

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

SANCTUS REACH

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Josh Reynolds

## *Defensive Emplacement Dornmeyer, Hive Morn*

The orks spilled through the ruptures in the outer shell of the hive like blood from a gaping wound. A raucous cacophony split the smoky air, duelling with the shriek of engines and the stolid thump of the internal defensive batteries as they were winched down by the emplacement servitors to fire at the horde that rapidly filled the outer hab-ring of Hive Morn.

The shell of the hive shuddered again as the ork machines outside on the dead dusty plain emptied their weaponry into it. The vibration of the constant barrage sounded like distant thunder, but grew louder when one of the great plates of metal, forged and fitted in centuries past and hundreds of metres across in width, was torn from the shell of the hive and punched inwards to fall down into the hive like a man-made comet. Buildings were obliterated in its descent, and orks and humans both vanished in its shadow. When it hit, the ground shook, and cracks crawled upwards along the foundations of the defensive batteries. A cloud of smoke and dust spread outwards from the point of impact like a choking, opaque wave.

Ghul Jensen, twenty-fourth to bear the name, twenty-fifth to rule the world for which he was named, drew his chainsword and thumbed the activator switch as the dust cloud rolled over the emplacement wall and enveloped him. Everything went dark for a moment before the internal systems of his artificer armour, forged for the first to bear his name, acted to compensate. The armour was a thing of unique artistry, crafted by the servants of the Machine-God. It was not quite up to the standards of the power armour worn by the Emperor's truest servants, but it was better than nothing. Targeting readouts scrolled across the eyepieces of the grotesque war-mask he wore, and he could feel the ancient

pneumatic systems wheeze to life, tightening and hissing as he readied himself. He glanced about, checking that the defences were shipshape, one last time.

Hive Morn, like all of the hives of Ghul Jensen, was arranged in a series of ascending, ever-contracting hab-rings, protected by internal emplacements which marked the demarcation line between the outer and inner ring. Great, reinforced bridges marked the circumference of each emplacement, connecting the upper to the lower. At a single word of command, he could order the bridges destroyed, isolating each hab-ring as necessary. The thought evoked a momentary sense of nausea in him. The bridges were ancient, as were the hab-rings themselves, the work of generations now lost to history. He wasn't entirely sure that they could be replaced once lost. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, but he knew, with a growing sense of dreadful certainty, that such a hope was in vain.

Outside, the last of the outer defensive batteries had fallen silent. There were orks on the outer shell now, as well as beneath it. Bodies fell like rain from far, far above as the orks assaulted the shell batteries and sent their brave, doomed crews hurtling down into the depths of the hive they had fought to defend. The orks below were ravaging the destitute slums that marked the narrow circle between the lowest hab-ring and the hive shell. Jensen could hear the raw thunder of thousands of screams echoing up from the shanty-city that grew in the hive's roots, and he closed his eyes, whispering a prayer for forgiveness. When he opened them, he looked around.

The defence forces of Hive Morn were clad in the char-grey livery of the noble house that bore the hive's name. Despite the chaos of the ork attack and the destruction being wrought on their home, they remained steady, checking their weapons and readying themselves for the assault to come. Hive Morn was the closest to the ork dropsites, and the first in their path. If they couldn't hold the orks here, the other hives would be in danger.

But he wouldn't let that happen.

He turned to make sure that his wives were nearby. Fifteen women clad in form-fitting, black, gilt-edged carapace armour beneath flowing robes of silk, stood ready to fight beside him. The daughters of the fifteen noble families of the world of Ghul Jensen, pledged to him in political courtship, as was tradition. The House of Jensen ruled Ghul Jensen, though the other fifteen families had their say, through the mouths of their daughters. One of them would become his Consort, and provide an heir to the gubernatorial throne, but until that moment, they served as bodyguards and advisors.

Each woman wore the colours of her hive of origin, and they carried a variety

of weapons – Sasha swung her crackling power maul in a lazy arc, Beatrix cocked one of the dozen stub pistols holstered about her person, the others hefted their axes, swords, glaives, lasguns and other, more esoteric weapons.

The emplacement trembled beneath his feet. The cloud was thinning, and he could hear the rumble of hundreds of feet on the rockcrete below. The emplacement had sheer walls, but that wouldn't prove much of an obstacle for the orks. He drew his ornate laspistol from the holster on his hip and readied it. Beatrix caught his eye, and was about to speak, when the sound of ork engines filled the immediate area, echoing around them. A spatter of gunfire erupted from the defenders, forcing them to seek cover.

The orks wore crude rockets strapped to their backs, and they corkscrewed through the smoke on tails of flame. Some didn't reach their target, either flying too low and slamming into the emplacement or else going too high and hurtling off towards some unknown point, their frustrated cries trailing after them. But most made it. They landed awkwardly, but they landed and set to with an enthusiasm that was terrible to behold up close. Men died without firing a shot, so quick was the attack.

Great crude blades rose and fell as the butchery commenced, and primitive firearms belched and thundered. To their credit, the soldiers of Hive Morn recovered quickly, but Jensen could see that they had already lost the advantage. They outnumbered the orks ten to one, but it would take them precious minutes to put that advantage to use. By then, they would be the ones outnumbered, as the rest of the greenskin assault reached the emplacement, and clambered up the dusty slope to reach the bottom of the wall.

Jensen traded blows with a muscular ork clad in fatigues reeking of oil and blood. It gabbled at him in its savage tongue, taunting him. He lurched forward and the serrated brow of his helmet struck the ork's head, tearing it open. The ork reeled, and Jensen opened its belly with a flick of his blade. Nearby, an emplacement exploded, and he cursed himself as he realised the true purpose of the assault. The rocket-orks had come to silence the guns that were preventing their comrades from pressing the assault.

Beatrix screamed, and he whipped around to see her stagger back, clutching her abdomen as she emptied her pistol into an ork's leering face. Blood spattered the ground at her feet, and he felt his heart lurch. The ork she'd shot fell, but there were dozens more cresting the wall. One of the other women caught Beatrix and pulled her back out of the line of fire as she emptied a second pistol. Sasha caught an ork beneath its jutting chin with her maul and sent it flying head

over feet backwards and off the emplacement. Blades stabbed and guns roared, but the green tide crested the wall again and again.

‘Fall back,’ Jensen roared, hacking down the next ork over the wall. The defence forces began to retreat with disciplined alacrity, firing as they went. Jensen fired his laspistol, killing an ork who’d been about to brain a soldier. His chainsword growled as it bit through alien muscle and bone, and he booted one of the aliens in the face, sending it toppling backwards even as it crested the emplacement. He caught Sasha’s eye and jerked his head. ‘You as well,’ he said. ‘Fall back to the next emplacement.’

‘And what are you planning to do?’ she demanded.

‘I am planning to show our guests the full width and breadth of Hive Jensen hospitality,’ he said, trying to sound confident. The emplacement shuddered as the gun turrets mounted on the next emplacement began to fire down from the slope of the hive’s core. Soon enough, this entire hab-ring would be nothing but pulverised ruins and mounds of corpses – mostly green ones, he hoped. ‘Go, Sasha. I’ll cover your retreat.’

‘But—’

‘Begin the evacuation procedures – civilians first. We’ll need to hold the orks here as long as possible, so that the other hives can prepare their defences,’ he said, steamrolling over her objections. He was hereditary-governor. It was his job – his duty – to see to the defence of his people, and he would not be the first Ghul Jensen to fail in that task. He hesitated, and then said, ‘Make sure Beatrix is on the first transport.’

He saw Sasha’s eyes widen, and he thought that she was about to argue with him, when something struck him, ripping the air from his lungs and sending him flying backwards. As he fell, he saw that the section of the emplacement he’d been on had disintegrated, struck by ork artillery fire. He hit the ground hard, and only the durability of his armour saved him from being pulverised on impact. Through the rain of debris, he thought he saw Sasha and the others falling back, and he allowed himself a moment of relief, before he tried to push himself to his feet.

