



WARHAMMER
40,000

THE BLACK PILGRIMS

A BLACK TEMPLARS TERMINATORS STORY
BY GUY HALEY



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A cathedral ship was an immensity. They had no class, mark or design. Each was unique, a baroque fancy fashioned by the faithful to divine and ineffable plans.

The *Veritas Diras* was seven million tons of sculpted stone carved from a single asteroid. The harsh and unforgiving soul of a pilgrimage fleet, built to bring the radiance of the Emperor the worlds of the Imperium. It reflected a cold, lunar light from its marmoreal splendour, no warmth to its albedo glare.

Missing for three centuries, it was lost no longer.

The *Veritas Diras* had emerged from the warp into the far reaches of Goshan. At that distance from the system's heart, the sun was an orange star not much larger than all the others. A world of ammoniac ice passed behind the *Veritas Diras*, bright as a coin. These were the dead marches. The cathedral ship was a monument in the graveyards of space. The beauty of its parapets and carved buttresses, of its towering statues of saints and heroes and the kilometres-long, double-eagle-headed prow, had become the stark beauty of a flensed skull, final and lifeless. Grand oriels and gallery casements reflected starlight, allowing none within. Blackness swam behind toothed mullions, secrets hidden by a skeletal grin.

This shrine-ship to the undying God-Emperor had become a mausoleum, an architectural death's-head heretically presaging His final end.

A handful of other vessels attended the cathedral, caught in its weak gravity well.

Of the rest of the fleet that had set sail with it – many hundreds strong, and the millions of faithful that they had borne along the Macharian circuit – there was no sign.

'This is an affront to the almighty Emperor,' spoke Brother Godwin. 'It is blasphemy!'

There were five of them. Black Templars, Sword Brothers, the veterans of the Dominar Crusade. They watched the dead ship through their helm displays, viewing feeds routed to them from their assault shuttle's augurs. Dim red lighting bathed them in a sanguinary glow, making their black armour dark as murder and their white helmets and bone-coloured surcoats the scarlet of gore.

'Three hundred years in the warp – I expected more damage,' said Brother Ercus. More analytical than his brothers, he was yet devout through and through. There was no doubt that his heart belonged to the Emperor – nevertheless, he did not allow his piety to overwhelm him. He was a welcome check on the others.

'The light of the Lord of Man would have kept it safe. That is a holy vessel,' said Brother Morholt, the pilot of the assault shuttle, over the vox. *'Proof, surely, against even the worst the warp can conjure.'*

'I do not think so. The ship's body is pristine, brother,' said Sword Brother Rolan. 'The same cannot be said for its soul. It has no doubt been polluted by the warp, its crew and passengers devoured.'

He shifted in his restraints, hefting the heavy flamer grasped in his fist. He was eager to unleash its cleansing fire.

'The Forge reports the Geller fields intact,' Castellan Adelard, their leader, said. 'Thermal signatures indicate both reactors are active.'

'Engines?' enquired Mallas, the last of their group. He was a man of few words.

'Offline,' said Adelard. 'The ship is dead.'

'Not dead, its spirit lives,' Dolus, the Crusade's forgemaster, interjected. He and his Techmarines travelled in a second shuttle alongside the Sword Brethren's. A third trailing the first pair carried more of their battle-brothers, the power-armoured Initiates. *'I have a reading on the central cogitator banks. Quiescent, but alive.'*

'You can rouse it?' asked Mallas.

'Of course.' Dolus's voice popped with star-born interference. *'It has slept only a few centuries. All organic components are dead. Servitor-led systems have perished, but the machine-spirits wait patiently for the touch of the faithful.'*

'Life signs?' asked Adelard.

'It is hard to say, my lord. The vessel is carved into solid rock with a high iron content. I will have no definitive answer until we are closer.'

The trio of black-skinned shuttles set their retro burners, slowing them as they drew nearer to the cathedral ship. They passed beneath a lesser vessel.

'Light escort cruiser,' said Adelard. He targeted reticules in his visor, each

centring on the armaments projecting from its sides. Each muzzle was fashioned in the form of a gargoyle. The stanchions between gun blocks were cast as angels – hands clasped, eyes looking upwards.

