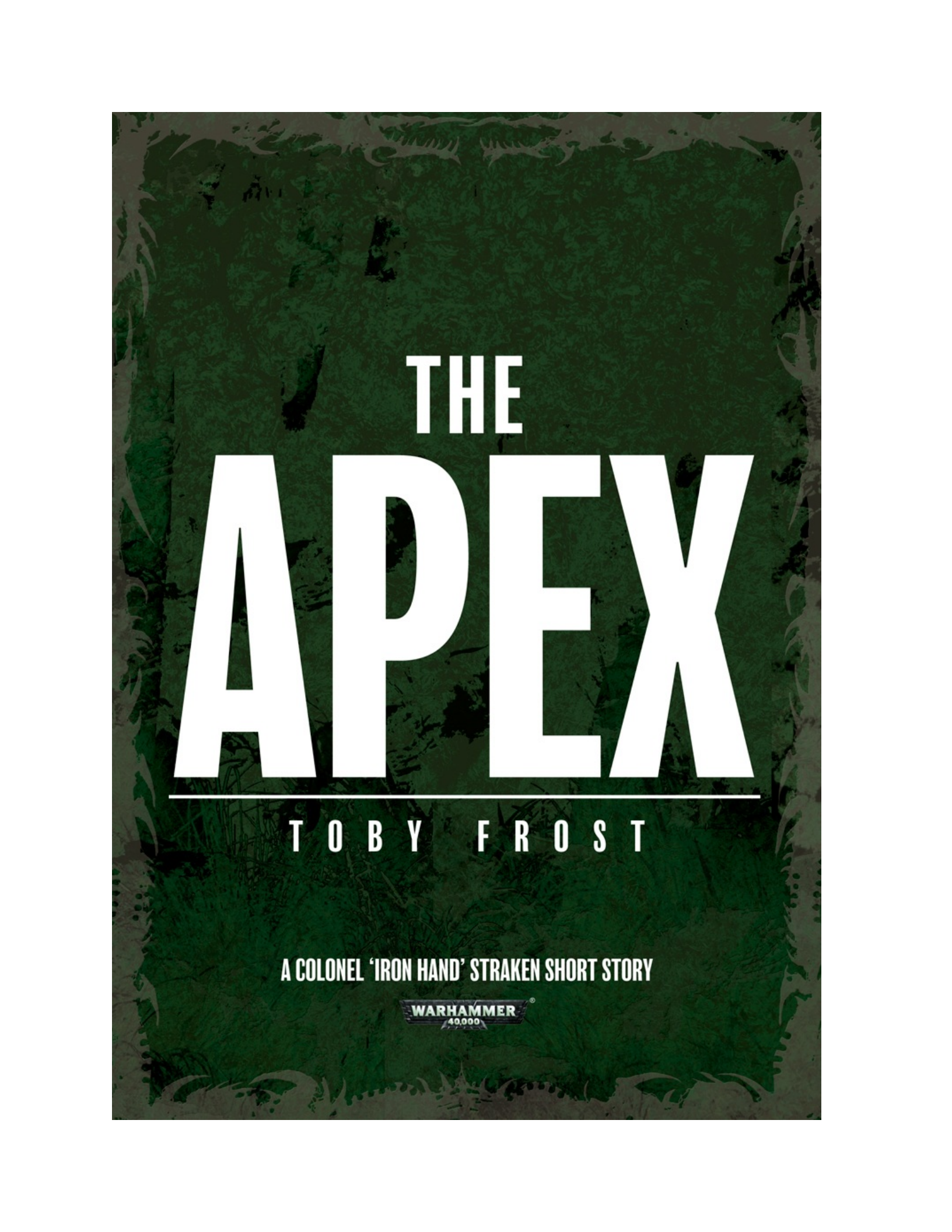


THE APEX

T O B Y F R O S T

A COLONEL 'IRON HAND' STRAKEN SHORT STORY





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THE APEX

Toby Frost

Hard rain battered the mansion of the Assistant Governor of Signis VII. Colonel Straken stood in the former dining room, now heaped with boxes of ammunition and sensoria, listening to the drumming against the boarded windows. The tyranids would be attacking the defences again – they always came when it rained. Perhaps they thought the noise would hide their approach.

The strategos called it a ‘splinter fleet’, as if it was only a little thing. ‘Infestation’ would be a better word.

They could do with a tour in the jungle to see how it really is, Straken thought. And then, looking around the plush, protected surroundings, *so could I.*

A soldier in full dress uniform opened the door. ‘The general will see you now,’ he said, and Colonel Straken followed him into what had once been the grand ballroom.

Tropical rain drummed on the roof. Batteries of sensor gear stood in the corners of the room, humming and flickering. Servitors checked the machinery like peasants tending a fire. Behind a table in the centre of the room, the officers of Sector Command waited. They looked like liveried servants, not soldiers, Straken thought – absurdly ornate, flimsy-looking in comparison to the Catachans that he commanded.

General Mari Delacor stood up, the light of the chandeliers catching the gold braid of her epaulettes. She was thin, about sixty, dark-skinned and hard-eyed, and she waited as if daring Straken to approach.

He saluted with his flesh-and-blood arm.

‘Colonel Straken,’ said General Delacor. ‘Welcome.’

‘I heard you had work for me, general.’ On a screen behind the table, blips moved out from the centre, plotting the course of a Valkyrie wing on standard anti-tyranid patrol. A servitor raised a steel claw and turned a dial.

‘Yes,’ the general said. ‘I gather that the Catachan Second have seen some hard fighting of late.’

‘Until two hours ago, yes.’

Delacor glanced at one of her aides. ‘What happened two hours ago?’

‘I was told to come here. Then I waited.’

Light flashed above the ballroom, throwing the room into hard relief. Straken wondered whether it was lightning or distant anti-aircraft guns, blazing at some huge flying-beast.

‘Things are hard here,’ Delacor said. ‘Until we’re reinforced, policy remains that of containment and defence.’

Straken managed not to make his thoughts show on his face. ‘Containment’ meant delaying the inevitable. He’d heard the aliens rushing the edges of the Imperium’s ‘safe zone’ night after night, helped his fellow Catachans man the guns, and thirsted to leave the compound, to slip into the jungle and take the tyranids on among the trees.

‘We have to be realistic,’ Delacor continued. ‘We have to hold that which we can feasibly keep, and make sure that the xenos can’t get anything from what they do capture.’

One of Delacor’s entourage poured wine into a small cup and set it in front of her. She paused and sipped.

‘We’re losing a lot of officers. Squad leaders, sergeants, lieutenants.’ Her mouth moved as if she tasted something bitter. ‘There are some who think that the tyranids are deliberately targeting them. You’ve fought tyranids before. Is that possible?’

Straken said, ‘Maybe. People say they’re like animals, but... they’re smarter than that. They’re as organised as we are – maybe more.’

The general nodded. ‘Wilkes?’ A captain at the far end of the table stood up and helped a servitor pull a screen forward on a long metal arm.

The captain wore polished riding boots, Straken noticed. *Riding boots in the jungle*, he thought. *High command never changes.*

A map appeared on the screen. Wilkes pointed, his gloved finger tracing the contours. ‘Ninety-five kilometres north-east of the safe zone is an outpost: H-93. Since the first tyranid landings, H-93 has been garrisoned by two squads from the Thirty-Eighth Massadar Rifles. They’re protecting a significant asset. Your primary objective is to recover the asset before the enemy overrun the outpost.’

‘And the secondary objective?’

‘Get out alive.’

Straken snorted, amused. ‘So what is this asset? I want to know what my men are fighting for.’

Wilkes glanced at Delacor. She said, ‘A magos biologis of the Ordo Mechanicus. His name is Jarv Bardex. He has been studying tyranid attack techniques. It’s been three weeks since we heard from him. Comms appear to be down. We need him brought back.’

Straken nodded. He wondered who had called this mission in: Sector Command, wanting the magos’s research, or the Mechanicus itself, demanding the safe return of its hierarch. Right now, with guns and tech at a premium, the Guard would not want to make the Adeptus Mechanicus unhappy. Not at all.

He said, ‘What about the squads guarding the outpost?’