The servos in his armour whined and protested, clogged with dust or damaged in the explosion. He fell onto his side, and tried to roll over. He saw shadows approaching through the smoke. He’d lost his weapons save for the poniard sheathed on his hip, but it was less a weapon than a family heirloom. Nonetheless, he clawed awkwardly for it as three orks charged towards him. *Stupid way to die*, he thought.

A blur of white and green interjected itself between the closest ork and its prey. Jensen rolled onto his back, his armour whining in protest. A man, Jensen saw, clad in green and white silks and carapace armour made from overlapping scales of bronze-hued ceramite, his head covered by a heavy conical helmet surmounted by a spike, with a visor covered in a curling script that had been etched into the metal.

The warrior chopped through the ork's wrist with the curved blade he carried in one hand. The ork, undeterred, roared and drove a fist into its foe's helmet. The warrior staggered, but slashed out, opening the ork's throat to the bone. The xenos slumped. The warrior lifted the autogun that dangled below his arm on a sling and fired two precise shots, dispatching the other orks. He turned and looked down at Jensen. 'Hereditary-Governor Ghul Jensen the Twenty-Fourth,' he said. His voice was tinged with an accent that Jensen didn't recognise. His armour was scorched and stained in places, and liberally festooned with spare ammunition pouches and grenades.

'I-I am he,' Jensen said.

'It wasn't a question,' the other man said. 'Up, hereditary-governor,' he continued, reaching down to clasp Jensen's forearm in a surprisingly gentle grip. 'This is no time for lying about.' The warrior cocked his head, as if waiting. Jensen stared up at him, uncertain of how he was supposed to respond.

'You should laugh. He was joking,' a new voice cut in. Jensen turned and saw a bald, scarred man in a heavy fur coat stalk towards them. He felt a thrill of revulsion cut through him as he recognised the markings on the man's hairless scalp as the brands of the Inquisition and the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. 'Big one for jokes, is our Ismail. The veritable physical embodiment of farce on this misbegotten plane of existence. Pardon me, some of us have work to do,' the psyker continued, striding past the governor and the warrior, his fur coat flapping about his lean frame. Blue lightning crackled about his head like an elemental crown, and he shoved his hands out, letting the sleeves of his coat slip down to his elbows.

More orks thrust themselves through the gap in the emplacement. They came in a rush, bellowing brute war songs. The psyker interlaced his fingers and cracked them. 'Boil, burn and burst, little rage beasts,' he said, clenching his fists.

The howls of the charging orks were cut short as their skulls exploded one by one. The bodies tumbled into heaps about the bald man and he grimaced in distaste as he scraped steaming lumps of green matter from his coat. 'I hate

when they do that,' he said, looking at Jensen. 'My name is Harks, by the by. Not that you asked. Not that anyone ever asks.'

'We have acquired the hereditary-governor,' Ismail murmured, and Jensen heard the vox-link in his own helmet crackle as someone replied. 'Understood. Falling back,' the warrior said. He lifted his autogun and checked the ammunition clip. 'Harks, escort the hereditary-governor to the next emplacement. I will dissuade any pursuit.'

'Just don't get killed, Ismail,' Harks snapped. 'You know how Mazarin feels about replacing his tools.' The warrior's only reply was the roar of his autogun, as he fired off a burst into the smoke billowing through the shattered emplacement.

Harks caught his arm. 'Come on, your governor-ship. Leave the Tallarn to his fun. The inquisitor would like to see you.' The psyker grinned unpleasantly as Jensen tore his arm loose from his grip. His teeth were black and shiny, like polished chips of obsidian. 'It's not polite, rescheduling without prior notice. No one likes that.'

'I could care less what you like,' Jensen spat. But he followed the psyker nevertheless, the dull, echoing boom of Ismail's weapon following him the entire way.

### *Defensive Emplacement Horabin, Hive Morn*

Jensen flexed his hand as his servants cleaned the clogged servos of his armour with holy unguents and sacred oils. They scurried about him as he stood in the command bunker of the second of Hive Morn's defensive emplacements. Outside, the orks were already assaulting the walls, and the air was heavy with the stink of weapons fire. Jensen longed to be out on the walls, fighting beside his people, but there were long-delayed courtesies to at last be observed.

Inquisitor Emilio Mazarin of the Ordo Xenos had arrived not long before the orks, bearing word of the destruction of Obstiria and the Space Marines of the Obsidian Glaives and wanting to meet with the hereditary-governor. Jensen had avoided the inquisitor with all due tact, hurrying to the front, leaving Mazarin to enjoy the hospitality of Hive Jensen. Mazarin, it seemed, was not content to do so. The inquisitor had followed him into the warzone, and not unaccompanied.

There were two others in Mazarin's retinue besides the Tallarn and the psyker. One was a thickly-built soldier, clad in faded, colourless fatigues, carapace armour and a full-face helmet in the shape of an eagle's head. He cradled a

combat shotgun in the crook of one bare, scarred arm, and idly tapped blunt fingers against the intricately carved stock. The other was a woman, wearing a vibrant red coat embroidered with the sigils of the Adeptus Mechanicus. She was slim and pretty, in an artificial way, with skin that was too perfect to be natural, and eyes that were too clear to be the ones she had been born with. Her pale fingers tapped against the hilts of the two swords sheathed on her hips. Jensen shivered slightly when he saw her coat bunch and rustle, as if there were something moving restlessly beneath it.

They stood to either side of Inquisitor Mazarin, who sat on a stool that someone had hurriedly fetched for him. The inquisitor was a wasted figure, swaddled in heavy, dark robes. He smelled of age and machine oil, and the two hands that balanced lightly on the head of his cane were withered claws wrapped in blotchy bandages. There was no human face beneath his voluminous hood, merely a metal mask, wrought into the cruel, beaked visage of a bird of prey. Two servo-skulls hovered over him, one with protuberant optical sensors in place of its empty sockets, and the second bearing an old fashioned vox-broadcaster where its rictus grin ought to have been. Both appeared to be recording everything going on around them.

The optical servo-skull floated closer to Jensen, its crimson lenses whirring and clicking as it examined him from every angle. The vox on the second skull crackled, spat and then said, *‘My compliments, Hereditary-Governor Jensen. Harks tells me that you are a man of rare capability. Pragmatic, with a keen mind. There are not many like you in these dark times.’*

Jensen twitched on his stool and glanced at the psyker, who grinned his black grin and tapped the side of his head. Jensen swallowed and turned back to Mazarin. The inquisitor hadn't moved, but the optic-skull hummed around Jensen, interposing itself. Jensen licked his lips and said, ‘Forgive me for not meeting with you when you arrived, but, as you can see, we have an – ah – situation.’ He gestured about him, indicating the controlled chaos of the command bunker. Communications screens flashed, showing the devastation of the ork advance. Dust drifted down as the emplacement to which the bunker was connected came under fire.

A burst of garbled noise emerged from the vox-skull. It took Jensen a moment to realise that it was laughter. *‘And a sense of humour as well. Oh mercy, you are a treasure,’* Mazarin said, via his floating proxy. A frail hand flapped at the woman. *‘I am being rude. You have already met Harks, and Master Ismail of Tallarn and the Doraha. Allow me to introduce you to my other companions –*

*this is Olympia, and the lump of gristle is Mamluc-9. Don't ask me what his real name is – they forget it when they put on the mask, and I never bothered to learn it, myself. Could be anyone under there... then, you know a little something about that yourself, don't you, Hereditary-Governor Jensen?*

Jensen hesitated. He nodded brusquely, and reached up, without thinking, to stroke the contours of his own mask. He had five others just like it, and the body doubles to wear them. Besides his wives and the upper echelons of the planet's military, no one was supposed to know of the existence of those men. Each of the five had been coached and trained in his mannerisms, and taught some of what he knew – enough to convince the troops under their command that they were the hereditary-governor in the flesh. Useful in situations such as this one, where he needed to be everywhere at once. 'It is a regrettable fact that sometimes a ruler must appear to be in one place, when he is actually in another.'

