

WARHAMMER
40,000

AN IMPERIAL KNIGHTS SHORT STORY

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DEFIANT
ANDY CLARK



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Andy Clark

Jennika Tan Draconis marched her Knight, *Fire Defiant*, along a rubble-strewn street. A lance of House Draconis Knights followed in tight formation. The flickering runes on her strategic overlay showed more Adrastapolian war engines striding down parallel roadways, guarding the flanks of her advance. In the wake of each lance came a Sacristan Crawler; the heavy vehicles crunched over debris and wreckage on their armoured balloon tyres.

Towering saints looked down upon the Knights as they passed, their sombre features wrought in marble, their hollow eyes doleful. Each statue stood taller than a Warlord Titan. They lined the primary roadways of Pyrodiah's capital hive, Castigorum, in their hundreds. The cowed stone giants flanked every gothic hab-block and reliquary-manufactorium, palpable reminders that Imperial judgement was omnipresent.

Jennika found herself stiffening beneath their regard on several occasions, her jaw clenching. She wondered if it was because of Donatos, and the aftermath of all that had transpired there.

'Status check, sires and ladies,' she voxed on her lance's closed channel.

'Hale and ready, my lady,' replied Sire Dyros and Lady Elayn Dar Draconis, almost in unison.

'Bellicose, my lady,' said Sire Jaekeb Dar Draconis with relish.

'Rein in that draconsfire, Sire Jaekeb,' said Jennika. 'This is a live warzone, not a tilting field. You are one of my lance, now act like it.'

'Yes, my lady,' replied the young Knight, sounding unrepentant.

'Necrons should not be underestimated, Jaekeb,' said Sire Dyros.

‘They’re implacable, undying, and everything we’ve seen of them during this war suggests powers and weapons we cannot begin to comprehend.’

‘With respect, sire, they didn’t appear undying at Piety’s Mount,’ said Jaekeb. ‘They emerged from their tunnels and we crushed them underfoot like rock-roaches.’

‘Piety’s Mount was a skirmish, Jaekeb,’ said Jennika. ‘The Sacristans believe those necrons had just awakened. They were disorientated, unsupported. You weren’t at Furia Fields, or the defence of Daebyn’s Shrine.’

‘No, my lady. I was not,’ replied Jaekeb.

Jennika heard his resentment, but chose to ignore it. She understood his burning need for glory. She had felt it once herself. But a ruthless war like this wasn’t the time or place for a warrior who had just Become to begin weaving his tapestry.

The war for Pyrodiah had been raging for months before they even arrived, and had only escalated after the drop keeps of Adrastapol rained down. Jennika’s Knights had succeeded in stemming the tide of android aliens that spilled up from below, and had rescued the planet’s defenders from annihilation. Yet despite their success, the fighting had been fierce and casualties were steep among the Pyrodiahn defence force and the Knights themselves.

As First Knight of Adrastapol, she had ensured the fiercest fighting fell to her more veteran warriors, rather than those recently Become. Logically, she knew this was in order to secure victory. Yet in her more introspective moments, she questioned whether it was also because she recognised elements of her younger brother Danial, as he had been on Donatos, in each of them.

Before the crown.

Before their father fell.

Scowling, Jennika expanded the vox to address her entire force, which comprised four lances – all the Knights that had been operating with her when the message was received that Governor Beatifica needed rescuing. With necron anti-aircraft weaponry rumbling up from the depths all over the city, aerial extraction was no longer an option. If Jennika’s Knights could not complete this mission, nobody would.

‘First Knight to all lances,’ said Jennika. ‘Maintain shield discipline and

keep a weather eye on your auspexes. Stay alert for any sign of tectonic activity. Remember, this enemy can emerge from underground, or even from thin air, and their weapons will flay you and your steeds down to sparking metal and red flesh.'

'Thank you, Lady Jennika,' came Sire Olphrec's blunt reply from the head of the westernmost lance. 'Dracon knows we've all fought the necrons recently enough, eh? Needn't coddle us, my lady.'

Jennika's eyes narrowed. Olphrec had stayed just on the right side of propriety since the campaign began, but his every utterance seemed expertly calculated to test her authority.

'A complacent pilot is a chink in his steed's armour,' said Jennika, the sharpness of her own tone irritating her. 'Just keep your eyes open and your weapons ready.'

Maintain calm and dignity in all things, whispered a voice from her throne. *That, or settle the matter on the duelling field*, said another, fiercer ghost. *Olphrec dishonours himself*, came a third voice, a dry old echo. *He is beneath you*. Yet Jennika noted that even amongst the ghosts of her throne, some voices murmured quietly together beyond the range of her thoughts, and she couldn't help but wonder if they sympathised with him. House Draconis had become more progressive under High King Danial's rule, but Jennika's appointment to First Knight was still unique for her gender.