Wilkes glanced at the general, then back to Straken. ‘That’s not your concern. Arrangements will be made for them.’ He took a breath, and resumed. ‘The extraction team will be dropped in thirty-two kilometres south of the outpost, via air transport,’ Wilkes put in. He indicated a route on the map. ‘They’ll move in on foot – the xenos seem to be watching our air traffic. If they know that people are heading to the outpost, the tyranids will mobilise and try to swamp it. So, you’ll be moving quietly through the jungle. We expect your men will need two days to get from the landing point to the outpost.’

Straken looked at the map. ‘Twenty miles? One day.’

Wilkes raised an eyebrow. ‘Then you’ll have an extra day to kill when you get there. On arriving, you’ll secure the location until the magos is ready. Then call for extraction and we’ll send a ship to pick you up. Once the magos’s research is secured, the outpost is to be abandoned.’

‘Right,’ Straken said.

Rain drummed on the roof. ‘Excellent,’ Delacor said. ‘It’s going to be a pretty tough job, colonel. Your people may be up cut off until they can be lifted out. Do you know someone suitable to lead the extraction team?’

‘Yes,’ Straken replied. ‘Me.’

The safe zone was quiet, but never truly safe. The great sloping walls were like a cliff of dark blue slate. Soldiers waited at gun embrasures while their comrades spooned down rations or snatched a few moments of sleep. Harsh lights picked out details: a little shrine; the head of a hunter-slayer, jammed onto a spike; a patch of ground where thirty Catachan knives stood driven blade-first into the earth, red bandanas wrapped around the hilt of each weapon to mark its owner’s passing.

Captain Ban Corris waited at the wall, staring out into the warm night. Something cried out among the trees, either an avian or a wounded animal. He

knew that, further down the perimeter, among the other regiments, men would be wondering whether to shoot. None of his own soldiers would waste ammunition like that. When you grew up on a death world like Catachan, you soon learned that getting jumpy got you killed.

Corris was massive, broad and heavily-muscled like all Catachans. He wore a vest and fingerless gloves, his rank and achievements tattooed on his arm. Like the men around him, he wore a red bandana, the symbol of the blood-oath that had inducted them into the Imperial Guard.

He turned, knowing that someone was coming. He saw the bulk of Straken's body, the light catching his metal arm and eye.

'Everything alright?' Straken asked.

'Quiet,' Corris replied, 'comparatively.'

'Get fifty good men together,' Straken said. 'We're heading out.'

'Out there?'

'Daybreak. They're fuelling up a transport. I'll brief the team in flight.'

'Right.' Corris had a long, lined face, seemingly made to look gloomy. Compared to many of the men he commanded, he was thoughtful and pious. 'Best place for a jungle fighter. I'm sick of standing behind this damn wall.'

Straken leaned forwards, against the wall, and boosted the vision in his mechanical eye. The trees appeared in green, bleached and sinister.

'Time to get our hands dirty,' he said. 'The sooner we're back in the jungle, the better.'

The transport was a huge brick of a thing made bulkier with improvised armour. As soon as it landed, Straken ordered his men to embark.

'Move it!' he yelled over the roar of the transport's engines. The sound of boots on the entry ramp was lost to engine noise. 'Do I have to do everything on my own? Get in there!'

He watched the team disappear into the dark hold of the flyer. Already, a Vendetta escort hovered over the encampment like a nervous chaperone, watching for tyranid air attacks. *Damned stupid idea*, Straken thought. What better way to let the xenos know that something was going on than to stick a gunship in the air? The tyranids had flying creatures big and fast enough to knock a Vendetta straight out of the sky.

'That's it,' Corris called. 'All in.'

'Let's go.' Straken signalled to the east wall while his other second in command, Captain Tanner, grinned and saluted. Tanner would be commanding

the remainder of the Catachan II, and had made no secret of wanting to be back in the jungle again instead of watching the compound walls.

A siren howled. Suddenly, voices rang out as loud and urgent as the cries of the jungle avians. The vox-caster squealed and crackled. ‘Attention west perimeter!’ a woman’s voice announced. ‘All soldiers on west perimeter ready yourselves for xenos contact.’

Men scrambled to their posts, boots thumping on the parapet. Mounted guns swung to cover the jungle, searching for targets. A preacher called out a blessing, his voice strained and hoarse.

Tanner turned and shouted to his men. They stayed put, facing the trees, knowing from experience that the attack on the west was likely to be a feint. The crack of lasguns came from the western wall: one or two at first, swelling into a crescendo of laser fire. Straken ran up the ramp into the transport, and the door slammed behind him. Suddenly he was in the cramped hold, stooped, the rumble of engines shaking the walls.

The transport shuddered, and with one great heave of its thrusters it was airborne. Straken looked through the tiny window set into the rear door. The western side of the compound was a wall of fire. The green of the jungle was pulsing with alien bodies. A huge beast, glistening like a beetle, lumbered through the jungle, trees collapsing around its bulk. Its forelimbs ended in dripping tubes, and as the transport gained height, the alien hosed the wall down in purple acidic sludge. Thick smoke billowed from the battlements.

The flyer turned north. Straken saw the first shots from the Catachans on the eastern wall, and wondered whether the western attack had really just been a pretence.

Tyranids were smart like that. Maybe Magos Bardex knew why. Straken sat down and strapped himself in.

The engines rumbled in the belly of the ship. For men as big as Catachans, the hold was cramped. In the red light, Captain Corris pulled a data-slate out of his thigh pocket and thumbed the controls at random. He peered at the screen for a minute then nodded as though he had only just understood it.

Straken sat opposite. ‘Got something?’

Corris leaned forward. ‘It’s a hymnal,’ he said, holding up the data-slate. ‘A missionary showed me this, for luck. You read a random passage, and if the Emperor’s with you, he might grant you a look into the future.’

A superstition, Straken thought, but sometimes you need them. Corris had been

religious ever since he'd left Catachan; once he had told Straken that the moment he saw one of the Emperor's cathedrals, he had known for sure that the Master of Mankind was watching over him. Given that the only large buildings on Catachan were fortifications, it was easy to be impressed. Straken remembered the first spacecraft he'd seen, when he had been half-savage and newly inducted to the Guard. He had not believed that mankind could build something so large.

'What's it say?'

Corris passed it over. *They shall have eyes, Straken read, yet use them not. They shall speak, but none will hear. They shall come in numbers, yet you will walk among them.* 'The tyranids,' Corris said.

Or High Command, Straken thought.

The vox-link crackled and the pilot's voice filled the hold. 'We're approaching the drop zone.'

Time to move. Straken unclipped the harness and stood up. *Time to move.*

'Five minutes, Guardsmen! Look sharp! I want dispersal as soon as we hit the ground.' He nodded to the colour sergeant, a wild-looking, bearded man. 'Halda, keep the colours furled. Your squad takes the left flank. Pharranis?'

Sergeant Pharranis, his shaven head criss-crossed with scars, looked up. His massive hands were locked around his plasma gun as if to strangle it.

'Your squad will be on the right. I'll be at the front.' Straken felt the flyer begin to sink in the air. The needle in the pressure gauge beside the door started to spin. Straken flexed the fingers of his metal arm and gripped his shotgun tightly. 'Two minutes, Catachans!' he called.

The transport hit the ground and the ramp dropped open. Straken was first out. He ran down into the blazing sunlight, his boots hit the ground and he glanced left and right, quickly checking for enemies. He scanned the trees, saw nobody behind the huge, turquoise leaves and turned back to his men as they scrambled out of the flyer. 'Move it!' he barked. 'Spread out in teams!'

They split into squads, as they had done many times before: Straken's squad advancing in the centre, the two flanking teams checking the edges as they scurried towards the treeline. 'Follow me,' Straken said, and he ran to the edge of the jungle.

The Catachans reached the trees and slipped between them like water flowing between the trunks. Suddenly the jungle was close. The fronds of great ferns brushed their arms and shoulders as they moved. The heat and vegetation closed

in on them, and the canopy muffled the roar of the transport as it pulled away and left them behind.

Straken checked his chrono and the position of the sun above them. He had memorised the terrain – now lines on the map turned into hazards on the ground.

