

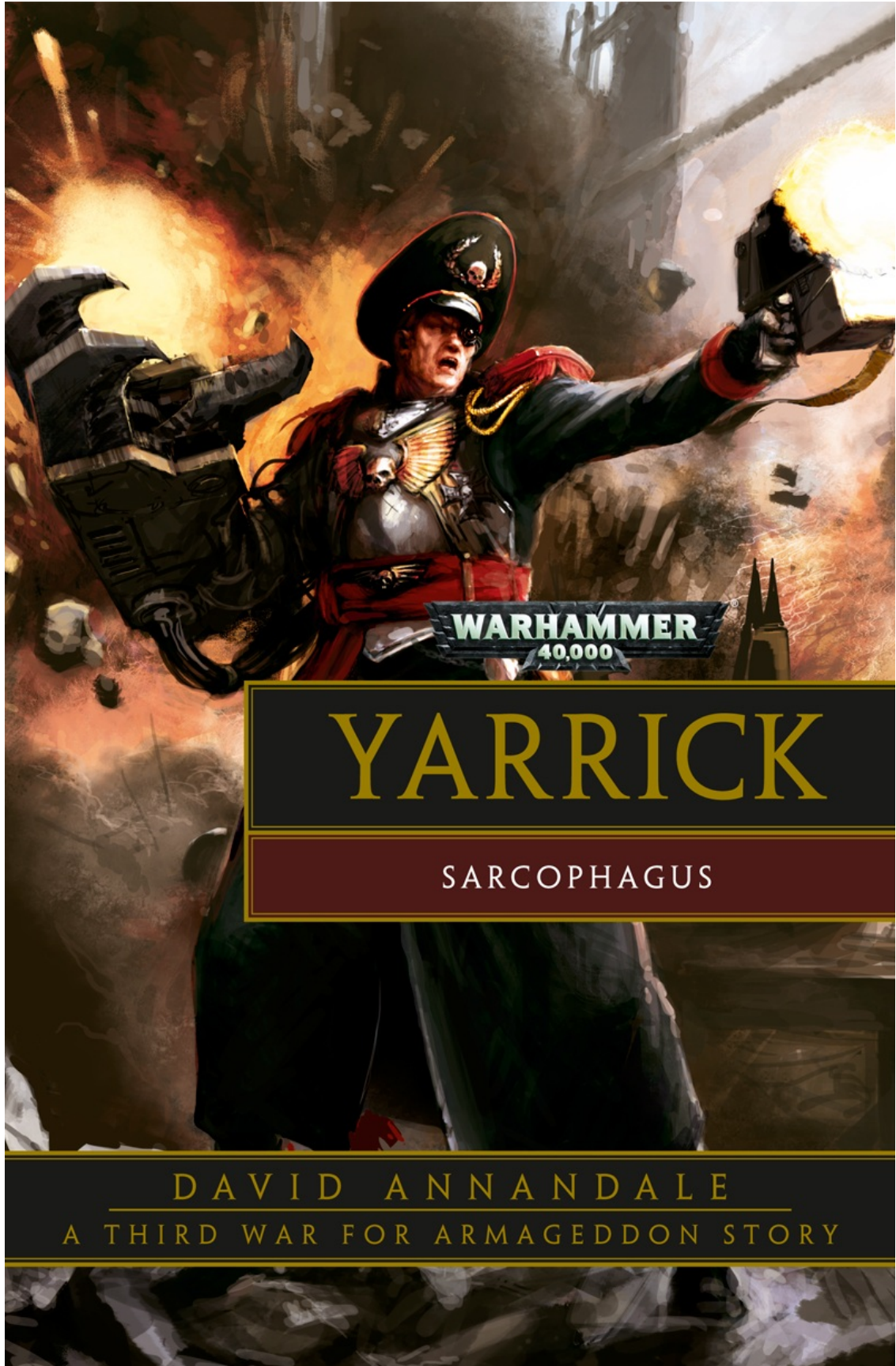
WARHAMMER  
40,000

# YARRICK

SARCOPHAGUS

DAVID ANNANDALE

A THIRD WAR FOR ARMAGEDDON STORY



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# SARCOPHAGUS

David Annandale

The true measure of my enemy's threat isn't just in the brute force at his disposal. Nor is it fully captured in the tally of victories and defeats. What lies behind events? Why are some actions taken and others not? The answers to those questions can reveal a power even more deadly than armies of millions could imply. Ghazghkull Thraka had annihilated our forces on Golgotha. What that showed of his means and ability was bad enough, but that he released me had even worse implications.

