

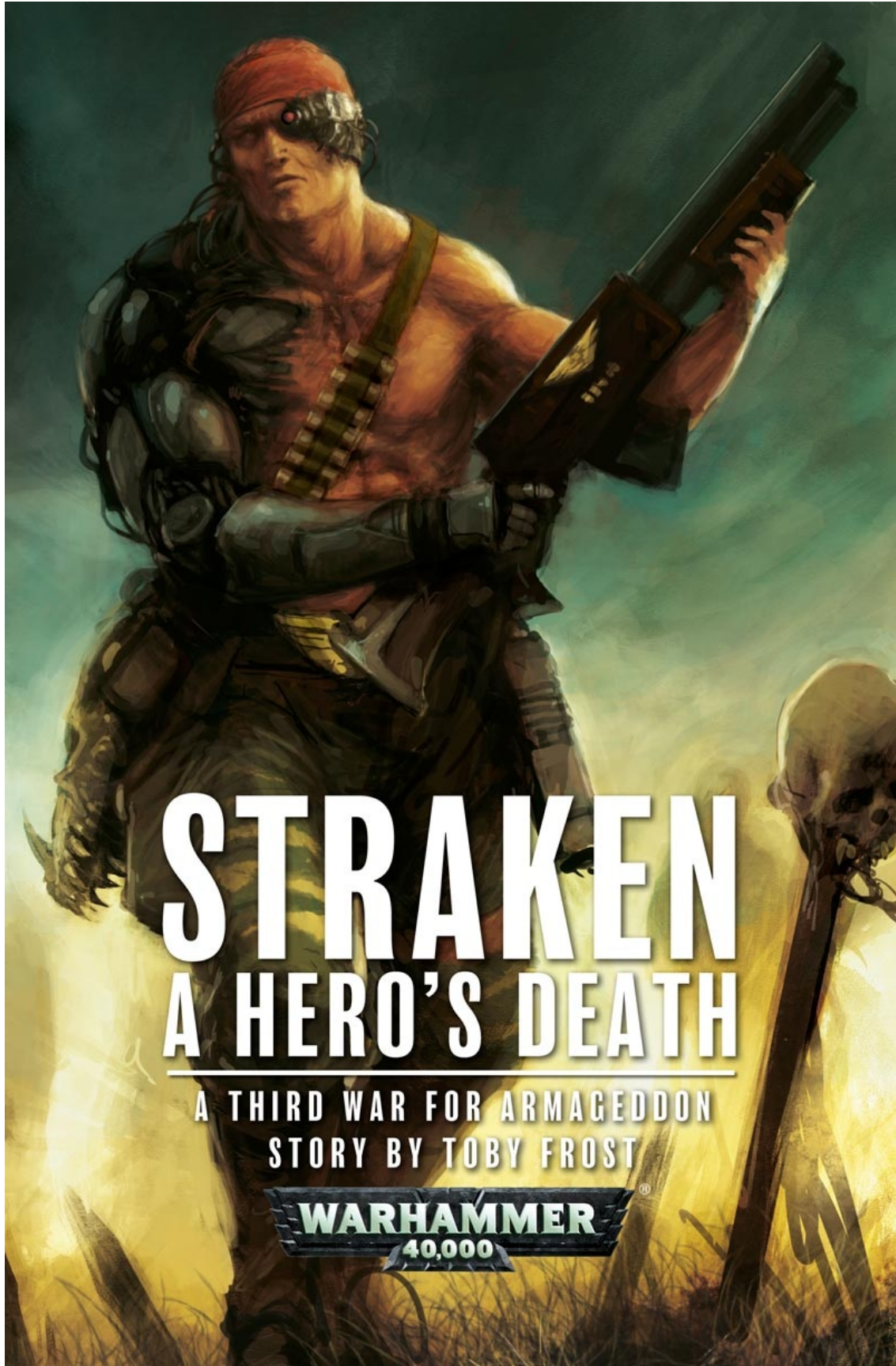


STRAKEN

A HERO'S DEATH

A THIRD WAR FOR ARMAGEDDON
STORY BY TOBY FROST

WARHAMMER
40,000



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‘Get down!’ Colonel Straken yelled, and the charges detonated. The Armageddon jungle seemed to burst apart, hurling itself at him. For a long second, foliage and chips of bark rained down on his bionics and his skin. The explosion rang in his ears. Then he shouted ‘Smoke!’

There was a hollow pop of grenade launchers and a hiss of smoke. ‘Move it, Catachans!’ he called. ‘Do I have to do everything myself?’

The platoon advanced: a rapid scurrying between rocks and fallen trees, ducked low with their lasguns raised. A few had slung their guns and pulled the long knives of their home world.

Straken took the centre. The orks would be dug in deep – the blast would have killed a few, but not enough. *You never can kill enough*, he thought.

‘Captain Montara?’ he called. ‘Get up on the left flank.’

‘On it,’ she replied. He saw her briefly, a bulky shape slipping through the smoke: her hair cut down to black stubble, an aquila shaved into it. Two men with shotguns followed her, one with a vox set lurching on his back. Straken plunged further into the smoke.

Ork heavy-weapons fire barked out of the swirling haze, a chattering pulse of light. Bullets hit tree trunks and tore them open, howling through the air over the Catachans.

‘Move it,’ Straken called. ‘Shut that gun up!’

Broad, hulking figures appeared in the smoke ahead, half-obsured. Straken glimpsed red eyes and teeth like tusks under crude metal helmets. Las-fire caught one of the orks, spun it, and sent it to the ground. Straken raised his shotgun and fired at the other. It grunted and ducked out of view. Injured, but not dead.

They’ve left their camp, Straken thought. *They’re in the trees.*

Doc Hollister appeared on Straken's right, medi-kit slung across his body, a big grin on his lined face. 'Got 'em scared now!' Hollister said.

Roars and grunts came from the undergrowth and flanks as well as from ahead.

'No, just angry,' Straken replied.

An ork burst out of the foliage on the right. It howled as if on fire, arms flailing, mouth swathed in foam. It wore a vest of grimy metal plates.

Straken blasted it in the thigh. The ork went down, cleaver bouncing out of its grip. Snarling, it reached for a pistol. Straken worked the slide of his shotgun and aimed, shooting it in the neck. The ork fell and Straken leaped after it. He stabbed down with his knife as the beast tried to rise, but the ork pulled a cleaver from its belt and blocked his blade. For a moment they strained against each other, a contest of sheer brute force, but the alien's strength seemed to break, and Straken's knife slid through its throat into the earth behind.

