

WARHAMMER
40,000

KNEE DEEP

Mitchel Scanlon



DESPERATE WARFARE ACROSS THE FIRE-SCORCHED
BATTLEFIELDS OF THE IMPERIUM

A WARHAMMER 40,000 STORY

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Imperial Guard - 01.1

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(An Undead Scan v4.0)



The sewers of Broucheroc were a lesson in endurance. Granted, the hardships were not the same as in the city itself. Above ground, Broucheroc was caught in the merciless grip of another harsh winter. Blizzards hounded the city remorselessly. Shripping winds screamed through the desolate streets. The city's defenders huddled together for warmth, or else suffered miserably in icy foxholes. Only the dead did not feel the cold.

The sewers were different. The air in the tunnels was sharp and biting, but the temperature was above freezing. In the sewers, there were other hardships, other adversities.

In the dank dark spaces of the underground world, the damp was all-pervasive. Moisture gathered on the walls and dripped down to join the filthy river of sewage that ran throughout the system. The tunnels seemed endless. They burrowed deep into the earth, stretching outward for tens of kilometres in every direction. To walk them was to know the most ancient and primal of fears. Even with the advantage of a portable luminator, the darkness felt stifling. Shadows moved strangely. The slightest sound cast weird echoes that travelled back-and-forth across the tunnels. The sewers possessed an almost palpable sense of menace. It was as though they stood at the gates of the underworld, on the threshold between life and death.

"So this is hell?" Davir said, surveying the scene in the beam of the luminator clipped to the underside of his lasgun. "Who could have guessed it would be so wet?"

Seeing that the way ahead looked clear, he raised a hand to signal down the tunnel and resumed trudging wearily through the knee-high waters. The other two members of Fire-team Three, his comrades Bulaven and Scholar, were beside him. Bulaven hefted the imposing bulk of a flamer while Scholar carried a hand-held auspex unit. The three of them were on point duty. The rest of a platoon of Vardans followed behind in single file. The men moved cautiously, keeping their lasguns at the ready and sweeping the barrels from side-to-side as they advanced through the tunnels.

"I don't like this," whispered Bulaven.

"You don't like *what* exactly?" Davir countered.

He was in a bad mood, as ever, and the hulking figure of Bulaven made an easy target. They had only been in the sewers for a few hours, but it felt like days. Tempers were running ragged.

By common consent, sewer patrol was the worst duty in Broucheroc. The battle against the orks raged every bit as fiercely underground as it did on the surface. In order to prevent the enemy from gaining a foothold beneath the city, regular patrols

were sent into the sewers on search-and-destroy missions to sweep them clear of ork infiltrators.

In the case of the Vardans, the new posting seemed doubly cruel. They had just served three times the normal rotation on the frontlines, facing multiple enemy assaults on a daily basis. By the unwritten law of Broucheroc, it was their turn to be assigned to less arduous duties in a more peaceful sector.

Instead, they had found themselves suddenly reassigned to the sewers on an emergency basis. Two patrols had vanished in the same section of tunnels. Much to their displeasure, the men of the 902nd Vardan had been chosen to follow the trail of the missing patrols to see what had happened to them. As an aid to the quest, they had been issued with an ancient, hopelessly outdated map of the sewer network. By common opinion, however, the map was next to useless.

“Is it that you don’t like being in the sewers on an ork hunt?” Warming to his theme, Davir sneered at Bulaven. “Maybe you don’t like the cold? The damp? You don’t like getting your feet wet? Well? Spit it out. After all, we’ve already been given the worst available posting in this whole damned city. It would be the icing on the cake to have to listen to you complaining about it like some mewling infant. So, tell me, fat man. What is it that you don’t like?”

“This is all wrong,” Bulaven said. “We shouldn’t be here in the sewers. We should be back topside. We should be looking for Larn.”

“Larn?”

“The new fish, Davir. He’s only been missing for two days. You can’t have forgotten him already.”

“I make it a policy to forget anyone I will never see again,” Davir scowled, but for once he took no pleasure in puncturing the fat man’s illusions. “The new fish is dead. You said it yourself. It has been two days. If he were coming back, we would have seen him by now.”

“You can’t be certain that...”

“Yes, I can. The new fish is dead, Bulaven. It is better that you grow accustomed to the fact. Forget the idea of scouring no-man’s-land for him. You’d only end up as dead as he is.”

“Davir is correct, you know. Statistically, the probability of someone surviving for two days in no-man’s-land is nearly non-existent.”

Drawn by the discussion, Scholar had waded over to join them.

“It is a matter of facing realities,” he said, not without sympathy. “Larn disappeared in one of the most hotly contested sectors in the city. That patch of ground has been fought over, blanketed with gunfire and subjected to artillery bombardment at least half a dozen times in the last forty-eight hours. It is the nature of the war here. Often, when two sides are in stalemate they struggle with ever-greater violence to achieve a resolution. Paradoxically, it creates a war where nothing of consequence ever happens, and yet men are constantly fighting and dying, giving their lives for as little as a few centimetres of territory. The militarist Hsu Chan discusses the irony in one of his tactical works, *The Book of...*”

“No. Stop right there,” Davir held up a warning hand. “I have heard enough, Scholar. The day I need you to fight my battles for me, it will be because I have already been reduced to a drooling basket case. I don’t care *what* the subject is—I

don't want to hear another of your yammering, pointless lectures. I swear, between listening to you and Bulaven, it is a wonder I don't go skipping off into no-man's-land myself in the hope the orks will put me out of my misery. Whichever philosopher said that hell was other people, obviously he had you two in mind."

"Frankly, I'd imagine he was talking about all *three* of you," a voice said, behind them.

It was Sergeant Chelkar, the Vardans' leader. He had advanced forward from the rest of the platoon without Davir and the others hearing.

"I'm sure this is a fascinating discussion," Chelkar regarded them coolly. "But you will understand it is probably better left to another time. There is the small matter of the enemy. I'm aware the relevant manuals claim that orks have poor hearing, but I'd rather not trust our lives to it. The three of you were arguing loudly enough to forewarn the deaf. I want silence from now on. There are no complaints, I take it?"

Chastened, Bulaven and Scholar shifted uneasily. Only Davir did not give ground before the sergeant's gaze. It was not in him to accept discipline gracefully. He respected Chelkar like no other leader he had ever known, but it was Davir's nature to try to have the last word in every situation.

"Complaining? I wouldn't dream of it, sergeant," Davir smiled sweetly, showing an ugly mouthful of broken and crooked teeth. "I was merely remarking to my comrades that we are in a sewer, wading knee-deep through ork shit. If I was of a more poetic inclination, I might almost think of it as some form of extended metaphor for our lives here in Broucheroc."

From the corners of his eyes, Davir saw Scholar and Bulaven goggling silently at him in disbelief. If he had spoken that way to an officer, a commissar or any other sergeant, he knew he would have faced a charge for insubordination—to likely later be flogged to death or shot, depending on the whim of the offended party.

Chelkar was not like other commanders, however. The sergeant was difficult to read, but at times, he seemed to find a dark humour in their situation. He was not a by-the-book soldier, nor a shrieking parade ground martinet. In contrast to most of the men who held authority of any kind in Broucheroc, the sergeant knew how to laugh. Sometimes, Davir supposed it was part of what had helped to keep Chelkar alive.

"A touching sentiment, Trooper Davir."

A gallows smile twitched at Chelkar's mouth, confirming Davir's suspicions.

"Perhaps we should meditate on it at length later," the sergeant continued. "In the meantime, however, one of the advantages of a policy of operational silence is that I would hate it if the orks killed such an original thinker. It is better if they don't hear you coming. That way you can surprise them with such pithy comments when they least expect it. It is a widely known fact that nothing frightens an ork more than a well-constructed put-down."

