. Outside was another matter. The new men looked at him questioningly, their eyes flicking from him to their own augur screens and back again. 'Wait here,' he ordered. Slung on his coat, he grabbed his magnoculars from the webbing depending from the ceiling and ascended the ladder into the turret. 'Meggen,' he said, 'with me.'

The gunner took off his headset and stood up from his station by the main

gun's firing block, head bowed in the confined space.

A hard wind bit into Bannick's face as he swung open the hatch of the turret cupola. He shuddered and buttoned up his coat to the neck. Meggen emerged from the second hatch. Both of them instinctively reached for their dust masks, their fingers finding empty space. The masks had been crucial to survival in their last deployment upon Kalidar, where razor-edged sand particles could shred a man's lungs in seconds. There was no need for them on Agritha. Cold the world was, and desolate as Kalidar, but the deadliest thing upon its breeze were flecks of snow.

The gunner peered into the distance, then grabbed the heavy stubber mounted on the turret pintle. 'Throne!' he said.

Reluctantly, Bannick raised his magnoculars to his eyes. He dropped them quickly.

Seventy metres down the road, the remains of the three men hung from x-shaped crosses, two to the right, one to the left. They had been cruelly treated. The ragged tatters of skin still clinging to their brown, dried-out muscles suggested that the knives that had flayed them had been of the cruellest sort, and employed while life persisted. Two of them had had their eyes put out. The crosses were flowing things, glossy black material crafted without joins, each sprouting hooks and blades pinning the men's limbs to the beams.

Bannick thought that if he inspected them more closely, he would discover further evidence of torture. He had no desire to do so, but he surveyed the scene for as long as he had the stomach – it was imperative he show no fear in front of his men. He had seen such horrors before, after all, in the dungeons of the Orks of Kalidar, but he felt he would never grow used to such atrocity.

'What did this?' asked Sergeant Meggen. It took a lot to spook the big gunner, but he was visibly shaken. There were murmurs from the others in Bannick's ears. Epperliant silenced them with hard words.

Bannick stared at the ruined corpses as long as he was able, long enough for Meggen to throw him a questioning look.

'Honoured Lieutenant, why have you halted?' The query came from Inquisitor Sashella, hidden somewhere out of sight and sensor with her strike team.

'Corpses ma'am,' he said. 'Three of them, tortured to death. Flayed, blinded. I'm too far away to see what else, thank the Emperor.'

Sashella's voice was cool. 'Do not stop again, Honoured Lieutenant. I warned you to expect such sights. There will be worse to come. Put your faith in the Emperor, and we shall prevail.'

‘Yes ma’am,’ said Bannick. Swallowing back bile, he spread his fingers on the hull of *Cortein’s Honour*, taking comfort in the impenetrability of the plasteel.

‘All ahead,’ he said into the vox. *Cortein’s Honour’s* engine roared in response. ‘Column, advance!’ Treads squealing on damp stone, the Baneblade jerked forwards.

Bannick and Meggen stayed up top as the column went on. Meggen plucked his Aquila and cog from his shirt and kissed them as the Baneblade rumbled between the dead men. There was no smell, not in the chill. Bannick kept his gaze firmly ahead, unfocused his eyes to blur the details of their excruciating deaths, but he could not unsee the agonised contortions of their limbs, or the silent screams on their faces. Chilled to the core, he climbed back into the fuggy interior of the tank.

‘Xenos raiders, Eldar decadents,’ said Sashella. Holos looped in the air over the chartdesk, showing lithe humanoids clad in bladed armour attack a local militia outpost. They leapt with unnatural grace, their faces, where unhelmeted, fixed with grins of savage enjoyment. ‘They’ve been raiding the settlements in a five-light-year radius of Heglon’s World for the last decade, and I will stop them.’

The briefing room was full of officers, all seconded from the *Gladius Argentum* fleet heading for Geratomro. A small force, five hundred strong. There were precious few assets left in that part of the galaxy, everything being drawn off to supply Macharius’s crusade. The men and machines had been given up unwillingly by General Ban Lo Verkerigen; there was no denying an Inquisitorial demand.

Now they were aboard a troop transport drawn off from the rest, following an Inquisitorial cutter into who knew what dangers.

Sashella was a tall woman with exceptionally broad shoulders, close-cropped hair and a heavy face that carried an aristocratic hauteur. Not a beauty by Paragonian standards, but a handsome woman who projected an aura of strength and confidence. She reminded Bannick a little of Kaithalar. Sashella wore golden, form-fitting armour of baroque type, covered in fluting and engraved scripts, as if she were about to go into battle.

Behind her stood one of the fabled Adeptus Astartes, one of five who accompanied the inquisitor. He wore no armour, just a grey robe, but he towered over the inquisitor, his features were both perfect and grotesque. Barely human, thought Bannick. Only once before had he been this close to one of the Angels of Death. The transhuman’s proximity unnerved him.

Captain Heskeliros of the Atraxian 19th Heavy Mechanised nodded at the giant and whispered to Bannick. ‘Deathwatch kill-team,’ he said. ‘Anti-Xenos squad, all from different chapters. Very interesting.’

Sashella continued. She moved fingers imprisoned in a web of metal over the chartdesk. Her gestures brought up more details, fresh pict of wanton, bloody mayhem that brought gasps from the men in the room. ‘They appear as if from nowhere, and disappear as quickly again. The navy cannot catch them because they use no spacecraft, not in these raids, but exit and enter real space at a whim through breaches in the walls of reality. Outlandish, impure, I know, but perfectly feasible, I assure you, gentlemen.’ She swept her arm expansively, the motion pulling up from the desk a sector whose stellar patterns blinked with a rash of red threat indicators. ‘Every world targeted in this sector has lost between twenty-seven and one hundred per cent of its inhabitants. Mundus Mundus, 19th Procyon, 47-32A, Dontanimar... They are bleeding parts of the segmentum dry. They know effective resistance is unlikely, what with the war. They reckon without the forces of the Holy Inquisition. We of the Ordo Xenos cannot allow this to continue. We will be a lance to the dragon’s heart. We will stop them.

‘No doubt you are wondering how I intend to accompany this, and so I will tell you, warriors of man. Each world targeted is harvested repeatedly, while nearby colonies remain untouched. It is known to my Ordo that their network of portals offers access to only a few, fixed places. I am deploying you upon one of these worlds, one most often reaped.’ She stabbed a finger downwards, and a world blossomed into life, slate grey and uninviting. ‘Agritha, of the Agrithon system, a seasonal mining world, entirely depopulated three times before it came to the attention of local Adeptus Administratum offices and shrewd officers there stopped sending the shift-change fleets.’

She looked each of them in the eye. ‘I am to offer the aliens the one thing they seem to crave – warm bodies. Your warm bodies.’ A map of a city leapt up from the chartdesk, icons moving over it in demonstration of her plan. Light infantry here, heavy there. Anti-aircraft batteries. Fortifications. Fields of fire. Bannick saw a blocky skull and cog that denoted his own command. ‘Do not think that your military might will discourage them. Rather, I expect it to draw them in; something of a challenge to these jaded filth. If – when – they attack, my elite company of storm troopers, aided by Sergeant Udon of the Silver Sabres and his Deathwatch kill-team, will move in to smite them.’ She stood tall, a smile playing on her lips. ‘You are to be the bait to my trap, gentlemen. I trust this does not worry you unduly, for we all must do our duty as the Emperor sees fit –

concern as to the danger of one's role is the basest heresy.'

She looked around them all, that powerful gaze piercing each of them. No voices were raised in protest.

The column picked up speed as the road ran down from the hills and joined the colony's main highway. The two lanes on one side of the carriageway were barely wide enough for the tank, but Shoam drove true, avoiding the ferrocrete divider. The tanks tore up the road surface.

They reached the outskirts of Minetown just after noon of the planet's long day, descending through the ravaged vales and their spoil heaps onto an ugly plain, where the highway sank into a cutting. The Baneblade's turret poked above the sunken way, but the other tanks were swallowed by it completely, and so scout elements fanned out onto the embankments on either side. They passed mining vehicles and wrecked machinery that bore the unmistakable signs of battle. The road was pocked with shell-holes, and burned-out transports blocked the way. The tall poles bearing lumen globes in between the carriageways had been toppled, leaning onto the square sides of the cutting. *Cortein's Honour* ground over all without slowing.

There were no bodies.

