

WARHAMMER
40,000

SANCTUS REACH

DEATH MASK



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Storm clouds were forming around Hive Vinter, blocking the light from Sanctus. Guard Captain Holt shivered despite the oppressive heat. His scowl intensified as the first drops of acidic rain started to fall, sizzling against his mottled green carapace armour.

The larger of the two cyber-mastiffs he held by heavy chains growled as the downpour started in earnest. Wisps of steam rose from the implants visible through old fighting scars in what was left of its flesh. It had fared better than its brother, a smaller but still impressive hound almost completely covered in metal plates. The pair slunk ahead of Holt as he patrolled the defensive wall, glaring out with glowing, amber eyes. No one dared argue with Holt while his two pets were on their leash.

And when he let them go... well, you'd better start running.

All around, his men were hunkering down behind their weapons, lasguns and autocannons aimed at every possible exit of the hive. None of them complained about the stinging rain even as it raised angry welts on any patch of skin that was exposed to the elements. They wouldn't dare. They had a job to do and their orders were clear.

They had been here two weeks now, holed up behind the defensive perimeter that had been erected around the hive. Ten-foot walls, topped with gun stations and sentry points. How many times had he walked the gantry around the cordon, gazing at the hive itself? How many days watching that strange green mould creeping from every joint, as if the building itself was decaying? Like meat gone bad.

He could almost taste the rot. Throne knew what it was doing to their lungs, breathing in that stench day after day. But here they would remain, until the job was done. Until they'd fulfilled the orders Holt had been given.

No one was getting out of that hive alive.

As if to question his resolve, a sharp crack drowned out the steady hiss of the falling rain. The cyber-mastiffs reacted with a frenzy of barks as Holt twisted around, careful not to slip on the now-slick walkway. Acrid smoke plumed from the mine that had detonated in the middle of the no-man's-land that surrounded the base of the hive, indistinguishable shadows moving through the dense fog. Another blast followed, just metres from the first, sending more debris high into the air.

'Runners, sir,' the sergeant nearest Holt reported, never looking up from his rifle sights.

'Wait for a target, Sergeant Lang,' Holt ordered.

That was easier said than done as more and more mines blew, one after another, shrouding the hive in thick mires of choking black smoke.

'There,' Lang barked, his lasgun shifting as the smoke started to lift. A bloodied man floundered in the roiled earth. He was missing an arm, his clothes reduced to rags. Holt raised his laspistol and fired, putting the poor soul out of his misery. His body slapped into the mud.

'Good shot, sir,' the sergeant said, as the mastiffs threatened to pull Holt over in their haste to get to the others that were now staggering forward. These few had survived the first wave of mines, a mixture of fear and relief on their faces as they hurried towards the cordon occupied by Holt and his men. Some were crying, others were shouting, yelling for the Guardsmen to hold their fire. When he was younger, less experienced, Holt may have listened to their pleas.

But time and experience had taken their toll. Now he barely heard the cries for mercy.

'Shoot to kill,' Holt bellowed and his Guardsmen obeyed the order without question, lasguns shrieking louder than the citizens they were slaughtering.

There was every chance they were innocent; sheep driven across the minefield. But their loss was acceptable if it meant keeping the heretics festering inside their traitorous hive. One by one they fell before any more mines could be trampled, clearing the way for the real threat.

'And here they are, the unholy scum,' sneered Holt as the first shots rang out from the hive doors. Without the need for another order, his men shifted their aim away from the last hopeless stragglers to the cultists that were now streaming from the hive.

The mastiffs were desperate to be freed, to sink their metallic teeth into the wretches, but Holt kept them firmly on the leash, watching as the first fatalities

tumbled to the ground. Victory for the Ninth Jensen Regiment was assured; there was no way the cultists could withstand the full force of his men's guns. He could almost hear the praise that would be lavished upon him from his superiors. His worth would be proved once and for all, his ticket away from this insignificant siege, payback for the two weeks stuck in the mud around this accursed hive. War was coming to Ghul Jensen. Everyone knew it, even if they didn't know exactly what threat was racing towards the hive world. Holt had his suspicions and would be there, in the thick of it, for the glory of the Emperor – and himself.

A shell slammed into the defensive wall, forcing Holt to duck. What in the name of the Eye was that? Last time the cultists had tried to run the stockade, they had been armed with simple handguns, crude rifles at best. But this?

Another missile whistled through the air, taking out an entire section of the barbed wall. The screams of his own men joined the battle cries of the enemy, who were flowing onto the field now, more than Holt had expected.

The captain slapped his laspistol against his thigh, the magna-lock holding it in place as he retrieved a pair of field glasses. The grainy image zoomed in on the cultists and Holt cursed beneath his breath. On previous escape attempts, the cultists wore nothing than leathers and their savagely-tattooed hides. Not now. Now they were sporting hefty armour, twin-barrelled ripper guns spewing hot metal from their drums, and that wasn't the worst of it. Behind this advanced guard, a trio of massive exoskeletons waded into the mud – crude yes, but intimidating all the same. They'd obviously started life as heavy-lifters for the hive's manufacturums, designed to carry unwieldy parts on the production line, but the cultists had been busy. Armour plates were riveted across the chest cavities to protect the operators, flamers and missile launchers mounted on each pneumatic arm.

'Man the autocannons,' Holt screamed, shouting to be heard over the increasing barrage. 'Fire!'

Within seconds the gun-turrets sounded, a thunder to rival the storm overhead and the last noise the cultists would ever hear. The exterminators carved through the advancing force, silencing at least some of the heretic's weapons.

Some – but not enough.

For every armoured cultist the Guardsmen mowed down, two more were ready to take their place, each bearing arms more powerful than the last.

Holt's mind raced. He had two options. Deactivate the rest of the minefield remotely and give the order for his men to surge forward, taking the battle to the

enemy, or bring fire down on their very heads from above.

Holt's scarred lips twisted into a smile as he barked into his vox. There was no contest.

'Skyraptor, take them down.'

