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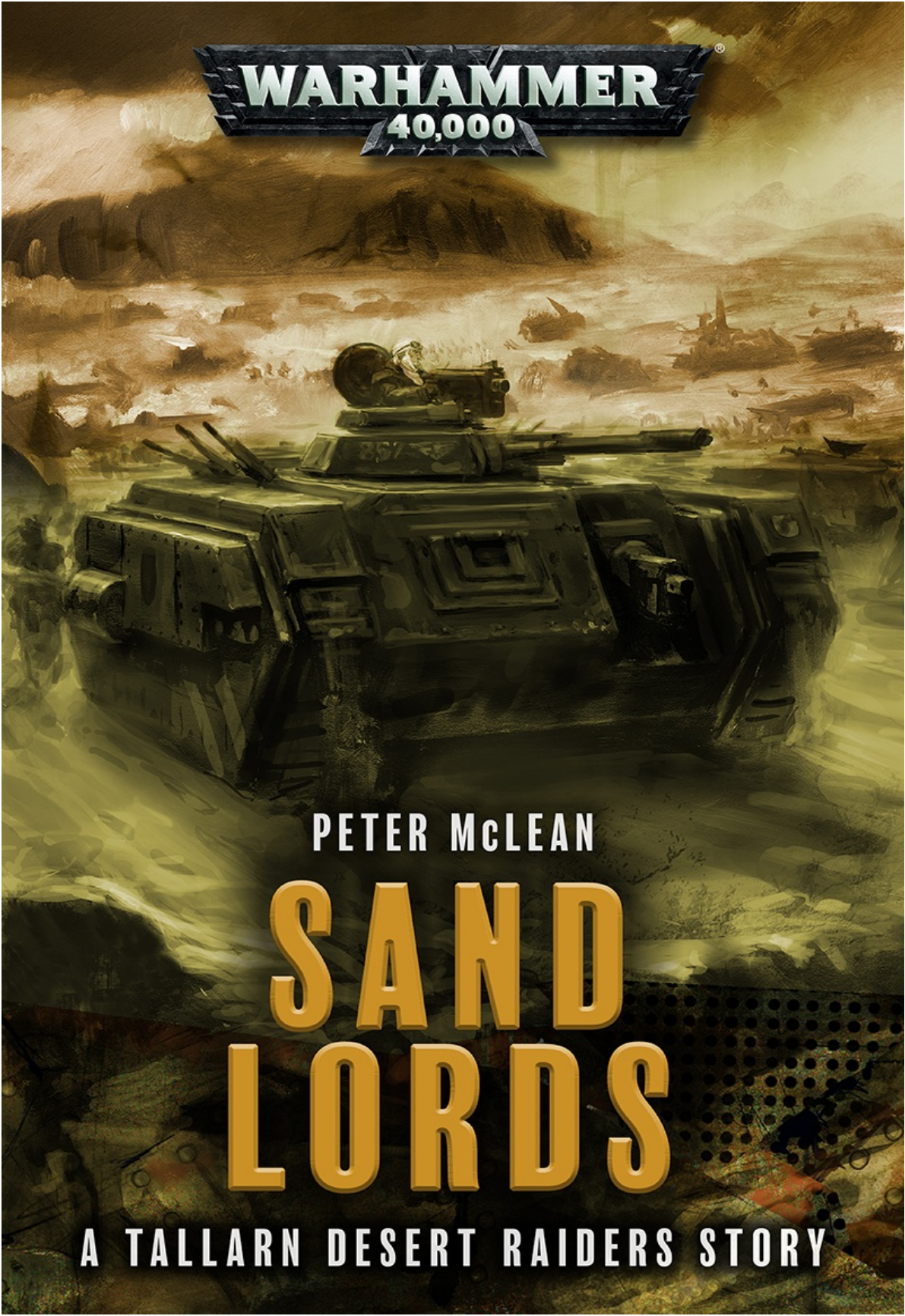
PETER MCLEAN

**SAND
LORDS**

A TALLARN DESERT RAIDERS STORY



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SAND LORDS

Peter McLean

*Captain Amareo Thrax
The deep deserts
Marbas II
Now*

The Chimera was dying.

Thrax could sense it from his position in the open turret of his command tank. He could smell the reek of over-burned promethium that told him the tracked carrier's fuel injection system was shot, could hear the grinding of the rear differential that made it clear there wasn't any point in even attempting a field repair. It was dying, and soon it would be as lost as the rest of his armoured column was.

When it finally expired, that would leave him the one Leman Russ he rode in, and two surviving Chimeras. Not a good outcome from an armoured recon force that had started out twenty-eight vehicles strong. All the same, he gave thanks. That any of them had got out at all spoke of the Emperor's blessing on the Tallarn 236th Sand Lords, and the grim wisdom of the colonel's plan.

Thrax turned his face to the pitiless sky of Marbas II. The sun beat down like the Emperor's wrath, scouring everything beneath its glare. All around was scorched sand, wind-whipped dunes and distant plumes of smoke rising from the ruined vehicles Thrax had left behind him. Marbas II was a baking, blasted wasteland of dust and misery. It felt like home to the men and women of the Tallarn 236th, but even they couldn't live without shade or water. There was none of the first to be had, and they were getting dangerously low on the second.

'Another reason why we lived underground on Tallarn,' Thrax muttered to himself.

He pulled his *shemagh*, the traditional tribal headscarf worn by every Tallarn desert raider, tighter over his nose and mouth. It did little to shut out the promethium reek of the dying Chimera, but at least it kept the flying dust out his face as the Leman Russ ground up over a dune and down the far side, its tracks kicking up sand dervishes in its wake.

'I'm losing her, captain,' a voice cracked in his vox-bead. That was Duf'adar Al-Rabbam, who had the controls of the ailing Chimera. *'Every rune on my screen is red. She's not going to make it more than another mile.'*

Thrax could only nod to himself, and accept the Emperor's will.

'So be it,' he said. 'We'll stop in the next depression. Decamp your men into the other two Chimeras.'

'But...'

'I realise that the loss of your holy war machine pains you, Al-Rabbam,' he said, 'but there's nothing to be done. The machine-spirit gave its all in the flight from Iblis Amrargh. We all did.'

Behind them, the howling started again.

Then

Iblis Amrargh.

A backwater Imperial shrine city overrun with orks, ransacked and all but destroyed by the foul xenos.

The sole reason the Sand Lords were on Marbas II at all.

They had stormed down the desert highway in a column twenty-eight strong, sixteen Leman Russ main battle tanks and twelve Chimeras full of murderous infantry to follow in their wake and mop up any remaining opposition after the armour had reaped its terrible corpse harvest. They came to reclaim the *khalig* of the great fallen Tallarn hero, General Al-Fallan, taken as a trophy in battle by the orks. The sword was a symbol of the general's leadership, an inspirational relic of his heroism even in death. Reclaim the *khalig*, that was the rallying cry that drove Thrax's men and women into battle against the xenos horde. That was what he had told them they were there for.

It was even partly true.

Captain Amareo Thrax had been standing up on his seat in the open turret of his command tank, *Rage of Tallarn*, his own *khalig* – three feet of wickedly curved, gold-chased steel – clutched in his fist. It had a pommel in the shape of a lion's head and a cutting edge a single molecule thick, the blade catching the sunlight

and calling for blood in the Emperor's name.

Iblis Amrargh was ahead of them, the dust-choked road into the city closed by a rough, handmade barricade of old promethium drums, barbed wire and salvaged flakboard. Shots blasted from behind the obstruction, but Thrax ignored them as they impacted harmlessly against the hull of his tank. The swarm of gretchin manning the barricade lacked heavy weapons, and their resistance was pitiful. A shot screamed past his head and he ignored that too, laughing with contempt. They were nothing in the face of the Divine Emperor's holy war machines.

He raised his khalig and brought it sharply down to signal the tank charge.

'For the Emperor!' Thrax bellowed, and his tank's cannon roared and demolished the crude barricade with a single shot.

It exploded in a cloud of shrapnel and smoke and bloody body parts, and the crude guns of the enemy fell silent. *Rage of Tallarn* ground over what was left, pulping bodies under its churning treads. The column followed, spreading out in a litter-strewn square with their turrets traversed to cover all the angles.