Sometimes questions alone point to dark revelations.

I was in Anaon, south of Hive Tartarus. It was a smaller hive on the coast of the Tempest Ocean. I had come for two reasons. One was to inspect the maritime defences. The fate of Helsreach still hung in the balance, and we had to prepare against the possibility of a second invasion from the water. The other reason was symbolic. That had always been an integral part of my duties as a commissar: to represent something more important than the individual in the uniform.

I never meant to become an icon, but circumstances were circumstances. The Second War for Armageddon had changed the meaning of my name. 'Yarrick' now meant 'the Saviour of Armageddon'. My thoughts about the truth of the matter were irrelevant. The legend existed. And now the Third War had come. My duty was to use every weapon at my disposal against the enemy. So if my presence was enough to motivate a population to a greater effort, then I would make sure I was seen. The people of Anaon had to be willing to sacrifice everything, down to their lives. Every single one. No one person, group or hive was more important than Armageddon.

So I flew in from Tartarus. I made my inspection. I met with the commanders of the military forces charged with the hive's defence. I made myself visible. Anaon had suffered a few bombing raids, but had been spared a major assault.

The people felt safe enough to take to the streets. I spoke to them. I exhorted. I made sure of their commitment to the war.

All was well and good, but the problems began when I had to return to Tartarus. A massive aerial battle was underway between the two hives. Air transport back to Tartarus was out of the question. I had to travel using terrestrial means.

I climbed out of my command car just inside the outer gate of Anaon, a massive configuration of entwined metal columns that resembled a fused manufactory. I greeted Captain Veit Morena of the Steel Legion's 12th Company, 22nd Regiment. He was a short man and wiry. A good build for a tanker.

'Captain,' I said. 'I understand your squadron is being recalled to Hive Tartarus.'

'That's correct, commissar.'

'I would like to accompany you.'

He seemed taller suddenly. 'I would be honoured if you rode with me,' he said.

'Thank you.'

He led me to his Leman Russ Vanquisher, *Storm of the Wastes*. His driver, Alna Klaren, and gunner, Jaro Berne, snapped to attention. Like Morena, they were compact soldiers. They looked as if they had been born in the tank, their bodies shaped to its confines. Oil was so deep in their folds of their skin, it might as well have been pigmentation. The hull of *Storm* bore similar marks. It had been scored by centuries of exposure to the acidic rains of Armageddon.

The long line of tanks rolled out of Anaon at dusk with *Storm* at the head. The toxic cloud cover was heavy with the threat of rain. We made good time for the first few hours, rumbling along the pitted, cracked rockcrete route that linked Anaon to Tartarus. Morena and I alternated riding the hatch. At the northern horizon, in the direction of Tartarus, the night sky flashed and burned with reflected explosions. I saw the streaks of missiles, and the spiralling flame of stricken aircraft falling to earth. War's steady, pulsing thunder rolled over us, all the sounds of conflict melding into a muffled, arrhythmic, stuttering – *boom, boom-boom, boom-boom, boom-boom*.

When I traded places with Morena, he looked into the distance. 'I make it another two hours before we're under the worst of the fighting,' he said.

'Agreed.'

I thought that would be the point of greatest vulnerability for the squadron, but I was wrong.

An hour later, when I was again at the hatch, the beat of the war drum changed. A layer detached itself from the rest. It was more regular, and sounded closer. It was slow, deep as a continent. Even over the rattling of the Vanquisher, I could feel the beat's vibrations in my chest. It came from north-east of our position.

I peered into the dark as points of light appeared. They confused me at first. They looked like stars, an impossible sight on Armageddon; the planet's polluted sludge of an atmosphere was impenetrable. Then I realised that the stars were moving. The ground shook at measured, relentless intervals. The stars drew nearer. They were in pairs and a red the colour of flames. I could make out massive shadows in the night as we came closer. Mountains were slouching toward the road to Tartarus.

I dropped back down the hatch. 'Gargants!' I warned.

Even in the red illumination of the tank's interior, I saw Morena turn pale. His fear was not cowardice. It was an entirely rational response to the presence of the ork monsters of war. 'We can't fight those,' he said. Those words weren't cowardice either. They were the judgement of a commander who knew the limits of his force's strength. War will call upon us to do the impossible. It will force us to fight when there is no chance of survival, let alone victory. But we were not in a position where choice had been taken away from us. Duty calls for sacrifice, not stupidity.