Guardsmen cheered as the sound of *Skyraptor's* engines filled the air. The Vendetta gunship swung around Hive Vinter, spotlights illuminating targets on the ground for the twin-linked lascannons to send to the mud.

One of the exoskeleton-clad heretics swivelled towards the looming aircraft, its shoulder mounted missile-launcher zeroing in on the gunship's cockpit.

Skyraptor's pilot fired first, reducing the exoskeleton to scrap.

'You've got your toys,' Holt grinned, his laspistol kicking in his hand, *'And I've got mine.'*

The cultists didn't know which way to attack. The Vendetta swooped low, blazing death, while Holt's guards continued the barrage from behind the containment wall. The cultists were outgunned, plus they had made a fatal mistake showing their hand.

If they were manufacturing weapons such as these inside the hive, Holt thought, he may be able to persuade command to bring the entire building down. When the news of the uprising within Vinter first broke, defence forces were sent in. The battles were fierce, the cultists sacrificing themselves – and their prisoners – to defend their newly won territory. The decision had been made. Shut them in. Don't let them pass. Let the cultists starve in the mouldering tower.

All it would take is a few well-placed missiles. Holt had made the recommendation before, only to be told it was a waste of resources.

'Just keep the miscreants within Vinter's walls, Holt. And remember your place for Throne's sake.'

Better to defend the other hives. Better to keep watching the skies.

They'd been wrong and he would prove it.

The Vendetta's engines whined as it came about for another sweep. The cultists were already breaking rank, running back for the exit. The sound of battle was incredible, almost drowning out the sergeant's shout.

'Sir, head's up!'

Holt glanced up just in time to see something hurtling down from on high. Something large.

'Incoming,' the captain yelled, willing the Vendetta to bank out of the way. The pilot slew the gunship to the side, but not fast enough. The falling object smashed through the Vendetta's port wing, sending the craft spiralling out of

control., *Skyraptor* ploughed into the defensive wall, its lascannons still firing, a ball of flame blossoming into the rain.

Holt was thrown from his feet, his vox filled with the dying screams of his men.

‘What is it, sir?’ Lang asked, boggling at the steaming metal cocoon now half buried in the ground, metres away from *Skyraptor*’s burning wreck. As the cultist’s assault began anew, a hatch blew from the side of the pod, neatly taking out an armour-clad attacker. The sergeant’s face blanched behind his visor. ‘Could it be the Angels of Death, sir? Have they sent reinforcements?’

‘I don’t think so, sergeant,’ Holt replied, watching as another cultist rushed towards the pod, firing into its cramped quarters. The advance didn’t last long. A single shot from within downed the heretic, a haze of bone and brain matter exploding from the back of his head.

The captain was right. The figure that burst from the pod couldn’t have been more different to a Space Marine. Yes, it wore black armour, but it was as sleek as members of the Adeptus Astartes were imposing. It raced out of the pod, a heavily modified bolt pistol thundering in one hand, a power sword growling in the other – but it was the thing’s head that caused Holt to gape. It was completely encased in a bone-white death mask fashioned after a human skull, red eyes glowing above a grinning skeletal mouth.

‘Sir, what is it?’ the sergeant spluttered as the thing’s power sword neatly separated a cultist’s head from his shoulders.

‘A distraction,’ Holt replied, struggling to hold the mastiffs back, the hounds driven wild by the newcomer’s scent. They pulled on their chains, eager to get away, even as more cultists fell at the mysterious aggressor’s feet. ‘Whatever it is, it shouldn’t be here. Bring it down.’

‘But sir, the cultists—’ began Lang.

‘Bring them all down!’

Lang didn’t argue. Without another word he brought his lasrifle about and discharged a volley straight into the back of the macabre figure that was mowing down more cultists than Holt’s own men.

Not that it even seemed to notice. One of the armoured cultists lumbered forwards, swathing the skull-faced brute in promethium. The stranger disappeared beneath the flames, but still didn’t stop. It barrelled forward and slashed across the exo-skeleton’s rough chest-plates, opening the armour up in one solid strike. Whether the blade cut through the cultist’s flesh Holt couldn’t see, but even if the heretic survived the initial assault, the bolt lodged in his brain

finished him once and for all.

The cultist toppled back, the weight of his exo-suit pulling him down. Even then, the death-bringer didn't stop. It vaulted forward, planting a booted foot on the cultist's chest, propelling itself through the air, still peppering the cultists with bolts as it leapt.

Autocannon shells were already churning the mud around its feet when it landed on the other side of the fallen exo-skeleton, a round finding its target and knocking the killer from its feet. The power sword flew from its grip, but the creature didn't stay down. It rolled with the impact, springing back up to its feet as if it had just been stung by a wasp rather than hit with a shell that should by rights have ripped him in two. It continued running towards the open doors, not even pausing to slash at the tattooed cultist that stood in its path, opening the heretic's inked cheek with the needle-like talons that extended from its empty hand.

So that was the real reason it was here. Not to aid the fight, but to get inside the hive. Not while Holt still had breath in his lungs.

'Rend!' the captain screamed at the mastiffs, finally loosening his grip on their restraints. The two hounds charged forwards, the chains flailing behind them, catching wounded cultists as they tore past. They covered the no-man's-land in seconds, and yet incredibly – impossibly – the death-bringer seemed ready for them. Without even flinching, it turned, dispatching the first mastiff with a single clinical shot. Practiced. Fluid. Like an assassin from hell. Holt screamed in frustration as the beast's corpse slid to a halt in the mud, the smaller of the two dogs threw itself at the assassin, ready to close servo-powered jaws around that fearsome grinning mask.

'Rip his head off,' Holt yelled, reaching for his magnoculars to witness the mauling – but as they focused, a strained gurgle emanated from the back of the captain's throat.

'No,' he spat. 'That's not possible.'

The assassin was wrestling with the mastiff, holding the hound's jaws open with its gloved hands. The claws he had seen carve open the cultist's face were now embedded in the side of the dog's face, the augmented animal's body going into some kind of seizure.

With a sudden jolt, the assassin ripped the jaws apart, splitting the dog's head open like a ripe fruit. With barely a shrug, he pushed himself free of the still twitching body and reached for his bolt pistol that had been thrown aside during the attack.