A small space port occupied much of the valley's flat bottom, its low-rise warehousing, ore hoppers and landing aprons overlooked by a strongpoint built onto a ridge of rock at the centre. Bannick examined this carefully, for the fort was to be the iron core of their battle-line. He zoomed what augurs he could up to the maximum, matching the features he glimpsed through gaps in the warehousing with the three-dimensional image projected onto his station's chartdesk, and he recognised it as the fortress from the holo-picts of Sashella's briefings. Ramparts ran along the spine of rock for two hundred metres, bracketing a broad fighting platform forty metres across; tall towers guarded either end. The nearer of these two had once supported the space port control tower, but it had gone, sheared off as neatly as a flower snipped from a bush – its remains lay at the base of the knoll. Other than that the fort appeared untouched. This troubled Bannick.

'Where is the garrison?' asked Meggen.

'Gone,' said Epperliant. 'I'm getting no kind of reading at all. No life, signifiers, broadcasts, vox. Nothing. This place is dead.'

Reaching the point at which the road widened into a crossroads, a spur leading into the space port, Bannick spoke. 'Column halt.' Shoam brought *Cortein's*

Honour to a gentle stop beyond the space port gates.

The journey from the dropsite was over. Bannick was off point duty, and relinquished command to Captain Heskeliros. The Atraxian worked fast, deploying the five hundred men of the taskforce. The vox grew busy as soldiers and armour moved off, the column breaking into its constituent elements. The majority of the force peeled away towards the defence installation. There *Cortein's Honour* was also to take up station, but waited until last so its low speed would not hold up the deployment. When the last of the fort garrison had passed through the gates, Bannick had Shoam back up and follow them. 'We're detailed to hold position here, by the right tower.' Bannick highlighted the relevant place on his chartdesk, flashing it to his crew's stations. 'Shoam, take us in.'

The Savlar manoeuvred the tank into position with admirable speed. The space port bore more signs of fighting. Several of the warehouses had collapsed, and large brown stains on the rockcrete spoke of dried blood. 'Still no bodies, living or dead, sir,' said Epperaliant.

The new crew murmured. 'Quiet there,' said Bannick. They were afraid.

Forty minutes later *Cortein's Honour* was hard in by the tower. The structure would provide cover for the left side of the tank's hull, while not compromising their forward fire arcs. They'd have to rely on the men in the tower to cover their rear, but Bannick could live with that. He checked their disposition, making sure they had maximum coverage of the killing ground before the fortress. 'That's us for now. Power down and await further orders.' Bannick stretched his arms and stifled a yawn.

Cortein's Honour quietened, systems went offline. The reactor noise dropped and the tank ticked and creaked. An uneasy quiet stole through the vehicle, until Meggen gruffly drove it back.

'What is it with us and mining worlds anyway?'

'All this stuff has to come from somewhere,' said Epperaliant.

'This Emperor-forsaken dreck-hole at the tail-end of nowhere. Minetown? *Minetown?* No imagination.'

'And what do you know of imagination, foundryman?' said Epperaliant.

'Plenty of creativity down in the heat, if you know where to look, rich boy,' said Meggen.

The others on the command bridge looked to Bannick, unsure how to interpret Meggen and Epperaliant's exchange.

'Gentlemen,' he said warningly, although not in earnest. Meggen had judged

well. Conversation started. Fear lost its hold.

Bannick got up from his seat and went round the command and lower decks, checking on his new crew. Ostensibly he did this to make adjustments to their equipment, in actuality to see how they were bearing up. The Atraxians seemed fine, although Kolios was as unforthcoming as usual, and Leonates appeared shaken under his martial phlegm. Huwar Ganlick was curious but tense, Jameron Kalligen too. After a few words with Jameron he checked on Shoam, stooping to get into the driver's compartment at the nose of the hull. The Savlar barely broke out of his nitrochem reverie. He locked eyes with Bannick, waiting for whatever it was Bannick had to say. Shoam was cold, unaffected. Bannick's attempt at conversation stalled. They were staring at each other in dangerous silence when shouting echoed down the cramped lower corridor.

'Emperor's teeth,' Bannick muttered, and headed for the shell room.

'No, no, no! That goes here, that goes there!' Vaskigen roared at the diminutive savage Gollph. The Bosovar sat on the shell room floor, hands before him imploringly. He gibbered in his unintelligible language. Vaskigen hauled the savage to his feet by the scruff of his too-big uniform. 'When are you going to get it, you little basdack?'

'Sorry, so sorry, I sorry!' shouted Gollph.

'Vaskigen!'

The first loader snapped to attention at the sound of Bannick's voice, dropping Gollph to the floor. The roof was low, and his neck remained bent. He glared at the Bosovar, who scabbled past his feet and into a corner.

Bannick pushed his way past the big loader, and grabbed the savage. Too roughly, he was taking out his anger on the Bosovar. Not only was Gollph ill-suited to life as a tanker, but loaders had to be strong, and have stamina. Gollph was a runty man, barely over one and a half metres. He had an odd colouring to him too, raw pink; it made him appear even more childlike. Bannick could understand Vaskigen's frustration, but he had to rise above it. He relaxed his grip, and coaxed Gollph out from the gap between the shell racks.

He took Gollph's chin, turning his face this way and that. Bruises were rising on his cheek, and blood dripped from a split in his lip. Bannick peered harder.

'Lift up your shirt,' he said, his voice shaking with anger.

Gollph raised his hands again, and abased himself.

'Good sir, thank you sir. Good good sir.'

'Shirt!' said Bannick. He gestured at his own vest. The Bosovar looked at him, slack-mouthed and uncomprehending. Bannick bent forwards and yanked it up.

Old, yellow bruises stippled his torso.

Bannick rounded on the first loader. 'Vaskigen!'

'Sir!'

'I don't want to see any more of this, do you hear? No more!'

The muscles in Vaskigen's jaw worked. 'Sir,' he said eventually. 'Permission to pass comment sir?'

'Granted.'

Vaskigen rotated his head uncomfortably against the ceiling, so he could look Bannick square on. 'This creature's no use as a tanker. He doesn't know one end of a lasgun from the other –what's he doing on a tank? He can't lift shells, he doesn't understand the machines, doesn't know the rituals, and he can't even speak basdack gothic properly. I've the work of two men here sir, and I can do it. I've loaded hard and well before now, but not while I'm playing nursemaid, to this... feral.'

He shot a murderous glare at Gollph, who shrank back into the shadows.

Bannick glared at his subordinate until he dropped his eyes. 'Vaskigen...' He raised his hand, clenched it, unsure. He slapped his palm against the wall. 'This is a new tank, with a new crew. You know what that means. You've good reports, Vaskigen. You're a good man. Honoured Captain Hannick himself recommended you.'

'Sir.'

'You will train this second loader to the standards demanded by a Baneblade, do you understand me?'

'Sir...'

'You will train him!' shouted Bannick.

Vaskigen tensed again. His hand twitched. 'Yes sir,' he said.

'Good. Start now, because you'll need him soon. We all will.'

With distaste, Bannick shook Gollph's fawning grasp from his boots and walked out of the shell room.

Bannick gave his orders, instructing the crew to make ready for combat. Kolios rose from his pit and began the rites necessary to ensure smooth running of the reactor in battle. Bannick paused at his command chair, pulling his shirt and greatcoat from the backrest and shrugging them on. 'I want to look at our battlefield. Epperliant, bring up the Salamander. Have Turragen make his way here.'

'They're detailed to scout the city, sir,' said Epperliant. 'Heskelios's orders.'

'They are, and I wish to accompany them. Meggen, want to stretch your legs?'

‘Yes, sir, thank you.’

Bannick climbed the ladder up into the turret, where Meggen was sitting sideways in the gunner’s seat, stretching out his arms and his legs.

‘Permission...’ a voice came over the vox, and then broke off.

Bannick hazarded a guess, unsure as to who it was. ‘Huwar?’

‘Sir.’

‘If you have a request on my tank, speak up.’ He tried to sound stern as he said this, but he and Meggen were grinning at each other.

‘Permission to accompany you sir.’

‘Why?’

‘I... I am curious sir.’

‘A good a reason as any. Very well,’ said Bannick.

‘I come too, sir?’ said a soft voice from behind him.

Bannick started. The Savlar had climbed the ladder without making a sound. Bannick hesitated, then nodded, remembering how hard he’d grabbed at Gollph. If he were going to weld this motley collection into anything approaching a crew, then he had to be more even-handed.

He nodded. ‘Of course. It would serve our driver well to gain a clearer understanding of the terrain.’