The sergeant made to turn away, before glancing back and tapping at the comm-bead in his ear.

"Oh, and a word to the wise. You may have noticed the comm-net has fallen quiet. It is the tunnels—they interfere with the transmissions. Our comms are as good as useless, so if you run into orks you will have to communicate with the rest of the platoon by more old-fashioned methods. I leave it to your discretion whether

screaming or waving your arms is the better choice. Either way, it should serve to attract our attention.”

The first encounter with the enemy came a little over an hour later. By Davir’s reckoning, it was at least four hours since they had entered the sewers. The members of Fire-team Three had reached a juncture where several tunnels met. In common with the other members of their platoon, they had left their greatcoats at the surface, expecting to find them cumbersome while wading through the waters. Now, they keenly felt their loss as a vicious cross-draught blew through the junction, cutting through the relatively thin material of their uniforms and setting their teeth chattering.

“Contact!”

Suddenly, the auspex in Scholar’s hands emitted a series of high-pitched beeps. In an instant, all the discomforts of the sewers—the cold, the damp, the claustrophobic closeness of the tunnel walls—were forgotten. Davir, Scholar and Bulaven readied their weapons, removing the waterproofed barrel smocks that protected their guns from corrosion in the wet environment.

“I’m reading multiple contacts ahead of us,” Scholar’s face was given a ghastly glow by the green light of the machine’s display screen.

He looked towards Davir, the most senior man in the fire-team and, technically, its leader.

“There’s a lot of them. And the sensor traces look too big to be anything other than orks.”

“Which tunnel?” Davir asked as he waved a frantic arm to draw the attention of the other Vardans following them.

Ahead, the sewer branched off into three separate tunnels.

“The middle one.” Scholar’s long fingers worked at the auspex’s controls, calibrating the readings. “They are directly ahead. I estimate the distance as no more than two hundred metres.”

Without warning, Sergeant Chelkar was beside them once more. The rest of the platoon had advanced to their shoulder. Instantly sizing up the situation, Chelkar signalled silently to the men around him.

With a firefight in the offing, a mood of grim seriousness had descended on the Vardans. They had been fighting orks for ten years, ever since they had first been posted to Broucheroc. They moved with a measured precision, as well ordered and disciplined in the face of potential combat as any more spit-and-polished unit.

The standard ten-man squads of Imperial Guard doctrine having long ago proven unwieldy in the close confines of the streets of Broucheroc, never mind its sewers, the Vardans were divided into a number of five-man fire-teams. At a series of hand signals from Chelkar, three fire-teams peeled off from the main group of the platoon—one to cover the Vardans’ rear and the other two to guard the entrances to the tunnels on either side.

The remaining teams entered the middle tunnel in groups of four abreast, the selector switches on their lasguns turned ready for rapid fire. Davir, Bulaven, Scholar and Sergeant Chelkar were in the lead.

“We are getting closer,” Scholar said. The tunnel had widened, seeming to grow larger with each step as he counted down the distance to the enemy. “I estimate contact in one hundred metres... Ninety metres... Seventy-five... Fifty... Thirty-five...”

“Where are they?” Chelkar said. “We should be able to see them by now.”

The tunnel ahead was illuminated in the glare of more than a dozen lasgun-mounted light sources. It appeared to be empty of life.

“I don’t understand it,” Scholar fidgeted with the controls of the auspex. “According to these readings they are right in front of us. We should be face-to-face with them.”

“You must have read it wrong,” Bulaven said. “Maybe they are not in this tunnel, but in the next one along.”

“These contacts. Are they stationary or moving?” Chelkar asked Scholar.

“Stationary, sergeant.”

Scholar advanced further down the tunnel, waving the auspex slowly from side-to-side. The beeping from the machine grew louder.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Scholar gazed around quizzically. “Unless... Wait a second... The display of the auspex can only show information two-dimensionally, as dots on a screen-map. But we are in a three-dimensional environment. Perhaps Bulaven is right. The orks could be in another tunnel, maybe directly below us. Or even...”

He paused, an expression of horrified understanding slowly dawning on his face.

“They could be *above* us...”

As one, the Vardans followed the line of Scholar’s eyes in peering upward. Someone pointed a luminator at the ceiling of the tunnel, revealing the mouth of a vertical shaft, hidden in the shadows and rising in a diagonal line above them. Caught in the glimmer of the light, red eyes stared from the darkness. Dozens of orks hung like bats from the shaft wall, waiting to spring an ambush.

“Pull back!” Sergeant Chelkar yelled out as, all around him, the Vardans opened fire. “Back to the junction! Don’t let them get into close combat!”

It was too late. Releasing their hold on the shaft wall, the orks dropped among the Vardans with the guttural roar of alien battle cries.

Firing his lasgun, Davir scrambled to get out from under the avalanche of falling orks. He saw grotesque and muscular forms, glimpses of green skin peeking out from underneath layer upon layer of savage war paint.

The enemy were everywhere. Lost in the haze and confusion of battle, Davir barely had time to think as he fired a succession of las-blasts at the nearest ork. The noises of battle were deafening. He heard screams, the high-pitched whine of lasguns firing at full auto, the *whoosh* of Bulaven’s flamer and the *thoom* of Chelkar’s shotgun—all made more intense by the enclosed environment. Abruptly, one sound cut through all the rest. Davir heard a snarling war cry behind him.

Instinctively, he dropped forward into the sewer waters. The movement saved him as a blade whistled close by his head. Spluttering out a mouthful of rank and foul-tasting liquid, Davir twisted in the water and tried to bring his gun to bear. The ork was standing over him, an enormous cleaver raised in its hand.

Against a human opponent, Davir might have lashed out with the butt of his gun to break the target's knee. Ten years in Broucheroc had taught him the folly of trying the manoeuvre on an ork. He fought the urge to panic, taking careful aim at the greenskin's face. With the added force of a hotshot power pack behind it, he fired a single las-shot that burned through the creature's left eye and into its brains, the rear of its skull exploding in a blast of steam and red gore as the shot exited the head.

Even as the monster fell, Davir was back on his feet. Crouched up to his chest in raw sewage, he scanned the tunnels in search of another enemy to kill. He chose his targets carefully, conserving the punch of the hotshot pack for where it would have the most effect. He was no sniper, but he was cool and accurate under pressure. Experience had taught him that the man who panicked in combat was lost. It was one of the wisdoms of warfare he had learned in Broucheroc; a key, in its own small way, to his continued survival.

He fired his lasgun a half-dozen times, each one a headshot, each one another dead ork. The scrum and press of the melee between men and orks had begun to lessen. The skirmish had turned in the Vardans' favour. The last of the enemy were dispatched without mercy.

As quickly as the fight began, it was over. As ever, in the aftermath of battle, there was a moment of strange and eerie calm—a quiet instant of disbelieving silence as men struggled to come to terms with the fact of their survival.

“Davir?” Bulaven came splashing through the waters towards him. They had become separated in the fighting and he looked down in concern. “It is you under that filth? Are you all right?”

“No thanks to you, pig face.”

Brushing at his uniform, Davir did his best to dislodge the worst of the muck he had inadvertently collected in his brief submersion in the sewer waters. It had not improved his mood.

“Where were you, fat arse? You realise I nearly had my head cut off by an ork with a meat cleaver? It is the whole point of being in a fire-team together that we are supposed to watch each other's backs.”

“We couldn't help it,” Bulaven gestured helplessly. “Before we knew what was happening, there were orks all over us. There were more of them hiding further down the tunnel. They attacked at the same time as the ones from the shaft.” Bulaven reached over his shoulder to tap the fuel tanks on his back. “If it hadn't been for the flamer, we'd have never been able to hold them back.”