Screaming with rage, Holt charged for the nearest gun-turret, roughly shoving a guardsman out of the way to get to the controls. He swung the autocannon around, finding the assassin in the sights and fired. The rest of his men joined the assault, the Assassin struggling to get to his feet as round after round thundered home.

‘Die, won’t you?’ Holt howled as the gun-tower bucked. ‘Just di—’

As one, every remaining mine in no-man’s-land erupted, sending mud and body parts high into the air. In his fury, Holt hadn’t seen the embattled assassin press a stud set into its belt, didn’t hear the sudden shrill tone that was perfectly masked by the percussive rumble of the autocannon. He wasn’t even prepared as shrapnel peppered the containment wall, a sliver of metal slicing straight through his protective visor, carving its way into the soft jelly of his right eye.

The pain would come later. For now, he was pulling himself back up from where he had fallen, knocked back by the combined force of the blasts, blood pouring from burst ear-drums.

With his one good eye, Holt scanned the battlefield, searching for any sign of the stranger.

There was none. As the sergeant ran up to him, Holt slumped to the ground, shock finally taking hold. Whatever that thing was, it had entered the hive – and Emperor help anyone who got in its way.

High in the Spires of the hive, Governor Vinter coughed violently, blood splattering across the rich dark brown rug. He’d purchased it just months before. Genuine Carnadon pelt. The best gelts could buy. How he’d loved slipping off his boots and feeling its deep soft pile beneath his toes. So luxurious. So extravagant.

‘The lower levels would kill for a carpet like this,’ he’d joked to his aide, pouring himself another glass of amasec.

It didn’t seem so funny anymore.

The governor had forgotten what it was like to be comfortable. He had no idea how long he’d been hanging from the wall of his chambers, nailed to the frame of his own official portrait, the cult leader’s idea of a sick joke. It could have been days, maybe weeks. Time had lost all sense of meaning. The memory of the heretic’s brutish face as the nails had been rammed home was all that was clear.

‘I don’t know much about art, governor but I know what I like.’

Why wouldn’t they just let him die?

Vinter tried to glower at the cult leader, rocking back and forth in front of the

makeshift shrine he'd erected on the other side of the office. It was useless. The governor couldn't even summon the energy to glare anymore. Instead he let out a long feeble moan – the greatest act of defiance he could manage.

The traitor stopped mid-chant, looking over his abnormally large shoulder.

'Quiet!' the brute rumbled. 'I'm praying!'

'So sorry to disturb you,' the governor murmured, amazed at how weak his voice sounded.

The cult leader turned back to the flayed skull that sat in the middle of his makeshift shrine. He reached up, caressing the heavy brow that formed a thick ridge over tiny, impossibly small eye sockets. His fingers lingered on the huge jutting jawbone, the large pointed canines. The heretic's head dropped into a deep bow before he rose to his full height. Even after all this time, Vinter was always surprised how big the traitor was. He must have been easily seven foot tall and seemed just as wide, muscles bunching beneath his heavily-tattooed skin. The governor felt sick to his stomach just looking at the freak, his broad back a pincushion of metal studs.

Or perhaps he was still nauseous from when Big Bruvva had broken both his legs. Surely he hadn't snapped them with his bare hands, as Vinter remembered. That was impossible wasn't it? It had to be another of the fevered dreams that had plagued him on the rare occasions that he'd managed to sleep hanging here.

The governor couldn't tell what was real or not anymore. Everything was a blur. The news that mutants were swarming through the underhive. The power going down. The sound of stuttering gunfire outside his office. Big Bruvva grabbing his aide by that lovely, slender neck Vinter had admired on so many occasions. The neck that cracked with the sound of splintering wood.

He hadn't seen her body hitting the carpet that she had so admired. He was too busy reaching for his gun.

The same gun Big Bruvva had twisted from his grip and used as a bludgeon.

His mind had blanked out most of the details – except for the pain. He remembered the pain. He'd lived with it ever since.

Big Bruvva turned and sniffed loudly, the bone thrust through his flat nose twitching obscenely.

'Should kill you for that,' his tormentor snarled, offering Vinter a glimpse of a terrifying row of filed teeth.

Please, the governor thought, proving that just when he couldn't disgust himself any more, there was further still to fall.

'Know why I don't?' Big Bruvva asked, thudding forward to bring himself

face-to-face with the broken man. When Vinter didn't respond, the cultist roared in his face, spittle flying from his pierced lips. 'Do you?'

'No,' the governor whimpered, trying to turn his head away from the brute's fetid breath. His head lolled forwards weakly instead.

Big Bruvva gazed up to the ceiling as if his piggy eyes could see the heavens. 'Because Gork wills it.'

The governor's stomach clenched at the name – one he hadn't even heard just over a month ago. He'd heard it enough since, chanted over and over again as the cult leader had daubed icons of his false god across Vinter's walls in lurid green paint. At least, he hoped it was paint.

Gork, Gork, Gork, Gork.

Big Bruvva would whirl towards him, his eyes wide with fervour, foam flecking the sides of his mouth.

'He's coming for us, governor. Coming to make us whole. Coming to make us ork!'

And that was the scariest thing of all. These simpletons believed, really believed, that this ork god, if that truly was what it was, was coming for them, to transform them into their twisted idea of perfection.

Not human, but greenskins. Xenos scum.

'Coming for us, coming for me.'

Oh, they were coming for him all right.

And then were Big Bruvva's followers, trooping in front of him, falling over each other to prove their devotion. Each one seemed larger than the last, muscles straining beneath taut skin that bled freely where the imbeciles had carved intelligible runes into their own flesh. It couldn't be natural. He'd seen big men before, men who'd worked hard to sculpt their bodies, but not like this. Throne knew what poisons they were pumping into their systems to swell their muscles to such unnatural proportions.

Yet the bigger the idiots were, the more damage they had lavished on their bodies, the warmer the welcome they received from their leader.

As long as they didn't dare to be bigger than Big Bruvva himself. Then they'd suffer. Then they'd be cut back down to size.