He thought this the right decision. But why was it he didn’t like the look of the smile on the Savlar’s face?

Bannick, Meggen, Shoam and Huwar climbed out through the turret. From the top of the tank they had a good view of the space port and city beyond. The tower to their left rose forty metres into the air. Now they were out, much more evidence of battle was visible. Most walls bore the scars of small-arms fire, broken machinery littered the ground, bloodstains and spatter were on everything, and everywhere strange, crystalline shards that crunched under the feet of the Imperial soldiers as they ran to and fro. Heskeliros had already garrisoned the fortress. Now his combat engineers heaped sandbags and welded barricades, preparing strongpoints and firebases in the space port to trap the aliens in fields of fire.

‘No sign of any bodies?’ asked Meggen quietly.

‘Not that I have heard,’ said Bannick.

Muted reports of more battle signs were coming in, but of the colonists or its small garrison there was no sign.

Agritha had no permanent population. Miners worked the rock for half the

year; the rest of the time the planet's orbit brought it too close to the system's sun, and they withdrew to Becker. The system's sole other inhabited planet, Becker was a nu-grade civilised world of no strategic value whatsoever. The prosaically named Minetown was thus utilitarian in the extreme, a soulless place lacking the embellishment or comforts of culture. It was deathly silent, not a human sound came from the place. Bannick supposed this was what the world looked like in the down months, when the sun waxed huge and bathed the surface in deadly radiation – only this was supposed to be the height of Agritha's working season.

The three platoons of Savlar Chem-Dogs attached to the army set out towards the city, on foot and in Chimera APCs, while the Titans stalked off around the compact city, one progressing clockwise, the other counter, sweeping the surrounding areas with their powerful banks of augurs and sensors. Bannick was entranced by them; raised on an industrial world with close ties to the Adeptus Mechanicus, he had always had a deep love for the wonders of technology. He watched until they disappeared behind the stacked hab-blocks of Minetown.

‘Sir, sir?’

‘Meggen?’

‘Salamander's approaching.’

The stubby form of a scout vehicle drove alongside *Cortein's Honour*. One of the 7th's own support vehicles, it was commanded by a Paragonian of the Turragen clan, a young officer of eternally good cheer. ‘Wanting a ride sir? Step aboard. Happy to take you where you want, Heskeliros has been generously indefinite with my orders.’

Bannick and his tankers went to the rear of their own, massive vehicle, which dwarfed the Salamander as a grox mother dwarfs its calf. They clambered down the Baneblade's fixed ladders one by one. Turragen and his comms officer offered hands to haul them aboard.

‘All in? Let's be on our way.’

The Salamander sped off, reaching an impressive turn of speed. Crystal shards crunched under its tracks, throwing up a fine dust that stung the nose and made eyes water. The ride was rough: both primary and secondary landing fields were wrecked; according to Sashella's intelligence, detonated by the last defenders of Agritha.

They left the space port through its eastern entrance, which changing shifts of off-world miners would have used to reach their barracks from their shuttlecraft.

There, damage was wide in extent but light.

‘If the guard had attacked this place it would have been flattened,’ said Meggen. ‘What kind of foe are we facing here?’

‘Minimal material damage, no bodies. I saw the pict feeds from the attack on the fort back there, quick in and as quick out. Typical raiders,’ said Bannick.

‘Aliens.’ Meggen shook his head and spat over the side as if that explained it all.

Shadows lengthened as they entered the city, the sun hidden by the hab-blocks of Minetown. It was an ugly place, built of stone blocks to the standard patterns with dropped-in prefab components.

Reports came in over the vox. The light Savlar troopers had found some of the miners and their defenders. The dispassionate nature of their reports did not prepare the Paragonians for what awaited them on Minetown’s central boulevard.

The boulevard was as drab as the rest of the place, but had been recently redecorated. The brutalised corpses of men hung from every lamp post. Nailed by their hands and feet, their contorted bodies and ruined flesh told the tankers all they wanted to know of their suffering. Stabbed, flayed, burned, gouged – every horror had been heaped upon them. Piles of internal organs, blackened by the sun, lay heaped at every intersection. Severed limbs in great profusion were delicately arranged by type, some fashioned into macabre sculptures of flesh and bone. Heads lined the kerbs, their eyes glazed and their mouths open in silent screams. All in the tank fell silent. The Savlars’ uncaring tally of the dead burst periodically from the vox.

‘Throne,’ said Meggen. Young Huwar went green and swallowed periodically. They drove into the central space of the city, a grand square of brutal, industrial ostentation, and now bedecked with the ravaged flesh of men. Agritha was cold at this time of the year, and the bodies had not spoiled, but an abattoir stench rose from the gutters, and the aseptic smell of refrigerated meat was thick on the air.

Meggen spat again, a great stream of watery saliva. ‘What did this?’

‘Xenos scum,’ said Bannick.

‘Oh no sir, not just scum,’ said Shoam softly.

‘What do you mean?’ said Bannick. The Savlar appeared totally unmoved.

Karlok Shoam’s eyes slid from side to side. His gaze settled on Meggen, who glared back at him until Shoam looked away. He was always furtive, a hunted look on his face even while he slept. Bannick would feel concerned that the

Savlar wasn't comfortable in his new position, but then Shoam's eyes would lock onto something, become fierce and possessive. His eyes were the eyes of a killer. The man made Bannick uneasy; he was unpredictable as all Savlar were, and not for the first time Bannick wondered what kind of hell Savlar must be to breed such men.

Shoam picked up the mask of his ever-present respirator and pressed it to his mouth; a click and a hiss. He inhaled, hooked on the nitrochem gas like all Chem-Dogs. He let the mask drop.

'Changelings,' he hissed. 'You no hear the talk? The legends? Star-folk, from outta the dark, they live in the spaces in between spaces. Shadow-creepers, dark ones. They come outta the night, snatch you up, take you away and make you wish you never been born.'

Meggen snorted. 'Fairy tales,' he said. 'Wet-nurse nonsense.'

'You think so? You know then, big man, you so brave. You tell me then, what did this to these poor citizens?' He gestured at the corpses hanging twisted with death's last agonies, pointed at the severed heads, the mounds of viscera. 'Who ripped the guts outta them, prised out their eyes, pulled their nails and tongues and teeth? Who made them scream, brave man?'

Huwar was unnerved by the Savlar's words. Terror showed in his eyes.

'That's enough, Shoam,' said Bannick.

'Why you think these digger boys blow the landing field? You think it cause to keep the shadowmen way?' Shoam shook his head and grinned darkly. 'No, they blow the field keep their own kind out, so they's countrymen not meeting the same fate. That's why, Paragonian, that's why.'

'Shoam!' barked Bannick. 'Silence!'

Shoam spread his oil-seamed hands wide and dipped his head. 'I sorry, sir, I help my crewmate, I make him see clear. Lesson over, Shoam obey.'

'Not another word,' said Bannick. He looked around the square at the tormented dead, bathed in the golden light of evening. 'Night's coming in,' he said. 'I'm sick of the charnel smell of this place. Turragen, standard recon pattern, quarter the place, then get us out of here.'

They made their notes as professionally as they could, steadfastly ignoring the dead, arriving back at *Cortein's Honour* as dusk began its swift descent.

Night fell quickly, when it came. Agritha was small, its atmosphere thin. Evening passed in a hurry, running scared of the dark.

The crew of *Cortein's Honour* waited, the tank at all-action stations, lit by the

dim glow of tac screens. Not a light showed anywhere within the space port or the city. The stars looked down upon a world as dark as before the coming of man. The landscape was of black shapes set against the deep blue of the sky. Men waited in silence, in the fortress, in the warehouses of the space port, in the city; bait and trap both.

Hours passed. Bannick dozed, dreaming of Paragon decked with corpses. He shouted as Epperaliant shook him awake.

‘Sir,’ he said. ‘Outside. Something’s happening.’

‘Where?’

Epperaliant pointed through a vision slit to the sky.

A glimmer formed in the night, almost directly over the ghost city. At first it seemed that the stars swam, as sparks of light blazed and died. Then stabilising, they shone in increasing numbers, clumping together to form a golden rent in the velvet of the night.

‘Look at that...’ said Huwar. ‘It’s beautiful.’

‘Quiet there,’ said Epperaliant.

‘Sir.’

Bannick went back to his station, and watched the fuzzy picts relayed to his command station by the tank’s augur eyes. Huwar was not the only one bewitched. The vox buzzed with chatter and orders to remain calm. The light grew in intensity, the slit widening, the blaze of it whiting out large parts of Bannick’s pict screens.

