

TALES FROM  
THE ARCHIVE



# HIVE FLEET HOARAOA

Barrington J. Bayley





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'WILL THE PAIN go, apothecary?'

'It is nothing but a skin rash, young man,' Jako Jaxabarm said. 'This balm will speed its healing. But I wonder as to its cause. What is your occupation?'

'I work in the chemics factory outside the town.'

Jaxabarm nodded. He knew the factory. It produced industrial acids and materials used in the manufacture of high explosives. Having dealt with his patient's right arm, he began applying a thin layer of the soothing blue unguent to his left arm, murmuring a prayer as he did so. The rash was indeed angry, and if left untreated might have rotted away the flesh and left the sufferer in a parlous state. He looked sternly into the young man's pale face.

'What did you say your name is?'

'Drenthan Drews.'

'Well, Drenthan, you must tell your employer to supply you with protective sleeves, or else find work elsewhere.'

Drenthan Drews looked alarmed. 'I can't go demanding safety gear from the factory managers, apothecary. I would be dismissed instantly. Work is hard to find, and I have an ageing mother to support.'

Jako Jaxabarm's mind went hazy as he listened to the all-too-familiar litany, looking out of the window to the increasingly busy street. He plied his apothecary's trade at a corner table in a cheap cafe, where the owner tolerated him because he brought in extra customers. The planet, a semi-industrial world in the Ultima Segmentum, lay somewhere near the Kreel Nebula. The factory workers here were poor and downtrodden, though not as downtrodden and poverty-stricken as on some of the more fully industrialised worlds he had visited. Jaxabarm had wandered much in recent years, never staying in one place very long, always fearing the clap of an arbitrator's -or worse, an inquisitor's hand on his shoulder.

Your work has caused this painful rash, young man,' he said pitilessly. 'It will heal now, but if you continue to work unprotected it will return, and eventually

you will lose your arms.'

Drenthan Drews's shoulders slumped but Jaxabarm was not looking at him. He could not take his eyes off the street. Adeptus Arbites patrols had increased dramatically, and the city - indeed the whole planet - was filling up more and more with the Imperial Guard. There were naval ships in orbit, and it was even rumoured that Space Marines were on their way. The legendary Adeptus Astartes!

An attack was coming. But where from? And by whom? The populace had not been told.

His young patient noticed his interest and seemed to cheer up. His eyes brightened. 'Don't worry, apothecary! The Emperor's forces are here. They'll soon see the enemy off, whoever they are!'

'Yes, no doubt.'

Few had come to see him today. People had left the city in droves, feeling they would be safer in the countryside and many who remained stayed indoors. He snapped shut his apothecary's bag, rose from the table and left the cafe with a casual wave to the proprietor.

Drenthan Drews followed only a few steps behind him. He had gone but a short distance along the pavement when a hulking arbitrator stopped them both.

'Your papers,' he said gruffly.

Jaxabarm avoiding looking at the dark visor which all but covered the face of the arbitrator, or judge to use the popular term. He and Drews both fumbled for their shiny pass books.

The judge carefully examined them both, then applied his scanner to the electrostatic text. He studied the results for a long moment, then returned his hidden gaze to the apothecary. 'You are Jako Jaxabarm?'

Jaxabarm nodded, clutching his bag. 'Yes, arbitrator.'

'I believe you to be Genetor van Leedrix, of the Adeptus Mechanicus, wanted for

escape from lawful custody. You are under arrest.'

'There is surely some mistake...'

Jaxabarm's words trailed off, as he realised that the dreaded hour had come. The arbitrator muttered into his throat mic. A grinding, bulky, black holding vehicle emerged from a nearby corner and drew up.

'This is a wanted criminal,' the Arbites said to his colleagues who piled out. He gestured to Drenthan Drews. 'Take his accomplice too.'

'He is nothing to do with it,' Jaxabarm protested. 'I am an apothecary. He is only a patient.'

'That's right!' Drews cried out in panic. 'I don't even know him! Please let me go!'

The officer ignored his words. He and Jaxabarm were thrown together into the holding vehicle's dark interior.