All over the governor's rug.

How desperate had things got in the underhive that deviants such as these could take control so easily? That their influence would stretch so far.

Why hadn't he been warned? Why weren't the authorities prepared?

Of course, the truth of the matter was that he had been told, his advisors

shuffling into his chambers, reporting the existence of a lowly mutant with an ork obsession.

‘He believes that he is a herald,’ Prefect Bodil had sneered as a hololith of the cult-leader appeared over the governor’s table, turning slowly in the air. ‘Sent to convert us to the xenos’ blasphemous faith.’ Bodil had chuckled as he’d made his report.

The ashen-faced man in the emerald robes sitting beside the prefect didn’t share the humour. This was Murkel, an astropath who had served Vinter well for many years, looking beyond the hive, feeding the governor secrets. Murkel’s sunken eyes seemed more troubled than ever. ‘There is a disturbance within the hive,’ the astropath muttered, his voice rarely louder than a whisper. ‘A presence I cannot identify.’

‘This herald?’ Vinter asked.

The astropath’s gaze dropped. ‘A devil from below.’

Bodil couldn’t hide his distain. ‘At the worst, he displays some low-level pysker abilities.’ His thin lips twisted into a superior smile. ‘Perhaps the bore is picking up on the coming troubles.’

The coming troubles. That’s how Bodil had described them. Such small words for the fleet of ork warships that were rampaging towards Ghul Jensen.

‘You think that’s what is galvanising this Big Bruvva character?’ the governor asked Murkel, and ignoring Bodil. ‘Fuelling the riots in the lower levels?’

‘We believe so, sir.’

Vinter thumped his fist sharply on the table. ‘Then it will only get worse the nearer the ork threat gets.’

The governor realised now that he should have listened, should have acted as soon as this muscled oaf had emerged from the Pit. If he’d cleaned that cesspool up years ago, when the sinkhole had first opened deep below the hive, none of this would have happened. His advisors had told him that the Pit had been a blessing in disguise, taking slums and crime-dens with it. Hundreds had died on that day, but thousands more had shed blood since. The wound in the bowels of Hive Vinter had since become an amphitheatre of sorts. The dregs of what could laughably be called society gathered on the edges, peering down into the Pit as combatants fought. Some used their fists, others caved in their rivals’ skulls with the debris that still littered the floor, the remnant of life before the sinkhole. The results were the same. The blood. The cheers. The gangs taking bets on the sidelines.

According to the reports, a rare few went voluntarily into the pit. Most were

thrown in kicking and screaming. If they survived the fall they'd fight for their lives. Winner takes all.

Until the next bout.

Big Bruvva had survived more fights than any other champion, but had used his newfound infamy to spread his unholy gospel. The word of Gork.

And now his followers had clambered out of the Pit to 'save' anyone who would listen, and slaughter those who would not. All while a plague of real ork ships was carving its way across the system, destroying everything that stood in its way.

Bodil reached forward and extinguished the hololith, snapping Vinter's thoughts to the here and now. 'I'm sure it is nothing to concern ourselves over, governor,' Bodil he said, but Vinter wasn't having any of that.

'Nothing to worry about?' the governor repeated, not quite believing what he was hearing. 'Bodil, Obstiria has already fallen. You do realise that, don't you?'

'Of course, sir.'

'The hive should be preparing for incursion.'

'As indeed we are—'

The governor had always hated being interrupted. 'Not facing dangers from within,' he continued. 'For the last time, how much of a threat is this cult?'

'The so-called 'Bruvvahood'? ' Bodil offered another of his shrill laughs. 'Mindless rabble, governor, nothing more. Violent, yes, but easily controlled.'

Vinter wondered if Bodil still believed they could be easily controlled when his head had been twisted from his scrawny shoulders.

He always thought Bodil was spineless.

The governor giggled at the words crossed his mind. The sound of a crazy man.

Big Bruvva buried his fist in Vinter's empty stomach to shut him up.

'You'll see,' the cult-leader said, grabbing Vinter's once immaculate hair and yanking his head back to face him. 'You'll all see when Gork comes.'

An alert blared from the cogitator embedded into the governor's desk. No, it was Big Bruvva's desk now, perfect for resting his filthy boots on. The cult leader plodded over and jabbed a glyph with a calloused finger.

'At last,' he growled. 'What happened? Did we break out?'

'No Boss,' replied in an equally guttural voice. 'There was a problem.'

'What kind of problem?' Big Bruvva asked, the chords on his neck standing out like ropes.

'You need to see for yourself.'

A grainy image flashed up on the monitor behind Big Bruvva. The Gork worshipper turned to see three of his men rushing down a dark corridor, armed to their sharpened teeth.

Vinter recalled the similar images he'd watched. His private defence force, the army he had spent years training, slaughtered at the hands of the insurgents. The dead mounting up one by one. All that effort keeping the extent of his empire building secret, skirting around rules and regulations, keeping his activities away from prying Administratum eyes whatever the cost, wasted.

Sounds hissed over the vox. Angry yells. The bark of weapons.

Screams.

The cultists dropped out of frame as a figure swept forward. A figure clad in black. A figure wearing the face of death itself.

Big Bruvva slammed his hand down on the controls, freezing the image. He took a step closer, almost pressing his flat nose against the screen, examining the stranger who had just cut down three of his best men.

And then he started to laugh; a deep, horrible sound.

'This is it,' he boomed, throwing his hands out wide in rapture, before whirling on Vinter. 'The Day of Reckoning is coming. This is the final test, as it was foretold!'

When Vinter didn't respond, Big Bruvva brought the back of his hand across the governor's cheek. 'Are you listening?'

The cultist snorted to himself as Vinter let out a pathetic whimper. 'Puny human,' he grinned, jabbing at the vox-control one more time.

'Take him down, boys,' Big Bruvva ordered, eyes blazing with sinful fervour. 'Take him down hard!'

Greenie had never felt so alive. Life had always been hard in the underhive. Ever since he was a kid he'd spent his days scavenging for tech, breaking into his neighbour's habs to pilfer whatever they'd stolen the day before, running home before his ill-gotten gains could be taken from him in turn and selling it to the highest bidder.