*'How many times has that xenos-worshipping cult – which was based out of Hive Noctis, by the way, you're quite welcome, no need for thanks – tried to kill you now? Seven, eight...?'*

Jensen grunted. 'Fifteen,' he said, knowing full well that the inquisitor likely knew the specifics of each and every one of those incidents.

'Sixteen, technically,' Harks said. 'Your – they are your women, aren't they? – your women did horrible things to a very unlucky assassin several months ago, but didn't tell you.' He grinned widely. 'They didn't want to worry you.'

Mazarin shook his head. *'I apologise, hereditary-governor. To Harks, even the strongest mind is but an open book, which he can't help but read over the shoulder of its owner.'*

'Except yours,' Harks said, with evident bitterness and not a little fear, Jensen suspected. 'And his,' he added, motioning towards Mamluc-9. The latter twitched, as if in amusement. Jensen looked at the mask, and felt a tingle of disgust as he took in the hooks and wires which anchored it to its wearer's flesh. He wondered if the man had been a volunteer. He suspected that where the Inquisition was concerned, 'volunteer' was a very broad term.

*'The world is made of limits, Harks. It is best for a man to know his, and act accordingly. Which brings us to you, Hereditary-Governor Jensen,'* Mazarin said. He tapped the floor with his cane. *'Master Ismail, if you would...?'*

'By current estimates, Ghul Jensen has, at best, a month left,' Ismail said.

'A month? Of what?' Jensen asked. Part of him already knew the answer, however, and a sick feeling rose up in him. If an entire fortress-monastery full of

Space Marines had fallen, what hope had his world?

‘Operational effectiveness,’ Ismail said. ‘In a month, the orks will have overrun this world.’ The Tallarn hesitated. Then, in a softer tone, he added, ‘I am sorry, hereditary-governor.’

‘He is, too,’ Harks said. ‘Hidden depths of pity, our angel of the desert.’ He spat.

‘*Quiet, Harks,*’ Mazarin said. ‘*Go on, Master Ismail.*’

‘With rapid redeployment, and adaptive strategies, operational effectiveness might be extended,’ Ismail said. ‘Given the calculations of the size of the enemy force, as passed on by the Obsidian Glaives, and my own estimation as to the defensive capabilities of the inner worlds in the Sanctus System, such a strategy will increase the statistical likelihood of a successful defence of Alaric Prime.’

‘Now ask him by how much,’ Harks muttered.

Mazarin didn’t bother to reprimand the psyker this time. ‘*You are an intelligent man,*’ he said, as the optic-skull circled Jensen slowly. ‘*Your current strategy is untenable. A man who seeks to defend everything loses all, as the war-poets of Chogoris say. You must pull your forces back, abandon the other hives and concentrate on defending Hive Jensen.*’

‘What – no,’ Jensen said. He shook his head. ‘No! That would mean condemning millions to death – we don’t have the means to evacuate one hive safely, let alone all of them.’

‘Who said anything about evacuating the hives?’ the woman in Mechanicus red trilled softly. She sang, rather than spoke, as if she were a life-size figurine from a music box. It was beautiful, but there was an artificial edge to it, as if a machine were trying to replicate a bird’s call. ‘Death comes swift or slow, but it comes all the same.’ She placed her hand on Mazarin’s shoulder and he patted it.

‘*Thank you, Olympia. As ever, your wisdom cuts to the heart of things.*’

Mazarin tapped his cane on the floor. ‘*Master Ismail?*’

Ismail looked at Jensen. ‘Ghul Jensen is doomed,’ he said bluntly, no trace of his earlier sympathy in his words. ‘As is Malaghai Morca and Squire’s Rest,’ he continued, naming two of the other planets in the Sanctus System. ‘But Alaric Prime can be saved. If it’s given enough time to ready its defences, it can weather the orks.’

Jensen didn’t bother to ask why. It was obvious – the Knight Worlds were valuable, but hive worlds were cheap, as were the lives of their populations. He swallowed, and looked around the command bunker. Outside, he could hear the sound of the assault redoubling in intensity. Soon enough, the defence forces of

Hive Morn would have to fall back, and then again and again. The same bloody story would be repeated over and over again at each hive, whether the orks chose to take them one at a time or all at once.

He'd known his world – the world he had ruled since his father had passed over the black river and into the Emperor's hall – was dead the moment the first ork ship crashed on the plains, the heat of its descent turning the sands of the wastes to glass. But to abandon his people in such a fashion galled him. He could still save some of them – couldn't he?

He looked around the bunker, trying to find a friendly face. The closest he came was Ismail. The warrior exuded calm, but not compassion. No, there was no hope there. He considered demanding an evacuation attempt of some sort, in return for his efforts, but the more pragmatic part of him knew that any guarantee the inquisitor gave him would be a lie. The orks were above as well as below, attacking the orbital defences. The conflict raging there was as effective a cage as any blockade. There would be no escape. Not for anyone. 'What about you?' he said.

*'What about us?'* Mazarin replied.

'You say my world is doomed. That there is no escape. And yet here you are. Did you come to die with us?' Even as he spat the question, he wondered if he could somehow save someone – his wives perhaps, his cousins, anyone. If there was a ship, he could save a few people at least. Even if he had to take it from its owner at the barrel of a gun.

He'd had vessels of his own, a small but expensive fleet of yachts, but both his and the ships owned by the ruling houses of the other hives had been pressed into service to bolster the orbital defences and were now so much as debris floating in the upper reaches of the stratosphere. Lightly armed as they had been, they hadn't lasted long, though the crews had fought bravely.

*'Regrettably, my personal vessel was damaged during our arrival. The skies are even more dangerous than the ground.'* Mazarin cocked his head. *'From orbit, your world rather resembles a piece of fruit surrounded by swarm upon swarm of flies. There is no way off of Ghul Jensen, I'm afraid. Not for any of us.'* He straightened. *'That is why we must make it count, hereditary-governor. Do not let the death of your world be for nothing.'*

Jensen's hands curled into fists. 'What do you suggest?' he said, forcing the words out.

'Redeploy all planetary forces not currently engaged with the orks to Hive Jensen,' the Tallarn said, without hesitation. The bunker shuddered again. The

sounds of ork artillery could be heard outside, hammering away at the emplacement. Men were dying, even now, to hold back the green tide.

‘What about the forces already engaged?’ he said, slowly, not wanting to hear the answer he knew was coming.

‘*We should leave as soon as you are ready,*’ Mazarin said. ‘*Gather your command staff and all essential personnel. We have little time, and much yet to accomplish.*’

### ***House of Jensen, Gubernatorial Palace, Hive Jensen***

Jensen stared out through the vast crystalline window that marked the outer edge of the palace gardens, his hands clasped behind his back. Around him, his command staff were hard at their tasks, barking orders into vox-transmitters, studying holographic maps, or talking quietly amongst themselves. His wives moved amongst them, overseeing the confusion so that Jensen didn’t have to.

The palace occupied the uppermost tier of the hive, just above the great hab-ring occupied by the minor aristocratic clans whose sons and daughters made up his command staff. He studied the massive enclosed gardens that spread out below him, each one dominated by a different colour of foliage and flower, and teeming with plants from the far-flung corners of the planet. Each of them had taken generations to coax into vibrancy and when they were gone, the galaxy would not see their like again.