THEY EMERGED into daylight outside the florid frontage of Adeptus Arbites city headquarters. Armoured tracked shapes were roaring by, their clanking treads tearing up the road surface, vast turrets reversed to leave stubby cannon barrels trailing as they raced towards the city limits. Jaxabarm recognised them as Baneblade battle tanks.

Evidently Arbitrator headquarters now doubled as Imperial Guard headquarters too. The building bustled with unfamiliar uniforms. But Jaxabarm and his young patient glimpsed these only briefly as they were hustled through the throng, quickly searched, and Jaxabarm's apothecary's bag taken from him. Then they were pushed hastily down cast iron stairs and flung into a prisoner cage.

A barred door clanged shut behind them. The faint pleasant aroma of blue balm

on Drenthan Drews's arms slowly filled the dim cell. There was already one occupant. To Jaxabarm's surprise it was an Imperial Guard soldier, uniform rumpled, headgear missing, hair tousled, who huddled in the corner, head down.

Drenthan Drews rounded on the man who had unwittingly caused his imprisonment 'What's happening? You aren't an apothecary at all! What are you? An engineer?'

'Better you shouldn't know,' Jaxabarm told him.

Drews looked blank. Jaxabarm took a step towards the guardsman.

'With what crime are you charged?'

The soldier peered up at him. His face was slack and despairing.

'Cowardice,' he muttered sullenly.

Arbitrators and the Imperial Guard were also using the same holding cells, it seemed. The guardsman appeared to be in state of shock. Was it possible he did not realise that the smartly dressed Jaxabarm was a prisoner too?

'This planet is being readied for an attack,' he said in commanding tones. 'Who is the enemy?'

'Not allowed to say.'

Jaxabarm drew himself up. 'I am Genetor Leedrix of the Adeptus Mechanicus. You may tell me. You must tell me. That is an order.'

The guardsman rolled on his side and turned his face away as he replied. Jaxabarm had to lean close to catch the words. 'Hive Fleet Kraken.'

Jaxabarm went stiff. Now it was he who was in shock.



HE HAD NEVER heard of Hive Fleet Kraken. But he knew of Hive Fleet Behemoth!

Two hundred and fifty years previously, the tyranids had come, from out of the darkness between the galaxies, in their huge fleet of organically engineered snail-ships. They had demolished world after inhabited world, leaving nothing but bare rock. If unopposed it would have done the same to the whole galaxy. It was the greatest threat the Imperium had ever faced, and it had taken so much of the Imperium's resources to defeat it.

As a young genitor, or adept of the Arcanum Genetica, van Leedrix had once been part of a team that was still studying preserved tyranid cadavers a hundred and fifty years after Hive Fleet Behemoth had been defeated. A tyranid warrior was a fearsome thing to behold. It was perhaps best described as resembling the warrior caste of a social insect such as a termite or an ant, except that it was by far more vicious-looking and about twice the size of a horse. Despite being highly intelligent, its behaviour was controlled in a way similar to that of social insects, by means of chemical pheromones released by the hive mind. All tyranid engineering was biological in character. It was known that the hive fleet had come to the galaxy looking for genetic material, but it was not really understood why.

That had been a hundred years ago. 'Jaxabarm' was older than he looked. He was one hundred and twenty-eight, in an Imperium where average life expectancy was perhaps about forty. His longevity was solely due to his membership of the Arcanum Genetica, for genitors were the great experts in extending human life. It was a privilege ostensibly granted only to the high priests of the Adeptus, the technomagi. But those who bestowed this gift quietly availed themselves of it too, a fact which the magi wisely ignored.

No wonder the Planetary Governor had made no announcement concerning the emergency. Few in the Imperium's million worlds knew that the tyranid invasion had even taken place two and a half centuries ago. The Imperium worked on the principle of secrecy - no one was told anything he did not absolutely need to know. Just to learn one of these secrets by accident could mean speedy death at the hands of one of the countless arms of the Administratum.

Thus, had Jaxabarm told Drenthan Drews why he was a renegade from the

Arcanum Genetica, why he was on the run from the Adeptus Mechanicus, he would likely have sealed the young factory worker's fate. The existence of the tyranids was a secret he was entitled to know. But there was another secret, to which he had no entitlement.