Visibility was suddenly down to a dozen yards. Tree trunks blocked their view like bars in a prison door. Straken peered between the greenery, looking for the glistening armour of the tyranids. The aliens were master hunters. The fact that the area hadn't been declared under xenos control might well be because nobody had spotted them yet, or returned alive to tell about it.

To the south, an avian screamed in the treetops, eerily like a child. The team's sharpshooter, a scar-faced man called Serradus, pulled up his sniper rifle and checked the upper branches through his telescopic sights. He shook his head and Straken gave the hand-signal to quicken the pace.

They crept between clumps of foliage. Where they could not pass unnoticed, they drew their fang-knives and carved a path with razor-sharp blades. Guardsman Logan, a new addition to the regiment, sliced his arm as he brushed past a leaf with edges like cut glass. He pulled a rag from his pack and tied it around the wound without breaking stride. As the Catachans advanced, the temperature rose. Red bandanas caught their sweat. A couple of soldiers took swigs from their canteens.

Night fell, although under the thick canopy it made little difference. They advanced through the dim forest, climbing over fallen branches, slipping through curtains of dangling vines. A family of tiny apes watched them from the treetops, huge-eyed and fanged like vampires.

Straken heard raging water. The trees parted and he stepped onto the shore of a broad, foaming river.

A pale, spined lizard the size of a bull grox crouched in the shallows. An eel as thick as a man's leg thrashed in its clawed fist. It looked up, glared at the Catachans and contemptuously bit off the eel's head.

Straken stared into its tiny, yellow eyes. 'Back off,' he growled.

The lizard took a long look at Straken and the Catachans then lumbered away.

Straken turned to his men. 'Hartigan, Reese, get that heavy bolter set up to cover the other side. The rest of you, follow me.'

The colonel went first, the weight of his bionics anchoring him against the roaring water. His men waited on the bank, watching the river like fishermen, guns ready. Straken coiled out a rope behind him. As he reached the other side, he smelt something bad. Rotting meat.

Quickly, he tied the rope around a thick root and slipped into the jungle, towards the smell. It didn't take long. Under a heap of branches lay the decaying body of another huge white lizard – and beside it, the remains of a man.

Corris was next across the river, using the rope to keep his balance. He arrived as Straken was searching the dead man.

'Who was he?' Corris asked.

Straken stood up, holding dogtags in his metal fist. 'Looks like one of the outpost guards. He must've been out patrolling.'

'Or looking for help.'

'Maybe. Him and this lizard thing both died the same way. Long slashing wounds. Like there was poison on the edge of the blade.'

'Tyranids?'

Straken nodded. 'The bodies were covered. I don't see these lizards doing that. And look at this.' The colonel bent down and picked up the guardsman's skull. It ended above the temples. 'They weren't just killed – they were hunted.' He crouched down and replaced the skull with the rest of the Guardsman's corpse. 'What the jungle takes, the jungle keeps. Alright,' he added, standing up, 'let's go.'

They advanced, scanning the foliage for alien eyes. Above them, avians screeched. They might sound ugly, but they were a good sign: the tyranids would devour anything they could catch. That meant that this area hadn't been fully infiltrated. They'd be concentrating on the main compound, and with luck—

Something moved up ahead. Straken flicked up his hand and the team froze. Men crouched down to hide their outlines, raised their carbines and held their breaths.

It took Straken a moment to realise why he had stopped. It had been unconscious, the instinct gained from a life of jungle fighting, but now he recognised the sound of footsteps, quick and irregular: of something human-sized approaching.

Straken made a quick gesture to Corris, and the captain drew back into the shadows. *Standard procedure*, Straken thought. *Let the enemy through, and then hit him from behind.* He tightened his grip on his knife, and waited.

The footsteps grew louder: ten yards away, then five. They paused a moment. Straken heard panting, and then the creature moved again. A dark shape shoved the leaves aside. Armour plates glinted in the murky light.

At the man's shoulder, Corris coughed.

The man whipped around, and Straken stepped over and pushed the soldier's lasgun up. 'Easy,' he said.

The soldier had a neat beard. His dark hair was drawn into a ponytail. His eyes were bloodshot, his breathing fast and hard.

'We're friends,' Straken said. 'And you're outnumbered.'

Slowly, the soldier exhaled. His uniform was dark-grey, mottled for urban combat. He wore a dark breastplate. He closed his eyes for a long second, and when he opened them again, he was composed.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I didn't realise – I didn't think there would be anyone here. Anyone human, I mean.' He saw the stripes on Straken's metal arm, drew himself up and saluted. The formal gesture looked almost absurd in the jungle; behind the soldier, one of the Catachans, Boone, grinned.

'Lieutenant Barrett Dillon,' the soldier said. 'Thirty-Eighth Massadar Rifles.'

'Colonel Straken, Catachan Second. You from the outpost?'

'Yes sir.' Now that the shock had worn off, Dillon looked tough, even if he was ill-equipped for the jungle. His armour was too heavy, Straken thought, his pack too big and too loosely stowed. 'There were two of us, me and Lall.' He looked back, the way he had come. 'Guardsmen Lall. We were patrolling the area. He was just...'

Straken pulled his shotgun up. A moment later, Corris did the same.

'Oh, no,' Dillon whispered. 'You've got to be... he was just there. Lall!' He started towards the undergrowth.

Straken's metal hand shot out. He yanked Dillon back, sent the trooper stumbling towards the Catachans. 'Shut up and don't move,' Straken hissed. 'Corris, Thorn, Meyer, with me. The rest of you, hold position. Quiet, now.'

The team stepped into the shadows of hanging leaves, took up positions shielded by tree trunks and fallen logs. Dillon hurried into cover.

Suddenly, the jungle seemed as quiet as it was still and hot. Straken crept forward, almost doubled over, shotgun raised and ready. He ducked under a frond, flicked his hand out to the left. Meyer and Thorn swung out, taking the flank to hit any enemy from the side. Straken heard Corris move to the right, his footsteps soft and irregular on the damp jungle floor.

Far away, above them, an avian screamed and its flapping wings beat against the leaves. Straken felt a single bead of sweat roll down the side of his face.

Visibility was down to almost nothing. Straken pushed stems aside with the barrel of his shotgun. A leaf bent down, and he saw dozens of tiny frogs clustered around the stem, bodies glistening red.

The brighter the colour, the more deadly the poison.

Then he heard it: a slow, drawn-out sucking sound, like a man reaching the end of a drink. It came regularly, pulsing, perhaps ten yards ahead. With each liquid sound, the ferns shuddered. Straken licked his lips and crept forward.

A boot protruded from the undergrowth. It twitched.

Straken burst up and out of cover, swinging the shotgun up. In a second he saw a little space between the trees, open ground. A body lay sprawled on the jungle floor and, crouched over it, was a folded, spindly thing like a mixture of insect and mummified corpse.

The gun boomed in Straken's hands. The alien unfolded like a trap. In a second it was upright, huge, nine feet tall, a mass of spikes and claws. Straken rushed forward, pumping the slide and firing again as he moved.

Purple ichor burst from the creature's side. It sprang at Straken, and a claw like a scythe-blade cut the air. Straken twisted and blocked it with his metal arm. The shock of the impact jarred his whole body, almost sent him staggering. He heard voices yelling around him as his team closed in. 'Can't get a clear shot!' Meyer yelled.

He dropped the shotgun and reached to the fang-knife at his side. Straken drew and cut in the same motion, felt the weapon hit chitinous armour and slide between two plates. The beast screeched and tore away from the blade, and Straken's men let rip with their lasguns. Armour plates chipped and shattered. Steaming purple blood splattered the leaves. The tyrannid screeched – and then it was twisting, blurring, melting into the jungle. It slipped between the trees, and the greenery dropped like a curtain behind it.

Guardsmen Thorn ran up, lasgun raised. 'It disappeared! Where'd it go?'

Straken stood there, his men just behind him, staring at the place where the tyrannid had gone. It had changed colour as it moved. But it was the creature's head that he saw in his mind, glimpsed only for a second – rows of gleaming yellow eyes around a mass of wet tentacles, each tendril ending in a tiny blade like a razor-sharp tooth, a biological scalpel.