With a sound like the tearing of silk, the sky opened and light brighter than the sun Agrithon burned in the sky. The crew of *Cortein’s Honour* flinched as their pict screens were overwhelmed.

The glare diminished. A circular, moon-bright portal hung in the sky.

And the air was full of alien craft.

Sleek grav vehicles arrowed swiftly from the rift, heading directly for the fortress; open transports crowded with slender alien warriors, one-man skyboards and cruelly finned jetbikes. ‘Emperor...’ breathed Leonates. ‘There are so many.’

‘More to kill,’ said Kolios dispassionately.

‘We’re going to need all the light weapons, we’ll never hit those with the primary and secondary,’ said Epperaliant.

‘Agreed,’ said Bannick.

‘Routing additional power to tertiary weapons systems,’ said Kolios.

‘Prepare for immediate attack!’ said Bannick. ‘Open fire on my mark.’

The craft were dark in colour, hard to make out against the sky. Baffles and arcane techs warded them against the tank's sensor suites, cloaks of night-black energy and electromagnetic sheaths; the aliens would be seen by visible light alone, if at all, and so Bannick glanced from tac screens to vision slits, chasing shadows over the vault of night.

'Incoming!' shouted a voice over the vox, and the night brightened with the fires of destruction.

Twin fighter craft screamed from the no-space of the rift to outpace the other alien machines. They passed from golden light to the night of Agritha in rapid acceleration. Flak streamed upwards from the squadron of Hydras arrayed by the Imperial strongpoint, explosions blooming against the panoply of stars. Fire drew writhing patterns of reflection upon the hulls of the alien craft and they dropped as if in response, swift as hawks stooping to a kill, beams of non-light streaking from their wingtips, hunting out the armour hidden among the warehouses. Where they hit, tanks died. A Hydra exploded noisily, and the aircraft screeched over the Imperial fortress, ruby lascannon light chasing them into the dark, upwards and away.

Kalligen, on the secondary weapon, screamed.

'Jameron, report,' said Bannick.

'My eyes, basdacks. My damn eyes!' On the pict feed of Kalligen's station, Bannick saw the new gunner wiping at tears streaming down his face.

Bannick swore inwardly. Theoretically, the loader of each weapons system should take over should the gunner be incapacitated or killed, but that would mean putting the jabbering Gollph onto the demolisher cannon and fore bolter turret. He could pull Vaskigen forwards instead, but he needed someone capable up with Meggen to load the main gun. Gollph could just about manage with pushing shells into the shell lift and dragging the sled forwards to the demolisher cannon; other than that he was a liability.

'Jameron? Kalligen? Can you see?'

'It's fading. Gah, but it hurts!' he blinked. In the grainy image, Bannick saw him grind his knuckles into his eyes and squint. 'Yeah, yeah, I can see enough to shoot. I'll be okay, sir.'

'He was fortunate, protected by the augur eyes. Do not look at the beams of the xenos,' said Tech Aspirant Kolios gravely, intent upon his instrument bank. 'Retinal damage is assured, should you gaze upon them unmediated by the gifts of the Omnissiah.'

'Epperaliant, Kolios,' shouted Bannick, 'find a suitable filter for the augurs.'

‘On it sir.’ The second lieutenant pushed his chair along the rails running parallel to his long desk, flicking switches as he went.

‘We have a solution,’ said Kolios. The pict screens flickered, taking on a different hue. The filter made it hard to see, but better than blindness.

Bannick punched the switch that would take him to external comms. ‘Captain Heskeliros, come in. Captain Heskeliros, do you have additional orders?’

The vox crackled. ‘Maintain position.’ Heskeliros said. ‘Concentrate fire forwards. Let’s meet these effete scum with a wall of flame and shot.’

‘Yes sir,’ said Bannick. ‘That might change,’ he said to his crew. ‘Kolios, increase reactor output, get some slack in it. I want us ready to move out at a moment’s notice. Keep the motive units hot and ready to run. Shoam, I want you poised over the drive sticks for my order.’

Shoam’s reptilian voice hissed over the vox. ‘As you wish.’

‘Sir,’ said Kolios.

Leonates, overeager, let off a volley of heavy bolter fire at a speeding grav bike, little more than a phantom. Every sixth bolt burned hot with magnesium as they streaked upwards; all missed.

‘Hold your fire, third gunner!’ shouted Bannick. ‘Don’t waste ammunition. Wait until you’re sure of a hit, they’re relying on us panicking. Wait until they are in range!’

They did not have to wait long. In the wake of the Eldar fighter craft, the swarm of darting skiffs and one-man attack-craft dove. Bannick scrutinised his readouts, but it was impossible to tell how many there were, or even if the tank could see everything.

First came the skyboards, so quick the eye could not catch them, every one bearing an alien warrior. The results of their passing were plain to see; men jerked, hooked like fish and yanked from their feet into the air by lengths of barbed chain. Released, they fell upon their comrades, or were carried away screaming into the night. The whole of the defence line erupted with muzzle flare and laser beams. Jetbikes followed, underslung guns firing. The screams of men were bloodcurdling over the vox.

‘All weapons, open fire!’ yelled Bannick.

Cortain’s Honour vented its fury upon the xenos. Three sets of twin-linked heavy bolters, two lascannons, a battlecannon and a demolisher cannon all sounded at once. The tank shook with their thunder, drowning out all noise except that which Bannick heard through his headset.

Streams of mass-reactive missiles sprayed the sky forwards of the Baneblade.

Leonates let out gasp of satisfaction as his lascannon burned a hole right through a small transport, cutting it in two. Eldar bodies tumbled from the sky, slamming into the broken landing field. But the aliens were quick; most of their craft, camouflaged by the night and esoteric alien tech, darted between the streams of Imperial fire. Skiffs and jetbikes parted, allowing Meggen's battlecannon shot through. A roiling cloud of fire burst from the abandoned city, bringing a shower of rubble down where it impacted.

Bannick felt rather than heard the turret servos, an additional tremor to the vibrations of the tank's life, as Meggen swung the battlecannon this way and that. Ranging tracer shots from the coaxial battlecannon sketched his inability to land a hit. 'They're too basdack quick!' growled Meggen.

'Cease fire, Meggen!' he called. 'You too, Ganlick; switch from demolisher to the bolter turret. We're more of a danger to the men in the city than we are to the xenos. Anti-personnel only.'

'Then I'm going up top. Permission?' said Meggen.

'Granted. Careful, first gunner!' said Bannick.

Flak fire from the task force's remaining two Hydras put holes in the Eldars' flight, but many more craft made it through than were felled. The skiffs dipped, slewing side-on to hover directly over the fortress walls, and units of black-clad killers came down, rappelling on lines or simply vaulting gracefully over the craft's rails. Falling impossible distances, they landed as surely as cats, leaping to their feet with weapons blazing.

Three of the alien craft bobbed over the fort walls, flimsy things, yet sharp-prowed and lethal-looking. Warriors on their decks fired into the units of Imperial Guard upon the walls, picking out heavy weapons as smaller transports swooped in, warriors leaping down. More warriors dropped from the sky into the space port, their transports skimming centimetres from the ground as they sped down the streets between warehouses.

Fire from the fortress converged upon a skiff that hovered over the centre of the line. Starting from the centre, explosions lit up its entire length, progressing towards prow and stern. Its keel broke, and it sank downwards slowly as its grav engines died, glancing off the bastion and crashing down to the wrecked landing field. The others jinked, even in place, avoiding the worst of the Imperial Guard's response. Their passengers deployed within a couple of seconds, and then the fragile barques were away.

Fierce fighting erupted the length of the central wall, close-ranged firefights in the main, although through the pict feeds and augur readouts of the fort Bannick

saw lithe figures charge into combat here and there, dancing around lasbolts.

‘So much for surprising them,’ said Bannick. ‘Men, keep your eyes open, we have hostiles on the ground here.’

Through Meggen’s vox pick-up he heard the chatter of the pintle heavy stubber start up.

Weapons fire flickered the full height of the hab-blocks as the Savlar there opened up. All the Imperial forces on the ground were engaged. Bounding warriors ran, shots bursting from strange rifles, never there when return fire raked their position. Jetbikes streaked overhead, grav engines whooping, strafing the landing field and the strongpoints around it, while skyboarding warriors dropped on frantic men, cutting them in half with blade staffs or snagging them on vicious hooks and dragging them from the ground.