“Excuses,” Davir snorted. “It is always the same with you. ‘Oh, the greenskins attacked. Oh, I couldn't help it.’ Listening to you, you'd think you were the only one who ever had to fight an ork.”

His eyes narrowed as he glanced past Bulaven to see Scholar approaching.

“And you needn't look so pleased with yourself either, you long streak of grox piss. If you'd read the auspex better, I wouldn't have had to go for a swim in a river of shit.”

“I don't know why you're complaining, Davir,” Scholar said mildly. “Swimming is excellent exercise. Certainly, it seems to have done wonders for your disposition.”

“Very funny, Scholar. You know, I think I like it better when you are giving lectures. It is true they are as dull as watching paint dry. But at least they are less of a pain in the spheres than your idea of humour.”

“We’re six men down,” Chelkar said, a short while later. “That’s what you’re telling me.”

Three-quarters of an hour had passed since they had driven off the orks and the sergeant had just received situation reports from the assembled fire-team leaders and the Vardan medic, Medical Officer Svenk. They stood a small distance away from the main body of the platoon so they could talk more freely. Despite the confines of the tunnels, and the dead bodies littered around them, the meeting had soon taken on the character of an impromptu briefing.

“Four men are dead,” Svenk replied. “Another twelve are wounded.”

“But only two of them are injured too badly to continue,” Chelkar pressed the point. “The others are walking wounded. That’s what you said.”

“They should still be evacuated,” Svenk argued. “In these unsanitary conditions it is almost a certainty that their wounds will become infected. And antibiotics are in short supply. Without them, a serious infection can easily turn out to be a death sentence.”

“All right,” Chelkar nodded. “Pick four men from among the walking wounded to escort the non-ambulatory cases back to the surface. They’ll have to improvise stretchers to carry them, if need be.”

Seeing Svenk about to protest again, he raised his hand to quiet him.

“That’s the best I can do, Svenk. If I send all the wounded back, it depletes our numbers and endangers the rest of the platoon. You’d better make the arrangements. I want us underway again in ten minutes’ time.”

Realising any further argument was useless, Svenk bowed his head and hurried away to organise the stretcher party.

Once the medic was gone, Chelkar turned to gaze at a trio of dead orks that had been propped against the sewer wall nearby for inspection. In keeping with standard procedure in Broucheroc, the Vardans had already beheaded the bodies to prevent any unexpected “resurrections”. It was not unknown for a comatose ork, with a seemingly mortal wound, to suddenly spring to life several hours after the fight had ended. Accordingly, the city’s defenders took the precaution of decapitating their defeated opponents after every battle.

“Well, I think we can agree we know what probably happened to the last two patrols,” Chelkar said, staring intently at the corpses. “Obviously, the orks killed them. But that still leaves several questions to be answered.”

He looked up at the faces of Davir and the other fire-team leaders around him, before gazing down at the orks again. Together, the headless orks made a gruesome sight. They put Chelkar in mind of one of the traditions of his homeland. On Vardan, it had been the custom for the authorities to display the lined-up bodies of executed criminals in public places on Imperial holidays, in order to serve as a warning to anyone contemplating breaking the law.

“They are poorly equipped, even by ork standards,” Chelkar said, thinking aloud as he nudged one of the corpses with his boot. “We haven’t found a single one of them with anything even approaching a firearm. They didn’t have stick bombs, either. They were armed only with the most simple of weapons—spears, axes, clubs and the like.”

There was something puzzling, even unsettling here, Chelkar decided. In the breathless, dizzying, adrenaline surge of combat, he had hardly noticed that there was anything unusual about the enemy. Now, in the calm after the battle, it was clear they were different from the orks he had fought before.

The sewer orks seemed even more primitive than their normal brethren. They lacked any but the most basic technology. They did not even possess clothes or boots. They had gone to war naked, their bodies painted in vibrant colours and orkish symbols, wearing necklaces of human scalps, severed fingers and rat skulls as trophies. Even by greenskin standards, they seemed extraordinarily savage, as though some lost remnant from the very beginnings of ork history had somehow landed in the sewers of Broucheroc.

“Perhaps they are part of an outcast tribe?” a voice ventured, quietly.

Turning, Chelkar saw that Scholar had approached the meeting. Strictly speaking, as an ordinary trooper, he was not privy to command briefings—even at the platoon level. He hung back, staying to the edge of the half-circle of fire-team leaders who stood facing Chelkar.

A thin man, Scholar was taller than the other Vardans. Of the entire company, only the brutish Bulaven could match him for height. Alone of the men around him, Scholar was the only one who did not look down at the headless orks with either indifference or distaste. If anything, he appeared to find the dead xenos fascinating.

Chelkar had never known quite how to read Scholar. He was a strange bird, much given to random outpourings of facts and theories on almost any subject under the sun. Still, over time, Chelkar had learned to listen when Scholar offered his opinions. He found they were often of value.

“What is it, Scholar?” he asked, beckoning him forward. “You have some insights?”

“I understand it is not unknown for ork war parties to be riven by religious schisms,” Scholar said, making no mention of where he might have gleaned such information. “The orks who ambushed us might have been members of a tribe that has broken away from the main army. They might even be a form of ork heretic, come to hide in the sewers to elude their enemies. Perhaps they have adopted a primitive lifestyle as an attempt to return to the traditions of their orkish ancestors.”

“Perhaps,” Chelkar shrugged. “But, who knows? There could be any number of reasons why they are so poorly equipped. The important issue is whether there are more of them down here somewhere.”

“With all due respect, isn’t that a question for others, sergeant?” Davir asked. “I mean, we have done our duty. We were sent to find out what happened to the other patrols. Our mission is accomplished. We have identified the culprits, searched them out and destroyed them. Frankly, I think it is time we returned to the surface for some hot recaf and medals all round. Not to mention some warm blankets and dry clothes.

We are foot soldiers. Our place in the grand scheme of things is to follow orders. We should leave the bigger questions to the geniuses who command us.”

“Spoken like a true Guardsman, Davir,” Chelkar said. A smile ghosted across his face.

“However, I have never liked leaving a job half-done. Especially when it could be vital to see that job finished. If there are more of these feral orks about, they need to be located and destroyed. Otherwise, they represent a danger. If they manage to establish themselves permanently down here, they might destabilise our efforts to defend the city. It is bad enough Broucheroc is surrounded by orks on four sides. Imagine how much worse it would be if they gained control of the sewers. They could use the tunnels to penetrate our defences at will. The city would be under siege from below. We can’t allow that to happen.”

“I suspect you are going to order us to do something noble, sergeant,” Davir’s face wore a glum expression.

“Noble? Not really. We will continue through the sewers a while longer and see if we can find where the orks came from. Of course, given the problems with our comms, we won’t be able to contact Sector Command to tell them where we’re going. We also won’t be able to call in reinforcements or heavy support if things get hot. The best I can do is send a message back with the wounded, apprising Command of our plans.”

“And if we run into trouble?” asked Davir. “Not to seem a pessimist, sergeant, but what happens if we find more orks down here than we can handle?”

“Then, we shall just have to fight our way through them,” Chelkar said. “If that happens, and if we survive, you will probably get the medal you were talking about, Davir. Although, I can’t promise to do anything about finding a hot cup of recaf. Not in Broucheroc.”

“I never thought I would agree with the arseholes who run this war,” Davir said, as they trudged through the tunnels several hours later. “But, apparently, the generals are right when they tell us to shut up and follow orders. After all, look what happens when sergeants decide to start thinking for themselves and show some initiative. It’s the poor, bloody Guardsman who suffers. That’s what happens.”

He was back walking point at the head of the patrol with Scholar and Bulaven. According to the chronometer function on Scholar’s auspex, they had been in the sewers for a grand total of nearly eight hours. As far as Davir was concerned, they were among the most miserable hours he had endured in his life.