He crouched down and examined the body. Lall wasn't just dead: his head was missing above the eyebrows. The cranial cavity was not just exposed, but empty.

'Damn,' Guardsman Meyer said as Straken stood up. 'It ate his brain.'

Corris stood behind them, watching the forest. 'Emperor,' he said quietly.

Outpost H-93 was a drab plascrete box three storeys high and eighty yards wide. Its grey walls, and the tarnished brass eagles sculpted onto them, had been

sprayed with some sort of atmospheric coating. The stuff had dried in ridges, and caught the light like old horn. It sat in the centre of a circular depression like a plate pressed into the ground. Nothing grew for sixty yards around the outpost.

‘Looks like they bombed the jungle and dropped the fort in the crater,’ Mayne muttered as he adjusted the vox-caster set he carried on his back.

‘They probably did,’ Straken said.

About seventy yards away, at the top of a small hill, stood a metal tower studded with dishes and antennae. It was like a lighthouse in the sea of green foliage.

A grey and purple flag hung in the still, hot air, held out on a wooden crosspiece that made Straken think of a gallows. Soldiers stood on the roof, manning a few mounted guns. A figure waved at the Catachans from the ramparts, then stopped waving and disappeared from view.

‘He’s seen that Lall’s not here,’ Dillon said. He paused. ‘Colonel?’

‘What?’

‘Look, there’s only a few of us left.’ Dillon gestured at the jungle around them. ‘The tyranids can hide so well you’d hardly know they’re there. We fought off a few of them – probing attacks, I guess – but it’s only a matter of time before they overrun the place.’

‘Now you’ve got some help,’ Straken replied. ‘One way or another, we’re all getting out of here.’

‘My men are good people,’ the lieutenant said. ‘They’ve taken a lot. I just don’t want you thinking we’ve been doing nothing.’

Straken didn’t look at him. ‘If you did nothing with tyranids around, you’d all be dead by now.’

‘Well, yes.’ Dillon sounded relieved. ‘You know, get the Thirty-Eighth Massadar in a city-fight and we’re pretty bad news. It’s just, out here...’

On the roof, a servitor tracked them with a heavy bolter. A multi-melta swung to cover the Catachans as they approached.

The Catachans left the jungle and stepped into the dead, open space between the outpost and the trees.

The doors rumbled open. Half a dozen Guardsmen waited inside, guns lowered but still ready. As they saw the Catachans, their grim faces broke into smiles. Voices cheered. A soldier shook his fist and laughed.

‘Out of the jungle, Emperor be praised,’ Dillon said.

‘Watch it, Catachans,’ Straken barked. ‘Open ground.’

They trooped into the main hall. It was cool and smelt of dust. A sensor rig loomed over the staircase like a broken chandelier. The holy bones of a revered colonist lay stacked in an alcove, wrapped in devotional parchments. Generators hummed. On each wall, like a family crest, hung the symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the skull-and-cog.

A robed figure approached with long, confident strides. Ten feet away, the man pulled back his hood.

The tech-priest's face was a sickly purple-white. It gave him a dead, fishlike appearance. His right eye had been replaced with a camera, and a brass cog fitted to the skin around the lens. Thin wires ran like braids from his scalp into the collar of his robe. For a long moment he stood expressionless in front of Straken and then, as if it was a trick he'd learned, he suddenly smiled.

His smile bared his teeth. 'Welcome.'

'Magos Bardex?'

'Yes. And you are?'

'Colonel Straken, Catachan Second'.

'Straken. I would shake hands, but, ah... ' Bardex raised his arm and his sleeve slid back. His right hand was a cruel-looking mass of blades, manipulators and syringes. His smile fell away. 'Welcome, colonel. Always a pleasure to meet one blessed by the Machine-God.'

For a moment, Straken wondered what the magos meant, and then he realised that Bardex was admiring his bionics. He said nothing.

'I have been carrying out research of considerable significance,' the magos said. 'The Adeptus Mechanicus will be most interested in my findings. How to put this in a way you'd understand... My work involves field examination of tyrannid ground tactics and their effect on unit morale. Of course, this requires close-range study. However, my guards have been depleted to the point of placing my work in jeopardy. Your arrival is therefore most fortunate. Now it's just a matter of returning the data I've amassed.'

There was a pause. Straken looked at him.

'To the Imperial Guard, of course.'

'Fine. We'll call up the transport and get you back to headquarters.'

'Me?' Bardex shook his head. 'I'm afraid it's not that simple, colonel.'

It never is, Straken thought. 'What do you mean?'

'I'll need time to gather my research – the items that can be brought with me, that is.'

Straken said, 'So you can't carry it all back?'

‘Not all of it, no,’ Bardex replied. ‘But I can *transmit* it. The real crux of the work can be delivered over the transmitter, in binaric. And that’s where your assistance would be welcome.’

You put your data first, Straken thought, and yourself second. He glanced around the room, at the few soldiers remaining of the magos’ guard, and thought, *And I bet you hardly register these men at all.*

Bardex smiled his meaningless smile again. ‘Perhaps you’d be better off seeing this facility in the flesh, as it were...’

‘Right,’ Straken said grimly. ‘Lead on.’

Corris and Dillon came with Straken. Magos Bardex took a hulking, dead-faced servitor with a stripped-down heavy bolter in place of one arm.

They climbed up a drab grey staircase, the servitor’s hydraulics whining as it ascended. Bardex reached the top and threw open a pair of doors. Suddenly, the lurid green of the jungle flooded into the room.

Straken walked out onto the roof. Heat dropped on him like a net from above. To the east, some animal cried in the treetops. Its voice was like a long, gabbling laugh.

Battlements ran along the edge of the roof, each stamped with a tarnished brass aquila. ‘A real little castle,’ Corris said.

‘Yes,’ Dillon replied. ‘But just try defending it.’

The magos walked to the edge of the battlements. He raised his arm and pointed, the metal digits at the end of his arm wriggling like crab’s legs. ‘The communications tower,’ he said.

It was the building Straken had seen on the way in, at the top of the slope. Seen from this angle, however, the comms tower seemed to be not on a hill but at the summit of a cliff. The ground fell away on the north side, leading to a twenty-metre drop.

‘Long way down,’ Corris said.

‘Twenty-seven point five metres,’ Bardex said. ‘Approximately. I added the extra antennae myself. It had to be built on higher ground for the signal to be sufficiently clear. Unfortunately, the closest ground high enough for the transmission of complex data is—’

‘Up there,’ Straken said.

Automatically, the servitor’s heavy bolter swung up to cover the hillside.

‘The tower’s functionality was halted by xenos attack. A track leads from this building up the slope, to the communications tower,’ Bardex added.

‘Unfortunately, it is somewhat overgrown. My priorities have been on my research, you see. Shortly before I requested your presence, I formed the thesis that the tyranids had infiltrated the path. Subsequent depletion of personnel along the track leads me to conclude that my thesis was correct.’

Dillon stared up at the comms outpost, shielding his eyes with his hand. ‘In other words, a bunch of my people tried to go up there and got their heads ripped off. It must’ve been the same thing that got Lall, I reckon.’

‘Figures,’ Straken said.

‘You want to go up there, be my guest. You might even get to the top.’

The magos turned. ‘Leave us, lieutenant.’

Dillon saluted and turned back to the stairs.

‘The garrison here is no longer operating within reasonable parameters,’ Bardex said. ‘While we have yet to face a full-scale tyranid assault, infiltration of the nearby area has had a psychological effect on the soldiery. A detrimental one,’ he added.

‘That figures, too,’ Straken said.

‘The actual work needed to put the tower on-line would not be great. But I suspect that without your assistance, the remaining men would be unwilling to approach it.’

Straken nodded. ‘That’s all I need to know for now. Thanks.’

‘Not at all.’ The magos paused a moment before he realised what Straken meant. ‘I will be in the laboratory, attending to my research.’

He turned and paced away, red robe flowing after him. Straken waited until he heard the lift door clang shut. ‘Thoughts, captain?’

Corris leaned against the parapet. ‘Well, I don’t like our Mechanicus friend much, and as for the rest of the garrison, I don’t know. *They* don’t like him either, I reckon. You ask me, they’re all losing it, one way or the other.’