This was completely different to fighting the ork horde on Kalidar, a rapier assault so fast the human mind struggled to react. Bannick watched helplessly as his men missed and missed again with the ponderous weapons of the tank.

Captain Heskeliös fought shoulder to shoulder with his men, the Atraxian way. The Atraxian Heavy Infantry were elite, his elite, veterans of the Kalidar war and a half-dozen other campaigns. Clad in carapace armour, and equipped with weapons of superior pattern to those of lesser regiments, they had held their own against rebels, Govashar, and Orks alike.

Now they were dying.

Alien females dropped into their midst, so lightly armoured Heskeliös thought it ridiculous until they began carving holes in the ranks of his men, their faces twisted with hatred. Grav vehicles raced overhead. Dark-armoured warriors had taken the roof of one of the towers, and shot down into the mass of men upon the wall. The ammunition they fired did not hit hard, shattering on the rockcrete and plasteel of the bastion without leaving a mark, but even the smallest nick caused excruciating pain. His men dropped, felled by scratches. Not dead but incapacitated, they writhed in agony upon the blood-slick rampart, their armour next to useless.

A quintet of fell-faced aliens riding skyboards banked around and came in fast, spinning their bladed weapons over their heads.

He searched for men who were not caught in the melee. ‘Squad two! Squad two! Fire on my target!’ he barked into the vox. Following his direction, the Atraxians levelled their lasguns, puny weapons alone, but devastating en masse. ‘Fire!’ he called, his own command squad opening up alongside squad two. The

aliens jinked, but lasguns beams crisscrossed their path, turning open space into a sudden thicket of deadly light, and all of them came tumbling down. ‘They are fast, but they can be killed!’ He roared. ‘Officers, direct your fire accordingly.’

With relief he saw that the screaming alien women had been boxed in at the far end of the rampart, more by dint of having slaughtered all the men there than by resistance from the Guard. Their bloodlust had betrayed them and now they were in the open, where Lieutenant Ephelius’s platoon cut them down. Heavy weapons atop the far tower turned across the gap, forcing the Eldar firing on the men to take cover. Shortly after, the men garrisoning the beleaguered tower broke through to the roof.

An Eldar in bladed armour plummeted screaming past Heskeliös’s position. ‘Keep them back! Keep them back! Keep them away from the ramparts!’

Firefight sparkle lit up Minetown. The twinned Warhound Titans, glimmering with void shield discharge, walked out of the city, the double pulses of their plasma blastgun beams lighting up the battle. Heskeliös risked leaning out over the parapet to take a look into the space port. There were running battles in the wide access ways between the warehouses. Grav skiffs raced by. One of his force’s five Leman Russ burned, the others lumbered slowly after fleet targets. There, too, human resistance was stiffening, the men under Lieutenants Sokranes and Bucephaklian abandoning the most vulnerable positions and forming up behind the tanks. Advancing behind these mobile plasteel bulwarks, they pushed the Eldar on foot into the killing field before the bastion. Alien vehicles and grav bikes lay broken on the ground. The Eldar were fast, but they were fragile, and the superior numbers of humans were beginning to tell.

‘Throw them back! Throw them back!’ He shouted. ‘Men of Atraxia, stand your ground!’

The fighting on the ramparts abated, then ceased. The men turned the weapons outwards once more. The numbers of skimmers strafing their positions diminished as the remaining Eldar pulled back out of range, dragging unfortunate guardsmen through the air behind them.

Heskeliös took advantage of the lull to take a head count. The Imperial Guard garrisoning the fortress, numbering some two hundred after dusk, were down to ninety able bodies. The screams of those hit by the splinters of crystal spat from the Eldars’ guns were demoralising those left standing, and the medicae could do nothing to ease their hurts. ‘Landing field forces, sound off!’ he barked. He took a drink of water from a canteen proffered by an orderly as reports streamed in. Despite the night’s deep chill, he was sweating heavily. One platoon near wiped

out, another trapped by alien war constructs. Two others fared better, but overall the story was the same, half the men dead, rendered unfit to fight, or carried off. The Savlar, bedded into the city, were faring better.

But even so, even so... The men of Atraxia had seen off the worst. He looked to the sky, wondering where Inquisitor Sashella and her storm troopers were.

‘Come on, come on!’ he said through clenched teeth. ‘Now is the time to strike.’

‘I can’t see a damn thing out there,’ said Bannick. He was peering through the vision slits set around the command deck. ‘Epperaliant?’

‘Seems to be dying back, sir.’

The noise dropped to acceptable levels, the heavy bolters chattering at targets of opportunity. The third gunner, his loader and Second Gunner Ganlick were doing most of the work. The muted clatter of the stubber on the turret sounded intermittently as Meggen took potshots.

‘This isn’t right,’ said Epperaliant slowly.

Leonates snorted. ‘We are winning, what is not right in that?’

‘Lieutenant?’ said Bannick.

Epperaliant looked round, his rapid movement over the comms console stilling. ‘These xenos carried off the entire population of miners here, without suffering much loss, as far as I can tell.’

‘They weren’t fighting the Atraxian 75th!’ said Leonates.

‘No, they were not. But the milita force would have put up a fight,’ said Epperaliant.

‘What are you suggesting?’ said Bannick.

‘I don’t know, I just don’t like it.’

Bannick stared out of the nearest vision slit. ‘The portal. It’s brightening. Epperaliant, what does *Cortein’s Honour* see?’

‘Hard to get any kind of reading on any of this basdacking alien filth. Kolios?’ said Epperaliant.

‘The unclean technologies are beneath the Omnissiah’s contempt,’ said the Tech Aspirant unhelpfully.

The portal glared, far more brightly than before. Bannick shaded his eyes with an arm. ‘Second wave, has to be,’ he said. ‘This is a trap to catch the hunter. Prepare for onslaught.’ Bannick dropped back into his chair. ‘Heskelios, there are more coming in. Heskelios?’ The vox hissed, communications broken. The tac screen glow brightened as the tank’s displays became crowded with contacts.

‘Throne!’ said Huwar.

‘We’re on our own,’ said Bannick. He fished out his Aquila and cog from under his vest and pressed them to his forehead. ‘Pray to the Emperor and Ommissiah both that *Cortein’s Honour* will carry us through this.’

Heskelios blinked as the portal above the city shone brightly. Shapes filled the sky anew. A trio of skimmers, more heavily armed than the rest, broke from the cloud of approaching aliens.

‘Second wave coming in!’

‘Prepare for contact! All heavy weapons, target the larger transports. I want...’

Columns of black light stabbed out from the three skimmers and hit the left tower. Rockcrete fizzed and spat where they touched. They played across the fortification, right to left, then cut out.

Heskelios cried out. His eyes burned. Black lines, that would not be blinked away, scarred his vision. Screwing his eyes tight, he was able to open them enough to see the smoking rubble of the fort tower tumble downwards to the landing field, carrying a cargo of terrified men to their deaths.

Fire from the tower abruptly ceased and replaced by screams.

‘Bucephaklian! Ephelius! Sokranes! Chiron!’ There was no reply, not even static, only an eerie silence.

‘Vox is dead sir. I’m trying...’

His vox operator toppled down, head gone as a flight of jetbikes hummed past at impossible velocity. Where they passed, men fell. More were cut down by storms of crystal shards, the cries of those wounded outcompeting the crack of lasgun fire. The screams intensified from the right tower. The door vibrated as something hammered on the other side.

Heskelios crouched down, eyes burning, the remains of his command squad with him. Basserios, his ensign, was snatched into the air. Medic Devo was hit by a tongue of black light, and simply ceased to be. There were only three of them now. All along the rampart was a similar story, his men reduced to a handful.

Wind stirred Heskelios’ hair. Through the black lines that scarred his vision, he saw a sleek jetbike with a broad fighting platform at its rear come floating unhurriedly over the parapet. A single bolt of ruby light shot at it; the vehicle span slowly, a volley of whispering reports its reply. Screams followed.

A vile lord of the Xenos stepped down. Tall he was, his armour ornamented with decadent designs and the grisly trophies of the slain. Three warriors in

daemon-masked armour, each carrying a huge blade, jumped down lightly after him, seemingly unencumbered by their war harness.

The alien warlord looked to and fro, as if surveying the aftermath of a wild party and not the battlefield's slaughter. He and his warriors walked the wall languidly, cutting down all before them whether they resisted or not.