Iblis Amrargh was a ruined place where now-derelict Imperial buildings sweltered endlessly under the merciless sun. The orks had stripped and scavenged everything worth having, and left the rest to collapse. The only structure of any note was the mighty cathedral that reared above the centre of the city, its vast, twisted gothic spire stabbing into the wide blue sky. That was their objective, some three miles deep into the city.

'Set course for the cathedral,' Thrax said into the vox. 'There the xenos have made their stronghold, and that is where we shall find the khalig of General Al-Fallan.'

Thrax took an auspex bearing then formed up his column again, leading them down a wide but rubble-strewn thoroughfare between crumbling buildings. They took a turn and were met with another crudely made barrier constructed from rusty scrap metal and old chunks of broken armourglass. There was a heavy autocannon of some kind concealed behind it, snarling and spitting rounds from a flickering cone of muzzle flash.

Shots rattled against the hulls of the lead tanks, chipping flakes from their paint.

Ork voices bellowed primitive gibberish from behind their roaring weapon.

They were xenos filth, Thrax reflected, nothing more than beasts in the eye of the divine God-Emperor. They deserved no mercy, and from the Tallarn guns they would receive nothing but death eternal.

'Gorebrakah Urlakk!' the orks bellowed. 'Gorebrakah Urlakk!'

The very name made Thrax's guts twist. The ork warboss was well known

amongst the ranks of the Astra Militarum, but still, hearing its name shouted with such reverence felt like a blasphemy. Thrax's hatred for the xenos beasts reached new heights, and he raised his khalig once more.

The Tallarn tanks went through the fortification like a chainsword through rotten meat.

The air was thick with the smoke of discharging cannons and promethium exhaust, and the screams of dying animals. It was music to Thrax's ears.

Now

Al-Rabbam's Chimera finally died halfway down the last dune before the designated changeover point at the bottom of the depression.

There was no tearing explosion, no awful grinding shriek of seized gears. It just surrendered and died, a pathetic wreck in the choking desert sands.

Thrax turned in his turret and looked over his shoulder, glaring at the failed machine through his heavily tinted wind goggles. He raised a hand to further shade his eyes, cursing under his breath as it started to tremble once more. The constant howling had shredded his nerves to breaking point, and now the sight of the motionless Chimera moved him to anger. He clenched his fist, partly in rage and partly to hide the shaking of his hand.

To have come so far, only to fail now.

It was useless.

Weak.

Unacceptable.

'Al-Rabbam!' he voxed angrily. 'Your machine has stopped.'

'I told you, captain,' the other man said. *'It's had it. There's nothing more I can do.'*

Thrax wanted to spit in disgust, but that would have been a waste of moisture. He had imposed full water discipline three days ago, and if nothing else he had to lead by example. In the deep desert you wasted nothing, spit and urine included. Any and all moisture could be reprocessed by the reclamation filters in the machines. It wasn't good but it was better than nothing, and it could be hoarded in preparation for the worst tests the Emperor had to throw at them. It could be drunk, if the need arose. There was one thing every Tallarn desert raider knew: if it was a choice between drinking your own urine or dying, you drink deeply and thank the Emperor for the richness of His bounty.

'Get the men out,' Thrax snapped. 'Vehicle transfer, right now. Then mine it to

blow. We leave nothing for the enemy who follows us. *Nothing.*'

'*Yes, sir,*' Al-Rabbam growled back through the vox, but his voice was full of bitter resentment.

Of course it was. The men were all bitter, after what had happened.

Bitter, and terrified.

Then

Iblis Amrargh was a killing place.

The Sand Lords lowered their dozer blades and rolled through the blasted remains of the pitiful barricade, the tracks of their holy war machines clanking as they ground on into the city. Resistance was heavy but ineffectual, small-arms fire rattling uselessly off their armour. The tanks' sponson-mounted heavy bolters tore into the surrounding buildings, pulverising walls and collapsing archways into clouds of grit and dust, silencing the ork gunners as the column rolled uncaring past their positions and onwards towards the looming bulk of the cathedral.

They swept out into another square, crunching over rubble as they went. Thrax's lip curled with contempt as he saw how the orks had defiled this once great Imperial city. Their crude runes were daubed on walls, and there were obvious signs of them fighting amongst themselves. One day they would wipe each other out, Emperor willing, Thrax thought, reassuring himself of the ultimate superiority of the Imperium over these bestial savages.

And even over the greatest foe, who Thrax alone knew lay waiting for them in the deep tunnels far beneath the cathedral ahead. There, too, they were ultimately superior.

They had to be, surely?

Of course they were. There could be no room for doubt, no chinks in his steadfast armour of faith.

His faith in the Emperor was strong, and the Emperor protected the faithful.

Until they reached that desecrated, once holy monument, they were free to kill and kill and kill again in the Emperor's name. Afterwards, Thrax was all too aware, it might be a different matter. All he could do was put his faith in the will of the Emperor and in his colonel's plan, and do his duty.

Yes, there would be sacrifices, Thrax understood that, and he regretted it. His troops, his whole company, were like family to him, but still the Emperor expected him to do his duty. No war was won without cost, and it was the very

purpose of the Astra Militarum to die in His name and His service.

‘His will be done,’ Thrax murmured to himself. ‘They will find their reward when they stand at the Emperor’s side.’

They crunched ever onwards, grinding over anything and everything that lay in their path, as was their divine right. The armoured column was unstoppable, a manifestation of the Emperor’s iron will even in this forsaken place. Nothing could stand before them. Nothing could...

The plasma blast vaporised Chimera Four, *Desert Stormer*, and every man in it before Captain Thrax even knew what was happening.

‘Return fire!’ he bellowed into the all-hands vox, spittle flying from his lips in his outraged fury. That had been Al-Nasir’s machine, and Al-Nasir had served under Thrax for eight Terran-standard years. For him to be taken so suddenly, without even the chance to go down fighting, was a bitter blow indeed.

Tank turrets traversed, hunting targets, but there was no movement to be seen. The plasma cannon could have been discharged from absolutely anywhere.

Everything looked the same, the dust-clogged streets and sun-baked buildings of Iblis Amrargh blending into a single despoiled vista of filth and hatred. There was no one in sight.

‘Shoot *anything!*’ Thrax screamed.

Weapons roared, the main cannons of the mighty Leman Russ battle tanks and the hull-mounted heavy bolters of the Chimeras. Buildings exploded in the face of the tanks’ fury, were chewed down by the sustained fire of the Chimeras.

The air filled with choking dust, with fire and the screams of the gretchin.

Thrax pulled the lever that dropped his command chair down into the turret of his tank, letting the hatch cover clang down above him and seal with a hiss of equalising pressure. The green light of the command vehicle’s interior washed over him.

‘Orders, sir?’ his driver, Trooper Kallan, asked, looking back over her shoulder at him.

They were Astra Militarum. What else was there?

‘Charge!’ Thrax roared.

Rage of Tallarn ripped forward, its wide tracks tearing chunks out of the road beneath it as it bellowed across the square with the column following in its wake. Thrax had his eye to the auspex, tracking heat signatures across the swarm of panicked xenos life that filled the crumbling buildings.

There was no sign of the plasma cannon, no residual thermal trace to tell him where the shot had come from. It was mobile, then, no doubt vehicle-mounted,

and already gone. Any one of those life signs could be the heavy weapon's spotter, but there was no way to tell which one. That made the solution simple.

Kill them all.

He put his eye to the auspex, green runes spiralling around the view in three dimensions as the wondrous machine factored compass-pattern analogues over the tank's current heading, cross-referenced against elevation and wind shear.

'Two point eight by nine two at five elevation,' he told the gun layer. 'High explosive.'

'Sir,' she said, working the crank as the loader heaved the heavy shell into the breech and slammed it shut behind him.

'Ready, sir,' the loader called out.

Thrax squinted into the auspex, gauging movement patterns. That cluster of heat signals – were they the regrouping orks of the plasma cannon crew, or just fleeing gretchin?

He cared not, they were xenos abominations one and all.

'Fire!'

The gun roared, the breech kicking back with a bang and expelling the spent shell casing into the catch hopper with a reek of scorched brass and spent fyceline.

'Load!' Thrax ordered. 'High explosive!'

The loader bent to his work, the sweat-slick muscles of his bare back flexing as he heaved the huge shell up and into the open breech. He clanged it shut with a grunt of satisfaction, and the layer grinned as she worked her crank.

