

HAMMER OF THE EMPEROR

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Waiting Death

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Borealis Four.

Can't say it was the most distinguished campaign of my career. A jungle planet orbiting a red giant on the inner rim of the Segmentum Tempestus. A hundred and ten degrees in the shade. Serpents lurking under every leaf, stinging insects as big as a man's fist. Even the flowers coughed out a nasty muscle-wasting virus. It was a damned disappointment, I can tell you. I had hoped for a challenge.

Never did find out if Borealis Four was worth saving. Could be that its crust was packed full of minerals and precious stones. Could be it was as dry as a corpse's throat. All that mattered back then was that, when the explorators set foot on this green new world, they had found a surprise waiting for them: a Chaos-worshipping cult, proud of the fact that the Dark Gods had begun to pervert their flesh and deform their bones.

And that's where I came in: Colonel 'Iron Hand' Straken – along with three regiments of the finest damned soldiers in the whole of the Imperium.

Catachan Jungle Fighters.

The cultists on Borealis Four were one of the worst rabbles I had ever seen. Yet again they came bursting from the trees, howling at the top of their voices, throwing themselves at us with no care for their own lives. That was fine by me – we didn't care about their lives either.

'Well, don't just dance with those damned sissies, Graves – use your knife, man,' I shouted. 'And Barruga, you're as slow as a brainleaf plant. You idle slugs, you gonna let this filth spew on the good name of the Catachan Second? I could whip this bunch with my one good arm if you sons-of-groxes weren't in my way. Thorn, stop flapping about like a damned newborn – you still got one damned hand, so pick up that lasgun! Kopachek, you got a clear shot with that flamer, what the hell are you waiting for? Emperor's teeth, do I have to do everything myself?'

We tore through that scum like blades through a reed bed. They were ill-disciplined, ill-equipped, didn't know what had hit them. They'd wasted their damned lives dancing around altars in dresses, waving stinking candles. Should

have spent a few days on my world; they'd have learned how to fight like men.

I'd made a bet with my opposite number, Carraway of the 14th, that we'd be done here in four months, tops. Two months in, it looked like I was going to collect on that bet. Until that one night.

That one night, when my platoon of some thirty hardened veterans – along with a certain General Farris – was cut off from our comrades, stranded in the darkest depths of the Borealis jungle. That night, when I faced one of the toughest, most desperate challenges of my life.

That night, when I had to fight my own damned men.

The jungle on Borealis Four was nothing compared to Catachan, but the march was taking too damn long. Cutting a way through the high vegetation was slowing us up, and the men were tired. But sunset was coming soon, and things out here tended to get a whole lot worse after dark, so I decided to offer a few words of encouragement.

'Pick up the pace back there! What do you think this is, a newborn's trip to the mango swamps? Myers, put some muscle into those knife strokes. Levitski, Barruga, keep trying to kick some life into that damned vox-caster.'

Still the machine offered nothing but a metallic thunk and yet another blast of static.

'Emperor's teeth, it's come to something when you mommas' boys can't finish off a bunch of damned half-mutant freaks.' I shouted down the line. 'And in front of the general! Well, I don't care how long it takes, not one of you is slacking off for a single damn second till we're back behind our lines. I promised you today was gonna be a cakewalk, and the man who makes a liar out of old 'Iron Hand' Straken, I'll throttle with his own entrails. What...?'

I drew to a halt, and the march stopped all around me. The constant buzz of insects and howl of jungle creatures had suddenly been joined by another noise – the faint tinkling of wind chimes.

'What am I looking at here? Where the hell did this come from?' I asked.

Without warning, we had come to a clearing, at least half a kilometre wide. The jungle canopy opened right up, and I was dazzled by the final rays of the setting sun. The air was suddenly cool and fresh, scented with blossom. And, squinting against the light, I could make out dark, unnatural shapes: Buildings. Dark-timbered wooden huts.

My first thought was that we'd found an enemy bolthole. But these huts were sturdy and well-kept, arranged around a larger central hall. Our enemies could never have built anything so orderly. Besides, if the taint of the Ruinous Powers had been there, I'd have damn well smelled it.

Why, then, was my gut warning me of something rotten about this place? And

why the hell didn't I listen to it?

As we stood gawping, a figure approached us from between the huts. A boy, barely into his teenage years – but, with the last of the blood-red light behind him, I couldn't make out much more than that. Of course, my men reacted as they had been trained to do, raising their lasguns and taking aim, but the boy didn't seem at all worried by the sight of thirty muzzles pointed at his heart.

He padded closer, as the sun disappeared and the clearing was washed in the faint blue light of a swollen moon. I could make out the boy's face now, round and gentle, his eyes bright and wide. His skin was sun-bronzed to perfection, and the moonlight made his bald head shine like a halo. He was wearing a simple white robe, ornamented by a garland of flowers.

'Welcome,' he offered.

The boy cocked his head a little, his full lips pursed as if he found the sight of thirty bloodied vets on his doorstep somehow amusing.

'Welcome to safe haven.' He continued. 'I am Kadence Moonglow – and all that my people have, we offer to share with you.'

'So you say, kid,' I spat back. 'But before we break out the damned peace pipe, I got a few questions for you.'

General Farris stepped forward with a diplomatic clearing of his throat. It was the first time I'd heard his voice all day.

'What Colonel Straken means to say is that we weren't aware of any settlement in this area.'

'And seeing as how, in two months here we haven't found a single life form that hasn't tried to eviscerate us—'

'I assure you that nobody in this village would wish harm to another being,' interrupted Kadence. 'We have learned to live in balance with even this harsh environment. As for your enemies... yes, they were a part of our commune once, but no longer. They have been cast out of this place.'

Sounded like bull to my ears. But General Farris motioned to the men to lower their guns – and, with a few uncertain glances at me, they obeyed.