There were those who did not approve.

Before Olphrec could engage in further barbs, a rune lit in Jennika's peripheral vision. It signified a priority vox-hail from Deathwatch Captain Azkarael. She answered it with a blink-click, opening a hardened channel.

'*First Knight*,' said Azkarael.

'Captain Azkarael,' replied Jennika.

'*Status?*' asked the Dark Angel.

'We are less than half a mile from the governor's compound,' said Jennika. 'No direct resistance thus far, though strategic auspex suggests that the Mordian Iron Guard are being hammered from coordinates eight-one-four through five-five-one.'

'*Make haste*,' said Azkarael, and Jennika heard the thump and thunder of boltgun fire in the background. '*We will penetrate the inner tomb complex within the next ten minutes. We will then plant and prime the purgator*

warheads. The governor must be clear of the primary engagement area before they detonate. Segmentum command require her to be fully debriefed in order to determine why this war had become such a debacle before your arrival. Beatifica has much to answer for.'

'I am aware, captain. You already informed me that the entire hive will collapse into the resultant pit,' said Jennika. 'We are Knights of Adrastapol, oath-sworn to see our duty done. Rest assured, it will be done.'

'Just so,' said Azkarael. '*Brother Shorrgath will transmit a three-minute alert prior to final detonation.*'

'Understood,' said Jennika. 'Good hunting, captain.'

'*Emperor go with you,*' replied Azkarael before breaking the vox-link.

Jennika's eyes darted skywards as a pair of necron fighter craft screamed overhead, spiralling in a lethal dogfight with a trio of Imperial Thunderbolts. As she watched, one of the Imperial craft took a direct hit, green fire leaping from the necrons' guns to tear away its tail assembly. The fighter hit a marble saint, decapitating the statue in a ball of flame. The remaining craft swept on, vanishing between crumbling hab-stacks. Jennika shook her head grimly and increased power to her steed's motive actuators.

'This war has already cost too much,' she murmured. 'We won't lose the governor as well.'

Governor Beatifica ruled from a structure that was half cathedrum, half fortress, stood proud upon a hill at the city's heart. The open square around the fortress was thick with penitent-poles, the cadavers of the unfaithful hanging from them like rotted fruit.

Through the macabre forest strode rank upon rank of necrons, advancing in eerie lockstep as they fired glowing green energies at the fortress' walls. Weaponised pyramids and gun-barges hovered above the necron foot-troops, annihilating chunks of the gothic battlements with every blast. The fortress' batteries fired back, stitching the invaders with shells and sowing volleys of explosions amongst their lines.

Jennika's lance emerged into the square from the shadow cast by a pair of marble saints holding scythes and scrying orbs. Lances Olphrec, Kathaine and Godfyr walked from the adjoining streets with ground-shaking steps. Runes lit Jennika's strategic overlay, her warriors indicating readiness and

requesting permission to let fly.

‘Lady Kathaine, halt and commence suppressing fire,’ ordered Jennika. ‘My lance, we push on to the gate. Olphrec, Godfyr, you have the flanks. Concentrate on their war engines, but don’t allow their infantry to mass against you. You’ve witnessed what those gauss flayers can do in large numbers.’

‘We all saw what happened to Sire Tylen when his lance was left over-extended,’ said Olphrec. Jennika gritted her teeth, rising above the old Knight’s implication. Runes of assent flashed back from the rest of her force, though she noted that they came slower from Olphrec’s lance.

Jennika fed power to her steed, swinging her ion shield up with practised ease and aiming her battle cannon with twitches of her haptic gauntlets. She felt her mother’s claw-ring tight around one finger, becoming conscious of it as she always did when she entered battle. As ever, Jennika swore to her mother’s memory that she would not dishonour her this day.

‘The necrons haven’t spotted us yet,’ said Sire Jaekeb.

‘Don’t be foolish, lad,’ said Sire Dyros. ‘How could they miss thirteen giants charging at them from behind? The xenos scum will turn their fury on us the moment we’re in optimal range. They won’t bother with us until then.’

‘Let us exploit their arrogance,’ said Jennika. ‘All lances, unshroud and unleash.’

She clenched and punched one haptic gauntlet. Her steed responded, its rapid-fire battle cannon spitting a pair of shells at the foe. The first clipped a necron gun-barge, overloading its shielding in a shower of sparks. The second slammed into it a second later, detonating the macabre engine and flattening the necrons around it.

‘Fine shot, my lady!’ cried Sire Dyros, adding his Warden’s fire to hers. Even as the necrons tried to stagger, burning, to their feet, Dyros’ avenger gatling cannon sent shells ripping through their ranks. His shooting dismembered metal bodies and caused a wall of xenos to vanish in crackling clouds of green lightning.

