

MERCY RUN

Steve Parker

If any event in recent years highlights the folly of underestimating the ork warlord, Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka, it is the woeful mishandling of the Palmeros incident. That a significant part of the 18th Army Group (Exolon) managed to evacuate the planet in time must be scant consolation, if any, to the anguished souls of the billions who did not.'

Excerpted from Old Foe, New Threat - An Assessment of Orkoid Military Developments in the Late 41st Millennium, Praeceptor Jakahn of the Collegium Analytica (Imperial Navy), Cypra Mundi

67 kilometres east-north-east of Banphry, Vestiche Province, 07.12 local (16 hours 35 minutes to Planetkill)

'FOR THE LAST bloody time,' roared Wulfe, 'make way in the name of the Emperor!' He sat high in his cupola, squinting into the morning sun. All around his tank, the highway was clogged with shuffling figures, overburdened animals and carts piled so high they looked ready to tip over. The closest refugees tried to make way for Wulfe's tank, but there was too little room to move. They were hemmed in by the rest of the human tide.

Shouting was futile, Wulfe decided. The old scar on his throat itched like crazy. Scratching it, he looked east, tracing the broad line of shambolic figures all the way to the shimmering horizon. The sky was clear and blue, and the air was warming quickly.

Palmeros. Even after two years of war, much of this world was still rich and green. Clean, fresh air. Pure, crystal waters. He'd thought this world a paradise when the regiment had first landed. What would it be like, he'd wondered, to settle here, find a wife, till the land? Then word of the coming cataclysm had leaked out and things started coming undone. Seventeen massive asteroids, allegedly guided by the will of the ork warlord Ghazghkull Thraka, were

hurtling towards Palmeros on a deadly collision course.

Desperate masses poured from the cities, marching in their millions to the nearest evacuation zones. Those squeezing past Wulfe's tank had come from Zimmamar, the provincial capital in the north-east.

They followed The Gold Road west towards Banphry. Neither rich nor skilled enough to secure places on the Munitorum's evacuation lists, they'd find themselves facing lasguns and razorwire when they got there. Every last centimetre of space on the Navy's ships was already accounted for.

Wulfe's own regiment, the Cadian 81st Armoured, were already rolling their tanks into the cavernous bellies of the naval lifters that would carry them to the relative safety of space. Not the entire regiment, of course. Not he and his crew - the crew of the Lemman Russ battle tank, Last Rites. And not the crews of Steelhearted and Champion of Cerbera, both of which followed close behind, running escort for those damned Sororitas in their unmarked black Chimera.

What did I do, Wulfe wondered, to deserve the honour of leading this Eye-blasted wild-grox chase?

His driver inched Last Rites forward, gunning the engine threateningly but to little effect. The refugees were already doing their best to stand aside. To proceed any faster, Wulfe knew, would mean pulping innocent civilians under sixty tonnes of heavy armour.

Sister Superior Dessembra was hailing him again on the mission channel. He didn't feel like listening. She'd already ordered him to roll forward, to lead their tanks off the road by crushing anyone in their path, but the thought of it turned Wulfe's stomach. These people were innocent Imperial citizens, and he was unwilling to stain his hands with their blood.

He watched some of them reach out to touch Last Rites as they passed thinking, perhaps, that the hulking machine's holy spirit would bless them with a little luck on this final hopeless day. A few craned forward to plant reverent kisses on her thick, olive-painted hull. The sight stabbed at Wulfe's heart.

He knew the mission clock was ticking. The town of Ghotenz, site of their primary objective, was still almost 200km away. Every second wasted here brought he and his men closer to being stranded, to sharing the planet's

imminent annihilation. His laspistol began to feel heavy on his hip, calling for his attention. Dessembra was right; breaking free of the masses by force was the only option left. The tanks had to get off the road.

A warning shot, he reasoned, might get them moving. He didn't want to panic them - many would be hurt - but it would be kinder than crushing them.

He lifted his pistol from its holster and thumbed the safety off. Before he could fire, however, screams of terror erupted from behind him. He spun in his cupola to see Champion of Cerbera coughing thick black fumes from her exhausts as she rolled towards the edge of the highway. The old tank pulled dozens of helpless refugees under her, crushing their bones to powder. By the time she reached the roadside, her treads were slick with glistening blood. Cries of anger and grief filled the air.

'What are you doing, Kohl?' Wulfe shouted over the vox-link. Those are Imperial citizens!'

It was Dessembra who voxed back, They are jeopardising the success of our mission, sergeant. And so are you. I'm ordering you to run them down at once!'

The refugee column fell into utter chaos. People howled in terror. They began barging each other aside, desperate to flee the proximity of the war-machines. Animals brayed and kicked out at the people behind them. The old and weak were barrelling to the ground, begging for help as they were trampled to death. Even through the muffles of his headset and the roaring of engines, Wulfe could hear, too, the heart-rending cries of petrified children.

Steelhearted and the black Chimera were already following in Champion of Cerbera's wake. More refugees fell under their treads. Last Rites alone stood unmoving, surrounded by a sea of frantic people. Now, however, broad spaces began to appear in the crowd as people pushed away. Wulfe could see the rockcrete surface of the highway clearing before him. He ordered his driver to get them off the road.

Only a few hours into the mission, Wulfe was already at loggerheads with the woman in command. At least the treads of his tank, like his hands, were unstained with the blood of the Emperor's subjects... so far.

Evacuation Zone Sigma, Banphry, Vestiche Province, 4 hours earlier

WULFE DREW ASIDE the heavy fabric of the entrance and stepped into Second-Lieutenant Gossefried van Droï's command tent, keenly aware of how dishevelled he looked. Only moments ago, he'd been fast asleep in his bunk.

He cleared his throat, and the three men present turned to regard him.

'Sergeant Wulfe reporting as ordered, sir,' he said, throwing van Droï as sharp a salute as he could manage.

The second lieutenant snapped one back. He looked rough around the edges himself. Deep lines radiated from his eyes, coarse grey stubble covered his cheeks and chin, and there was an unlit black-leaf cigar in the corner of his mouth.


Bad news, then, thought Wulfe.

Van Droï only ever chewed unlit cigars when he was especially troubled.

'Did we interrupt your beauty sleep, sergeant?' asked van Droï. When I call a briefing, I expect my men to be punctual.'

Wulfe winced.

Van Droï indicated a steaming pot on a low table in the corner and said, 'Caffeine.' It was an order, not an offer. Wulfe walked over to pour himself a cup while the other two sergeants turned back around in their chairs.

One of these men was Alexander Aries Kohl, broad-faced and flat-nosed, commander of Champion of Cerbera, and a notorious martinet. With six years more experience than Wulfe, he'd proven himself a tough, reliable tank commander on battlefields from here to , but his personality, or lack of one, had so far barred him from advancement.

Sergeant Mikahl Strieber, on the other hand, seated on Kohl's right, was a hit with almost everyone in the 81st. Good-humoured and optimistic, the tall red-head took particular delight in anything that got under the skin of old Kohl. Some thought him reckless, but his survival suggested a certain talent, too.

Wulfe guessed he was somewhere between the two men; more experienced than Strieber and less detested than Kohl. Maybe that was why van Droï liked to

dump so much crap on him.

The second lieutenant indicated a chair, and Wulfe sat, apologising for his tardiness. 'Last Rites isn't due to board until oh-nine-hundred, sir, so the crew and I had a few drinks before lights-out.'

'Not a crime,' said van Droï. 'By the time you've heard me out, you'll be needing a few more.'

Wulfe raised an inquiring eyebrow. His commanding officer sighed and perched himself on the edge of his desk. He took the damp cigar from his mouth, looked down at it and said, 'You're astute men, all of you, so you know I haven't called you here for a smoke and a glass of joi. Tenth Company drew the short straw tonight, gentlemen, and when I say Tenth Company, I mean you.'

Wulfe felt a sinking sensation in his stomach.

Still staring hard at his cigar, van Droï continued. 'Last Rites, Champion of Cerbera and Steelhearted are being refuelled and reloaded. Your crews are being ordered to prep for duty as we speak. They'll be waiting for you at staging area six by the time we're finished here. Foe-breaker and Old Smashbones will be sitting this one out. They've been under heavy repairs since the breakout at Sellers' Gap. Given the losses we suffered there, your tanks have been chosen by default.'

'You're sending us back out?' exploded Strieber. 'You can't be serious, sir!'

'It's not something I'm likely to joke about, sergeant,' van Droï snapped. 'I've made my opinion clear to Colonel Vinnemann, but the top brass are having it their way.'

Sergeant Kohl muttered darkly to himself.

Wulfe's mouth had gone dry. This is a bad dream, he told himself. Wake up, Oskar. Wake up! He took a bitter swig of caffeine, gulped it down and said, 'Last Rites can't roll without a driver, sir. Corporal Borscht is still listed as critical. I checked on him myself about six hours ago.'

A few days earlier, Borscht had been bitten by some kind of local worm. He'd been in a coma ever since. His throat had swollen up like a watermelon, his

limbs were turning black, and he smelled like rotting meat.

Van Droï nodded grimly. 'I've taken care of it. Got you a replacement. It wasn't easy on such short notice, so you'll understand my choices were limited.'

The second lieutenant's nested apology set Wulfe even further on edge. Before he could ask van Droï to elaborate, however, Strieber interrupted. What's it all about, sir? Why send us back out now? By midnight tonight, the whole bloody planet will be spacedust!

The voice that answered was female and unfamiliar, and came from the entrance of the tent. Time enough, then, to salvage some glory from this mess.'

Wulfe turned in his seat. A short, rotund woman in flowing white robes walked past him to stand beside Second Lieutenant van Droï.

'Planetkill,' she said, 'will occur at exactly twenty-three forty-seven hours. Of course, with the Emperor's blessing, gentlemen, we'll all be far away by then.'