'Berne,' Morena told the gunner. 'Vox Tartarus Command. Warn them.'

I climbed out of the hatch entirely to make room for Morena, riding on the turret and grasping the cupola with my power claw. We watched the progress of the Gargants. There were three of them, each a hundred metres high. They were still far from us, but we could see them more clearly now. They were lumbering, wide-bodied products of diseased invention; they had none of the majesty of Titans. But they provoked awe all the same. They gouted flame and smoke, towering over the landscape like brutal, shambolic gods. A single one could destroy a city. And they would reach the road long before we had passed them.

We looked further to the east. The land was dark, and there were no further sign of ork forces accompanying the Gargants.

'That way seems clear,' Morena said. 'I wish the terrain was better.'

We were in a region of bare, rocky hills. Perhaps at some point in Armageddon's distant, eroded past, they had been verdant. The millennia had stripped them of all vegetation and worn them down until they had the dead, rounded shapes of bone. The tanks could handle their slopes, but we wouldn't be

able to see far ahead. Obstacles in the form of boulders would be common, and we'd be encountering them in the dark. Progress would be slow.

'We have no other option,' I said. If we stayed on the road, annihilation was a certainty. 'We'll need to make a wide sweep.' Even more time lost.

Morena nodded and disappeared inside the tank to issue the commands.

We turned off the road onto terrain that was uneven, broken, hostile to our passage. It was riddled with the cracks of dried stream beds. Forward visibility in the tanks' lamps shrank to the crest of the next hill. We headed east and did not turn until the earthquake rumble of the Gargants faded, their flames only pinpricks in the dark again. I guessed we were twenty kilometres off the road when Morena finally ordered a northward course again.

The hours passed. Dawn was still a long way off when the Gargants were finally to our south. Though we had been slowed, we were still faster than they were. I was so focused on the Gargants' position that I barely noticed how close we had come to the aerial battle.

It came to us with a high-pitched snarl. I looked up. More lights in the dark, a swarm of them racing in from the north-east: two ork bomber squadrons, and ten aircraft that I could count. There was no question of evasion – we had been spotted and the bombers were coming right for us.

They were still some distance away when they began to release their incendiary bombs. The land vanished in a billowing cloud of flame. The night burned, heat racing ahead of the fire. My face blistered. The holocaust marched toward us, and there would be no escape.

I went down into the tank again and sealed the hatch. The others were already reacting to the threat. Morena was at the vox, coordinating the response. Heavy bolter turrets along the entire line of the tank squadron were turning to fire at the enemy fliers. Klaren gunned the engine, pushing *Storm* to full speed, terrain be damned. We had little defence against what was coming. If we were lucky, heavy bolter-rounds or a miraculous cannon shot might bring down a couple of planes. Speed was a gesture more than a strategy. The weapons that were about to hit us did not require accuracy.

I braced, grasping the hatch ladder with my claw.

The booming voice of war had arrived and the bombs continued to fall. The light of sudden day burst through the driver's viewing block, bright enough to illuminate the full interior of *Storm*. Then the full force of the bombardment arrived and we drove into a high-explosive firestorm.

The vox exploded with cries. Morena was shouting into it. '*Tartarus*

*Command, this is Scorched Earth Squadron, Twelfth of the Twenty-Second out of Anaon, transporting Commissar Yarrick. Our position—*

The world erupted beneath *Storm of the Wastes*. For a moment, I had the impression of a gunship lifting off. Then we were turning end over end, and everything was violence and ruin.

And then everything was darkness.

Waking was a transition from one darkness to another. I left oblivion for pain and crushing pressure on my legs. Something was pushing my head and neck forward, forcing me into a harsh bend. The blackness swam with sparks, but they were all from behind my eye. I could hear metal ticking, creaking and settling. Somewhere, a circuit crackled and fell silent. I didn't know where I was or why I hurt.

Nothing moved. Nothing changed. There was only the pain, growing worse, and the weak muttering of wreckage. Then my head cleared and I knew what had happened.

*It's not important*, I told myself. *What's important is knowing what is happening now*. Did I even know which way I was facing? No. Was I the only survivor?

'Captain Morena,' I called. 'Klaren. Berne.'

No answer.

I waited a minute before trying again, several more times, and louder. Nothing.