‘I see no damage here either,’ said Ercus.

A thumbnail screen in Adelard’s visor showed Ercus’s view. The Sword Brother was rapidly scanning the nearest vessels. ‘There is no damage to any of them.’

‘Then it is as reported. They were not overtaken by raiders,’ said Adelard.

‘The mystery deepens,’ said Ercus. ‘Genestealers, perhaps.’

‘Pah! There is no mystery,’ said Brother Rolan. ‘Warp intrusion. It is as I said. Genestealers could not infest an entire fleet. You are wrong, brother!’

‘Care to take a wager?’ asked Ercus.

‘Let us not make assumptions, best be wary for all eventualities,’ said Adelard. ‘Even you, Brother Rolan, as old as you are, have not seen all that the galaxy has to offer.’

The others laughed good-naturedly. Rolan made an exasperated noise. A fine fighter he was, perhaps the best of the Crusade’s veterans, but he spent more time doing penance than any of them.

The shuttle coasted under the giant, holy vessel. It was as big as a battleship, an ornate sphere as regal as a king’s orb, and the long prow and stern extending from its equatorial diameter made it appear transfixed by a sword. The shuttles circled it once, then again. The Sword Brothers watched intently, searching for signs of weapon damage or hull breaches. There were none.

‘All entries are sealed. Blast doors shut.’ Morholt reported. *‘This vessel was placed in lockdown.’*

‘Forgemaster Dolus, can you access the ship’s systems and open the way within?’

‘Regrettably I cannot, Castellan. I will need to interface directly with the machine-spirits of the cathedral ship. Once they are roused, remote operations will be child’s play. For now, they hide behind their code-walls and will pay no heed to me.’

‘Then select us a landing site that will allow quiet entrance,’ said Adelard.

‘There is window, a lesser chapel, here.’

A wireframe schematic scrolled up the inside of Adelard’s visor; Dolus’s suggested ingress blinked red. Adelard nodded, impatiently clearing with a thought-command the screeds of information cluttering his view. He was ready for action. They all were.

‘Brother Morholt, follow Brother Dolus’s recommendation. Bring us in. Enough of this reconnaissance.’

His brothers voxed their glad agreement. ‘Always forward,’ said Rolan, ‘never back. That is the way of the Black Templars.’

‘Aye!’ shouted the others. ‘Onwards for the glory of the Emperor!’

The shuttle travelled vertically relative to the cathedral ship, its heavily decorated skin scant metres away from the Black Templars prow. Grand statues slipped by, expansive canyons of carved stone plunged deep into the hull. The shuttle passed between two buttresses the size of fleet tenders. A tall window was before them.

There was a silent flash and the window sagged inwards, slagged by the assault craft’s melta array. Plasteel shutters on the inside of the windows shone with white heat and collapsed. Air blasted from the breach, buffeting the ship. Morholt played the weapons over the window, until he had cut out a gap large enough to allow the craft inside. The rush of air gave out and Morholt piloted them carefully within.

Darkness enveloped them. The shuttle jolted.

‘The gravitic plates here are functional,’ said Morholt.

The shuttle’s lights snapped on and tiny discs of illumination played over silent stone saints – a lesser chapel, yet still mighty. Morholt put the craft down near the chapel’s doors, some two hundred metres inside the ship. The other shuttles followed, landing not far from the first. They faced the doors, ready to bring their weapons to bear should the need arise.

The landing ramp of Adelard’s vessel opened. With metallic clunks felt and not heard, the mag-harnesses securing their Terminator suits disengaged. ‘Sword Brothers, forward,’ he said over the vox.

The Terminators filed out, passing from the shuttle’s light into the chapel’s gloom. The Initiates ran out of their own craft, soundless in the vacuum, their swift deployment in a defensive circle registered as tremors upon the Sword Brothers’ suit senses. Dolus and his two acolytes came out of their own craft last, servo-harnesses unfurling as they cleared the hatchway.

Adelard investigated the chapel with all the technology his suit possessed. He sent his brothers out from him to widen the net. Their faith lanterns flickered at their waists, representing their undying zeal to bring the light of the Imperium’s rule to the darkness. Suit-lamps, far brighter, stabbed out from their hunched carapaces to chase off the night.