Straken looked up at the hill. ‘This place reminds me of those forts they used to build on Catachan. Doesn’t matter how big you make it - sooner or later, the jungle eats it up.’

He remembered the fortress-towns, the only places on Catachan where off-worlders could survive. He saw the daily sorties of Valkyries, swooping low over the canopy, spraying the jungle with defoliant strong enough to melt a man’s flesh. The foliage just grew back. The forts were like sandcastles against the green tide.

Straken looked at his chrono. ‘Alright, here’s the plan. Find every hard point and gun emplacement in this building. Get the cogboy to dig out the blueprints if

you can. I want this place fully defensible. Can't say I'm much in the mood for a last stand.'

The captain smiled grimly. 'Me neither.'

'Tomorrow at dawn we head out,' Straken said. 'I'll recce the comms tower. Halda's squad will be with me. Pharranis's men will guard the main base. Put a couple of mortars up here on the roof, and make sure the guns are manned – it will give us some cover if things get nasty.'

'I'll do that.'

'And put a watch up here,' Straken added. 'I want to know if there's any xenos activity. Get some traps mounted outside as well – rig up some grenades at the best ambush points, to catch anyone trying to get the drop on us.' He turned back towards the lift. 'I'll tell the garrison to get ready to pull out of here.'

The captain frowned. 'Is that part of our orders?'

'Damned if I know. But I'm not leaving anyone behind.'

Dawn came. Shafts of light punched between the upper canopy like lasgun beams. On the roof of the outpost, Guardsman Tayt gave the signal, and the doors rolled apart.

'Let's go!' Straken barked. 'Quickly – move it!'

He was first out. Straken slipped through the gap as the massive doors were still parting, and ran for the treeline. It was still dark at ground level, and the dead soil was littered with withered stumps and dead roots where the defoliant had done its work. He weaved between the dead vegetation, too well-practiced to let any of it snag his boots. He hit the trees, dropped down beside a gnarled and ridged trunk, and gestured for his men to hurry up.

Thirty men rushed across the gap, almost silent, taking positions in the edge of the jungle. Straken knew that they would be as glad as he was to be out of the open.

The comms tower itself was invisible from here, but the track leading to it was easy to see, a stripe of dirt winding between the trees. Compared to the forest, it looked inviting. *A good place for an ambush*, Straken thought.

'Fan out,' he whispered. 'Flank the trail.'

Slowly, they began to climb. The slope was steep but not so bad that it couldn't be walked. On either side of the path, the Catachans picked their way through the jungle undergrowth, where roots and jagged branches lay like snares under leaves. Forty-five metres in, a venomous snake lunged out from the bole of a tree. Straken snatched it out of the air and crushed its head in his mechanical

fist. He'd known worse on Catachan – all his men had – but that was no reason to be complacent.

As they advanced, the light grew stronger around them. Straken reckoned that they were a third of the way up. Ahead of him, he saw Sergeant Halda taking a bearing, his las-carbine slung over his shoulder.

The air warmed up. Straken felt sweat on the back of his neck, saw condensation on his metal arm. He caught Halda's eye and made a quick set of gestures, using Catachan hunting-signs.

Prey near?

Halda shook his head and made a quick sign back. *I see nothing.*

They kept moving, Straken at the front. Now they were halfway to the comms post. *Any moment now*, Straken thought –

And there it was. A metal tower three times the height of a man, the dome festooned with comms gear. The base was brown with dirt. Creepers stretched halfway up the side, but they were dead. The vegetation around it had been sprayed with the same stuff as the main outpost.

Straken boosted his vision and saw that the door was slightly ajar. A maroon stripe ran down the doorframe. He hoped it was rust but suspected that it was blood.

Cold eyes watched the Guardsmen move through the jungle. They were different prey to the soldiers from the garrison – less afraid, more skilled – but they left traces: tiny sounds, smells, heat-trails that lingered in the lictor's mind. At their head was the human that had injured it earlier: the one with the dead eye that saw and the arm that was not flesh.

The lictor contemplated attacking him. He was worthy prey – his memories, when sucked out of his skull, would be valuable indeed – but he was lethal, even more so than the men around him. Even if he could be killed, his pack would finish the lictor long before it could drain his mind. They knew the tricks of the jungle as much as it did.

No, they were too much to take on alone. But with assistance, they would not last long.

Straken motioned for Halda to stop, then pointed up the slope. The sergeant nodded. His beard made him look feral.

Quickly, Straken crossed over to him, scuttling between the tree trunks and bent down low to hide his silhouette. 'It's near,' Straken whispered. 'Form a

perimeter. I'm going up to check.'

Straken looked back and pointed to Mayne, the vox-operator. 'With me.'

They crept forward, following the path but not on it. Behind them, the Catachans took up positions, watching and waiting.

Straken went first, Mayne following. If the vox-caster set on his back weighed him down, he didn't show it. He was only a few months off Catachan, new to the Imperial Guard but an old hand at surviving. His face looked young, but his eyes were sharp and hard.

The forest ended. 'Cover me,' Straken said.

He tore out of the jungle, raced across the dead ground towards the comms tower. He charged at the door, yanked it open and stormed into the building.

For a moment he stood in the middle of the ground floor, listening, knowing that he was not alone. He looked up and mouths seemed to fall from the roof, a dozen of them, fangs and saliva.

Straken cried out and leaped backwards. They hit the floor with soft thuds, as big as pythons, twisting like worms. Straken jumped back, out of the building. He saw armour plates and endless jaws, reaching blindly for him. A sinuous body flicked out towards him, and he pulled the shotgun up and blew its head off. The decapitated ripper flopped back into the comms tower. Its comrades slithered over its thrashing body.

Straken tore a grenade from his belt, hurled it into the room and slammed the door. Bodies thumped against the other side of the door; something clawed or bit at the metal. Straken tensed his muscles, and a second later the grenade went off. The door kicked against his shoulder, as if the tower was going to burst, and then it was still. Shotgun raised, he looked inside.

The rippers lay in a puddle of ichor like spilled glue, their bodies torn and split. One was not quite dead. It heaved itself towards him, jaws working like a machine. Straken looked at the creature, disgusted and strangely impressed by its determination, and killed it with the heel of his boot.

The tower was a hollow tube. Stairs wound round the edge, leading up.

He strode to the stairs and flicked his shotgun up to cover the stairwell. Then he began to climb, watching the way ahead.

The steps creaked softly under his weight. He climbed quickly, step after step, until he reached a trapdoor in the floor above. Straken paused, pushed the trapdoor open and climbed into the room.

It was circular with a domed roof. Lights glowed against the walls. The comms station looked powered-down, but not dead. Straken quickly checked the

room. His bionic eye took in the roof, the ventilation pipes, even the speaking tube to communicate with the floor below. He found nothing.

Straken returned to the stairwell and called for Mayne.

The vox-trooper ran up to join him. ‘Yes,’ Mayne said, looking over the machinery, ‘it’s down, but getting it going should be fine. Just give me a few minutes.’

‘Work quickly,’ Straken said. ‘This place is too quiet.’

Straken watched the door. Behind him, Mayne muttered to himself, half running commentary, half invocation of the machine-spirits of this place. Straken flexed his fingers. He had never liked waiting: it felt like losing ground.

‘There!’ Mayne said. ‘Easy. It was hardly broken at all – more switched off than anything. Now then,’ he added, reaching out to a console, ‘I should be able to get the viewing dome open...’

A wad of lights flickered on the screen nearest to Straken’s head. It seemed to depict a large object, moving in from the north. ‘Do it,’ he said. ‘*Now.*’

Mayne worked the controls. Inside the walls, machinery rumbled. With a squeal of dry metal, the roof above them opened to the sky. Light flooded in – and silhouetted against the light, something huge and winged. Straken saw a sinuous body, an elongated, crested head, and round cysts racked along its length like bombs.

‘Harpy!’ Straken yelled, as the tyranid dived for the tower. It hit the roof like a hawk on a rabbit. The tower shuddered with the impact.

Straken punched the controls and the dome started to swing closed. ‘Run!’ he shouted, and the vox-trooper shot past him, boots clanging on the metal steps.