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98 kilometres east of Banphry, Vestiche Province, 09.12 local (14 hours 35 minutes to Planetkill)

LAST RITES SPED east, treads gouging dark furrows in the earth, throwing grassy clods of dirt up behind her. Her driver, Metzger, was pushing her over the plains with everything she had. The Gold Road was out of sight now, hidden from view by the shallow hills to the north. Wulfe had ordered the hatches open for ventilation, but he wasn't riding up in his cupola as he usually preferred. Instead, he was down in the turret basket, perched on his cracked leather command seat, cursing under his breath as he was lambasted by the voice on his headset.

'If you ever put civilians ahead of our objective again,' raged the sister superior through a crackle of static, 'I'll strip you of escort command. Sergeant Kohl has proven capable of grim necessities. I'm sure he'd be willing to take over.'

Wulfe wasn't about to argue with her. He'd seen her papers. They bore all the relevant signatures and seals, some from individuals so high up the ladder he'd never heard of them. Exolon's top brass had issued the woman absolute authority over the mission and, while she was smart enough to leave vehicular management in the hands of experienced tankers, she clearly wasn't about to let something as trivial as human compassion jeopardise her success. Sergeant Kohl apparently felt the same.

'Listen carefully, sergeant,' Dessembra continued, 'because I won't be repeating this. While I admire your sense of morality, I warn you there's no place for it on this mission. The life of a very important man depends on how quickly we reach Ghotenz and return. And all our lives depend on catching the last lifter out of Banphry, so do not test me again. Are we dear?'

Wulfe mentally blasted her with a string of insults, but he knew better than to verbalise them. 'Understood, sister,' he said, and broke the vox-link.

That black-hearted sow, he thought. What the hell was High Command thinking? And isn't all human life supposed to be sacred to the Order of Serenity?

At the same time, however, he couldn't deny a certain uncomfortable relief. Weighing duty against personal honour had always been difficult for him. While he'd wrestled with his conscience, Dessembra's cold disregard for the lives of the refugees had put the mission back on track. Whether he liked it or not, ultimately, she'd been right.

Very well, he swore. It won't happen again.

He'd stow his humanity for now. He could be stone-hearted, too, if necessary.

Keying the tank's internal vox, he said, 'Metzger, keep her running full ahead, eight degrees east-south-east. We'll rejoin the highway south of Gormann's Point. Shouldn't be many refugees so far out. We'll make some time up there.'

'Aye, sir,' replied the driver.

Wulfe rose from his seat and climbed into his cupola, immediately enjoying the warm wind on his face.

Last Rites rolled along at the head of the column. Twenty metres behind her,

Champion of Cerbera followed, turret facing south-east. Kohl was in his cupola, but he didn't return Wulfe's nod.

Following Champion of Cerbera, the unmarked black Chimera purred along with an easy grace, capable of twice the speed of the Leman Russ tanks, but hobbled by the need for their protection.

Steelhearted brought up the rear, her massive cannon pointing south-west. Seeing Wulfe, Sergeant Strieber threw him a casual salute.

Wulfe did likewise then turned to survey the land ahead. The plains north of here were still regarded as safe zones. Naval reconnaissance put the nearest orks just to the south, in the province of Drenlunde. If the mission group were to encounter any greenskins, they'd come from there.

Wulfe was gazing at the low, tree-crested hills to his left when a nasal voice spoke through his headset. It was Metzger. 'Could you check your panel, sir? The auspex is picking up a signal. Looks like a civilian SOS beacon about fifteen kilometres away, just north of our current heading.'

Wulfe ducked back down into the turret to check his station and found that Metzger was right. Someone was signalling for help.

His first instinct, he knew, was the wrong one. Even so, it took him a moment to overcome it. With an unpleasant twist in his gut, he voxed, 'No detours, corporal. We don't have time. Keep her at full ahead, please. Whoever they are, the Emperor will decide their fate.'

'Aye, sir,' replied Metzger, 'full ahead.'

There was no hint of judgement in the man's voice, but Wulfe heard it anyway.

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Evacuation Zone Sigma, Banphry, Vestiche Province, 3.5 hours earlier

WULFE KNEW SOMETHING was wrong the moment he reached the staging area. Standing in a pool of electric lantern-light, Viess, Siegler, Holtz and Garver were huddled together, slightly stooped in the way of all long-serving tankers, whispering and passing a single lho-stick around. With the exception of Siegler, the set of their shoulders told Wulfe they were in a foul mood.

As Sergeants Kohl and Strieber left him to greet their own crews, Wulfe breathed in the smell of promethium fumes on the night air. The field was almost empty. The last few engineering tents were waiting to be taken down. And there, just beyond the final tent in the row, sat the shadowed forms of three hulking monsters. They belched oily smoke from their twin exhausts as they sat with their engines idling. To Wulfe's eyes they were familiar, beautiful things. One, in particular, held his eye. He smiled as his gaze followed the sweep of her hull and the noble line of her powerful battle-cannon.

Last Rites.

A trio of robed figures, each grotesquely misshapen by the mechanical appendages that sprouted from their backs, performed final checks on her track assemblies and external fixtures.

Helmut Siegler was the first to spot his sergeant. He came racing over like a hyperactive puppy. After a brief, jittery salute, words began gushing out. Viess says it isn't right, sir,' he panted. 'Garver and Holtz won't do it, either. They said they won't ride with him, sir. The Eye is on him. That's what they said, sir. The Eye!'

Wulfe blew out an exasperated breath and walked past his loader, who fell into step behind him. He stopped a few metres in front of his men and returned their stiff, sullen salutes.

Viess the gunner. Holtz and Garver, the sponson men. He'd known them for years - as good a crew as any when the fighting started, and just as troublesome when they were idle. 'That's all this crap about not riding with the new man?' Wulfe demanded.

'It ain't right, sir,' said Garver glancing at the others for support.

'I heard that already' said Wulfe. 'Let's have some details.'

Holtz, the eldest of the three, took a step forward. A man like that ain't nothin' but bad news, sarge. It's wrong enough we're going back out, but to have a cursed man on crew... You'll be wanting him swapped out.'

Wulfe scowled. 'Are you speaking for me now, Holtz? I don't think so. And if you mean to complain about someone, you'll furnish me with a bloody name first.'

Holtz tipped his head by way of apology, but his blue eyes continued to blaze. Once upon a time, those eyes had won him his share of female hearts. That was before so much of his face had ended up looking like hashed groxmeat. Anti-loyalists back on Modessa Prime had hit the tank's left sponson with a shaped charge. Holtz had been inside. These days, the women he bedded fell into two categories - the charitable and the desperate - and Wulfe often found himself cutting the embittered man some slack.

Footsteps sounded on the grass and a nasal voice said, The man they're talking about is Corporal Amund Metzger, sir. It's me.'

Wulfe turned to face a tall, skinny man with dark eyes and a long, curving nose. He was dressed in standard-issue tanker's fatigues and, unlike the rest of Wulfe's crew, who mostly smelled of oil, sweat and propellant powder, he smelled of Guard-issue soap.

'Don't be too hard on your men, sir,' Metzger continued. They're not wrong. Hell, my own company wouldn't have me.'

'Lucky' Metzger, thought Wulfe. Thanks a lot, van Droi.

Everyone in the regiment knew the story of 'Lucky' Metzger. He had a reputation for climbing out of burning tanks unscathed while everyone else roasted to death. Among the crews of the 81st, that made Metzger about as popular as crotch-pox. Just twelve days ago, he'd survived yet another tank fatality. Now the whole regiment, including officers who should have known better, believed that riding with Metzger was a death sentence. It had nothing to do with his driving ability, of course. He'd been considered exceptional by his instructors back on Cadia.

Unlike his crew, Wulfe knew curses for cudbear crap. Death claimed everyone sooner or later. All a man could hope to do was fight it off for as long as possible

and sell his life dear. Only the Emperor Himself was immortal, after all.

All the same, his crew was spooked, and Wulfe knew he had to squash it right away. He glared at the new man. ‘Listen up, corporal. This so-called curse of yours is a load of bloody ball-rot. Everyone knows that if the turret takes a hit, nine times out of ten, the driver walks away. I’ve seen plenty of men crawl unharmed from burning tanks.’

Plenty, he admitted to himself, was stretching things a bit.

He pointed to his own tank and said, That big beauty over there is Last Rites. Finest in the regiment. Thirty-eight confirmed tank-kills and plenty more besides. And if you take care of her, she’ll take care of you. That’s how it works. Give me any less than your best, I’ll have you up in front of “Crusher” Cortez on more charges than he has metal fingers.’ Wulfe turned to the rest of his crew. That goes for all of you. The commissar isn’t nearly as forgiving as I am. Now get to your damned stations.’

Wulfe’s men were about to move off when the clanking of cast-iron treads made them stop. An unmarked black Chimera, workhorse troop-transporter of the Imperial Guard, ground to a halt near the waiting Leman Russ tanks. Its rear hatch opened, spilling orange light onto the dark ground, and disgorged three female figures clad in the long white robes of the Order of Serenity.

‘Women,’ gasped Viess. ‘And one of them looks good!’

They’re not women! barked Wulfe, ‘they’re Adeptus Sororitas, so don’t even think about it, Viess. I don’t need the hassle.’

Viess groaned and mumbled something euphemistic about firing his ‘gun’. Garver and Siegler chuckled. Holtz managed a grin. Metzger’s mouth barely twitched.

With Sister Superior Dessembra leading them, the women approached the crew. ‘Sergeant Wulfe,’ said Dessembra, ‘we should be underway as soon as possible, but perhaps a quick introduction. Just as a courtesy. I doubt you’ll need to communicate with my subordinates once we’re underway. My driver, Corporal Fichtner, will introduce himself via vox-link.’

Wulfe shrugged. ‘Then the courtesy is unnecessary, sister superior. But to show

my respect for your order...’ Offering shallow bows to the two sister-acolytes, he said, ‘Sergeant Oskar Andreas Wulfe at your service, as are my crew, the men of the Leman Russ Last Rites.’

Dessembra’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. She gestured to the tall, grim-faced woman on her right and said, ‘This is Sister Phenestra Urahlis.’

Wulfe smiled genially at the imposing acolyte, but her expression remained fixed like a mask.

‘And this,’ said Dessembra with a wave of her hand, ‘is Sister Ahzri Mellahd.’