‘No signs of damage, brother,’ they said, one after another.

Adelard approached the side of the chapel. The floor was stone, cracked under the weight of the shuttles. The panels of the walls were of dark bronze inscribed with devotional scriptures. He glanced towards the broken window.

‘We shall do penance of thirteen nights for the destruction wrought upon this holy place,’ he intoned. ‘Unwillingly we destroy that which is sacred to the Emperor. May the light of Terra forgive us for our misdemeanours, though committed as they are during the course of our duties.’

‘We ask forgiveness of the Lord of Man,’ responded his brothers.

‘Forgemaster Dolus, attend to your prayers. We shall see if they will rouse the machine-spirits. Initiate Brusc, ensure that he does so unharried.’

‘We are eager to accompany you, my lord,’ Brusc protested.

‘I approve of your desire to engage, brother, but a defensive perimeter must be maintained. You will remain here. Protect the Forge.’

‘Yes, Castellan,’ said Brusc, bowing his head. ‘As you wish it.’

The Sword Brothers lumbered through echoing corridors, their backs swaying. They pushed on past chapel after chapel, thoroughly checking each for the presence of evil. They found none, only the stone faces of saints glaring in their suit-lamp beams. The squad flicked through their numerous sensor arrays without thinking. Infrared overlays gave them nothing but the chill landscapes of forgotten presbyteries, while echolocators sketched funereal monuments in sound. Motion trackers caught only their own progress.

Atmosphere persisted in the inner halls, but it was stale and poisonous. They breathed suit air, ripe with their own scents and the harsh, vinegary stink of carbon scrubbers. Their armoured boots clanged obscenely loudly in the silence, mag-locks clamping hard where gravity gave out.

‘Truly,’ said Mallas, dolorously, ‘this place of devotion has become nought but a tomb.’

They came at last to a set of great plasteel doors, every inch chased in gold depicting scenes from the Emperor’s life. The Space Marines halted in front of it, awed by its beauty. They muttered quick prayers and brought their weapons up to their faceplates, longing to kiss the killing edges of their blades and mauls in obeisance to the God of Men.

‘Sealed,’ said Ercus, who had recovered quicker than the rest. His upper torso rotated, away from the door switches hidden in exquisitely wrought miniature churches of alien wood. ‘The mechanisms are dead, their spirits fled.’

He rejoined his brothers. Terminator plate was clumsy and cumbersome, its

heavy plating and restrictive range of movement made most wearers ungainly. Yet, somehow, Ercus managed to remain graceful.

Adelard thought out to his suit's cogitator, commanding it to capture every square centimetre of the door. 'The Black Templars will recreate this object, this I swear. I shall do it myself if needs be.'

'A good oath, brother,' said Godwin.

'A necessary one. Now, break it down.'

Godwin advanced slowly in contrast to Ercus. However, he was nigh on unstoppable in battle. 'My hammer is sorrowed by this work,' he said.

'Have Dolus pray to its spirit to placate it,' said Adelard. 'And assure it that you shall smite those who are forcing us to undertake this defilement.'

'Yes, Castellán,' said Godwin. With a snap and flare of soapy blue energy, Godwin's thunder hammer came to life.

They left the door broken behind them.

'Forgemaster,' reported Adelard. 'We have gained the tertiary transept. We are making our way to the nave.'

Acknowledged, Dolus replied, his voice faint.

The nave ran the length of the ship, kilometres long and hundreds of metres high. Interstellar night lurked in the vaulting high overhead. Faces of the devout, carved from the chill rock of the asteroid that made the cathedral ship, appeared suddenly from the gloom before vanishing just as quickly.

Adelard led from the front, as it should be. A Black Templar never held back from the fight. His hammer's disruption field was active and eager. His storm shield hummed on his other arm.

Ercus, Godwin and Mallas followed – Godwin's own hammer spitting with fury, Ercus and Mallas's lightning claws gleaming with a quieter, more sinister light. Rolan went protected in their centre, his heavy flamer ready.