Gunfire roared from the left. Straken threw himself down and fired prone: he glimpsed a tusked face, and a body dropped into the undergrowth. Straken leaped up and rushed down the length of a huge fallen log, turned and saw Guardsman Hardec lying on the ground. Wooden spikes stuck out of his shoulder and a pack of scrawny creatures pinned him down, jabbering as they prodded the spikes.

Straken was on them before they could turn. His shotgun blasted the first three aliens apart. Their comrades turned, but too slowly, and Straken's metal fist clamped down on the biggest gretchin's head. Bone shattered. The others squealed and ran into the trees. Straken fired, and a thin scream answered him. He shouted for the medic to help Hardec and pushed on towards the ork camp.

In a clearing, just before the camp itself, an immense ork raged and bellowed. Half a dozen Guardsmen surrounded it, pouring las-fire into the ork's hide. It was riddled with wounds, kept alive, it seemed, by fury alone. Wild blows sent up a cloud of chopped foliage. 'Take it!' Straken cried, and he added his shotgun to the las-fire. Slowly, the brute sank down, grunting. It collapsed onto its knees, half-hidden by plants as if drowning beneath a green sea, then slumped onto all fours. For a moment, Straken could hear its hard, loud breathing. Then came the inevitable shot, and the sound of a huge body striking the earth.

Sudden quiet. Straken heard Hollister's voice – 'I'll just tie the bandage off' – and a groan of pain answered it. Captain Montara looked over her shoulder and made a throat-cutting gesture. She meant that the enemy were all dead.

Straken said, 'Three squads. Montara, you check the area east of the bunker.'

Grierson?’

The lieutenant looked round. The left side of his face was mottled with scar tissue. ‘Sir?’

‘Take the west. I’ll check the ork camp.’

Straken gestured to Cole, the demolitions expert, and Myers, the support gunner. Massive even by Catachan standards, Myers lumbered over and waited for the call to fight, holding his heavy bolter like a lasgun.

‘Colonel?’

He turned: it was Lessky, the command squad’s vox operator. The man squinted, pressing the comm-link to his ear. ‘Sir, I’ve got a signal. It’s on the special frequency, coded. I can almost make it out...’

‘Get to higher ground. I’ll cover you. Stokes,’ he added, pointing at a corporal who wore nothing on his chest except dirt and a bandolier, ‘take four men and come with us. Sergeant Tren, get the rest of the camp checked! Now move!’

‘Alright, listen up. Previous orders are overridden.’

Straken stood on an outcrop of bare rock, as high as he could get. His officers watched from a little way down. Montara stood at the front of the group, arms folded. Lower down, a ring of Catachans watched the forest. The orders might be cancelled, but that didn’t mean that the orks had gone away.

The outcrop just cleared the tops of the trees. They were only a few miles from the edge of the jungle, and the plant life was less dense here. Among the trees, visibility was down to a reasonable fifteen yards. Further in, you would be lucky to see three feet into the forest.

‘There’s a reason we’re up here, and this is it.’ Straken pointed to the east, his metal arm glinting in the sun. Miles away, a massive dark structure rose up from the ground, its base hidden by the forest. It was gigantic, but distance made its exact size hard to make out. The tip was wreathed in clouds: smoke billowed from the edges of the structure. It was roughly conical in shape, but bulged in places like a termite mound. It was, in some ways, the closest thing to a termite colony that the Imperium produced.

‘Infernus Hive,’ Straken said. ‘A message has come through that the orks have been gaining ground inside the hive city. Looks like the front is stabilised – Emperor knows if that’s good or bad news.’

A couple of Catachans nodded. Sergeant Halda spat over the side of the outcrop. The fight for the hive went in waves: not just forward and back, but up and down as different levels of the structure changed hands. It was confusing

and vicious work, and Straken knew that his men had been pleased to be sent to fight orks in the jungle outside. The jungle might be no less deadly than the hive – probably more so – but it was a deadliness that they knew well.

‘The vox says that in the last greenskin offensive, something called Perimeter Fifty-Six was overrun. It seems that General Beran of the Mordian One Hundred and Sixth had been believed dead along with his regiment. Turns out they’ve picked up a signal from them. The general is injured and they need extraction.’

There was a murmur. Someone said, ‘Ah, hell.’

‘And *we* will be extracting them. We move in on the location, taking out any opposition on the way. We locate this general and whatever’s left of his men, then we get out and signal for extraction. Questions?’

Lessky raised his hand. It was missing a finger. ‘Does that mean that we’re going back into the hive, sir?’

‘Yes, we are.’ Straken looked them over. ‘Alright then, what’re you waiting for? Let’s move!’

They slipped easily through the jungle, even as a multi-limbed and spider-like creature lunged at Straken. But he pinned its head to a trunk with his long knife, cleaning the blade as they kept walking.

Seventy years, nearly, he thought as he slipped the long blade back in its sheath. They made the fang-knives of Catachan well. Straken had never marked his kills on the blade the way some soldiers did – had he done so, he would have run out of metal decades ago.

‘Colonel?’ It was Hollister. The unit’s medic was as tough as any of the rest of them, but there was something odd about the fellow, as if his mind was always half on other things.

The medic glanced at Straken, as if checking something. It made Straken think of the rejuvenat treatments that Hollister could provide. The thought of being kept going by some drug sent a flash of anger through him.

Seeing the colonel’s expression, Hollister drew away, and Straken scowled at the path ahead.

They stopped at the edge of the jungle, spreading out at the treeline. Suddenly, there was no canopy to hide the Catachans. They had arrived at Infernus Hive.

Somewhere to the east, gunfire crackled and boomed as the front raged, but here it was quiet. Two hundred metres of barren ground stretched before them. It was dirt, grey-brown stuff, more like brick dust than compressed earth. Ruts

criss-crossed the ground, a mass of scars laid down by tank tracks and huge wheels.

Ork vehicles lay wrecked before them: buggies, tanks, gun platforms, half-tracks, even a couple of flying machines covered in trophies and glyph-signs. They had that motley, thrown-together look common to ork machinery and lay among craters and chunks of rubble, some burned out, others blasted apart. Their pilots and crew were strewn around them, great green bodies torn and burned. All had been heading towards the same place, trying to swarm into the hive city when its defenders had opened fire.

Beyond the barren ground stood the wall of the hive. It rose into the sky, higher than any cliff. Gargoyles studded the wall. Friezes of Imperial heroes had been painted onto the rockcrete. The figures were taller than knight Titans, chipped and worn away by storms and explosions.

The scale of the wall was dizzying; it would have dwarfed a Capitol Imperialis. Beyond it, the next level of the hive city began, tapering slightly. High above, miles from ground level, the city vanished into the clouds.

Straken voxed the order down the line.

‘Move up in squads,’ he said. ‘Use the ork armour for cover. And careful – just because a greenskin’s lying down doesn’t mean he’s dead. If you don’t know for sure, *make* sure. You’ve got your knives for a reason.’