Farris introduced himself, and the rest of us, to this Kadence Moonglow, and accepted his offer of hospitality.

'Now hold on a minute, Sir.' I said. 'I told the men I'd get us back to the camp tonight. Nothing has changed. We can still—'

Farris shook his head firmly. 'The men are tired, Straken.'

'And some of them need proper medical attention. You think they've got a damned hospital tent set up here?'

Kadence interjected again. 'We will do what we can for your wounded. We have balms and tinctures, and most importantly our faith in the healing spirits.'

‘Yeah’, I thought, ‘cos a few herbal potions and a bit of wailing to the skies, that’s gonna sew Trooper Thorn’s damned hand right back on. But Farris wouldn’t be moved on the subject.

‘We’ll keep the men in better shape by letting them rest than by force-marching them overnight through that jungle.’

I wondered if he was really talking about the men, or about himself. Farris had taken a scratch in the fighting today. His left arm was held in a makeshift sling. He’d kept up with the rest of us so far, and hadn’t whined about it – but I’d been watching him sweating and stumbling for a while now, waiting for him to drop.

Either way, I couldn’t fault his logic – even if he hadn’t been my superior officer. So, taking my silence as a sign of assent, the general asked Kadence to lead the way forward, and ordered my men to follow. I caught Thorn’s eye as he passed me. He was still holding his bloodied hand to the stump of his left wrist.

‘Never mind, kid.’ I told him. ‘That hand’s looking a bit green now, anyway. Probably too late to save it. Have to make do with an augmetic. Hell, I once had my whole damned arm ripped off by a Miral land shark, you don’t hear me grizzling about that. It’s character forming.’

Walking into that village was like stepping onto a different world. The jungle suddenly seemed a long way away, and I was surprised to see children playing on the grass between the huts. Some of them stopped to stare at us as we passed. There was excitement and wonder in their wide eyes, but not a trace of fear, although we must have presented a terrifying sight in our jungle camouflage, laden down with weapons.

Farris dropped back, falling into step beside me.

‘How do they survive?’ he asked. ‘They let their children play outdoors, for the Emperor’s sake, just a few hundred metres from the monsters and the poison and the sickness out there.’ He shuddered at the thought. ‘We have to evacuate them, Straken. First thing in the morning. They aren’t safe here.’

General Farris, you might have gathered by now, was not one of us. He hailed from Validius, a world so in-bred that eighty per cent of its population belonged to the monarchy, and didn’t they just love to let you know it. To be fair, Farris had posted himself to the front line this morning – he must have had some guts. Somehow, though, during the fighting, he’d been separated from his own regiment and ended up with ours. A scrawny, pasty-faced man, the general clearly wasn’t used to jungle conditions. He had brightened up plenty now that we had found shelter.

Kadence led us into the spacious central hall. It was packed with more of his people, all dressed in white robes, talking and laughing and sharing out bowls of

plump, ripe berries. They cleared spaces for us, on benches or on cushions, and handed us fruit, hunks of sweet-smelling bread and mugs of crystal clear water.

Farris was in his element, shaking the hand of anyone who looked like they might be important, thanking them for their kindness, promising to repay it. I was happy to leave all the jawing to him.

My men were approaching the villagers' gifts with caution. I'd have stuck my boot up the backsides of any of them who hadn't. As Catachans, though, we have good instincts about food and drink; wouldn't last too damned long otherwise. We were soon satisfied that no one was trying to poison us.

In fact, the fruits in particular were sweet and moist, quenching the flames in my throat. I couldn't help but wonder why I hadn't seen their like before on Borealis Four.

Soon, my men were mixing with the villagers as if they'd been friends all their lives. I listened in on their conversations, heard a lot of small talk about Catachan and life in the Imperial Guard, but not so much about our hosts. They were good at deflecting questions.

Then Farris introduced me to two village elders – white-haired, straight-backed and dignified but with the same glint of humour in their eyes that I'd seen in Kadence's – and it seemed he had pried some information out of them, at least.

'They've been telling me of their people's legends,' Farris began. 'They believe they came to this world in a "great sky chariot" a thousand generations ago.'

'The Stellar Exodus?'

I knew that some of the first colony ships had strayed beyond the Segmentum Solar, and so in those pre-warp days had become lost to history. It had even been suggested that one of those ships had seeded human life on Catachan.

'Their ancestors were born on Holy Terra. They're the Emperor's people, like us.' Farris said.

'It seems we have a great deal in common, and much to talk about on the morrow.' One of the elders spoke up. 'For now, you and your men must sleep. We can clear this meeting hall for you. I see you have bedrolls. We can fetch more cushions and pillows if you wish.'

'That would be more than acceptable.' Farris responded. 'Thank you.'

As Kadence and the elders left, I grumbled something about making the men soft. Farris let out a sigh. 'You know, your men don't all have your... advantages, shall we say. You can push them too hard.'

I didn't bother to answer that. No outsider could understand the bond between me and my men. They'd have crawled through a Catachan Devil's nest on their

bare bellies if I'd asked them to. That much I knew.

'All right, you milksops, that's enough damned pampering for one day. Get out there, start laying traps around the village's perimeter. Go easy on the mines, we're running dry. I want toe-poppers, lashing branches, anything that'll kick up a damn good racket. Graves, put that cushion down! Hop to it, you slackers, or do I have to do everything myself? And once you're done, I want four volunteers to join me on first watch. McDougal, Vines, Kopachek, Greif, you'll do.'

It didn't take me long to find a good sentry position, in an old tree right on the jungle line. Its star-shaped leaves gave off a eucalyptus reek that would mask my scent, and my camouflage would be more effective here than against the buildings behind me.

I lowered myself onto my stomach along a low, stout branch, and shouldered my plasma pistol.

I was almost invisible now. So long as I didn't move a muscle, or make a sound. But then, I had no reason to do either.