His gaze was drawn upwards, towards the reflective surface of the solar collectors that lined the uppermost edge of the hive’s outer shell. The collectors gathered and filtered the light of the sun down through the hive like so many solar aqueducts, so that even the deepest levels of the underhive had some access to natural light. It had been his grandmother’s innovation, he recalled, crafted from older technologies which they could no longer make work. Hive Jensen relied on many such engines, and as the weeks and the siege went on, more and more of them ceased to function. Already, whole hab-rings were without light, heat and water, and he had been forced to divert precious resources to rigging up temporary water sumps so that his people would not die of thirst before they froze to death, or were killed by the orks. He closed his eyes and his shoulders slumped.

The redeployment had gone as planned. His authority was absolute, and his body doubles had proved their value yet again, allowing his people the illusion that he had not abandoned them but, rather, was sacrificing himself for a greater

purpose. The military resources of each of the great hives had retreated through the subterranean darkways that stretched between hives and across the wide ashy wastes. Hive Jensen, the largest of the great hives, was now full to capacity. Its resources were stretched to the breaking point. Not that that would be the case for long.

The orks had finished with the rest of the planet in record time. The death-pyres of the other hives were visible from the weapons clusters of the outer shell, and the smoke of their passing still choked the atmosphere. Millions of lives, snuffed out and forgotten. The bulk of the ork forces had already turned their attentions towards Hive Jensen, looking for new opportunities for battle.

He opened his eyes. The noise behind him had dimmed. He turned. Inquisitor Mazarin and Olympia moved through the crowd of officers and staff, who drew back to give them plenty of room. The old man was orbited as always by his servo-skulls, which rotated slowly as they hovered, seeing and recording the faces of everyone around them. Olympia stared straight ahead, her hands resting on the pommels of her swords. In the retreat from Hive Morn, Jensen had witnessed just how deadly the former skitarii tribune was with the blades.

‘Inquisitor Mazarin,’ Jensen said. The dull rush of conversation resumed as he spoke, but he knew they were being watched. The inquisitor had come to be regarded as something of a bird of ill-omen by Jensen’s officers.

*‘I have come to compliment you, hereditary-governor. You are as efficient and as competent as promised,’* Mazarin said, through the vox-skull. *‘Master Ismail’s projections have been exceeded beyond my wildest fancies.’*

‘Are you here just to compliment us for not dying as quickly as you estimated?’ Jensen said. His fingers twitched, and he was conscious of the weight of the blade on his hip and the pistol holstered opposite it. Olympia watched him, her perfect features twisting into a perfect smile.

*‘Not solely, no,’* Mazarin said. *‘Master Ismail has done all he can to improve your defences, and the peculiar talents of Olympia, Harks and Mamluc-9 are – heh – wasted here in your palace, lovely as it is. The orks are even now scaling the outer shell of the hive, like rats seeking entrance to a store room. The lower hab-rings are already under attack. I humbly request that you allow me and my retinue the honour of assigning ourselves to the front. Master Ismail has estimated where the next attack will come, and I feel that our talents would be better put to use there.’*

‘You will go with them?’ Jensen asked, startled. For the brief time he’d known the inquisitor, the man had not risked himself in open combat, leaving the bloody

work to his subordinates. It wasn't surprising; Mazarin was old, ancient even, and looked no more durable than a rotting branch hanging from a dying tree.

*'Of course,' Mazarin rasped. 'It has been a long time since I met the enemy openly, but I wager that I still recall how to do it. Once learned, never forgotten and all that.'*

Jensen stared at him for a moment, trying to parse for any hidden meaning in those words. He had the natural suspicion of the Inquisition that every planetary governor cultivated; it was a survival instinct. And he was suspicious of this sudden change of heart. Why now? Was it simply the impatience of a man used to manipulating events from afar caught up in an unwinnable situation? But there seemed to be no hidden agenda where Mazarin was concerned. As the redeployment had proceeded the old man had overseen much of it, displaying a strategic acumen that was rivalled only by the most senior members of Jensen's staff. And now that there were no more decisions to be made, and nothing to do but hold, fight and die, he seemed impatient for the latter. 'What if I say no?' he said, finally.

*'Why would you?' Mazarin said. 'You are angry with me, I can see it in your eyes.'* The optic-skull swooped closer, its red gaze boring into Jensen's own. *'And you have every right to be. I brought tidings of doom, and there are very few people who appreciate that. But if my discomfort would be a salve to your anger, then why deny me the joy of being messily dispatched by an ork?'*

'You have a point,' Jensen said. He turned back to the window. 'Do as you wish. If that wish is to die on the front lines rather than here, who am I to deny you?'

*'You are a most congenial host, Hereditary-Governor Jensen. My thanks,'* Mazarin said, bowing courteously. He turned and made his way back out, trailed by Olympia. Jensen watched their reflections recede, like ghosts vanishing into the light of the fires rising from below.

'So, that's it then?' Harks said, pushing away from the wall as Mazarin and Olympia exited the gardens. 'He's going to let us fight, just like that?'

*'A wise man uses all of the resources available to him,'* Mazarin croaked. *'And he is very wise, the hereditary-governor.'* He didn't bother asking how Harks knew. He had grown used to the psyker's eavesdropping, and had even profited from it on occasion. Indeed, they would not be on Ghul Jensen now, were it not for Harks's inability to keep from spying on the thoughts of those around him.

'But not too much so, otherwise he would have put a guard on our ship, rather

than taking your word that it was out of commission. It's ready to go when you are, by the way,' Harks muttered. He frowned and rubbed his skull. 'Which I assume will be soon, yes?'

*'As soon as we get what we came here for,'* Mazarin said. Then, *'Has the girl been located?'*

'We have narrowed down her bio-signature to somewhere within the lower hab-ring,' Olympia hummed softly. 'Shall we find her?'

*'Not yet,'* Mazarin said. *'Jensen is suspicious. We have our reason for being there. When the time comes, we will find her.'* He raised a hand, silencing Harks before he could speak. *'And then, we will depart this sad, dying world.'*

'And until then?' Harks asked.

*'We do exactly what I said we'd do, Harks. We fight.'*

They left the palace, Harks keeping up a steady flow of complaints and muttered recriminations, and Olympia humming something which sounded like machine code. Mazarin stopped as they came to the great gates, carved from the last trees to have grown unaided in the bitter soil of Ghul Jensen. Scenes from the world's founding and the erecting of the first hives had been carved into the surface of the towering gates. Mazarin stared up at them for a long time, his mechanical eyes recording every shape and whorl on the wood.

It was very lovely, he thought. It only seemed right that someone remember it.

As the servitor-guards that controlled the gates hauled them open with a squeal of abused wood and metal, a wave of heat entered, washing over Mazarin and the others. His servo-skulls wobbled in the air, buffeted by the almost solid gust of temperature. Harks was already sweating as they left the palace behind. The broad procession way beyond, its bulwarks topped by marble statues of ancient heroes of the Jensen line, afforded a picturesque view of the sloping descent of the hive. From Mazarin's perspective, it was rather like a stack of ever-shrinking data-discs, and just as ill-balanced. The inner curve of the hive's shell was highly reflective, so as to more easily bring warmth and light to the lowest hab-rings, and it seemed as if the hive city stretched forever in all directions. The fury of the fires reaching up from below were redoubled by those vast reflective surfaces as well, and they were the source of the heat, Mazarin knew.

The orks had broken through into the lower rings almost immediately, having grown experienced in shattering hives over the past weeks. But they had been held, and even thrown back in places, though not for long.

As they walked down the wide staircase that led to the main thoroughfare below the gubernatorial palace, Mazarin could see through the cracked and

shattered sky-paths that stretched like a vast web of rockcrete and metal between the outer shell and the spire, and down into the inferno below, where the shapes of alien war machines struggled through a landscape rendered inhospitable even to the galaxy's toughest breed of vermin.