'Keep close watch, brothers. We are exposed here,' said Adelard.

'Something is in the way ahead. Residual organic traces, and metal,' said Ercus, gesturing to an irregular heap furred with dust.

'Cyber-cherubim,' said Adelard. He clumped over to the fragile remains: child's bones tangled with age-dulled iron.

'Someone has heaped these here,' observed Mallas. 'There are seven or eight of them.'

'Eight,' Ercus confirmed. 'This suggests that whatever befell these people, there were survivors. Still convinced it is the denizens of the empyrean, Rolan?'

‘We’ll see,’ said Rolan. ‘I’ll not tolerate your boasting until we are sure.’

‘Genestealers, brother. I am sure of it,’ said Ercus, the smile in his voice plain to hear.

Adelard brought up his brothers’ life signs. The temper of a crusader was short. Elevated heartbeats were a useful telltale. They pulsed quickly, but not as yet with the frantic rhythms of rage.

‘Forgemaster Dolus, what progress?’ he said.

‘There is extensive systems degradation throughout. The machine-spirits are sluggish. It will take many prayers to both the Emperor and the Emperor-as-Omnissiah to bring them to full effectiveness.’

‘Twice the prayers, twice the time,’ said Mallas.

‘It is a holy vessel, brother,’ said Dolus. *‘Holier than most. I will wake them, make no mistake. This task is not beyond the skills of the forge. But be warned, repairs must be made to the craft’s power net. Many sectors will remain without one or more critical systems until this can be done.’*

‘We have gravity here and air, though it is foul,’ said Adelard.

‘And in the next you might find light, but no gravity and no air. I shall do what I can to ease your passage. Wait.’

Dolus shifted his communications channel. Binaric cant squealed over the vox-net as he conversed with one of his Techmarines. Chanting, flattened by electronic transmission, came with it.

‘We have progress,’ said Dolus.

Lights sputtered on in the nave-way. Ancient lumen globes burst in showers of white sparks as energy flowed into them after long absence. The Sword Brethren raised their weapons instinctively.

Fewer than half the globes lit up, most of the others strobing on the edge of malfunction. The lights hid more than they revealed. The nave-way was too monstrous to illuminate. Shadows shrank back to either side of the columned aisles, but refused to retreat further.

A chime drew Adelard’s attention to an icon in his helm.

‘Interesting,’ he said. ‘Dolus’s efforts show us the way. A power spike – functional systems.’ He gestured with his hammer. ‘Come.’

A door set into a three-layered frame, all carved with saints and heroes, let them into the inner part of the ship. It opened, protesting, but it opened. Fresher air gusted out around it with a moan that died as the pressure equalised.

‘Power, gravity, air,’ said Adelard. ‘Can you see this, forgemaster?’

'I can, Castellan. If you will excuse me, I will use your squad-link as a carrier so that I might approach the machine-spirits here. You will experience a twelve per cent drop in efficiency.'

'Let it be done,' said Adelard.

A faint buzz came onto the channel as Dolus co-opted their suits' capabilities.

They were in a corridor five metres wide: a cramped space after the vastness of the nave-way. Pointed arches made up the ceiling. The lights up there no longer functioned, and so the corridor was lit by tapers of filthy tallow set atop skulls mounted on the wall. Stalactites of fat hung from dead chins, soot staining the walls above them. Detritus choked the floor – rags of cloth, broken machines, holy objects and bones.

So many bones. A carpet of them, ankle deep, that the Terminators' heavy boots burst into powder.

'What happened here?' said Godwin. 'The faithful, butchered!'

The Sword Brothers spoke quiet prayers for the souls of the departed.

'There must be thousands of dead here,' said Ercus, playing his suit-lamps further down the corridor.

'Can you hear something?' asked Rolan.

'Yes, brother,' said Mallas. 'Singing?'

Adelard concentrated. His suit's aural sensors increased the gain, sifting through near inaudible sounds. He caught it too. 'A hymnal?'

'Perhaps they have not all perished after all,' said Ercus. 'Perhaps Morholt was right, and the vessel was protected. Praise be to the Golden Throne if so!'