Something was wrong.

It was nothing I could see, nothing I could hear. But I knew there was something. Something out there, at the edge of my senses.

I held my breath, straining to catch the slightest sound. There was nothing. Just the night-time breeze. Without turning my head, I refocussed my gaze, through my pistol's sights. I re-examined my surroundings through an infrared filter, but again there was nothing.

My damned comm-bead was still dead. I couldn't sub-vocalise a warning to the other four sentries, couldn't shout to them without giving myself away. It didn't matter, I told myself. They'd have sensed it, too.

For the next fifteen minutes, I stayed frozen in place – as did my unseen opponents. A waiting game. That suited me. I could wait all night.

Of course, I knew I wouldn't have to.

They made their move, at last. If I'd blinked, I'd have missed it. I knew then that these couldn't be the same cultists we'd been fighting these past months. They were too damned good.

But I was better.

There was a subtle shift in the texture of the darkness, the crunch of a leaf on the ground. I had already teased a frag grenade from my webbing and thumbed the time-delay to its shortest setting.

It plopped into the jungle grass just where the disturbance had been, and it lit up the night.

I had hoped to hear screaming, but instead I saw shadows streaming from the impact point, just an instant ahead of the earth-shattering blast. These were

lumpen, gnarled shapes that could have belonged to nothing entirely human. I squeezed off ten shots, until my pistol was hot in my hands. I couldn't tell if I had struck true. The explosion had shot my night-vision to hell. I knew one thing, though. I had to move.

I rolled out of the tree, hitting the ground running beneath a barrage of las-fire from the jungle. Whoever – whatever – was out there, like the cultists, they had Imperial weaponry. At least I had made them reveal themselves.

I feigned a stumble, faltering for an instant, making myself a target. I was hoping to make the hostiles bold – and careless. A few steps forward, and they'd hit the tripwire that I knew was strung between us.

No such luck. I heard a soft thud at my heels, and I leapt for the cover of the line of huts ahead of me. The grenade that had just landed exploded, the blast wave hitting me in midair, engulfing me in a broiling heat but buoying my flight. I was propelled much further than my legs could have carried me. I landed hard, and instinctively rolled onto my augmetic shoulder, letting it take the brunt of the impact. I heard something break inside it, and a servo sputtered and whined, but I felt no loss of function as I pushed myself up and put a charred hut between myself and my attackers.

The sound of las-fire across the clearing told me that Kopachek had also engaged the enemy. I thought about going to his aid, but knew I had a line to hold.

I swapped my pistol for my trusty old shotgun: primitive, in some people's eyes, but reliable, and suited to firing from the hip. My eyes were readjusting to the dark, and I peered around the hut's side. The jungle was still again, silent. As if nothing had happened. But that silence was a lie.

The hostiles were still out there. Chastened, maybe; tonight, they had learned that Colonel 'Iron Hand' Straken was no pushover. They would be regrouping, redrawing their plans. But they hadn't retreated. I could still feel their presence, like a stench of old bones in the air.

They were waiting.

A second burst of gunfire took me by surprise. This one came not from one of the other sentry posts, but from the meeting hall at the village's centre. I hesitated for about half a second before I turned and pelted towards the sound. When I got there, the men were spilling out of the hall. They were still shrugging on jackets, tying bandanas, checking their weapons, but were already awake and alert to their surroundings, looking for a target. I grabbed the nearest of them – Levitski – and ordered him to replace me at the jungle's edge. I sent the next to relieve Kopachek – I wanted him back here with a situation report.

Trooper Graves was nursing a fresh wound. Snatching his hand from his

temple, I saw the familiar red welt of a glancing las-beam hit.

‘What the hell’s been going on here?’ I shouted.

I pushed my way into the hall, where I found the remains of my platoon in disarray – and two of them dead on the floor.

Standing over these two, with his laspistol drawn, was General Farris – and as he turned to me with a regretful slump of his shoulders, I realised what he must have done. He had shot them. A tense silence filled the hall before Farris leapt to defend his actions: ‘I had no choice. They were lashing out, screaming, firing everywhere. This one, he came at me with his knife. He was saying crazy things, calling me a monster. I think... I think the cultists must have got to them.’

‘No!’ The protest came automatically to my lips. ‘No damned way!’

It was one thing to see a comrade cut down in battle, dying for what he believed in. This... This was senseless. I felt cold inside. I felt numb.

I felt angry.

I remembered how Myers had fought so well that morning, laughing as he’d sunk his knife arm up to the elbow in cultist guts. I remembered how Wallenski had been so proud, last week, when the men had honoured him with an earned name. ‘Nails’, they had called him.

‘They were good men, my men. You had no right.’

Farris’s eyes darkened.

‘Do I have to remind you, colonel, that I am the ranking officer here? You weren’t even present. You don’t know what—’

‘I knew them, sir. I know my men, and they were two of the best.’

A heavy silence had fallen upon the hall. All eyes were fixed upon the general and me. Still, my words provoked a ragged, defiant cheer from the dead men’s comrades.

‘Either one of those soldiers would have given his last damned drop of blood for the Emperor.’ I continued. ‘It must have been... They must have come down with some virus. A fever. It made them see things.’

‘Whatever the cause of their behaviour, they were threatening us all. I had to act.’

‘You didn’t even know their damned names!’

And the silence returned, almost a physical force between us.

It was broken by a quiet voice. Kadence Moonglow had entered the hall, and walked right up to my shoulder without my being aware of him. That, as much as any of the night’s events so far, disquieted me.

‘The covenant has been broken,’ the boy said.

‘What the hell does that mean?’ I rounded on him.

‘Blood has been shed. Now, they will not rest until they have blood in return.’

‘Who will not rest? The cultists?’ Farris asked.