You never knew which gang would be in charge of the block when you woke up in the morning, not until you ventured outside to see which bodies were lying in the gutters. Not that the victors remained in power for long. Events moved quickly in the undercity.

Not anymore. The gangs were all gone, and for once Greenie was on the winning side.

On Gork's side.

He belonged here now, with his 'bruvvas' by his side and a gun in his hands. Greenie ran his pierced tongue over his newly pointed teeth. Shaving them into fangs had hurt like hell, but that's what Gork had commanded.

'It's a message to your enemies,' Big Bruvva had explained as Greenie had gone to work with the file. 'If you're willing to do this to yourself...'

'Imagine what we'll do to them!' Greenie had replied happily.

The pain had been worth it. Big Bruvva had even given him his new name. His parents had christened him Halcum, a weak human name. He wasn't weak any more. Now he was Greenie, on account of the fact that he'd dyed his hair the colour of jade before the teeth-filing ceremony. Yeah, it was falling out now, the chemicals having scorched his scalp, but he'd proved his devotion.

The Day of Reckoning was coming. Gork would make them whole. Would make them ork.

Greenie couldn't wait.

'He's in the power plant,' Rippa shouted from up front. Rippa was Greenie's hero. Other than Big Bruvva, Rippa was the largest cultist he'd seen so far, and therefore the best. He had more tattoos than anyone else too, thick green runes snaking across his broad back. Most of them were weeping, of course, the edges encrusted with dried blood. Rippa had made the ink himself, using the fungus that had started spreading across the walls of the hive the day that Big Bruvva had taken control.

Old Raine had said Rippa was an abomination – the mould had got into his blood.

Rippa had torn the old man's tongue out and left him to die in the street. Served him right. Greenie had always hated the arrogant old git. Always thought he knew best. He'd meant to go back and take Raine's head, boil off the flesh and present it to Big Bruvva himself as an offering, but the rats had got there first. There wasn't much left.

This was his chance to prove himself to them all. To Rippa, to Big Bruvva – to Gork.

'You'll go far, Greenie,' that's what Rippa had said. 'Just do what you're told.' And today he was being told to kill. Best kind of telling there was.

Of course, he didn't really know who it was they had to kill.

Rippa had shrugged when Greenie asked. 'Some git from outside the hive.'

'An invader?'

'Big Bruvva reckons it's a test, sent by Gork.'

Greenie didn't care about that. He just wanted to try out this new gun. He ran his head over the smooth barrel. What had Rippa called it? Yeah, that's right – a 'shoota'!

'Main generator room,' Rippa yelled. 'Come on!'

They obeyed without question. Of course they did. Rippa would crack their skulls otherwise. Greenie wanted his skull to stay the way it was – although he did fancy getting some of those fancy horn implants he'd seen on the others. Maybe he'd get one after he'd killed the git. A trophy.

The cultists ran into the vast chamber, giant turbines stretching up on either side like vast metallic cliffs. There was a narrow path down the middle, similar channels on either side. The noise was incredible, generators roaring like mud-lizards.

Greenie's skin tingled. You could almost feel the power in the air, the energy that the spire-scum had denied the underhivers for so long. Not now. Big Bruvva had shut off their power on the first day. Made them beg, just so that they could use their stupid little machines again – and then Big Bruvva had killed them anyway.

'Where is he, then?' one of the other cultists called out, struggling to be heard. They swept down all three paths, checking between the turbine towers, firing around corners, just in case the git was hiding in the shadows like the cowardly human it was. Not like them. They were going to be orks. They were going to win.

Greenie stuck close to Rippa, itching to find a target. He didn't have to wait long.

Shots rang out across the generator room, mixed with cries of triumph and then fear, as Greenie's brothers finally found their prey. He soon wished they hadn't.

'Get him!' Rippa yelled, running between two of the turbines and firing wildly ahead. 'Knock him down! Stomp him good. Dakka, dakka, dak—'

Rippa's head exploded. Just like that. One minute it was there, the next it was gone. His body continued to run before his legs realised that his brain had been pulped and simply stopped. Rippa's headless corpse toppled forward to land wetly on the floor.

Hot metal buzzed through the air like a swarm of angry hornets. Greenie ducked, slipping on Rippa's blood, and fell, a tumble that saved his life – for a few moments at least.

He never saw who fired the mortar that screamed above his head and barely

even registered its trajectory in the chaos, but by Gork did he feel the fireball that burst out of the turbine behind him, the clothes on his back melting in an instant. The pain of filing his teeth was nothing compared to this, but even with the world going mad, he knew what he had to do. For Rippa. For himself. Gritting his teeth so tight he thought they would crack, he scabbled across the slick floor towards where his gun had fallen. Someone else snatched it up – another new recruit, hardly a tattoo on his skin. The runt hadn't even been granted an ork name yet. He was still called Vorn, the same snivelling wretch Greenie had known in the schola.

'Hey, that's mine,' Greenie cried, staggering back up to his feet, ready to pull the weapon out of Vorn's hand, to kill him if necessary – but he didn't need to. A look of complete surprise flashed over the runt's face, four sharp points bursting out of his chest. They vanished as quickly as they'd appeared and Vorn dropped to the floor, his body convulsing.

Greenie didn't hang around to see Vorn's veins blackening, blood streaming from his dimming eyes. He was running from the thing that had already stepped over Vorn's corpse. Turned out Greenie didn't care about proving himself so much after all. All he cared about was survival.

As he fled, Greenie threw a look over his shoulder, more a reflex than any desire to know how much distance he'd put between him and certain death.

Not enough.

The claws raked against Greenie's skull as they slashed clean through his screaming face.

Big Bruvva roared in fury, sweeping a heavysset arm across the governor's table, sending its contents flying across the chamber.

Behind the cult leader, Vinter allowed himself the ghost of a smile.

Are you scared, yet Bruvva? Are you feeling as helpless as I was when I watched my own guard trampled beneath your followers' boots?