Straken’s command squad went first. They ran out, dashed across the open ground and ducked behind an armour-plated truck that had flipped onto its side. Straken peered around the edge of the truck and boosted the vision in his bionic eye. No lights shone on the wall, but he could see alcoves that looked like windows and firing-points. Maybe they were being watched. In a structure that big, it was impossible to tell. The only hope was that they would seem so tiny that no one would pay them any notice.

The snipers and heavy weapons teams hung back, hidden among the trees, covering the advance. Straken saw Serradus, the most experienced of the snipers, directing his crew to vantage points. Sellen and Ferricus, two men so alike that they seemed to share the same brain, set up their missile launcher.

Squads moved up behind Straken’s, using one another’s cover to advance. Straken kept to the front, as he always did. He ran alongside a stripped-down buggy, little more than a frame on wheels. A plasma gun had blasted straight through it, and the incinerated driver was as skeletal as his machine. The ork’s mouth gaped open, the eye sockets turned to the wall as if awestruck by the size of the hive.

Sergeant Eiden gestured to get the colonel's attention. Eiden was on the far edge of the advance, crouching down behind a heap of ruined ork bikes. The white-haired sergeant wore a necklace of ork canines, each seven centimetres long.

'Hold position,' Straken told his squad. He broke cover, rushed across the ground and darted to Eiden's side. 'What've you got?'

'Entry point.' Eiden nodded at the wall. Straken looked, didn't see it for a moment, then realised what the sergeant meant.

Something, a vehicle or some kind of tunnelling missile, had blown a hole in the bottom of the wall. It had cut along the ground, burning a trench as deep as a man was tall, before tearing into the rockcrete. Orks lay scattered around the hole, presumably killed as they had tried to rush into the breach.

But they still got in, Straken thought.

The hole in the wall was big enough for a Baneblade tank to pass through. It made him feel wary, a sense of being outside his natural hunting ground that no jungle, no matter how hostile, could give him.

'That's it,' he said, and motioned to the command squad to follow him.

They were forty-five metres from the hole when the orks opened fire.

Lights flared in the hole, bullets roared, and four men were cut down in half a second. Corporal Jenks was hit by some kind of mounted gun and blown to pieces. 'Take cover!' Straken bellowed, and threw himself down, reaching for a grenade with his steel hand.

Eiden's squad darted back behind a ruined truck. A great howl echoed from the wall and massive aliens rushed out of the hole, holding axes and machetes. Straken pulled the plasma pistol from his hip and snapped three shots into the first pair of orks.

An ork leaped onto a ruined buggy, heaving a machine gun up after it. Lasguns cracked, and its head burst. The alien toppled backwards, out of view. Straken risked a glance out of cover and saw more orks running down from the hole, a slaving gang of them. He raised the grenade to his mouth and paused a moment to let the aliens get closer.

Straken pulled the pin out with his teeth. He counted – one, two – and hurled the bomb with his metal arm. It hit the ground, bounced and exploded in midair. Several of the brutes were killed – but, more importantly, it made the rest of them pause.

'Come on,' Straken shouted, 'do I have to do everything myself?'

The Catachans rose up around him and charged in. Straken hacked down one

ork and put a plasma blast straight through a second. His men brought the aliens down with knives and lasgun butts.

Gunfire rattled out of the hole, mowing down three men, but a missile streaked out of the Catachan line and burst in the gap, blasting orks out of cover. Enfilading fire came from the flank: Montara's squad ripped into the enemy from the side. A few orks ran back into the dark; most charged forward when they realised that their cover was no more use, and fell a few steps later.

Eiden approached. His knife was bloody and he held two long teeth in his other fist. 'Ambush,' he said.

Straken nodded. 'Let's go. They'll bring up others if they know we're here.'

The Catachans moved in silently, picking their way through the rubble and the wreckage that the orks had left behind. Straken sent out scouts to check the edges.

'Emperor!' Eiden said. 'Look at that.'

The explosion that had blasted through the wall had exposed several layers of the hive, as if the front had been ripped off a gigantic hotel, revealing the rooms and lives behind. Straken gazed upwards, seeing different levels: the narrow warrens of hab-zones, the halls that served as chapels and factories, canteens and recreation areas – even what looked like a mechanic's yard, crammed with dozens of armoured vehicles.

The entrance was daubed with dozens of ork symbols.

'Place looks infested,' Montara said. 'No wonder these Mordian guys are pinned down.'

'Keep moving,' Straken said. 'Go quietly. From here on, use your knives.'

One of the few good things about fighting orks was their disunity. In the decades that he'd been killing greenskins, Straken had never seen much organisation. They barely had ranks, and their groups were more like feral gangs than regiments. They came together to attack a common enemy, like animals preying on the same herd, and squabbled and bullied one another when there was no better enemy to be found. Straken had seen dozens of ork hordes, but never a true ork army.

Now, as he dragged a dead ork sentry into the shadows, he realised just how useful that was. The aliens considered it only natural that they would feud among themselves: if an ork went missing, he had probably just been killed by his fellow orks.

They pressed on, deeper into the hive, moving steadily closer to the Mordians.

The hab-zones had been gang territory before the orks had taken them. The Catachans passed gang symbols on the walls and the corpses of the people who had once sprayed them there. Now various ork clans occupied the areas, and had added their own scrawl to the graffiti. The locals lay sprawled over barricades and across the narrow corridors, or wherever the orks had found it amusing to leave them. It seemed that the xenos had taken particular delight in throwing their enemies down the lift shafts.

The Catachans went quickly and quietly, fighting only where they had to, and killing swiftly and silently when it could not be avoided. The scouts brought back reports of large alien gatherings to the east and west and Straken's men would be passing between them. Then they started to find dead orks.

'Las-fire,' Montara said, glancing at a huge green corpse. 'We must be near.'

Straken raised his metal hand. 'Wait.' He tilted his head, concentrating. 'You hear that?'

Montara cupped a scarred hand around her ear. 'Hear what? Wait, I—'

'Gunfire,' Straken said. 'Coming from the rendezvous point. Listen!' he called. 'There's firing up ahead. Let's get down there and get stuck in. On the double, Guardsmen!'

They picked up the pace, running towards the sound. Only a few yards further, Straken began to hear the individual guns. A hundred yards on, and it was as though they were entering a storm of noise.

Straken led them down a staircase, towards the epicentre. Voices joined the gunfire: human shouts and screams, and the roars and grunts of aliens. Straken paused at the end of the corridor and checked his weapons. Then he turned to his men.

'Go!' Straken shouted, and he lunged around the corner.