*They're dead, then. What about the rest of the squadron? Learn the situation.*

I kept quiet and listened. Beyond the groans of the dead tank, there were sounds from the outside world. The war thunder continued. It was distant once more. No combat in the immediate vicinity. I kept listening, straining to focus beyond my pain and interpret what I could hear and what I could not. There were no engines or guns. No hammering of tools. No sounds at all of any activity in the close proximity of the hull.

The conclusion was a simple one. The ork bombers had done their job well. The tank squadron had been destroyed.

A further conclusion: I was alone.

I confronted the temptation to close my eye and return to the deeper dark. I judged it unworthy. I had not earned the right to rest. Not yet. After Golgotha, when Thraka had taken me captive to his space hulk, he had thrown me into a pit. I had had every reason to believe I was about to die. During my fall, that was when I had known several seconds of rest. Those moments would still have to

suffice. Perhaps, once Thraka was dead, I would win the reward of the truest sleep. Not now, though. My duty was far from discharged. Armageddon called.

Besides, I was very uncomfortable.

I tried to move. I could turn my head from side to side, for all the good it did me. I was still hunched, my back protesting and darkness was everywhere. My legs were pinned. My left arm was blocked if it moved more than a few centimetres to my side. My right, though, had a good degree of range. I raised the claw up and down, left and right. I imagined that I was caught in a fold of the wreckage. My right arm reached into what had been the open space of the tank's interior.

Though my legs were trapped, I didn't think they were broken. They hurt, and I wasn't going anywhere. But I could feel and move my toes. When I struggled, there was no sudden burst of fresh agony.

*You're intact. The Emperor protects. He truly does. So how will you use his blessing, old man? Show your gratitude. Get out.*

I reached forward with the claw and struck crumpled metal right away. Keeping its digits closed, I brought it next to my side, then slid it up and down against the barrier. My legs were held, not pulped, so there had to be a gap, small though it was, in the wreckage that gripped me. It took me several attempts. I was trying to accomplish a task by touch with a hand that was not mine. At last, though, the claw slid forward a few centimetres. I worked it forward until it was wedged. Then I paused.

*Are you sure you want to do this? You have no idea of the condition of the wreckage. You don't know what will happen if you disturb the present equilibrium.*

True. I might contrive to crush myself properly. Then again, did I have a choice?

*No. You don't.*

I opened the claw as slowly as I could. Metal protested. I pried the three metal digits apart. The corpse of the Vanquisher cried out. The pressure eased on my legs. I pulled. My feet moved. I lurched my torso to the right while keeping the claw in place. I was pivoting on my own arm, and now I did get some new bursts of agony.

I didn't stop. I risked opening the claw all the way. The wreckage shrieked. I heard snaps. I bent my legs and threw all my weight to the right, moving a bit further. I tested it, scrabbling with my feet until I found a purchase and making sure my boots wouldn't slip.

*Ready?*

I whispered, 'The Emperor protects.'

I shut the claw with a snap and propelled myself to the side, sliding out of the trap a second before it slammed shut.

I tumbled free through the space, landing on hard angles. I bought myself some new bruises.

I sat up, working the kinks out of my neck. Feeling around with my left hand, I learned the contours of my prison. Jagged angles and heavy masses pressed in on me. Not everything I found was metal. I discovered a leg that appeared to be sticking out of a solid mass of metal and broken bodies. My hand sank into something that felt like a broken sphere. It was very wet. I didn't know whose head it was.

I had room to crouch, but not stand. I could move a few steps in any direction. In the centre of the space, I found a cylindrical depression. This, I guessed, had been the turret hatch. The *Storm of the Wastes* was upside down. I would not be leaving that way.

I sat down on something level and rested, thinking. Trying to make my way up would mean going through the chassis. There was little hope there, unless it had already been split open. Was it night or day? I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious. A few more hours and I could assume there was daylight outside the tank. I'd know then if there were any tears in the armour I could exploit. I didn't feel any stirring of air, though. Upwards did not seem like a fruitful route.

The flanks, then. For the time being, I put aside considerations of where the armour was thickest or thinnest. I could punch through a lot with the claw. But not anything. And my leverage was limited.

I thought about the driver's compartment. The viewing block was too small to crawl through, but any gap might be something I could enlarge. I worked my way around the circumference of the space again and tried to orient myself. Where was the gunner's seat? Which way was the cannon? Which way were the engines?