The tower rang from a flurry of blows. The dome was almost closed now, but the flying beast rammed a huge claw into the aperture. Straken raced down the stairs as the beast ripped the observation room apart.

He was halfway down the stairs when the harpy screeched. The sound rang through the tower like a hurricane. Straken reeled, nearly losing his footing. He felt as if he had put his head inside a cathedral bell.

Lasguns crackled and spat from outside. Straken reached the doorway and saw the side of the hill erupt in bursts of fire, as if the jungle itself was shooting. Tyranids were pouring in – not from the ground, but from the sky, skimming the treetops on leathery wings.

Mayne stood beside the door, horrified. Straken yelled, ‘Gargoyles! Move it, Guardsman!’

The vox-trooper jolted alert, as if slapped, and shook his head. ‘Yes sir!’

‘Follow me,’ Straken barked, and he ran across the open ground, towards his men.

Gargoyles flew in like thrown darts. Straken heard guns open up behind him. Chunks of earth burst from the ground around him, sizzling with bio-acid. He ran flat out for the trees.

Straken reached the treeline, ducked behind a trunk and fired at the creature perched on top of the comms tower. Mayne rushed at the trees, reached them and threw himself down into cover.

Lasguns punched through the foliage. A gargoyle was hit by half a dozen bursts of laser fire. It dropped spinning out of the sky, corkscrewing down through the jungle canopy like a wrecked fighter plane, to crash dead among the tree trunks. A second gargoyle shot into Guardsman Laka and tore his head off before it was shot apart.

Gunfire thundered out of the outpost. The rest of the Catachans were on the roof firing lasguns and heavy weapons. A mortar team sent bombs sailing up over the treetops, bursting in the canopy. A shell knocked one tyranid straight out of the sky, wings wrapped around it like a broken parasol. The harpy clinging to the comms tower looked round and screeched with what had to be fury. Lasfire hit its throat and face and it pulled back, dropping out of sight behind the comms array.

Straken saw hunched shapes scurry between the trees, shafts of light catching on fangs and armour plate. He lined up a shot and, as an alien slipped out of cover, blasted it. It was thrown onto its back, hissing and kicking. Something struck the tree beside him with a loose, damp thud like wet clay; the next second the trunk crackled and steamed as acid burned through it. A man screamed deeper into the jungle.

‘Fall back!’ Straken shouted. ‘Back to the outpost! Move!’

The team in the outpost kept up a murderous covering fire. Gargoyles crashed down around Straken as his men fell back, the alien bodies falling like meteors. Shards of chitin hit Guardsman Harper in the thigh; he yanked them out and hobbled across the open ground, half-carried by Thorn.

They rushed into the fortress, into the shadow. Straken turned immediately and laid down covering fire, using the doorframe for cover. Others took places beside him, picking off the tyranids as their comrades struggled to outrun the aliens.

‘Move it, Guardsmen!’ Straken yelled. ‘Move, move!’

Men dashed into the outpost like sprinters over the finish line. As they got in they joined their colonel at the door, firing at the enemy.

For all the gunfire, the tyranids took their toll. One monster took a melta-blast in the knee and went down bellowing. For a second it flailed helplessly – and then a weird calm overtook the thing, and it lined up a shot with its bio-weapon. The shot hit one of Straken’s team – Corporal Velasco – in the back of the head and sent him stumbling in a cloud of vile green smoke: moments later he keeled over, his head and right shoulder disintegrated. Another man was snatched from the ground by a flapping monstrosity not twenty yards from safety. ‘Get it!’ Straken cried, pointing, and a storm of lasfire burst around the beast. Two shots from a plasma gun hit the monster and sent it crashing into the earth – but not before it had used its talons to snip its victim in two.

The Catachan ran through the doors. ‘That’s it,’ he gasped.

Men rushed to the firing slits in the lower walls. Straken stayed in the doorway, directing their aim. ‘That’s it – bring it down! Watch your left, Hobbs. Gorrik – you’re aiming too high, damn it. That’s it – give these things some lasfire!’

Slowly, the swarm thinned down. Gargoyles dropped from the sky as if they had hit an invisible wall. Even broken on the ground, they tried to drag themselves towards the outpost.

‘Keep it up!’ Straken bellowed. ‘They’re losing numbers!’

Suddenly, there was nothing left to shoot. The ground outside the outpost was carpeted with broken tyranids, the ground sodden with gargoyle blood. On the roof, men began to cheer. Someone whooped.

Sergeant Halda licked his lips as if he’d just eaten a good meal. ‘Yeah, lads,’ he said, ‘that’s how it’s done.’

A lone gargoyle was trying to crawl towards the outpost. Its legs and tail had been cut to pieces, but it was too enraged to feel pain. Straken stepped out of cover, into the sunlight, and finished it off with a single shotgun blast. Then he walked back inside and hit the door controls. The great doors rumbled shut behind him. Of the thirty men who had gone out to the comms tower, nine had not returned.

As Straken entered the main hall of the outpost, Captain Corris came down the stairs. Lieutenant Dillon followed.

‘Are your men holding up?’ Straken asked.

Corris nodded. ‘Not bad considering. We lost two people to one of those flying devils, and Jenks has got a broken arm. Otherwise, fine.’

Dillon shook his head. ‘I can’t believe it,’ he said. ‘We killed them all!’

‘No,’ Straken replied, ‘There’ll be more. Dillon, have you got any explosives here?’

‘Some. Not very much, colonel.’

‘Alright. Get what you’ve got and bring it down to the front. Corris, I need a squad on detail to fix up the area outside. Mines, tripwire grenades, punji traps, whatever you can do. The xenos’ll be back, and we need to slow them up as much as we can. And get the roof guns reloaded. Now, where’s the tech-priest?’

Dillon pointed. Straken headed off down a long corridor. It sloped down gently, and the feel of the air told him that he was going underground. At the bottom of the corridor, a servitor waited in front of a massive blast-door embossed with the cog-and-skull of the Adeptus Mechanicus. As Straken approached it came to life, swinging a heavy bolter up to cover him.

‘This area is an Adeptus Mechanicus secure research laboratory,’ it grated. ‘Please state your authority and the purpose of your visit here.’

Straken banged his metal fist on the door control. ‘This is Straken. Let me in.’

‘You have no secur—’ the servitor announced.

The speaker by the door controls crackled. ‘Override,’ the magos said. ‘Enter.’

The doors parted. The air that came out tasted of chemicals.

The room was broad and clean. Data scrolls stood in racks. The arm of a large tyrannid hung in a humming stasis tube. A smaller creature lay across a table, partly dissected by a dozen jointed arms. They looked like torture devices.

Magos Bardex stood in front of a bank of screens. Images of blue sky and green foliage appeared on the screens, interspersed with gunfire.

‘Magos?’ Straken said.

‘I am reviewing the vid-caps of the last enemy attack,’ the magos said, not looking round. ‘I’ll need – oh, eighteen minutes.’ He waved his hand at the door. ‘Come and see me then.’

‘The comm-link’s up,’ Straken said. ‘The sooner you can do what you have to, the sooner we can get out of here.’

‘I know. My instruments registered it.’ Bardex turned back to the screens.

‘See to it *now*,’ Straken said. ‘I don’t want any of my men dying because you were too busy to help. And I doubt you want that either. I’m going to vox headquarters. I need you packed and ready to leave the moment the transport arrives.’

Bardex looked round again, and for a moment Straken thought there would be anger there. But the magos’s voice was as calm as ever. ‘Believe me, I’d rather not linger either. This information is much too precious to waste.’

Straken watched him get to work, pulling levers, tapping at keys with his long metal digits. He decided to check that the uplink was being used later on. He wasn't sure what he'd do if the Magos wasted any more time – but he knew that it wouldn't be pretty. He turned and hurried back to his men.

'I put the request through,' Mayne said, shutting down the vox set. 'They say it's been pretty hectic back at base. They think it could take three hours to get over here.'

'Right,' Straken said.

Time passed, but there was no relaxation. The sun hung over the outpost, baking the rockcrete. Straken watched the jungle. He stood on the roof, carefully checking his mechanical arm, knowing that the enemy could return at any time. A servitor lumbered up, carrying a metal box. The magos's research, Straken realised. Hopefully, there wouldn't be too much of it.