Fresh fire blossomed amidst the necron lines as Lady Kathaine’s Knights launched another salvo. Rockets streaked in on tails of flame, causing one of the war pyramids to shudder and drop from the sky as explosions wracked its metal flanks. Detonations marched through the necron lines as

the Knights unleashed their fury. Dozens of alien warriors and more than half of their war machines were annihilated in the opening bombardment.

'By His will, witness the ironclad goliaths of the Emperor as they stride to battle!' came a rapturous female voice, blaring through Jennika's vox and causing her to almost miss her stride.

'Vox discipline,' she barked. 'Who in Throne's name is this?'

'The shriven!' cried the woman. *'The chaste! The repentant and the prepared!'*

'Who is this lunatic?' spat Lady Elayn over the zealous tirade.

'No idea,' replied Jennika. 'Sacristans, isolate and cloak that channel. I can hardly hear my own throne.'

The voice vanished a heartbeat later as the Sacristans followed her orders. As it did, Jennika saw the enemy were turning to address them.

'Shields,' she barked, before a maelstrom of lurid green energies lashed the Knights. *Fire Defiant* juddered around her as its ion shield flared again and again. Warning runes flashed across her controls as stray shots bypassed her ion barrier to scour away strips of adamantium and plasteel. The merest touch of the necrons' weaponry could flay layers of metal from a Knight's hull before flensing the vital systems beneath, and Jennika winced as she saw damage reports scroll across her lance manifolds.

'Draconis!' roared Sire Olphrec. His Knight Gallant, *Imperator Incendus*, charged through the firestorm. The Knights of his lance followed, Errants and Gallants scattering penitent-poles with every stride. Thermal cannons thundered and another necron pyramid listed sideways with glowing holes bored through its hull. As Jennika watched, the machine's metallic skin tried to flow in to patch the catastrophic wounds. Olphrec smashed it into the ground with a clubbing blow of his thunderstrike gauntlet and the pyramid detonated, driving Olphrec's steed back, green lightning leaping out to turn nearby necrons to glowing particles.

The rest of the lance drove home their attack, punching a hole in the necron lines. At the same time, Godfyr's lance tore into the xenos' right flank and began to roll it up with ferocious vigour. Jennika saw her moment.

'My lance, on to the gate,' she ordered, stomping *Fire Defiant* through the necrons before her. Android bodies crunched beneath her Knight's footfalls, twitching their last before fading eerily from sight. Dyros and

Elayn followed close on her heels, while Jaekeb brought up the rear, firing his Errant's thermal cannon.

'Die, you xenos filth!' he bellowed. 'For Adrastapol and the Golden Throne!'

'Discipline, Sire Jaekeb,' said Jennika. 'Get back in formation before you expose us to enfilading fire.'

'Hah. Give 'em the draconsfire, lad!' came Olphrec's voice.

'Sire Olphrec, attend to your own lance and remember the damned code chivalric, sir,' said Jennika icily. A rune flashed back from Olphrec by way of reply. Too dismissive by half, she thought. Too disrespectful. Words would be had.

Firing her guns into the necrons that still swarmed the roadway, Jennika pressed on towards the fortress' gates. The xenos firestorm was slackening, and even as she watched, the surviving enemy began to fade like a mirage.

'They're... retreating?' said Lady Elayn.

'A close enough approximation, if unsettling,' said Jennika. She halted *Fire Defiant* before the gilded gates of the governor's fortress. Necron fire had abraded whatever inscriptions and carvings the gates had once borne, but they still made for a tall and imposing bulwark.

'This is Jennika Tan Draconis, First Knight of House Draconis and ranking Crusade Commander of Adrastapol,' she voxed, sending her voice winging out across the primary Imperial command channels. 'I am oathed with the evacuation of Governor Juliandros Beatifica as a matter of the utmost urgency, upon the direct orders of Imperial segmentum command. Besieging forces are eliminated, and I would request the governor present herself immediately that we may escort her to safety.'

Burbling servitor voices responded to Jennika's summons, chattering confirmation signals to her throne mechanicum while choral music swelled through her vox-pickups. With a boom of disengaged locking bolts, the gates swung ponderously inwards. Beyond was revealed a grand processional that led away into the fortress, flanked by brass witch-scourging cages and huge gothic braziers. Lined up along the processional, Jennika saw ranks of Crusaders clad in flak-tabards and hooded helms, shields and blades held ready.

The holy warriors escorted a convoy of three bizarre armoured transports.