Kadence shook his head. ‘The jungle has bred far worse than those misguided souls. There are monsters out there. Monsters that the eye cannot see, but whose presence is felt nonetheless.’

‘Yeah, well, thanks for the warning,’ I said, ‘but those “monsters” of yours already tried to blow me into chunks.’

Kadence shot me a sharp look – and, for a moment, his calm facade slipped and I caught a glimpse of something darker beneath it.

‘They would not have attacked you except in self-defence.’

Then, composing himself, he continued.

‘We welcomed you into our village, our home, because we sensed that you were noble souls. We only prayed that, in return, you could leave your war at our doors.’

‘I don’t know if you’re aware of this, kid, but your monsters have this village surrounded.’ I replied.

‘And now they are free to enter it as they please. By sunrise, all we have built here will be ashes. No one will survive.’

‘In a grox’s eye!’ I spat. ‘Those things out there, whatever they are – they aren’t dealing with a bunch of tree-hugging pushovers any more. If they want this village, they’ll have to go through us to get it.’

‘Colonel Straken has a point.’ Farris cut in. ‘We will do everything in our power to protect you.’

‘There are less than thirty of you. Their numbers are legion.’

‘But we have the defensive advantage,’ I said. ‘My boys can keep those hostiles at bay till dawn, or I’ll want to know the damned reason why.’

‘And once the sun is up, we’ll be able to lead you – all of you - to safety. We have an army, not twenty kilometres from here.’ Farris said.

Kadence bowed his head.

‘As you wish.’

The next half-hour was given over to frenetic activity.

I trebled the guard around the village, this time counting myself out of the assignments. I wanted to be free to go where I was needed. I sent Barruga and Stone around the huts, telling people to pack their things and move to the central hall. They would be safer there, harder to reach. General Farris stayed in the hall, too – his choice. Someone had to organise things in there, he claimed.

I debriefed Kopachek. His story was similar to my own – except that, in his case, the enemy had fired first. Like me, he hadn’t managed to get a good look at them. I sent him, along with MacDougal, Vines and Greif, to grab an hour’s sleep in one of the vacated huts. Farris had been right about one thing: my men

were the toughest damned sons-of-groxes in the Imperium. Sometimes, it was easy to forget that they didn't all have chests full of replacement parts to keep them going.

I hadn't forgotten about Wallenski and Myers. There would be a reckoning for their deaths, and soon. Meantime, I had warned every man to keep an eye on his watch partner – and to call for a medic if he felt the jungle sweats coming on.

The quiet of the night was broken only by the occasional squawking bird, and the deeper cries of much larger and much more dangerous jungle creatures. Trooper Thorn was sprawled on his stomach, alongside a small, square hut, his wiry body masked by the long grass. His lasgun barrel rested on a mound of dirt, waiting for a target. I hurried up to him, keeping my head down, and dropped to my haunches beside him. He gave me a situation report without my even asking.

'Nothing, sir. Not a sign of the hostiles. Perhaps you made them realise what they're facing, and—?'

'They're out there.' I interrupted. I had rarely been more sure of anything in my life.

'Do you think...? That boy, sir, what he said... was he right? Are we facing... monsters? Daemons, or...?'

'Trust me, kid, I've seen enough monsters in my lifetime, and nothing – not a damned one of them – would last two minutes in a scrap with a Catachan Devil, or make it through a patch of spikers alive. So, don't you dare start shaking in your boots just 'cos you've seen a few drops of blood today and heard some damned fairy tale.'

'No, sir. It's just that... Colonel Straken, sir, is something wrong? You... you're sweating.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' I asked.

'What... what did you say?' asked Thorn.

Suddenly he was clawing at the ground with the bandaged stump of his left arm, pushing himself away from me and to his feet. His eyes had widened with fear, and his voice was loud – too loud. He had blown our cover for sure.

'Trooper Thorn, to attention!' I snapped. 'You're behaving like a damned newborn yourself. Hell, I know you're not long out of nappies, but—'

'Take that back, sir. Take it back!'

'I beg your damned pardon, trooper?'

We were both standing now, and Thorn had managed to grab his lasgun and was pointing it shakily at my head. I had brought up my shotgun in return – an instinctive reaction - but the image of a comrade in its sights shocked me to my core.

I lowered my gun, brought up my hands.

‘Listen, kid.’ I said. ‘You’re not yourself. You’re sick. Like Wallenski and Myers, they were sick. But you can fight it.’

‘I don’t want to believe... This is a test, right? Tell me it’s a test. Don’t make me—’

‘Why do you think you’re here? Do you think I make a habit outta taking every snot-nosed brat fresh out of training into my command platoon? “Barracuda” Creek back at the Tower reckons you’re the next damned Sly Marbo. You gonna prove him wrong?’

‘The fever!’ he cried and, for a moment, I thought I’d got through to him.

‘It must be the fever, making you say those things. Please, sir, just... drop your weapons. I don’t want to have to shoot you – not you – but I swear in the Emperor’s name, if I must—’

His sentence was broken by a barrage of las-fire, which provided just the distraction I needed. I tackled Thorn before he could say another word, and the lasgun fell from his grip as we hit the ground together. I’d saved his life, my instincts and a keen ear keeping me a half-second ahead of the fresh salvo of enemy fire that had just erupted from the jungle.

In return for that favour, Thorn was trying his damned best to kill me.

I had him pinned with my knee, keeping him from drawing his knife. But the fingers of Thorn’s one hand were locked tight about my throat. He was stronger than he looked.

No match for my augmetic arm, of course. I fought out of his grip, breaking a few bones in the process. Thorn was screaming curses, thrashing about wildly as he tried to unseat me, foaming at the mouth. In the meantime, I knew the hostiles wouldn’t exactly be sitting around making daisy chains. They couldn’t have asked for a better distraction, or easier targets, than these two damned fools brawling in the open.