I failed. The damage was too severe. Nothing was recognisable. Whatever direction I chose could lead me toward the engines, and I had no desire to start pounding at them. I was lucky that they had not exploded, and that I wasn't wading through promethium waiting for the first spark. I was already entombed. I was not ready to be cremated.

The thought of *Storm of the Wastes* as a coffin gave me pause. I stopped moving and made myself take the time to work through that possibility. The air

smelled of grease and blood. There was a trace of smoke. I was not short of breath; the space was small. Enough time had passed, and I had exerted myself enough, that my lungs would be labouring if I were sealed in hermetically.

Air was getting in. That did not imply I would be getting out. It could mean that I would be able to breathe until I died of thirst.

*What about rescue?*

I chose not to work through those possibilities just yet. I would have to rely too much on outside circumstances. I was already at the mercy of plenty. Time enough to think about that later.

*Up, then?* I thought.

*Yes. Up.*

That was the only direction of which I had any certainty.

I felt above my head, looking for any hint of weakness. I found an area where the wreckage seemed a bit more sparse. I swiped at it with the claw. A metal tangle came down on me. I brushed it off, then began in earnest. I pulled my arm back as far as I could. The energy of the claw built up. I punched upward.

The bang shook the entire vehicle. I paused, waiting for the explosion or the final collapse. When neither occurred, I struck again. Then again. And again.

I settled into a rhythm. Each blow worked out a bit more frustration. For the first few minutes, I made progress. The decking buckled under my attacks. I had to reach higher. Soon I could straighten up.

That was the extent of my victories. Though I was tearing through layers of metal, I was also smashing the plating, mechanism and armour together to create a denser mass. A moment came when I could no longer reach my target. I tried to climb, but there was nothing I could perch on with enough stability to punch again. Even if I clung to the edge of the hole in the decking, there wasn't enough room to get the claw past my own arm.

I sat back down. I had gone as far as I could in this direction. My options had been reduced to one, and it was poor one: rescue.

I examined the facts. Remaining dispassionate was not difficult. Between the battering I had taken and the one I had just given, I was exhausted.

There would be a search for me, and to the degree that was possible in the middle of the worst ork assault in Armageddon's history. I had last been seen in Anaon, and it was known that I was travelling with the tanks of Sixth Company. Morena's route was known too.

But we had gone many kilometres off that route to avoid the Gargants towards the region of the air war. I could still hear the sounds of conflict, though I

couldn't tell from that rumble how close the battle was to my position, nor its nature. Was the struggle for control of the airspace near Tartarus still ongoing? Or was I hearing the siege of the hive itself by the Gargants? I had no beacon. The vox was in fragments. There would be no transmission coming from the destroyed squadron.

So where did that leave me? I would have to count on the burned squadron being spotted by an overflight of this particular patch of hills. From the air, I doubted there would be anything to suggest the chance of a survivor. I was also having to count on *Storm of the Wastes* not having met its end so far from the rest of the squadron that it would be missed. How far had we rolled? How far had the others travelled? There was no way to know.

But *if* someone were to see the wrecks, and a land-based search followed, there would be nothing to say there was a survivor. Nothing to suggest that prying open the destroyed armour would be worthwhile. Unless there was an unmistakable signal.

That was the one thing I could do. I couldn't reach high enough to strike and do any damage, but I could ring the hull like a bell. So I did. Three rhythmic blows. I stopped to listen, counting to twenty, then three more blows.

I fell into the new rhythm. I might very well not be able to hear searchers until they were actually working on the tank. For all I knew, I could be the last human on Armageddon, fruitlessly hitting the interior of his coffin. But I could not risk silence, in case there *was* help nearby. So I hit three times and listened. Hit three times, listened.

On and on. For hours. How many, I had no way of telling. My existence reduced itself to this one task of striking metal in pitch blackness, a task I had no reason to expect would be successful. I refused to accept the likelihood of failure. If I did, the temptation to rest would become overwhelming. I lived from second to second. I found the energy to strike the hull three times, and then again for another three. I tried to shut out all thoughts of the past and future. The eternal present was all that mattered. Despite my efforts, though, I could not ignore the irony of my situation. The Saviour of Armageddon, dead in an overturned tank. A glorious end, truly.

I did laugh a bit. That helped.

Time wore on, and my bursts of dry laughter died away. My throat was parched. I could barely move my arm. My body demanded sleep, but I refused. Then, quite suddenly, I heard noises outside. Engines. Loud, coughing, rattling engines. And over their din, closer to the hull, voices. Guttural. Savage.