Years ago his colleagues in the Arcanum had begun to wonder why his prayers and incantations were so much more efficacious than theirs, when it came to assembling DNA into useful biological inventions. Under examination, it was found that he was a latent psyker whose powers were only now beginning to develop. It was deemed that he was at risk of daemonic possession, and he was sentenced to speedy execution. Up until then he had had no inkling of the daemonic realm. To hear of it came as a huge surprise to him, and he had a feeling of resentment against his accusers - which they, of course, interpreted as yet more evidence of daemonic intervention.

Scant hours before his sentence was due to be carried out, he had contrived to escape. With luck, and with cunning born of desperation, he had survived until now.

For long it had been thought that the Imperium had seen the last of the tyranids. Now they were back, it seemed - a terrifying prospect! - in the form of a second hive fleet, given another name. This explained something else to Jaxabarm. His psychic talent was still developing. Occasionally he could hear people's thoughts. If he relaxed and opened his mind, he heard a background of whispering. But lately the whispering had turned into a deathly silence, as if an advancing wall had obliterated psychic space.

The wall of Hive Fleet Kraken? Jaxabarm turned his attention back to the huddling guardsman. 'Describe this enemy, this Hive Fleet Kraken,' he ordered, in the same peremptory tone as before. 'What are their warriors like?'

'They are monsters!' the guardsman replied in a strangled voice. 'Nothing can withstand them! Their claws can tear a tank apart!'

His voice fell. 'They don't just conquer planets, they dismantle them! I am one of the few survivors from the defence of Moloch. Moloch is gone! Every man, woman, child and animal was taken up into the hive fleet. It was the same with Devlan -Devlan is gone! And Salem, and Sotha - homeworld of the Emperor's

Scythes! I tell you there is nothing you can do here.'

Jaxabarm sensed fear and despair from the man. But inside that, he sensed also a guardsman's discipline and courage. He suspected the prisoner had been incarcerated not so much for cowardice but to stop him from telling others yet to encounter the tyranids how bad the situation was.

He and Drew tilted their faces as a loudspeaker voice came echoing down the stairwell from the ground floor. He just managed to make out the words.

'Hormagaunt horde advancing from the south. Break out all arms and distribute to city population. Release and arm prisoners.'

Hormagaunts... Quite likely whoever had sent the message from the front knew only this one term to describe the terrors that were coming. But there would also be carnifexes, lictors and termagants, not to speak of the tyranid warriors themselves, and all the rest of the multiformed nightmare war biology that had so amazed the magi biologis of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The city was about to be overrun. And when that happened...

They heard footsteps and the clang of cell doors opening. An arbitrator appeared and flung open the gridiron gate.

'You are free. Leave the building. Join the defences.'

He tossed three lasguns into the cell and passed on.

This truly was a measure of desperation: a general levy to try to hold off the tyranid swarm. Jaxabarm picked up the lasguns, passed one to Drews and another to the Imperial Guardsman, who also had been listening intently to the booming voice. The guardsman gave Jaxabarm a stricken look, but accepted the weapon with apparent gratitude.

Then he turned the emitter muzzle to his own head and immediately pressed the firing stud. His body jerked, then went limp and slumped, a neat hole burned through his skull.

A wise choice, Jaxabarm thought, if all he had been told about Hive Fleet Behemoth was true. He nudged the shocked Drenthan.

'Come on.'

The building was emptying rapidly. Outside, a great deal had changed in a very short time. It had gone gloomy; the sky seemed overcast but glimmered with faint flashes, while stronger shafts of light speared up from somewhere nearby. They were laser beams from the land silos and from warships in orbit.

Jaxabarm peered, slitting his eyes, and began to see why the sky had darkened. The air was filled with spots or specks as the hive fleet disgorged its rain of death upon the planet, each spot a pod bearing some monstrous invader.

Clumsily Drew waved his lasgun. 'I don't know how to use this thing!'