Godwin panned his suit-lamps down at the floor, having to lean his entire torso forward to do so – a graceless movement in Terminator plate. 'Your first guess was better,' he said. 'Look.'

Amidst the bones, Godwin's lamps picked out a horror; a skull, not entirely human. Although the bones of its face bore the features of the children of Terra, it grew knobbed and brutish towards the occiput.

'See, genestealers,' said Ercus, unable to keep self-satisfaction from his voice.

Rolan clicked the vox once, too annoyed to vocalise his acknowledgement.

The Sword Brothers' equipment whined as they initiated combat protocols, bringing their suits' machine-spirits to full awareness. Adelard savoured the angry pulsing of his battleplate's power systems.

Weapons raised, they followed the source of the song.

Increasing signs of disturbance showed in the muck of the floor, signs of life aboard the dead ship. Skeletons clad still in scraps of flesh, black sinews holding

them in postures with some semblance of life, sat against the walls. Priceless artefacts were mixed carelessly in with the wrack of ages.

The candles increased in number, burning brighter and higher, great plaques of solid fat flowing down to the floor from each. The Terminators did not need to sample the material to know what it would be derived from.

A door. They entered.

In a chapel layered with three centuries of filth, the faithful prayed. They sang songs in snarling, wordless voices, broken hymns to the glory of the Emperor, Lord of all Mankind. What appeared to be a man stood in the pulpit. He gripped its sides in fervour as he sang along with his flock. He stopped as soon as he saw Adelard enter.

The singing faltered as the Black Templars' suit-lamps stabbed across the chapel. It was a misshapen congregation, hunched and filthy. Desperate, mongrel faces – human but grotesque with alien admixture, turned to face them, yellow eyes set either side of pug-noses, rows of pointed teeth that caged black tongues. The Terminators forced their way within unopposed, Ercus turning outward to cover the corridor.

‘In the name of the Holy Emperor of Man, I reclaim this sacred vessel for the Adeptus Ministorum!’

The preacher spoke. ‘How can you reclaim that which has not been lost? We are the faithful of the Emperor, we keep his ship for him. We are his pilgrims. We bring enlightenment to those in darkness, we bring vision to those who cannot see. Who are you to say otherwise?’

Adelard privately voxed his squad. ‘Stay ready. Do not attack. We can learn here.’

‘Servants and worshippers of the divine Lord of Man, as you also claim to be,’ he said aloud, his voice grating through his vox-grille. ‘Space Marines of the Black Templars Chapter, the chosen knights of the Emperor.’

The man leaned across his pulpit, his neck flexing far more than it had any right to do.

‘You lie!’ he hissed, his face becoming bestial. ‘You are intruders. You are the servants of darkness, decked in shadow. You have come here to destroy us!’

Adelard grunted in the affirmative. The noise was loud and hard. ‘So be it.’

The creatures attacked as one, their movements eerily coordinated. Filthy rags were cast off to reveal twisted human torsos, though many sported additional limbs, all knobbed and ridged with xenos bone structure. In some, it pushed through pale skin to form hard exoskeletons. Their crooked legs propelled them

quickly, and they were upon the Sword Brethren in a second.

‘Destroy them, destroy them!’ shouted the mongrel preacher. ‘They are not servants of the Emperor, they do not carry his light within! Can you not feel it? Their souls are dark!’

Adelard bashed outwards with his storm shield, to give his hammer room to swing. Four of the mutant things were caught by his swipe and sent sprawling into their comrades. His hammerhead boomed with released thunder as he pulverised the chest of the first to rise, plastering his surcoat and armour with blood. The others scuttled away, tangling with their fellows, all of them growling and snapping like dogs. Most had no true power of speech.

‘Slay them! Kill them! Cleanse the chapel!’ shouted Adelard. ‘No pity. No remorse. No fear!’

The chapel echoed with the howls of dying hybrids. Disruption fields banged and crackled as they shattered flesh. Rolan pushed his way forward, releasing fire from his heavy flamer. Creatures burned and squealed. In the half second the Terminators’ auto-senses took to compensate for the roar of heat and light, the creatures had turned tail. Mallas clanged after them into the flames, but they were quick, and rapidly gone.