The governor knew what that thing was down there, knew what it could do. He'd seen reports, highly classified reports that no one outside Hive Jensen had been supposed to see. Secrets that had been commodities to trade, back when the world made sense, when he'd had been lord and master. Before this brute had ruined everything.

Big Bruvva wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand, shoulders heaving. 'It doesn't matter,' he growled. 'That freak will bleed soon enough, whatever it is.'

‘He’s coming for you, you know?’ Vinter was surprised to hear a voice challenging the oaf, even more so when he realised it was his own. ‘He won’t stop until he’s killed you too.’

Big Bruvva peered at the governor over his shoulder, a cruel grin spreading over his blunt features.

‘I’m counting on it...’

Anya could barely breathe, the stench of her fellow prisoners becoming more overpowering by the day. She had no idea how long they’d been crammed in these cages, suffocating in their own filth. The survivors of Big Bruvva’s purges. The lucky ones.

A bony elbow jabbed her in the ribs, but she’d taught herself not to react. Cause a scene and you’d be pulled out of the cage. Cause a scene and you’d die.

And so she kept quiet, watching their two guards inhaling spores from the mould they heated in a small metal bowl, their bodies shuddering with every ragged breath.

‘Blades,’ the thinner one of the two called out, his rough voice catching on the smoke. ‘You’ve got to try this stuff. Think I just saw Gork.’

Beside him, his obese companion half-choked on the fumes. ‘Where is Blades anyway?’ he hacked, his abnormally stretched earlobes joggling.

Anya knew exactly who they were talking about – the largest of their three guards. Tall, muscular and cruel with the habit of clanging his knife blades along the bars of the cages, not caring if he cut the terrified prisoners within.

‘Who cares?’ grinned the first guard. ‘All the more for us. Gork be praised.’

He raised his gaunt face, a dozy smile stretching across his tattooed features before his eyes went wide. He didn’t even have time to shout a warning before something heavy crashed wetly down between them, guttering the small fire and sending the bowl clattering across the floor.

In her cage, Anya gagged as she realised what had fallen from the access panel high above their heads. A slab of meat that had once been a man, his green-inked skin covered in blood, the arms that had once carried long wicked knives missing, ripped off at the shoulders.

The fat guard gaped before a jagged hole opened in his forehead, as another figure leapt down from on high, landing heavily on Blades’ corpse, gun still smoking. The thin cultist jumped back, grabbing his own weapon, but couldn’t even drag it from its holster before his face was shredded by the newcomer’s claws.

The guard hit the floor, limbs jerking as what was left of his features started turning black.

Anya looked up, locking eyes with the living nightmare that had so proficiently dispatched her tormentors; furious red orbs glaring back from a bone white face.

There were shouts from behind, the sound of running feet. She glanced over her shoulder, trying to see through the gaps left by her panicked fellow prisoners. A mob was running towards them, more cultists than she'd ever seen, guns already up and firing.

A shot thudded into their skull-faced saviour's chest, followed by another, but it didn't fall. It didn't even make a sound, simply swinging up its own weapon and firing a single bolt – not at its aggressors, but at the lock on Anya's cage. The door was open in an instant, the prisoners pouring out of the corridor and straight into the path of the approaching gunfire.

Anya didn't run. She shrank back into the cage and watched as the former captives were struck down, those who escaped the hail of bullets running in every direction, blocking the cultists' view of their skull-faced target, a perfect shield.

And then it was in the midst of them, moving so fast Anya could barely see. She slid down the bars, pressing her palms over her ears, trying to block out the rattle of bolts and the shrieks of those breathing their last. She screwed her eyes tight, expecting any minute for one of those shots to find her, cringing in the corner of her cage like an animal.

But the shot never came. After a while, Anya realised the sounds had stopped. Her hands dropped from her ears as, still shaking, she turned to see a carpet of bodies on the floor – prisoners and cultists alike. Limbs were at awkward angles, blood running in rivulets down rapidly cooling flesh. Somewhere someone was weeping, faint sobs that ended abruptly with a wet cough and a dry rattle.

She's seen enough massacres in the last few weeks, but nothing like this, cultists and prisoners alike united in death.

One body was missing as Anya nervously stepped out of the cage – a body with a bone-white face.

Big Bruvva's fist piled into the screen.

For the first time since the revolt, Vinter wanted to live, if only to witness their beloved leader's despair as his forces were diminished level by level. It couldn't be stopped now.

Any perverse enjoyment the cult leader had been deriving from the bloodshed was gone. As Big Bruvva turned to the vox his face was a mask of pure hatred. The heretic hunched over the desk, thumbing open a vox-channel that could deliver a message to every speaker in the structure simultaneously. The new lord and master of Hive Vinter was about to address the masses.

‘You think you’re so hard,’ he growled, leaning close to the vox-bead, his voice echoing around the corridors deep below them. ‘Well, Big Bruvva is about to teach you a lesson, do you hear?’

The doors of the cathedral blew open, blessed splinters hammering against the pews – and that wasn’t all. A figure was thrown into freshly defiled nave, knocked back by the force of a frag grenade, crashing into the ancient wooden benches.

It didn’t get a chance to stand. Even before the smoke had cleared, cultists thronged through the wrecked doors, emptying their guns into its black armour. From his perch, high in the gallery, Hurta saw a flash of white amidst the chaos. The freak’s skull mask.

He hated waiting. Always had. Even now, his trigger finger twitched, desperate to fire, but Big Bruvva had told them to wait for the signal. The moment had to be right.

The assassin struggled to rear up, chips of its armour flying in all directions. One of the cultists got near – too near – and was rewarded by talons digging deep into his leg. The Gork worshipper screamed as he was dragged in front of the assassin, his own brothers’ ammo slicing through him.

It was the opportunity skull-face had been waiting for. It was on its feet again, returning fire, kicking and swiping with those damned claws. Surely it couldn’t remain standing for long. It was surrounded. It was dead.

A brother Hurta had never seen before grabbed the assassin’s gun arm, yanking it back, attempting to rip every ligament in the freak’s shoulder. Old skull-face just swung around, driving its talons deep into the tall man’s neck, perforating muscle and bone. Another brother lost. Another dead.