'Stay resolute!' Thrax shouted into the vox-horn. 'Did our noble General Al-Fallan falter before the xenos horde on Grennak? He did not! Even impaled with his own blade, he remained defiant to the last breath! In the general's name and for his memory, *fire!*'

The building in front of them shattered as the huge shell tore into it, the core of high explosive detonating with the force of a hundred krak grenades. Dust washed over the tank in a huge cloud, blinding the entire column of vehicles behind it.

Answering fire slammed into their flanks, stubber rounds bouncing impotently off their heavy armour. There was no more plasma fire.

'Make for the cathedral,' Thrax ordered his tank commanders over the vox. 'That's what we're here for. Reclaim the khalig! By fire group, break and advance. Forward, in the Emperor's name!'

The column split with textbook precision, executing manoeuvres practised over

and over again in the barren wastes of Tallarn itself. Thrax had three tanks and three Chimeras behind him, standard fire group pattern for a sweep-and-kill raid. He was going to run this operation by the book for as long as he could.

Now

‘Get aboard!’ Thrax shouted into his vox, watching the men and women from Al-Rabbam’s crippled Chimera jostle to find places in the other two remaining vehicles.

The simple fact was, there wasn’t enough space.

The dead Chimera was pouring thick, greasy smoke out of its engine vents now, and everyone had disembarked, but the other two carriers had been mostly full to start with anyway. They ended up with six infantry troopers behind them on foot, following in the dust-wake of the machines as they lurched and bucked over the dunes.

Towards the firebase.

Towards salvation.

Behind them, the abandoned Chimera exploded with a roar as the demolition mine detonated and blew it to shrapnel.

Those on foot fell gradually further and further behind.

Then

It didn’t go by the book.

For the book did not have a section on being vaporised by a plasma cannon.

Worthless, filthy creatures like gretchin shouldn’t have *had* a plasma weapon, and Thrax hadn’t expected any of the big orks to be around on the surface even if *they* did. Surely they would still be in the deep catacombs beneath the cathedral, too far below the surface for an orbital bombardment to reach them, gloating over their victory and dividing the spoils of General Al-Fallan’s army. The colonel’s briefing had told him to expect light infantry resistance until they reached the cathedral, nothing more than that. By the time the second tank went up in a flare of molten ceramite and purple lightning, Captain Thrax had to admit that perhaps that was so much wishful thinking. Orks were famous scavengers and thieves, after all, and it came to him then that perhaps the plasma weapon *was* one of those spoils. It sickened him to think of noble Imperial technology in the foul hands of the xenos, but such were the dishonourable abominations they faced. He regrouped his unit into a single column again, figuring there was better

safety in numbers while the source of the murderous nuclear fire remained unknown.

‘Infantry, drop and disperse,’ he ordered into the vox. ‘Lieutenant Marhara, sweep your men through the advance positions. Find that cannon!’

‘Yes, sir,’ Marhara replied through his vox-bead.

The Chimeras halted in a defensive circle, their heavy bolters providing covering fire as they disgorged the infantry platoons into the city. Men ran doubled over, their long-barrelled lasguns held at the hip and their shemaghs flowing in the wind.

A heavy stubber opened up from somewhere, stitching a line of impact craters across the dust-choked road towards the running men. Two troopers dropped in sprays of blood as the hidden gunner found its range. The muzzle flash showed as a bright flare in Thrax’s auspex, coming from a high window almost directly ahead.

‘Zero point eight by zero one at nine elevation,’ Thrax snapped to his layer. ‘Fire!’

The gun roared, and the upper floor of the building exploded violently. The stubber fell silent. The loader grunted as he slammed a fresh shell home into the smoking breech.

Kill them *all*.

While they still could.

‘Form up,’ Thrax snarled into the vox. ‘Follow the infantry. Forward!’

The foot-soldiers were invisible now, the natural-born guerrilla troops of the Tallarn infantry already swarming through the maze of alleys and buildings ahead of the armoured column. A row of decrepit habs blew out in front of them as krak grenades made short work of the enemy resistance.

‘Clear,’ a voice crackled over the vox. ‘Column, proceed six eight by three. Advancing.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Thrax replied.

That was Duf’adar Al-Maddon, lead duf’adar of Alpha Platoon and one of the fiercest women Thrax had ever met. Company legend had it that Al-Maddon had been the youngest of her tribe ever to complete the sacred Trial of the Sands. For thirty days and thirty nights she had survived in the deep desert alone, with nothing but her knife and a canteen of water. When it was done she had not only returned to her people alive and well, but as tribute she had brought them the head of a huge sand raptor she had killed in single combat. There was strong magic in a sand raptor, the magic of the desert night, and that was a feat to tell

tales of. She had been only eleven years old at the time, Terran standard. That was the company legend, and Thrax could well believe it.

'Heavy activity ahead,' Al-Maddon voxed back a few minutes later. *'Recommend extreme caution. These aren't gretchin.'*

Thrax frowned. If what the colonel had told him was true, and he had no reason to doubt it, then the inner circle of orks at least would have access to the very best equipment and weapons they could ask for. Even including a plasma cannon, it seemed.

'Anti-tank mines?' he asked.

'Hard to say, sir,' Al-Maddon replied. *'Perhaps—'*

Her voice was cut off by a sudden burst of las-fire, followed by an explosion. Curses and screams crackled across the already distorted vox-link, Al-Maddon's voice shouting orders over the confusion of gunfire and the roars of orks.

'All units, activate your frag assault launchers,' Thrax ordered his column. *'Forward!'*

Close urban battlefields were the very worst places for tanks to fight.

Tanks are designed to charge head-on into the enemy, to manoeuvre on open ground and use their speed and armour to the best advantage. Wedged into narrow streets like those of Iblis Amrargh, Thrax knew they were relatively easy prey for expendable troops like gretchin with krak grenades who were willing or forced to chance almost certain death to get close to the weak points where turrets joined hulls. Frag assault launchers helped level that terrain in the tankers' favour. Thrax had insisted on them being fitted to his tanks for this mission, as well as the mighty dozer blades for clearing rubble, barricades and corpses.

They were halfway down the narrow street, closing on Al-Maddon's last known position, when warning runes flashed up on the periphery of Thrax's auspex. Orks, swarming up out of holes in the ground and charging the tanks with guns and grenades clutched in their huge paws. He reached out and slapped the frag assault launcher rune on his display.

Explosive fragmentation charges detonated along the sides of his tank's track guards, blowing a barrage of shrapnel out in a great fan like the blast from a huge shot-cannon.

Red mist and strings of bright gore splattered the cratered walls to either side of the tank where the greenskins had been.

'Forward,' he snarled.

Now

The men and women on foot following the trail of the last tank and the two surviving Chimeras lived almost until nightfall.

That was when it caught up with them for the first time.

Thrax grit his teeth in rage as he heard the bellowing and howling behind them, now mingled with the first human screams. He could only close his ears to the shrieks as his exposed troops were martyred in the Emperor's name.

'Traverse turret!' he roared at his layer. 'Six point zero by nine one at zero elevation, fire!'

Thrax gave the order on pure instinct, realising its futility even as he spoke.

They were out of shells, and had been for some time.

'I'm still out,' his loader said. 'I've got nothing left, sir.'

Thrax cursed, watching helplessly through the auspex as the horror that followed them tore his troops limb from limb.

'Quickly, while it's occupied with the bodies,' he voxed to the other two remaining vehicles under his command. 'Full speed, forward! *Run!*'

It pained him to his soul to leave them to die, but he had to do his duty above all else. His company, his family, had given their all for this mission, and he couldn't let it fail now. He had to remain strong, to lead by example however ruthless it made him look. His remaining troops had to keep their faith in him, and in the mission, just a little longer. When it was done, then and only then would he allow himself to weep.

They churned on into the desert twilight, taking the chance their fallen comrades had bought with their lives.

Then

The resistance didn't get really heavy until they were within sight of the cathedral. They were running low on frag charges by then, and at least three of the Chimeras were out of heavy bolter ammunition. Still, Thrax thought, they had left a bloody smear of carnage behind them for the last three miles. They re-embarked the infantry onto the Chimeras for the final assault.

The column was approaching the wide, open plaza before the rearing bulk of the cathedral when that thrice-damned plasma cannon opened up again and tore his rearguard into molten shreds.