Resting on super-heavy track units that were each as large as a Sacristan Crawler, the vehicles resembled elaborately decorated reliquaries. Their armoured flanks were thick with bone, skulls, gilt and layers of purity seals. Jutting from the prow of each was a huge cage of banded iron. Jennika's eyes widened as she realised that within the strange prows were screaming, thrashing people. Several dozen within each cage were lashed to iron poles, their bruised and bleeding features showing the evidence of recent and violent treatment. Even as she watched, flame units lit with a deafening hiss, sending jets of fire leaping amongst the bound prisoners. Their screams rose to frantic shrieks as their flesh and ragged robes caught alight. Jennika recognised with a surge of nausea that those robes bore the sigils of the governor's own household.

'What in the name of—' she began, before her audio-intakes resounded with the same strident voice that the Sacristans had blocked minutes earlier.

'Lady Jennika, your arrival is as the Emperor wills. Praise be. My retinue and I welcome you with an offering of penitence and punishment.'

Magnifying her vid-feed, Jennika's gaze landed on a robed figure stood before an auto-shrine atop the lead transport. Tall and gaunt, with intense eyes burning above a vox-grille vocal augment, the woman bore an aquila tattoo across her shaved scalp. She was flanked by a pair of cowled figures who toted long-barrelled flamers, and a cluster of hunched servitors hovered behind her, bearing censers and holy pennants.

Jennika switched to her Knight's vox-emitter. 'Madam governor?' she asked.

'Thus has the almighty Emperor appointed me, that I might correct the sins of my people,' said the woman, voice blaring from her augment with steely fervour. *'You have come at the hour of the final judgement, Lady Jennika. The city burns. Let us go forth now without pride or fear, and if death be the Emperor's will, then let us welcome it.'*

'Well,' voxed Sire Dyros over a private channel. 'This should make matters interesting...'

As the governor's procession flowed down from the gates of her fortress, Jennika organised her Knights into a mobile defensive perimeter. Sire Godfyr's lance took rearguard, following the transports and marching

Crusaders across the square. Olphrec and Kathaine's lances took the flanks, while Jennika led her warriors to the front of the procession, studiously trying to ignore the burning, twitching figures borne along by the governor's transports. Greasy smoke boiled from the burning bodies, raising a telltale column above their position.

'If the enemy wasn't aware that we were coming before, they certainly are now,' commented Lady Kathaine.

'We're hardly unobtrusive, my lady,' said Jennika. 'Just keep your eyes open for trouble.'

As she fed power to *Fire Defiant's* actuators, Jennika switched back to the governor's vox-channel and muttered the third benediction of encrypting in case the enemy should be trying to listen in.

'Madam governor, we are to escort your column to beachhead seven on the western outskirts of the city. We will follow the primary western processional through the Kolchan District until we reach the Mordian piquet. The Aeronautica have a bulk lander waiting there to bear you to safety, and thence to your debriefing with segmentum command. Please follow our lead, and I swear upon my honour we will see you evacuated before the bombs detonate.'

'*Do as you will, Lady Jennika,*' replied Beatifica, her tone strangely knowing.

'I... Madam governor, would it not be safer for you to ride *within* your transport?' asked Jennika. 'We are likely to encounter stiff enemy resistance before reaching the Mordian beachhead. It will be easier to protect you if you take proper shelter.'

She saw the governor begin to shake, and her thoughts leapt to some malignant weapon or influence of the enemy. After a moment, Jennika realised that Beatifica was *laughing*.

'*Your devotion to the Throne does you credit, First Knight,*' said the governor. '*But you have not been listening. We stand now in the eye of the Emperor's judgement. The blade of death hangs over us all, held in His almighty hand. For the sins of my people, this world has been found wanting. For their lack of faith shall we all be judged, and only those who are truly worthy shall be found righteous.*'

Jennika felt weariness tug at her as she listened to the governor preach.

'Madam governor, your people are already dying for you,' she said,

striving to keep her tone respectful. ‘Thousands of Mordian Iron Guard have marched to their deaths in diversionary attacks, so we might have a clear run to extract you. More are falling in battle this second to evacuate the citizenry you swore to protect.’

‘*Sinners!*’ said the governor, cold and matter-of-fact. ‘*All sinners. Them, you, even I, all of us are ridden with sin. Only the Emperor can redeem us, Lady Jennika, and He is not forgiving.*’

Jennika held back her anger at the fanatic’s contempt for her subjects.

‘Just have your drivers follow my orders, madam governor,’ she said. ‘I have sworn an oath. I will see it fulfilled.’

Jennika cut the vox-link on Beatifica’s renewed mirth. She shook her head, feeling something akin to despair. What was the sense of it all? So many lives lost on Pyrodiah. On Donatos. On every world she’d ever fought on. And for what? For the sake of callous maniacs and despots like Beatifica?