But that was the freak’s first mistake. As the brother dropped, the assassin pulled its claws free, turning its back towards Hurta. The moment Hurta had been waiting for.

Big Bruvva’s voice hissed in Hurta’s ear-piece: ‘Now!’

Hurta squeezed his trigger, the harpoon bucking in his arms. The barbed spear shot forward, burying itself in the freak’s back with a satisfying crunch. So much

for that armour.

The assassin arched its back, pulling against the thick cord that stretched back up to Hurta's harpoon. Hurta grabbed at the gargoyle that was crouched beside him, anchoring himself as the refined acoustics of the cathedral sang to the sounds of harpoons being fired from all around the gallery.

Spears plunged into the assassin's flesh, barbed spears impossible to pull out without doing more damage than they had caused going in. Spears dipped in poison. Big Bruvva had promised the freak a lesson. This was it.

Within seconds, the assassin was caught in a web of cords, each reeling back into the harpoons, holding the freak tight. At first it thrashed, a couple of Hurta's brothers losing their footing and crashing down from their hiding place.

Not Hurta. Hurta hung onto the gargoyle, even as the freak stopped struggling, its head finally lolling drunkenly forward. A stream of red drool flowed from its slash of a mouth, the slabs hissing and steaming where it pooled.

A cheer went out from the faithful, a roar of victory, but silence descended as a green-skinned giant swaggered into the cathedral.

Big Bruvva reached out and, almost gently, tipped the back of the freak's head. The cult leader smiled and then planted a pile-driving punch on the assassin's cheek. Its head snapped around so fast that Hurta was sure its neck must have broken instantly.

When the head fell limply back, the side of the death mask was smashed, opened by the spikes implanted in Big Bruvva's knuckles, dark blood oozing from the cracks.

'Bring it to the Pit,' Big Bruvva sneered.

It was like coming home. The roar of the crowd. The rubble beneath his feet. The stench of stale blood and fear.

The Pit.

It had been here that Big Bruvva had pulled a bone from beneath a collapsed wall and used it to stave in the head of his first opponent. Here where his first vision had seared its path across his mind. Here where he had first heard Gork's name, screamed across eternity.

They were coming now. Big Bruvva could feel them. Ready to descend. Ready to crush and stomp and kill. It wouldn't be long.

Bombs falling. Guns firing. Bones ground into the dirt.

The Day of Reckoning.

Big Bruvva swayed on his feet, but no one would see. He was standing in the

shadows, all eyes on the freak, hanging from chains in the centre of the Pit. Limp. Broken.

Big Bruvva would break him some more.

He could feel the drugs burning through his veins, his muscles hardening second by second, pressing against the restraints of the exo-suit. It hurt. Gork knew it hurt, but pain was good. Pain kept you alive and when you were alive you could make others dead.

Stomp 'em. Crush 'em. Kill 'em.

Big Bruvva lurched forward, ignoring the pain squirming at the back of his mind.

They are coming. They are coming. They are coming.

The suit's pistons hissed with every step – out into the arena, out into the light.

Stomp 'em. Crush 'em. Kill 'em!

The crowd went wild as soon as they saw their champion striding purposely towards the freak, his name chanted over and over again. It mixed with the cry inside his head, the otherworldly bellow that threatened to split his skull in two.

‘Bruv-va! Bruv-va! Bruv-va! Bruv-va!’

He was running now, arms raised, teeth bared, ready to rip this deformity limb from limb.

Big Bruvva roared, a single wordless howl that echoed around the arena, his followers instinctively joining the chorus, drowning out the harsh grind of the chainblades mounted on each of Big Bruvva's arms.

And still the freak didn't move.

Maybe it was unconscious. Maybe it was dead. It didn't matter. Big Bruvva would cut it in–

The chains attached to the post broke free, the freak ducking as the chainblade buried itself into the stone. The teeth caught, just for a second, but long enough for the assassin to brake his curved claws against Big Bruvva's exposed chest.

The pain didn't even register as he brought his free arm around, cracking hard into the side of the freak's nightmarish face. The assassin stumbled back as Big Bruvva pulled the embedded chainblade out, the momentum causing him to take a step back – far enough to avoid the boot that swung out to take his legs away from beneath him. Blood sprayed from the freak's cracked mask, hissing as it splashed against the rubbish beneath their feet.

Big Bruvva brought his right chainblade down, but the freak rolled out of the way, sweeping up with those claws, cutting through cables and wires to find the welcoming flesh of Big Bruvva's left forearm. The blades did their work, cutting

deep to the bone.

Big Bruvva's vision flared white, the pain silencing everything else, the roar of the crowd, the buzz of his blades. Even the thunder in his head.

He had suffered worse injuries in the past, but he bawled with the agony, and Bruvva barely noticed the freak springing up to plant a boot in the middle of his blistered chest.

The force of the blow threw him back, the hand of his ravaged arm cramping into an involuntary claw of its own.

This couldn't be happening. The skull-faced freak had inflicted a few scratches, nothing more, but as Big Bruvva lost his footing, it was as if his body was going into shock.

Realisation dawned as he hit the floor. Those claws. They were poisoned, just as the spears in the cathedral ambush had been. His body felt like it was burning up from the inside – matching the flames that raged through his mind.

Stomp 'em. Crush 'em. Kill 'em

He couldn't even tell if his followers were still cheering or had been shocked into silence. All he could hear was the sound of a battlefield. A single, monotonous war cry drowning out every else. He forced his head around in time to see the freak swinging a weapon down towards him. No, not a weapon. Those damned claws.

Big Bruvva twisted, the exo-suit's joints whining in protest, and batted the claws away with his near useless-arm. He brought it down hard, crushing the hand beneath the exo-suit's armour plating and rolled on top of his opponent. He knew what he was going to do, even as he planted an armoured knee into the assassin's chest, a pleasing spurt of blood spraying through those skull-like lips.

With more effort than it should have taken, he drew his near-dead arm back sharply, twisting it so the chainblade met the freak's own mangled arm. The teeth sliced through armour and flesh, before it reached bone. The assassin bayed, the first noise Bruvva had heard it make, scarlet eyes widening behind the mask.