Injured worshippers mewled on the floor, trying to get up on broken limbs.

‘Kill them all,’ said Adelard.

‘Suffer not the unclean to live,’ his brothers intoned in response.

Adelard strode forwards. The preacher stood still, defiant in his pulpit, uncaring of the flames that burned the filthy hangings on the walls around him. An altar lay behind him, stacked high with bones – sacrifices to their unholy vision of the Emperor.

‘We bring light to the darkness,’ said Adelard. Close by, it was clear that the man was not a man at all, but a half-breed like his congregation. His alien parentage was there to see, in the ridges over his nose, in the total hairlessness of his skin. ‘Take me to your Emperor, so that we might bring our light to him.’

The preacher glared hatred at Adelard. He smiled, revealing crooked, dirty teeth. ‘Gladly, brother. Then it shall be *you* who is baptised, and you will feel his light within.’ His alien eyes flicked down to Adelard’s lantern of faith, hanging from chains at his belt. ‘The true light.’

The preacher stepped down from his pulpit. He walked calmly from the chapel through a side door. The Terminators had to stoop in their haste to follow him.

‘He is leading us into ambush,’ Mallus warned.

‘Yes,’ said Adelard.

The not-man took them into a catacomb, a huge space dominated by mighty piles of bones. The dead were stacked, artfully arranged in tall pyramidal cairns, patterns in their sides made from the long bones and ribs, pelvises and skulls at the top.

These were the true worshippers of the Emperor, interred here as a mark of their devotion, and their resting place had been defiled.

A wide space had been cleared towards the middle of the chamber, the bone-piles pushed over and scattered. A rough nest had been made at the centre, bones restacked in the crude semblance of a chair. Fragments of gold leaf had been draped over it, torn from holy books, devices, monuments and the costumes of holy men. In this cradle of bone and treasure squatted an alien beast of immeasurable age and size. Two sets of gangly arms – one bearing wide, veined hands and the other triple claws – were crossed over its chest. Its carapace of alien chitin was dark, dark red, its skin pallid white and riven with crevices like bark.

‘The Emperor of Mankind,’ said the not-man in tones of hushed reverence. ‘The lord of the Imperium upon his golden throne.’ The preacher bowed, his alien eyes blazing.

Adelard killed him first, obliterating his deformed skull with one mighty blow.

‘Here is the heart of the infestation. Kill it!’ he roared. ‘Gird your souls, brothers, for such as he are mighty witches!’

‘Abhor the witch!’ his warriors shouted.

The ancient genestealer scrambled to its feet. From the shadows, from atop the bone stacks, more of its kind came. Dozens of purestrains, although none had the great size of their lord, nor the malicious intelligence that glittered in its hateful gaze.

The broodlord clacked its black teeth. Adelard felt a pressure in his mind.

He pushed back, drawing upon his faith in the Emperor. ‘*Do not let me falter, lord. Do not let me fail!*’ he prayed. He tasted blood at the back of his mouth. His limbs trembled. With a mighty effort, he heaved the invidious presence of the creature from his soul. ‘Back! Back! Back! In the name of Emperor!’ he shouted. He waded forward, his giant boots snagging on the snarl of bones. The broodlord waited for him, staring malevolently all the while.

Rolan doused the catacomb in fire, filling the air with the sharp stink of burning bone. Ercus duelled with a pair of genestealers, his claws blocking their impossibly quick attacks. Godwin struck a creature aside, sending it staggering, dark blood pumping from its shattered carapace. Mallas slew one that launched

itself at him from atop a bone heap, impaling it in mid-air and flinging it to the side. He pivoted, chopping another in half with one blow. A third died as it reached for him, then two more leapt forth, and he staggered backwards under their weight. Ercus, galvanised by his brother's peril, gutted one of the two trapping him, knocking the other away with a backhand swing. He reached Mallas, killing one of the creatures scraping at his armour, only to be forced to turn and defend himself from three more.