He was cold and wet. He stank of sewage. His boots and trousers were sodden with water and, he was sure, other substances that were far more unpleasant. To make matters worse, the sewer waters had deepened as they pushed on into the tunnels. With his short, stocky build, Davir was now wading waist deep in water.

“And you needn’t think I’ve forgotten your part in this, Scholar,” he said, viperishly.

“My part?” the other man blinked. “I wasn’t aware I had one.”

“No? ‘Perhaps they are part of an outcast tribe’,” Davir said, mimicking Scholar’s voice. He turned to Bulaven. “You should have heard him, fat man. If he’d put his tongue any further up Chelkar’s arse, we’d have had to surgically remove it. You

couldn't just stay quiet, could you, Scholar? You had to open your slop-hole and send us all on this fool's errand, heading deeper and deeper into the sewers on the trail of an imaginary tribe of orks."

"I was simply offering an opinion."

"Well, *don't*," he spat. "In future, if you have any opinions, keep them to yourself. We'll all live longer that way. As it is, Chelkar will probably keep us wandering these damn tunnels until we get lost and die."

"You know, you really should try to look on the bright side, Davir," Bulaven said. "After all, things could be worse."

"The bright side? Do you see one hereabouts?" Davir gestured in annoyance at the sewer walls about them. "I'll tell you what, you lumbering moron. If you can find a bright side to our situation, why don't you share it with us? We are in a sewer. We have been drenched to the bone with untreated sewage. In the next few days, we are undoubtedly destined to contract every deadly disease known to humanity. Assuming, of course, the orks don't kill us first. So, what is this 'bright side' you were talking about? I can't wait to hear it."

"Welllll..." For a moment, Bulaven seemed stymied. Either Davir's hectoring had put him off and he had lost his train of thought or, as Davir himself suspected, it was the first time the fat man had considered their situation in detail.

"Go on, imbecile. I'm listening. In fact, I'm on tenterhooks. What is the bright side?"

"Well," said Bulaven, finally, "it could be *colder*."

"That's it?" Davir was aghast. "After all this—the sewers, the orks, the shit-stink, the damp—that is the best you could come up with? 'It could be colder.' Truly, your idiocy holds no bounds."

"Actually, Bulaven is right." Abruptly, Scholar became animated, a familiar gleam of discovery shining in his eyes. "It doesn't seem as cold now as it did an hour ago. I'd almost swear the sewers are getting *warmer*."

Pausing to peer intently at their surroundings, Scholar suddenly handed the auspex to Davir and hurried over to examine a filth-encrusted section of the sewer wall. Pulling out his bayonet, he began to dig at the wall, removing an accumulation of mud and sewer residue to reveal a rusted metal pipe, bolted at about head height.

"We couldn't see it before under the layers of dried-out sewage," Scholar said, pulling at the dirt with his hands to expose more of the pipe. "It seems to run the length of the tunnel, bracketed to the wall. I would estimate it as about fifteen centimetres in diameter. It's definitely warm to the touch. I'd say it's some kind of heating system."

"A heating system?" Davir squinted as Scholar excavated more of the area, revealing several similar pipes running in parallel. "The smell in these tunnels must be getting to you, Scholar. Who would build a heating system to keep a sewer warm?"

"The function of the pipes is unmistakable." Scholar's voice was firm. He knocked on the surface of one of them with his bayonet, creating a hollow noise. "The sound would be different if there were liquid inside. The system is obviously designed to funnel hot air or gases, warming the sewer tunnels. They couldn't possibly be serving any other purpose."

“All right, Scholar,” Davir said, humouring him. “So, these pipes are warming the sewers. If you insist on it, I believe you.”

Glancing behind him, he saw Chelkar approaching them, presumably eager to know what had caused this latest hold-up.

“But I leave it to you to tell the sergeant.”

“You were right, Scholar,” Sergeant Chelkar said. He waved a gloved hand in front of his face. “Look. My breath is no longer frosting in the air. It is definitely getting warmer.”

Twenty minutes had passed since Scholar had shown him the heating pipes and explained their function. Initially, Chelkar had expressed the same disbelief as Davir. Deciding to test the matter, he had ordered the main force of the platoon to remain where they were, while he scouted further down the tunnel in the company of Fire-team Three. It had quickly become clear, however, that Scholar’s theory had merit. Chelkar could not be sure whether the pipes were really a heating system, but it was beyond question that the temperature in the tunnel was rising.

“But what does it mean?” Bulaven asked, while Chelkar pulled out his map of the tunnels in an attempt to check their location. “Why would anyone want to build a heating system for a sewer?”

“I don’t know,” Scholar replied. “But, looking at these tunnels and the pipes, the entire system could be centuries old. Perhaps even older. It could date back to when the city was originally founded. Who knows what secrets Broucheroc might hold beneath the surface?”

“Hnn. Listen to you,” Davir snorted in disgust. “From the way you talk, Scholar, you’d think we’d found the secret of eternal youth or a treasure chest filled with gemstones. Ultimately, all we’ve discovered is that some idiots once built a central heating system for the express purpose of keeping their bodily motions warm. Frankly, I don’t see it as any great cause for rejoicing. You ask me, it just demonstrates the extraordinary stupidity of the whole human race. I’d much prefer it if someone could find us some dry clothes and a good cup of recaf in this cesspit. Now, *that* would be a discovery worth celebrating.”

“You’re missing the bigger picture,” Chelkar told him, refolding the map and placing it back in the pocket of his tunic. “We’ve encountered two strange things since we entered the sewers. First, a group of feral orks armed only with primitive weapons. Second, a heating system for the sewers. I’m no savant, but I’d say they are likely to be connected. Either way, we need to check it out.”

He turned to Scholar.

“It only started getting warmer once we had pushed pretty deeply into the tunnels. Does it mean the heating system doesn’t extend to the upper levels?”

“It could do,” Scholar nodded. “Heat rises, so there would be a transfer of warmth up through the system even without the pipes. From what I’ve seen, however, the sewers appear to be designed to channel the waste downward. I can’t be sure, but I suspect there’s some form of treatment plant deeper underground. It was probably designed as a central collection point for all the city’s sewage.”

“All right.” With a nod of his head, Chelkar turned to gaze into the darkness of the tunnel before them. “We’d better go get the rest of the platoon and start moving.

According to what I can decipher from the map, if we follow this tunnel it should lead us down to the lower levels. If the orks and these heating pipes are somehow connected, we'll find the answer deeper in the system."

An hour passed. Soon, Scholar's theory that the pipes served as a heating system was proven beyond debate. As the platoon pushed onward, descending into a deeper section of tunnels, the sewers continued to grow warmer. Before long, it seemed remarkable this was the same environment which had once been cold enough to make them shiver. The surroundings began to feel almost balmy. If anything, having equipped themselves with the freezing temperatures of Broucheroc in mind, the Vardans found they were overdressed—even without their greatcoats.

The other hardships of the sewers remained. There was still the dampness to deal with; the thigh-high waters; the stench of raw sewage. After ten years spent freezing in Broucheroc, however, the warmth of the lower sewer levels made the rest of it feel almost bearable.

As the Vardans journeyed onward, the members of Fire-team Three had taken up their usual position walking point for the rest of the platoon. They were tired, but with the change in temperature, even Davir had found relatively little to complain about.

"Have you seen this?" Scholar said. "Now, this is interesting."

He drew the attention of the other members of the fire-team to a series of fist-sized fungal growths clinging to the tunnel wall over one of the heating pipes. Scholar prodded at the growths with his long fingers, showing all the enthusiasm of a child with a new toy.