Heskelios stood, unwilling to cower before such a degenerate. The warlord turned to face him. Stretched in front of the helmet of the alien across a framework of bone was the skin of a woman's face. Through her empty eyes, the helmet lenses of the alien glinted.

'You stand, Mon-keigh, when you should kneel. Kneel before Archon Vardracht of the Ebon Law.'

'We will not kneel,' said Heskelios defiantly. His men got to their feet behind him.

'Oh, but you will. You will beg to kneel before the end, you will beg for whatever I choose. You will beg for death.' As he spoke, the lips of the woman's face moved.

'I will not kneel!' Heskelios raised his sword. Lightning fast, Vardracht's hand whipped out. Some device flared, and Heskelios and his men were all wracked in agony. They dropped to the floor, unable to control their own bodies, soiling themselves in their excruciation.

The alien spread his arms as if basking in sunlight. 'Ahhh,' he said. 'Your pain is delectable. You are stubborn, you are strong. You will feed me well, I think, Captain Heskelios.' Vardracht signalled to his daemon-masked bodyguard. 'Incubi! Take him to the dark city. This one is a rare prize, and I will taste his suffering this night.'

Vardracht stepped away with a flourish of his manskin cloak. Choking on vomit, Heskelios was too immersed in a universe of pain to notice the hooks that sank into his flesh and bound his limbs together.

The crew were intent on their tac screens, gunning for the second wave of Eldar attackers, when a series of rattling bangs rang out through the hull. They braced themselves as the tank rocked on its suspension. A lump of rockcrete bounced into the command deck from the turret. A pattering of lighter fragments followed.

The tank crew recovered, eyes scanning the ceiling.

'Hull status?' said Bannick.

'Unbreached,' said Kolios.

‘That was no weapon’s hit,’ said Bannick. ‘Meggen? Meggen, come in?’

‘He’s okay,’ said Vaskigen. He coughed. ‘Rubble up here, came in through the hatch, could do with a hand getting it out.’

‘I’m okay,’ said Meggen. ‘Tower fell on us, got inside just in time.’ The scrape of stone on metal came over the vox. ‘Got about half of it in the turret with me. Couldn’t get the hatch closed in time. Stubber’s still there though. I’m going back.’

The noise of the gun restarted.

‘They’re getting pounded out there,’ said Bannick. ‘Any vox traffic?’

‘Negative sir,’ said Epperliant. ‘Nothing via datasquirt or anything else.’

‘Keep the cogitators on it, broadcast a cycling request for orders,’ said Bannick. ‘At least that will let them know we’re still active.’

Bannick squinted at his tac displays. Only Imperial Guardsmen and their tanks showed up clearly on the augur screens, and they were rapidly diminishing in number. He stood and craned his neck to see out of the vision slits. Natural sight was less clear still. ‘They might as well be invisible,’ he said.

There was a rattle of noise on the tank’s upper armour. ‘What the...?’

A scream sounded from the turret, then frantic scrabbling.

‘Meggen’s hit,’ said Vaskigen. ‘We’re being fired on from the fort.’

‘Pull him inside,’ said Bannick. ‘Get that damn hatch shut.’

‘The rubble...’

‘Never mind the damn rubble! Epperliant, keep scanning the vox waves. Shoam, prepare to move us out, we’re vulnerable here.’

Bannick pushed his way to the central well ladder that led into the turret. He climbed a few rungs and poked his head through. Vaskigen was cradling Meggen’s head. The gunner’s feet pedalled at the dust and grit on the floor, his teeth clenched in agony. He clutched his left shoulder so tightly his knuckles were white.

‘Meggen? Meggen?’ said Bannick. The gunner moaned. ‘Is he hurt badly?’

‘It’s nothing, so far as I can tell,’ said Vaskigen helplessly. ‘But I ain’t no medic, honoured lieutenant. Must be poisoned.’

Bannick hauled himself fully into the turret. There were pieces of rockcrete all around. He glanced upwards to make sure the hatch was finally shut, then knelt by Meggen and pulled at his hand. It took three attempts to yank it free, revealing an ugly pattern of welts surrounding a tiny puncture wound.

‘Keep him calm, give him a shot, or a sedative if that doesn’t work,’ said Bannick. He looked to Vaskigen. ‘I’m going to need you on the battlecannon.’

The amount of fire coming from the towers intensified. A pair of sonic claps sounded, the Eldar fighters strafing the Imperial Guard. A large explosion sounded somewhere close. ‘The fortress has fallen,’ said Bannick. ‘Time to withdraw.’

‘What about Inquisitor Sashella?’ said Huwar.

‘Nothing,’ said Epperaliant. ‘Nothing in the air registering as Imperial at all.’

‘I don’t think she’s coming,’ said Bannick. ‘Shoam, engage main drive units, take us away.’

‘Yes sir, as you wish. Where?’

Bannick thought. Should they hide in the space port? No cover there, not for a machine the size of the Baneblade. He needed somewhere the skimmers would struggle, somewhere he could be safe from the Eldar aircraft. Somewhere the Baneblade could fight on its own terms.

‘The city,’ he said. ‘Take us into the city.’

Cortein’s Honour rumbled through the space port, crushing battlefield debris beneath its broad tracks. Rubble, wrecks and bodies were ground flat as it rode onwards, a ship of plasteel braving a storm of projectiles and baleful energies. Crystalline rounds shattered on its hull, bolts of unlight glanced from its glacia plate, scoring bubbling wounds. All the while it fired and fired, the ignition-bursts of multiple bolt-rounds leaving its sponson weapons lighting its side plating in flickering yellow.

Vox channels jammed, Bannick spoke through *Cortein’s Honour’s* speaker system. ‘Form up, form up on us. Make for the city. I am Lieutenant Artem Coloran Lo Bannick of the 7th Paragonian Super-Heavy Tank Company, and I have assumed command.’

Those that were alive to hear did not doubt it; Captain Heskeliós’s position burned with flames that cast no light, the fabric of the fortress warping under the dire heat of burning dark matter.

In truth there were few left to hear. Many of the men lay dead, or had been subdued. Bundled aboard floating prisons of glowing bars and harsh, spurred metal, they were taken away, through the portal and out of the material realm. Others fought desperate, close-range battles, penned in and unable to heed Bannick’s call. *Cortein’s Honour* aided them when it could, blasting delicate alien bodies to pieces where it caught them, once felling a crowd of shambling horrors of moulded flesh, but the Baneblade, mighty as it was, was alone, and could not be everywhere at once.

Nevertheless, a thin stream of men ran either side of it now, a pair of Chimeras, a Salamander and a Leman Russ guarding its rear. On the tank went, on through the tumult of war and ruin, towards the city of Minetown.

‘Follow, follow men of Atraxia, of Paragon! Follow us!’

They gained the exit to the space port, grateful as the road dipped into its cutting. The Titans of the Legio Crucis ran out to them, their enormous weapons blazing. They clear-burned a widening path behind the fleeing Imperial Guard, safeguarding their retreat.

And then, disaster. The inhabitants of the twilight city were artful and devious.

Soaring on wings of gravitic waves, the three heavier skimmers banked around the buildings of the southern precincts. The men jogging alongside *Cortein's Honour* ducked in fear, but they were not the intended prey. The three craft, Ravagers in a slaughter squadron, sighted their potent weapons upon *War's Messenger* of the Legio Crucis. Nine lances of dark energy burst forward, boring into the void shields of the Titan. The fields flared in opposition to the arcane energies of the Eldar weaponry. The first shield winked out, the skimmers banked around, their beams locked onto the same spot, dodging as the Warhound twisted at the waist to spit plasma bursts at its assailants.

The second void shield flared and died, leaving the Titan vulnerable. The beams shut off as the murder squadron sped on, weaving their way through the barrage of projectiles coming off the god machines and the Baneblade. Banking sharply, they turned, Eldar in weapons pods smoothly bringing their lances to bear once more.

The guns fired as one, intersecting precisely at the delicate backwards joint of the Warhound's knee. They boiled off layers of plasteel and ceramite, biting hard into the machine's vulnerable spot. As the Titan turned, tracking those that hurt it, its leg gave out.

Screeching metal heralded the fall of *War's Messenger* as it crashed hard onto its right, plasma conduits tearing open and spraying super-heated gases across the rocky plain. The Eldars' fighter craft screeched down from the uncontested sky, finishing what the Ravagers had started. Black light slammed into the stricken Titan's cockpit, shearing it in half. The craft passed on, leaving the Titan broken, as secondary explosions consumed it.