Sister Mellahd smiled and gave a shallow curtsy. Her robes, cinched tight at the waist, accentuated a striking figure. She was young, curvaceous and excruciatingly pretty.

Viess took a step forward. ‘You must see my cannon, sister. It’s huge!’

Wulfe’s hand flashed out, clipping the gunner on the side of his head.

‘Ow!’

‘Get to your bloody stations, all of you,’ he growled. ‘Internal systems check. Four minutes.’

‘But, sir,’ Garver moaned, ‘the cogboys have already run two full sys-‘

‘Don’t make me repeat myself, soldier. Move!’

With a mixture of muttered complaints and angry scowls, the crew jogged off towards the tank. Siegler raced over to it with his typical abundance of child-like energy. Dessembra followed him with her eyes.

‘That one seems a little Throne-touched, sergeant,’ she said, nodding in Siegler’s direction.

‘Injured in the line of duty,’ replied Wulfe, tapping the side of his head with a finger. ‘And yet, without doubt, the best man on my crew. He’s the fastest loader in the regiment, and that’s merely one measure of his worth. Sister Mellahd here, on the other hand, possesses the kind of beauty that makes trouble among men.’

Best she stay out of sight during the operation.'

At the word operation, Dessembra flinched. She turned back around to face Wulfe. 'My sister-acolyte is quite without sin, sergeant. It is undisciplined minds that are to blame for such troubles. I'm speaking in general terms, of course.'

'Of course,' said Wulfe, brushing off the mild insult.

Sergeants Strieber and Kohl were already sitting in the cupolas of their respective tanks. You can confess your depravities later, Wulfe,' Strieber called out. 'Let's get our arses into forward gear.'

Dessembra frowned. 'Crude though he is,' she said, 'Sergeant Strieber is quite right. Time is not on our side, sergeant. Get us to Ghotenz. Someone there requires our immediate attention.' She made the sign of the aquila on her chest then turned and led her subordinates back to the Chimera.

Wulfe strode over to his tank. In the sky above, vessel after overcrowded vessel was pulling away from the planet's orbit, and here he was, about to roll out on a last-minute mercy run, probably for some damned incompetent blue-blood who'd gotten himself into hot water.

He clambered up the hull of his tank, swung his legs over the lip of the cupola, slid through the hatch and dropped down into the turret basket. As soon as he was seated, he pulled on his headset, activated the tank's intercom, and issued instructions to his new driver.

With their headlamps throwing stark light out ahead of them, the four Imperial war-machines rolled off into the night.

82 kilometres west-north-west of Ghotenz, East Vestiche, 13.09 local (10 hours 38 minutes to Planetkill)

THEY REJOINED THE highway about sixty kilometres south of the abandoned outpost at Gormann's Point. There were no refugees in sight. Perhaps the locals knew they'd never make it to Banphry in time and had opted to die at home. Or perhaps they'd already passed through. Wulfe hoped their absence wasn't a sign of something more sinister.

The surface of the highway dropped gradually, easing its way down into a deep sandstone canyon known as Lugo's Ditch. Wulfe rode high in the cupola, warm winds whipping his lapels as he scanned the area for threats. Craggy, sandstone walls rose high on either side. Wulfe marvelled at the natural beauty of the place, fascinated, in particular, by the rich and varied hues of the rocky strata.

It hadn't escaped his notice, of course, that the canyon was an ideal place for an ambush. There was no word that the orks had spread this far north, but he put his men on high alert anyway. Sergeants Kohl and Strieber, he saw, were equally uneasy. Both sat in their cupolas, peering through magnoculars at the rocky outcrops on either side.

Taking his cue from them, Wulfe dropped down into the turret basket to retrieve his own pair. While he was there, a light began to wink on the vox-board. It was Sergeant Kohl.

'Wulfe,' he said, 'we're well out from the naval patrol routes now.'

'I know that, Kohl. What's your point?'

'My point, sergeant, is that Last Rites is the only vehicle here with a decent vox-array. Hasn't there been any kind of intelligence update from regimental HQ?'

It was a fair question, but the answer wasn't likely to satisfy. 'No updates,' replied Wulfe. 'If they've anything to tell us, they'll get in touch. But you said it yourself; we're outside of the patrol zone. The fighter wings have their hands full running defensive sweeps for the lifters. I think we can forget about aerial reconnaissance updates.'

Kohl was quiet. A moment later, he signed off.

Though Wulfe's tank boasted a crew of six, only two other men shared the discomfort of the turret basket with him. Viess and Siegler sat within arm's reach of their commander, backs ramrod-straight, eyes pressed to their scopes, scouring the terrain for the first sign of trouble. Wulfe hoped Garver and Holtz were being equally vigilant, tucked away in their cramped, stifling sponsons. Metzger, up front in the driver's compartment, had more space than anyone else, but not by much.

The tank's intercom, usually alive with dirty jokes and crude banter during long

journeys, was silent save the background hiss of white noise. The silence told Wulfe just how tense his crew were.

Having fetched his magnoculars, he was about to climb back up when he heard someone say, 'Stop the tank.'

He wasn't sure he'd heard it correctly at first. The voice came through his headset as little more than a whisper, almost lost against the background rumble of the engine. 'What was that?' he voxed back.

'What was what, sir?' asked Viess.

'Stop the tank,' someone whispered again, clearer this time.

'Do not stop the damned tank,' Wulfe barked. Who the bloody hell said that? Holtz? Was that you?'

'Don't blame me, sarge,' replied Holtz. 'I never said anything.' 'Garver?' Wulfe demanded. 'It wasn't me, sir.'

Wulfe placed a hand on Siegler's shoulder and half-turned him in his seat. 'Siegler, did you just call for the tank to be stopped?'

'Negative, sir,' the loader replied, shaking his head emphatically.

Wulfe had never known Siegler to lie. He didn't think the man was about to start now. Who said to stop the tank? One of you said it, Eye-blast you. Confess!'

'Do you want me to stop the tank, sir?' asked Metzger in obvious confusion.

'No, by the Throne! Keep her steady in fifth.'

'I never heard anyone say to stop, sir,' voxed Garver.

'Me, neither,' said Viess.

They sounded worried now. Wulfe was spooking them. It wasn't like him to get flustered this way and it certainly wasn't like him to hear voices.

When we get back to base,' he told them, 'I'll be checking the vox-logs. Then we'll see which of you smart-arses is having a laugh.' With a scowl, he climbed

back up into his cupola. What he saw when his eyes cleared the rim of the hatch turned his blood to ice and jolted him with such a spasm of fear that he dropped the magnoculars.

They struck the turret floor with a loud clang.

A shocking, impossible figure stood on the road up ahead, arms raised, palms out, eerily insubstantial despite the glaring sunlight.

Borscht!

The dark hollows of his eyes locked with Wulfe's. His voice thundered in Wulfe's mind, drowning out everything else. Stop the tank!

Wulfe's finger flew to the transmit stud on his headset. 'Stop the bloody tank! All stop! All stop!'

Metzger braked hard on command and Wulfe was slammed forward, ribs hammering against the rim of the hatch. He winced in sudden flaring pain. When he opened his eyes a split second later, the figure of his old friend had completely disappeared.

'By the bloody Golden Throne!' gasped Wulfe.

Panicked voices tumbled over each other through his headset.

What's wrong, sir?'

Where are they, sir? I have no targets. I repeat, no targets.' 'Give us a bearing, sarge!'

Wulfe dropped back into his seat, shaking, chilled to the bone. No, he thought. No way. It's nerves. It wasn't Borscht. It can't have been. It's me. I must be cracking. It's the pressure. It's the damned mission clock. It's...

The vox-board was blinking furiously with calls from the other vehicles. On reflex, Wulfe reached out and keyed the mission channel.

What in the warp are you playing at, Wulfe?' bellowed Sergeant Kohl. 'You bloody fool. If my man wasn't so alert we'd be halfway up your exhaust by

now!’

‘Why have you stopped, sergeant?’ demanded Sister Superior Dessembra.

Wulfe didn’t know what to say. He felt numb. He sat rigid, eyes wide with fear and confusion. Siegler and Viess stared back at him, deeply discomfited. He forced himself to answer the uproar over the vox. ‘I... I thought I saw something,’ he said. ‘But it’s gone now.’

‘What did you see?’ Sergeant Strieber asked. ‘I don’t know, damn it!’

Typically, Sergeant Kohl’s meagre patience ran out first. ‘You don’t know? Throne curse you, Wulfe! Planetkill is just hours away and you’re braking for shadows? We don’t have time for this.’

‘I know that,’ Wulfe snapped.

‘Enough!’ voxed Dessembra. ‘I want someone else on point. Sergeant Strieber, your tank will move up and lead us on. Last Rites will guard the rear.’

‘Sister superior,’ said Strieber cheerily, ‘I thought you’d never ask.’

Before Wulfe could protest, Steelhearted broke formation, rumbled past the other vehicles and accelerated up the highway.

‘Wait!’ Wulfe shouted over the vox. ‘I said wait, Throne damn you!’

But it was too late. Strieber’s tank hadn’t gone two hundred metres when the road bucked under her with an ear-splitting boom. A pillar of fire erupted from the surface, ripping away her left tread, spinning heavy iron links off in all directions.

‘Landmine!’ shouted Metzger over the vox.

‘Strieber, respond!’ demanded Kohl. ‘By the blasted Eye!’

‘Steelhearted, respond!’ voxed Wulfe.

Groaning and cursing, Strieber answered a moment later. ‘Bloody orks mined the road!’ he hissed.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ snapped Kohl. They haven’t got the brains for that.’ He didn’t sound at all convinced.

Through his vision-blocks, Wulfe saw dark, ugly shapes pour from the shadowed gullies on either side of the canyon. The air filled with the growl and sputter of countless throbbing engines.

‘Button up, Gunheads!’ he yelled over the vox. ‘Lock hatches! Safeties off!’ He reached up and slammed his own hatch shut, locking it tight in one practiced motion.

‘He’s right!’ voxed Strieber, panic charging his voice. ‘It’s a warp-damned ambush!’