‘What’s the use of chivalry and honour when its sacrifice is frittered away by the likes of her?’ she said.

We fight for the Emperor, Lady Jennika, whispered a voice from her throne. It sounded like old Baron Hoxley, as pious an incumbent as her throne had ever known. *Everything we do serves Him in the end.*

‘Yes, but what she does, she does in the Emperor’s name also,’ muttered Jennika. Half her attention was on the strategic overlay, the conversations of her comrades, the statues and buildings flowing past as her Knight strode along the processional. The rest she turned inwards, letting her ghosts speak.

The Emperor is not responsible for the ways in which we practise our faith, whispered Hoxley’s voice. *That burden falls to each one of us. In this instance, it is no wonder that her world has suffered so, or that her masters wish to speak with her so urgently...*

‘There must be more than that,’ Jennika said, surprised by the edge of desperation she heard in her voice. She was suddenly glad to be wrapped in the ironclad sanctum of her steed. ‘I am here on the orders of my brother, the High King. Do I, then, lay these deaths and tragedies at his feet instead?’

It is your duty to serve the High King of Adrastapol, hissed another voice. *You serve your brother as you served your father before him, my lady. But*

it is a weak flicker of the draconsfire indeed that blames their liege for the deaths of those under their command.

‘I have spent my life serving my brother,’ said Jennika. ‘Ever since our mother... Ever since he lost his mother, I have been one to him, then his protector, his counsellor, now his First Knight. And he has always needed me, always been grateful, but...’ She cut herself off.

We all have duties, my lady, sighed a third voice, female and ancient. *And duty should be enough for any Knight.*

‘What if it isn’t any more?’ asked Jennika. Her words fell flat within her empty cockpit. Her ghosts lapsed into silence. Her heart thumped with the shock of her own words. Her thoughts whirled.

‘My lady,’ came the voice of Sire Dyros, breaking the deafening silence. ‘The necrons!’

Jennika snapped her attention back to her controls, drinking in the data from her strategic manifold. She felt ice fill her chest as she saw the concentration of enemy forces closing in on their position. This was no time for a crisis of faith. There was only time to fight, fulfil her oaths, and attempt to survive.

The primary western processional was thick with necrons. Even from half a mile away, Jennika could see a xenos structure that had erupted from the roadway. Glowing portals rippled in it like quicksilver, and more and more alien androids spilled from them to join the blockade. Numerous hovering war engines accompanied the mass of xenos infantry, while spectral figures flitted and writhed around their flanks.

‘Jennika Tan Draconis to beachhead seven command,’ voxed Jennika. ‘Beachhead seven command, do you receive? Heavy enemy presence is blocking our route to your position. Engagement will prove costly, potentially untenable. Please advise.’

She repeated her hail, but heard only static. Jennika cursed.

‘My lady, orbital augury suggests the beachhead is beset,’ voxed Lady Kathaine. ‘Our best bet is to reroute through coordinates five-six-six and aim for beachhead five. Reports suggest they’re still receiving evacuees.’

‘No,’ said Jennika. ‘I will not lead death to hapless evacuees for the sake of a self-destructive zealot.’

None may judge me but the Emperor Himself,’ cried Governor Beatifica,

and Jennika's gut twisted at the madness she heard in the woman's voice. *'Forward now in this glorious hour! Forward unto judgement!'*

To Jennika's disbelief, the governor's convoy accelerated, their blackened prows trailing ashes as they lurched around her Knights and made for the necron lines. The Crusaders ran with them, raising a mighty cheer.

'Governor, stop! Halt now or we will fire upon your convoy!' the First Knight boomed through her steed's vox-emitter.

'We can't afford to get mired in a pitched battle now,' said Sire Dyros. 'We must reroute around this blockade before the three-minute warning comes through or we'll all perish.'

'We can punch through the enemy,' exclaimed Jaekeb eagerly. 'A glorious charge to carry the governor to safety. They are no match for Knights!'

'Damn it, Lady Jennika. Orders!' barked Sire Olphrec. 'Are we to just watch that ridiculous woman rush to her death? We need to push up and support her or we'll all be damned as honourless cowards.'

For the briefest of instants, Jennika froze. All the anger, the frustration and despair that had been brewing inside her threatened to choke her. She saw the governor rushing to her own demise; all she could think of was her father's Knight, crippled but defiant, vanishing into a curtain of falling rain and tumbling rubble as he made his own, selfish exit rather than face the betrayal of his oldest comrade.

'My lance, forward,' barked Sire Olphrec. 'Leave it to the old men of House Draconis to preserve our honour!'

The Knights of Lance Olphrec accelerated into a pounding run, straight towards the necrons. Jennika was shocked from her paralysis as Sire Jaekeb broke ranks and followed.