Far too much waiting, he thought. It was one thing to be patient when you hunted. To stand around, relying on someone else to get you out of danger – that was different. Had they been able to carry the magos's research, he'd have been happy to cancel the transport and just pick his way back through the jungle. Better to die on the attack than let yourself get taken by surprise.

Half an hour in, something flapped across the horizon and disappeared into the jungle. The tyranids were out of sight, but somehow that made him all the more certain that they were gathering their forces.

One of the Catachan sentries patted a heavy bolter. 'First tyranid out of that jungle is getting half a dozen bolts in the face,' he said, and the man nearest to him chuckled.

No doubt, Straken thought, *but what about the hundredth, or the thousandth? They've tested our defences*, he realised. *Now they know what to expect.*

He had waited too long. Straken hurried down the steps, towards the lab.

This time, the servitor let him in. Straken couldn't see Bardex in the laboratory. He must have been deeper inside the facility.

'Data is eighty-six percent uploaded,' the servitor announced.

Straken looked at the cogitator screens. One flickered with symbols, gibberish too fast to read – Binaric, he supposed, the language of the hierophants of the Machine-God. Another displayed the cog-and-skull emblem of the Adeptus Mechanicus, slowly lightening in colour as the transfer proceeded. The third looked like tech-speak too, but a tiny image in the bottom right corner distracted

him.

It showed a man in a dark uniform running between trees, taken from about 76 yards away. The man was struggling up a slope, and Straken immediately recognised the place as the path to the comms station. That meant that the man was being watched from the main building. Numbers appeared around the man's body, little scraps of data.

Something slipped through the bushes behind him. It was a blur, half-visible, like a trick of the light. But the camera knew that it was there, and tracked its progress towards the soldier. *Why doesn't anyone do something?* Straken thought. *If you know it's there, why not shoot the thing?*

'Servitor, what is this?'

The servitor paused a moment, considering. 'Field research pertaining to assessment of battlefield stress among Guard personnel consequent to prolonged exposure to enemy infiltration.'

Straken watched the man on the screen. He was frantic now, weaving back and forth between the trees, his lasgun brandished before him. Straken had seen that kind of mad fear in hunted animals, and once or twice in men. The jungle did that to you, unless you were prepared. Did the soldier know that he was being watched? Straken doubted it.

'This chapter is entitled *Analysis of Breakdown of Rational Response*,' the servitor added.

Straken scowled. 'I bet it is.'

He found the magos further back in the lab, in a darkened area fenced off by heavy plastek drapes. Bardex was fussing over a terminal, carefully tuning it in. Straken walked straight up and grabbed the man's shoulder with his mechanical hand, not caring whether it was flesh or steel under his grip.

'How many men did you send up that hill?'

'I'm sorry, colonel? That doesn't comp—'

'Simple question. How many?'

Bardex said, 'We have had six formal attempts to repair the communications station. As for patrols—'

'Did you film them?'

Bardex tried to slip out of Straken's way, but he was too clumsy. 'I don't see what you're—'

'Did you film them, when they were getting hunted down and killed?'

The floor shuddered slightly. A low creak came from the wall struts.

Bardex was silent for a second. Then he said, ‘The purpose of my research has been to find out how long our forces could realistically hold out against the threat of tyranid attack. This facility is, in effect, a microcosm. The psychological effect of one or two highly-dangerous organisms on this small garrison can be compared to the long-term effects of an entire tyranid army on our own forces.’

‘So you let them die.’

‘They were a study group, colonel. Better a few controlled losses than a major depletion of resources.’

‘And did you tell them that?’

‘Of course not.’

‘I didn’t think so.’ Straken shook his head. ‘Maybe *I* should.’

A rumble ran through the room, more a sensation than a noise. For half a second the magos and the colonel glared at each other.

‘Tyranids,’ Straken said.

Magos Bardex nodded. The rumbling came again, a low ripple of noise, and under it something even more ominous: the sound of cracking rockcrete.

‘They’re *under* us,’ the magos whispered.

The lights went dead. The room shook. The walls and ceiling groaned. Straken strode to the comms array and grabbed at the vox-thief. ‘Attention all troopers! This is Straken. Prepare for immediate attack!’ He turned to the magos. ‘Where else could they get in?’

‘The drainage pipes, maybe,’ Bardex replied. Something hit the corner of the room from underneath. A set of shelves collapsed. Specimen jars shattered and rolled. ‘But there are steel grilles blocking the way.’

‘They’ll tear through them. Then the big ones’ll just drill straight through the foundations.’ Straken strode to the door. ‘Finish the upload. Now!’

Straken reached the main hall. Men milled around, alert but not knowing where to look. A Catachan stepped back from one of the viewing slits. ‘Nothing there!’ he announced.

‘Full alert, Guardsmen!’ Straken barked. ‘They may be trying to tunnel through. I want one team on each—’

Something crashed to the east wing. Gunfire cracked and rattled. A man shouted: ‘The mess-room! They’re getting in!’

Straken rushed through the mess-room door. The air was full of dust. There was a great hole in the floor of the common room, and tables and chairs had fallen into it. Beside the hole, a long-bodied creature thrashed in its death-throes as four soldiers pumped gunfire into its chest. It was like a mixture of snake, centipede and tyranid warrior, and its tail battered the walls and floor.

A head appeared at the edge of the hole, then broad, spade-shaped claws, and a second tunneller began to haul itself free. Straken ran forward, raised his gun and blasted it full in the face. It dropped back, screeching. He tore a grenade free to toss down the hole, and something smashed into the back of his legs.

Straken's back slammed against the ground. The wounded tyranid tried to pull itself towards him, despite the half-dozen oozing wounds in its chest. A Catachan ran in and stabbed it from behind. The grenade rolled across the floor.

Desperately, Straken lunged for the grenade. His metal fingers met the steel casing, and he flicked his hand out, knocking the bomb away. The grenade skidded along the ground, bounced once and dropped down the hole.

A second later there was a wet, loud crack, and scraps of bio-armour spattered the ceiling. Straken scrambled upright.

He strode into the main hall as the guns on the roof began to fire. 'They're coming from underground!' he yelled.

Suddenly, the outpost was full of noise. The floor of the lavatoria collapsed in a rush of broken tiles and men poured las-fire into the burrowing things as they tried to crawl out. One burst free in the mess-room and slaughtered three men before Sergeant Pharranis shot it point-blank in the head with his plasma gun. Straken directed teams of men to the roof, to the firing-slits, to kill the creatures breaking in from below.

Five Catachans were reinforcing the front gate, heaping junk and furniture across the doors. Straken ripped the door controls out with his metal hand. Screams came from one of the bunkrooms, followed by the dull boom of grenades.

In a side-room, a row of troopers stood at the wall, their lasguns blazing out of the firing-slits. The ground collapsed behind them as Straken entered the room. One man – Guardsman Thawn – slipped into the hole, and immediately shrieked through a mouthful of blood. Straken grabbed Thawn's arm and pulled him free – but only his upper half came out. They threw frag grenades into the hole.

Corris ran in. His face was white with dust, a long cut livid against his scalp. 'Colonel, we've lost the south hall. The floor caved in under the firing-slit.

Nobody got out – it’s full of filthy xenos now.’ The sergeant shook his head. ‘Emperor! This place is falling out from under us.’

Straken nodded. The ground floor was lost. To stay there any longer would allow the tyranids to overrun not only the lower building, but its defenders. There was bravery, and then there was suicide. ‘Get everyone upstairs. We’ll take ’em higher up.’

‘Sir – maybe – if a few of us stayed to hold them back–’

‘No. Now get up the stairs, captain – that’s an order!’

The men rushed up the steps, stopping on the landing. Two other Catachans were attaching a frag mine to the main doors. *Not long*, Straken thought.

Bardex’s Guard servitor lumbered into view. Its integral gun hummed. ‘Xenos presence detected,’ it announced.

‘You don’t say,’ Straken muttered. He tore open an emergency box on the wall, unpinned a grenade and wedged it beside the pressurised fire suppressor, so that anything brushing past would dislodge it. ‘Move it, soldiers,’ he called at the doors, and the men finished their work and hurried past him, up the staircase.