61 kilometres north-west of Ghotenz, East Vestiche, 13.51 local (9 hours 56 minutes to Planetkill)

THERE WERE HUNDREDS of them.

Wulfe’s heart was pounding in his chest as he watched them spill out onto the canyon floor. ‘Close ranks,’ he ordered on the mission channel. ‘Form up on Steelhearted. Defensive pattern thetal’

Metzger gunned Last Rites into action. Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera leapt forward a second later, speeding towards Sergeant Strieber’s crippled tank.

Steelhearted lay utterly immobilised, track-links scattered around her in a forty-metre radius. Her left sponson was still burning. The shrivelled, blackened body of its occupant, Private Kolmann, hung from its twisted hatch. The other vehicles reached her side now, slid to a halt, and spun on their treads to face outward in a defensive, four-pointed star.

‘Stinking greenskins,’ spat Wulfe. ‘It’s a wonder we didn’t smell them.’

Among the myriad enemies of mankind, it was the old foe he hated most. An image flashed through his mind; the blazing red eyes of one particular ork he’d encountered on Phaegos II. The scar on his throat was a memento of that day - the day he’d almost bled to death.

‘Holy Throne!’ voxed Kohl. ‘How many of them are there?’

Wulfe wasn’t about to count. Buggies and bikes of every possible description roared into the canyon. They were gaudy things, painted red, with fat black tyres that churned up the dirt. Many were decorated with crude skull motifs or images of tusked deities. Some boasted far grislier forms of decoration -strings of severed human heads and banners of flayed skin. But the ugliness of the machines themselves was nothing compared to that of their riders and passengers. The orks were hideous, malformed brutes that waved oversized blades and pistols. Their bodies were twisted and hunched with overgrown muscle. Their eyes and noses were miniscule, but their mouths were wide and full of massive, jutting yellow teeth.

The throaty roar of each engine merged into a cacophony that filled the air. Thick black fumes spewed from exhaust pipes as the orks raced over the sun-baked land, kicking up clouds of dust behind them. But they weren’t surging forward. Not yet. They surrounded the Imperial tanks and began circling them at range, moving anti-clockwise.

‘What the hell are they doing?’ voxed Strieber.

The answer came all too quickly. From random points in the massive circle, small groups of ork vehicles suddenly broke formation and sped inward towards their prey.

The hull of Last Rites rattled under a heavy barrage of stubber rounds.

‘Damn,’ shouted Viess.

‘They’re trying to confuse us,’ Wulfe voxed to the other tanks. ‘If we can’t predict their angles of attack, there’s a chance they can close the gap. We have to start thinning them out, now! Siegler, high explosives!’

‘Aye, sir!’ With thick, powerful arms, the loader hefted a shell from the magazine on his right, slammed it into the cannon’s breech, and yanked the locking lever.

The loading light turned red. ‘She’s lit, sir!’

Through the vision-blocks, Wulfe spotted a knot of large, open-topped half-

tracks among the smaller, faster ork vehicles. They were filled to overflowing with monstrous green savages. 'Viess,' said Wulfe. 'Traverse left. Ork half-tracks. Four hundred metres.'

Squinting through his scope, Viess spotted them easily. The ork passengers were howling with insane laughter and excitement. Their blades glinted in the sun. He hit the traverse control pedals, and the turret swung around. Electric motors hummed as he adjusted the angle of elevation. Targets marked!' he called out.

Wulfe braced himself in his seat. 'Fire main gun!'

Last Rites rocked backwards with the massive pressure of exploding propellant. Her hull shuddered with the thunderous signature boom of her awesome main gun. The turret basket filled with the coppery smell of burnt fyceline.

Through the vision-blocks, Wulfe saw the leading ork half-track vanish in a great mushroom of fire and dirt. The vehicles nearby were blasted into the air, spinning end over end. They smashed hard to the ground, spilling some of their foul passengers, crushing and mangling the rest. Shrapnel scythed out from the blast, eviscerating scores more.

It was a fine shot.

Bikes and buggies began swerving to avoid the burning wreckage, and the ork circle tightened. The enemy swerved inwards with increasing frequency to pepper the tanks with stubber-fire, but Last Rites boasted front armour 150mm thick, slanted to deflect solid rounds. The greenskins' armament didn't pack enough penetrating power to pose an immediate threat.

The real danger was in letting them engage at close-quarters.

A regular drumbeat of deep, sonorous booms told Wulfe that the other tanks were firing round after round into the ork horde. Every impact threw shattered vehicles and torn green bodies into the air. Alien blood splashed on the canyon floor, mixing thickly with the sand. In only the first few minutes of the battle, hundreds of greenskins were blasted apart by the legendary firepower of the Leman Russ's main battle-cannon.

Like her sister tanks, Last Rites boasted a powerful hull-mounted weapon, too. Wulfe ordered Metzger to fire the lascannon at will. Seconds later, blazing

beams of light lanced out to strafe the ork horde. The scorching las-blasts cut straight through light armour, igniting fuel tanks and sending bikes and buggies spinning into the air on great fountains of orange flame.

A trio of ork bikes swerved just in time to avoid destruction and came screaming towards Last Rites. Bolter-fire from the sponsons shredded two of them, but the last veered from side to side, racing unharmed through the hail of shells. Wulfe saw the hideous rider grin and lob a grenade towards his tank.

‘Brace!’ he shouted, and prayed that the blast wouldn’t wreck their treads.

There was a dull boom and the tank shook. Lights flickered in the turret basket. Wulfe’s diagnostics board reported trouble with the right sponson. He ordered the crew to sound off.

Garver didn’t answer.

Wulfe ordered Garver to respond.

Nothing.

‘Damn it all,’ Wulfe shouted. We’ve lost the right sponson. Garver’s gone!’

‘No!’ yelled Holtz over the vox. Those bastards!’

In his periscopic sight, Wulfe watched the ork bike accelerating away. As it passed the black Chimera, it was blasted apart by a searing spray of multilaser fire.

Someone was manning the transport’s turret-mounted weapon. The multilaser turned quickly to target an ork truck and fired again, charring wide horizontal slashes in flesh and metal alike. Slaughtered orks tumbled from the back of the truck in limp, lifeless pieces.

Wulfe wondered if Dessembra herself was dispensing the Emperor’s judgement. Or was it one of her acolytes? Whoever it was had avenged Garver. He’d have to thank them later.

They’re getting closer,’ voxed Metzger. They’re using smoke from the wrecks to bridge the distance.’

‘Stay calm, you dirty fetcher,’ snapped Holtz. ‘Keep firing. The sarge won’t let them get on top of us.’

You bet I won’t,’ added Wulfe, but he saw how quickly the gap was closing. There were just too damned many of them. Sooner or later, they’d get close enough to tag the tanks with high-explosives, or some monster with a flamethrower would press the nozzle of his weapon to a ventilation slit and cook them all alive.

We can’t keep this up, thought Wulfe. Strieber, you idiot. If you hadn’t hamstrung yourself....

But Strieber’s tank was hamstrung, and Wulfe was quickly realising that this battle couldn’t be won. The mission clock kept ticking. There just wasn’t time to fight this one out. And Strieber couldn’t hope to retread his tank under fire. Last Rites, Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera had to break through now.

They had to leave Steelhearted behind.

Wulfe saw another armoured half-track, overloaded with roaring ork infantry, break from the circle and make straight towards his tank. Metzger fired a blast from the lascannon, but the truck’s thick front armour soaked it up. Wulfe called out to Viess and the gunner swung the turret around with no time to spare. ‘She’s lit,’ shouted Siegler.

Viess didn’t hesitate. His left foot stamped on the firing pedal. Last Rites bounced on her suspension as her battle-cannon spat its deadly payload straight into the driver’s cab of the enemy machine.

A flash. A boom. An earthshaking explosion at point-blank range. Metallic clattering sounded on the roof of the tank as a shower of burning junk and body parts rained down.

‘Good shot,’ voxed Metzger with obvious relief.

‘Great shot,’ Viess corrected.

Wulfe was more concerned with the dense cloud of black smoke that was rolling over them from the blazing frame of the ruined enemy vehicle. ‘We can’t see a blasted thing now. They’ll be coming straight for us. Sponson gunners, stay

sharp!’

He used the plural out of habit, and the loss of Garver suddenly stung him. They hadn’t been particularly close, not like he and Borscht, but the sponson gunner had been crew. Love them or hate them, crew was family.

Dessebra’s voice sounded in Wulfe’s ears. “We can’t stay here. Move out, now!’

‘We must thin them out more,’ Wulfe voxed back. Adrenaline was surging through him, making his blood sing. At least enough to give Strieber a fighting chance.’

‘Priorities, sergeant,’ hissed Dessebra. There’s nothing you can do for him. Look to your rear. We have to go at once!’

Wulfe checked the rear-facing vision-blocks and felt his battle-rush bleed off in an instant. It was obvious now. The bikes and buggies were just a diversion, intended to harry the tanks and slow them down while the real firepower closed off the canyon at either end. Grinding its way south-east along the road was a loose formation of ork war-machines -massive, heavily armoured and bristling with fat-barrelled cannon.

Wulfe was filled with rage as he looked at them -at least half of the enemy armour had been built from the looted carcasses of fallen Imperial machines. The foul xenos had mutilated and desecrated them.

Under thick plates of armour bolted on at all angles, he saw the familiar forms of a Basilisk mobile-artillery platform, three Chimera transports, and a disfigured Leman Russ. Other vehicles in the formation seemed entirely built from scratch to some maniacal alien design.

‘By the blasted Eye!’ he spat. Demonstrating impressive aptitude for their kind, the orks had managed to outflank him.

The canyon shook with a ripple of ork cannon fire. ‘Incoming!’ shouted Wulfe. Explosive shells rained down on the highway. The resulting detonations sent up great clouds of dirt and debris, but little else. The ork cannonade was falling far short of its target, but that wouldn’t be the case for much longer.

‘Emperor above!’ voxed Sergeant Kohl. They’re fielding heavy artillery!’

We break through now,’ voxed Wulfe, ‘or we’re dead men.’