'Jaekeb!' she snapped.

'Duty and honour, my lady,' he replied, before cutting his vox-link. His defiance made fury flare, and in an instant the draconsfire burned away her shock and dismay.

Necron ranging shots were falling amongst the governor's procession. Clouds of emerald energy crackled skywards as explosions turned Crusaders to ash. Bolts of fire battered the transports, causing them to rock on their tracks and flames to billow from their innards. More shots hammered the advancing Knights, splashing from their shields.

As she saw the situation spiralling towards catastrophe, revelation hit Jennika like a thunderbolt. She wasn't here to fight for Governor Beatifica, or her brother – much as she loved him – or even the Emperor on high. She had spent her life fighting for those she cherished and served, those to whom she felt duty bound. But now she knew she was here for herself – for the only woman ever to become First Knight of Adrastapol, for the warrior she was, who sought victory over every enemy fool enough to stand before her.

With a thought, she triggered a mass-inload of auspex data, the strengths of her forces and of the enemy, the orbital auguries and their telltale strategic signs. Her neural jacks shimmered with heat and she gritted her teeth through the overload as she processed information at a ferocious rate, and formulated a plan.

'Lady Kathaine, your lance, all fire on the necron architecture,' she ordered. 'Eliminate those portals then turn your guns on the enemy war engines.'

'*At once, my lady,*' voxed Kathaine. Her Knights opened fire, and explosions blossomed across the necron structure.

'Sire Godfyr, close up behind the governor. All Sacristan Crawlers move in behind Godfyr's Knights. Fire to cripple the transports, and dissuade the Crusaders if you must. Sacristans, arm yourselves, and take the governor onto one of your Crawlers by whatever means. She is going to live to face segmentum command whether she wishes to or not.'

Assent runes flashed back, and Knights and Sacristans leapt to obey.

'What of us, my lady?' asked Lady Elayn.

'We're going to support Olphrec's charge, and break through the xenos lines,' said Jennika fiercely. 'Knights, shields up, fire at will, break these alien ghouls in half. *In Excelsium Furore!*'

'Let the draconsfire burn!' cried Elayn and Dyros, pushing their steeds into a run behind *Fire Defiant*.

Jennika drove *Fire Defiant* hard, hearing her steed's fury in the thrum of its power plant and the revving of its reaper chainsword. Her footfalls left craters in the roadway as she pelted towards the necrons, and as her shields flashed with impacts she gave vent to a furious war cry of her own. Her battle cannon spat fire, its shells slamming through a necron gun-barge

and blowing it apart. Then she was upon them without mercy.

Jennika swept her chainsword down to bite into the road surface, before wrenching it sideways with a snarl. The blade struck ferrocrete and metal as it hurled up a bow wave of rubble and chewed through the necrons, sending limbs and shredded torsos spinning away. She attacked again at point-blank range, and flickering android components fountained from the resultant fireball.

To her right, she saw Olphrec and his Knights smashing and tearing at the necrons with furious abandon. One of the lance was down, an Errant lying upon its back with its legs abraded to glowing stumps. Her teeth ground together in disgust at the sight of mechanical insects swarming over it, sparks spitting from their mandibles as they ravaged the steed.

Bands of Crusaders clashed with the necron infantry, outnumbered but fighting with zealous fury. Their blades hacked into android bodies. Their shields came apart under flurries of green fire, their robes and bodies disintegrating moments later. Jennika's disgust grew as she watched a blade-limbed necron flay the flesh from a fallen warrior and drape itself in blood-wet skins, before greedily guzzling down the meat and organs.

A firestorm screamed overhead, Lady Kathaine's lance launching another volley against the necron structure. Explosions tore through it, portals flickering and imploding, circuits flaring and dying.

'Hah!' cried Kathaine. 'You're no match for us, you xenos filth!'

In response, three of the necron war pyramids crackled with lightning. As one, bolts of energy leapt from their pinnacles like uncoiling whips and slammed into Kathaine's Knight Warden. The steed convulsed, before explosions burst from every joint and seam. Kathaine didn't even have the chance to cry out before her steed crashed down amid her lancemates.

Wrath seized Jennika and she drove her steed onwards, deeper into the fight.

'Lance Godfyr, close up and drive through the phalanx before you,' she barked. 'Lance Olphrec, you risk being overwhelmed – beware the weapon barges on your right flank. My lance, rune-marking a necron command barque now – close volleys if you please.' As Jennika fought, she realised that she relished the challenge of focusing her warriors' efforts and drawing upon every reserve of tactical and strategic skill she possessed to prevent them from being overrun.