They stood at the edge of an enormous hall. The ceiling, so high that it was almost lost to view, was criss-crossed by enormous pipes like metal intestines. Under them, in the centre of the hall, stood a singular slab-sided building covered in robed statues and symbols of the Adeptus Mechanicus. There was a hole in one corner, where something had blown the building open, and a barricade of junk, furniture and metal sheeting was piled around the hole like a scab on a wound.

Lasgun fire crackled from the barricade. Orks lay in heaps around the chamber, piles of xenos carcasses. Some were riddled with precise burn-holes, others blown limb from limb by grenades and mortar shells. As Straken entered, an ork eighteen metres away tried to rise, despite missing half of its head.

Straken finished it with a shotgun blast.

The Catachans tore into the remaining orks. The aliens were taken by surprise, hit from both sides. The las-fire from the Mordians and the knives of Straken's men made short work of the orks. Straken grabbed one alien from behind, broke its shoulder in his metal grip and yanked its chin back, snapping the alien's thick neck. Halda, the colour sergeant, knocked the legs of an ork out with his banner and drove it through its chest as if claiming the alien as Catachan territory. On the right, Montara grappled with a huge brute in yellow armour. Her arms strained as she pushed its head up and back, away from her. A Mordian on the barricade obligingly shot it through the brain, and it flopped down in a clatter of ramshackle armour.

Straken could just make out faces over the barricade. Most of them wore dark blue caps.

'Hey!' he called. 'Are you General Beran's men?'

'That's right!' a voice called back. A corporal stood up. His left arm was bandaged, most of the sleeve torn away.

'Colonel Straken, Second Catachan,' Straken replied. 'We came to get the general out.'

'Yes? You'd better come inside.'

'So,' the Mordian said, 'you've arrived.' Her name was Krall: she was about forty, pale, with light brown hair and hard, deep-set eyes. She dressed like the rest of them: blue tunic, trousers with a stripe down the side and a pillbox hat. Her insignia said that she was a lieutenant. She looked like a toy soldier, Straken thought. So did the rest of her men.

'Yep, we're here.' Straken walked into an entrance hall. Montara followed him. She looked grim and unimpressed. Behind them, Mordian soldiers were repairing the high barricade that they had half-dismantled to let the Catachans in. 'Where's General Beran?'

Lieutenant Krall pointed off into a doorway. 'He's over there. But... the general's dead.'

'Dead?'

Montara said, 'So what the hell did we hear?'

'Probably a recorded message. We got hold of one of High Command's servitors on the vox and told them to relay it. Then the orks attacked, and in the fight the set got smashed up. That's the last message we were able to send.'

'Great,' Montara said. 'So we came out here for nothing.'

Straken said, ‘Sounds like there’s not much to stay here for. How many of you are there?’

Krall paused. ‘About a hundred and fifty. Forty of whom are wounded, fifteen seriously.’

‘Get your troops ready to move out. You’ve got fifteen minutes. Put the injured on stretchers: we can rig up some sort of cart with the junk we passed on the way in.’

‘We’d need to take the general. But—’

‘Get him on a stretcher too.’ After all this time, Straken still hadn’t got used to the way some regiments dealt with the dead. On Catachan, it had always been the case that the body was left in the jungle, for the jungle to take. A man’s knife and his bandanna were left to mark his passing – his corpse meant little once the life was gone.

‘Colonel, you don’t understand. We can’t leave. I don’t have the authority.’

Straken shrugged. ‘Then tell your commander. What is he, a captain?’

‘No. He’s a commissar.’

Straken cursed under his breath. He paused a moment, thinking. ‘Where is he?’

Krall said, ‘At the other barricade. That’s where we had the last big attack. You want me to take you?’

‘No. Show the captain here what your set-up is. Montara, send two teams of scouts to check the area outside. I need you to find out what the defences are, how far the perimeter extends and where the exits are – all the usual stuff, but especially the exits.’

The Mordians had prepared for a siege, and once, Straken thought, they had been well-supplied. But now only a few ammunition boxes were stacked next to a couple of spare lasguns; the remaining medical gear and ration packs were guarded by broad, hard-eyed troopers. He passed an improvised hospital and saw a row of camp-beds filled by battered Guardsmen; their pain and senses blotted out with morphia. It was well-organised and neat. The only thing he couldn’t see was a way out.

He walked past blue-uniformed men who looked as disapproving as they were wary of him. Thin grey dust was everywhere – Straken wondered how the hell the Mordians kept their gear so clean.

The room beyond was wide and long, like the nave of a church. A massive hole had been blown in the rear wall. Thirty yards down, furniture had been

heaped around bulky machines to form another barricade almost twice the height of a man. Troopers stood on the barricade, watching for the orks. Every few seconds, there would be a sudden crackle of lasguns, and a grunt or bellow from beyond the barricade. Beside the soldiers was a man in a long leather coat.

‘Commissar!’

The man turned from his watch, stared at Straken, and then clambered down the heap of furniture.

‘Who are you?’ he demanded. ‘Where’s your uniform?’

‘Colonel Straken, Second Catachan. We picked up your distress message. I’m here to get you out. And this *is* my uniform.’

The commissar was old, Straken saw, long-limbed and quick. He looked strong without being bulky.

‘Welcome,’ he said. ‘Commissar Redmund Verryn. I assumed command here when General Beran was killed, and after Major Adamik showed himself incapable of facing up to the situation.’

Which probably means that he got nervous and you shot him, Straken thought. *All the same, commissars.*

Verryn took off his cap and stashed it under his arm. His hair looked as if it had been glued to his scalp in strips. ‘I don’t know how you got down here, but I’m afraid that the time for rescue is long-gone. We’re surrounded by the xenos.’

‘I’ve brought my men. We reckon we can get out of here. Probably take the wounded back, too. And the general.’

‘Appreciated, colonel.’ The commissar glanced back at the barricade. ‘But the orks will be too many. One way or another, we’re hemmed in. Emperor only knows how you got in – we barely managed it, too – but believe me, the way out will be closed by now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, colonel, that we are surrounded.’ He gestured around the hall. ‘This is it.’ Verryn smiled. ‘I always wondered what a last stand would feel like. It’s surprisingly bearable.’

Straken felt a strong urge to knock that smile off the man’s face. ‘So we die here, is that it?’

‘Like heroes of the Imperium, colonel.’ Verryn sighed. ‘I’ve been with the Mordians all my life, you know. A lot of that time, I had the honour to serve with General Beran. Believe me, you’d have had the honour of fighting beside one of the great soldiers of the Imperial Guard.’

‘Too bad he’s a corpse. I’d have asked for his autograph otherwise.’

‘That’s enough of that attitude! You are in the presence of great men here, Straken. Great men. You should consider yourself lucky to be in such company.’

‘You should consider *yourself* lucky that I’m in a good mood.’