When the freak pulled its arm back to its chest, the severed hand stayed where it was, claws still twitching. It grabbed its bloody stump in shock, long enough for Big Bruvva to grab the assassin's throat with his good hand. He pressed hard, feeling the freak's windpipe buckle beneath his grip, heard a choked gasp behind the mask. Not such a monster now. Strip away the skull and the weapons and the armour and the freak was just another stinking human ripe for sacrifice, one more tribute to Gork.

Stomp it. Crush it. Kill it.

The freak clawed helplessly at Big Bruvva's arm, the cult leader lifting his prize into the air. No poison could stop him. No wound would bring him to his knees. He was the Chosen One. He was Gork's herald. He was triumphant.

Big Bruvva held the freak aloft, ignoring the pain. This was his moment. He threw back his head and joined in his followers' cry.

'Waaaaaag—'

He didn't even see the freak move. There was no warning. One minute it was hanging from his fist, like a slab of meat, and the next it was thrusting the stump of its arm through the protective cage that surrounded Big Bruvva's head. He had no time to react. The bloody end mashed into his face, stripping the skin away in an instant. The flicker of a memory replayed through his mind. The pool of gore steaming on the cathedral floor, eating through the stone slabs like acid.

Big Bruvva had no idea if he screamed. He saw Gork's bloodshot eyes, painted large across a blazing cosmos, even as his own were reduced to a viscous jelly that dribbled out of melting sockets. Gork was laughing, throwing back his mighty head and roaring with mirth.

Big Bruvva never felt his hand loosen around the freak's throat. Never felt it press its stump deeper, burning through his skull and into his brain. Never even felt his knees buckle, his engorged body crashing forward, the exo-skeleton smashing into the jagged debris on the floor.

As he died, the only thing Big Bruvva could hear was Gork's mocking laughter, taunting the man who would have been an ork.

His Chosen One.

His fool.

The stars were falling across Ghul Jensen. That's what it looked like for Governor Vinter at least. New suns blossomed in the sky before fading, fire streaking through the heavens.

This was what Big Bruvva had wanted the governor to see, why he'd kept him alive. The Day of Reckoning. The Coming of Gork.

The idiot would have claimed that the explosions in the upper atmosphere were a sign, a portent even, if his vocabulary hadn't been that of a child.

He was right about one thing. It was a sign – that bombs would soon start falling. That ships would be descending through those leaden clouds, crushing all opposition.

Not that Big Bruvva would see it himself. The cult leader had left the smashed screen operating in the office, so that Vinter could witness him slaughter the

Assassin first hand. The governor wished he'd still had the strength to cheer as the brute had fallen in front of his followers, his face an unrecognisable mess – but he could hardly breathe. It wouldn't be long now. A blessed relief.

He didn't know what had happened to the Assassin. As soon as the cult leader crashed to the floor, his disciples swarmed into the arena, desperate to take down the creature that had killed their so-called herald. The scene became a confused mess of bodies, gunfire crackling over the speakers, as the Gork worshippers turned on each other. Big Bruvva's lieutenants were desperate to take control, filling the gap left by their leader's demise, even before his body grew cold.

The governor wondered how long the Assassin had lasted in the melee; which of the mindless drones had delivered the killing blow. It didn't matter anymore. Soon they'd all be dead. The weakest of laughs gurgled in Vinter's throat as he imaged the cultists welcoming real orks with open arms. He could just imagine the response, the leer on the orks' faces as they cut the pretenders down where they stood.

'Stupid humies!'

There was movement in the corridor outside. He'd heard muffled explosions and gunfire earlier, the feuding cultists making for the spires to claim their throne. Let them have it, for all the good it would do.

The door opened. Vinter couldn't look up. His head was like a lead weight.

He followed the noise across the room, booted footsteps on the carpet. It wasn't like the heretics to be so quiet. Where were the jeers and yells, the cries of victory? Maybe they were there and just couldn't hear them. For all he knew, his senses had finally deserted him. A blessed release.

A shadow passed in front of him, blocking out the light of the panoramic window. Something pressed up against his chin, pushing his head back. Something that burned. The governor looked up, expecting to find himself staring at the idiotic features of a cultist, all tattoos, studs and pointed teeth. Instead, the face in front of him was bone white, albeit streaked with dried blood. Red eyes regarded him coldly, the death mask frozen in an eternal smile.

Vinter wheezed a weak approximation of a laugh. 'So, you weren't sent for Big Bruvva at all. Of course not. What would the Imperium care about a heretic and his motley band of followers, eh? Not when you could have me.'

The Assassin didn't answer. That wasn't a surprise. Nor was the fact that the Imperium had known all along. About the illegal arms. About the army.

About the plans to attack the other hives.

He could have ruled Ghul Jensen – no longer the poor relation among the

founding families. Vinter, a name they had always ridiculed. A name they would have learnt to fear.

Until that dolt had dragged himself from the Pit – and the moment Obstiria fell. It had only been a matter of time.

Not that such a triviality would stop the Assassinorum. Why leave things to chance when you could send an Eversor to tie up any loose ends? To finish the job.

Typical Imperium efficiency, praise be to the Throne.

Behind the bleeding Assassin, far in the distance, a fireball erupted from the walls of Hive Jensen. The first casualty of the incursion.

Hive Vinter would be next. The governor wondered how long it would be until all the towers were burning.

The knife slipped easily into his parched throat. He locked eyes with the Assassin as he was released from his torment, his chambers bathed in the red glare of the battles already raging outside.

Was the Assassin's death mask grinning a little wider as he slipped away? And what was that sound Vinter heard as he slipped away? The sound of the Eversor's body crumpling into a heap at his feet, its wounds finally taking their toll?

The governor would never know.

Perhaps the Day of Reckoning had come for them both.

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Cavan Scott's writing for Black Library includes the short stories 'Doom Flight' and 'Trophies', with lots more on the way. He has written novels, audio dramas, short stories and comics based on many popular series. He lives and works in Bristol.

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