I had no choice but to finish this. Fast. I could already hear my men returning fire, and this one was going to get ugly, and quick.

I twisted my shotgun around, trying to jam the barrel up beneath Thorn’s chin. I had no intention of shooting him, of course. If he’d been in his right mind, he’d have known that. Instead, he fought with all his strength to push the gun away from himself. I let him succeed, even as I blindsided him with my metal fist.

The punch knocked Thorn spark out, and left a dent in the side of his skull that would probably take a metal plate to straighten out. The way this kid was going today, he was liable to end up like me.

While we had been grappling, the hostiles had made their move.

They came running, screaming, firing out of the jungle, somehow managing

to evade all of our traps. My men were shooting furiously at them, but Thorn's little turn had left a gaping hole in our defences – and the hostiles knew exactly where our blind spots were.

I was a damned sitting duck. I didn't know why I wasn't dead already – but, seeing as I wasn't, I figured I could spare another second to hoist the unconscious Thorn across my shoulders before I ran for cover. No one gets left behind if I can help it.

My men were closing with the invaders, yelling for the rest of the platoon to back them up. I deposited Thorn on the ground behind a hut. I didn't stop to check how he was. No time for that. I had a battle to get back to. I raced back to join my men, running at the hostiles with my shotgun blazing. Emperor's teeth, but they were ugly! It was all I could do not to puke at the sight of them.

They had been human once, that much I could tell. Cultists, no doubt, some of them still wearing the tatters of their black robes.

Kadence had been right about them. They were monsters, now, no two of them alike. Their flesh had run like wax, set in revolting shapes. Arms had been fused to torsos, fingers melted together, heads sunken into chests. Some of the monsters – the mutants – had sprouted new limbs, from their ribs, their spines, even out of their heads. Some of them had six eyes, four noses, or mouths in their bellies. They were bristling with clumps of short, black hair, with blisters and blood-red pustules.

And they outnumbered us about five to one. There was no way we were going to survive without some discipline, so I started spitting out orders.

'Barruga, aim for the slimy one's eyes. No, its other eyes! Emperor's teeth, this one has a face like a grox's back end, and it stinks as bad. Greif, wake the hell up, you'd have lost your damned head if I hadn't shot that one behind you. Move it, you slowpokes, I want you up close and personal, right in their damned faces. Marsh, stop holding that knife like you're eating your breakfast. It only takes one hand to hold in your guts, so keep the other one fighting. Kopachek, where's that damned flamer? I want the smell of burning mutants in my nostrils!'

One thing I have learned about mutants over the years: they might be strong – damned strong, some of them – but it's rare that they're fast. They're clumsy, unwieldy. Comes from fighting in bodies they hardly know. That, and having the brain power of a blood wasp on heat.

And, at first, it appeared that these mutants were no different.

I was right in the thick of them. It was safer that way. It made it impossible for their snipers, on the edge of the melee, to keep me in their sights, or to use their grenades without decimating their own ranks.

So, the mutants were swiping at me with poison-dipped claws, straining for my throat with misshapen fangs, and I can hardly deny it, this is one battered old warhorse who has started to slow down himself. I always figured that, what I've lost in speed, I make up for by having a tougher damned hide than most. Even so, in a fight like this one, I'd have expected a few cuts and bruises. Not this time, though. This time, it felt like I was charmed. Like those damned freaks couldn't lay a hand on me.

And yet...

And yet, somehow, my knife thrusts weren't hitting home either. The mutants were ducking and weaving like experts. And whenever I thought I had a clear shot at one, as I started to squeeze my trigger, my target was gone, spun away, and there were only comrades in my sights instead.

My men were faring no better than I was. They'd slashed at a few of those melted-wax faces, cracked a few twisted skulls, but no more than that. And they'd taken surprisingly few wounds in return, just a shallow cut here and there. It was almost like... like the mutants were playing with us.

Insulted, enraged, I lashed out with my feet and my elbows, widened the arc of my knife swipes, turned my shotgun around and used its butt as a cudgel, but nothing got through. So, I took a calculated risk. I did what every nerve in my body was screaming at me to do.

I leapt at the nearest mutant and I slashed its throat, my frustration bursting out in a cruel bark of laughter as its hot blood spattered my face. My first kill of the night. But to make that leap, I'd had to drop my guard, leave my right flank exposed.

I expected to feel a talon in my ribs, to die in agony, but no such blow came. My instincts had been right. The mutants weren't trying to kill us. It was worse than that.

'They want to take us alive!' I shouted. 'Well, they can't have met a Catachan Jungle Fighter before. Time to step up your game, you goldbrickers. Show these mutant scum that we don't lie down and roll over till we're damn well stone cold dead!'

With a roar of enthusiasm, the men followed my lead. They fought with abandon, not caring what risks they took with their own safety as long as they hurt the enemy.

The switch in tactics took the mutants by surprise. They were thrown off balance, reeling, falling like tenpins. I knew it couldn't last.

They must have identified me as the leader, because now they were swarming me, grasping at me with filthy hands. I landed a few good blows, but then strong arms encircled me from behind, and a cold, clammy tentacle seized my left wrist

and twisted it almost to breaking point. My shotgun fell from my numbed fingers. My knife hand... that was stronger than my opponents had bargained for.

For a moment, it looked like the struggle – my augmented arm against three of those freaks – could have gone either way. But then, a flailing limb – or a tail, I suspected – whipped my legs out from under me, something blunt and hard struck the back of my head, and I was toppling backwards.

And the first thing I realised, as I blinked away stars, as I fought to keep awake and on my knees at least, was that my blade – my Catachan Fang – had indeed been wrenched from my grip.

Someone was gonna pay for that!