The great pneumatic lifts which provided quick access between hab-rings for those allowed access to them were still working, and were being used to ferry troops and command staff between the upper levels of the spire and wherever the front line happened to be at that moment. The lifts were reinforced and would likely be standing long after the rest of the hive collapsed in on itself.

As they rode down, Mazarin watched the hive rise around him, taking note of which of the gun emplacements on the outer shell were still active. These were the only things keeping the bulk of the ork forces pinned on the wasteland outside. But they were isolated, and vulnerable to attack by those orks clever and suicidal enough to attempt to scale the shell, or surf the sea of anti-air flak to their target. Even as the lift reached its destination, one of the gun emplacements far above exploded, casting a weird light over the trio as they stepped out. They traversed the sky-path that led to the emplacement, striding beneath the gazes of the ornate statues that lined the high rails that marked the edges of the path.

Mazarin had contacted the others as they descended, and saw Mamluc-9 sitting on an upturned fuel drum, briskly loading his shotgun. He hopped off his perch and fell in beside them. *'Where's Ismail?'* Mazarin asked as they moved through the crowd of soldiers moving back and forth between the primary and secondary rows of defences.

Mamluc-9 gestured with two fingers towards the highest point of the emplacement, where soldiers were firing at the orks. *'Of course,'* Mazarin murmured. He waved a hand. *'The rest of you, try and look busy. Mamluc-9, come with me.'*

The masked man followed him up onto the emplacement, where Ismail was observing the enemy with cool detachment. They stood in silence for some time. Then, at last, as the orks mounted another assault, Ismail glanced at him.

*'This attack is a prelude,'* Ismail said. His autogun thundered, and down below, orks died. *'The ones too eager or too stupid to obey orders. The others are waiting for something.'*

*'And what would that be, Master Ismail?'*

*'If I knew, I would have said,'* Ismail said.

Mazarin eyed the Tallarn for a moment, considering. Then he sighed slightly, the vox-skull amplifying the sound into a staticky hiss. Such disrespect from his

subordinates was his lot, and it would be borne gracefully. *‘My apologies. Can you hold the line here?’*

Ismail’s head turned slightly, the lenses of his helmet’s eyepieces reflecting the crimson eyes of the servo-skulls. He said nothing, but the meaning of the look was plain enough. Mazarin shook his head. *‘Again, my apologies – better to ask, can you hold for the time required?’*

‘No,’ Ismail said, turning back. ‘But I can try.’

*‘That is all I ask, my friend.’*

Ismail made a noise; it was something like a cross between a leopard’s growl and a bolter going off. Mazarin realised that the warrior had laughed. Before he could comment, a great cry went up and orks surged across the broken ground below, charging towards the emplacement. ‘Best you get down below, inquisitor,’ Ismail said.

*‘Yes, quite,’* Mazarin said. An ork crested the emplacement, and Ismail twisted around, punching its head off of its shoulders. *‘Come, Mamluc-9. Let us see to the next line of defence, shall we?’*

Mazarin made his way back down, followed by Mamluc-9. As he walked, he said, *‘Olympia informs me that we have pinpointed her location. You know what to do?’*

Mamluc-9 nodded, and patted his shotgun affectionately. Mazarin stopped and turned. He reached out and clasped the other man on the shoulder. *‘As soon as the battle commences, go. We will meet you at the lift platform, when you have signalled that you have her. Do not fail me, my friend. Much counts on your success.’*

Mamluc-9 said nothing, and Mazarin hadn’t expected him to do so. He never did. Mazarin turned as he heard Ismail’s autogun roar. The orks were on top of the emplacement, propelled by eagerness more than strategy. One appeared at the top of the steps. Mamluc-9 spun and the shotgun belched. The ork pitched backwards. Mazarin continued down. *‘Olympia, Harks, we will soon be having guests,’* he said, extending his arms. *‘Ready yourselves for war, my soldiers.’*

‘We’re always ready,’ Harks spat. ‘My mind is a machine, and it’s always in overdrive,’ he continued, tapping the spot between his eyes. ‘A finely tuned meat-engine of mass destruction, devised by chance and guided by the grace of the Emperor. I can burn armies and ignite a planet’s atmosphere. I am built for war. We all are,’ he continued, more softly. ‘You – your kind – saw to that. We are your weapons, just like these poor fools.’ He gestured about him, to the soldiers of Hive Jensen, who were falling back around them to the second line of

defences as the orks washed over the emplacement. Mazarin joined his retinue as the emplacement became a scene of carnage. There were orks everywhere now. Ismail hadn't been able to hold back the tide so much as he had forced it to go around him.

'*Your point?*' Mazarin said. He watched as Ismail led the surviving defenders in a fighting withdrawal. The Tallarn was an old hand at fighting orks, and he did so with economy, never allowing himself to be drawn into close-quarters combat. He kept the orks at bay with precise bursts of autogun fire as he backed down the steps.

'No point,' Harks said, baring his black teeth. He pointed at the servo-skulls. 'Your eyes and voice are outside of your body, maybe your conscience is too, eh?'

'*If I had one, it wouldn't be you,*' Mazarin rasped. The eagle mask tilted, and the optic-skull moved closer to Harks, who flinched back from it. '*Now hush. Olympia is about to sing.*' He motioned with his cane in a grandiose fashion, and Olympia gave a courtly bow before she turned and strode through the crowd of retreating soldiers. She began to pick up speed as the first orks spilled past Ismail's bulk and reached the courtyard.

As she ran, Olympia swept back her coat, revealing the second set of arms folded tight against her belly. The secondary arms unfolded, and the gleaming metal hands sought the hilts of the swords sheathed on her hips, even as the pale fingers of her real hands drew the pair of laspistols holstered under her coat. Then, with a strange, piercing shriek, Olympia bounded forward, moving with inhuman speed.

She had been born for this, in a way. Or rather, reborn. She had risen through the ranks of the skitarii, shedding flesh and weakness to become something other, something deadly. The blades in her lesser hands hummed with force as they cleaved through green flesh and bone, and her laspistols hissed as she danced through the orks, singing her killing song. Her weird caterwaul caused orks to stumble and fall, retching. The effects of the sonic pulse transmitter built into her larynx were different for different species, and Mazarin noted the reactions of the orks with interest.

'*Beautiful,*' he rasped, to no one in particular. An ork charged towards him, perhaps thinking him easy prey. He sighed and stepped aside, drawing the hidden blade from his cane as he did so. The brute stumbled and whirled, impaling itself on Mazarin's sword cane. '*You, on the other hand...*' he said. The ork's eyes bugged out, and it yowled. Mazarin thumbed the switch on the blade's

hilt, activating the weapon's power cell. Energy ripped through the creature, burning it from inside out. What was left of it sloughed off of the blade and Mazarin sniffed in distaste.

'It isn't often you bestir yourself, old man,' Harks said. Energy crackled about him, crawling from his pores and curling around his limbs. He flicked a finger, and an ork became a howling torch. 'The hour must truly be desperate.'

*'Hush, Harks. We all play our part. Speaking of which... where is he?'*

'Already gone, the sneak,' Harks said. 'Following orders like a good tool.'

*'Soldier, Harks. He is a soldier. We are all soldiers.'*

'Whether we want to be or not. I wonder which it was, in his case.' Harks grinned mirthlessly, and lightning crawled across the black surface of his teeth. 'I—'

Whatever he'd been about to say was lost in the rumbling destruction that consumed a section of the bastion. Chunks of rockcrete and twisted lengths of smoking metal hurtled across the battlefield. Harks gestured hurriedly, and the storm of debris struck the coruscating shield of protective warp energy which had enveloped him and Mazarin. 'What in the name of the Emperor was that?' Harks snarled, as he strained to protect them.

*'Offhand, I'd say it's what the rest of the orks were waiting for,'* Mazarin said.