Something seemed to snap in Verryn. His head darted forward, as if to bite Straken. His eyes were wild and as round and hard as spotlights. ‘What the hell does that mean?’

‘It means that I’m getting these people out of here before you get them killed,’ Straken growled.

‘I’m not “getting them killed”! Didn’t you see how many orks there were? Or have your bionics rusted up?’

‘Yes, I saw. And I fought my way through ’em! Listen – I saw the state of your supplies. You don’t have long, commissar. Once you’re out of heavy weapon ammo, the orks will take two minutes to get over your defences and one minute to take your men apart. If we want to get out of this, we need to stick together and get out of here. *Now.*’

‘That’s enough! You will man the barricades and fight like a soldier of the Guard. And if you don’t...’ Verryn glanced over Straken’s shoulder. ‘Believe me, you won’t be on the barricade – you’ll be in front of it.’

At the edge of Straken’s vision, a Mordian soldier stopped and glared at him. Straken wondered if there were others standing around, listening. He felt eyes on his back. He lowered his voice as much as his anger would allow.

‘Commissar, my men got here and they can get out again. We can get you, and the others, out. And then you can bury the general, come back and blow the hell out of as many orks as you want. Nobody has to die – not penned up in here, not on the way back.’

Verryn’s teeth were clenched. ‘Your opinion is noted, colonel.’ He took a deep breath. ‘We will hold our ground. We can inflict far heavier casualties upon the enemy here than we could do on some hopeless escape attempt. The general’s body has to be protected. Consider it an honour guard.’

‘I consider it a waste of time,’ Straken said, turning away.

‘I don’t know what your customs are on Catachan, colonel, but the Mordians don’t abandon their dead,’ Verryn said, coldly.

‘Catachans don’t abandon the living, commissar,’ said Straken as he walked back towards his men.

‘They’ve tried to rush us more times than I can count,’ Lieutenant Krall was saying, ‘but the barricades hold up.’ She patted the heap of furniture. ‘We had

some mines rigged, but the orks sent gretchin over them. Thing is, we're short of ammo. Short of pretty much everything, really. Two, three, more good attacks and they'll be inside.'

'Right,' Montara replied. She held a battered cup, a third full of low-grade recaff. It was the best that Krall had been able to provide. 'Right.'

Straken approached as Krall turned back to the barricade. Montara stepped back and walked over to him. 'How's the commissar?'

Straken grimaced. 'Well, he's either crazy or just a mean bastard,' he replied. 'Either way, this is his last stand.'

'What?'

'He means to die here. With these men.'

The captain glanced around. 'Are you serious? And they're going to let him do that?'

'Maybe. I told him otherwise. They didn't look happy. These guys are used to following orders.'

'So? *I* follow orders. I just don't follow crazy orders from a lunatic.' She glanced round. 'To hell with this place. I say we just leave and write off the whole damn thing. If they want to waste their lives playing soldier—'

Straken raised his flesh-and-blood hand. 'Captain,' he said, 'what do you know about this hive?'

Montara shrugged. 'Not much more than you, sir. The lieutenant said that it goes down much deeper than this, into the ground. She said the lower levels are full of mutants, and most of the upper floors are overrun by orks. I never liked these places—'

'Colonel!'

It was Krall. She pointed behind them, to the way that Straken had arrived.

A man scrambled over the barricade, helped in by the defenders. He wore a combat vest and a Catachan sniper's cloak. *Trouble*, Straken thought. *As if I need more of that.*

The man was Strom, one of the scouting team. 'Sir, we've got a problem. The orks are coming back, closing on our position.'

'How many?'

'A few thousand, perhaps more. Heavy armour, flamers, rocket launchers, all kinds of stuff.'

Straken thought of his team, outside, facing a horde. He glanced at the barricades and then at Montara, seeing that she understood the decision he was taking.

‘Get your team inside the perimeter.’

‘Sir, once they’re inside—’ Montara protested.

‘Do it.’

A voice bellowed, ‘Orks!’ Men gripped their weapons, soldiers resting at the base of the barricade scrambled up to man the parapet.

‘Orks to the east!’

Straken ran to the barricade, shotgun in hand. He leaped up, caught a protruding chair leg and hauled himself up. He took up position beside his men, waiting as the sound rose from beyond the defences: roaring ork voices and the pounding of hundreds of pairs of heavy boots.

The aliens ran into sight but the Guardsmen cut them down. The ground beyond the barricade was like a tunnel down to hell: packed with hulking bodies and faces that were little more than glittering eyes and fangs. Mobs of ork infantry surged towards the humans, grunting and roaring, and within moments the hall was half-choked with alien dead.

They kept coming. They trampled their wounded, tripping on them, and were shot full of las-fire before they could rise. Straken used his shotgun on those that threatened to get close, but the great majority were killed within a few moments of coming into view. Some of the orks carried crude shields, but grenades and plasma fire took care of them.

The Mordians weren’t bad fighters, Straken thought. They lacked the natural fury of the Catachans, the hunger for combat, but their cold discipline nearly made up for it. Lieutenant Krall never seemed to stop barking commands, as if to rival those yelled by Straken and his men.

Suddenly, the orks stopped coming. Nobody fired: the corridor seemed incredibly quiet. Somewhere far off, an alien groaned. Straken glimpsed a few shapes in the distance, hidden by smoke and dust, pulling back. The attack was over, for now.

The defenders checked their wounds. Six Mordians and four Catachans had been killed, all victims of lucky ork gunfire. Another man had slipped down the barricade and broken his arm. Overall, it wasn’t bad.

But as he climbed down from his firing-point, Straken saw the real problem. One of Krall’s men handed his comrade a new magazine. Another put his grenade launcher down and drew a laspistol instead. Power packs that should have been charged from a generator were placed on a metal rack over a fire, like barbecued meat. First, they would run out of grenades and support weapons, and

then their lasguns would run dry.

Straken gestured to Lieutenant Krall. 'I need to talk to you,' he said. 'Quietly.'

'The orks come maybe once, twice a day – sometimes more,' the lieutenant said. 'Maybe they have orders from above, maybe they're like small gangs. Perhaps they just smell a fight.' They stood at once side of the building, in the shadows near empty hab-quarters that had been used by the soldiers to doss down. A Mordian sat on a stool, cleaning his lasgun. He leaped up and saluted; Krall motioned him back at ease. 'I don't know what makes them keep coming.'

'They're orks,' Straken said. 'It's what they do.' He stepped into one of the hab-quarters, satisfied that they would not be overheard.

'You wanted to talk privately, sir,' Krall said.

'Yes. Your commissar expects you all to die here. He thinks the ship's sinking, and he wants everyone to go down with it. Mark of respect for the general or something.'