‘Get me a firing solution on those anti-tank skimmers!’ yelled Bannick. ‘Once they've finished with the Titans, we'll be next. I want them downed, now!’

‘Yes sir,’ said Epperliant.

The tank rocked hard as the Titan's reactor detonated. A hemisphere of blinding light bleached away the night. Alarms shrilled.

'A hundred metres closer and they would have taken us with it,' said Bannick. 'What's the status of *War's Gift*?'

'Titan's backing away sir, trying to get into the cover of the city like us,' said Epperaliant. 'I'm trying to raise the princeps but the vox is dead, totally silent. I've no idea what the xenos are using to block us but I've never seen anything like it before.'

'We are outclassed and outgunned,' said Bannick. 'The best we can do is hope to survive.'

'You denigrate the might of the Omnissiah!' said Kolios.

'He's right,' said Leonates.

'Vaskigen?' said Bannick.

'Sir.'

'How's Meggen?'

'Not good, but he's not hurting, he's out cold.'

'Get on the gun, get me a hi-velocity shell in there. You'll need to take the shot off the tac screen yourself, no good me giving the order, too much lag. You understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Firing solution coming now. I've had the cogitator spit out the skimmer's average speed and likely break pattern. It's the best chance you'll get.'

'Understood,' said Vaskigen.

A second later, the whine of servos advertised the movement of the turret as it tracked left.

'They're coming in,' said Epperaliant, 'in five, four, three, two, one...'

The skimmers came so low, Bannick could swear he heard the teeth-jarring hum of their anti-gravity motors as they passed overhead.

A boom, and the shudder of recoil passed through the tank.

'Did you get it, Vaskigen? Epperaliant?'

An explosion burst in the air, rending an Eldar skimmer in pieces.

'A hit! A hit!' whooped Epperaliant. Cheers went round the tank.

'Save the celebrations for later,' said Bannick. 'We've got their attention now.'

Cortein's Honour grumbled on. Bannick's palms sweated; the city blocks were close, but the Baneblade was slow. 'Quickly Shoam, quickly!'

'I go as fast as it go,' said the Savlar. 'You no worry, we make it.'

'They're coming back! Aircraft and grav attack both.'

‘Keep up defensive fire!’ ordered Bannick. ‘Vaskigen, try for another shot. If we can’t hit them, we can discourage them.’

‘Too late!’ shouted Epperliant.

The tank rocked. Sparks flew from instruments. Bannick grabbed at his station. ‘Damage report!’

‘Left side sponson’s not responding, sir,’ said Huwar.

‘Reactor running at 87 per cent,’ said Kolios, ‘blessed be the Ommissiah! All drives online and functional.’

‘A glancing blow. We’re sheltered by edge of the cutting.’

Bannick looked forwards. ‘We’re coming out of it. We’ll be vulnerable for a thirty-metre space. Intensify upwards fire!’

Cortein’s Honour ground up the ramp from the cutting into the city. An open space lay between it and the shelter of the buildings. The noise from the remaining secondary weapons systems was relentless. He heard muttered prayers over the tank’s internal vox.

More black light slammed into them. More alarms. Plasma roared over them, the retreating *War’s Gift* provided covering fire.

‘We’ve been holed!’ shouted Epperliant.

‘Left sponson’s dead!’ shouted Huwar.

‘Almost there,’ said Shoam. For the first time, Bannick heard tension in his voice. ‘Almost there.’

‘Vaskigen!’ shouted Leonates. ‘Shoot low, timed airburst, force them up.’ He turned to his loader. ‘Huwar, you do the same. Take the right sponson bolter control. I’m going to need to concentrate. Epperliant, count them in.’

‘Three, two, one...’

The pair of Ravagers came in low from the left, trying to get the tank side-on. They split and wove around fire coming from the men following the tank. The *Leman Russ* to the rear supplied covering bursts now that *Cortein’s Honour’s* left sponson was dead. Plasma beams burned between them, spoiling their aim. Dark lance light ripped up stone and slew men, but barely kissed the *Baneblade*.

‘Now!’ shouted Leonates, his eyes intent on the right sponson lascannon’s targeting scope.

The Ravagers flew over, the wind of their passing blowing through the men following the tank. Vaskigen shot low, a timed round. It blew not far from the tank, forcing them to climb steeply, and that slowed them. Huwar gunned to their left, forcing them close to the city’s towering hab-blocks, giving Leonates a clear shot in a confined space. ‘Die!’ he shouted, and depressed the button on the

lascannon twitch-stick. He almost missed, almost. The grav skiff tried a complicated dodge, but the red beam of focused light caught its engine unit. Billowing fire, it ploughed into the ground, snagged, and tumbled over and over, coming to a stop as a ball of scrap.

‘We’re in! We made it!’ shouted Kalligen.

The walls of the hab-blocks rose up high, trapping the sky. The pursuing Eldar grav craft broke away.

‘I’d like to see those basdacks pull off their fancy manoeuvres in here,’ said Vaskigen.

‘And they don’t have the heavy artillery to bring this place down,’ said Epperliant. ‘A fine choice, sir, worthy of Cortein himself.’

‘Good work, good work all,’ said Bannick. ‘But we’re not free yet. Sunrise is four hours away. Sashella suggested they come only at night. We have to survive until day.’ He had an idea. ‘Shoam, get me inside. If we’re running for cover, we might as well do it properly.’

‘As you wish,’ said the Savlar.

The left track stopped dead and the tank turned abruptly to the right. Bannick spoke orders through the tank’s external speakers, telling the men to wait, then follow. Shoam re-engaged both tracks. The tank surged on, and punched right through the wall of an apartment block. Bannick looked up, but the building was vast, and its integrity held.

Then they were inside, sheltered from the wrath of aliens.

Gollph shook every time he heard an explosion. He was no coward; on his home he was a warrior, slayer of many Ulur, protector of his tribe.

But that was a long time ago, and as much as he could understand, a long way away. These weapons he did not understand, they were mightier than the lightning bolts cast by the God-Emperor in storm time.

He waited in the heat. The big man who hit him – Vazkeyn? – had not asked for more of the metal, nor was the man at the front of the metal animal he now lived in in need of more. And so he shook with fear that humiliated him, and waited to die, and remembered his home.

The forest, the cool waters of the sea, the love of Kollpja. He had everything a man wanted, until the off-worlders came down from the citadel of the Iron Lord and demanded a tribute of warriors to take to the sky war.

Training was a long nightmare. Clothes that chafed, food he did not want to eat, machines and weapons he did not understand. Many times he had tried to

speak for the others, to say that this was not the Bosovar way, but he had been beaten, and imprisoned.

Then the skyship, a thing as big as the world, the cramped, foul-smelling long night of transit. More training, more hitting. Slowly, he had begun to pick up the words of the off-worlders. Slowly, he had begun to learn their ways.

And then the machine-man in red, the half-of-metal who took him from his comrades and brought him here. Why, he did not know. It had been explained to him, by one of the few who spoke the words he understood, that the Sky Emperor and his Machine God had a special task for him, to be in the belly of this beast.

The stench of Baneblade made him sick, the oil, the dirt, no wind or air. Gollph was brave, he was not a fool, but circumstances contrived to make him one, to make him shake with fear. If only he could talk and make them listen. Vazkeyn he hated. The big man was a fool. Did he not realise that Gollph could kill him without thought? That he only lived because of the code? Vazkeyn did not live by the code. He hurt and hit when Gollph was bound not to retaliate, and he had made of him a pathetic thing. There were no elders to release him, to allow him to strike in return. It was not fair. Gollph railed inside at the injustice of it, but the code... He must follow the code.

A great crashing sound came from outside. Gollph started, then pressed his lips together. It was time to stop jumping at every noise. Metal squeaked outside, as if the beast pushed itself through stone. He waited to see what would happen next.

The beast stopped. It was still for a long time. Gollph thought hard, ran through the off-worlder's words in his head, trying to make more sense of them. He longed to sleep but would not allow himself to waste time.

It was cold. Suddenly, wintry cold.

It was never cold in the beast.

Hair prickled on the back of his neck. His hunter's senses became alert.

In the dark corner of the shell room, there was movement. Shadows became blacker, the very darkness pulled into itself, forming something – a shape, a form.

A hand reached from the dark, blacker than the deepest shadow, patterned with glowing green. A hunched thing with pointed ears, clad in the skin of dead men, faceless, soulless; chill came with it, the chill of death and endless night.

Gollph's spirit quailed. Here was something truly evil. He should run, his instincts told him to flee, but he would not.