Orks.

I had poor options. A choice of deaths, but the decision was an easy one. I would go down fighting. I smashed at my tomb with renewed force. After another three blows, I heard pounding from the other side. And then the unmistakable grind of metal cutting metal. The greenskin voices sounded excited.

I reached to my belt and activated my shield generator. The air around me thrummed as the power field sprang into being. I drew my bolt pistol, building up the charge of my bale eye. I waited. I was eager to begin. The moment the orks broke through, the situation would change. I had no illusions about my chances, but I would make the best of them.

Sparks showered into my cell. The pitch of the grinding rose to a scream, and a chainblade broke through.

Still I waited for the enemy to free me and provide a clear shot at his bestial face.

The blade worked its way around in a rough circle about a metre wide. The cuts joined. The blade withdrew. A heavy blow from the other side knocked the sliced plating inside.

Armageddon's grey daylight was blinding after the hours of total darkness.

I fired my eye as the ork poked its head through the hole. The lasburst shot through the greenskin's right eye, incinerating its brain, and it fell away. There was a growl, and then another ork appeared. I blew its skull off with the pistol.

The orks roared with outrage. Fists pounded against the hull. For the moment I saw nothing except a circle of brown sky. Heavy booted feet thudded across the hull towards the hole. Firing again, I took off the brute's arm just as it began to aim.

The attack began in earnest now. They fired around the hole at every angle. Bullets ricocheted around the interior. My shield absorbed their kinetic energy and they fell. A grenade arced in. I caught it and threw it back outside. It exploded in midair, and I was rewarded with roars of outrage that turned into roars of pain.

The orks kept coming and I kept shooting them. I was trapped, but they couldn't come at me where they could see me more than one at a time. I could hold them off indefinitely... until I ran out of clips for the pistol. Even then, I would take them apart with the power claw if they tried to come inside.

Indefinitely. Not infinitely.

I knew what the end was. I dismissed it. I would kill them one by one in the

same eternal present as when I had banged my claw against the hull. They kept coming, wearing me down closer and closer to final exhaustion.

As I fought, and shot, and killed, I wondered why their attacks were so limited. I didn't hear any engines, so perhaps these orks were without heavy armour. But none of them tried to burn me out with flamers. A well-placed rocket would have ended the struggle in an instant. Instead, they appeared to be limiting themselves to shotguns and blades.

But in the end, they tired of the game, and decided to change the rules. The grinding started up again. When the blade poked through, it began to cut the outline of a much larger hole. I would lose my shelter. I would be cornered with no protection except my power field, and concentrated fire would overwhelm it.

I changed my bolt pistol's clip and waited for the endgame.

The huge roar of an approaching aircraft shook the air. I heard the shriek of launched missiles. Explosions. Howls from the orks. A confused stampede. The aircraft came closer. There was the blast of retro-rockets as it landed. And then the sounds of a perfect, cleansing slaughter.

I leapt and grabbed the edge of the gap with my claw. Hauling myself up, I climbed out of the coffin.

*Storm of the Wastes* had come to rest in a narrow plain between the hills. The wreck of one of the other tanks lay on the slope to my left. A dozen metres to my right, an obsidian Thunderhawk gunship sat on level ground. A squad of Space Marines marched through the battlefield. It was full day, but they looked like darkest thoughts of the night. They were horned monsters. Though they carried bolters, most of them were killing orks with blades that grew out of their forearms.

Black Dragons.

Judging from the number of bodies I saw, there had been a few hundred orks to start with. I had lost track of how many I had killed. In the initial moments of their attack, the Black Dragons had cut them down by half. The rest fought back, but not for long.

The massacre was over in just a few minutes.

The captain of the Black Dragons came to meet me as I jumped down from the Vanquisher's upturned hull. He towered over his battle-brothers. The adamantium edge of his crescent horn gleamed in the sun. The coating of his bone blades was dark with greenskin blood. His flesh seemed more reptilian than human. In appearance, the Space Marine approached the daemonic.

This being too, I reminded myself, had a role to play in service to the Emperor.

The Black Dragon nodded. ‘Volos,’ he said. ‘Second Company. An honour, commissar.’

‘My thanks, Captain Volos. I am greatly in your debt. How did you find me?’

‘If we had flown through this area before you were attacked, I don’t think we would have,’ he said. ‘We spotted the orks.’