'I know.'

'You going to do something about that?'

'Like what?' Krall asked. 'I've got orders to follow, sir.'

'Too bad those orders are going to get you, and the people you command, killed.'

For all her discipline, Krall couldn't prevent the anger that flashed in her eyes. Then it was gone.

Straken sighed. 'That's the trouble with the Guard. Too many people making last stands, getting medals, settling scores, rubbish like that. Not enough winning wars. You're a good soldier: you must be, to keep this mess together.' He glanced around the room. It seemed tiny compared to his high-gravity physique, as if he'd strayed into a doll's house. 'What would happen if Verryn wasn't in charge?'

'I'd take command, sir. Or rather, command would transfer to you, as ranking officer. But – but the commissar would never go. And people are loyal to him. Well, not to him personally, but to the uniform. It's how we are, sir. Every soldier is part of the unit, and the unit obeys the officer. On your own, you die.'

That's the difference, Straken thought. On Catachan, you were always on your own. You grew up tough and self-sufficient. The people who died were the ones who couldn't manage on their own.

'So if the commissar happened to get himself killed, you'd be in charge. And the others would obey you.'

A strand of sandy hair slipped out of Krall's cap and hung across her eyes. 'I am uncomfortable with this line of conversation, sir.'

'Captain Montara said that you mentioned something strange,' Straken said. 'Something about mutants on the lower levels. Thing is, I've seen a lot of orks... but no mutants.'

'The under-levels,' Krall replied. 'Look, there's levels under here, loads of them. I don't know much about them, but I saw some on the way in here, and they weren't nice. They have workshops down there, where they keep these mutants – slaves, I suppose. But with the war all the people, the normal people, took off. And the mutants took over.' She shrugged. 'Maybe some of them were loose before, feral, but they're all free now. I don't know whether the orks go down there. Probably not much to take if they did.'

'So these mutants control the levels below us?'

'I think so. I didn't stay too long. It makes this dump look like a noble's palace: no power, no light, half the place flooded...'

Straken nodded and smiled. 'Sounds great.' Had Krall known him better, she would have realised that trouble was coming. 'How do I get there?'

The manufactory had a cellar, where the workers had stashed things that they did not need. Rolls of cable hung from pegs on the walls. A deactivated servitor stood in a corner, head drooping. Along the far wall was a row of alcoves.

Krall led Straken to the alcoves. One had a square grating in the floor. Straken heaved the cover up, without difficulty, and set it aside.

'Close it after me,' he said.

Straken loaded his weapons and descended. He dropped down and heard Krall push the lid back into place as quietly as she could.

It was dark, pitch black. There was no sound, not even that of boots overhead. The air smelled of dust. Straken pulled his bandanna up over his nose and mouth and activated the image enhancement in his bionic eye. Then he started walking.

His vision made the world look bleached: a dead, washed-out world. He passed the inevitable gang signs, insults and threats scrawled on the walls and advanced. At points, the graffiti was so dense, and the walls so high, he felt like an insect on a printed page. The place seemed deserted, but he did not lower his guard.

The floor had collapsed up ahead: the sloping rockcrete made a ramp down to the next level. He descended into what had once been a scholam. A faded mural showed children greeting saints and heroes. He began to sense that he was being

followed. Good.

Straken found metal stairs that could still bear weight and went down. The air was damp now. Condensation clung to the walls and patches of fungi gave off a soft, blue glow. There were shallow puddles under his boots.

The corridor opened out onto what might have been a loading bay, sunk into the ground. It was full of water now. Jury-rigged machines stood around the reservoir: pipes channelled the water away to be filtered and piped into cans. The walls were covered in lichen.

In the centre of the pool, bobbing on a wooden raft, stood an effigy of some kind of god, perhaps the Emperor. Arms open, face in a broad and empty smile, it greeted him.

Straken took a step forward. Half a dozen guns clattered as they were raised.

They came from the shadows, like animals at feeding time – the monsters, the discarded people, the genetic heretics. Hunched, wide-eyed, as pale as the bellies of fish, the mutants advanced on him. Some held crossbows, others clutched looted guns. One skinny creature raised a spear like a tribal fisherman.

A slight, long-necked person walked from the far end of the room. Smooth-skinned, huge-eyed, it wore a robe made from old sacks. Straken wondered if the thing was male or female. It looked very old.

‘You are lost,’ the elder said.

Straken shook his head. ‘I want to talk to you.’

‘No,’ said the elder. ‘You are lost. Your kind, the soldiers with their guns, the overseers with their whips, as soon as they come here, they are lost. The orks as well. They drown as easily as men.’

Straken looked around. They were, in their own way, adapted to this place. ‘I kill orks too.’

The smooth face frowned. ‘Lucky you. And then, when all the orks are dead, your lords will send you after us. This place is ours.’

‘Yes. That’s why we want to leave.’

‘Leave? To go?’

‘I want to get some people out of here, through your territory. Once we’re gone, we’ll never come back.’

To Straken’s right, one of the mutants gave a low, gurgling laugh. Straken heard the contempt in it.

‘The orks want to kill us all,’ he said. ‘They don’t care that you’re mutants. They don’t give a damn about what you think of the Imperium. You’re just another kind of human to them. More people to kill – that’s how they see you.’

The elder smiled, without pleasure. ‘And how do *you* see us?’

‘As someone who can help. Once we’re gone, you can do whatever you like. Stay here, if you think you’ll live – I won’t tell anyone, that’s for sure. Run away, if you like. Just let us out, and we’ll leave you alone. That’s a promise.’

The elder folded its arms. ‘And why should I believe you?’

‘Because I keep my word.’

Myers and Eiden were on lookout when Straken returned. He pushed the hatch up, and Eiden’s lined face glared back at him. The sergeant stuck out a hand, but Straken didn’t take it. He could manage fine on his own – and his metal fingers could crush a man’s bones.

Straken crouched down and put the hatch back in place. ‘Anyone miss me?’

Sergeant Eiden shook his head. His white hair was dusted with grime. ‘We told ’em you were busy. And that you wouldn’t like being interrupted.’ He smiled, revealing chipped and uneven teeth. ‘They didn’t bother us after that.’

Myers nodded keenly. ‘I didn’t see nobody,’ he said. ‘Honest.’

Straken believed him. The gunner might be simple, but he obeyed every order to the letter. ‘We’re good to go,’ he told Eiden. ‘Let the others know.’

They climbed the stairs. Straken opened the door, checked that nobody was there, and slipped out. In a side room, Hollister and a Mordian orderly were checking several wounded troopers. The medic looked up as Straken passed. Straken gave him a quick nod, watching as Hollister responded with a grin before getting back to work.

Getting the injured ready to go, Straken realised.