The mutants were looming over me. Seven of them, I counted. Or maybe just six; I wasn't sure if one had two heads. They were shouting at me in a language I couldn't understand, but one that made my every nerve jangle like the strings of a grox-gut harp. I had no doubt that they were screaming blasphemy of the vilest kind, and all I longed to do was to shut them up, to stop those awful, hateful words escaping into the world.

The grenade felt cold in my hand, and reassuringly solid. It gave me strength, put me back in control. I knew it would rip my body apart. I knew that this time not even the most skilled surgeon would be able to stitch me back together. But a glorious death was far preferable to defeat. And a death that took six – or seven – of my enemies with me...

Then, just like that, the mutants were gone. Withdrawn. Swallowed up by the jungle once more, with hardly a ripple to mark their passing. The quiet rhythm of the jungle settled in again as I unsteadily picked myself up. I saw a number of my men doing the same, looking as confused as I felt.

'How many wounded?' I asked.

There were only a few, and nothing a can of synth-skin couldn't fix. It didn't make any sense. The mutants had been winning!

They had left a handful of misshapen bodies behind them. I glared down at one as if it could tell me in death the secrets it had kept in life. The mutant was lizard-like in appearance, a forked tongue lolling from its open mouth, a thorny tail tangled about its ankles. It hurt my eyes to look at it. I blinked and shifted my gaze along the grass until it found a more welcome sight.

I didn't dare believe it at first. My knife. My Catachan Fang. Half a metre of cold steel, its early gleam dulled through a lifetime of use but still the most precious thing in the damned world to me. An extension of myself, a part of my soul. And the mutants had left it, standing upright in the ground. Almost... respectfully.

I spent a long time kneeling beside that knife, looking at it, before I picked it up, wiped it down and returned it to its sheath.

I spent a long time thinking about what it might mean.

Twenty minutes later and I was back in the central hall butting heads with Farris.

‘We gotta ship out of here.’ I told him. ‘We can’t wait till morning.’

General Farris shook his head.

‘We’ve been through this before, Straken. I won’t have us marching through that jungle at night.’

‘The men can cope with the jungle.’

‘Maybe they can, but the villagers...’

‘If we stay here, and those mutants attack again, I can’t guarantee we can hold them back. Our best hope is to take them by surprise, punch through their lines and keep on going.’

‘With the hostiles at our heels?’ he asked.

‘We only have to reach base camp, then the odds’ll be even.’ I said. ‘With a couple more platoons, we can turn back around and blast that damned Chaos scum to—’

‘But the villagers, man! Some of them are old. There are children. They won’t be able to keep pace with us.’

‘So, we lose a few civilians. Better that than—’

‘No,’ he insisted. ‘We stick to my original plan. You said yourself that there were no casualties of the first attack.’

‘Because the mutants weren’t trying. They thought they could take us alive. Now they know better.’

‘If I didn’t know you better, I’d be starting to wonder if you’d lost your nerve.’

And for the second time that night, I had to fight down the urge to punch this damned Validian upstart in his smug damned mouth. Through gritted teeth I said: ‘You’re asking me to sacrifice my men, my entire command platoon, for a lost cause.’

‘You have your orders, Colonel Straken,’ he said coldly.

One hour till dawn, and a forbidding bird call broke the morning silence. The cold crept into my old bones as I lay waiting, and I longed to feel the warmth of the sun – any sun – one final time.

In the jungle, nothing had stirred. Still, I was sure that the shadows had grown longer. And darker. A deep, unnatural darkness. The mutants – the monsters – were gathering their forces, increasing in number.

There were butterflies in my stomach. That wasn’t like me. A Catachan’s

patience is his greatest strength. But tonight, it didn't feel that way. It felt like we were only postponing the inevitable.

My mind flashed back to my talk with Farris, and I felt my blood heating up at the memory. But I realised something now. The general had had a point. Not about my motives – 'Iron Hand' Straken is no damned coward. But I had been reluctant to face the mutants again. I still was.

I couldn't explain why. It was a churning in my gut. An itch in my brain. An instinct that there was something wrong here, something I'd missed. Thinking back, I realised that the itch had been there all night. Ever since I had first clapped eyes on this damned place.

So, what was I doing out here? Waiting for an attack that I couldn't defend against, waiting to die? I was following my orders. But the Emperor knows, I've defied enough fool-headed generals in my time. I'd have stuck my knife in Farris's damned heart and been glad to do it, if I'd thought it would save a single one of my men. The problem was, this time, I didn't know if it would. I didn't know what to do for the best.

Or maybe I did. Maybe, at some level, I had known all along.

Maybe I just had to listen to my gut.

I climbed to my feet, and I walked towards the jungle, grass rustling beneath my feet.

As I passed the outermost huts of the village, I could almost feel the sights of a hundred lasguns upon me. I was out in the open now, at the mercy of those guns – but not one of them fired. I stooped and laid my guns on the ground, then I shrugged off my backpack and webbing, and set them down too. Finally, I raised my hands to show that they were empty.

I almost choked on the words I had to say, the last words I had ever imagined would come from my throat. I didn't raise my voice; there was no need.

'My name is Colonel Straken, and on behalf of the Second Catachan regiment of the Imperial Guard – on behalf of the God-Emperor Himself – I offer you my unconditional surrender.'

It was a minute – a long, anxious minute – before anything happened.

Then, I heard a whisper of leaves to my left and a near-human shape detached itself from the foliage. It padded towards me, lasgun raised, and I felt my fists clenching involuntarily.

The mutant was beside me now. I recoiled from its rancid breath. It spoke to me, in the same unholy language as before, and I wanted with all my soul to lash out. I wanted to punch, to kick, to spit, to pull my knife and to carve my name in that abomination's chest.

Instead, I just watched as the mutant signalled to its comrades. One by one,

they stepped out from the jungle behind it. Each was an abomination, and the sight of them gathered together just made the violent urge grow even stronger.

From behind me, a single lasgun shot rang out. A mutant fell to the floor, clutching its shoulder.