Strieber was almost screaming over the vox. ‘You can’t be serious, Wulfe. You can’t possibly leave us here. You can’t!’

Wulfe felt sick to his stomach as he answered. ‘I’m sorry, Strieber. We’re out of options.’

‘My tank, my crew - we’re Gunheads, damn you! Don’t you run from this fight. Don’t you turn away from us, you rotten bastard!’

There was another rumble of thunder from the ork cannons. The impact blasts were much closer this time. Last Rites was showered with dirt. The enemy armour continued to zero in.

Wulfe spoke through clenched teeth. ‘Lead us out, Metzger. Full ahead. Keep her off the highway. There’ll be other mines there. Siegler, load her up. Armour-piercing. Viess, get ready to break a hole in them. They’ll not stop us here!’

Throne blast you, Wulfe!’ screeched Strieber.

I’m sorry, Strieber. I truly am. But you must see that there’s no other way. Keep firing. Keep fighting. Help us break through, and I promise the regiment will remember and honour your sacrifice. It’s all I can offer you now.’

Last Rites lurched into motion just before another volley of heavy shells shook the canyon floor. With a sudden convulsion of dirt and rock, a great shell-crater appeared where she’d stood only a moment before. The ork armour was now in range, and still the bikes and buggies raced forward with insane abandon, uselessly spraying the Imperial tanks with volleys of stubber-fire.

In subdued tones, Strieber voxed, ‘Good luck then, Wulfe. We’ll fight on for as long as we can. I... I hope you make it back to Banphry.’

Viess shouted ‘Brace!’ and fired the tank’s main gun. Three hundred metres away, a bastardized ork Chimera was violently peeled apart. Beside Siegler, the cannon’s breech slid back, dumping the empty shell-casing in the brass-catcher on the floor. With servitor-like efficiency, the loader slid a fresh armour-piercing

shell into the breech, yanked the lever, and shouted, 'Lit!'

Metzger shifted the tank up into third gear, accelerating out past the crippled Steelhearted. Viess swung the turret left, zeroing in on a bulky ork battlewagon. He adjusted for elevation, compensated for the tank's forward motion, prayed to the Emperor for a clean kill, and fired. Last Rites skewed to the right with the force of the cannon's recoil, but didn't slow. The round slashed brightly through the air, then buried itself deep in the body of the ork machine. It must have pierced the battlewagon's fuel tanks, because the vehicle was blown so high it flipped onto its roof. Flaming wreckage and charred bodies littered the land and roaring fires blazed from its twisted metal carcass.

Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera followed close behind Last Rites. Wulfe saw a tongue of fire flash out from Kohl's battle-cannon. The ork-modified Lemman Russ on the far left rolled to a stop, smoke billowing from a large hole in its turret armour. A moment later, flames erupted from inside. Burning alien bodies began tumbling out of the vehicle's hatches, but it was too late for them. The roasted greenskin crew twitched, then lay still on the sand.

'Keep firing,' ordered Wulfe. 'We're almost through.'

They roared past the chugging ork tanks, narrowly dodging a fusillade of high-explosive shells and rockets. Viess fired directly into the nearest, blowing the entire front section up into the air in a fiery spin. Kohl's tank spat again and crippled another with a shot that shredded its right track-assembly. The black Chimera was firing constantly, but her multilaser could do little damage to the enemy's heavy armour. Instead, Dessembra targeted a large, open-topped truck and managed to slaughter a score of ork infantry.

Then they were through. The canyon lay behind them and open lands stretched out ahead.

The heavy ork machines turned to follow, but they were far slower than the well-oiled Imperial tanks. Only the surviving bikes and buggies had the speed to give chase. They charged forward in pursuit, many of them forgetting the mines that their own warband had laid on the highway surface. Those that weren't blown to pieces closed the gap quickly, but their weapons were inadequate. As Last Rites, Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera sped away, Wulfe ordered Viess to turn the turret and pick off their lightly-armoured pursuers with the co-axial

autocan-non.

Wulfe noticed a blinking light on his vox-board. It was Kohl. He was calling on a closed channel. Whatever he had to say, it wasn't for Dessembra's ears.

Wulfe opened the link. What is it, sergeant?

'I'm going back,' said Kohl.

'You're what?'

Think about it, Wulfe. The orks will chase us all the way to Ghotenz unless they have a fight to hold them here.' There was a pause. 'Besides, I've got blinking lights all over the place. We took a big one on the rear decking. The cooling system's almost out and so is the extractor. We can break down halfway to the objective, or we can turn back and buy you some time. I'd rather go out fighting, if it's all the same to you. Maybe we can help Strieber and his crew go out in style.'

Wulfe didn't know how to respond. He felt hollow.

'Get those damned women to Ghotenz,' Kohl voxed. 'Complete the mission for the honour of the regiment, if nothing else. You can still make it off-world if you don't mess about'

Wulfe wished he could believe it. He'd stopped looking at his chronometer. It only offered bad news. The orks had cost them so much, and not just in terms of time. A voice in his head told him to follow Kohl's example, to die honourably alongside his fellow Gunheads. But another told him that the honour of the regiment had to come first. He had to see the mission through.

'What do I tell Dessembra?' he asked Kohl.

The truth. I'll give those green bastards plenty to do, by the Throne. They won't be missing you.'

Honour and sacrifice. Wulfe saw that he'd been misjudging Kohl for years, blinded to the man's nobility by his icy manner. Whatever Kohl's flaws, he was a true soldier and a man of uncompromising bravery.

If I survive this mess, Wulfe promised himself, I'll make sure van Droï puts Kohl and Strieber up for the Medallion Crimson. It's not much, but it's something.

Kohl didn't wait for any kind of approval. Through the rear vision-blocks, Wulfe saw Champion of Cerbera peel off and swing back around towards the canyon. Soon, she was lost in her own dust cloud.

Last Rites and the black Chimera raced on in the other direction. Dessembra was hailing Wulfe on the mission channel and, reluctantly, he opened the link.

'I demand to know what's going on! Why won't Sergeant Kohl answer me?'

Wulfe didn't bother to keep the tiredness and frustration from his voice as he replied, 'Sergeant Kohl is ensuring our escape. His tank is badly damaged. He has decided to give his life and the lives of his crew for the success of this mission.'

Dessembra paused. That's... acceptable,' she said. 'Let's take advantage of it'

Wulfe couldn't contain his contempt any longer. 'Listen to me, Sororitas,' he hissed over the vox. "Whoever we're supposed to rescue at Ghotenz had better be a bloody saint reborn, because you and your damned superiors have a hell of a lot to answer for. Do you hear me?'

He cut the connection before she could respond.

33 kilometres north-west of Ghotenz, East Vestiche, 15.09 local (8 hours 38 minutes to Planetkill)

WITH THE CLOCK driving her hard, Last Rites churned up the surface of the highway, but not so fast that Wulfe could outrun his guilt and anger. His thoughts were on the men he'd left behind. The absence of Garver's voice, in particular, pained him as he knew it must pain the rest of his crew.

He was still shaken, too, by his vision of old Borscht. Since the battle in the canyon, Viess had been pressing for an explanation. How had he known to stop the tank? What had he seen from his cupola? Whose voice had he heard?

The others added their own questions now. Wulfe wished they'd let it go, but they wouldn't. In the end, he exploded at them, ordering them to shut their mouths and concentrate on the job in hand. The mention of Commissar Cortez was enough to put an end to it, at least temporarily.

Wulfe didn't grudge them their curiosity. It was only natural. But he couldn't reconcile himself with what he'd seen and heard. Borscht was in a hospital bed back in Banphry. There were no two ways about it. On the other hand, Wulfe wasn't about to concede insanity, either.

Metzger's voice sounded over his headset, announcing their proximity to the primary mission objective. Ghotenz was less than an hour away. That helped Wulfe to centre his thoughts a little.

It was mid-afternoon now, and the air inside the turret was stiflingly hot. Wulfe ordered all the hatches open, making an immediate difference. He rode up in the cupola and, as Last Rites and the black Chimera approached the low hills that sheltered the town, he watched his tank's shadow gradually lengthen on the road in front of him as the sun moved ever westwards.

Only eight hours left until the first massive impact shook this world. In the global firestorm, every living thing would be blasted to ash. It would be a quick, merciful death for most, but it was no soldier's death. There was no glory in it.

'There's something on the road up ahead, sir,' reported Metzger.

Wulfe scanned the highway and spotted the object in question. Metzger had good eyes. There was something approaching, large and dark, but indistinct. As the two Imperial machines sped closer to it, the shape resolved itself into the form of a great, shaggy boviath, three metres tall at its massive, hunched shoulders and just as broad. Six curving black horns framed its leathery face. It dragged a large cart, filled with people, up the highway towards them. Wulfe counted twenty passengers, most of them adults.

Last Rites pulled up beside the cart and Wulfe ordered its driver to halt. The cart's driver shouted something to his beast and, with a deep, resonating moan, the boviath slowed to a stop. Every man, woman and child in the cart turned their eyes towards Wulfe, but it was a tall, ugly woman in the gaudy robes of the Palmerosi merchant class who addressed him.

‘You’ve come, then,’ she said. You’ve come to stop it.’

Wulfe locked eyes with her. To stop what, udoche? As was proper here, he used the local term for a woman one doesn’t wish to court. A short, bearded man seated beside her, presumably her husband, nodded his approval.

The madness, of course,’ answered the woman. ‘Ghotenz is in utter chaos. The riots. The killings. We were lucky to get out alive.’ At these words, some of the men in the cart patted old civilian-model laslocks.

So the townsfolk are rioting, thought Wulfe. Great! Thank you for your warning, udoche,’ he said. ‘We’ll do what we can. But where are you going?’

‘We’re going to evacuate. We’ve heard of vast ships at Banphry and intend to buy our passage off-world.’

Just for a moment, Wulfe considered telling them the truth. They’d never make it to Banphry. Even if they had time, even if there were no orks on the road ahead, no amount of money would help them. They were doomed. But perhaps it was kinder to let their hopes carry them to the end.

‘Be careful on the highway,’ he told them. There may be greenskins in Lugo’s Ditch.’