"It's certainly some kind of fungi," Scholar said. "But I don't recognise the species."

"Shouldn't you be careful with that?" Bulaven raised an eyebrow. "Fungus can be poisonous, can't it?"

"Hmm?" Scholar did not appear to have heard him. "Do you see how the heating pipes are already exposed here? In the other tunnels, they were buried under dried sewage. I think the fungus may be responsible for uncovering the pipe."

He pointed at the green tendrils anchoring each fungal globe to the warm surface of the pipe.

"These anchor-roots must have absorbed all the nutrients and organic material from their surroundings, leaving the remaining inorganic detritus to fall away—hence, revealing the pipe underneath."

Doing his best to look interested, Bulaven tried to follow Scholar's explanation. As ever, he found it hard going. In contrast to Scholar, whose learning covered hundreds of topics, Bulaven had been given only enough education to help him work in the foundries on his homeworld of Vardan—no more.

"It's amazing really," Scholar stroked his fingers over the fungus almost lovingly. "This may well be the beginning of a new ecosystem. The warmth from the heating pipes has created the conditions in which this fungi can flourish, allowing it to colonise the environment. At the same time, the presence of the fungus has effected the environment itself in turn—clearing the sewer residue from around the pipes and allowing them to heat the tunnels more effectively. I wonder where the fungi came

from? It could be a new species, entirely native to the sewers of Broucheroc. If only there was some way for me to establish its identity..."

"I may be able to help you there," Davir said. "Although, I suspect you won't be thrilled with the answer."

At some point, Davir had wandered away while the others were studying the fungus. Now, having scouted further down the tunnel, he returned. He walked toward them with an unhappy expression.

"While you two half-wits were gawking at the local life-forms, I decided to check what was ahead of us," Davir said, his face grim. "You'd better come and have a look. And fetch Sergeant Chelkar, as well—he'll want to see this. I have bad news, Scholar. Your fungus isn't a *new* species, after all."

"You know something, Davir?" Bulaven whispered beside him. "I thought you were only joking before, when you said this place was hell. Now, I am not so sure."

They were lying on the ledge of an overflow outlet with Scholar and Sergeant Chelkar, peering cautiously over the edge to survey a scene that might have issued directly from the worst nightmares of every man, woman and child alive in Broucheroc.

The tunnel they were following had opened out into a broad atrium-like space where dozens of other sewer tunnels met. Davir had no idea who had built the city's sewerage system, but he was forced to concede the extraordinary scale of their design.

Considering they were underground, the size of the atrium where the tunnels came together was vast. It put him in mind of the Grand Basilica of the Imperial Light on the planet Solnar. Where the Basilica had been dedicated to the glories of the Emperor, however, the sewer atrium was like a gargantuan cathedral devoted to the disposal of human waste. For all that it took the breath away, though; Davir found his amazement at the atrium was overridden by more immediate concerns.

"You understand why I thought you should see it?" he said, for once ignoring the chance to snipe at Bulaven. "Obviously, this is where the feral orks came from."

The entire area of the atrium was covered in fungal growth, creating a weird alien landscape that was almost mesmerising in its strangeness. The predominant colour was green, but in places, Davir could see startling outgrowths and carpet-like patches in blue, red and purple. It was as though they stood on the edge of an altogether inhuman world, monstrosly transformed in accordance with the needs of the *xenos*.

"It is the warmth from the heating pipes," Scholar whispered. "It created the perfect conditions for ork colonisation."

Like the rest of them, he seemed caught between fear and awe. The Guardsmen spoke quietly, careful to keep their bodies low and stay out of sight. Dozens of orks could be seen moving in the fungal panorama below them. It was likely there were many more within earshot.

"This could well have started with just a single spore," Scholar said. "One spore, drifting down from the city above. In any other part of the sewers, it would have lain dormant. But, here, it found a warm setting in which it could thrive. The spore gave birth to an ork, whose body in turn released thousands more spores. They took root

here as well, slowly changing the environment to make it more suitable for their needs. Now, it is like the whole area is an enormous nursery.”

All across the atrium, there were thousands of round globes of fungus—adhering to walls, suspended from overhanging pipes, or lying thick on the ground in clusters. They were like the examples they had seen earlier in the tunnel, but *bigger*. They ranged all the way up to several metres in width. Unlike the ones in the tunnel, the true purpose of the globes in the atrium was clear. On some of the larger specimens, the round outer skin of the fungus was pulled thin enough that shadowed forms could be seen within them.

Observing the scene, Davir realised he would have to revise his opinions. Long ago, Scholar had told him that orks grew from spores like mould or fungi. He had never believed it, instinctively rejecting the idea as a foolish fancy.

Yet, here was the proof. He could not argue against the evidence of his own eyes. Even as he watched, a muscular clawed arm emerged from one of the larger globes. Within seconds, the new ork had pulled itself free of its fungal chrysalis. Its skin still slick with amniotic fluid, it emerged eagerly into the world and threw its head back in an exhortation of triumph, before stumbling from the atrium in search of conquest—another ork born to plague a suffering, dying galaxy.

Davir could not be sure which was worse: the sight of so many orks waiting to be born, or the sound of their breathing. He could hear them, even from the ledge. The air of the atrium was alive with a constant susurrus. The skins of the larger globes rose and fell in time with the breathing of the horrors hidden inside them. The thought of it made Davir uneasy. He was standing no more than a stone’s throw from an army of sleeping monsters, which might awaken at any moment.

“We will have to withdraw,” Chelkar said. “Get back to the surface. There are too many of them for us to fight. We have to warn the city. Then, we can lead a larger force back down here to destroy the orks. Otherwise, if this colony survives, it could tip the balance of the war. We’d be fighting on two different fronts at once—above ground and below. Broucheroc could fall.”

Nodding in unspoken agreement, the four of them turned to retreat back down the tunnel to where the rest of the platoon was waiting. Instinctively, they knew Chelkar was right. After the ork ambush earlier in the day, there were barely twenty-five men left in the platoon—some of them wounded. The situation in the sewers was too big for them to deal with. For there to be any hope of success, they had to get back to the surface to warn the city.

Before they could move, though, the sound of shots came from further along the tunnel in the direction they were headed. Casting a wary eye at the atrium behind them, Davir saw the sudden disturbance had not gone unnoticed. He could see orks moving among the fungal landscape, alerted to the presence of intruders.

Suddenly, any prospect of an easy withdrawal appeared out of the question.

Afterwards, it would never be entirely clear who had fired the shots that had given the Vardans away. As far as anyone could work out, the men of Fire-team Six were the most likely culprits.

They had been assigned to stand overwatch on a subsidiary tunnel that ran off the main tunnel the Vardans were using. At some point, while Davir and the others were observing the atrium, the men of Six were attacked by a large group of orks.

It was unclear whether the orks had blundered into them by simple bad luck, or if the members of Six had given themselves away somehow. Whatever the case, it hardly mattered. By the time the dust settled, the five men of Fire-team Six were dead—as were over seven times their number of orks. More importantly, however, the fact there were humans in the tunnels was now known to every ork in earshot.

For Davir, the loss of the men of Fire-team Six was doubly troubling. He had known the fire-team's leader, Elias Yevgen, for years. They played cards together regularly, an activity of which Davir had been particularly fond, as Yevgen was perhaps the worst card player he had ever encountered. Money meant little in Broucheroc, not that the Guardsmen had it anyway, but it was a source of pride to Davir that he had beaten Yevgen so many times the man had been forced to offer the services of the next three generations of his family as indentured servants in order to pay off his debts. Yevgen had no children, so their contract was more theoretical than actual, but it was the winning that was important.

Sadly, the agreement had been rendered null and void by the bite of an orkish axe. Davir would never know what it was to own three generations of a man's family as slaves. Similarly, he would no longer be able to rub the fact in Yevgen's face every time they played cards.