'Fire!' he ordered. 'Fire! Fire!'

The tanks opened up with wild abandon. In the absence of a firm target fix they were shooting in all directions at anything and everything, bringing buildings

down in huge clouds of dust and rubble. A discharging plasma cannon should have lit up like a flare on Thrax's auspex, but there was just... nothing. It was like being shot at by an atomic ghost.

It was like magic.

'Why can't we see it?' Kallan shouted from her steering pit, cursing as the tank jolted over a mound of rubble. 'I thought orks were too stupid to hide a plasma cannon from an Imperial auspex!'

Dammit, it *was* magic, some foul xenos sorcery, and that tested Thrax's resolve more than any number of mortal foes could ever have hoped to do. Thrax didn't fear men, however many of them there were. He trusted his machine and he trusted his troops and his training and the protection of the divine God-Emperor to see him through against the enemies of mankind, but he couldn't fight magic. He refused to admit that in front of the troops, however. Mention magic and there would be panic.

'Perhaps we have underestimated them,' Thrax said grimly. 'Gorebrakah didn't rise so high amongst the xenos beasts by being a fool.'

He charged what was left of the column out of the deathtrap maze of streets and onto the plaza, and a second plasma beam struck down from the heights of the cathedral and turned number four tank into a miniature sun.

'Armour-piercing!' Thrax ordered. 'For the general! For the *khalig*! Fire!'

The tank's gun spat holy death into the heavens, the shaped charge of the armour-piercing round cutting its way through the sandstone walls of the cathedral and blowing a fountain of molten rock into the air high above them.

'Armour-piercing, load!'

Purple light ripped down once more, and a Chimera went up with a howl of superheated air and dying human torment.

'Fire!'

The tank kicked and roared again, and now the other Leman Russ units in Thrax's column had found his mark and were also belching stone-burning armour-piercing rounds into the sky. The twisted spire of the cathedral finally began to sag and melt, and the plasma cannon fell silent at last as lava streamed down the flying buttresses of the once holy building like molten tears.

Thrax clenched his teeth in rage. He was *destroying* a magnificent monument to the Emperor. Curse them! Curse the foul xenos beasts that had so defiled this holy place and forced him to such extremes. If he could burn every ork in the galaxy he would gladly do so, and count himself blessed to give his life for the privilege of doing it in the Emperor's name.

‘Forward,’ Thrax snarled, all too aware that the other murderous weapon was still at large somewhere behind them in the poisoned rat runs of Iblis Amrargh.

The great doors of the cathedral were fully thirty feet high and twenty wide, more than large enough to drive a tank through. Thrax put another armour-piercing shell through them, blowing the priceless, thousand-year-old carved hardwood into cinders, then did just that.

There was a prize inside, a prize and a great xenos evil, and the Astra Militarum were coming for them both.

In the Emperor’s name.

The tank bellowed down the nave of the cathedral and into a cavernous central chamber, the vaulted stone ceiling lost in the gloom above. Sunlight slanted down through high stained-glass windows, catching motes of ancient dust floating in the air. The armoured vehicles despoiled the space in seconds, their tracks tearing up the inlaid mosaic marble floor while their engines belched promethium fumes into the incense-scented air.

Thrax threw back his hatch and elevated his command chair, taking a great breath of exhaust smoke and fyceline. It smelled like victory.

The profaned high altar was on the far side of the vast chamber, half a mile or more away. The huge gold aquila had been smashed aside and the great stone slab of the altar daubed with foul ork glyphs, but even from his tank Thrax could see the colonel’s prize flashing in the light of the Chimeras’ search beams.

The khalig of General Al-Fallan.

A talisman so powerful, so glorious, he would have been prepared to risk his entire company to retrieve it even without the colonel’s plan. Gorebrakah himself had slain the great and noble General Al-Fallan back on Grennak, disembowelling him with his own blade. Thrax would not, *could not*, allow the last blood shed with that storied weapon to be the general’s own. No, it must be reclaimed, and used in the service of the Emperor once more. It *must* be. The honour of Tallarn depended on it.

Even so, there was more to this mission than just the khalig. The colonel and the high command above him played a long game, and of all their company only Thrax knew what it was.

Now

The second time it caught up with them, they ran away.

Thrax knew it stuck in the throats of his brave, proud warriors to flee rather

than fight, but what else could they do? With no tank ammunition left, they had no choice. Bolters alone wouldn't touch the horror that followed them.

They heard it coming, its howls and the grinding of its gears drowning out even the roar of their own machines as it bellowed in fury behind them, its voice echoing in the still desert night.

'Forward!' Thrax shouted into the vox, kicking Kallan to force every ounce of power she could out of *Rage of Tallarn's* labouring engines. 'On, on!'

'Sir,' Al-Maddon's voice crackled across the vox from her place in Chimera Two, '*we should turn and fight!*'

'We can't fight that, duf'adar,' Thrax said, his voice almost gentle for once.

He understood her concern. She was a true-blood warrior of Tallarn; of course she wanted to fight it. She was also, he realised, too naïve to rise any higher in the command structure than she already had. Sometimes, Thrax reflected, a commander has to acknowledge when something is simply impossible. Killing the thing behind them with only sponson-mounted heavy bolters and two Chimeras full of infantry was *utterly* impossible.

Trust the colonel, he told himself. Trust the plan.

Trust in the Emperor, and pray.

Then

'Forward,' Thrax said. 'Slowly, now. There could be traps.'

Slowly might help an experienced tank driver spot a weak area in the floor and avoid a deadfall, but it doesn't spot a concealed melta bomb.

Tank Six, *Blood of the Eagle*, went up like an inferno, and the flying molten slag of its dying burned straight through Chimera Nine, *Sand's Wrath*, and killed the entire complement of infantry and crew it was carrying as superheated overpressure blew the machine apart.

Thrax swore fluently into the vox and ordered a full halt. They were maybe halfway between the entrance and the altar. They hadn't seen a living thing since they breached the cathedral, and yet he was already down two more vehicles.

'Infantry, disembark,' he ordered. 'Full dispersal, maximum caution. I want this whole place swept for more traps.'

He watched them pour out of the remaining Chimeras, then after a moment, he grabbed a mobile vox-bead and stuffed it into his ear, and climbed out of his turret to join them, his khalig in one hand and his precious bolt pistol in the other.

‘Sir!’ his layer exclaimed, but he ignored her and slithered down the side of the tank’s turret and onto the track guards, then swung his legs over and jumped onto the cracked and torn ruin of the ornate marble floor below.

The khalig was the prize. It was the lure. It was...

The chamber flashed with purple light, followed by the shriek and searing heat of a plasma cannon discharging. Thrax threw himself to the ground with the infantry troops as he saw the hindmost tank of his column evaporate, then the next. Something behind them howled with a killing fury, its awful voice reverberating around the vast chamber as it advanced through the swirling clouds of dust and molten metal. It had a huge, defiled plasma weapon clutched in its fists. The slanting shafts of light from the high windows caught the enormous bulk of its shoulders and illuminated tusks fully two feet long that jutted from its massive jaw.

It was the biggest ork Thrax had ever seen in his life, encased in heavy armour and spitting murderous hatred with every step it took.

Simple, animal fear swept over Thrax at the sight of the monster. Humankind seemed so frail in the face of something so huge, so primal and savage. How could he hope to fight something like that? He cursed himself for his weakness, grasped for his faith in the Emperor and clung to it in sudden desperation. The Emperor protects the faithful, he told himself.

The ork charged, bellowing, into the nave, the plasma weapon in its hands belching death that consumed another Leman Russ in an expanding ball of superheated nuclear destruction.

Stay resolute, Thrax screamed at himself. Embrace the burden of command and lead by example or the company will break.

‘Kill it!’ Thrax roared into his vox. ‘All units, target and obliterate! In the Emperor’s Name! *Kill!*’

Now

Gorebrakah Urlakk forced himself forward one step at a time, kicking up plumes of rock and sand from beneath his gnarled, armoured feet. Only three of them were left now, less than the many they had been. Gore dripped from his power claws as he stomped across the dunes.

‘Iz mine!’ he bellowed into the desert night, his voice howling from the scavenged vox-amplifier built into his carapace. ‘My shiniez! My Waaaagh!’