You point it and press that stud there,' Jaxabarm informed him. A screaming noise, inhuman and terrifying, like an insane siren, caught his attention. Beyond the Arbites building was a broad prospect. Up this, half a dozen Baneblade tanks were reversing at full speed, firing as they retreated. Pursuing them were carnifexes, a hundred at least, living engines of destruction running on pairs of jointed legs, four huge scythe-blades of limbs carried by each massive, rounded, chitinous body. It was from these monsters that the eerie screams came. The

Baneblades' shells blew a few apart, but most came inexorably on. The very sight of them caused an almost uncontrollable fear in Jaxabarm, and even more so in Drews. Then, from one of the monstrosities, a crackling fireball issued and surged forward to engulf a Baneblade in a glowing nimbus. The tank juddered and came to a sudden halt. In seconds carnifexes were all around it. The two men watched appalled as scythe-limbs carved through the Baneblade's armour, taking it apart. Briefly they glimpsed the doomed crew within, in the moments before there was nothing but splashes of blood.

Drenthan Drews whimpered. 'I've got to go to my mother! I must help her!'

Jaxabarm said nothing to stop him, useless though the young man's sentiment was. There was no help for anyone now. He fondled the unfamiliar lasgun, wondering if it would be possible to take one of the tyranid scum with him.

Drews did not get any distance. It was as if the air above the city gave birth to an evil harvest. Husky pods by the thousand were tumbling down and cracking

open as they hit streets or buildings. From them billowed white floss which expanded until, within seconds, it had covered the city in foam to a height of fifty feet.

Jaxabarm and Drews, together with anyone else still within the conurbation - everyone in the countryside too, perhaps - were now trapped inside a mesh of sticky threads which made movement impossible. Jaxabarm could see little: all around him was nothing but a suffuse white glow. He heard Drenthan calling out to him in a muffled voice. 'Apothecary! Where are you?'

He heard other muffled voices, too, seemingly far away. Finding he could still move his fingers, he pressed the lasgun stud. The beam shot through the enveloping floss, frizzling it but achieving nothing else. When he lifted his finger the floss instantly closed in again to fill the narrow pipe he had drilled.

After a while he became dimly aware that, immobilised though he might be, other things were able to move through the mesh. Tiny spider-like creatures crawled and skittered along the threads which made it up. Hulking shadow-shapes, visible as vague blots, were blundering through it.

Tyranids.

Then he could feel the whole mass moving, piling up, rolling along. At the same time his psyker sense started to open up again. He could sense human beings all around him, all stuck in the gloom - tough, cynical judges, battle-eager Imperial Guard, men, women and children, all overwhelmed with dismay, bewilderment and terror.

He felt something near him. A large wet tongue licked his face. It belonged to a small animal of the sort commonly kept as a pet on this planet. Somehow it had ended up next to him. He turned his face away.

More time passed. Then eerie ululations sounded, penetrating the mesh. Jaxabarm felt a tugging or a pushing, he could not tell which. He heard a dragging noise. Then it went dark. He heard a loud hissing, and felt a savage force pressing him down towards the ground.

Except that it was not the ground. It was a floor of some kind. He knew what

that pressing down meant: acceleration, G-force.

They had been transferred to the innards of another type of tyranid beast. One that served as a shuttlecraft. He wondered if he would get a chance to turn the lasgun on himself, as the guardsman had.

They were being taken aboard the hive fleet.



WHEN THE acceleration ceased a peculiar cloying smell invaded Jaxabarm's nostrils and he lost consciousness. When he came to, the floss was melting into thin air all around him. The lasgun was gone from his hand. He flailed desperately to find it, but to no avail.

The worst of all nightmares was about to begin.



WHEN HIS head cleared he went nearly mad with horror. He was but one of a tangle of people who lay on the floor of a round, crimson-walled tunnel which pulsed like a living thing - as, indeed, it was. The light, too, was reddish and murky, issuing from nodules dotted randomly about the walls, made hazy by a drifting mist. A distant but steady thudding or booming, as of a giant heartbeat, accompanied the tunnel's writhing pulse. An acid stench filled the air. Jaxabarm guessed it was the smell of the pheromones by which the hive mind controlled its creatures.

Drenthan Drews tugged at his sleeve.

'Where are we?' he hissed fearfully.

Jaxabarm did not answer. His heart was in his throat. Approaching down the tunnel from both ends came tyrannid creatures. The dreadful sight caused a wailing and a sobbing and a screeching with terror of children among the humans. Uniformed arbitrators and guardsmen came to all fours, defenceless now and stripped of all the certainty of the human Imperium, staring paralysed at the pure bestial alienness into which they were now plunged.