More immediately, though, when Davir heard the sound of distant shots and saw that the orks in the atrium were now aware of their presence, his heart sank. He had a terrible feeling he knew what was coming next.

"Someone will have to hold the orks back and cover our retreat," he heard Chelkar say.

"We understand," Davir sighed, feeling resignation at something he knew was inevitable. As their commander, Chelkar was required to lead the platoon to safety—meaning it fell to Bulaven, Scholar and himself to play the sacrificial lambs.

"We'll hold them as long as we can, sergeant."

"Ten minutes," Chelkar pulled the grenades from his belt and handed them to Davir. "These should help. You have plenty of power packs? And, Bulaven? You have a laspistol for when the flamer gives out?" Seeing the three men nod, he continued. "Give me ten minutes. It should give me time enough to get the rest of the men clear."

"Ten minutes, sergeant," Davir agreed. "Although, I warn you, if you hear what sounds like a stampede in ten minutes' time, I wouldn't be surprised. It'll be the sound of me, Bulaven and Scholar running to catch up with you."

"Ten minutes," Davir shook his head once Chelkar was gone. "Ten minutes, he says. Why not just ask for an hour and be done with it? For that matter, why doesn't he ask us to take on every ork on the planet, break the siege and save Broucheroc in the bargain?"

"It was you who told him we'd do it," Bulaven said. "In fact, you all but volunteered us..."

They were crouched in the tunnel, ready to make their stand. Bulaven had taken the fuel tanks of the flamer from his back and placed them on the ground. There had been no sight of the pursuing orks yet, but the thunderous rush of their stomping feet could be heard echoing down the tunnels.

“Can I help it if I am sentimental?” Davir shrugged. “It was clear the sergeant was struggling with the unhappy duty of having to order someone to stay behind to face almost certain death. So, I took pity on him. I volunteered us. Don’t tell me you would’ve done it any different, pig brain.”

“No, I wouldn’t have done anything differently,” Bulaven said. “Nor would Scholar. Sometimes, I think we are all as mad as each other.”

“Speak for yourself,” Davir checked the charge level on the power pack in his lasgun. “I have a finely tuned mind and I intend to use it to survive this mess.”

“Perhaps you are thinking of painting yourself green and disguising yourself as a gretchin?” Scholar asked. “You’re certainly the right height.”

“Ho ho. If you were any more amusing, Scholar, I’d be afraid I might die laughing before the orks can get me. No, remember the plan I told you and everything will be all right.”

“This would be the plan to kill as many orks as we can, then run away?” Bulaven asked.

“Precisely.” Davir clicked off his safety. “Now, shut up, both of you. The bastards are coming.”

It happened so quickly. Davir had been in combat on more occasions than he cared to count, but each time it was the same. It passed in a blur: minutes seemed like seconds, while seconds seemed like instants.

One moment, the orks were charging. Davir heard his own voice give the order to fire. He felt a wave of heat to the side of him as Bulaven triggered the flamer. In the tight confines of the tunnel, it was devastating. He saw orks burning, screaming. He and Scholar shot to the side of the flamer’s expanding cone of fire, aiming for the orks at the edge of the inferno. He had spent ten years fighting orks in Broucheroc, but these creatures were hideous, terrifying. There was something about the war paint and the necklaces of bones. The orks seemed like savagery personified. If Davir had been created of less stern stuff, he might well have made water at the very sight of them.

All too soon, the flamer died. Where once there had been a fearsome torrent of fire, suddenly there were a few dying and fitful sparks.

“The canister’s empty!” Dropping the flamer, Bulaven pulled at something on the fuel tank and then grabbed for the laspistol on his belt.

“Pull back!” Davir yelled. “Run for it!”

As plans went, it was simple. Using the flamer, they had held off the orks for as long as they could. Once the flamer was empty, they had known they would need a diversion. It had been Davir’s idea to strap every grenade they had—including the ones Chelkar had given them—to the flamer’s fuel tank. The tank was empty, but even without fuel it made a useful source of extra shrapnel.

The grenades exploded with an impressive roar. The tunnel worked in their favour, channelling the blast and multiplying its power. Too much so, Davir realised

as, unexpectedly, he felt the tunnel floor abruptly give way beneath his feet. For the briefest instant of time, he felt weightless. Then, he fell into darkness.

“Davir! Davir!”

He awakened to a voice calling out his name as rough hands shook his body.

“Davir! Davir!”

For a moment, Davir wondered whether he was dead. Then, he opened his eyes, saw Bulaven’s face looking down at him, and he knew he was not in the afterlife. At least, not any afterlife he *wanted* to be in.

“Davir...”

“All right! If I answer you, will you stop rattling me like a rag doll? Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not a good idea to shake an unconscious man, Bulaven? For all you know, I could have a concussion.”

Taking his bearings, Davir looked around to find he was lying in another sewer tunnel. He couldn’t see any orks.

“Where are we?”

“The floor gave way,” Bulaven told him. “I think there must’ve been some kind of hatchway beneath us. When the grenades exploded, it blew open the hatchway and dropped us into a big overflow pipe underneath it.”

“So, basically, you’re saying we fell down the drain? What about the orks? Didn’t they follow us?”

“Not as far as I can tell. When we went down the overflow, a lot of water came down with us. Maybe they thought we’d been washed away. Either way, I haven’t seen any orks since we landed.”

“Any idea how far we fell?” Standing up, Davir gazed at the tunnel ceiling. “I wonder how far we are from Chelkar and the others?”

“I don’t know. But I woke you because I was worried about Scholar.”

Bulaven moved aside and pointed to where Scholar lay unconscious against the tunnel wall. Going over to him, Davir saw a wound on Scholar’s scalp. He checked his pulse.

“Well, he’s alive,” Davir said. “If you want a more informed opinion you’d have to find a medic. The head wound doesn’t look too bad. We should probably just leave him to wake up in his own time.”

Davir turned and looked down the tunnel.

“Not to seem too exacting, Bulaven. But you did notice there’s a light coming from the end of this tunnel, didn’t you?”

“I did. Why? Do you think it’s important?”

“Given that, for all we know, it’s a torch-wielding mob of orks coming to finish us off? Yes, I’d say it could be important. You stay here with Scholar, while I go check it out. Oh, and you’d better keep your gun handy. Considering our luck so far today, whatever is causing the light, it’s bound to be trouble.”

Following the light, Davir emerged into another cavernous underground space and was pleased to see there was no sign of a mob of orks—torch-wielding or otherwise—waiting to kill him. Instead, he saw a bewildering network of metal pipes

that criss-crossed and came together at a squat, ugly metal building. Approaching it, he heard the sound of machines. He detected a distant rhythmic vibration through the soles of his boots.

“Finally, a delivery of personnel,” he heard a voice behind him. “I was beginning to think our work here had been forgotten.”

Whirling in the direction of the sound, Davir found himself facing an old man in the faded robes of a tech-adept of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The ancient figure seemed as much machine as man, his body surrounded by fidgeting mechadendrites and his withered face barely visible from beneath the cowl of his robe. A half a dozen servitors trailed in his wake, as dutiful as dogs.

“I am Serberus, senior adept in charge of this pumping station,” the old man said. “What is your designation?”

“Desig... Ah... My name is Davir.”

“Well, Layperson Davir, you can start by manually recalibrating the gas pressure in the methane feeds. The levels are still dropping, even with the temperature alterations in the sewer habitat. You have brought foodstuffs?”

“Food? Uh, no. Excuse me, did you say something about temperature alterations?”

“Indeed,” Serberus nodded slowly. “It is a pity about the foodstuffs. I have developed a method of processing the local lichens for their food value, but they are deficient in a number of vitamins.” One of his dendrites scratched absently at an ugly sore on the side of his head.