‘I’ve yet to see one of these green-kin,’ said the woman. ‘But the pamphlets say loud shouting is weapon enough against them.’ She jabbed her thumb at a barrel-chested man in the back of the cart. ‘Brudegar has the loudest voice in Ghotenz. He’ll drive the aliens from our path.’

Wulfe gave an involuntary shake of his head. This kind of fatal ignorance was the Imperial propaganda machine at its worst. Citizens rarely knew the danger orks represented until they were bearing down on them roaring ‘Waaagh!’ and all the shouting in the Imperium wouldn’t do a damned thing.

Conscious of the black Chimera idling impatiently behind him, Wulfe waved the locals on, and the cart-driver cracked his whip. The massive boviath brayed and began hauling its burden off up the highway, and the Imperial vehicles resumed their journey.

Black smoke could be seen now, rising into the afternoon sky from just beyond

the next hill. Only a few kilometres separated them from their objective.

Riots, the woman had said. And killings.

Wulfe steeled himself, thinking that perhaps the least pleasant phase of this whole fiasco might yet lie ahead.

Ghotenz, East Vestiche, 16.02 local (7 hours 45 minutes to Planetkill)

HE WAS RIGHT.

Ghotenz, when he saw it, was a town lost to anarchy. Bloated corpses lay strewn about the base of the old-fashioned curtain wall, rotting in the afternoon heat. Flocks of floating maldrothids, indigenous carrion-feeders, had descended from the sky to gorge themselves on the reeking dead. These strange creatures floated three metres above the ground, plucking soft gobbets of human flesh from the bodies below. Their tentacles, each tipped with a sharp beak, lifted morsels of meat to obscene pink mouths while fat flies buzzed around them.

The spectacle was stomach-churning, and so was the smell. Fighting the urge to vomit, Wulfe thumbed his laspistol's safety off, took aim, and fired into the nearest flock.

He struck one of the maldrothids dead-centre, his shot igniting the creature's internal gases. Its sac-like body exploded with a pop.

Others nearby immediately began pushing off from the ground with their long tentacles. They rose into the air to drift away in search of a safer meal.

'By the Throne,' voxed Holtz from his sponson. They're foul, unholy things!

Outside the gatehouse, his back resting against a stone wall, there sat an old, sun-browned man with a wounded leg. Beside him lay a battered laslock. Judging by the number of empty green bottles surrounding him, he was about the business of drinking himself to death.

As the mighty form of Last Rites loomed over him, the man reached drunkenly for his weapon, missed it twice, and gave up. 'Wha'dya want, stranger?' he asked, squinting up at Wulfe. 'Have y' come here to die with the folks the Emp'ror forsook?'

Wulfe scowled down at him. 'Watch your tongue, citizen. The Emperor only forsakes traitors and heretics.'

The old man made a rude noise and resumed his drinking.

Wulfe cursed him for a fool and ordered Last Rites through the town's open gates with Dessembra's vehicle following a steady ten metres behind.

As they passed into the town, Wulfe swept his pintle-mounted heavy stubber from right to left, covering the corners of the streets and alleyways they passed. Then he remembered that Garver was dead and that the tank's right flank was open. 'Stay alert, all of you,' he told his crew. 'Holtz, I want that heavy bolter covering side streets, windows, doors. Viess, same goes for the co-ax. I'll keep an eye on our right.'

Fires still burned in some of the buildings. They passed walls bearing hastily scrawled slogans like What frakking Emperor? and Fine day for an apocalypse! Most of the stores and stalls had been looted. Rows of squat yellow habs sat silent and still, their windows shattered, their doors splintered. Lifeless bodies hung from blood-stained windowsills and balconies. The streets themselves were dotted with so many corpses that Last Rites couldn't avoid them. Wulfe ordered Metzger to drive over them, grimacing every time a wet crunch sounded from underneath the tank. Many of the bodies on the street were women, their clothing shredded. The crack of laslocks and autopistols rang out frequently, sending frightened maldrothids up into the air, abandoning the rich pickings until things settled down.

All this carnage, thought Wulfe, is the work of man. There's no sign of an ork hand in any of this.

Only recently, Ghotenz had been a town of dedicated, hard-working Imperial citizens. Foreknowledge of their doom had shattered that. Word of the coming end had unravelled their civilisation faster than any xenos invasion ever could have.

Dessembra's voice broke through the static on the mission channel. Turn left at the next corner, sergeant,' she said, 'then take your second right. Our objective awaits us in the church at the end of Procession Street.'

Wulfe relayed the orders to Metzger and the tank rolled on. The sound of gunfire

was more frequent now. It was getting closer, too.

As Last Rites turned onto Procession Street, Wulfe's jaw dropped. Up ahead, in the square at the end of the street, a violent riot was raging. The focus of the mob's ire was a small Imperial church - a black two-storey structure with a proud golden aquila perched atop its central spire. Wulfe watched in horror as some of the rioters fired at the sacred icon. On the wide stone steps below, people shouted and jeered, and launched rocks and bottles at the building's stained-glass windows.

'They're attacking the church!' snarled Wulfe.

From her Chimera, Dessembra must have seen it too. 'Forward, sergeant,' she ordered. 'They mustn't get inside. Kill every last one of them if you have to.'

Last Rites charged down Procession Street.

The rioters turned. Many who saw her bearing down on them fled screaming into the shadowed side-streets, but others were more foolish. They swung their weapons around and began peppering her hull with small-arms fire.

Shots ricocheted around Wulfe, but he stayed in his cupola, anger galvanizing him. Setting his heavy stubber to full-auto, he swept the barrel from left to right, spraying the mob with enfiling fire. A hailstorm of lead cut through the apostate ranks, ripping into their unprotected bodies. Screams of pain filled the air. Those who weren't killed or wounded leapt for hard cover then leaned out from stone corners to take hopeless pot-shots at the tank.

The left sponson rattled back at them, its heavy bolter chewing apart their inadequate defences, killing them in a blizzard of stone chips.

Behind him, Wulfe heard the rapid cracking of the Chimera's multilaser and the chattering of her hull-mounted gun. Between them, the two Imperial vehicles unleashed an overwhelming barrage on the street and its buildings.

Less than a minute later, Wulfe ordered his men to cease fire. Procession Street was a silent, blood-soaked wasteland. The only thing moving was the smoke that curled from the muzzles of Imperial guns.

With the mission clock never far from his mind, he glanced down at his pocket-

chronometer. About seven hours left. Whatever the bloody Sororitas have come here to do, he thought, they'd better do it quickly. There was still the return journey to contend with. They couldn't pass through Lugo's Ditch again. That would be suicide.

'Forward,' he voxed to Metzger.

With the immediate threat neutralized, the two vehicles approached the church. Sister Superior Dessembra ordered them to a halt at the bottom of the steps. Seconds later, the Chimera's rear hatch was thrown open and the three sisters hospitaller emerged into the dry afternoon air.

'Secure the area, Sergeant Wulfe,' Dessembra called out as she stepped over a twitching body. Some of the wounded rioters were still alive, but only just. 'Nothing must disturb us.'

Each of the women, Wulfe saw, carried a sealed ceramite case marked with twin insignia: the winged and laurelled Cadian Gate symbol of the 18th Army Group, and the distinctive fleur-de-lys of the Adeptus Sororitas.

'Metzger,' voxed Wulfe, 'get her ready for a hasty exit. Holtz, stay sharp. Viess, use the co-ax. Siegler, get up into this cupola and man the stubber. Cover the blind spots. Nothing gets close enough to threaten the tank or the Chimera. Is that understood?'

With a quick check of the charge-pack in his laspistol, he leapt down from the hull of his tank and strode up the church steps after the three women. Halfway up, he turned to take a quick look at the tank's right sponson. It was a mess of twisted, blackened metal. Wulfe shook his head. If there was anything left of Garver inside, it wouldn't be much.

Loud creaking announced the opening of the church doors. Wulfe continued up the steps, stopped behind Sister Urahlis, and saw a thin, sallow-faced man in a burgundy robe peering out at them from within. Seeing the insignia on Dessembra's robes, the man smiled and opened the door wider, ushering them in.

'Frater Gustav,' said Sister Superior Dessembra. Tell me, does the man live?'

'He lives, sister superior,' replied Gustav in a high, scratchy voice. 'I've been ministering to him in the undercroft, but I lack the skills to do much good.'

The sisters moved inside and Wulfe followed, stepping beyond the heavy wooden doors to find the church filled with people. They knelt on low wooden benches facing the glittering golden altar. They were deep in prayer.

The faithful, thought Wulfe. While the town fell into madness, they took shelter in this sacred house. That, at least, is as it should be.

On his left, Dessembra and the thin priest were talking as they descended a dark stone stairwell followed by the two sister-acolytes. "You did a great thing when you reported his whereabouts, frater,"

Dessembra was saying. The man is critical to the war effort in this sector.'

Uninvited and unnoticed, Wulfe hurried after them, following them along a short, dark corridor to a gloomy chamber under the church.

There, in a room lit by hundreds of flickering candles, was the answer to a question Wulfe had first asked back in van Droi's command tent: who were they expected to rescue? The man's identity was no longer classified.

Captain Waltur Kurdheim, only surviving son of General Argos Kurdheim, lay groaning and shivering on a makeshift bed.

The captain's aging father was a High Strategos in the Officio Tacticae. He'd been attached to Army Group Exolon for years. If anyone had the authority to send Imperial tanks on such a reckless mission for personal reasons, it was the hawk-faced old general.

Dessembra moved swiftly to the captain's bedside and checked his pulse, then gestured sharply at Urahlis and Mellahd. 'Quickly, sisters. Open the cases. I need 10cc's of paralycium and 15cc's of gamalthide.'

Wulfe crossed to the opposite side of the young captain's bed. 'By the Eye, sister superior,' he said. 'He's in bad shape. What's wrong with him?'

Dessembra looked up as if seeing Wulfe for the first time. What are you doing here, sergeant? Get out at once. You mustn't be in here. Get out, Throne curse you!'

