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DAVID ANNANDALE



A COMMISSAR YARRICK SHORT STORY

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*by David Annandale*

There was a jitter in Bekket's eye that I didn't like. We were trained at the Schola Progenium to watch for the early signs of political deviance or dereliction of duty. That meant being able to read all the nuances of body language. Hans Bekket was no traitor, and he was no coward. But the time of our imprisonment was eroding him, physically and spiritually, as surely as the sands of Golgotha had eaten away at the metal and flesh of our forces.

I had been watching him for several shifts now. How many days those were, I had no way of telling. The concept of time as a series of moments arriving from the endless potential of the future to become a distinct and defining past was a luxury denied to the slaves on Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka's space hulk. We had only the grinding scream of an eternal present. Existence was labour, whips, agony, death. I had tried, early on, to gauge the length of the shifts, but the orks made even that effort futile. They simply worked us until the numbers collapsing from exhaustion became annoying. Then they bundled those of us who were still alive back into our cages. There we slept as best we could, waiting to be turned out to suffer again.

Bekket and I were hauling salvage. It was junk of every description scavenged from the ships that, along with a central asteroid, made up the hulk. We dragged heavy, clumsy carts full of the stuff to a massive depot, where the orks' grotesque versions of engineers pawed through the material. We pulled the carts with chains, but we weren't chained ourselves. The orks didn't bother. Where could we go? And what fun would there be in beating stragglers to death, if there were no stragglers to be had?

Bekket's eyes flicked back and forth as if he were a malfunctioning gun servitor seeking targets. He was unconsciously looking for an excuse to strike out. When he did, he would believe he was acting out of rage and honour, but he

would be wrong. Impulsive rebellion in this terrible place was an act of despair. It had only one possible outcome.

I would not have it. There were so few left of the men who had come with me to Golgotha. And our mission was unfinished. Thraka still lived.

Bekket was a few metres ahead of me. Beyond the strain of pulling his cart, there was an extra tautness in his shoulder blades. He was on the verge. I tried to get closer. It was difficult. I only had one arm with which to pull the chain. My battle-claw was long gone, my trophy now Thraka's. And I wasn't a young man. All the same, I managed to draw within two metres before I risked speaking.

'Trooper Bekket.'

'Commissar?'

I had his attention, but then the man in front of him stumbled. He was another Guardsman, wearing the rags of a Mordian uniform. I didn't think he'd been with us on Golgotha. He looked like he'd been here for much longer. And still, he didn't fall or drop his chain. He just stumbled. That was enough for the nearest ork guard. The greenskin roared and lashed out with its whip. The weapon was a length of flexible metal cable embedded with jagged bits of blade. It wrapped around the Mordian's neck. The ork yanked hard. The coils tightened, constricting and severing. The man's head flew off. The ork roared again, this time with delighted laughter.

There was a heavy piece of piping in Bekket's cart. I had seen him eyeing it earlier. Now he grabbed it, letting his chain drop to the ground.

'Bekket, no,' I shouted, but he was already lunging at the ork, swinging the pipe at the monster's head. The ork swatted him down. The spikes on the back of its wrist-guard tore his cheek open, and I heard the crunch of his nose breaking. He spun as he fell. The ork put an iron boot on his chest. It stowed its whip and pulled a massive axe from its belt. It raised the blade high, the stupidly glowering eyes under its thick brow fixed on Bekket's skull.

I stepped forward. I locked gazes with the ork.

'No,' I said again, but I said it to the guard, I said it with ice and I said it in orkish. It disgusted me to use that obscene tongue, but it startled the guard. The ork hesitated.

I held the monster's eyes with my single one. I peered up with my head tilted slightly down, so there would be more shadow, more mystery, in my empty socket. I was a one-armed, one-eyed human past his prime making direct eye contact with an ork. I should have been dead, my guts strewn all over the ground. But I was Yarrick, and I had the evil eye. I killed orks with a look. The

brute in front of me knew this. At that moment, so did I. With Bekket's life dangling by a frayed thread, I channelled all of my faith in the Emperor and my hatred of the orks into the crystalline, adamantine belief that my gaze was a greenskin's doom. I was what they believed me to be.

The guard's axe wavered. The ork looked away from my eye and my dangerous socket, and glanced around, uncertain. It seemed to notice something on the gantries in the gloom high above our heads. Then it lowered the blade. It took its foot off Bekket, gave him a kick in the ribs, and stalked away down the line of slaves, snarling to itself.

As I helped Bekket up, the back of my neck prickled. I looked up into the shadows. I sensed the massive presence. *He* was up there, watching. The ork. Thraka.

I couldn't see him, but I hoped he saw the look in my eye.

I hoped he saw the lethal promise that lay within.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day, DAVID ANNANDALE dons an academic disguise and lectures at a Canadian university on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games, shaping his students into an army of servitors awaiting his signal to rise. He is the author of several thriller and horror novels and the acclaimed short story 'Carrion Anthem' for Black Library. He lives with his wife and family and a daemon in the shape of a cat, and is working on several new projects set in the grim darkness of the far future. Visit him at [www.davidannandale.com](http://www.davidannandale.com).



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**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

**Published in 2012 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

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**ISBN 978-0-85787-649-2**

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