I took in the bodies stretching away on all sides. ‘So large a group in the middle of nowhere would have caught the eye,’ I agreed.

‘A large raiding party, yes,’ he said. ‘I am puzzled by their overall weakness, though. There are no warlords here. And their weapons...’

‘...are very limited,’ I finished.

He must have seen something on my face. ‘Commissar?’ he asked.

An ork force weak in strength but large in numbers. Easily spotted. One that could not simply blow up the tank they were attacking; one that would be just possible for a single human being to hold off. And why were the orks here? I had called them to the specific tank, pinpointing my location for any searching eyes, but I could not understand why this force had been in the area at all. After the bombers did the job, there was little to scavenge. There would have been no reason for any infantry to be diverted to this location.

Unless *I* was the reason.

I remembered Morena’s last vox transmission, alerting Imperial forces to my presence. I wondered now if someone else had heard it, if my enemy had sent this force knowing I was here. If they had sent these orks, whose constant fire showed they were not trying to capture me and also did not have the means of an assured kill.

I had no answers, only possibilities. But the questions were enough.

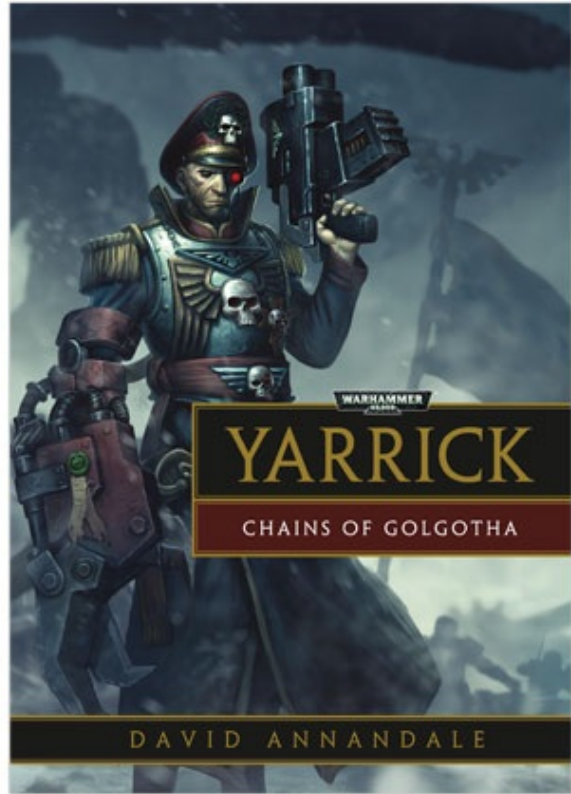
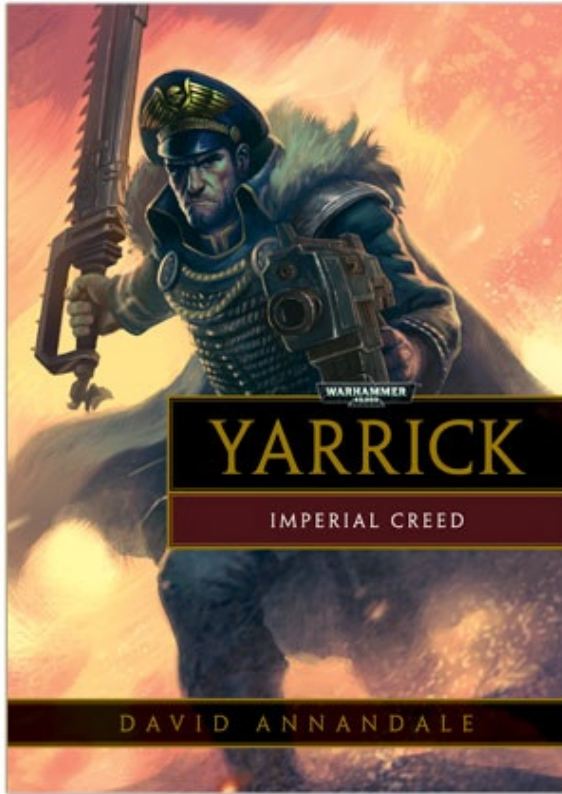
They were their own revelations, and they gave me that much more of the measure of my enemy.

I finally answered Volos. ‘I was just gathering my thoughts, Captain Volos,’ I said. ‘Learning what I must to win this war.’

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Annandale** is the author of The Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. He also writes the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novel *Imperial Creed*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in The Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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