The servitor took up a position facing the door. ‘Enemy intrusion imminent.’

Soldiers crowded in on the landing, kneeling and standing, ready to cover whatever came from below. Straken ran up to the roof.

He kicked the door open and was in a scene of mayhem. Huge flying tyranids swooped and wheeled like heraldic beasts. Men filled the roof, their las-beams cutting the sky. The air was so thick with gunfire that Straken could hardly hear the screams of the tyranids as they were blown apart. But that was a distraction compared to the armoured wave that rushed from the jungle. Catachans manned the mounted guns, struggling to stem the tide. Bullets ripped tyranids apart, blew them into pulped flesh and shards of armour. The aliens crawled when they could no longer run, until their comrades trampled them. In the middle of the horde came the warriors, using the advance as cover, taking careful shots with bio-guns.

On the very top of the building, Sergeant Halda held the banner of the Catachan II aloft in his left fist, firing an autogun with his right. Xenos blood splattered his bare chest and unkempt beard. He looked like a madman.

Good, Straken thought.

A pile of metal boxes stood nearby; four Catachans were using them for cover. Straken paused, seeing the cog-and-skull symbol on the side of the crates. Did the magos intend to take all of those back? They’d barely fit in the transport.

Something swooped down from above. Straken dropped, fired his shotgun into

the thing's belly as it rushed overhead, pumped the gun, fired again and the flying tyranid screeched. It dropped out of the sky and ploughed into its comrades, rolling end over end.

Straken got up in time to see a bio-shell hit the soldier manning the melta-turret. The man staggered back in a cloud of spitting, hissing smoke, put his hands to his face and suddenly they were melting too. He fell, his head liquidised.

'Any news on the transport?' Straken yelled at Mayne.

Mayne hunched over the vox. 'I can't get a clear message, sir. They're – sounds like they're on the way...'

A figure appeared on the stairs. Metal glinted through ripped red cloth. The magos pushed his way past the defenders, onto the roof. 'The upload is complete, colonel.' He gestured at the crates. 'My preparations are complete.'

'Magos,' Straken shouted back. 'That junk won't all fit in the transport. Not when my men are in there.'

'Well, make room.'

'Like hell I wi–'

A great crash from below shook the front of the outpost. Straken ran to the parapet.

Below, a huge beast lumbered forward, shots pattering off its armour. It grabbed the doorframes with gigantic pincers and rammed its tusked head into the main doors. Straken rushed over to the melta turret. He swung the multi-melta on its mounting and blasted the alien in the flank. It turned and roared at him.

'Yeah,' he shouted, 'Come on!'

The monster opened its mouth again, and Straken lined up the shot. *Straight down your ugly neck*, he thought, and then he saw the extra rows of teeth, the bony plates rubbing together in its oesophagus.

Screamer-killer! Straken leaped aside. A ball of bio-plasma erupted from the monster's throat, into the sky. It clipped the multi-melta, reducing it to slag. Heat seared Straken's side.

Below, the front door burst open. Soldiers tossed grenades into the stairwell as the tyranids pressed inside. Lieutenant Dillon died like a hero, bellowing curses in the patois of his home world. Guardsman Tayt leaned around the parapet to get a better shot and was riddled with borer larvae like bullets from an autogun.

Alien corpses piled up around the front entrance, but now that the tyranids were inside, it was only a matter of time.

Magos Bardex saw them fall. It really was quite remarkable, he thought, how ferociously men could fight when their lives depended on it: even the last few Massadarians, exhausted as they were, battled to the last. Perhaps it would be necessary to amend his conclusions on the depletion of morale. It certainly was a new variable to consider—

He detected the lictor half a second too late. It speared him as it climbed over the parapet. The alien lifted him flailing off the ground, twisted round like a shot putter and hurled the magos off the roof, into the thrashing mass of claws below.

The southern wall of the outpost began to collapse. Straken ran to the stairs and fired into the tyranids as they rushed into the building until his shotgun was dry. Then he tossed a pair of frag grenades down and reloaded, his metal hand a blur as it pushed fresh shells into his gun.

Corris staggered over. ‘The magos is dead,’ he called. ‘If we don’t get out soon... Colonel, look!’

He pointed. Straken looked up. A dark speck sank towards the horizon, growing as it came, and instead of alien flesh, he saw steel. The transport!

‘Let’s go,’ Straken cried. The ground lurched under his boots. ‘Corris, get your people in first. Everyone else, covering fire!’

Corris glanced at the heap of crates. Bardex’s servitor stood twitching beside them, mind-locked by the death of its master.

‘Forget the damn boxes,’ Straken shouted. ‘Get your people in!’

The transport swung down low. Tyranid gunfire spattered against its armour, pitting and corroding the sides like accelerated rust. The rear door dropped open like a drawbridge.

The first squad ran for the door while the others covered them. Men fell back from the stairwell, firing as they came. One of Pharranis’s squad was hit and staggered about, spraying the roof with las-fire before he collapsed. A stray las-shot clipped Mayne’s thigh and he fell down, cursing.

Halda’s men were next into the ship, the sergeant last to join them. He brandished the banner at the xenos, shook his fist and climbed inside.

And then it was Straken’s turn. He fired as the first tyranids climbed over the parapet, blasting a few of them back. His soldiers rushed past him. The roar of the engines was almost unbearable. He climbed up onto the ramp and looked back for one last glimpse of Outpost H-93, before it was overrun.

He saw one Catachan still down there. It was Mayne, the vox-trooper, lying on his back with a lascarbine in his hands, blazing away at the tyranids as they

swarmed over the wall.

Straken looked at Corris. 'Cover me,' he said.

Straken jumped off the ramp. He dashed across what was left of the roof, the rockcrete seeming to fall apart under his boots. Hunter-slayers poured out of the stairwell.

Shots flew out of the back of the transport, throwing the aliens back. Head down, Straken raced towards the parapet, to where Mayne lay. The Guardsman raised a hand and Straken grabbed it and heaved him upright. Half-carrying, half-dragging the man, Straken started back towards the transport. Las shots flew around him; tyranids hissed and screeched.

Corris ran down the ramp and hauled Mayne on board.

'Nice work,' Straken said. 'Now let's go.'

Something jumped onto the end of the ramp. It was a blur in Straken's bionic eye, a multi-armed shape that seemed to be as much mist as solid. But he still turned, threw up his metal arm and felt his fingers close around invisible armour.

Straken clenched his fist and chitin cracked and splintered under it. The lictor appeared, no longer needing to be camouflaged, and lunged.

Straken shoved the shotgun into its chest and fired. The lictor stumbled, teetered on the edge and fell. It dropped into the swarm of alien bodies and was lost to view.

The transport pulled up and turned for home. Outpost H-93 was gone. It collapsed as the tyranids overwhelmed it, and disappeared beneath the swarm.

The transport rumbled around them: beneath it, the jungle canopy was like a deep green sea.

Straken leaned back against the wall and allowed his breathing to slow. Opposite, Corris sat with his eyes closed, sleeping, maybe, or at prayer. Mayne rooted through the medical kit. Sergeant Pharranis took out a flask, took a deep swig and offered it around.

The transport lurched. Halda swore. Further inside, men muttered. The flyer righted itself, but the roar of the engines was thinner now, and the shaking of the hold had become worse. Then Straken felt it, the slow churning in his gut that told him that they had started to descend.

The vox crackled. 'Bad news, Guardsmen. We've taken damage. We're going to crash-land. I'll try to put us down safely, but we'll be back in the jungle.'

Cursing, the Catachans came back to life. They sat up straighter, checked their weapons and put flasks and ration bars away. People muttered and readied

themselves for the world outside.

‘Back in the jungle, eh?’ Straken said. He smiled. ‘I thought you said it was *bad* news.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A trained legal professional, in his spare time TOBY FROST enjoys writing science fiction for Black Library and other publishers. *Straken* is his first novel set in the grim dark future of the 41st millennium.



Plucked from a catastrophic war against the monstrous tyrannids, Colonel 'Iron Hand' Straken and his Catachan Jungle Fighters are sent to the cavern world of Dulma'lin to clear it of an ork infestation.

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