‘Hold your damned fire! That’s an order!’ I cried. ‘No one is to engage these... the hostiles. It’s not us they want.’

The mutants had brought up their own guns, but now they lowered them again. I couldn’t meet their eyes, any of them. I felt sick inside, and my flesh was crawling like I’d been dipped in fire ants.

And now the mutants were shambling past me, a score of them – two score, three – and into the village. Towards the meeting hall.

I saw MacDougal and Stone springing to their feet, getting out of the mutants’ path, drawing their knives but resisting the urge to use them. I was grateful to them. They trusted me. Even though, for all they knew – for all any of my men knew, watching this scene from their vantage points – I must have gone out of my tiny mind. Maybe I had, too.

But, somehow, this felt good to me. It felt like the smart thing to do. For the first damned time in this forsaken night, something felt right. From behind me, I felt the familiar rush of heat and flame as the mutants’ grenades blew the meeting hall apart.

The villagers must have heard them coming – but for most of them, there had been no time to escape. The survivors came charging out of the fire and the billowing smoke. I saw old men and young boys, their faces darkened and twisted by hatred and rage. It was hard to believe they were the same peaceful people whose food we had shared. The villagers moved towards the mutants with an angry roar, lasguns firing wildly as they sought to kill the intruders.

The mutants showed no mercy. Half the villagers were shot down before they could take two steps. The remainder closed with their attackers, but they were unskilled in combat, quickly shredded by mutant claws. Their screams filled the clearing, drowning out the sounds of las-fire and conflict. This was the last thing I wanted to see, but I forced myself to pick up my feet, to get closer. Because I had to see this. I had to know.

Even transfixed by the unfolding horror, my old battle instincts hadn’t deserted me entirely. Someone was coming at me from behind. I sidestepped his charge, threw him over my shoulder. The figure regrouped quickly, scrambling back to his feet. I was horrified to see that it was General Farris. The left side of his face had been burned away. He must have been in incredible pain. He was cursing at me, calling me all the damned names he could think of, and his fury gave him a strength that I’d never have expected. I may have hesitated too,

because he managed to plant his foot in my stomach and push me into the wall of a hut.

‘This isn’t what it looks like,’ I forced out. The words sounded pathetic, even to me.

Farris was marching on me with his pistol levelled and eyes bulging white with fury.

‘I knew it would come to this. I’ve been watching you, Straken. You’re undisciplined, insubordinate. I put up with your backchat because this was your regiment. But I always knew you were one step from turning, from betraying us all. I should have put this bolt between your eyes hours ago.’

The fighting suddenly seemed very far away, and in that moment it was down to just me and him.

I could have taken him alive.

But a pair of lasgun beams struck Farris from behind, and he stiffened and gasped, then crumpled to the ground.

Emerging from the shadows, Trooper Vines crouched over the general’s fallen body, and pronounced him dead.

‘I had no choice,’ Vines said dryly. ‘He was lashing out, screaming. He was saying crazy things, calling you a monster.’

I remembered that Vines had been close to Wallenski. I acknowledged, and dismissed, his actions with a curt nod.

The fighting was almost over.

The villagers were struggling to the very end, but there were only a handful left standing. It would be – it had been – a bloody massacre. One for which I could take much of the credit. And in that moment, I was filled once more with a crippling self-doubt.

But only for that moment.

The meeting hall was still alight – and where the blaze flickered across the faces of the last few combatants, native and invader alike, a transformation was taking place. I blinked and I refocussed, unsure at first if I was imagining things. But I couldn’t deny what I saw.

In the glow of those cleansing flames, the lies of the moonlight were dispelled at last, and the truth stood revealed.

It wasn’t till some days later that I heard the other side of the story. Colonel Carraway came to see me in my hospital bed, where I’d just been patched up once again, and he told me how lucky I’d been.

The explorators, it seemed, had left a survey probe in Borealis Four’s orbit – and the tech-priests at HQ had tapped into its scans of the planetary surface. The aim had been to produce a tactical map, locate a few cultist strongholds. Instead,

they had discovered a whole damned settlement, where a moment before there had only been trees.

Carraway and I worked out that the village must have shown up on the scans about the same time my men and I found it. As if, by crossing its threshold, we had broken some kind of foul enchantment.

Anyway, the upshot was that Carraway needed someone to investigate – and, since half my regiment was already in that area searching for me and my platoon, they were quick to step forward.

Kawalski, one of my toughest, most experienced sergeants, led the recce. He found the village soon enough – but his first impressions of it were quite different from mine. In his report, he described tumbledown shacks standing on scorched earth, twisted trees bearing rotten fruit, and a putrid stink in the air that made him want to retch.

I don't know why Kawalski and his men saw the truth when I couldn't. Maybe Kadence's mind-screwing mumbo-jumbo could only affect so many of us at once. Maybe that was why it hadn't worked so well on Wallenski and Myers, or on Thorn. Or maybe that damned psyker meant for things to turn out just as they did, Catachan at war against Catachan.

Kawalski sent a pair of scouts along the village's perimeter. They returned with reports of booby traps, and sentries hiding in the trees. Even when some troopers exchanged fire with one sentry, they weren't able to identify him. I had just been a shadow to them.

It was only when Kawalski's men broke cover and attacked us that they saw who we were. That was why they had fought so defensively, trying not to hurt us, though we were trying to kill them. Kawalski himself took me down, with some help. He was trying to get through to me, but he couldn't seem to make me understand.

We thought we were fighting Chaos-infected mutants. Instead, we were the ones infected. I'll always be haunted by the fact that it was me who killed Trooper Weissmuller, and laughed as I ripped out his throat. Standing orders say that Kawalski should have shot me there and then.

But he had more faith in me than that.

It was a damned relief to be back on my feet again, and to have my time on Borealis Four done with.