The emplacement had been ruptured, not by artillery fire or explosives, but by something far more deadly. Harks's eyes widened as the brute shape capered through the smoky gap, muscles swelling with deadly power and a sickly green energy bleeding from its pores. It was bigger than any of the orks that flooded through the breach around it, as if it were drawing strength and mass from its surroundings. The ork's eyes were fiery orbs, and a murky froth spilled from the sides of its mouth as it stamped and gibbered. It lurched forward and vomited a searing burst of green fire, which incinerated a number of unlucky soldiers, reducing them to greasy char in moments.

Mazarin looked at Harks. *'Well? Are you waiting for an engraved invitation, perhaps?'*

'You can't be serious,' Harks protested.

*'I didn't bring you for your scintillating wit, Harks. Now, go thought-murder that alien freak for me like a good little sanctioned abomination.'* Mazarin lifted his blade, and let the tip drift casually towards the psyker's throat.

Harks spat at his feet, but turned to face the approaching ork psyker. 'I hate you, old man,' he said, as he started forward.

*'The feeling is mutual, I assure you,'* Mazarin called after him.

The air between the two psykers began to vibrate as they approached one another. Lightning reached out and crackled between them. The ork bellowed and nearby fires seemed to swell and grow in strength. Harks cursed and the fires crackled. An ork raised a weapon, and the ork psyker reached out with a flabby paw and crushed the over-eager warrior's head.

Then, with a sound like thunder, the ork psyker turned and unleashed a howling wave of green energy, which burned the air and turned the rockcrete to slag where it passed. Harks thrust out his hands and caught hold of the energy as if it were a serpent. It crawled up his arms and lashed out at his skinny form, opening a wound in his side which vented superheated blood as a red mist. Harks screamed and the energy he held exploded back towards the ork, tearing great gouges in its rubbery flesh. It staggered and threw itself forward, trailed by lightning. Harks did not go to meet it, instead raising his hands, palms up. As if at some unspoken command, the shattered chunks of rubble strewn all around rose into the air.

The ork stomped a warty foot, and the ground cracked and split. Harks stumbled, and then threw out his arms, unleashing a barrage of debris. The ork roared as chunks of rock and metal pierced its already wounded flesh, ripping and burrowing into it. Blood splattered the ground as it forced itself forward, lightning gathering in its hands. Harks gritted his teeth, and redoubled his efforts. The ork's body swelled, and across the battlefield, the heads of its fellow xenos began to pop as whatever power it was channelling overcame them. Mazarin had seen similar occurrences before, and he knew that Harks wouldn't survive what was coming.

'*Master Ismail, if you would,*' he murmured, trusting the vox-signal to carry his words to the warrior's ear. Ismail's autogun cracked once, and a crater opened in the side of the ork's skull. Green smoke boiled out of the rupture, and the ork was spun about by the force of the shot. A second round took it between the eyes, and, with a sigh like a deflating bladder of air, it toppled backwards, the power it had been drawing into itself spilling out and away harmlessly. The Tallarn stepped up beside Mazarin. '*Thank you,*' Mazarin said.

Harks looked down at the dead alien, and placed a hand to the wound in his side. He looked at Mazarin. 'Can we go now?' he asked wearily.

### ***Hab-Ring Deucalion, Hive Jensen***

Mamluc-9 moved swiftly across the swaying gantry towards the hab-unit,

shotgun at shoulder height. As the first ork burst out of the gloom of the corridor beyond, he fired. The ork was knocked back, but not down. Mamluc-9 fired again, and the ork fell, missing most of its skull. He paused at the edge of the entry-hatch, considering. Then he unclipped a grenade, activated it, and sent it bouncing into the compartment beyond. He huddled away from the blast, and the gantry shivered as the grenade went off.

He pushed himself away from the wall and swung into the compartment, the sensors built into his helmet compensating for the smoke that now filled the area. An ork, its flesh torn by shrapnel and its crude combat vest aflame, rushed towards him blindly, ruined jaws working soundlessly. He avoided the rush and pivoted, driving the reinforced stock of his shotgun into the back of the brute's head. Alien bone, softened by the heat, crumpled, and the ork pitched forward. Mamluc-9 whirled around, narrowly escaping a blow that would have done the same to him, and fired, taking the second ork in the gut.

It stumbled back, eyes wild with shock, and then lurched forward, roaring. It swung its crude blade down and Mamluc-9 caught its blow on the length of his shotgun. The tableau held for a moment, man and ork straining against one another, until the former snatched his knife from its sheath and drove it point-first up through the ork's jaw and into its brain. Even then, it took several moments for the brute to realise that it was dead.

Mamluc-9 did not remember who he was or what he had been, before he had put on the mask. But he knew how to kill. He had killed xenos of every type and species. He had killed them with explosives, guns, knives, sharp sticks and, in one case, a decorative paperweight shaped like the Imperial seal.

The owner of the hab-unit had not been so skilled, however. The man was dead, torn apart by the bite of savage blades, his blood decorating the floor and walls. An autopistol lay near a lopped-off hand, unfired.

There were orks everywhere in the hab-ring now, looting and killing. The area would be abandoned entirely soon. His helmet's HUD showed the positions of his companions as the emplacement was slowly overwhelmed. His skin prickled as he felt the aetheric chill of Harks's powers being unleashed. There was a rumble that came from no explosion, and he shook his head. He didn't have much time. He checked the tracking device hooked to his belt, and looked around. He heard a soft sound, like an animal's whimper.

Ah, there she was.

The one they had braved the horrors of a planetary funeral pyre to find. The whys and wherefores of the mission escaped him, as so much did the longer he

wore the mask. He didn't care; the mask saw to that as well. All that mattered was the mission.

He moved quickly towards the sound. When he tore open the closet, the woman screamed, and moved to shield her child. It wouldn't have taken long for the orks to find them as they ransacked the house. The girl was young, barely more than a toddler. She stared at him over her mother's shoulder, displaying no fear, only curiosity.

Mamluc-9 considered her for a long moment. Then he held out his hand. Shyly, the girl took it.

### *Hab-Ring Deucalion, Exitus Node, Hive Jensen*

Ismail saw them first.

'He has succeeded,' the Tallarn said.

'Ah, and not a moment too soon,' Mazarin said as he clapped his hands together. Through the eyes of his servo-skull, he saw the broad shape of Mamluc-9 hurrying across the bridge, a woman beside him, a child clutched in her arms.

'It's them,' Harks wheezed, clutching the wound that was his souvenir from his battle with the ork psyker. 'The woman, I mean. I can hear it in her head.' Mazarin glanced at him. He had dealt with the creature efficiently enough, but he looked as if he was on his last legs. Mazarin hoped he would survive. It was difficult to find a battlefield-capable primaris psyker not already attached to a military command.

Harks stiffened. 'Wait,' he said. 'There's something...'

'The rail,' Ismail said, lifting his gun. Mazarin saw the first ork a moment later. Where they'd come from he couldn't say, but he recognised what they were easily enough. There were thousands of them loose in the lower levels of the hive. Wrapped in ash-stained rags and wearing crude fatigues, the ork commandos hauled themselves onto the sky-path with howls of excitement.

Mamluc-9 noticed them a half-second after Harks, but by then, it was too late. The orks were on them in an instant, hurling themselves over the sides of the bridge, ragged cloaks flapping. Mamluc-9 spun, shoving the woman aside. A blade sank into his chest, ripping through his armour as if it were paper. His shotgun roared and an ork was flung back.

Mamluc-9 stumbled, and Mazarin almost cried out, before he remembered himself. 'Go,' he croaked. Even as the word echoed out of the vox-caster, Ismail

and Olympia were in motion. The Tallarn drew his blade as he ran and removed the head from one of the orks as he slid past. Olympia bisected another, carving the alien into bloody chunks with her blades. The last two beasts flung themselves at their enemies with gleeful howls, and were summarily dispatched for their efforts.