Rage drove him. Rage, and the need to reclaim what was his. How would he

look, otherwise? He would look weak. He would be challenged. He would be challenged many, many times, until he had slain all his top boyz. Where would that get him? No. Better this way. Take it back.

Take back what was his.

Rage drove him.

Every stomp, every bellow, made him angrier.

Every step brought him closer to the running-away machines that had stolen what was his.

Every stomp brought him closer to the blade.

He *would* have it back.

It was *his*.

It was the greatest treasure he had.

That, and the rage.

Then

The whole column turned their weapons on the monstrous ork at once, armour-piercing and high explosive shells slamming into it from so many directions at once that it simply disappeared in a fountain of vaporised blood and molten armour.

An awful silence fell, broken only by the sound of the shattered plasma cannon, blown straight out of the xenos creature's hands in the initial barrage, falling back to earth and clattering loudly across the marble floor of the inner chamber.

'It can't be that easy,' Lieutenant Marhara said over the vox.

'Nothing ever is,' Thrax said. *'I believe this was the one that was stalking us through the city, but there was a second plasma weapon, firing from the heights of the spire. That, I think, is our true foe. It must have crawled out of the deep catacombs to attack us from the heights.'*

'We blew up the spire.'

Thrax nodded.

'We did,' he said, *'but no battle worth fighting is ever won so easily. There is another. The warboss that the gretchin call Gorebrakah Urlakk is still at large somewhere in this cathedral. It's been hiding in the depths, out of the Navy's reach, but I believe we have drawn it out into open battle.'*

'So what do we do, captain?'

'We follow our orders, lieutenant. We take the khalig from the altar and turn and burn for our own lines as though the very Archenemy himself were behind

us!’

Which, Emperor willing, he may well be, Thrax thought to himself.

At least, that was the colonel’s plan. The fact that they had managed to destroy a single ork that powerful was little short of a miracle; Thrax was under no illusion that they could hope to do it again, not with a world-conquering warboss like Gorebrakah Urlakk.

‘Go,’ he said.

Lieutenant Marhara and his platoon raced forwards across the great expanse of unbroken marble towards the altar, leapfrogging by squads with their long-barrelled lasguns held tight to their shoulders, each advance covering the next as it raced past them.

It was all going to plan now, Thrax thought. They would execute the mission objectives as the colonel had set them.

The floor began to tremble beneath him.

‘Defence pattern!’ he bellowed, but he was too late.

They came up out of the deep catacombs in a green tide, baying and slaving with primitive guns and huge spiked knives in their hands. He saw Lieutenant Marhara slashed in half through the abdomen and spine, spraying blood and offal across the floor as he fell into two perfectly sliced halves. Another trooper was hit through the side of her helmet, the multilayered polymer armour bisected easily by a blade with an ork’s enormous strength behind it, the weapon cutting a clean line through the skull and brain beneath.

‘I don’t f–’ she said over the vox, even as the top of her head was still spinning away into the air.

She swayed on her feet, a look of astonishment still on her face even as the light of the Emperor’s mercy left her eyes. She reached up with one hand, touched the back of her head, her mouth falling open in shock as she realised what had happened.

She fell with a wet thud.

And she was gone.

Las-shots screamed across the cathedral as the Tallarn infantry fought back.

‘Waaaagh!’ something bellowed from the heights.

War indeed. The heavy bolters on the vehicles exploded into life and blew orks to pieces all around them, strafing back and forth and chewing through their ranks until there was gore splattered across the ground thick enough to wade in. Thrax rolled and lifted his bolt pistol, firing in the direction the voice had come from. The weapon roared in his hand, the recoil jarring his wrist even as the holy

bolt tore upwards and exploded in the stonework somewhere far overhead, showering chips of marble into the air.

The voice replied with some guttural snarl Thrax didn't understand, but its mocking laughter made him clench his teeth with hatred.

Xenos abomination!

Something began to hiss.

Thrax turned, looking around as his infantry came up into firing positions all around him, dripping with ork blood. There was a mighty bang as reinforced plasteel blast shutters slammed down at the end of the nave, where the carved wooden doors had been, sealing them inside the cathedral.

Orks burst up out of the catacombs once more, and the hiss of ignition jets was replaced with a mighty *whuuumph* as their flamers ignited.

One of the troopers, the one nearest the altar, was consumed by a belch of reeking promethium fire. He shrieked as he burned, arms flailing in unspeakable agony. The flesh cooked from his face until Thrax could see the skull beneath, screaming in torment.

'Flamers!' Thrax shouted.

They returned fire, having to grab for respirators as the choking smoke of burning human flesh threatened to overcome them. Thrax and his troops laid down a withering counter-attack with their long-barrelled lasguns, but nonetheless the merciless flamers took four victims. They died screaming in unimaginable pain, giving their lives for the Emperor in one of the hardest ways there was. The stench of their tortured dying filled the once holy space, desecrating it further until Thrax was all but insensible with rage.

The voice boomed out of the ceiling, out of the impenetrable darkness above, ranting in the angry, guttural gibberish that passed for language amongst the vile xenos.

Thrax swore into the sweaty confines of his respirator and fired again, wasting precious bolt-rounds to blow chunks out of the stone overhead. Hatred fuelled him, but bore no fruit.

More angry laughter echoed around the vast chamber, making Thrax feel sick and unclean in equal measure.

'Form up,' he snarled into his vox. 'Forward!'

Again he drove the column forward, on foot now, the colonel's briefing ringing in his ears.

'Take the khalig. Nothing else matters,' the colonel had told him. *'Take the khalig, and Gorebrakah Urlakk will follow. He will have to, or lose face with his*

horde. Make him follow into my reach, Thrax. Nothing else matters at all.'

We don't matter, Thrax realised. Nothing did, compared with the chance to take down an ork warboss as great as Gorebrakah Urlakk. We're just lives, and the Emperor has those to spend in abundance.

So be it.

He had lived his whole life in the Emperor's service. It would be an honour to die in it too.

'Forward!'

The infantry sweep was three-quarters of the way across the great marble plain of the inner chamber, the remaining armour churning up the tiles as it followed in their wake. That was when the second melta bomb went off.

There was no warning, no clue as to what set it off. There was nothing but twenty men and women in full combat order, highly trained and highly disciplined and well equipped, and then there was a sunfire flash of obliteration and the reek of superheated flesh and boiled blood and burning bone, and they were gone.

They were just *gone*.

Thrax turned and blasted his bolt pistol into the darkness again, hunting his foe. Hideous, guttural laughter echoed throughout the vast chamber.

'Did dat 'urt?' the monstrosity mocked, in a travesty of Low Gothic.

Thrax roared and emptied his bolt pistol in the direction of the voice in a hammering blast of full auto. 'All armoured units, on my target. Fire!'

The remaining Leman Russ tanks traversed their barrels to where Thrax's bolt-rounds were slamming into the far-above ceiling, and opened fire with a thunder like the Emperor's own fury. The stone blew apart in a pounding rain of destruction, and something fell from the heights above to come crashing down amongst the infantry as the ground was shot out from under it.

It was clad head to toe in something like home-made Terminator armour, a massive powered exoskeleton with piston-enhanced metal limbs that vented greasy steam as it moved. He had seen the like only once before, on Grennak, when the blessed Adeptus Astartes had finally turned the tide of battle. At the time he'd had no idea what glorious avatar of the Emperor's wrath he beheld, but the colonel had explained it to him later, after their final victory. Thrax knew well what an honour it had been to witness such a thing. This monstrosity though... this was different, a xenos perversion of that holy majesty. One arm ended in a huge, hideous steel claw, while the other held the plasma cannon.

'Like me armour?' it snarled in its broken Gothic, and its claw lashed out and

bisected three troopers with a single snap. Their blood misted the air as they fell. ‘Good, innit?’

Thrax sheathed his khalig and slammed a fresh magazine into his bolt pistol, dropped to one knee with it braced in both hands and blasted four rounds into the monstrosity’s soot-stained breast-plate.

‘Infantry, reclaim the khalig!’ he yelled into his vox. ‘Armour, *kill!*’

He charged for the altar with the infantry, dodging a swing of the abomination’s claw that would have disembowelled him with a stroke. He turned and blasted a double burst of shots at it, but they pinged uselessly off its impossibly thick armour.

‘Reclaim the khalig!’ he shouted again, as another of his tanks was lost to the purple fury of the armoured warboss’ plasma cannon.