Or so I'd thought.

We were all sat around a warming fire, with the sights and sounds of the jungle around us. But this wasn't the familiar scenery of Catachan – this was still a world marked by Chaos, and the ruined village around us was just another reminder of that.

I was the only one who saw him.

I don't know what made me look, why I chose that moment to tear my eyes away from the dying fire. But there he was, standing in the shadow of a hut – a ramshackle, worm-eaten hut, I could now tell. After all that had happened, he appeared unscathed, his robe still pristine and white. Kadence Moonglow.

He was watching me.

Then he turned, and he slipped away – and I should have alerted my men, but this was between him and me now.

I followed him alone.

Trouble was, the boy was faster than I expected. We were already a good way into the jungle when I caught up with him. Or rather, I should say, when he stopped and waited for me.

'Colonel Straken. I knew it would be you who came after me. Leading from the front. You always have to do everything yourself.'

I was in no mood for talking. My knife was already in my hand. I only wished I hadn't laid down my shotgun in the village.

I leapt at my mocking foe. And missed.

I hadn't seen him move. One second, Kadence had been in front of me, and now he was a few footsteps to the left. I almost lost my balance, having to grab hold of a creeper to steady myself. It was bristling with poisoned spines. If I'd gripped it with my good hand, instead of my augmetic one, I would have been on the fast track to a damned burial pit.

I tore the creeper from its aerial roots and snapped it like a whip, but again, my target wasn't quite where I'd thought him to be.

'Your men aren't here now, colonel,' he said. 'You were overconfident, strayed too far from them. They won't hear your cries.'

And suddenly he threw out his arms – and although he wasn't close enough to touch me, I felt as if I had been punched. The impossible blow staggered me, and Kadence was quick to press his advantage. More strikes followed – once, twice, three times to the head, once in the gut. I was flung backwards into a thorny bush, caught and held by its thin branches. A thousand tiny insects scuttled to gorge themselves on my blood.

'You wanna hear crying, kid?' I yelled, wrenching myself free from the clinging vegetation. 'How about you get the hell out of my head? Stop making me see things that aren't damn well there, and face me like a... like a... whatever the hell it is you are.'

Kadence just smiled. And he gestured again, and my left leg snapped. It was all I could do not to gasp with the pain, but I refused to give him that satisfaction. I just gritted my teeth, transferred my weight onto my right foot, and

continued to advance on him.

‘I didn’t ask for this fight,’ said Kadence. ‘I was content with my tiny domain, and a handful of followers who would do anything for me. For centuries, we hid from the outside world. Until, by the whims of a cruel fortune, you came blundering into our safe haven.’

I thrust at him with my knife. I missed again, his dodge too quick to even register.

‘Your followers were mutants. Perverted deviants. And you tricked me into eating with them. You made me think... You made me see my own men as...’

I roared in frustration, my rage getting the better of me. I was swinging wide now, hoping to nick my target wherever he might be. My blade whistled through the empty air, and he was suddenly behind me.

‘I knew that, once you had found us, more of your kind would come.’ he said. ‘I could not cloud so many minds at once. I hoped it would be sufficient to make you few see my followers as friends, your comrades as the thing you most despise.’

‘You didn’t count on me.’

‘No. No, I did not. But for all you have taken from me this night, Colonel Straken, you will pay with your life.’

He made an abrupt slashing motion with his hand, and my leg broke again. A flick of his fingers, and my left shoulder dislocated itself. Kadence extended his right arm, formed his fingers into a claw pattern and twisted his wrist, and something twisted inside of me.

I was buckling under the pain, straining to catch my breath, but determined to close the gap between me and my tormentor, even if I had to do it on my hands and knees.

‘Think you can finish me?’ I struggled out. ‘Good... good luck, kid. Better monsters than you have... have...’

I felt my ribs crack, one by one. My augmetic arm popped and fizzed, and became a dead weight hanging from my shoulder. I was on the jungle floor, not sure how I had got there. There were tears in my eyes and blood in my throat. And as I looked up, trying to focus through a haze of black and red spots, I saw Kadence making a fist, and it felt as if he had reached right into my chest and was crushing my damned heart.

And that was when something miraculous happened.

I felt the warmth of the rising sun on my back, saw the first of its light piercing the jungle canopy above me. And where those red rays touched the slight form of my assailant, like the flames of the fire back in the village, they exposed his deceptions for what they were.

Kadence Moonglow – the boy in the white robe – faded from my sight. But a few steps behind him, exposed by the sunlight, was a twisted horror.

I couldn't see the whole shape of the monster. The parts still in shadow were invisible to me. But I could make out a rough purple hide, six limbs that could have been arms or legs, and a gaping, slavering maw that seemed to fill most of the monster's – the daemon's – huge head.

I could make out a single red eye, perched atop that great mouth. And it blinked at me as it realised that I was returning its glare.

As my Catachan Fang left my good hand.

As it flew on an unerring course towards that big, bright target.

It was the shot of a lifetime. My blade struck the dead centre of the daemon-thing's eye, piercing its shadow-black pupil. It buried itself up to the hilt. And the daemon that had been Kadence Moonglow gaped at me, for a second, with what I took to be an expression of surprise.

And then he exploded in a shower of purple ash.

I don't know how many hours I lay there, face down in the jungle.

I couldn't lift my head, couldn't move my legs without my broken bones grinding against each other. My insides felt like jelly, and most of my augmetics had failed. I was dying.

And if I didn't go soon, I knew there were any number of predators gathering in the brush, ready and eager to help me on my way.

I wasn't worried. Far from it.

I knew that my men were nearby. I knew they would never stop searching for me. And I knew that, whatever it took, they would find me. They would carry me off to the surgeons, as they had done a hundred times before.

I could trust them.

And when I heard their distant footsteps, I was still able to force a smile.