The centre of the building was empty: most soldiers were manning the barricades at either end. Someone had pinned a devotional poster to the wall. The saint gazed out, stern but not angry, sword held out in both hands for the viewer to take.

Montara came to find him, striding across the stone floor. Her combat jacket and trousers, both originally green, were now grey. Even her red bandanna was dusty. ‘Any luck, sir?’

‘Yes. There’s a way through. Any news on the orks?’

She shook her head. ‘We’ve been watching. I sent a few scouts forward. There’s no mines, but we’ve wired up a few tripwires and grenades. Should give us some warning.’

‘Good. They’ll come.’ Straken sighed. ‘Seventy years fighting for the Guard. Even after all that time, I’m still sticking the same knife into a bunch of orks.’

‘You’re complaining, right?’

Straken snorted, amused. ‘When the time comes, we’ll move out by squad. You take the lead. Head straight down and follow the marks on the walls. In case I’m not with you, you’re looking for sub-level Sixty-Eight Gamma. If you see anyone down there – gangs, even mutants – do not open fire. Anyone except orks, of course. Understand?’

‘Sure.’

‘Good. Take the Catachans first. The Mordians should realise that it’s time to head off once we’re gone. I’ll hang back and make sure they all get out.’

The captain leaned closer. ‘Listen, colonel. What are we going to do with the commissar?’

‘I’ll take care of him.’

Montara’s face hardened. ‘I’ll do it if you want. The way Captain Tanner would have done.’ She ran a finger across her throat. ‘Commissars.’

He taught you well, Straken thought, and he felt a stab of sadness. Tanner had been a good officer – a great one, even – and a friend. For a second Straken wished that Tanner was still with him, fighting at his side – but then again he didn’t, because Tanner was somewhere much better now.

‘Get back to the men,’ he said. ‘Watch for orks. I’ll talk to Commissar Verryn once I’ve checked my weapons. Last thing I need is my plasma pistol cooking off in the middle of battle.’

The commissar stood on the western barricade, a boltgun held ready across his chest. He looked hard and ancient, a man from whom the flesh had withered away. The commissar’s profile reminded Straken of a face he’d seen moulded into the cutting edge of an axe. A Chaos cultist had wielded it on a world whose name Straken had long since forgotten.

‘Commissar!’

Verryn climbed down to meet Straken.

‘Ah, colonel. I was wondering where you’d got to.’

‘I was manning the other barricade.’

‘Of course. I hear that you did good work repelling the last attack. Your men are a welcome addition.’

Straken hadn’t expected that. ‘Thanks.’

Verryn smiled. ‘It’s a pleasure to be fighting beside an expert. Two veterans against the tide, eh?’

Suddenly, Straken understood him. *We are the same, in a way*, Straken

thought. *No shrines or statues to remember us, not even children and wives. Once we're dead, all that will remain will be other people's memories.*

Verryn didn't want to die fighting because he was a great commissar, but because his stubbornness had overcome him. To the commissar, retreat, surrender and failure had become the same thing. Anything less than a heroic death would be a defeat.

Straken almost pitied the man. Then he remembered that Verryn's great deed would take hundreds of people down with him.

He said, 'There's still a way out of here, commissar. I found a way down, through the hive—'

'Through the mutants?' Verryn scowled. 'No. A man risks not only his life, but his very soul down there. The place is tainted, colonel. Tainted.' The commissar looked curiously pleased with himself. 'The creatures down there are insane. The touch of Chaos has driven them mad.'

'Chaos? I don't think so. I reckon they just stuck around here too long, commissar.' Straken flexed the fingers of his metal hand. 'Listen. One way or another, we're getting out of here. You can have your last stand, you can go down in all the history books you like, but you're doing it alone.'

'Not alone,' Verryn said. He glanced over Straken's shoulder. Figures moved, not quickly, but coming closer. Big men in dark blue uniforms.

Straken knew that he could take them. But it would be mad to set Catachan against Mordian. The Mordians already regarded Straken's men as wild and ill-disciplined, and that would be proof of their worst suspicions. The Catachans would look like nothing more than bandits to them – and whatever happened then, it would help the orks.

'You see, colonel—' Verryn said, a cruel smile creeping across his lean face, but a voice drowned him out.

'Orks!' a Guardsman screamed from the top of the barricade. 'Orks!'

Straken spun round, away from the commissar. 'To your positions!' he shouted. 'Full alert! Commissar? I'll take the east barricade.'

Yells tore the air. Straken ran back towards his men. Hollister stood in the doorway of the makeshift infirmary, lasgun in his hands. 'Get ready to go,' Straken barked. 'If anyone asks, tell them I said so.' He ran on, weaving down corridors, past soldiers scrambling to man the lines. 'Get moving, Guardsmen! Do I have to do everything myself?'

Orks, he thought, and anger rose in him, fired him like a dog on a scent.

He saw the barricade. Two troopers crouched beside a mortar, ready to lob

shells over the wall. Sellen had propped his missile launcher on the parapet. Ferricus crouched next to him, ready to load.

From far away, Straken heard roars and the thumping of heavy boots. Dust trickled from the roof.

Men leaned over the edge of the barricade and pulled up several Catachan scouts.

Straken strode towards them. 'You!' he shouted, pointing. 'How many are there?'

'Hundreds, sir,' the scout replied. 'A whole legion of 'em. They've got big guns, and heavy armour as well.'

'Get ready, then.' Straken climbed up the barricade, over broken furniture and sheets of dented metal. Around him, soldiers checked their guns, loosened their knives in their sheaths. 'Listen! I want none of these scumbags anywhere near this barricade. If you can't hit 'em in the head, take their legs out. Heavy weapons, pick your targets. Shoot the big ones and any special gear they've got. Take out anything that's too thick for a lasgun to go through. Make those shots count, Catachans!'

He paused. The acoustics were bad; it was hard to make out where the orks were, let alone how close they might be.

I could live a thousand years, he thought, and there would still be orks to kill.

'I see 'em!' a woman yelled at the far end of the balcony.

'Then what are you waiting for?' Straken roared back. 'Kill them! Kill them all!'

Shadows moved in the dark and the wall came alive in gunfire. For a moment, the dust obscured the orks, and Straken couldn't quite make them out. Then he saw that they were covered in chunks of armour, square plates like paving-slabs. Las-shots ricocheted off the metal. A Mordian blew a hole in the mass of orks, killing one of the beasts, but another alien scrambled over its fallen comrade and advanced. A missile blasted two of the great orks apart in a shower of torn metal and alien flesh, but others rushed to take their place.