Godwin, meanwhile, waded methodically forwards and away from Rolan. With waves of fire to protect his back, Godwin was free to wield his thunder hammer to the fore. His shield crackled time and again as he shoved away screaming genestealers. He wasted no movement, applying his hammer only when he had a clear opening. The thunderous detonations of its power field dominated the cacophony of battle. The brothers shouted with the joy of the fight. Mallas began the Imperator Exultis, and the others joined him in song.

Adelard cursed. The bone field was deep, a check even upon the might of Terminator armour. An angry bark of pain broke through the Sword Brothers' hymn. A spike in Rolan's vitals indicated that he had been injured, but then a deafening bang sounded as his power fist found his assailant. Flesh pattered down.

But Adelard could spare no attention to Rolan's plight, nor would he. A worthy foe awaited him, and he was eager to test his mettle against it.

'I am Adelard, Castellan of the Black Templars, knight of the Emperor of Terra.' He levelled his hammer at the broodlord. 'I challenge you.'

The broodlord cocked its bulbous head to one side. A growl that could have been a laugh twisted its hideous features further. It stood tall, towering over the Space Marine. Adelard adopted a defensive stance, crouching behind his storm shield.

The broodlord swung at him, its claws a blur. Adelard blocked them with his shield, energy sparking angrily at the impact. He swung for the creature, but it sidestepped his blow easily, its inhuman reflexes more than a match for his. Grasping hands lunged, grabbing at his shield. One slid free, but the other held, long black claws biting into the ceramite of his Templar's cross. Unable to move his shield, Adelard was forced to parry the next strike with the head of his hammer. His armour's generatorium hummed angrily at the strain placed upon it.

With a mighty wrench, Adelard tugged his shield free and stepped back. His feet were fouled by the bones on the floor and he stumbled. Aided by the inherent stability of the Terminator plate, he kept his footing, smashing the

genestealer broodlord hard in the face with his shield as it came at him again. He blocked again, then again with his hammer. A claw came at him while his guard was open and he swung his thick shoulder plating to block it, grunting at the sensory feedback as alien claws scored deep grooves in the armour. He shrugged violently, knocking the claw aside. With a final bash of his shield he flung the broodlord's arms wide, opening the way to its face. He drove his thunder hammer upwards, catching the alien beast under the chin.

The hammer's disruption field reacted according to the ferocity of the blow. Adelard had put his entire strength and that of his armour into his attack. There was an almighty crack of artificial thunder. The genestealer's head jolted backwards. It screeched as its jaw broke, and went reeling towards the rear.

Adelard was merciless, pressing his attack.

'Oh, Emperor, in wrath rejoicing at bloody wars,' he shouted, 'fierce and untamed, whose mighty power doth make the strongest walls from their foundations shake!'

One of the creature's abominable offspring attacked from the right, but he crushed it without a thought, carrying the swing through into the broodlord's upper left shoulder and shattering it with another roaring bang of his hammer.

'All conquering Master of Mankind, be pleased with this war's tumultuous roar.'

The broodlord swiped at him with its three unharmed claws in quick succession. Adelard blocked two, but the third bit deep into his right leg, bringing forth sparks. He howled along with his armour's anger and knocked a following blow aside, breaking fingers. 'Delight in swords and fists red with alien blood, and the dire ruin of savage battle.'

He grunted with effort as he sent a wide swing at the genestealer's injured side. His hammer whistled with the speed of it. The broodlord twisted, barely dodging the blow, but Adelard was ready. Performing a manoeuvre impossible without the fibre-bundle assistance of his armour, he arrested and reversed the swing, sending it in a deadly uppercut again at the broodlord's head. It impacted cleanly, the weight of the hammer alone enough to smash the skull. Empowered by the disruption field, it annihilated the creature's head entirely, showering Adelard with gore.

'Rejoice in furious challenge, and avenging strife, whose works with woe embitter human life!' he roared, as the broodlord fell dead to the floor.

Adelard looked upon the broken corpse.

'A prayer for the true Emperor of Mankind,' he muttered.

Kill counters clicked up in his helmet readout. His warriors did their work well.

The day was theirs, and with it the *Veritas Diras*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A prolific freelance author and journalist, **Guy Haley** is the author of *Space Marine Battles: Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Eternal Crusader*, *The Last Days of Ector* and *Broken Sword*, for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

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