The woman was screaming, clutching the child, her cries spiralling into the smoky air to join the cacophony rising from below. *'Silence her,'* Mazarin hissed. Olympia jabbed the woman and the girl with syringes held in her artificial hands. The solution inside would put them to sleep, and had been prepared for just such an occasion.

Mazarin knelt and, with steady hands, unhooked his servant's mask. The man was already dead, and had been from the moment the ork blade severed his spine. Mazarin stared down at the pale, wrinkled ruin of the face, trying to recall who the man had been before he'd become Mamluc-9. At last, Mazarin gave up and allowed Harks to help him to his feet. He cradled the mask to his chest as gently as Ismail held the child. *'Satisfied, old man?'* Harks said, softly.

*'Not yet. Not until we've left this place far behind. Come, the shuttle awaits,'* Mazarin said, stalking towards the lift, the mask held tight. Ismail bent so that Olympia could lay the woman over his shoulder, and then they followed him towards the pneumatic lift which would carry them back to the uppermost levels of the hive. There was only one still working on this level – the others had been shattered by the heat, or had been caught in explosions, or had simply stopped working. Those, he saw, were caught between the hab-rings, and most were full of soldiers trying to head down to the fighting or civilians seeking escape. They would remain where they were, until the fire reached them or the orks did.

The pneumatic lift climbed the spine of the hive, towards the skyport. Below, the lower rings of the hive were being consumed in fire and war. Smoke and ash drifted upwards, caught by the still-functioning oxygen recyclers mounted in the upper reaches of the outer shell. There was a crashing roar as a section of one of the lower rings gave way and collapsed in a cloud of dust and a plume of fire. He could make out the crumbling shapes of buildings giving way to gravity and becoming a flood of bent metal and rockcrete that swept over everything in its path.

The air was thick with noise – screams, roars, gunfire, explosions, splintering metal, tearing stone, all of it rising up, combining into a singular noise that defied description. If he had been a man for poetry, Mazarin thought he might have compared it to the death-scream of some great leviathan, or the funeral

dirge of an entire race, but because he was who he was, it was merely noise.

The child whined, and Mazarin glanced at it. Ismail shifted slightly, as if to protect the child from Mazarin's sightless gaze. *'It should be sleeping,'* Mazarin said. The mother was, where she hung unceremoniously over the Tallarn's shoulder. But the child squirmed and wailed.

*'She's frightened,'* Harks said, clutching his wound. He looked paler than normal, and Mazarin wondered if his confrontation with the xenos psyker had broken something inside him. *'She's a child, Mazarin. Her parents are dead. Her world is dying.'*

*'Worlds die, but the dance goes on, eternal and pristine,'* Olympia trilled.

*'Emperor's bones, shut up,'* Harks hissed. He hunched forward, one hand pressed to his skull. *'I can hear the death of every living thing in this misbegotten place. I don't need some berserk wind-up doll yammering in my ear as well.'*

Olympia whistled and the glass face of the elevator trembled. Harks clutched his ears and made a strangled sound. Mazarin thumped the floor with his cane. *'Stop it. I'll have none of your childishness, Olympia, and none of your whining, Harks. Rejoice, my soldiers. Our war is almost won.'* He glanced down at the blood-spattered mask he held, and felt a flicker of annoyance. *'Yes, almost.'*

*'If this is victory, I'd hate to see defeat,'* Harks murmured.

### ***Defensive Emplacement Jensen-Primus, Hive Jensen***

Jensen cradled Sasha's torn, explosion-ravaged form to him, her blood staining his fire-blackened armour. The hab-ring burned, and orks loped through the smoke. Beatrix's body was nearby, lost amidst the piles of dead, as were those of the rest of his wives. A stray blast from an ork gargant had ripped through the emplacement, gutting the command bunker and the hab-ring beyond. Buildings lay shattered like forgotten children's toys, cracked open by the roiling beam of destruction which had passed over them. Jensen had only survived thanks to his armour... and Sasha. She had thrown herself between him and death, as was her duty, and his heart felt like lead in his chest as he looked down at her.

*'I'm sorry,'* he said, stroking the ruin of her, and looking out at the ruin of his world. The hive shook like a dying animal. The orks were ripping it apart from the inside out. Their barbaric war machines trudged through the lower levels, pounding the rubble flat and shaking the ground beneath his feet. They had occupied the outer shell and were smashing through in places, using the hive's

own weapons emplacements to fire down at the centre of the hive. Comets of fire rained down, killing man and ork alike. 'I'm sorry,' he said, more loudly. He looked down into her unseeing eyes, and bent low, until his head touched hers. Then he set her body aside and shoved himself to his feet, her power maul in his hands.

As he stood, his vox-link chirped, spitting out a coded frequency. Mazarin was making his move, and Jensen was in no position to do anything about it. Anger filled him, and brought with it strength. Orks charged towards him through the smoke and the fire, and he killed them, battering their snarling faces to pulp as he fought his way back to where the remaining defenders were regrouping. Armaments bawled, and orks died on their knees, scythed away by the last dregs of the artillery's ammunition.

He shook off the helping hands as he reached his soldiers, and barked orders. Smoke rose from the spire of the hive, and he knew the gubernatorial palace was already under attack. One of his remaining body doubles would be there, seeing to the defence. The man would have to do for as long as the hive had left. He had other business than overseeing the immolation of all that his people had built.

Jensen borrowed a laspistol from one of his men and pushed away from them, ignoring their questions. They would hold their position until they were forced to fall back, or they would die where they stood. There was nothing else left for them, but to die and die well. But not for him. He had one last duty to fulfil. Quickly, he made his way to the closest of the level's pneumatic lifts and hammered a button with a fist.

There was still power, thankfully, and as he rose towards the skyport, he tried to clear his mind of distractions. He turned away from the transparent wall and ignored the sounds that caused the lift to vibrate around him, as if it might judder loose from its moorings and plummet into the fires below. He shed his responsibilities and fears, letting the mantle of authority slip from his shoulders.

It was almost a relief.

He fingered the clasps of his mask, considering. Then, with a grunt, he let his hand fall. While the hive still stood, he was still the governor.

The skyport shook around him as the lift slowed and the doors slid wide. He stepped out, and breathed in smoke. The wide, open area was full of cargo that had been abandoned at the start of the fighting, and technical servitors stood awaiting orders that would never come, heedless of the destruction occurring around them. Coughing, he stumbled forward. Through blurring vision, he saw a shuttle – Mazarin's, he knew – touch down on the landing pad, its thrusters

dimming from white hot to blue.

He'd had his people keep a watch on the inquisitor's shuttle. The damage to it was evident, but his spies had informed him that this was purely cosmetic. It clearly still functioned. It had remained docked in an upper grav-berth, and had not moved since its arrival, but he'd known that it was only a matter of time. He'd set the control-servitors of the communications tower to alert him, and him alone, if the shuttle moved.

Sooner or later, Mazarin would have made a run for it. Jensen had expected it. He'd hoped to have others with him now – Sasha, perhaps Beatrix, others. He could have saved some of them, sent them off into an uncertain future, but better that than staying here. He'd had it all planned. He intended to die with his people, and he intended for Mazarin to do the same. But some of them could have been saved. Someone would have been left alive to remember Ghul Jensen and its people. The thought was like a hammerblow in his head, pounding against the wall of his mind. He couldn't save them, not now.

He would settle for avenging them.

Dust rolled across the landing pad, mingling with the smoke and haze of the growing inferno below. For a moment, he could see nothing. Then it cleared, and he saw his quarry, starkly outlined in the light of his home's pyre. 'Mazarin,' he roared, and fired, striking the armoured hull of the craft and causing Mazarin to whirl. The old man moved fast, but not fast enough. Jensen had him dead to rights, and they both knew it.