Suddenly, Jennika registered the outraged screams of the governor over the vox-net. A glance at her rear vid-feed showed the governor's transport was a smoking wreck, its hull crawling with necron insects. There was no sign of her fanatics with flamer units, barring perhaps the heaving mounds riddled with metal bugs atop the transport's hull. Yet Beatifica herself was being bundled unceremoniously into a Crawler by a band of armed Sacristans, Godfyr's Knights standing sentinel over them with guns blazing. Out of the corner of her eye, Jennika saw a necron gun-barge line its huge cannon up on the Sacristans and their vital prisoner; with a clench of her fist, she sent shells looping down to blast the barge apart.

'Another fine shot, my lady,' voxed Sire Dyros. 'We will deny that lunatic her martyrdom.'

'We might all be martyrs yet, Dyros,' replied Jennika, spraying stubber fire into the massing foe. 'We can't afford to stay here and finish this. We have to break through! All lances, Sacristan Keyloch's Crawler is now our first and only priority. The governor is aboard and we will get her to safety if it costs every one of our lives! She'll answer for her crimes. Lance Kathaine, move up and escort the Crawlers – avenge your fallen. Godfyr, Olphrec, force a corridor through the foe and hold it. We'll smash a hole and once the Crawlers are through, bunch around them and make for the beachhead.'

'Knights of Adrastapol, do not flee the foe,' roared Olphrec as he waded into the necrons. 'We'll make your damned breach, my lady, but I shall not have you order us to cowardice!'

'Sire Olphrec, you *will* obey the commands of the First Knight of Adrastapol or your honour will be forfeit,' said Jennika. 'You have been insolent to the very brink of insubordination, and I shall allow it no longer.'

Energy whips lashed her shields, staggering *Fire Defiant*. She steadied her steed with a growl and blasted her attacker to wreckage.

'*My lady, what if the beachhead is overrun?*' voxed Sire Godfyr as his Knights blasted a path through the xenos. They were taking ferocious punishment, but the necrons clearly had not anticipated such a bellicose attack. They reeled under the Knights' massive firepower and crushing blows.

'We will escort the governor all the way back to Pyrodiah Defence

headquarters on foot if we must, Godfyr,' replied Jennika. 'That route is still the most direct way out of this city.'

Alert runes lit her peripheral vision.

'*Deathwatch Brother Shorrgath to First Knight Jennika Tan Draconis,*' came a deep voice over her vox. '*Three minutes to detonation.*'

'We're running out of time,' she breathed. A concussive blast rocked Jennika in her throne, and she wheeled her steed to see another necron war pyramid trying to seal the gap her Knights had opened.

'Draconsfire!' bellowed Sire Jaekeb, charging the pyramid head on. His steed was limping, many of its armour plates flayed down to sparking metal and wires, his reaper chainsword dangling uselessly at his side. Still he fired his thermal cannon and gouged a glowing crater in the xenos war engine.

'Jaekeb, move aside,' shouted Jennika. 'Your steed is in tatters. Pull back to safety!'

Jaekeb echoed Olphrec's words angrily. 'Knights of Adrastapol do not flee the foe.' The next instant, the war pyramid's guns blasted one of the Errant's legs off at the hip. Jennika saw Jaekeb's steed topple onto its face; his yell of fear cut off at the moment of impact. His life signs still showed on the manifold, but faintly.

Taking careful aim, she fired twinned shells into the wound Jaekeb had torn in the pyramid's flank. Explosions flared within the war engine. Smoke billowed forth, and the pyramid vanished in a storm of unnatural energies.

'Sacristans, pilot retrieval,' ordered Jennika, and one of the vehicles swerved towards Jaekeb's fallen Knight. A glance showed her that her warriors were holding the enemy back, protecting the Crawlers with their shields and armour, though it was costing them dear. Another Knight of Olphrec's lance had been slain, and two of Godfyr's were sorely damaged.

'My lady, the lad can't be saved,' voxed Sire Dyros, runes flashing up on her vision to highlight the horde of necron foot-troops closing with Jaekeb's steed.

'He's right, my lady. For all our sakes, we must leave him,' urged Olphrec.

'The moment Jaekeb is rescued, we retreat,' she said, feeding power to her Knight's actuators. *Fire Defiant* surged forwards, Jennika aiming each

swinging step like a battering ram to shatter the necron lines. Fire splashed against her steed from every direction, but she pushed on regardless. She fired swift volleys, placing them with expert precision to blast the necrons away from Jaekeb's steed. Reaching the fallen Knight, she braced *Fire Defiant's* feet and sprayed shots into the enemy. A wraith-like construct turned towards her, seeking to drive its metal tendrils into her cockpit, but she annihilated it with a precise swipe of her reaper chainsword. Necron aircraft screamed overhead and fired their energy rays straight at her, but Jennika raised her shield in time to intercept the blasts, smoothly redressing her aim and blasting apart another gun-barge in the same motion.