He couldn’t stand against that. He could only run.

Al-Maddon suddenly whooped in triumph, and Thrax looked up to see her swinging from the desecrated altar with General Al-Fallon’s khalig clutched in her hand.

‘Here!’ he shouted, and she wound back her arm and threw it to him.

Thrax caught the khalig with the skill of a born Tallarn blade-warrior, and his eyes widened as he saw yet more orks bounding up the steps from the catacombs.

‘*Down!*’ he screamed.

Al-Maddon made it down in time, but she was the only one of her squad who did: a wall of heavy-calibre explosive rounds from the ork guns slaughtered all those who were still standing.

Behind them, the tank cannons roared.

The warboss staggered as the high explosive rounds blew chunks out of the ground around it, howling and spitting guttural obscenities and return fire from its plasma cannon.

Another tank died in a flash of atomic purple flame even as the Chimera’s bolters scythed down the fresh horde of orks.

‘Armour-piercing!’ Thrax yelled into his vox, still a tank commander in his heart even if his boots were on the ground at the time. ‘Target the centre of mass, coordinated fire. *Kill it!*’

The remaining Leman Russ tanks blasted their last armour-piercing rounds into the warboss all at once, blowing it apart at the middle.

It thrashed on the ground, torso and legs separated by six feet of gore-slick marble.

Thrax approached it slowly, the weight of the general's khalig clutched in his hand. It seemed that the colonel's plan had been unnecessary after all.

'And so General Al-Fallan is avenged at last,' he snarled. 'With the very weapon you slew him with, Gorebrakah Urlakk, I now end you!'

The monstrosity looked up at him with dimming eyes and grunted through its massive tusks.

'I ain't da boss,' it said, and laughed a pained laugh that made blood stream down its chin and neck. 'I'z... just... one of 'is boyz! I was... 'is top boy! What you fink of dat?'

Thrax frowned down at the dying monster for a moment, then he lifted the general's khalig and severed its great head from its shoulders with a single savage blow of the monomolecular blade.

'That's what I think,' he said.

He stood looking down at the corpse for a long time, the khalig dripping in his hand. If this monster was not Gorebrakah Urlakk, then...

The floor of the cathedral exploded in a cloud of dust and splintered stone as something huge and terrible tore its way up out of the deep catacombs, and then their world began to end.

Iblis Amrargh was a dying place.

Now

Gorebrakah Urlakk was in a furious rage as he tore the trakk-waggon apart. His massive power klaw rent and ripped, shredding armour and flesh alike as he reached into the crippled machine, clutched the soft bodies of the infantry inside and *squeezed* until they burst.

They were shooting him, but it didn't even hurt.

Nothing hurt him, not in his armour it didn't. It had cost him many teef, but Gorebrakah got the best. He always got the best. He had the best mekboyz, and he had the best armour.

Better than Mega Armour.

Better than a Deff Dread.

He was the boss, and his Waaaagh! was unstoppable. No one could stop him 'cos he was *the boss!*

He looked up for a moment as the last tank ran away with the last trakk-waggon following it like some runt. That tank that had his shiniez in it.

There were three of the little soldiers still alive in the ruptured belly of the

trakk-waggon, grovelling before him and screaming with fear, their minds broken by his strength.

Gorebrakah Urlakk decided he would take his time with them.

Then

Captain Thrax sprinted for his tank, the general's precious khalig still clutched in his hand.

Every human instinct screamed *Run!*

A wave of terror emanated from the monstrosity before him, turning his bowels to water. Nothing could stand before that. The thing that should not live.

The ground shook as it took a step forward, belching smoke from its chimneys. The massive cannon that made up one of its four arms roared and blew a tank to pieces even as Thrax fled for the scant safety of his own machine.

'Run!' he screamed into his vox, his head splitting with the noise of the ork warlord's clanking, smoking onslaught. 'For the love of the Emperor, run!'

He hauled himself up into *Rage of Tallarn* and slammed the hatch cover down, Kallan already throwing the machine around in a tight turn that gouged great chunks out of the marble floor under its tracks. The plasteel blast shutters loomed ahead as the tank tore down the nave towards them.

'Armour-piercing!' Thrax ordered. 'Zero by zero at zero, fire!'

The cannon roared and their last shell blew a molten hole through the thick plasteel barriers seconds before the tank smashed headlong into them. Kallan put her faith in the Emperor and charged straight into the inferno of the explosion, driven as much by sheer terror as any sense of tactical awareness.

The sides of the tank screamed against the torn wreckage of the blast shutters, and then they were through and running with the remnants of the column behind them.

The monstrosity that was Gorebrakah Urlakk unleashed a storm of fire from the twin-linked heavy weapons in its third arm, shredding those unfortunate troopers attempting to flee on foot. Thrax could only watch the auspex in horror as the monstrosity reached out with its power claw and tore the back off a Chimera, the heavy flamer that tipped its fourth arm washing the inside of the vehicle with screaming death.

'Run!'

Now

They fled across the desert in the light of the rising sun.

One tank, one Chimera.

All that was left of Thrax's once mighty river of armour.

'The colonel protects,' Thrax whispered to himself, twitching in his command seat and unaware in his terror of how close he skirted heresy with those words. 'For the colonel. For the Emperor. Run. *Run.*'

They had shut down all vox-channels. Gorebrakah Urlakk was so close now that its constant amplified howling and ranting had driven the Chimera's vox-operator insane with fear. Thrax had heard Duf'adar Al-Maddon shouting at the man to close the hatch, that running on foot would do him no good. Eventually, she had been forced to do her duty and shoot the man for attempted desertion. Thrax had ordered the vox switched off after that, before the panic could spread.

'Fuel's so low, fuel's so low,' Kallan whimpered, bent over her levers as she coaxed more speed from the overworked Lemman Russ. 'I'll bleed. I'll bleed for the fuel tanks if I have to. Run it on blood. Run it on pain.'

'Keep it together, Kallan,' Thrax urged her.

He couldn't shoot his own driver, however ragged her sanity had become. Without her they were *all* dead, and the mission lost. In the gun bay behind her, the loader was whimpering in a corner, curled up in a ball of terror with his hands over his head. It didn't matter.

They had no ammunition anyway.

Thrax wiped sweat-slick hands on his combat trousers, cursing the wasted moisture.

Hold on to that thought, he told himself. Combat discipline. Water discipline. Normal things. *Real* things. Hold on!

He clung to his sanity by his fingernails, forcing himself to recite the Tallarn water ritual over and over in his head. Anything to shut out the endless howls of rage and madness that followed them across the desert. Anything to not have to think about what the horror behind them was doing to the crew of the lost Chimera.

Filthy xenos abomination.

Below Thrax's command seat his gun layer took out her autopistol, stuffed the barrel into her mouth, and blew her brains out rather than be taken alive. Blood and bone fragments splattered against the inside of the hull behind her as the noise of the shot reverberated around the interior of the tank.

Thrax cursed at her dishonourable action and consulted the auspex, watching as the blue line of the target area slowly crawled closer. Two miles now, no more.

Almost there, almost there...

‘Hard as you can, Kallan,’ he urged his driver. ‘We’re nearly there.’

‘It’s closing, sir, I can feel it!’

Thrax could only nod. The blinking red rune that represented Gorebrakah Urlakk was gaining on them again, and his sole remaining Chimera was starting to lag behind. Thrax grit his teeth and keyed the vox.

Howls of rage and fury washed over the frequency, stabbing into his mind like rusty knives.

‘Al-Maddon!’ he roared over the horrifying noise of the ork warlord. ‘What’s wrong? You’re slowing down!’

‘Nothing’s wrong, sir,’ the duf’adar said. ‘I’ve worked it out, that’s all. What that blue line on the auspex means. It’s a range delimiter, isn’t it? I know what you’re doing, and you won’t make it. We won’t make it. Not unless something slows it down.’

Thrax swallowed hard.

‘Al-Maddon...’ he started, but she cut him off.

‘No, sir. The mission is everything. That... that thing has to die!’

‘Yes,’ Thrax said at last. ‘Emperor go with you.’

Behind his tank, Al-Maddon’s Chimera made a tight turn and charged at Gorebrakah Urlakk.

‘I’ll see you get a medal for this,’ Thrax whispered, but the vox was dead in his hand.