*'Hereditary-Governor Jensen, what a delightful surprise,'* Mazarin rasped. *'My people informed me that you were still in the palace. I take it that was one of your doubles, then?'*

'Where do you think you're going?' Jensen snarled, ignoring the question.

*'We have accomplished what we came here to do, so we are leaving,'* Mazarin said.

'And what was that?' Jensen demanded.

Mazarin was silent for a moment. Then, *'We came here to find someone. We needed as much time as possible, which meant that your world needed to survive longer than it was expected to. Now we have found them, and we are leaving.'*

'Who are they? Who did you sacrifice my world for?'

*'Your world was always going to die. I simply extended its agony.'*

'Who?' Jensen roared. His finger twitched and Mazarin raised his hands in a placatory fashion. Jensen saw the mask he held, and knew that Mazarin wasn't escaping unscathed.

*‘No one important,’ Mazarin said. ‘Someone whose safety was desired by one who will now owe the Inquisition a debt, to be called upon at a later date, after this war is long finished and the next one begun.’*

‘You weren’t interested in helping us. You were only interested in putting some poor fool far from here in your debt, just in case you needed him at a later date,’ Jensen said bitterly. ‘For that, you sacrificed my world – made me sacrifice my world – and got your companion killed.’

*‘All men die, Hereditary-Governor Jensen. The reason is, frankly, immaterial. The end result is a given.’* Mazarin cocked his head. *‘Would it help if I said that it was necessary? That the death of millions here will prevent the deaths of billions elsewhere?’*

‘I’m not the hereditary-governor elsewhere,’ Jensen snarled. ‘My people, my wives, all of them will die, and for what?’

‘A little girl,’ Harks piped up. The psyker leaned against the ship’s hatchway, one hand pressed to his wounded side. ‘Last scion of a noble Rogue Trader dynasty, more valuable than a hive world to the right people.’ He smiled. ‘The mother ran away, you see... Fell in love with a crewmember aboard her mother’s vessel and came here to start a new life. They’ve been looking for her for some time. That’s she’s had a brat only spices the meat, as it were. Her family will be overjoyed to get her back, snatched from the very jaws of the ork, and they’ll swear an oath of fealty to the Ordo Xenos. They’ll be just another set of tools, to be employed where required.’

‘What?’ Jensen said, momentarily off balance. He saw the child then, noticing her for the first time, huddled in Ismail’s arms.

*‘Quiet, Harks,’* Mazarin said.

‘He deserves to know,’ Harks said simply. The psyker looked at Jensen. ‘We all have our uses. The question is, what happens when you’re no longer useful?’ He smiled bitterly. ‘What’s a governor without the governed, eh?’

Jensen shook his head. ‘Nothing,’ he said flatly.

*‘Not nothing,’* Mazarin said. The vox-skull drew closer to Jensen, buzzing around him like a fly. *‘Harks is a fool. When a tool is no longer fit for purpose, other uses can be found by a clever man. A hammer can destroy as well as build, to stretch a metaphor. You’re a capable man, Ghul Jensen. You’ll forgive me if I don’t use your title. We are but men here, now, in this moment. Emilio and Ghul. We worked well together, Jensen. You show great promise.’*

‘What are you talking about?’ Jensen longed to rub the sweat out of his eyes, but he didn’t dare lower his weapon. Ismail and Olympia were too close; a single

moment of hesitation would cost him his one chance at revenge. Revenge for his wives, his people, his world.

Mazarin held up Mamluc-9's mask. *'I do so hate to have to replace my tools,'* he said. *'I get attached, you see. I'm an old man, and sentimentality is a weakness of the old. I have grown fond of you, Jensen. And I am loath to waste a man of your capabilities.'*

'You want me to – no,' Jensen said. He licked his lips. Far below, something large and important exploded, and the outer shell of Hive Jensen shuddered like the flesh of a man afflicted with ague. A solar collector tore loose with a shriek that caused his teeth to shiver in his gums, and plunged down, smashing against the edge of the platform. Jensen staggered, but didn't fall or lower his weapon.

Thunderous explosions shook the spine of the hive, and Jensen heard the wail of alarms and the booming roar of hab-rings being isolated. Those guns still active on the inner curve of the hive shell began falling silent, one by one, and fire sprang from them, as if the hive had been engulfed in a typhoon of flame. He knew that one of those explosions likely signalled the destruction of his palace, and he felt a twinge of pain in his chest. The gardens were gone. Sasha was gone, and Beatrix and all of them. Everything was gone, wiped away, as if it had never been.

*'Then why did you come?'* Mazarin said. *'Revenge? Or pragmatism? Your palace is gone, your people meat for the Beast, and you came here, rather than falling with them. You say you knew that my shuttle still functioned? Then why didn't you confront us sooner? Why wait?'* The servo-skulls circled Jensen like carrion-birds, and beneath his mask, his eyes stung with sweat. *'Because you are not a fool. You were buying time, even as we were. You are a creature of practicality.'* Mazarin lifted the mask. *'We all have our limits. It is best we recognise them, when we reach them.'*

'I was waiting so that I could save someone,' Jensen growled. 'But since that is impossible, I am here now to avenge them.'

*'And thus, damning the last of these people whom you claim that you wish to save to a bad death,'* Mazarin said. *'The servitor piloting this ship is attuned to my bio-rhythms. If I die, it will self-destruct, and take this vessel with it. But if I live, well... we all live.'*

'I don't care,' Jensen said, but his eyes strayed to the child again. She was a waif, there was nothing special about her that he could see. But she was one of his people.

'Of course you do,' Harks said. Blood from the wound in his side pooled at the

psyker's feet. He coughed. 'If you didn't, you'd have had this ship sabotaged, or simply blown it out of the sky when we tried to leave. But you cared enough to come up here. If we die, she dies. The last of your people die, as if they'd never been.' Harks grinned. 'She might still die. Her family is on Alaric Prime, after all, and that's where we and the orks are going.'

Jensen felt something twist inside him. He stared at the girl, uncertain of what to do.

Mazarin stepped forward, and extended the mask. '*Do your duty, hereditary-governor. Protect your people,*' he said. Jensen's eyes flickered from the mask to the girl, to the gun in his hand.

Around them, Hive Jensen burned.

### *Alaric Prime*

The reunion was a strained, but joyful affair, Mazarin judged. The girl and her mother were welcomed with open arms by the latter's parents as old sins and past indiscretions were forgiven in the face of looming obliteration. They clasped one another lovingly in the shadow of great war machines, making ready for the war to come. There was a certain poetic melancholy to the moment, and Mazarin recorded it for his records. He also recorded it as proof of services rendered – rogue traders were, by and large, useful people, and he would have much work for such in the coming days, he suspected.

'It's like something out of a holodrama,' Harks said, and spat. He sat in the open hatch of the shuttle, nursing his side. It had begun to heal. By the time the orks arrived, Harks would be in fighting trim, Mazarin judged.

'*Perhaps,*' Mazarin said. '*Then, I have never known a sentimental psyker.*' He turned, and looked at the man standing beside Harks, arms crossed over his chest. He wore an ornate eagle mask over his face. '*What do you think, Mamluc-10?*' Mazarin asked.

The man didn't reply.

Then, Mazarin hadn't expected him to.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Josh Reynolds** has blazed a trail across the Warhammer World with the novels *Master of Death*, *Neferata* and *Knight of the Blazing Sun*, along with the Gotrek and Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. As well as numerous short stories, he has also written the Warhammer 40,000 audio drama *Master of the Hunt* and contributed to the Apocalypse anthology *Damocles* with the novella *Hunter's Snare*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

[The Red Waaagh! descends on the world of Alaric Prime, intent on plunging the sector into war. Only the forces of the planet's Knight houses and their Cadian allies stand against the alien tide.](#)



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