The creatures were lictors, a mutation of the standard tyrannid warrior which, though a vicious killing machine like all tyrannid progeny, was highly intelligent and had feeder tentacles for consuming a victim's brain, thereby absorbing and analysing his memories and genetic data. Cold, expressionless eyes, as blank as a spider's, were set above chitinous mandibles filled with huge curved teeth. The lictors moved in, seized the nearest soft-bodied humans in barbed flesh hooks and inserted tentacles through eyes, temples or beneath the jaw. Those seized went limp almost instantly as the transfer of brain tissue began.

Drenthan Drews and Jaxabarm had both come to their feet, but Drews seemed about to faint. Holding him up, his heart pounding with terror, he glanced behind him to see that the lictors were not alone. Picking their way among them were four monstrosities unlike any he had seen or heard described during his days in the Arcanum Genetica. They were large, but moved delicately as if physically puny, and sported huge bloated heads decorated with chitinous patterns and surrounded by bony antler-like structures. Behind them moved an even larger monstrosity, so huge that it barely found room for itself in the tunnel. Twice the size of a normal tyrannid warrior, this was a type of monster which Jaxabarm did recognise. It was a hive tyrant, believed by some magi biologists to be individual embodiments of the hive mind.

There was no place to run. Delicately, but with more than human strength, the unnamed creatures bent their moiré-patterned heads and used their forelimbs to select and pick up squirming humans, among them Jaxabarm and Drews. Helpless in the pincer-like grip, the screeching of the captured and soon-to-be-decorticated men, women and children ringing in their ears, they were carried down the tunnel and emerged into a more bulbous chamber.

The pheromonic smell here was different from in the tunnel, less acid, but nonetheless just as revolting. The hive tyrant stood in the entrance, swaying slightly. A grotesque scene was then enacted. Under the bloody light, a middle-

aged man was laid down and stripped of his clothing. Two large-headed tyranids bent over him, pinning him down as he tried to crawl away, looking desperately towards his fellow humans as though appealing for help.

Then the dissection began. The tyranid creatures, white slime dripping from glands in their underbellies, seemed oblivious of the screams of utmost agony from their experimental subject as he was laid open without anaesthetic and his intestines were torn out and tossed here and there. Drews gagged and even Jaxabarm staggered.

And then he became aware of the psychic presence of the tyranids. It was weird, like nothing else he had ever experienced: an implacable, ferocious sentience which was ancient beyond imagining. It stood alone; no one would ever be able to speak to it.

Suddenly he felt as though his psyche had been torn apart like the human body on the floor of the chamber. The scene before his eyes vanished.

He was somewhere else. Somewhere dark, but filled with a seething and a rustling. He had entered the hive mind.

And now he understood what the tyranids were.



THE TYRANIDS were what ants and termites would be if they could evolve further and become intelligent. What made such intelligence incomprehensible was that the tyranids had never evolved emotions. They were aware that concepts such as sympathy and honour existed in the species they harvested, but they viewed them only in the abstract and dismissed them as evolutionary mistakes. Gene coding for emotion was never made use of by the hive fleets.

Yes, the tyranids were intelligent, but intelligence was not a quality particularly prized by the hive mind. A tyranid creature could reason, but it never did so out of self-interest. Intelligence, like everything else, served only tyranid hive

instincts - or rather, it served the single great tyrannid instinct, the one overwhelming, compulsive urge.

**SURVIVE! AND SURVIVE FOREVER!**

When the tyrannids invaded a galaxy they took aboard vast amounts of foodstuffs and raw materials, but those were not what they came looking for. They knew that every system, whether mechanical or biological, eventually runs down. Most species lasted only a few million years. A few - like some Earth ants - managed to survive for up to a hundred million years. But sooner or later they perished as their DNA either failed to adapt or simply deteriorated through natural wear.

The tyrannids had found the only possible remedy for this. They moved from galaxy to galaxy, harvesting fresh, newly evolved DNA with which to renew and reinvigorate their own. They were the universe's ultimate life form. Quite possibly they had existed forever, and would continue to exist forever. Quite possibly the universe contained an infinite number of hive fleets.

The Imperium of Man had beaten off one hive fleet. Perhaps it could beat off others. It would be a rare reversal for the tyrannids, but that did not matter at all. In a few million years the Imperium would be gone, the human race would be gone, and some other hive fleet would arrive, meeting weaker resistance, and would leave the galaxy lifeless and desolate.