Before Wulfe could respond, he felt a weak hand grip his forearm. It was

Captain Kurdheim's. Wulfe looked down into wide brown eyes filled with fear.

The frater betrayed me/ rasped Kurdheim. 'Don't leave me to them, soldier. If you've any honour in

you...'

Wulfe looked at the pale white hand on his arm. 'Rest easy, captain,' he said. These women are sisters hospitaller of the Order of Serenity. Medical specialists. They've come to save you.'

Kurdheim pulled his hand away. 'Fool/ he coughed. They're my father's lapdogs. He's the only man they came to save.'

Wulfe looked at Dessembra, his frown communicating his confusion.

'He's badly wounded, sergeant,' she said, pulling back the blood-stained sheets. Wulfe saw a big wet bandage on the captain's side. 'His company was lost four days ago on the far side of the Yucharian Mountains. It's a miracle that he made it here. Now, please, step outside and let us do our work.'

Wulfe trusted Dessembra about as far as he could throw an auroch, and he liked her even less, but he could find no legitimate excuse to stay. He left as ordered, but a nagging voice remained in his head. Something wasn't right. Captain Kurdheim hadn't seemed confused at all. His eyes had been sharp and bright, despite his obvious pain. And the fear in them... Wulfe knew real fear when he saw it.

Rather than return to his tank, he stationed himself on the other side of the undercroft door. The sisters would need help, he rationalised, in carrying the young captain up to the Chimera.

Moments later, the screams began. The first was so sudden and unexpected that Wulfe almost leapt into the air. He burst back into the undercroft with his laspistol drawn, but what he saw stopped him dead.

Captain Kurdheim lay under his sheets as before, only now they were utterly drenched with blood. The whole chamber stank of it. Transparent tubes snaked out from under the sheets to a boxy medical device that sat in an open case on the floor. The young captain was screaming through gritted teeth as some kind of

thick, viscous substance was being siphoned from his paralysed body and collected inside the machine.

As Wulfe stood stunned and horrified, following the flow of the grey-pink fluid down the transparent tubes, he saw four pale shapes in the shadows by the foot of the bed.

It can't be, he thought. Throne above, it can't!

It was difficult to tell in the low light, but they looked uncomfortably like severed hands and feet.

Wulfe raised his pistol towards the ceiling and fired off a shot. The crack of ionised air was deafening in the small chamber. The women started. Frater Gustav let out a frightened whimper.

Dessembra spun to face Wulfe, anger twisting her fleshy features. 'I told you to stay outside, you dolt. Don't interfere!'

'Ball-rot, sister/ Wulfe spat back. That man is a Cadian officer and, from the sounds of it, you're torturing him to death. You'd better have a damned fine explanation for this.'

"You're out of your depth, sergeant. I was assured by your superiors that you'd comply.' Dessembra turned to Sister Mellahd. 'Show him our orders.'

'But they're classified, sister superior/ protested Mellahd.

'Do it, blast you, girl!'

The shapely young Sororitas bowed to her superior, then lifted a rolled parchment from one of the ceramite cases and held it out to Wulfe. 'It's all here, sergeant,' she said. 'See for yourself

Without lowering his weapon, Wulfe looked over the scroll. What he read felled him with outrage. The young captain was right - these women hadn't come to save him at all.

They'd come to save his father.

The scroll avoided naming General Kurdheim's particular condition - perhaps it was a source of some embarrassment - but it was very specific about the nature of the cure. Fresh marrow had to be extracted from his son's living body. The scroll listed drugs approved for the procedure, but Wulfe couldn't find any anaesthetics among them. A line in bold red script said something about anaesthesia denaturing important elements of the extracted marrow, but the medical jargon was far too deep for Wulfe to tackle. It was clear, however, that Exolon High Command had given full authorisation to this horrific operation. Penalties for failure were listed at the bottom. Anyone interfering in the retrieval of the young captain's bone marrow would be executed publicly as a traitor.

This is sick,' said Wulfe. 'He's conscious, for Throne's sake.'

Dessembra spoke without turning. The captain will make this sacrifice for his father, whether he wishes to or not. General Kurdheim is an important man. His survival is critical to our success in this sector. His son, on the other hand, is expendable. Think logically, sergeant, and you'll see that it makes perfect sense.'

Thick fluids continued to drain from Kurdheim's body, sliding down the transparent tubing and into the humming machine. Something clogged one of the tubes and Sister Urahlis moved forward to adjust it. As she did so, the captain howled in agony.

Wulfe's face was twisted with pity and rage. This was too much. He pointed the barrel of his laspistol straight at the captain's head and said, 'I can free you from your misery, sir. Just say the word! Order it!'

In the blink of an eye, Dessembra had positioned herself between the pistol and the paralysed officer, blocking Wulfe's shot. The marrow must be taken from a living body,' she said, her eyes boring into Wulfe's. 'Do you want to give him peace, sergeant? Do you really want to cut this operation short prematurely? Think about it. You're gambling with the lives of your crew. You saw the paper. If we don't get back to Banphry before that first rock hits, we die. If we return without the marrow, we die. And if you return without me, I can promise you that the Commissariat will be waiting for you. And you will die.'

Wulfe's hand was shaking. He itched to kill this woman. How could such a monster claim to serve the righteous Golden Throne? Do it, his conscience urged. Kill her. End this man's agony and punish this dreadful woman for the

lives she's already cost Gossefried's Gunheads.

But Wulfe knew he couldn't condemn his crew. To kill Dessembra was to kill all of them. And, as

Dessembra watched the realisation show on his face, she knew she had him. With an infuriating grin, she said, 'Leave this chamber now, sergeant. We'll be finished shortly. Have the vehicles ready to move out on my word.'

Hating himself for it, Wulfe holstered his pistol and turned from the room. As he walked stiffly up the stone stairs, he tried to block out the captain's screams, but it was hard. The young man was yelling Wulfe's name over and over, cursing him to the darkest corners of the warp.

Ghotenz, East Vestiche, 17.17 local (6 hours 30 minutes to Planetkill)

WULFE EMERGED FROM the church to find the sun low on the western horizon. The sky was filled with a watery glow, casting the ravaged town in hues of reddish gold. In front of Last Rites, dozens of townsfolk had gathered, kneeling with their hands on top of their heads while Siegler covered them with the pintle-mounted heavy stubber.

Wulfe climbed his tank to stand on the engine decking, just behind the turret, and said, 'Vvfhats going on here?'

'Locals, sir,' said Siegler. They presented themselves while you were inside. Waving white flags, they were. They've come to ask for help.'

'After the attack on the church?'

They say they had nothing to do with the riots, sir. Busy defending their homes.'

A dark-skinned man kneeling at the front of the group eyed Wulfe, spotted the silver pips on his lapels and said, 'Forgive me, sir, but would you be the officer in charge?' He was middle-aged, muscular and wore the uniform of a town custodian.

Law enforcement, thought Wulfe. Where was he during the riot?

I'm no officer,' he replied. 'But I'm in charge, after a fashion.'

Then, may we stand?’ asked the custodian. There are elders among us. We’ve not come to threaten you or your men.’

Without lowering his voice, Wulfe said, ‘Keep them covered, Siegler.’ Then to the crowd he said, ‘Stand if you wish.’

Slowly, they got to their feet. Some needed help to rise. The custodian took a step closer to Wulfe’s tank and said, ‘Ships have been crossing the sky in greater numbers than usual today. Some of the merchants fled west, talking about evacuation, and we’ve all heard about the asteroids and the coming end. We thought.... Have you come to help us?’

Wulfe had to lie. He knew that much. Last Rites still had to make it out of here in one piece. Let these people believe whatever they wanted if it served that purpose. False hope was better than genuine despair, wasn’t it?

‘We’ve come to Ghotenz on other business,’ said Wulfe, ‘but I can tell you that a Naval lifter is scheduled to arrive here later this evening. Have no fear. The ship will come in plenty of time. But you must be ready to leave.’

Excited muttering swept through the crowd. Wulfe tried not to look at them for fear of seeing relief on their faces. In the last twelve hours, his self-respect had been eroded almost to nothing.

He had begun to hate himself, and there was more to come.

‘You’ll each have a personal cargo allowance of twelve kilograms,’ he told them, cementing the lie. ‘It’s not much, I know, but it’s better than nothing. No weapons of any kind may be taken aboard. No plants or animals are permitted.’

Where should we gather?’ asked a woman on the right. We don’t want to waste any time.’

The bhakra fields south-west of the town seem best suited to a landing,’ said Wulfe. ‘I recommend that you assemble there.’

This is wonderful news,’ said another woman behind the custodian. ‘Praise the Emperor!’

The rest of the crowd took up the cheer.

Automatically, Wulfe did the same, but there was a bitter taste in his mouth. You should return to your homes now,' he called down to them. 'Our vehicles will be leaving momentarily and our way must be clear.'

Why don't you wait to be lifted out with us?' asked the custodian. Your men must be tired and hungry.'

Thank you,' said Wulfe. 'But our work isn't finished. We have another stop to make before we can evacuate.'

More mutters rippled through the crowd, this time filled with respect and sympathy.

The custodian turned to the townsfolk and said, 'Let's disperse, people. Back to your homes, now. We must all pack for the evacuation.'

After saluting Wulfe with something like parade-ground pomp, the custodian led the crowd away from the square. Their excited chatter filled the street until they disappeared from view.

Siegler turned to Wulfe and asked, 'Are we ready to move out, sir?'

Wulfe looked for it, but Siegler's expression was void of any criticism.

We're just waiting on-'

The old church doors creaked loudly behind him, and the sisters hospitaller emerged into the fading sunlight. Frater Gustav followed them out. Screams and curses, barely discernable over the noise of the idling tank, still issued from within the church. Wulfe leapt down from the rear decking and climbed the church stairs once more.

Dessembra turned at the door and took the thin priest's hands in her own. The Emperor will reward you soon, frater,' she said. 'But one last thing, please. Lugo's Ditch is held by the foe, and we must reach The Gold Road some other way'

Gustav nodded. There is an old trade route, sister superior, that we used before the highway was built. Follow the dirt track north at first. A series of switchbacks will take you up into the highlands, ending just east of Gormann's

Point. You can rejoin The Gold Road there.'