This time, the orks didn't sprint at the barricade. Gunfire came from gaps between the armoured bodies: fat bullets ripped through the barricade. A long barrel, drilled with rows of ventilation holes, was thrust between the rows of orks, and high-calibre shells scythed across the parapet. One Mordian was cut in half; a Catachan toppled back, his scalp suddenly red. Worse, soldiers took cover, and as they ducked, the orks closed in.

'Frag grenades!' Straken shouted. 'Aim low!'

His men pulled out their bombs, yanked the pins and hurled them over the parapet. The grenades looked tiny as they hit the walls and ork armour, disappearing from view.

A moment later, he heard the muffled boom of grenades. Orks still roared, but with pain as well as rage. 'Now!' Straken yelled.

They sprang up. The orks had paused; several had fallen. As one, the Guardsmen poured las-fire into the aliens. The corridor strobed with light and drummed with explosions. Orks fell by the dozen. Human voices shouted, cursed and screamed.

Suddenly, there were no more orks to kill. The alien advance was stalled. From beyond, out of view, ork voices called and bellowed.

Other orks answered, and, under them, other creatures. They sounded like grox.

A swarm of bodies dashed around the corner. Red things ran between the orks, no higher than the aliens' knees. They looked the heads of monsters: round creatures that seemed to be nothing but snarling teeth and scrabbling legs.

Squigs, Straken realised, as the lasguns cracked out.

The squigs were much faster than their masters and harder to hit. Straken used his shotgun, brought one down, then another, but a third slipped through. One of the squigs reached the barricade and tried to jump up. Others joined it, and then Straken saw the packs strapped to some of them, the wads of explosive and wires—

'Down!' he cried, and the bomb-squigs detonated.

The barricade burst. Men and women were thrown in all directions. Bodies were ripped apart, soldiers smashed against the roof and walls, Guardsmen stabbed and lacerated by debris. Something crashed into Straken's metal arm and he fell, tumbling down, pieces of the barricade hitting his hip and side like the blows of a club. He struck the ground, rolled onto his front, clambered upright with his ears ringing. He heard snarls from behind, and turned back to see the first ork soldiers tearing through the barricade.

'Fall back!' Straken roared. 'The orks are inside! Fall back!'

They pulled back. The orks swarmed over the barricade. Straken saw Doc Hollister helping two Mordian orderlies carry a wounded Catachan. Myers, the gunner, shouted wordlessly and fired his heavy bolter, blasting orks apart.

Men ran in, Mordians and Catachans. They saw the orks and began firing, using doorways and support joists as cover. Lieutenant Krall was among them, yelling orders and encouragement.

‘Montara!’ Straken shouted. ‘Help the Mordians.’

‘What about you?’

Straken drew his plasma pistol. ‘I’m getting the commissar.’

The boltgun bucked and shook in Verryn’s gloved hands as it punched shells into the ork horde. The aliens had reached the west barricade – partly through covering fire, partly through force of numbers – and they were climbing up faster than they could be shot down. Behind him, someone shouted about the eastern barricade going down. The boltgun ran dry.

This is it, Verryn thought, tearing the magazine out and slapping the last one into place.

‘For the saints!’ he cried.

Then something huge ran at the barricade, and he knew that this was indeed the end.

It was an ork warboss, twice man-height and wider again, its chest bare, its left leg and lower jaw replaced by crude bionics. It had a chainaxe in one hand and a whirring, oversized buzzsaw in the other.

Lasgun shots hit its warty hide: those that penetrated did not slow it. A grenade blew a hole in the beast’s shoulder-armour, revealing pistons inside. The monster waded over and through the barricade, its weight snapping and twisting the defences. Every sweep of its weapons threw soldiers into the air, a bowing wave of mangled bodies.

Verryn sighted the ork and fired.

It threw its arm up, and the bolter shells burst against metal. Stray shells caught the ork’s body, wounding and enraging it. The ork’s chainaxe clipped a man and threw blood across the ceiling.

‘Hold your ground!’ Verryn shouted, over the screaming. ‘To the death, Guardsmen! Together we—’

His gun ran out. The warboss towered over him, its shadow entirely eclipsing the commissar. The words stopped in his throat.

‘Verryn!’

He spun round. Straken ran forward, out of the mayhem behind him, and drew his arm back. He lobbed something – not a grenade, but a gun. ‘Use it!’

Verryn snatched the plasma pistol out of the air. The warboss pulled itself over the parapet of the barricade, and then ork and commissar were eye-to-eye.

‘Die, filth,’ Verryn said, and he pushed the barrel against the ork’s forehead.

He pulled the trigger. The gun exploded.

The plasma gun liquefied both the commissar and the warboss's head. The ork toppled forward, collapsed limb by limb, keeling over onto its front. It crashed onto the remains of the barricade. Of Commissar Verryn, there was no recognisable trace.

The battle was over.

Orks lay in heaps and wreckage covered the floor. Amid the aliens, perhaps one to every seven orks, lay soldiers of the Guard. Some wore blue uniforms, others combat vests and red bandannas. Already the dust was settling on them all.

'They'll be back soon,' Captain Montara said. Her face was grey with dirt.

Straken could taste blood. There was a steady ache in his side that rose and fell with each breath. As he walked it became a sharp pain, jabbing him with every step. He'd felt worse. 'Move out,' he said.

Montara said, 'I'll go and check my team,' and she strode off into the cloud of dust.

A small group of Mordians approached with Lieutenant Krall at the front.

'You're the commanding officer now, colonel,' Krall said. 'I'll have my people ready in ten minutes.'

'Five,' Straken replied. 'We need to move.'

'Yes, sir. I saw what happened back there. To the commissar.' She looked straight at him, but he couldn't read her expression.

Montara took a deep breath. 'Best get moving, then.'

'Yes,' Straken said.

They picked their way through the underhive, boots sloshing through brackish, oil-slicked water, the blue light cold and soft around their faces. Protected by scouts, the Guardsmen carried their wounded, and General Beran, home.

Fresh signs had been painted on the walls, to show the way, but they saw nobody else. The Mordians did not go as quickly as Straken would have hoped, but they were tough and uncomplaining. He glanced back to make sure that no one had lagged behind, and Hollister came hurrying up to talk.

'Damn shame about your plasma pistol, eh?' the medic said, grinning.

'Yeah.'

'An honest mistake,' Hollister replied. 'How were you to know? Some of these plasma weapons are terribly unreliable, I've heard. The machine-spirits, you know.' He peered at Straken, frowning. 'Are you feeling all right, colonel?'

‘Fine,’ Straken said. ‘Let’s go.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toby Frost is the author of the novel *Straken*, about the eponymous Astra Militarum colonel. His other published work for Black Library includes the short stories 'Lesser Evils', 'A Hero's Death' and 'The Apex', the latter two featuring Colonel 'Iron Hand' Straken. He has more tales of Straken on the way.

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