Gorebrakah Urlakk watched the trakk-waggon turn. He raised his cannon, then thought better of it.

Why rush?

He flexed his power klaw in anticipation. This was going to be *fun*.

He waited for the trakk-waggon’s big shoota to open up on him, looking forward to the storm of the impacts against his carapace so he could show he was so hard that they didn’t even hurt, but nothing happened. He was still waiting when the bellowing vehicle ploughed headlong into him at full speed.

The impact knocked him off his feet, stomped him down into the sand hard enough to raise a great plume of dust high into the desert sky. His klaw smashed upward through the trakk-waggon’s undercarriage as though he were gutting a squig, ripping the drivetrain away with a rending shriek of tortured metal. He punched up further, into the crew bay, pulping soft little bodies by the handful. A woman appeared in his blood-splattered field of view. She looked hard enough to

be one of his top boyz, to be a proper nob. Blood streamed from her ears and nose and mouth even as she threw herself at him. She had an entire bandolier of stikk bombs wrapped around her.

The explosion lit up the auspex behind them, and Thrax knew that Al-Maddon had died well. The blue line crept forwards, less than a mile to go now.

‘Give it everything!’ he roared at Kallan. ‘*Run!*’

The sobbing driver didn’t need to be told. She was leaning on the control levers with all her weight, as though pushing them harder against the maximum point could somehow wring a few more ounces of power from the Lemman Russ’ howling engines. Thrax looked down past the corpse of the gun layer, saw that his loader was huddled under the empty breech of the tank’s main cannon, sobbing with helpless terror in the dim green light of the tank’s interior.

‘Faster!’

Behind them, the abomination Gorebrakah Urlakk was back on its feet and moving, the smoking wreckage of the Chimera abandoned in its lust for more death. It began to lumber after them, its massive clanking strides eating the distance at a terrifying rate.

The auspex flashed, the blue line finally passing over them. The tank sped on.

‘Nothing’s happened!’ Kallan wailed. ‘The line... I thought the line meant we were safe!’

‘The line isn’t for us,’ Thrax growled. ‘Forward!’

The tank was wallowing in the dunes now, one of the tracks slipping as the transaxle ground ominously against the chassis. *Rage of Tallarn* was dying around them, Thrax knew, but the mission was almost complete.

By the Emperor’s love, it was almost done.

He popped the hatch cover and reared up in his seat, the general’s khalig clutched tightly in his hand. He brandished it in the air, taunting the lumbering, smoke-belching monstrosity that followed. It was nearly over the line itself now.

Almost. Almost...

‘Come and take it!’ Thrax roared into the wind of their passage, laughing despite the vomit that welled up in his throat at the very sight of the ork warlord. ‘You want this? Come and get it!’

Gorebrakah Urlakk broke into a hideous travesty of a run, naked lust emanating from it as it reached out its power claw and grasped at the empty air. It didn’t dare shoot for fear of damaging the precious artefact, but Thrax knew it was going to catch them in a matter of minutes.

‘Mine!’ it bellowed, its guttural voice almost lost under the grinding of its gears, the clanking of armour and the wheeze of pistons. ‘Is mine! Stole it! Zoggin’ runt! Waaaagh! *Waaaaaaaaaaaaagh!*’

It didn’t matter, now. Gorebrakah Urlakk had crossed the blue line, and it was done. At great cost, but in the Emperor’s name, it was done. The mission was complete.

Thrax grabbed the vox, keyed it to the firebase’s emergency channel.

‘*Now!*’ he screamed over the furious howls that filled the airwaves. ‘Fire-pattern Alpha! *Kill it!*’

The horizon lit up in a flash like the very coming of the Emperor, and the air filled with screams that drowned out even Gorebrakah Urlakk’s insane ranting. Thrax threw himself back into the turret and began to pray at the top of his voice as the hatch slammed shut above his head.

The monster was finally in range of the Imperial artillery, lured out of the safe haven of its catacombs just as the colonel had planned all along.

The Earthshaker barrage split the sky, and *Rage of Tallarn* lifted into the air and flipped end over end as the massive shells came down behind it and smashed Gorebrakah Urlakk into the ground in a titanic explosion.

Thrax screamed as he was thrown free of his seat, falling upward into the crew bay as the tank rolled again. His head crashed into something, making his helmet ring like the tolling of a great bell. Again the world exploded as the second barrage fell, the Emperor’s judgement on the vile xenos abomination behind them. The auspex went dark, the green light failed, and Thrax knew no more.

The sobbing woke him.

Kallan was shaking him, weeping, begging him to live. He slowly opened his eyes.

The body of the gun layer was smashed to pulp, and the loader had been thrown face first into the breech of his weapon so hard that the impact had torn away his bottom jaw and ruptured his neck, almost ripping his head off. Kallan had a great shard of metal sticking out of the oozing red mess where her left eye had been.

‘Did we do it?’ she whispered. ‘Is... is it dead?’

Thrax groaned and nodded. They were still alive, so Gorebrakah Urlakk couldn’t be. If it was, they would be suffering impossible torments by now. He pulled himself up and pitched over sideways, and only then realised that his left leg had been torn off at the knee.

‘I gave you a shot for the pain and tied it off,’ Kallan said. ‘Had one myself.’

I'm not really crying, there's just something in my eye.'

She laughed, then, a thin, reedy giggle that spoke of madness.

Thrax pulled an emergency lever and blew the nearest hatch clear of the tank, hauled himself out of the shattered vehicle with his hands. He lay on the ground, feeling the desert sun on his face once more as his severed leg oozed dark, arterial blood into the sand. Behind them there was a crater half a mile wide and a hundred feet deep, scattered with fragments of spiked black armour plating.

It was wonderfully, blissfully quiet.

'There's a Valkyrie coming for us,' Kallan whispered. 'Heard it on the vox. The colonel is pleased.'

Thrax closed his eyes and wondered if the sound of Gorebrakah Urlakk's insane howls would ever leave him, if he would ever be able to sleep again. He looked at Kallan, at the metal sticking out of her face and the mad spit-flecked smile on her lips, and wondered what the future held for them.

That, as everything, was in the Emperor's hands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter McLean has written the short stories 'Baphomet by Night', 'Lightning Run' and 'No Hero' for Warhammer 40,000. He grew up in Norwich, where he began story-writing, practising martial arts and practical magic, and lives there still with his wife.

An extract from *Gaunt's Ghosts: The Founding*.



I

Location: Formal Prime, Sabbat Worlds, 755.M41

They were walking by lamplight, finding their way by the criss-crossing beams of their lamp packs. They were deep underground, so of course it was going to be dark.

Except it seemed unnecessarily, *extravagantly* dark. Lightless. As though some kind of anti-light, an un-light, had been poured into the gloom to thicken it.

Every few seconds, and to no particular rhythm, the earth shook.

Ibram Gaunt could feel it through his boots. He swapped his lamp pack to his right hand, and placed his left palm against the tunnel wall. He felt the rough surface transmit the vibrations. At every subterranean quiver, dirt trickled down from the ceiling, or spilled from loose sections of the old, decaying arches.

The men in the advance squad could feel the shaking too, and it was putting them on edge. Gaunt could tell that by the way the beams of their lamps jerked and shifted at every tremble. Gaunt knew someone should say something. That someone was him, a part of his duty.

‘Shelling,’ he said. ‘The Warmaster has focused the artillery divisions on Sangrel Hive. It’s just shelling.’

‘Feels like the world’s moving,’ muttered one of the troopers.

Gaunt tilted his lamp to find the man’s face. Picked out starkly by the lamp’s beam, Trooper Gebbs shielded his eyes at the glare.

‘It’s just shelling,’ Gaunt assured him. ‘Concussion from the shelling.’

Gebbs shrugged.

The ground shook. Pebbles skittered.

‘Why are we here?’ asked another man. Gaunt’s lamp beam moved to identify

Trooper Ari Danks.

‘You getting all philosophical now, Ari?’ Gebbs asked with a chuckle made throaty by the dust in the air.

‘I just wondered what the Throne we were supposed to be doing?’ Danks replied. ‘There’s nothing out here. Just these endless, pitch-black bloody ruins...’

‘So you’d rather be hacking your way through Charismites in the hive-stacks, would you?’ asked Trooper Hiskol.