'How long will it take?' Dessembra asked.

'From what you've told me, sister superior, you'll be cutting it fine, but it will save you the trouble of the canyon.'

Wulfe stormed over to the small group and thrust his face in front of Dessembra's. 'Finished mutilating Cadian officers, are we?'

Dessembra's expression hardened in a flash. Watch your tongue, sergeant. We have what we came for, if that's what you mean.'

Then why in the warp is the man still screaming?'

Dessembra tried to push past him, but Wulfe's hand flashed out and grasped her wrist. She struggled for a moment, but the sergeant's grip was like iron. The sister-acolytes stepped forward to intervene, but the cold fire in Wulfe's eyes made them hesitate.

'Unhand me, damn you,' spat Dessembra. 'Not that it's any of your business, sergeant, but General Kurdheim was quite clear on the matter. His son will be allowed the honour of dying with this planet and its many faithful martyrs.'

Wulfe felt like striking the woman in her fat face. The honour of what? He's in absolute hell. Can't you hear that?'

Echoing up from the below the church, the captain's screams were gut-wrenching. 'His suffering will atone for his unwillingness to do his duty,' said Dessembra. 'He'll go before the Emperor with a clear conscience.'

Maybe it was Dessembra's voicing of the word, but Wulfe found he couldn't suppress his own conscience any longer. He'd done far too much of that already today. Releasing Dessembra and shoving Frater Gustav violently aside, he marched back into the church, drawing his laspistol as he moved.

'Get back here, sergeant,' screeched Dessembra. The general's orders were very specific. You'll face a court martial for this!'


Wulfe didn't stop. Looking over his shoulder, he called out, This is supposed to

be a mercy run, you fat grox. And mercy is what I intend to give him.'

Moments later, the sharp crack of a laspistol rang out from the undercroft.

*

26 kilometres north of Ghotenz, East Vestiche, 17.53 local (5 hours 54 minutes to Planetkill)

THEY FOLLOWED  frater's suggested route back to the highway without encountering the enemy, but the sky was darkening quickly, and Wulfe felt time slipping away from him like water through his fingers. The road up into the highlands was hard, and lesser vehicles would have struggled - surefooted boviaths were far better suited to it - but the muscular engines of the Imperial war-machines had enough grunt for the job. There were some hair-raising moments. Twice, while turning hairpin bends, Last Rites almost slid from the steep, narrow trail. She would have plummeted, smashing her crew to death inside her, had Metzger not demonstrated remarkable skills. Even Holtz, still convinced that the new man was a doombringer, felt compelled to pay him a terse compliment.

To Wulfe's great relief, the land soon flattened out. They turned westward just six kilometres south of the old outpost under a night sky dusted with bright, winking stars. Some of those stars were moving -naval transports and escort ships leaving orbit with all haste.

Emperor above, thought Wulfe as he gazed up through his open hatch, let the last ship wait for us.

The vox was quiet. Wulfe watched the other men in the turret struggle with their growing sense of desperation. Siegler was rocking back and forth in his chair, muttering mathematical problems in an attempt to divert his mind. Viess was patting the turret wall beside him and cooing, 'Faster, old girl! You can do it!'

Wulfe watched the second hand spinning on his chronometer, willing it to slow down, but it seemed to get faster instead. The background static of the tank's

intercom hissed in his ear, broken only by affirmations when he issued occasional orders to Metzger or general reminders to stay on the lookout for any signs of a firefight out there in the dark. The only orks they spotted, however, were the occasional green bodies on the road. They were surrounded by human corpses. Wulfe guessed a warband had swept north towards Zimmamar, slaughtering any refugees caught in its path.

The tank's headlamps occasionally picked out flocks of maldrothids floating silently in the dark, feasting on the recently deceased. Holtz and Viess, either offended by the sight or just eager to distract themselves, requested permission to fire on the eerie scavengers, but Wulfe wouldn't have it. Gunfire and muzzle flashes might draw unwanted attention. He imagined orks crouched by the roadside in the dark, just waiting for a target to come along.

About halfway between Gormann's Point and Banphry, with a little over seventy kilometres still to go, Dessembra voxed him. You must realise, sergeant,' she said, 'that at this speed, there's no hope of catching our ride out.'

'I hope you're not suggesting we give up,' replied Wulfe sourly. 'She's not built for speed, but my man is squeezing everything he can out of her.'

'I'm sure he is, but I think you're missing my point. My Chimera is lighter and capable of far higher speeds than your tank. Since I believe we're no longer under direct threat from orks, and no longer require your protection, I'm ordering my driver to break formation and pull ahead of you. It's imperative that our cargo reaches General Kurdheim. I'm sure you understand.'

There we have it, thought Wulfe. I should have expected no less from you, Dessembra.

'Emperor's speed to you, then,' he voxed back coldly.

The Chimera pulled out of Last Rites's slipstream, charged past her on the right, and pulled back in directly ahead of her. Contrary to Wulfe's expectations, however, the black transport didn't accelerate away.

'Stop your tank,' ordered Dessembra. What?'

'I said stop your tank, sergeant. Order your man to pull up at once.'

Wulfe did as he was told. Viess and Siegler turned to give him nervous looks. The last thing they could afford to do right now was to lose forward momentum.

The Chimera slid to a halt on the road ahead, starkly illuminated by Last Rites's headlamps. A heartbeat later, the rear hatch opened. Dessembra appeared in the glaring white light, gesturing impatiently.

'Get a move on, sergeant,' she voxed. 'If you and your men aren't onboard in less than a minute...'

Wulfe could hardly believe his ears. 'Everybody out on the double,' he ordered. 'Into the Chimera, damn you. Don't stop to take anything!'

Hatch doors clanged as they were flung open. Wulfe hauled himself up and out of his cupola in time to see Metzger scramble from his hatch at the front of the tank. Holtz launched himself backwards through his sponson hatch and landed on his back with a grunt. No time for graceful exits.

Wulfe raced over to the Chimera's rear door and stood there, yelling at his men to double-time it. Only when they were all inside did he enter, slamming the hatch shut and locking it. He heard Dessembra say, 'Full-ahead please, Corporal Fichtner!' and the vehicle leapt forward with a sudden burst of acceleration.

Dessembra moved through the cramped passenger compartment until she was standing before Wulfe. She nodded to him once, then, without breaking eye contact, lowered herself into the seat opposite him. 'You see sergeant?' she said. 'Perhaps I'm not the monster you think I am, especially when circumstances allow a certain latitude.'

Wulfe wouldn't let her off that easily. He doubted he'd ever be completely free from his terrible memories of the church undercroft. Wordlessly, he looked along the compartment at the rest of his crew and saw his own mixed feelings mirrored on their faces. Even Metzger, with them for less than a full day, looked glum.

Dessembra followed his gaze. 'What's wrong with you all? You should be grateful. Your chances of survival are now markedly improved.'

A sad smile tugged at the corners of Wulfe's mouth. 'We are grateful, sister superior, but we're grieving, too.' Speaking for the attention of his crew, he added, 'Last Rites was the very finest tank I've had the pleasure to command.'

She was reliable and responsive, accurate and unstoppable.’ His men nodded in silent assent. With the Emperor’s blessing, her indomitable spirit will infuse another great war-machine. May she be reborn to fight on for the glory of the Imperium.’

Ave Imperator,’ the men intoned.

Dessembra nodded. ‘Ave Imperator,’ she said, then called to the driver’s compartment where the youngest of her acolytes rode beside Corporal Fichtner. ‘Sister Mellahd? A hymn if you please. Something to speed our journey back.’

The acolyte’s beautiful, oval face appeared at the forward end of the compartment. What shall I sing, sister superior?’

With the hint of a grin, Dessembra said, ‘Sunder All, His Shining Hammer.’

It was a well-known favourite of the Cadian tank regiments.

As Mellahd’s clear, high voice filled the compartment, lifting the tankers’ hearts, Wulfe stared numbly at his chronometer, mesmerized by the inexorable clockwise motion of the hands as the minutes bled away.

58,000 kilometres from Palmeros, Darros III System, Segmentum Solar, 11.31 ship’s time (0 hours 0 minutes to Planetkill)

THE MASSIVE IMPERIAL Navy starship Hand of Radiance swung away from Palmeros, filled to capacity with rescued men and materiel. Most of those onboard crowded into the ship’s vast windowed galleries where, together, they bore witness to the death of an Imperial world. For some, the horrific, violent beauty of it was too much. Dozens fainted.

Wulfe opted not to watch, though the rest of his crew did.

When the first of Ghazghkull Thraka’s accursed asteroids punched a hole in the planet’s surface and ignited the global firestorm, he was alone in one of the starship’s many small chapels, kneeling on a cold wooden bench, praying to the Emperor for the souls of dead men.

He prayed for Kohl, for Strieber and for the crews of their tanks. For Jans Garver, who had died well in faithful service to the Golden Throne. And for Dolphus Borscht - tank driver and friend - who had passed away in his hospital bed during the day.

A shiver ran the length of his spine as he remembered reading Borscht's death certificate. The time of his old friend's passing coincided, almost to the minute, with his inexplicable appearance in the canyon.

Wulfe had opted not to mention the chilling apparition in his report. People who spoke of such things tended to disappear without explanation.

Finally, he prayed for Captain Waltur Kurdheim -tormented and sacrificed to prolong the life of his powerful, uncaring father. A mercy run, Dessembra had called it. More like a sick joke. Wulfe hoped the young officer's soul was at peace in the presence of the undying Emperor.

He rose from his knees and sat back on a wooden pew, turning his thoughts to the future. The 18th Army Group was already en route to their next theatre of war. High Command was talking of a major operation on Planet G. They wouldn't disclose the true name of their destination until Hand of Radiance arrived in-system to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet, but rumours ran that Commissar Yarrick was somehow involved. And that meant orks.

The fighting the killing, the losses, thought Wulfe Endless war.

Despite his melancholy mood, his face betrayed the ghost of a smile.

Last Rites II, he'd been told, would be waiting for him when he got there.