Even as she aimed and fired, hacked and slashed, Jennika watched the runes on her strategic overlay, a fragment of her consciousness processing that the Sacristans had reached Jaekeb's steed and were extracting the fallen warrior.

'We have him, my lady,' came a voice laced with binharic. 'You must withdraw – your steed is suffering considerable damage.'

'Go,' ordered Jennika. 'I shall follow and provide cover.'

The Crawler ploughed forward, guns blazing, and Jennika followed, trampling over a field of fallen foes as she blasted a path to freedom.

A private hail came from Olphrec's Knight. Jennika opened the channel with a blink-click.

'My lady, I—'

'Now is not the time, Sire Olphrec,' she said. 'Your thoughts on my gender or my suitability for this role are of no interest to me, but if you ever undermine my authority again, I will meet you on the duelling field and we will fight to the death. And you will lose. Do I make myself inescapably clear?'

Another assent rune.

She nodded. It was enough.

At last, the Crawlers broke free of the battle, rocking on their suspension as they powered away. One small part of Jennika's psyche processed the data-exload that showed Sire Jaekeb was still alive, if badly wounded. There was no time to think further on it as the necrons redoubled their attack. Her shields flashed, and fresh damage readouts blared at her. *Fire Defiant* couldn't take much more.

‘All Knights, full retreat,’ she ordered. ‘The bombs will detonate in less than a minute!’

As one, the surviving Knights accelerated away along the processional towards the outskirts of the city. They angled their ion shields rearwards, protecting their more vulnerable back armour and power plants, and concentrated on speed.

Necron fire chased them, but with many of their war engines destroyed and most of their remaining forces on foot, the xenos could not sustain their pursuit. A wing of their strange fighter craft attacked from above, killing beams leaping from their guns. Yet by the grace of the Emperor, no more steeds fell. Buildings and statues whistled past as *Fire Defiant* pounded along the roadway as the rearmost Imperial Knight of the formation, the last to stop firing and turn away from the foe.

A sudden tectonic spike lit Jennika’s sensors, and she felt a tremor race beneath her steed’s feet. Through her rear vid-feed, she saw billowing clouds of red-and-green flame rising from the heart of the city, more leaping skywards with every passing heartbeat. Then the structures at her back were slumping, imploding, falling away into a yawning pit that raced outwards by the second. She spared a prayer for the safety of Captain Azkarael and his warriors, and for all the refugees and Imperial Guardsmen still desperately fleeing the collapsing city.

She ran on towards the beachhead, towards safety and victory. Not for those who had fallen. Not for the madwoman she had been sent to save, or those who had sworn her to the task. Jennika ran onwards for herself, and in that moment, she knew with absolute certainty that she would prevail.

The war for Pyrodiah was effectively brought to a close by the daring efforts of Kill Team Azkarael and their expertly placed explosive charges. With the destruction of the necrons' core tomb complex, and the 'death' of their heretical Master Program, the xenos threat was reduced to a scattering of lost and wayward elements. Still dangerous, but no longer operating to any coherent plan, these marauding forces were extinguished by the Pyrodiahn Defence Forces over the following weeks.

The Knights of Adrastapol were lauded by segmentum command for their part in the conflict. Though Governor Beatifica initially expressed outrage at her detainment during the evacuation, her voice bore little weight with the subsequent martial tribunal, whose disgust at her spectacular mishandling of Pyrodiah's defence soon earned her the martyrdom she had sought all along. Albeit, in rather more squalid conditions than she had expected.

Jennika Tan Draconis earned the acclaim of her warriors for her part in commanding the Pyrodiahn campaign and her heroism in leading their last, desperate break-out from the capital city. No voice was louder in support than the respected veteran Sire Olphrec Dar Draconis, who ever after was a staunch supporter of Adrastapol's First Knight.

Some even say that the war for Pyrodiah was where Lady Tan Draconis' legend truly began...

– Extracted from the writing of Sendraghorst,
Sage Strategic of Adrastapol, vol XVIII 'Echoes of Pyrodiah'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Clark has written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Kingsblade*, *Knightsblade* and *Shroud of Night*, as well as the novella *Crusade* and the short story 'Whiteout'. He has also written the short story 'Gorechosen' for Warhammer Age of Sigmar, and the Warhammer Quest Silver Tower novella *Labyrinth of the Lost*. Andy works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer Age of Sigmar and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham, UK.

Now fighting as a Freeblade, Imperial Knight Luk Kar Chimaeros faces his past and a dreadful decision that will decide his future.



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