Then, a few billion years later, life would evolve all over again, on millions of planets.

And again a hive fleet would move in....

Jaxabarm did not think the hive tyrant was at all aware that he was eavesdropping on the hive mind. He was not worthy of notice. The tyrannid did not respect human intelligence - they did not respect any intelligence, not even their own. All they saw in the human race was a species possessing young, vigorous DNA.



A VIOLENT barking noise snatched him abruptly out of the unholy contact. He saw three of the large-headed tyranids blown apart, then the fourth. A ragged hole had been blown in the wall of the chamber, too. Shreds of rubbery flesh, the substance of the snail-ship, flapped and trailed, oozing pink ichor. Crowding through the hole came armoured man-shapes with pointed visors, seemingly grotesquely hunchbacked, the all-enclosing armour itself hulking over the back of the helmet. Their red and purple colouring seemed to merge into the blood-hued innards of the snail-ship.

Space Marines! The rumour was true! And they were using their favourite hand weapon - the bolter! Explosive bolts rained against the chitinous hide of the hive tyrant, which being weaponless itself, backed away up the tunnel. The lictors, however, launched themselves immediately at the Marines, shooting off flesh hooks which scraped and scored the Marines' armour, trying to get to grips with them with their claws and teeth. Against these creatures, the explosive bolts were more effective. The Marines had a strategy: they aimed for the lictors' gaping mouths, exploding the bolts within the tyranid skull.

Jaxabarm knew what the response would be to an intrusion into the organic tyranid ship, itself but a genetically modified tyranid. Tyranid monsters in all their forms would be rushing to the spot from all over the snail-ship. A single squad of Spaces Marines would stand no chance.

As it was there were too many lictors for them. Two had already been overcome, borne down by the weight of the creatures, their armour ripped open. The others, making no attempt to help their comrades, prepared to retreat. Jaxabarm's hope that this was a rescue mission was quickly dashed. One of the Marines carried a chest or box which he placed on the floor of the chamber. Bolters still barking, the Marines backed through the hole they had made, ignoring the human captives and leaving them to their grisly fate.

A lictor now turned its attention to Jaxabarm, its acidic stench almost overpowering him. Shivering, he tried to evade its reaching claws.

Again came a bolter bark, so close it nearly deafened him. The lictor took the bolt in the jaw, shuddered and slumped. Looking round, Jaxabarm was startled to see Drews awkwardly holding a bolter he had taken from a dead Space Marine.

'This way, apothecary!'

Drews grabbed him by the arm and dragged him towards the hole through which the Marines had already disappeared, firing off the bolt gun in all directions. Jaxabarm's last glimpse of the murky chamber was of a lictor picking up the discarded chest in its forelimbs and inspecting it.

The path of the Marines was easy to follow. Rather than try to find their way through the maze of tunnels and passages, where they would be prey to ambush, they had chosen to blast their way through the tunnel walls. There was very little light in these tunnels. They met no tyranid warriors of any kind, only small, spider-like creatures which scuttled everywhere, taking no notice of them. In minutes they had come in sight of the departing Marines, who were about to embark - again through a hole blasted in the skin of the ship-creature - in a spacecraft of some kind.

'Help us! Help us!' Jaxabarm cried out.

For a moment he thought they would be abandoned. Then the last Marine to embark gestured to them hastily. They went through a circular metal port and found themselves in a cramped hold among the hulking Astartes adepts. The Marines began removing their headgear as the craft shot away from the tyranid ships. They were watching a small screen set like a porthole in the side of the hold.

There, the snail-ship suddenly exploded, reddened chunks of it flying into space. Yet, in the distance, other glints could be seen, many of them. The hive fleet consisted of thousands of such ships.