“Remember, we were talking about the temperature?” Davir prompted.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Methane production levels fell, so I redistributed some of the remaining supply toward heating the tunnels in order to encourage bacterial growth.”

“Bacteria?” This time, it was Davir’s turn to scratch his own head. “And why would you do that, exactly?”

The old man stared at him in incredulity for long seconds, before gesturing at the wide expanse of pipes and tunnels around them.

“Why, to perform my allotted task, of course. I can see your work instruction has been entirely deficient, Layperson Davir. The sewers of this city are a marvel of engineering, many thousands of years old. They are designed to be a self-sustaining system in which nothing of potential value is left unused. Human waste is converted into methane gas by the action of gene-sculpted bacteria bred specifically for that purpose. In turn, this methane is pumped to the surface to be used as fuel in some of the city’s manufactories.”

“I see.”

Briefly, Davir considered the matter.

“So, if I understand this, you recently noticed the methane levels were falling? So you started heating the sewers, so the bacteria would create more methane. Is that right?”

“Indeed.”

“You do understand there is a war on?”

“Certainly,” Serberus gazed at him blithely. “It is why we are short-handed. My fellow adepts in the sewers were transferred to other duties, years ago. I have been

alone, with just these few servitors to help maintain the entire system. I will confess, Layperson Davir, I had even begun to wonder if my presence here had been somehow overlooked. But then, you arrived.”

“I’m not a coghead. I’m a Guardsman. As to the fall in methane production, I suspect that is to do with the war. At last count, more than four-fifths of the city’s civilian population are dead. That’s why your methane levels are falling. Less people means less shit, means less raw material for your bacteria to work on.”

In response, Serberus was silent. He stared at Davir with incomprehension.

“Don’t you understand?” Davir asked him. “Raising the temperature in the sewers was a mistake. In fact, it has put the city in danger. It has allowed the orks to infest the sewers.”

Still, the old man just stared at him.

“Are you deaf?” Davir said in mounting annoyance. “I’m telling you that you’ve been wasting your time. Your work here is meaningless. Given the way that things operate in Broucheroc, there’s every chance you’ve been forgotten. No one even knows you’re down here.”

Suddenly, Serberus sprang to life. Screaming with incoherent rage, he leapt at Davir and tried to strangle him. Madness burned in his eyes. Catching his wrists, Davir fought to hold him back. Now they were standing so close, he could see the old man’s skin was raddled with weeping sores. His gums were swollen and bleeding. Years of malnourishment had taken their toll. Despite this, Serberus was stronger than he looked. Insanity fuelled his strength.

As they struggled, the tech-adept’s mechadendrites whipped into a frenzy. Davir felt them scrabbling at his uniform, scratching at him. One of the dendrites gouged into his cheek, breaking the skin. He winced. Red with his blood, the dendrite withdrew and blindly stabbed at his face once more. Appalled, he realised it was trying to find his eyes, attempting to hook them from their sockets.

He felt a surge of anger. He had been trying to hold back so as not to hurt the old man, but it was time to end this.

Lowering his head like a bull, Davir butted Serberus across the bridge of the nose. As the pain made the old man shy away, the dendrites loosened their hold. Pressing home his momentary advantage, Davir twisted his body and levered Serberus over his shoulder. It was a demonstration of the effectiveness of the Guard’s unarmed combat doctrine. Davir would not have cared to try it on an ork, but the tech-adept was a different story. Shrieking, the old man landed with a *thump* and was briefly still.

“Listen to me,” Davir said, holding out a placating hand as he saw Serberus stir back to life. “Stay where you are. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Kill him,” the old man whispered, his voice as dry as dust and cracked with age. “Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!”

For a second, Davir wondered who Serberus was talking to—until he heard the sound of heavy footsteps and saw the servitors lurching towards him.

They were hulking monstrosities, created from the union of machine and human corpse. There were six of them, each as old and poorly maintained as their master, Serberus: shambling, blank-eyed things that moved with the whirr of gears and the whine of motors.

Davir had seen servitors before. On some Imperial worlds they were relatively common, but he could never escape a feeling of horror when he looked at them. He understood enough to know they were not truly alive. For all that, the human parts still moved with the semblance of life, their owners were long dead, their bodies harvested and grafted to the machine for use as organic components.

Still, there was something unsettling about them, something sickening. The only reason that Davir did not give in to the impulse to flee in terror was that he was confident he could deal with them. He was armed, and they moved so slowly. Raising his lasgun to his shoulder, he sighted in on the lead servitor and drilled a las-blast through the centre of its forehead.

The abomination kept on moving.

Davir fired again. Another las-blast hit the servitor, destroying even more of its brain. It made no difference. The monster continued to advance towards him. They all did. Their slow, shuffling footsteps were like drumbeats, sounding his death-knell.

Realising the seriousness of his predicament, Davir looked around for somewhere to run. But it was too late. While he had been firing at the lead servitor, the others had moved to cut off every avenue of escape.

He fired his lasgun again, letting off a salvo of rapid shots in the hope of blasting his way through them. It was to no avail. No matter how much damage he did to their human parts, the servitors seemed indifferent to his efforts. When he fired at the machine parts, it barely dented them—the las-blasts were simply absorbed or deflected.

Trying to buy time, Davir retreated. His hand went to his belt in search of a grenade, only to remember he had used them all up against the orks. He switched his lasgun to full auto and fired off the remainder of the power pack in a matter of seconds. It achieved nothing. The servitors kept coming.

They had backed him into a corner. As one, the servitors lifted their arms towards him. In the background, he could hear Serberus still screaming at them to kill him. Horrified, Davir realised he was going to die.

“Adept! Desist immediately!” a strangely familiar voice called out in a commanding tone. “Code command: epsilon beta nine-five, alpha seven-seven-seven omega! Adept! I am giving you an order!”

It was Scholar. Clutching at the wound on his temple, supported by Bulaven to the side of him, he advanced toward Serberus. The effect of his words was dramatic.

At a gesture from Serberus, the servitors suddenly stopped. Abruptly docile, the old man bowed to Scholar.

“Magos, I acknowledge your authority. I am yours to command.”

“Very good, adept,” Scholar said. “Return to your duties. I will speak with you later.”

“I never thought I’d ever be quite so happy to see you, Scholar,” Davir said to him, once the tech-adept and the servitors had tottered away. “Some day you will have to tell me just how you did that. In the meantime, however, with your help, I think perhaps I have a solution to all our problems...”

“Fire-team Three to Sergeant Chelkar. Are you receiving this, sergeant? Please respond.”

Chelkar was getting ready to make his peace with death by the time the call arrived. He did not intend to go quietly, but he could see no choice other than to accept the inevitable.

He had lost nearly half his men. It was all the remainder could do to hold off the orks. The enemy were everywhere. The Vardans were attempting to stage a fighting retreat, but it was hopeless. There was no way they could hold back the orks while making the long journey to the surface.

The call changed everything. Chelkar heard the comm-bead in his ear buzz into life, while a familiar voice came over the airwaves.

“Fire-team Three to Sergeant Chelkar. Are you receiving? Over.”

“Davir?” Chelkar voxed him back. “Is that you?”

“Most definitely, sergeant. Listen, we have to make this quick. We’re using some of the equipment down here to boost the signal and beat the interference from the tunnels, but Scholar says it won’t take long for it to burn out. I have some directions for you. I know you outrank me, but you have to do what I say. Trust me. I have a way to pull your fat out of the fire.”

“It’s called Tunnel Section A-92,” Davir had said, before giving him precise directions on how to reach it. Guiding his men toward it, Chelkar could only hope it wasn’t some sick joke. Davir had promised him a miracle. He hoped he could deliver.