Here was something he could fight. The code permitted this combat, this was unman, an enemy of the Sky Emperor and of all the people of every world, a proper foe.

Gollph smiled. His fury and sorrow crystallised. He drew his bayonet from the sheath at his belt.

The thing turned to face him, long white hair swinging.

Gollph threw himself at it.

They waited in the dark, the tank and forty men, like scared peasants praying for the dawn. Attacks came now and then, but the guard and the tank drove them back each time until they ceased.

Day was forty minutes away.

An ululating cry broke the silence of *Cortein's Honour*. Bannick surged to his feet. 'What by the throne...'

Gunfire erupted outside, then shouts and the cries of the dying.

'Are we under attack again?'

'I don't see anything,' said Epperaliant.

'Look harder!' said Bannick.

A clatter came from downstairs, more shouting. Ganlick's voice joined the high-pitched war cries.

'I've got movement!' said Leonates. He opened up with the sponson bolters, catching some dark and nightmarish thing. It shook as a dozen rounds hammered into it. 'Terra's bones!' said Leonates. He squeezed harder on the twitch-stick triggers, as if this would make the creature die. Bolts disappeared into its flesh. Only when Huwar blasted it with the sponson lascannon did it finally topple and lie still.

'What in the name of the Emperor is that?' he said.

'I don't know, but there are several of them outside,' said Epperaliant.

'We've an intruder, an intruder!' shouted Ganlick

'The shadows!' called out Shoam. 'I tell you, I tell you all, they come outta the shadows!'

'One's inside,' said Bannick. 'Get the lights on. All of them. Inside and out.'

'Sir,' said Epperaliant, cranking up the Baneblade's meagre interior lighting to maximum. Floodlights and headlights snapped on outside. Where they caught shadow creatures, they howled and leapt aside.

Bannick drew his laspistol and hurried downstairs toward the sound of conflict, pushing past the petrified second gunner, who pointed to the shell room.

Bannick swung into the doorway, pistol raised. Gollph was locked in combat with a creature out of nightmare, some daemon's get with coal-black skin. The room was freezing cold, and condensation ran down the walls. Bannick's aim wavered; he could not get a clear shot past the feral.

Gollph was a revelation. He darted around the thing, using the cramped space to his advantage. The creature swung a hooked blade at the diminutive feral, but he ducked, and it caught on a shell rack. Gollph shrieked, the same war cry Bannick had heard on the command deck, and holding his bayonet like a sword drove it two-handed into the creature's chest. The shadow-daemon cast back its head, a terrible hissing coming from its mouthless face as Gollph twisted the bayonet in the wound.

Bannick opened fire. Beams of light connected with the creature, the air cracking with their heat. The thing roared, and sank down to its knees.

Gollph stepped back, his breath pluming on the air. He dropped his bayonet to the ground, clutching frost-burned hands tight to his chest.

Bannick stepped in. The creature dissipated, shadows running into shadows, until only its grisly kit and knife remained.

'Epperaliant, what's the situation?'

'Enemy's gone, quick as he came. I think it's over.'

Bannick holstered his gun, and gently took the feral's hands. They were blue, blackened where the metal of the blade had pressed into his hand. 'We need to get these seen to,' said Bannick.

The little feral looked at him quizzically. He was shivering in the cold.

'You are hurt. Cold hurt.'

Gollph nodded. 'Yes. Cold hurt. Cold burn.'

Bannick searched out the medicae kit on the shell-room wall. He applied salve to the burns, gave Gollph a spray of painkiller. He bandaged the little man's hands.

'You fight well.'

'I fight. I warrior. I great warrior at home. I...' he paused as he searched for a word. He gabbled something in his clucking tongue, then said. 'I village protector. Champion.'

Bannick looked Gollph square in the eye. 'Then why do you let Vaskigen beat you?'

Gollph looked down. 'He not enemy. It not code. Only elder give yes, give no. No elder here.'

'Second Loader Gollph, listen to me. Aboard this tank, here, I am the elder. I

am the leader. Do you understand?’

Gollph narrowed his eyes, thinking. ‘You no elder.’

‘Yes. I am the elder.’

Gollph’s face screwed up. ‘Yes,’ he said cautiously.

‘And I say, never let Vaskigen hit you again. He is not your enemy, but you may stop him if he hurts you. I have told him not to hurt you, so if he does, as far as I am concerned he must suffer the consequences. Do you understand?’

Gollph’s face quirked. Almost a smile. ‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ Bannick stood to go, then had a thought. ‘On no account are you to kill him, do you understand? And you must do as he says. You must learn, Gollph.’

Gollph now smiled properly and saluted sloppily. ‘Oh, I no kill. I no kill sir. I learn good. Gollph no stupid.’

Bannick saluted back. ‘No, I don’t think you are.’ Perhaps he could make a crew out of this odd collection of individuals. As he returned to the short flight of steps to the command deck, he touched his amulets in a silent prayer of gratitude. Hannick had been right. The Emperor and Ommissiah knew best, after all.

Dawn came at last. The vox came back online with the first rays of sun. Bannick ordered the tank out of shelter, and began a roll-call. The names of the living were outweighed by those of the dead.

He checked on Meggen first, who was awake, and pale, but no longer screaming.

‘You’re through the worst of it now, Meggen.’

The first gunner nodded.

‘Yes, sir. Sir?’

‘First Gunner?’

‘For what it’s worth, you’re a good officer. You’ve changed, more confident. Never thought that skinny kid would have it in him, nor did Cortein, I think. Both wrong.’

‘Rest, Meggen. Don’t talk. These wounds aren’t fatal. Ride out the pain, and you’ll be fine.’

‘Feel like I’m dying, sir.’

‘You’re not.’

‘Hurts so much I almost want to.’

Bannick gave him a tight smile, and returned to his station.

The same sights met them as the day before, the signs of struggle, of weapons fire, of wrecked vehicles, but of men or aliens, living or dead, there was no sign. The dawn was clear and golden, the light of day making mockery of the terrors of the night. The Baneblade left the shelter of the city, flanked by survivors, and the men let out a cheer each time another unit crawled free of its hiding space and joined them.

The biggest cheer of all they saved for *War's Gift*. Battle-scarred and limping, the Scout Titan joined the group, Princeps Gonzar hailing the tank and expressing his great relief that they had made it through.

Of the five hundred men who had deployed on Agritha, seventy-nine had survived the night. They did not speak of those who had been taken.

Bannick, the ranking officer now, ordered them to depart. Sashella's trap had never been sprung. They discovered the reason why not long after they left the highway, travelling the miners' by-roads back to their dropzone. Where before there had been three corpses by the side of the road, now there were many. Five Valkyrie assault carriers had been placed nose first in the earth, buried up to their engine turbines in spoil, their broad wings display boards for the terrible arts of the Eldar. Most prominent of all, pierced by dozens of shining blades, sternum cracked and heart exposed, was a corpse ruined beyond all recognition. Were it not for the golden armour that clad its legs, Bannick would not have known it for Inquisitor Sashella.

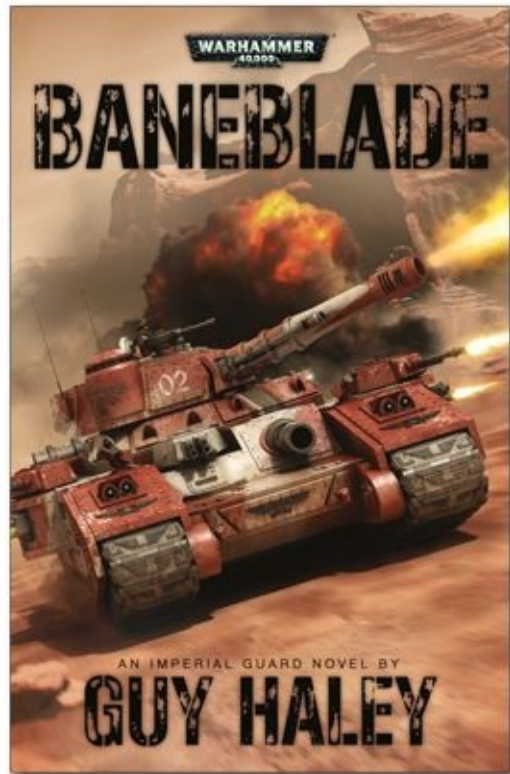
Across the road, five helmets from five different Space Marine Chapters had been carefully placed.

Bannick ordered the helmets removed, then took his column onwards.

He called in their transports for home.

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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