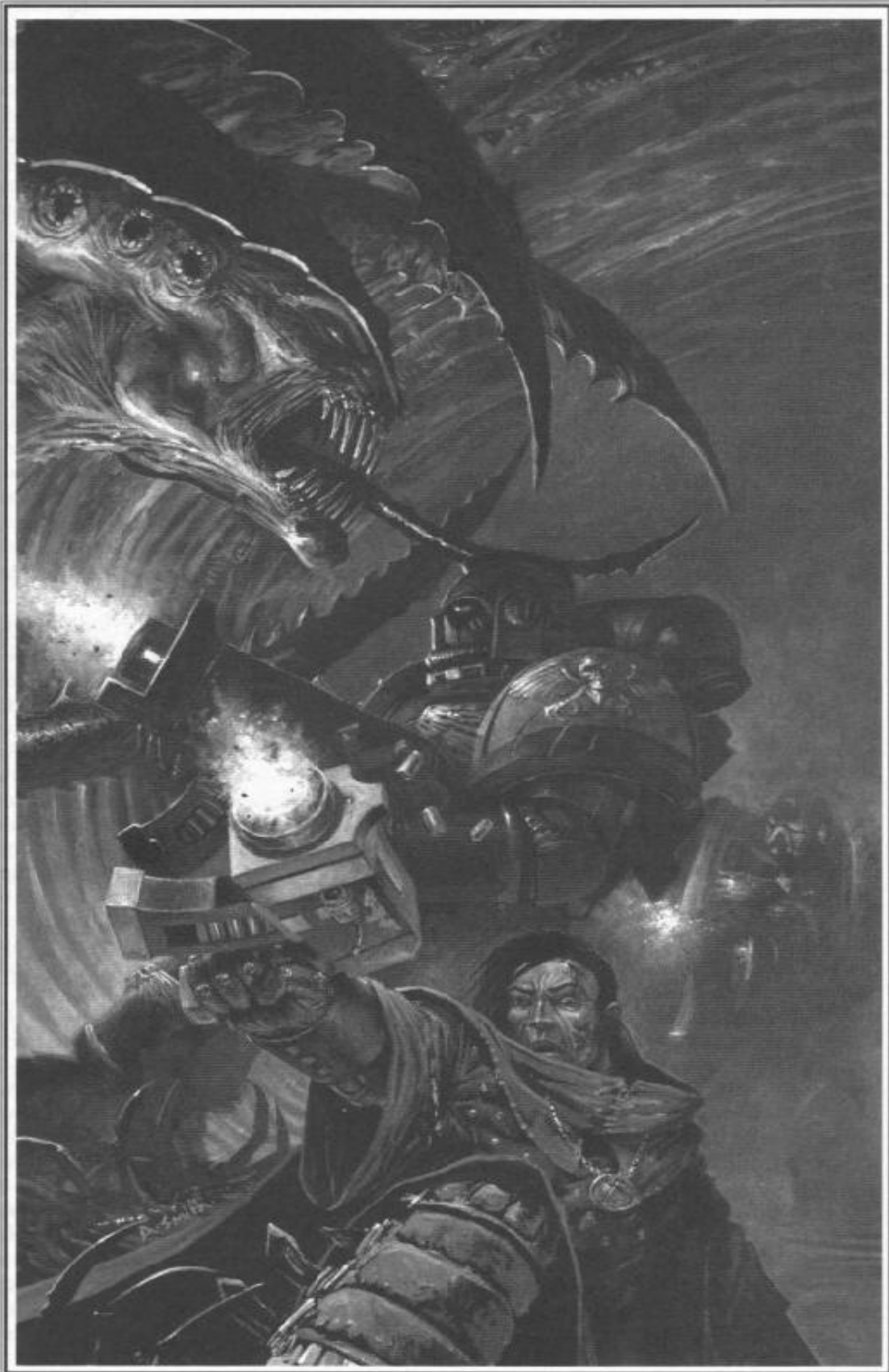
What now? Jaxabarm began to think of the future. He was no longer the condemned Genetor van Dreelix. He was Jako Jaxabarm, apothecary, once again. The discovery of his alias had been made on a planet shortly to be reduced to rubble.

He would try to persuade Drenthan Drews to join the Imperial Guard and help defend the Imperium. Hive Fleet Kraken had to be repelled or humanity was doomed.

Not that the outcome was of any importance to the tyrannids. To them, species evolved and perished like blades of grass. Galaxies condensed, blazed, then guttered out. The supposedly immortal Chaos gods would not even last that long. They would perish when the psyches which sustained them died out.

Only the tyrannids lasted forever.☹







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