“Sergeant! This way!”

Leading his men down the tunnels with the orks in hot pursuit, Chelkar suddenly saw Bulaven ahead. The big man was gesturing frantically, urging the Vardans forward.

“Quickly! Quickly!” Bulaven shouted, herding them towards a place where the tunnel briefly narrowed before widening again. “Scholar has jury-rigged the mechanism, but we don’t have much time!”

Chelkar turned to ask what he was talking about, but when the last of the Vardans were past the section of narrowed tunnel, Bulaven gave a signal.

“Now! Do it! They’re all across!”

A concealed metal shutter slammed down with the screech of rusted gears, cutting them off from the advancing horde of orks. Once the shutter came down, Davir and Scholar emerged from by the side of it.

“Not bad, eh, sergeant?” Davir smiled like a feline with a mouthful of cream. “It is an old sluice gate. We saw it on the sewer schematics and knew it was just what we needed.”

“That shutter won’t hold them back long,” Chelkar said. Already, he could hear as the orks pounded against it from the other side.

“It won’t need to,” Davir’s smile widened. “It only has to buy us the time to get back to the surface.”

He had lived in the sewers for so long. A lifetime, he supposed. Now, finally, it was over.

Deep below the city of Broucheroc, in the pumping station that had been his home for decades, Serberus stood in the main control room and felt an abiding sense of sorrow.

The feeling was unfamiliar to him. In many ways, so was every emotion. In order that he might better perform his labours, long ago his brain had been fitted with cybernetic implants designed to regulate and moderate his emotional responses.

He suspected the implants had begun to fail. Similarly, he was experiencing a curious malfunction in some of his organic systems. The ducts intended to provide lubrication to his eyes were overflowing. Tears stained his face.

For years, he had known nothing but duty. He had maintained the sewers, dedicated his every waking hour to ensure the system worked efficiently. It had been a constant losing battle, even more so since he had been left alone with only the servitors to help him.

Still, he had done what was expected. He had kept to his appointed task, forswearing the half-remembered pleasures of friendship and human interaction. In the face of advancing age, and the progressive decline of his own augmented systems, he had continued his labours.

He had not asked for thanks. As a servant of the Machine God, it was not his place to expect any honour for his work. In many ways, he was as much a component of the system as a bleed-valve or a humble restraining bolt. As with any component, ultimately he would wear down and need to be replaced. The only surprise was that he had continued in service as long as he had.

The news he was no longer needed had been unexpected. He had been told he was obsolete, as were the sewers. That last news had been the most surprising. With a single stroke, his entire life, every sacrifice he had endured, had been rendered meaningless.

He had been shocked, but there was no questioning his orders. They had come from the tall tech-priest—the one his bodyguards called “Scholar”. He looked and acted strangely for a magos, but that was hardly an issue. His status was clear. He had spoken to Serberus in machine code, using all the correct commandments and overrides.

A tiny part of Serberus had wanted to rebel. He had wanted to refuse the order, but the impulse had quickly passed. He understood he was merely a small cog in the Great Machine. It was not his place to defy his superiors. The fact that he had even considered it was simply further proof of his growing malfunction. His life was no longer useful. It was time to put an end to it.

Moving his hands over the controls responsible for overseeing the sewers’ function, Serberus adjusted the valves in the massive methane storage tanks beneath the pumping station. He raised the pressure in the tanks to critical levels.

He felt a tremor beneath his feet as the tanks struggled to hold together. He had pushed the system as far as it would go. His hand went to a red ignition switch, set under a protective plexiplast bubble in the centre of the control panel. He lifted the bubble, exposing the switch.

With a last prayer to the Machine God, Serberus followed the orders that Scholar had given him. He pressed the switch, sending a spark into the system, and welcomed oblivion.

The effect was spectacular. As the spark entered the system, the methane tanks ruptured as the gases inside ignited. Serberus was atomised by the blast, along with the pumping station.

A vast superheated cloud of burning methane exploded outward, expanding in every direction. Channelled by the tunnels, it moved at a speed faster than sound. By the time the roar of the explosion reached any given point in the sewers, there was nothing alive there to hear it—the fire cloud had already raced ahead, incinerating everything in its path.

In the ork-infested atrium, devastation came without warning. The weird fungal landscape of the birthing grounds was destroyed in an instant. Embryonic orks, yet to be born, burst into flame. Caught in the raging firestorm, every ork in the sewers was burned to ash. There were no survivors. The fire scoured the tunnels of life. Even ork spores could not withstand the inferno.

The fire cloud sped on. By the time it reached the surface the worst of the heat had dissipated, but sewer coverings were suddenly sent vaulting into the air all over Broucheroc due to the massive change of pressure. The ground beneath the city trembled. It was like an earthquake. Across the city, the pious made the sign of the aquila and prayed to the Emperor to stop the ground from rising to swallow them. Some wondered whether an angry god had awoken beneath their feet, a new horror to be added to the city's ills.

Briefly, the ground rumbled once more.

Then, it was quiet.

“We survived,” Chelkar said, afterwards.

He was standing in the shadow of a burned-out building, watching as the first glimmers of dawn touched the sky. Half an hour earlier, the Vardans had emerged from the sewers with hardly any time to spare. A few seconds, either way, and they would have been caught in the blast. As it was, they were still alive. Normally, it would have been a cause for celebration, but there were still other matters to which he needed to attend.

“Yes, we survived,” Davir said, standing beside him. He smiled, showing his bad teeth. “Of course, I never had any doubt of it—that I would survive myself, you understand. Frankly, this city hasn't yet come up with the ork who can kill me.”

“Thank the Emperor for small mercies, then,” Chelkar said. “It would be a shame to lose you.”

Nearby, the other survivors from the patrol were doing their best to recover from their ordeal. Men tended their wounds, or helped injured comrades. One of the Guardsmen had even managed to find fuel and a brazier. Troopers huddled around it for warmth. Ration bars were being handed around.

They had survived, but only at the cost of the lives of half the platoon. Chelkar hadn't lied to Davir when he said he did not want to lose him. He did not want to lose any of them.

"You realise, there will have to be a report made," Chelkar told Davir. "Probably a lot of them. General HQ and Sector Command will want to know about the orks in the sewers and where they came from. Most of all, they'll want to know how we destroyed the orks and we blew up the sewers. For that matter, I'd like the answer to it myself."

"It is a long story, sergeant," Davir shrugged. "Though, suffice to say, I acted with extraordinary heroism throughout the entire business. Still, perhaps it would be better if you heard the story tomorrow. When we are both more rested."

"When you have had the chance to come up with some convincing lies, you mean?"

"Precisely, sergeant."

"Very well," Chelkar agreed. "Tomorrow, then."

"Do you think we'll be in trouble?" Bulaven asked, later, once dawn had broken. "For destroying the sewers, I mean?"

He stood around the brazier with Davir and Scholar, trying to keep warm. The balmy warmth of the sewers was a distant memory.

"I shouldn't think so," Davir said. "They were mostly derelict, anyway. If some general now finds his indoor plumbing no longer works, it is just tough luck. He can shit in a ditch like the rest of us. Besides, Chelkar will help cover for us. He's a good man, the sergeant. Of course, one thing still interests me."

He turned toward Scholar and favoured him with a penetrating stare.

"I know you've always been a mine of information, Scholar. But I can't wait to hear your explanation for what happened in the sewers. Serberus may have been crazy, but it doesn't explain how you knew the codes the cogheads use. Well? I'm waiting."

"It's been a long day," Scholar said. "Perhaps you will let me tell you tomorrow?"

Davir grimaced, looking out at the landscape of the city where he woke up every day knowing it could be his last. He shrugged.

"Tomorrow, then," he said.

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