‘At least it wouldn’t be as black as up my—’

‘Enough,’ said Gaunt. He didn’t have to raise his voice, and the troopers didn’t have to turn their beams to see his face and read its expression. They ceased their chatter. Some of them had served long enough to remember when Gaunt had just been ‘the Boy’, Oktar’s cadet, but none of them were about to forget what that young cadet had become. Gaunt was the commissar. He was discipline.

The ground shook again. Gaunt heard a little river of grit spill down the curve of the tunnel wall. He had to admit that Trooper Danks had a point. What *were* they doing here?

Gaunt understood the mission parameters clearly enough, and frankly, given the intensity of the hive-war, this advance detail was a blessed relief.

Even so, he’d calculated the journey time that morning, overestimating to allow for detours where the maps didn’t match the navigable reality of the undersink, and they should have reached their destination two hours ago.

Gaunt told the men to wait, and used his lamp to pick his way along the unlit tunnel. The officer in charge of the detail was standing at the next bend, checking his charts.

Major Czytel glanced up at the lamplight bobbing towards him.

‘That you, Gaunt?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We may have taken a wrong turn back there, Gaunt,’ Czytel said. ‘At that junction where the tunnel split.’

He turned and twitched his beam back the way they had come, partly as an indicator, partly to pick out Gaunt’s face.

Gaunt nodded. He’d presumed as much. Galen Czytel was old school, and most definitely remembered the time when Gaunt had merely been ‘the Boy’. Unlike the rank and file, he had never really got over the idea that Ibram Gaunt was an over-educated, over-privileged scholam boy with too much book-learning and not enough actual soldiering. Czytel liked what he called ‘honest men’. He

seemed to be allergic to anybody who had an air of the officer class or entitlement. Czytel had ‘dragged himself’ up through the Hyrkan ranks. He’d freely tell you that, possibly several times in the course of one regimental dinner.

In fact, when Gaunt received his full promotion at Otkar’s deathbed on Gylatus Decimus, Czytel had been one of a group of officers who had formally requested that Gaunt be transferred out of the Hyrkan Eighth to another unit. They felt that it would ‘undermine morale’ because the men ‘would not take seriously the authority of an individual who had previously been the regiment’s mascot’.

General Caernavar had thrown the request out quickly. Ironic then, it was officers like Czytel, and not the regular troops, who had found such difficulty in accommodating Gaunt’s maturity.

Gaunt, for his part, had learned that it was best not to correct Czytel unless absolutely necessary. An officer’s mistake could be carefully smoothed over by a diligent commissar. An open argument between an officer and a commissar had potentially devastating effects on discipline.

‘We’ll go back,’ Gaunt said. ‘It’s not far. Or we could go on to the next intersection, and move east.’

‘The next intersection?’ asked Czytel.

In the lamplight, Gaunt could see that Czytel was looking at him with a sort of sneer. ‘You haven’t got your chart out. You just *remember* that, do you?’

‘I reviewed the route this morning,’ Gaunt replied. ‘I don’t have my chart out because—’

He stopped. He had been about to say ‘because you, as officer in charge, were leading the route’.

‘I will double-check,’ Gaunt said. ‘I could be wrong.’ He reached for the data-slate pouch attached to his webbing, but Czytel just handed over his own slate. It looked like impatience, that Czytel didn’t want to wait while Gaunt produced his data-slate and woke it up. But it was actually a small concession, one which allowed for the idea that Czytel might have made a navigational error. The major wanted to keep the peace too.

Gaunt reviewed the screen.

‘Yes, you see, sir? The next intersection seems to allow access to this sinkway here. That should lead us directly to the shrine.’

‘If it is a shrine,’ said Czytel.

Which is the point of us being here, Gaunt thought, but did not say it. He just nodded.

Czytek turned the squad.

‘Pick it up! Let’s go!’ he called into the darkness.

II

The Crusade had finally begun.

The Crusade.

The top brass had been talking about it for years, and received wisdom was that the region known as the Sabbat Worlds was past saving. It was a vast territory at the rimward edge of the Segmentum Pacificus, a major Imperial holding that had, in the course of two bloody centuries been overrun by the marauding armies of the Sanguinary Worlds. Some worlds had fallen to the Eternal Archenemy. Others, like Formal Prime, had struggled on, surrounded by the barbarous foe, fighting to maintain their Imperial identities. The Sabbat Worlds deserved the protection of the Throne, their seneschals and governors pleaded for it, but liberation was a monumental task. Few thought that High Command would ever sanction the massive expenditure that a crusade war would require.

Until Slaydo. Lord Militant Slaydo was a persuasive beast, and with the victories of the Khulan Wars on his honour roll, he had been declared Warmaster and allowed to prosecute the Sabbat Worlds Crusade.

It was the biggest Imperial mobilisation in the segmentum for three centuries. The *Departemento Tacticae Imperialis* estimated it would take a century to successfully complete the campaign.

Ibram Gaunt had no real interest in looking that far ahead. The fighting to retake Formal Prime’s ancient and crumbling hives had been some of the most brutal and intense he’d experienced, and his career with the Hyrkans had not been lacking in bloodshed. Eight years since he’d joined the Imperial Guard as a Commissariat cadet, and he’d seen plenty of action, but nothing like this.

Sangrel Hive, the world’s most massive hab centre, was the stronghold of an enemy ‘magister’ or warlord, a monster called Shebol Red-Hand. His cult followers, the Charismites, held their ground with a zealous rage that was quite intimidating. The previous week, Gaunt had seen more men die in one hour than he thought possible.

So this, this lamplight detour mission into the rambling, pitch-black undersinks seventy kilometres beyond the recognised limits of Sangrel Hive, this could be seen as something of a perk. It got a squad of men out of the front line for a few days. It had the personal sanction of the Warmaster. The surroundings might be dismal – the unnerving darkness, the steady seep of tarry ground-water, the smell of rot and mildew, the vermin, the unsafe sections of tunnel – but the Hyrkan

soldiers were out of the front-line action, and there were no screaming waves of spear-wielding Charismites rushing their formation every few minutes.

The ground shook. Dirt trickled. Gaunt noted the agitation of the men once again, the flickering beams. He realised there was a chilly lick of sweat between his own shoulder blades. Sangrel Hive was a long way away. If they could feel the earth-shock of the artillery bombardment at this distance, what kind of hell had the main front turned into?

The assault of Formal Prime was part of Operation Redrake, the Warmaster's opening move. Named after the famous predatory serpent, Redrake was intended to be a lightning strike against multiple targets: four significant worlds at the trailing edge of the Sabbat group: Formal Prime, Long Halent, Onscard and Indrid. Slaydo had chosen to lead the Formal Prime assault personally. It was the keystone world.

If Redrake failed, then the Crusade was as good as botched before it had even got going. The High Lords of Terra would recall Slaydo. Tactics would be reconsidered. The Sabbat Worlds might be left to rot for another thousand years. Another ten thousand.

Gaunt tried not to think about it. He was an ambitious young man. He had achieved his status in the Hyrkans through sheer hard work and perseverance. He had welcomed the possibility of a major new campaign because it was an opportunity for an ambitious young man to prove himself and make a name.

The reality was bitter and exhausting. War was not a glorious thing, no matter what memories or reputations resulted from it. War was about suffering and loss, about struggle and sacrifice. It was about blood. Just a few weeks into the opening engagements of the conflict, Ibram Gaunt no longer thought about it in terms of proving himself, or building a reputation.

He had realised that the Sabbat Worlds Crusade was something he was going to have to endure. It was something a man simply had to survive.

Gaunt wondered what kind of strength that feat was going to require. He wasn't sure he had it. He wasn't sure he'd ever had it. He was just an over-educated, over-privileged scholam boy with too much book-learning and—

The ground shook.

'Here,' said Gaunt. 'Sir?'

Czytel turned. Gaunt shone his lamp down a side passage that was partly obscured by architectural debris.

'This is the junction?' the major asked.

'Yes, sir,' said Gaunt.

Czytel shrugged, and clambered through. The men followed, lasguns across their chests. Gaunt wanted to assign them a covering pattern, to send some men ahead to recon. However, the Hyrkans, excellent, well-drilled battlefield soldiers though they were, generally lacked an aptitude for scouting and recon.

Besides, it was not Gaunt's place to issue commands. That was the officer's job. Gaunt was merely the commissar.

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